

Robert Earl Kaske

June 1, 1921 — August 8, 1989

Robert Earl Kaske, an eminence among the medievalists of his generation and a teacher of extraordinary skill and dedication, died at his home on North Quarry Street on 8 August 1989, having served for twenty-five years as professor of English at Cornell and, since 1975, as Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities.

Bob grew up in Cincinnati, where he was born on June 1, 1921. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Xavier University in 1942, immediately entered the field artillery, and served with distinction as a platoon leader and company commander in the Pacific. Upon leaving the army he began graduate study at Chapel Hill, receiving his doctorate in 1950. He taught at Washington University, Penn State, Chapel Hill and Illinois before coming to Cornell in 1964.

Once installed at Cornell, Bob founded a graduate program in Medieval Studies which soon came to be recognized as the foremost program of its kind in North America. Sustained by Bob's own rigorous standards and boundless enthusiasm, and by his unique ability to instill these qualities in others, the program produced a group of scholars who have become the backbone of the next generation in medieval studies, and who, in their collective achievement and their dedication to the pedagogical and scholarly ideals of their mentor, constitute Bob's true monument.

If Bob was the heart and soul of the Medieval Studies Program, the heart of his teaching was a bibliographical seminar which not only opened up the possibilities of medievalist scholarship to Bob's own students, but was presented in various forms at virtually every major center of medieval studies in the country, and has become one of the scholarly legends of our time. A burning issue among students of medieval poetry in the '50s and '60s was the question of whether our mystery could be practiced, as it were, *in vacuo*, on the model of that "New Criticism" which, in other areas of literary study, was rejecting traditional historicist scholarship in favor of a minute attention to the internal workings of the text. Those opposed to this tendency argued that, because of the historical remoteness of the medieval world, the poetry of that world must be read as nearly as possible through medieval eyes, in the light of a careful reconstruction of medieval intellectual and religious culture. Bob Kaske, though his writings abound in "close readings" as deft and probing as those of any new critic, was strongly committed to this latter position, and did perhaps more than any medievalist of his time to give practical expression to the historicist ideal. His bibliographical seminar was both a dazzlingly comprehensive repertory of the literary and religious texts medieval scholars read and wrote, and an introduction to the ways in which these texts can be employed in

the study of medieval literary culture. Conceived with an astute eye to the needs of beginning graduate students, it made the tools of serious medievalist scholarship available to them and communicated Bob's own zeal for such scholarship in a highly effective way. The material substance of the seminar was eventually reproduced in book form (*Medieval Christian Literary Imagery: A Guide to Interpretation*. Toronto, 1987), but while this has achieved its due acknowledgment as an indispensable tool for medievalists, no mere book can recreate the rich life its contents enjoyed in the animated version purveyed by Bob himself over three decades.

In the classroom Bob was a showman in the best sense of that term. His lectures were entertaining (often very funny), well organized and informative. Perhaps the most striking feature of his teaching, however, was his scrupulous care in responding to students' written work. Submitting a paper to Bob Kaske was a great educational experience: his students learned how to write English, and how to develop an argument, and when they made mistakes Bob would not only show them what was wrong, but would characteristically show them how to correct it. In this aspect of the process of teaching, Bob simply had no peer.

Bob also had a wonderful capacity for maintaining warm scholarly friendships, and will be sorely missed by his colleagues in the profession. In addition to working tirelessly with his own students, he frequently served as a much-admired mentor for medievalists who had not been in his courses, a generosity which extended to his work as a member of the editorial boards of *The Chaucer Review*, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, *Speculum*, and *Traditio*. From 1975 until his death he was chief editor of *Traditio*, and one of the great scholarly editors of his generation: a colleague has observed that his extensive bibliography would be far longer if it could be made to include the many contributions to that journal that Bob has in effect co-authored.

Among many honors and awards, Bob received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the Guggenheim Foundation (twice), Cornell's Society for the Humanities, the Southeastern Institute of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 1975 he was elected Councillor of the Medieval Academy of America, and in 1982 he was named as a Fellow of the Academy.

Bob Kaske is survived by his wife, Carol, professor of English at Cornell; a son, Richard, of Ithaca; a son, David, of Cincinnati; and three grandchildren.

Alice M. Colby-Hall, Thomas D. Hill, Winthrop Wetherbee