

*Dr. Lally's Reflections on The Poet's Prize Committee*

Professor Margaret Lally of The Department of English is now in her twentieth year of serving on The Poets' Prize Committee. This small group, founded by Robert McDowell, Louis Simpson, and the late Frederick Morgan, founder and editor of *The Hudson Review*, awards \$3000 each year at a ceremony in New York City to the American poet who has written the book they deem to have been the best of that year. The founders said, "We believe there is no greater honor than to be awarded a prize by a jury of one's peers."

All twenty members serve at the invitation of others (Mr. Simpson was the one who extended the invitation to Professor Lally). Each personally contributes \$150 annually to the prize and nominates two books. In November, December, and January, each reads as many as forty books of poems that come in from across the country. During the rest of the year, they gather in more; they read throughout the year, looking for the ones they will nominate.

Among the twenty poets serving at this time are Louis Simpson, Claudia Emerson, Natasha Trethewey, and Ted Kooser, all winners of The Pulitzer Prize. A former member is Dana Gioia, who went on to chair The National Endowment for the Arts.

In her first year at The Citadel, 1987, Professor Lally thought, "Louis Simpson should come here." Professor Simpson had served in World War II, from Normandy to Berchtesgaden, in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Mr. Simpson was awarded the Bronze Star and was twice awarded the Purple Heart; several departments on campus, including the Army, Navy, and Air Force, were pleased to be asked to contribute to his honorarium.

In April of 1989 Professor Simpson came to the college; ours was one of the few invitations he accepted that year.

At one point during his reading in Jenkins Hall, the poet stopped reading and looked up at the wall above his audience, where he had noticed an insignia. He said quietly, "That's my outfit." The room went silent.

The next morning he taught Dr. Lally's class; he met in the afternoon in the Rare Books Room with nine student poets, telling them what it had been like to land on the beaches of Normandy, and talking to them about writing and life. Later, one said to Dr. Lally, "Do you realize that I will never forget this?"

Dr. and Mrs. Simpson stayed in Charleston for a long weekend. After they left, Dr. Lally wrote an article about his work for *The Post and Courier*. They enjoyed their visit so much that the next year he suggested to Dr. Lally that she invite Mr. Morgan to the Citadel. Mr. Morgan, a brilliant poet himself, who had been his close friend since the post-war years at the beginning of both their careers, also stayed a long weekend. During that time his wife, Paula Dietz, an expert on landscape gardening and many other subjects, visited Charleston plantations and wrote an article about them for *The New York Times*. Ms. Dietz is now the Editor of *The Hudson Review*.

Those who have read Paul Fussell's book *The Great War and Modern Memory* will remember Professor Simpson's having been asked there what life was like for the soldier in World War II, and the Daniel Library has a good number of Simpson's books in its collection. *A Dream of Governors* and his *Selected Prose* focus, in large part, on his wartime experiences. The latter contains correspondence between him and his family during those years. One striking element of it, to Dr. Lally's mind, is its loving pretense:

no matter what the young soldier was going through, he wrote as though he was just having a good time, some travel, and another cigarette or two. Later books—and they are many—take up a host of diverse subjects: the reputations and influences of poets, the craft of writing, suburban life, travel. They are characterized by Simpson’s distinctive tone of crisp irony and a “fit-audience-though-few” sense of disappointed urbanity.

Professor Lally met Professor Simpson when she was a graduate student at Case Western Reserve University. He had come to Cleveland’s University Circle to give a reading, and since she had been researching his work, she was invited to be part of his visit. For her, some of the most notable among his poems are “The Runner” (a long poem about a soldier-messenger in The Battle of the Bulge), “The Heroes” (a soldier’s redefinition of the word), “The Bird” (about a singing Nazi prison guard), “Chicken Soup” (about an underfed German girl upon whom the speaker-soldier reflects), and “I Dreamed That in a City Dark As Paris” (where an American soldier contemplates a statue of a World War I *poilu* on a city street and feels more kinship with that figure than he does with the world around him).

Thanks, in greatest measure, to the inspiration and efforts of its three founders, The Poets’ Prize is now in its third decade. Professor Lally feels privileged to be poised between the Greatest Generation and its heirs.

# # #