

# A Beacon of Intellectual Light

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

**THE NAMES OF MARY ELLEN MILLER AND ROBERT PENN WARREN ARE CLOSELY LINKED TO MANY ON THE CAMPUS OF WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY AND TO THE LITERARY COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE.**

For more than 15 years, Miller has been a driving force in making the Robert Penn Warren Center what it is today. Yet she is modest about her many accomplishments, giving credit to others, particularly to Joy Bale Boone, the first chair of the Robert Penn Warren Center. She refers to herself and Joy as the “founding mothers” of the Center.

Robert Penn Warren, a distinguished scholar-writer, achieved fame as a poet, novelist, essayist, critic, and editor. His many awards included three Pulitzer Prizes: *All the King's Men* (Fiction, 1947), *Promises* (Poetry, 1958), and *Now and Then* (Poetry, 1979). In 1986 Robert Penn Warren was named as the first U. S. Poet Laureate, an honor confirming his stature as an outstanding poet.

Professor Miller describes Robert Penn Warren as “one of the most extraordinarily gifted writers and critics that the country has produced. He combined those extraordinary gifts with an amazing humility.”

The history of the Robert Penn Warren Center is a colorful one and one that Miller professes to be able to talk about for hours. “Robert Penn Warren was born in Guthrie, Kentucky, just 40 minutes down the road,” she said. “In the mid-80s the house where he was born was on the market, listed at \$34,000. Then-President Kern Alexander thought Western should buy it. He appointed Joy and me to head a committee to look into buying it and moving it here. After that, people in Guthrie decided they didn't want to let go of it, so they formed a committee to buy it and restore it.”

This turn of events sent the committee back to the proverbial drawing board and they decided to establish the Robert Penn Warren Center. The committee worked diligently, dedicating a room to Warren in Cherry Hall and establishing an annual symposium and The Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies.

Created in 1986, The Center honors Kentucky's native



son for his worldwide literary achievements and his dedication to education. The committee's annual activities include the presentation of an annual graduate fellowship to a qualified student for study of Warren's writing; the annual Robert Penn Warren Symposium that attracts scholars from across the nation; and the establishment and maintenance of the Robert Penn Warren Room and Robert Penn Warren Center. The Center publishes an annual journal, titled “rWp: A Robert Penn Warren Annual.”

“People in the literary world recognize Robert Penn Warren as quite possibly the most distinguished writer and critic this country has ever had,” Miller said. “One reason they do is because his literary criticism has affected the state of literature forever. He wrote both poetry and fiction and is the only writer ever to receive the Pulitzer Prize in both poetry and fiction. Perhaps his most famous work, *All the King's Men*, is something of a masterpiece.”

Miller said it is an honor that Western is in Robert Penn Warren's corner of the world. “Having his library and the symposium bring to this campus one of the most prestigious and important academic events of the year. Hav-

ing the kind of scholars we have on our advisory board and speakers we have each year have given us literary prestige in the country. We are proud to have these scholars at the symposium and proud to have them come here to conduct their research.”

According to Miller, the Warren Center and its many activities remind us of what a university is all about. “A university should be about learning the best there is to learn,” she said. “The Center stands as a literary beacon of intellectual light on this campus.”



Mary Ellen Miller

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