

NEWS

of the National Humanities Center

PLUS



What Was in the Air

When the National Humanities Center planned for the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the dedication of the Archie K. Davis Building on March 25, Deputy Director Kent Mullikin asked five former fellows to reflect on their time at the Center—to recall “what was in the air,” what fellows talked about over coffee, at lunch, in seminars, and who were some of the memorable people doing the talking. Wye Jamison “Wendy” Allanbrook (Mellon Fellow 1986–87; William J. Bouwsma Fellow 2003–04), Anthony J. La Vopa (MacArthur and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow 1983–84; Fellow 1998–99), Colin A. Palmer (Fellow 1989–90; Trustee), Anne Firor Scott (Commonwealth Fund Fellow 1983–84; Trustee Emerita), and Herbert “Chip” Tucker (Walter Hines Page Fellow of the Research Triangle Park Foundation/ National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow 2000–01) accepted the invitation. Excerpts from Allanbrook’s and Scott’s comments appear below.

Anne Firor Scott

When Kent asked me to take part in this reminiscence I had a vague idea that it would be interesting to look back to that early day when the Center was only in its third year—and reflect on what a great experience it had been.

Confident I could do that—for memory painted the year with a rosy glow—I turned to my long-running journal (which reaches back to 1939 and forward to this morning) and a work diary that I had instituted in 1976, and kept sporadically, when I had time for systematic research and writing.

What I found in these sources was not quite what I expected as I read what I wrote at the time. My first reaction was—Oh dear, I can’t tell them that. Then I remembered Montaigne, who once wrote, “I tell the truth, not so much as I know but so much as I dare... and I dare a little more every year,” and Ellen Douglas, who called a book *Truth Now That I Am Old Enough to Tell It*. And I was emboldened to try to follow their example.

Of course my memories do not all prove to be wrong, but the reality recorded at the time was more complicated. Applying for a fellowship I had

written, thinking it was so, that I was ready to write a book. That I had the material in hand and with a year of freedom from other responsibilities a manuscript would emerge. What optimism THAT was...

Sitting alone in a study with no distractions facing a typewriter—now you know how long ago it was—can be intimidating. Also, my plan was flawed. At first I tried the impossible task of combining two major themes in one book. Soon I had a bear by the tail. Like Penelope at her loom I wrote drafts one day and ripped them up the next morning. On October 29 I wrote a despairing note: “The discouraging thing is that the more one learns the clearer it is how much there is to learn.” There was a lot of despair in November and December.

It was January before I could write that I had begun to have a glimmer of how the book might really take shape, adding “If I can hold on to it (the glimmer, that is) perhaps a book will emerge.” Things began to look up. That was a bit premature. The book did finally emerge five years later after a year at the other center in Palo Alto, too far from home for phone calls, and when—learning from this experience—I eschewed travel and other distractions, at least to a point. It is important to know that that year would never have been so effective without the experience of the year here.

Wendy Allanbrook

As one who is almost through her second stay, I ought to say a few words about the continuities and changes between those two classes. What struck me first—or more truthfully, what struck me after I got used to the outrageous fact that someone else was inhabiting my old office—was the extraordinary continuity, a continuity ensured by this brilliant building, lovingly tended by Corbett Capps, that can’t help but be the star of the show. It is a building cunningly conceived to serve a particular function—cunningly enough that both structure and function have thrived over twenty-five years with almost no need for change. This building doesn’t get old for me: I still get a thrill out of the giddy perspectives one gets when walking the second-floor ramps, and feel compan-

ioned by the deliciously ominous creaking of the frame, like the rigging of a ship, on solitary Sunday afternoons. To the returning fellow the building seems to promise that, no matter what the differences, the enterprise is still the same, and work will get done.

As for the inevitable minor differences, there is one thing I have missed this year, something that back then brought us closer together as scholars—the occasional Wednesday lunch talks. Anyone who wanted to could sign up to give a 30-minute paper, and on the appointed Wednesday we would all carry our lunch trays into the seminar room. These conversations provided us with a sense, beyond the longer, rarer formal lectures, of what other fellows were thinking. I remember Lee Mitchell talking about moral luck in Henry James, Marta Petruszewicz talking about her favorite Calabrian bandits, the brilliant Indian art historian Brijen Goswamy most lubriciously describing lubricious Indian paintings, to a room hanging on every word. We would stay around afterward and talk; it was a good moment in the week. When I mentioned this to a fellow of this year, she replied wisely that these days there already seems to be more than enough to do. Papers to give and hear at other institutions, the e-mail umbilicus, the brutal job market preoccupying many younger fellows, the call of family (there are more and younger women scholars in this class, which is a welcome trend, and one mustn’t forget the committed fathers)—all these things apply a centrifugal force that forces more flights from the Center. Did we really lead more tranquil lives in 1986? I suspect so, so the one thing I would change is perhaps the one thing not in my power to effect. Or if I did have the power, it would turn us too radically away from the world we all must occupy, and the Center, no matter the haven it offers us as scholars, cannot want to do that.