IN MEMORIAM

John Paterson
Professor of English, Emeritus
Berkeley
1923 — 2002

John Paterson came to the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley in 1956, earned tenure five years later, and was promoted to the full professorship in 1969. Even before earning his Ph.D. (University of Michigan, 1953), Paterson had published two articles, one on Hamlet, the other (in the Saturday Review), on postwar detective fiction. A few years of teaching at Princeton University preceded his coming to Berkeley; a professional move to be sure, but in personal terms, a pleasure and a relief. Once here, he began a career that earned him, in the years of his strength, esteem as a colleague, respect as a scholar, and admiration as a teacher. His service to the department and the University displayed his commitment to our students and to the world outside: for several years early on, he was an assistant dean in Letters and Science, and then, years later, ombudsman. For a time he served on the board of the campus chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. To viewers of KQED, the local public broadcasting television station, he was known as the host of its then weekly program, Books and Authors (1961-62). In 1980, Paterson received the highest honor the English department bestows on its own — he was invited to deliver the Charles Mills Gayley lecture, which he entitled “Edwardian London: Life and Letters.” On this occasion, Paterson brought forth the first fruits of the research that would later result in his third book, Edwardians: London Life and Letters, 1901-1914.

Paterson was fiercely committed to modern culture and not only to its literary monuments. His preferences in music, for example, extended from Brahms to the Beatles, from Stravinsky to the Sex Pistols and on to John Adams. Perhaps as the first in his family to go to college, Paterson was also energized by a powerful sense of the teacher’s mission — to convey to his students the liberating power, the imaginative and moral self-creation he himself discovered in the great achievements of modern culture. Among graduate students, Paterson was known (and by some, loved) for his personal support as well as professional mentoring. Most of his teaching was with undergraduates, and from these younger students especially he demanded the same authenticity of response that he himself experienced in the works he loved. In the words of one student (who nominated him for a distinguished teaching award), we may glimpse the intensity of the admiration he earned for this: “Mr. Paterson has the rare quality of caring about a student’s feeling in his work and communicating in such a way as to evoke honesty in writing and speaking. . . . He knows things, and students can recognize this, but he is never on another level, [hiding] behind his desk, behind his published works . . . He sees greatness in people, and thus, in even [his] students and their ideas.”

But nobody reading this tribute should mistake his faith in art or his discovery of “greatness in people” for a familiar sentimental humanism. Paterson’s was a fiercely skeptical and irreverent intelligence, and he could turn a satirical gaze upon books and authors and institutions, including this one. So it was that as dean and ombudsman, his sympathies were almost always with the student, and he often mounted a dogged and insistent defense of those who ran afoul of the University’s institutional rigidities. Paterson thought that the career of an academic was a fine thing, and he was always ready with the gentlemanly politeness the occasion required — but no more than the occasion required. And as a scholar, along with his positive responsiveness to all that he loved, he could direct a pitiless eye at the often fatuous intensities of the literary and artistic life. Precisely this capacity to admire achievement and to expose absurdity made his Gayley lecture the

memorable and pleasurable occasion it was for an audience not unfamiliar with elegant expression and spirited thinking.

Paterson's first major scholarly publication was his The Making of The Return of the Native (1960), a study of Hardy's manuscripts and what they reveal of the novel's imaginative development. Paterson's interest was profoundly stimulated by Hardy's pessimistic grandeur, never more powerfully than in an essay of 1959, "The Mayor of Casterbridge as Tragedy." Here Paterson argues that, alone among Hardy's Wessex microcultures (and perhaps in modern fiction), the citizens of Casterbridge live in a heightened, tragic world: "a Nature that was still a mystery and a miracle," predating our petty humanisms and Darwinisms where human actions still brought a just and inexorable response — in this way, and only thus, restoring dignity and meaning to human error and ill- doing. But if Paterson can see the grandeur, he also insists upon the sordidness that Hardy doesn't shrink from representing, the sheer nastiness of Mixen Lane and its (in Paterson's words) " imagery of damp and decay," its "corrupt and criminal past," its "brutalized populace bearing witness, like the pimps and whores of Measure for Measure." Paterson's penetration, powers of response, range of imagination and enviable prose were never better displayed.

His next project was a departure: ambitious, original and at least technically eccentric, having neither apparent center nor a conventionally progressive argument. The Novel as Faith: The Gospel according to James, Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf (1973) means to discover a theory of the modern English novel, not through the fictions themselves, but rather through the medium of that living, ongoing collateral theorizing with which many writers surround their work: deposits of unsystematic, impromptu theory lodged here and there in letters, prefaces, reviews, book margins, memoranda, diary entries and the like: six writers in six chapters, plus a lengthy epilogue. Here Paterson pretends humbly to cut and paste, but the voices he reconstructs in this way are something of a revelation and among the pure pleasures of the exercise: recognizably James or Woolf, but not quite as we have heard them before. For Paterson has made a symphony of all these voices, in whose music what is precisely and finally revealed is Faith, just as the book's title had promised: faith in the novel's power to reconcile its own contradictory formal and representational commitments, and thus, more sweepingly, faith in its power to be "a form of moral knowledge" in the modern world. The conclusion may be disputed; the argument itself is out of fashion; but the voice, the passion and commitment are essential Paterson. The New Yorker's reviewer (January 21, 1974) praised the author's urbanity and intellectual sophistication, and understood the book's significance to reside in its demonstration that the "the purpose of the modern novel is to help the common reader (or the common man) take himself seriously."

Edwardians: London Life and Letters, 1901-1914, Paterson's last published work, appeared after his retirement. It, too, gives us a chorus of contemporary voices making themselves heard through some 3000 (!) citations. The book is a cultural, even "behavioral" history: ignoring chronology, slicing through the period any which way in bold cross sections, from the sexual innovations of Bloomsbury to the social impact of the bicycle. Paterson fully indulges his manifest fondness for these first person testimonies, plus related high-level gossip. But what is new in Edwardians is the author's voice: ironic, even satiric in tone. It is now a highly stylized voice, making us feel the distance between the author acting as the historian of a place and a time, and his dramatis personae, whom he is free to undercut, patronize, expose. Here, for example, is how H. G. Wells looks in Paterson's satiric gunsight (the italics are ours): "What on earth did they see in the man? Short and slight and with small hands and feet, he was no henry lamb, no rupert brooke. But he had gusto and charm and 'limpid blue eyes' and perhaps, as he chose to believe, there did come from his flesh the sweet odor of violets."

The note of incredulity is delicious, and typical; the book as a whole is a mine of such pleasures; and finally, of course, very good history, too. Often Paterson would say that in doing this book he discovered his true calling as a journalist. The implied note of self- deprecation was entirely needless. Just how needless is immediately clear in Noel Annan's exuberantly positive account of Edwardians in the New York Review of Books (April 24, 1997): "Rejoicing in the title of emeritus professor, Paterson has thrown his cap and gown into a corner and written with gusto a shrewdly judged account of the new Edwardian novelists and playwrights... His book reminds one of fireworks on the Fourth of July; the jokes are excellent..." Enviable praise indeed for an academic author, and enviable notice! That Paterson in retirement should break out like this into fresh fields both humbles and encourages us.

John Paterson was married to Susanna Bromage in 1954. Together they raised six children, and these children have themselves come forth with 15 grandchildren, all nourished by John's love and delighted by the whimsicality with which he could show his joy in them. His close friendships included colleagues and

graduate students, a number of whom shared his sporting passions, especially for his beloved game of golf, which they played together for almost 30 years. A canny poker player, he was always an intense competitor, and despite several serious illnesses, a man of great physical strength. “There’s nothing more terrifying,” remarked a friend from his graduate student days, “than John Paterson charging the net.” But to his golfing partners, the sight of John Paterson hunkering down to make the long putt he needed to beat them for a dollar was equally menacing and a peculiar cause of joy in his presence. He always tried to hit the ball too hard to be the good golfer he wanted to be, but none of his partners could have enjoyed the game so much had they not had to contend with the ferocity of his wish to beat them. He was loved by his friends; by his family he was adored.

Richard Feingold
Andrew Griffin