

HERBERT ROSENGARTEN

William Robbins
1909-1995



William (Bill) Robbins was, in Robbie Burns's well-worn phrase, "the gentleman and scholar," a man deeply versed in the ideas and literature of the Victorians, who sought to bring the best of nineteenth-century liberal thinking into his own life and into his practice as a university professor of English. Born September 17, 1909 in Cranbrook, British Columbia, Bill was brought up by adoptive parents, and after their deaths by family friends on the Coast. He began his higher education in 1926 at Victoria College in the provincial capital of Victoria, and moved to Vancouver in 1928 to pursue English studies at the fledgling University of British Columbia, with which Victoria College was then affiliated. The UBC English department was in those days the undisputed fiefdom of Garnett Sedgewick, whose autocratic style of leadership was tempered by legendary powers in the lecture room and a deep love of literature. Bill came under Sedgewick's spell, and would later call him a "rare spirit and beloved teacher"; under his tutelage, Bill completed his undergraduate studies in 1930 and wrote an MA thesis on "Matthew Arnold as a Social and Educational Critic," his first extended study of the influential Victorian poet, critic, and philosopher whose writings would occupy him for much of the rest of his life.

After a period of teacher training, Bill obtained his diploma in 1932 and undertook brief stints as a high-school teacher in Prince Rupert and Victoria. However, he needed a larger intellectual arena than school-teaching could offer, and upon the completion of his MA in 1934, he committed himself to the peripatetic life of the university scholar, beginning with a year at the University of London made possible by an I.O.D.E. scholarship, then moving to Winnipeg, where he spent 1935-38 as a Lecturer in English at Wesley College (soon to become United College). The College was a hotbed of Protestant debate about religion, secularism, and "social" Christianity, and it is likely that during his time there Bill deepened his knowledge of ecclesiastical history and theological debate, an area that he would draw upon extensively in his later studies of religious controversy in nineteenth-century England. From Winnipeg he found his way to the University of Toronto, where, with the help of a Reuben Wells Leonard Scholarship, he immersed himself in the life and writings of Matthew Arnold under the guidance of E. K. Brown and A. S. P. Woodhouse. It was the latter, perhaps the best-known and most influential of all English professors at Toronto, who supervised his 1942 PhD dissertation on "The Religious Thought of Matthew Arnold." When Bill later published his first book on Arnold, it was to Brown and Woodhouse that he gave explicit thanks for their inspiration and their high standards of scholarship.

In 1939 Bill found himself back at Victoria College in BC, where he spent the next five years as an Assistant Professor of English, interrupted by a year in Toronto finishing his doctoral dissertation. During this period he produced a number of poems, several of which were taken by Earle Birney for the literary columns of *The Canadian Forum*. In 1944 he was appointed Assistant Professor at UBC, and rejoined his former mentor Garnett Sedgewick. The department to which he returned was about to experience significant change, in part because of the end of the war and the consequent enrolment increases, but more importantly because of the retirement of Sedgewick in 1948 and the appointment of his successor, the redoubtable Roy Daniells. Bill and Roy would engage in many heated disputes over the years, but always retained a mutual regard grounded in their respective accomplishments as teachers and scholars.

The UBC English department would remain Bill Robbins' academic home until his retirement over thirty years later, a home that he found intellectually and socially congenial and that, in its adherence to a traditional curriculum taught in traditional fashion, suited his somewhat

conservative (though never narrow) approach to academic affairs. His dedication to his profession, his skill as a teacher and his powers as a scholar brought him early recognition, and he was rapidly promoted, attaining the rank of Professor in 1947. Thereafter he became a central figure in the English Department's growth and development, greatly respected by his colleagues for his fairness and reasonableness-qualities not always evident in a department that would experience much dissension and internal rivalry in the 'sixties and 'seventies. As Chair of the Graduate Committee, he helped develop the department's research profile and its introduction of the doctoral degree. His administrative skills and diplomacy led to his twice being asked to serve as Acting Head of the Department, in 1959-60 and again in 1972-73. Bill's strengths as an academic administrator were recognized beyond the Department: in 1957 he was chosen to be Secretary of the newly-founded Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, and from 1960 to 1966 he served as an elected member of the UBC Senate. National recognition of Bill's contributions to learning and of his preeminence among Canadian scholars of English literature came in 1973, with his election to the Royal Society of Canada (Section II). In 1975 he retired from his post at UBC and was named Professor Emeritus.

Somewhat formal in manner, even a little stern and forbidding in the eyes of students and younger colleagues, Bill Robbins revealed himself upon closer acquaintance to possess a warm and friendly disposition. His perceptiveness and dry humour reflected a keen intelligence that often pierced through the flabby excesses of endless committee discussion to identify salient points and guide his colleagues back to reason and relevance.

Bill's intellectual clarity and steady moral vision were nowhere more apparent than in his scholarship, much of which dealt with the complex and often confusing debates among the Victorians about the rival truths of religious belief and the physical sciences. Matthew Arnold was a central figure in these debates, a man who sought to reconcile warring opposites and find an ideal of harmony through adherence to the higher values celebrated in great literature as well as the Christian Bible. This search for spiritual moderation clearly appealed to Bill's own sense of reasonableness, as did Arnold's notion of the critic/educator as a disinterested propagator of the best that has been thought and said. In his first book, *The Ethical Idealism of Matthew Arnold* (1959), Bill presented Arnold's blending of faith and humanistic philosophy as preferable to the extremes of religious dogma on the one hand and scientific rationalism on the other. Herein, for Bill, lay Arnold's modernity: in his search for meaning and values in an increasingly materialistic and scientific age.

The liberal humanism that brought Matthew Arnold criticism from many of his contemporaries is what Bill found particularly appealing, for it reflected his own values as a scholar and teacher. In 1960 he gave five talks on CBC's "University of the Air" on the topic "Humanistic Values in English Literature" (published under the same title by the CBC in 1960). While respecting the primacy of the aesthetic, he examined the psychological, social-political, scientific, and religious insights to be derived from the study of literary works, concluding in Arnoldian fashion that the greatest writers convey important philosophical and moral ideas through their imaginative rendering of felt experience. Like Arnold, Bill valued the study of literature as a guide to the greatest that has been thought and said, and saw it as a means of finding something of permanent value in the shifting perspectives created by modern scientific materialism. In *The Arnoldian Principle of Flexibility* (1979) Bill presented Arnold as a model, albeit an imperfect one, of the critic and educator who brings an educated and open-minded idealism to the contradictions of

experience, who can at once embrace deep Christian faith, humanistic values, and modern scientific discovery in the search for a higher truth and a universal moral standard.

This combination of principle and pragmatism is what appealed to Bill in the character of Francis Newman in his study *The Newman Brothers: An Essay in Comparative Intellectual Biography* (1966). The book compares the divergent paths taken by John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and his brother Francis William Newman (1805-1897): the former becoming a convert and a Cardinal in the Catholic Church, the latter a classical scholar who became a proponent of free thought and social reform. About Francis, relatively little has been written; the value of Bill's book lies in its sympathetic portrait of the younger Newman who, though sharing his brother's devotion to spiritual values, could not accept the unscientific mystery that lies at the heart of religious experience. *The Newman Brothers* remains one of the best studies of Francis Newman and the rationalist tendencies that arose steadily throughout the nineteenth century as a challenge to theological orthodoxies and the traditional powers of the Anglican and Catholic churches.

Following a lengthy illness, Bill Robbins died in Sidney, British Columbia on January 19, 1995. He was survived by his wife Margaret Robbins, née Ross, whom he had married in 1937 in Sidney, BC, and by their son Peter. Bill was one of the last of a generation of Canadian scholars and teachers who believed, like Matthew Arnold, in the possibility of human betterment through the study of great ideas in literature and philosophy, and who would find difficulty in understanding the relativism which governs much of the teaching of such subjects in the classrooms of the twenty-first century. Writing in 1959, Bill observed that we could still learn much from Arnold: "The practical idealism of his values can give meaning and purpose to education, which too often has neither and it can be a means of reconciling the persisting differences of Christian, scientist, and humanist." Bill's own life was marked by such a "practical idealism," and it helped to make him a fine teacher and a first-rate scholar.

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