

Citation for William S. Merwin
Class of 1944
For Distinguished Service Award

“Rise up, undaunted, blissful, sleeping world;
Thy war-scarred face we challenge to be free.
Where conquerors oft their legion terrors hurled,
We dare to give thee peace and liberty.”

These are the first four lines of a poem written for the Wyoming Seminary Class of 1944 by William S. Merwin and first presented during the Senior Class Exercises on June 5th, 1944 in the school’s centennial year. Though the poem is short and reflects the class’ reaction to World War II, it also is an early indication of the talent that would one day carry William Merwin to the very top of the poetry world.

While poetry is the venue in which he has received the most acclaim, William also is highly regarded for his prose work and his ability to translate the poetry of Latin, French and Spanish poets. He recently completed a travel book and a translation of an ancient story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and two years ago translated a portion of Dante’s “Divine Comedy” for a book titled “Purgatorio.”

William has said he began writing early in life, creating hymns for his Presbyterian minister father when he was only five years old. He continued to develop his talent while at Sem and later as a student at Princeton University. From the late 1940s to the mid 1970s he traveled widely, living in Europe, Mexico and the United States, and striking up friendships with such notable writers as Robert Graves, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Adrienne Rich and Donald Hall. His early poetry, possibly influenced by the medieval poems he was translating, was formal and neoclassical in style, often featuring animals and legendary or mythological themes. His 1960 volume, titled “The Drunk In The Furnace,” indicated a shift away from formality to the more fluid and irregular style, marked with a lack of punctuation that he is known for today.

With nearly fifty books of poetry, prose and translation to his credit, William’s work is now considered to be among the most widely read and imitated in America. In a 1997 article the Atlantic Monthly noted that his poems have appeared in their pages more frequently than those of any other poet. Fans and critics consider him to be a profoundly anti-imperialist, pacifist and environmentalist voice in the arts, and his work reflects his concern for the separation between animals and humans and the destruction that humans cause to the environment as a result.

As a poet, writer and translator, William Merwin has had a profound impact on American arts and letters. He continues to travel, to write and to express his praise for the natural world around him. Passionately concerned about the environment, he and his wife Paula maintain a botanical preserve of rare and endangered tropical trees and plants.