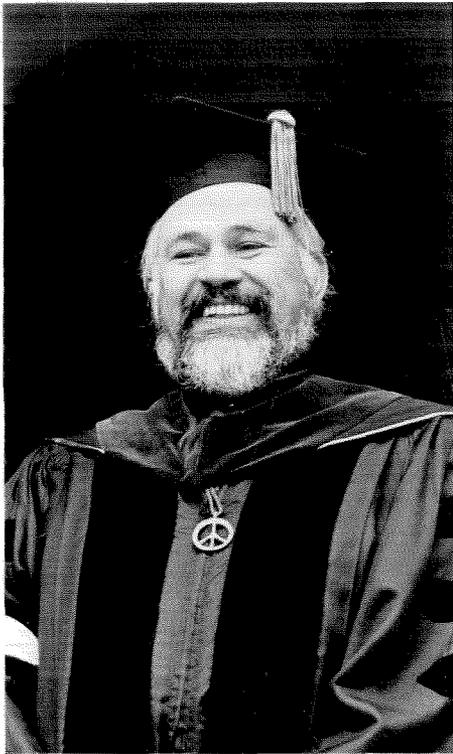


David R. Smith 1923-1990



Professor of Literature David R. Smith, a Caltech faculty member for more than three decades and a scholar of Joseph Conrad's works, died of cancer August 31, 1990. Born May 21, 1923, in Langdon, North Dakota, Smith earned his BA (1944) from Pomona College and MA (1950) and PhD (1960) from Claremont Graduate School.

A man of great physical vitality and appetite for life, Smith was an enthusiastic surfer and sailor. He served as a popular and irreverent master of student houses from 1969 to 1975, and founded Caltech's Baxter Art Gallery in 1970, nationally known for its "daring" exhibits of contemporary art. He directed the gallery for the first five years, and from 1980 until the gallery's demise in 1985 was chairman of its board of governors. In addition to scholarly works in his own field, notably his book *Preface to a Career: Conrad's Manifesto* (he was also editor of the journal *Joseph Conrad Today*), Smith contributed a number of essays to Baxter Art Gallery catalogs, and collaborated with his wife, Professor of French Annette Smith, on a published translation of *Mademoiselle Irnois and Other Stories* by Arthur de Gobineau.

Among the friends and colleagues who spoke at a memorial service in Dabney Lounge October 11, was Martin Webster (BS '37), cofounder of the Caltech literary group, an informal group of alumni and their spouses that has been meeting to read and discuss books for 37 years. David and Annette Smith acted as the group's mentors for 23 of those years. Diane Wakoski, University Distinguished Professor of English at Michigan State University (and lecturer

in English and poet in residence at Caltech in 1972), read her poem "For David." Smith was the author of a book on Wakoski's poetry, not yet published when he died.

Jack Miles, book editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, read from several documents Smith was reading, or writing, during his last months of life. Among them was the Cabeza de Vaca's 16th-century memoir of an "inward journey that took place during a harrowing outward journey," which found resonance in Smith's own situation, and which he and his wife were reading together. Annette Smith wrote about their last months: "Because David inscribed his death in a larger picture, with total compliance with the transience of the mortal world, it was a truly transcendent adventure, a terrific opening. We thought of it as an adventure—our last joint venture."

Miles also read from a letter Smith had written to a fellow ex-Marine, who was organizing a reunion of the men in his unit. Smith had served as a lieutenant, later captain, in the Marine Corps from 1942 to 1946, and saw action on Iwo Jima. His letter (with reference to Lt. George Todd, who, like Smith, was from Glendale) described the desperate nighttime attempt of 46 marines (of whom only 7 survived) to take a hill from the Japanese, part of an engagement known as Cushman's Pocket. They gained the hill but couldn't hold it.

"Because of the extreme pitch of the land, protection from the rear and the flanks was the hardest. And we paid the price, particularly as they were mostly behind us, and one son of a bitch among them was a first-rate



sharpshooter. Within minutes of the first light he killed my favorite among the men, a kid of 18; my sergeant; George—bullet between the eyes. It was instantaneous. And he got me in the solar plexus. The ironies abound, for if my rifleman was a kid of 18, George and I were kids of 22, though acting like men, and the sergeant a kid of 25. The bullet that hit me turned out not to have gone through, though I didn't know it at the time, as there was an exit wound on the rear quarter of my left side. It hit a button on my jacket, which broke it up and caused the core to go around my chest cage outside the ribs but inside the skin. Then came the mortars, which chewed up what was left of us. . . . We finally made it out, after several disastrous attempts, at night as we had come. . . . We had all been wounded for nearly 24 hours, had lost a great deal of blood. We were tired and getting slow. I was able to crawl on my back (couldn't crawl on my gut) along those deep tracks the tanks left in the volcanic sand. . . . I should like to add that being an officer in the Marine Corps, serving under Col. Robert L. Cushman, and, for that matter, serving in Cushman's Pocket have all been elements in a central core of pride that has governed my life these past 45 years."

Miles remarked on Smith's "considerable self-confidence, to which his identity as a marine officer contributed much," and added, "David Smith knew how to have a good time, as if we didn't know, and to show you a good time. And what's so special about that? How do we get from Iwo Jima to that? Just by way of the observation that a worried man doesn't either have or give much pleasure. David may often

enough have been irritated but he was never finally afraid. I take it that this was the gift of the bullet that entered his solar plexus, traveled the circumference of his rib cage, outside the bones but under the skin, and exited at the rear . . . —a survivor's unshakable sense of being among the lucky ones."

Mac Pigman, associate professor of literature, spoke of his friendship with Smith, which had begun even before Pigman arrived at Caltech as a young faculty member. He also noted his courage, although not on the battlefield. "The memory that stays with me the most is one of my last ones—of David when he was in the hospital. It was his first stay in the hospital, and so I was nervous visiting him because he was very ill. I knew that he was dying and he knew that he was dying, and I was anxious about what might or might not happen when we talked. I was impressed with the serenity and the courage with which he faced his death. He had the courage to feel the pain of losing his life at a time that he was flourishing as a scholar to a degree that he had perhaps not been until very recent years. He was losing his life at a time at which he was very much involved in so many activities, and yet he had the courage to talk about his feelings of loss." Pigman has taken over production of Smith's last work—a collection of essays Smith had edited, *Joseph Conrad's "Under Western Eyes": Beginnings, Revisions, Final Forms*, from a Conrad conference that Smith had held at Caltech last year.

David Smith's leadership and scholarship were also evoked by Eleanor Searle, the Edie and Lew Wasserman Professor of History and executive officer

for the humanities. In referring to Smith's own contribution to the forthcoming collection of essays, "that brilliant article about the 'K' in Conrad," she remarked that, "it was almost as if David talked to Conrad; it was almost as if he knew him. He went to the manuscript and found Conrad marking passages with the initial of his Polish surname. David could point out that it was there for a reason, that it was Conrad talking to Conrad. And David in doing this article was himself talking to Conrad. He had that wonderful scholarly ability of getting to the marrow of his subject. And as a colleague he got to the marrow of us all."

Another colleague, Professor of Literature Jenijoy La Belle, read several selections of poetry and ended with the final sentences of Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*:

Already the ship was drawing ahead. Nothing! no one in the world should stand now between us, throwing a shadow in the way of silent knowledge and mute affection.

Walking to the taffrail, I was in time to make out, on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the very gateway of Erebus—yes, I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny.

Donations to the David R. Smith Memorial Fund may be sent to Charlene Chindlund, Caltech 105-40, Pasadena, California 91125. □