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Robert Penn Warren 75th Birthday Symposium

Introduction

J. A. Bryant, Jr.

Robert Penn Warren was born in Guthrie, Kentucky on 24 April 1905. Accordingly in late October of 1980, the University of Kentucky planned and executed a slightly belated 75th birthday celebration in his honor, which was no more than the man's due, since by that time he had written ten novels, twelve books of poetry, several collections of essays, a play, and a biography, and had in addition won Pulitzer prizes for both fiction and poetry, the National Book Award for *All the King's Men*, the Bollingen Prize, and a National Medal for Literature. In the course of things he had also taught at L.S.U., Minnesota, and Yale, edited a magazine, collaborated on a number of text books, and served for a year as Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress. Kentucky's birthday party, occupying only one whole day and parts of two others, was scarcely long enough to recognize fully such an array of accomplishments, but its attempt to do so attracted admirers from all over the region and beyond, most of whom simply came to see and pay respect to the great writer whose works had long since been recognized as national treasures and not merely objects of regional pride. There was also a group of specially invited guests, including Mrs. R. P. Warren, Eleanor Clark, a distinguished author in her own right, and a number of old friends and admirers, some of whom Warren had known from his youth. Among these were the Southern novelist, essayist, and fellow Agrarian, Andrew Lytle; Cleanth Brooks and R. B. Heilman, literary critics and one-time collaborators with Mr. Warren; Peter Davison, a friend of long standing, poet, and poetry editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*; scholarly colleagues from the English and History departments at Yale, R. W. B. Lewis and C. Van Woodward respectively; James A. Grimshaw, Jr. of the Air Force Academy, Mr. Warren's bibliographer; and the Kentucky poet, novelist, ecologist, and essayist, Wendell Berry.

Much of the public part of the affair was impromptu in nature. Formal papers were read in the morning hours, and a slide presentation with previously prepared sound track was presented at an evening of tributes that constituted the climax of the whole; but most of what went on had the character of genuine spontaneity, that gracious fire which sometimes kindles and glows when talented people of like mind and temper can pause to take joy in one another's company. Readers will recognize but regret that there can be no record of the fueling of friendship's fire that went on over the breakfast table during those two days, in hotel suites after hours, when the guests took time out to hear debates among the candidates in the 1980 presidential election, and in the drawing rooms of those who played evening host to the visitors, among them Governor and Mrs. John Y. Brown, Jr. and President and Mrs. Otis A. Singletary; but thanks to modern devices the record of what was said formally and informally in the public appearances remains and is here presented, at least in part, for admirers now and admirers in years to come who could not join the party even as spectators.

The first group of materials is a collection of tributes read or simply spoken impromptu by the group of special guests to a large audience in Seay Auditorium on the second evening, and these conclude with a wholly impromptu speech by Mr. Warren himself, who later said that he always liked to have the last word. These are followed by Professor Grimshaw's more formal tribute, which was read the next morning. After that come R.B. Heilman's reminiscences of Warren and then a panel discussion at which Warren and his friends took a retrospective glance at seventy-five years of American literature. The collection concludes with the voice of Warren himself captured earlier in a series of interviews with David Farrell, which served as the basis of the slide-tape presentation. Susan Emily Allen compiled the text for this presentation and later shaped it into an article; Mary Byrd Davis prepared for publication the tapes of the evening program and of the panel discussion.

Near the end of the slide-tape presentation Warren speaks of using the summer of his seventy-fifth year to put the finishing touches on a book that might serve as a birthday present for himself. "In case nobody remembers," suggested Mr. Farrell with delicate irony, and Warren in all seriousness replied, "in case nobody remembers." It is a fitting last word indeed. Kentucky did



Cleath Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Phyllis George, Eleanor Clark and Gov. John Y. Brown, Jr. at Cave Hill Place, Lexington, 28 October 1980. Courtesy of Kentucky State Department of Tourism

remember, of course, and will go on remembering. Such gifts as R. P. Warren has given are not stuff to be noted and forgotten.