

Edward Ronald Weismiller

Aug. 3, 1915 - Aug. 25, 2010

He was raised in Monticello, Wisconsin and Vermont. In 1936, the twenty-year-old Edward Weismiller became the youngest poet to win the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets prize.

He graduated from Cornell College in 1938, from Harvard University with a master's in 1942, and from Oxford University, with a D.Phil. in 1950, where he was a Rhodes scholar.

Professor Weismiller, an eminent scholar of John Milton's poetry, came to Washington, DC in 1968 to study original source materials in the Folger Library, and stayed on to teach in the English department of the George Washington University. After his retirement in 1980 he remained there, reveling in the city's beauty, variety, and cultural ferment. He was in love with words and stories and had a gift for making and keeping friends. An inspiring teacher, he worked to instill the love of beautiful and precise language in his students, and many of them went on to success as writers, artists, actors, teachers.

Weismiller was proud of what he called a nice American success story. His father, Jacob Weismiller, came of German-Swiss stock; his mother, Georgia Wilson, was of Scottish descent. Young Edward grew up inventing word games and creating crossword puzzles for his sister Jean. The family lived on a tiny farm in rural Wisconsin and the children went to a small country school where Edward won good grades from his teachers and attacks from a bully. His mother died when he was 11, shattering the family. Two years later, taken in by his older sister Luverne, he began doing better in high school and writing songs and poetry. Gently guided by his brother-in-law, paper chemist Westbrook Steele, he won scholarships to Swarthmore and then to Cornell College in Iowa, where he fell in love with Milton's poetry and began to publish his own. At age 20 he became the youngest Yale Younger Poet when his first book of poems, *The Deer Come Down*, was selected for publication by series editor Stephen Vincent Benet.

In 1936 he was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, soon interrupted when England and Germany declared war. Repatriated with the other U.S. students, he earned his master's degree and taught at Harvard, where he founded lifelong friendships with some of the best poets and writers of his generation. A sojourn at Yaddo nourished his talent. He also met and married Frances Merewether Power of Redlands, California, a budding poet and journalist; their first child was born in 1942. He translated a prize-winning French novel, *The Young Concubine*, and began his second book of poems, *The Faultless Shore*, published after the war, in 1946.

When the U.S. joined the European war, Weismiller's life took an astonishing twist. In a midnight phone call from the new Office of Strategic Services (OSS), he was recruited for counterespionage. (He never knew who had recommended him.) He chose to earn his required commission and startle his friends—and the Commandant—by joining the Marine Corps. On detached service in Europe, he was trained by the British secret services MI5 and MI6 and watched the terrible beauty of firebombs falling on the roofs of London. Deployed to Cherbourg, France, after D-Day, he became the first American officer to run a captured enemy agent back against the Germans. Eventually he was put in charge of counterespionage in the American Zone in occupied Germany. He was awarded a Bronze Star and the Médaille de la Reconnaissance française. When he turned in his final report, he was told that it was so highly classified that he would never see it again. (He later heard that the British, apparently less secretive, were using their copy in counterespionage training.)

After the war Weismiller declined an invitation to join the newly formed CIA, which succeeded the OSS; instead he went home to his family in Southern California and commenced work on his novel, *The Serpent Sleeping*, sustained by a Guggenheim writing fellowship. In 1948 the Rhodes Trust invited back the scholars whose time had been cut short by the war, allowing them to bring their new families, so he earned his doctorate from Oxford. He went on to teach poetry, creative writing, and Milton at Pomona College. Over the years four more children were born.

In 1968, now divorced, he came to Washington and began a new phase of life. His third book of poems, *The Branch of Fire*, was published in 1970, and he was invited to give a reading of his poems at the Library of Congress in 1979. After retiring in 1980 he continued to write and reap honors. He contributed to the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry, was an editor of the Variorum Milton series (a compendium of the best modern scholarship), and received the 2001 Robert Fitzgerald Award for lifetime contribution to the study of metrics and versification. In 2002, at age 87, he became the oldest Yale Younger Poet when the press published *Walking Toward the Sun*, with a foreword by W. S. Merwin (then U.S. poet laureate).

Weismiller always saw himself as a citizen soldier, not professional military, but his service affected him deeply. The war's ambience and human lessons permeated his 1962 novel, *The Serpent Sleeping*, recently republished in a British series of classic spy novels. FOIA requests by historian Tim Naftali got his final OSS report declassified, setting off a much-enjoyed series of interviews with historians and popular writers on what his war was really like. Weismiller had been one of the few Marines stationed in Europe; most were in the South Pacific. His unusual situation eventually yielded a bonus: a White House invitation to attend the 50th anniversary celebrations of V.E. Day, traveling to England, France, Prague, and all the way to Russia in a special tour with distinguished veterans from all the services, then-Vice President Gore, and then-Secretary of the Army Togo West.

His work has appeared in *Kenyon Review* and *The Atlantic*.

In 1941, Random House hired Weismiller, then a 26-year-old student, to translate the first award-winning novel of Franco-Khmer poet Makhali-Phal into English. *La Favorite de dix ans* was published in New York in 1942 as *The Young Concubine*. In 2008, Professor Weismiller began advising a literary team working to produce an updated version of his original translation incorporating cultural background material unavailable in 1941.

He lived in Washington, D.C. until his death on August 25, 2010, at 95.

NOTE: Edwards sister, Elsie Luverne, graduated from Monticello high school in 1920 and his mother and father are buried in Highland cemetery.