

Excerpt:

TRUSTEES' BULLETIN

December 1950

911
P.P.

5

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF CREATIVE WRITERS

Somerset Maugham, addressing an audience of book publishers and authors in New York last month, called attention to the plight of the poets, novelists, and other creative writers who are just entering upon their careers. "The difficulties that confront them are greater than they have ever been," he said. "The costs of production are now such that it is hard for a young author to get the chance of publication. The result is that the young and unknown author finds it more and more difficult to get a hearing. And, even when he does, how is he going to live on the royalties of a book that has probably just paid the expense of publication?"

To meet this dilemma - to save the creative faculties of choice minds from being frittered away on potboiling, and to increase the probability of the United States' producing great literature - Mr. Maugham proposed the establishment of a richly-endowed academy to provide fellowships in creative writing for brilliant young American unknowns.

"By creative writers I do not mean philosophers, historians, or economists, however much you may think their productions are akin to fiction," he went on, "but poets, novelists, short-story writers, and dramatists. And I would not ask that the fellowships should be awarded to them for their high intellectual and personal qualifications and because they have already demonstrated unusual ability, but only because they show great promise."

As a small-scale example of what he had in mind, Mr. Maugham mentioned that he had provided the Authors Society (of London) with a sum sufficient for it "to hand over every year to a promising young author, man

or woman, a sum of money large enough for him, or her, with thrift to spend the greater part of a year abroad. No strings are attached to this award. It is left to the good sense of the recipient to make the best use of it. I was well aware that the judges would sometimes make the award to someone who would not do this. I was also aware that sometimes the recipient would not be able to profit by the experience. I did not think that mattered. If once in ten years the experience enables an author to produce work which is an enrichment of our literature, I think the money will have been well spent."

In view of such a proposal, coming from one of the successful novelists of the day who in his younger years had to fight his way out of the garret, it is interesting to examine what the Humanities division of the Foundation has done to advance the field of creative writing.

Fellowships in the Humanities

At the end of 1948, when it had been in operation fifteen years, an extensive survey was made of the fellowship program in the Humanities. This appraisal showed that in the decade and a half the Foundation had given direct fellowships to more than 500 persons at a cost of more than a million dollars. In addition to these, for which the appointees were selected and the administration of the fellowships conducted by officers of the Humanities division, there were 735 fellows appointed by outside institutions under programs financed by the Foundation. These outside fellowships were administered by such agencies as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Huntington Library, and the University of Minnesota, to name three representatives of the many that were aided; and Foundation

grants to the outside institutions for their fellowship programs totaled over \$1,500,000. Altogether then counting both direct and indirect fellowships, assistance was given to something over 1,235 fellows at a cost of more than \$2,500,000 during the fifteen years.

A review of these fellowships shows that there have been two systematic programs to assist creative writers - one in Great Britain which provided awards to young workers in all four fields of writing, and one in the United States which was focussed on workers in the drama. Apart from these, most of the fellowships in the Humanities went to train young people in Far Eastern and Slavic studies, North American regional studies, linguistics, history, anthropology, archaeology, radio broadcasting, and library administration.

The program in the drama had its origin in 1934 when the Foundation called a conference of leaders in university departments of drama, and invited them to suggest ways in which it could assist the development of university work in that field. Those present were unanimous in recommending that fellowships be provided for the final stage of training. Experience had demonstrated, they pointed out, that young playwrights invariably needed a year in which to apply what they had learned and actually turn out a play. It was suggested that fellowships be provided not only for playwrights but also for stage designers, directors, and stage-lighting experts.

As a result of these recommendations, 65 persons were given fellowships in drama during the period 1934-1948. Checking over the list of these former fellows today one finds none who can be said to have made a commanding success of creative writing in the drama. Two men, E. P. Conkle, author of Prologue to Glory, and Thomas Job, author of Uncle Harry, enjoyed

a brief recognition and were hailed as playwrights of unusual promise. But Job died before his talent had time to show what it really could do, and Conkle accepted an academic appointment and is now a member of the drama department at the University of Texas. Apart from Lemuel Ayers, who has deservedly won recognition as a stage designer, most of the other successes have become directors of university theatres or teachers of drama. The Yale dramatic department includes in its staff three former fellows, and others are to be found widely distributed, from the University of Maine to the University of Hawaii. All are doing good work as educators and directors, but not as creative writers.

Beginning in 1938 the Foundation made a three-year grant to the Authors League of America to finance an annual six fellowships in playwriting; and the following year saw the beginning of a series of grants to the National Theatre Conference for a similar program under its direction. One of the fellows selected by the Authors League turned out to be unusually gifted. This was Tennessee Williams, a young Mississippian who had recently completed undergraduate studies at the University of Iowa and was laboring doggedly to complete a play. Williams has said that the fellowship came at a critical time, providing the economic freedom which enabled him to concentrate on playwriting. His Battle of Angels was produced by the Theatre Guild in 1940. This was followed four years later by The Glass Menagerie, and in 1947 by A Streetcar Named Desire. Tennessee Williams's great success and positive contribution to dramatic literature provides an example of the satisfaction that sometimes accrues from taking the chance of staking an unknown artist.

An occasional poet, novelist, and short-story writer has received help. For example, Peter Viereck was teaching history at Harvard in 1947 when he was given a fellowship in modern European history, and shortly after completing his fellowship published a volume of poems, Terror and Decorum, which won attention. Another poet whose fellowship was in a different field, is Alan Swallow; his War Poems and The Nameless Sight were worked on during his fellowship. Josefina Niggli, who had one of the drama fellowships several years, has done best perhaps in her stories of Mexican life and customs.

Several budding novelists received fellowships from the Newberry Library in its Foundation-supported program to encourage writing on subjects related to the Midwest. However, these are a small minority, and most of the beneficiaries of the Newberry project have been writers of regional history. The one out-and-out effort to concentrate on the creative writer in all forms is the fellowship program at Birmingham University, England, known as the Atlantic Awards.

The Atlantic Awards

This fellowship program had its origin in a concern for the plight of the beginning author in postwar England. One of the Foundation officers, who had gone abroad early in 1945 to prospect opportunities for the Humanities division, was impressed with the character of writing being produced by young people in the war-torn lands. There was evidence of a growing renaissance with promise of a literature enriched with human experience. The officer discussed the literary trends with leading figures in England, including T. S. Eliot, Herbert Read, F. R. Leavis, and Edwin Muir, and on

the long convoy trip back to the United States had ample time to reflect on what he had seen and heard. It occurred to him that a practical way to help the youthful British writers, dislocated and exhausted by war, would be to give carefully selected ones a year or so of freedom from the pressure of making a living, a period in which they could get a grip on their creative faculties and have a chance to formulate and present in retrospect the experiences that, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, "the boredom, and the horror, and the glory" of war had given them.

At first the Humanities division considered recommending that the fellowships be offered as part of the Foundation's program, but on reflection it was decided that a plan to help British writers could best be administered by a British institution. The University of Birmingham was chosen to serve as the administrator, and in December of 1945 the Foundation appropriated \$56,000 to finance the project for three years. Of this \$50,000 was to be used as stipends for fellows, the remainder to care for administrative expense. An Adjudicating Committee, to pass on applicants for fellowships, was appointed. It consisted of a poet, a dramatist, two novelists, a newspaper editor, and four professors of English literature. It was this Committee, meeting for the first time in early 1946, that named the fellowships "Atlantic Awards" in recognition of the source of the gift and acknowledgement of it "as a bond of goodwill between America and Britain."

The first public announcement was made in February, and it brought a heavy bombardment of inquiries and applications. Crusaders, revolutionaries, cranks of various types, men and women who were down on their luck, all wrote in to ask for a share of the bounty. Later the publicity simmered down, and the Committee found that it had in hand several hundred ap-

plications from persons who could be considered seriously. The number of applications naturally declined after the first year: there were 437 in 1946, 94 in 1947, and 72 in 1948. And from this total of 603 applicants the Committee in the three years selected 47 to receive Atlantic Awards.

These persons were selected on the basis of what they had already written, as exhibited either in published work or unpublished manuscripts, plus such literary plans as they were willing to draw up and submit. Only applicants on whom the Committee had reached a unanimous decision were given awards. As it turned out, the fortunate 47 consisted of 27 novelists or short-story writers, 17 poets, and 3 dramatists. Two of them, one poet and one novelist, were women.

An appraisal of the results of these 47 awards was made by the Committee last spring. It found that 28 of the recipients have had at least one book published or accepted for publication (or play produced) since they received help.

"It would be invidious to single out the achievement of any one of these writers for special praise," says the Committee in its report, "but an examination of the list will show that several of them are building up for themselves a high reputation. How much the award contributed to this success cannot, of course, be estimated, but that it did provide both an opportunity and an incentive is not to be doubted." On this latter point the writers themselves give first-hand testimony, as the following excerpts from letters show:

"My talent is primarily lyrical, intense preoccupation over a short period. Having published three volumes of lyrics I wished to attempt to retain the intensity of the lyric within the form of a major work of about 1000 lines. This was quite impossible with a job that kept me busy, on average, about 12 hours a day. The award enabled me to encompass my

design in a 1500-word poem which I hope will be published within the next eighteen months." The poem has since been published.

"Without it (the award) I am quite convinced that my novel would not have been finished with such care and would not have satisfied me nearly so much."

"The money was very nice, but it is the fact of the award and not the money which has altered my whole writing life. If I ever write anything that is worthwhile, and I shall try all my life, it will be, in part, because of the confidence and encouragement that the Atlantic Award has given me."

The project had turned out so well that at the expiration of the 1945 appropriation, the Foundation made a supplemental grant of \$15,000 to provide additional Atlantic Awards for 1949 and 1950. The Birmingham Committee is now endeavoring to raise funds locally. Its recent report says, "The Rockefeller Foundation has played its part with its customary blending of munificence and wisdom, and the Committee must now be able to draw upon British liberality if it is to continue its work."

Helping the Writer Indirectly

It is interesting to note that the Atlantic Awards did not originate primarily as a project to help young writers as such, but as a measure to help the young man dislocated by war. If there had been no background of war, one wonders if the plan would have been considered. With regard to the American scene, it can be said that the officers in the Humanities division are not convinced that direct aid in the form of fellowships is the only kind of assistance that will advance the development of young writers. Possibly a better scheme would be to strengthen the institutions which encourage literary excellence and which provide media for the publication of new writings.

This idea was implicit in the Humanities' sponsoring two grants - \$22,500 to the Kenyon Review in 1947 and \$27,600 to the Sewanee Review in 1948 - which indirectly have done a great deal for young writers. The funds were given to enable these periodicals to raise their rates of payment from the starvation scale called "nominal" to rates that were regarded as "reasonable" - i.e., $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents a word for prose. As a consequence, two other literary magazines, the Partisan Review and the Hudson Review, brought their rates to the same level. In recommending these actions, the Humanities pointed out that the grants were in effect subsidies to younger writers who established their claim to such assistance by securing the publication of their material in magazines that maintain high literary standards.

During the last twelve months the officers in the Humanities have talked with numerous writers, publishers, and critics concerning the literary enterprise in the United States, seeking to discover ways in which an agency like the Foundation can be most useful and effective. The maintenance of creative work at a high level in a society involves much more than support for the writer himself. His apparent problems are really the problem of the role and acceptance of literature in a civilization. Not only the writer, but the publisher, the reviewer, the bookseller, and the buying and reading public are involved. One cannot assume, without careful exploration of the entire terrain, that the most strategic move is the one which Mr. Maugham suggests.