

Professor Emeritus W.J. Keith died on Saturday, July 14, passing away quietly in his sleep.

Professor Keith was born in London and graduated from Jesus College, Cambridge. He did his MA and PhD here at UofT, taught at McMaster for five years, and here from 1966 until his retirement in 1995, winning the regard, affection, and friendship of his students. Details are in the [obituary in the \*Globe and Mail\*](#), Monday, July 16.

Professor Sam Solecki read at the service on behalf of the Department.

### **‘Eulogy For W.J.Keith At Holy Rosary Church, Toronto, 20 July, 2018’**

Bill indicated that he wanted the obituary he wrote for the *Globe & Mail* to be read at this service. But since most of the individuals we have spoken to said they had already read it, Hiroko and I decided that my eulogy will be delivered alone. Think of it as the second part of the official version. That one was by the professor; this one is by his student.

Bill says nothing in his obituary about his teaching and he is cursory about his writing, perhaps I can fill some of the gaps. He had at least three areas of expertise: Rural Writing, British Literature from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to Modernism, and Canadian Literature. His several books on rural writing anticipated by two decades the arrival of the field of eco-criticism, and his first book, *Richard Jefferies*, marked the start of the Jefferies revival. Closer to home, his two volume history *Canadian Literature in English* is still in print after four decades—the standard work in the field for its generation.

He championed several contemporary writers, including Don Coles, Rudy Wiebe and Hugh Hood, and wrote the first important book-length studies of the last two. And he paid his dues to the worlds of academic and mainstream writing with over 600 reviews. He did all this while also writing over twenty books and teaching a full load of courses at the university. I took undergraduate and graduate courses with him in the late 60s, and he supervised my thesis on D. H. Lawrence. In the 1970s we made the transition from student and professor to colleagues in the English Department, though it took me another decade before I felt comfortable calling him Bill. At one point he suggested it was time we became *Sam* and *Bill*. I responded, ‘of course, Professor Keith.’

I remember him as an articulate and animated lecturer, always prepared and always willing to entertain questions. He had a charming occasionally puckish sense of humour. He tried to offer a balanced view of every writer, and only once did I see him fall short in this respect. In Victorian poetry he had made it safely through Arnold, Tennyson, Clough, The Brownings and The Rossettis without losing his cool, but there was something about Swinburne that made him lose his poise and go on the attack. When I told this story to our mutual friend, the late James Cameron, he answered slightly cryptically—‘Swinburne does that to some people.’

Bill returned essays promptly, each page with a delicate filigreed palimpsest of small hand-written comments in his distinctive boyish hand. They were like a polite addition to

the paper rather than a corrective assault on it. Even when he rewrote sentences in my thesis, he left me with the sense that *this was just a suggestion, something to consider*. It was one of many examples of what I think of as his general thoughtfulness and *sociability*. He was not only thoroughly professional but consistently kind. He was also a polite and tactful man who avoided open disagreement or confrontation: so when he didn't like some point in my thesis he would begin by smoothing the potential disagreement with 'yes, but . . .' or 'perhaps' or 'you might consider.' these indicated that dialogue was possible.

I should also mention that as a graduate supervisor, Bill was what we might call 'an angel of almost lost causes'—he took on students that he knew would need a great deal of help to write and defend a doctoral thesis. Sometimes these had been dropped by another colleague. *And he got them through*.

We met in 1967, and when I think of him across the past half century, I see a thoughtful and good man, usually wearing a dark slightly rumpled off-the-rack suit, fulfilled in his work and his marriage. A man who met the complex demands of whatever contract it is that he signed with others and with his god.

Sam Solecki.

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