

## R. Merritt Cox (1939–1987), Pioneer of John Bowle Studies

There had been little scholarly attention given to John Bowle's landmark 1781 edition of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* when R. Merritt Cox entered graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, where he worked with Mack Singleton. His dissertation, "The Rev. John Bowle, First Editor of *Don Quixote*," on the figure called by Julio Casares the "verdadero fundador de la crítica erudita del *Quijote*," was published as *The Rev. John Bowle. The Genesis of Cervantean Criticism* (1971). This first book-length appreciation of Bowle's grand accomplishment was expanded during Cox's early faculty appointments, first at Wisconsin and then at Duke, and grew during his tenure at the College of William & Mary (1972-1987) into a companion volume dedicated to Vicar of Idmiston's life and publishing career, *An English Ilustrado: The Reverend John Bowle* (1977). The lasting contributions of these two monographs are well documented by the fresh research presented in this issue of *Cervantes*.

Merritt's roots in Richmond, Virginia—the second colonial-period capital of this Commonwealth after Williamsburg—were deep. A native son, he did his undergraduate work at the University of Richmond, and even after he decided on Spanish literature as his area of professional specialization he chose to focus on the same era as that of Virginia's pre-eminence in eighteenth-century America. That century is still the most neglected in Spanish literary studies, but Merritt laid out the intellectual territory for his

peers in solid volumes on the then still-undervalued authors *Tomás de Iriarte* (1972) and *Juan Meléndez Valdés* (1974), and finally in a comprehensive panorama of *Eighteenth-Century Spanish Literature* (1979). He also explored the political and literary relationships between Spain and the American Colonies during that formative century. His attainments as a researcher won him the distinction of becoming the youngest person ever elected a Corresponding Member of the Hispanic Society of America.

It's a little curious to compose a biographical note on a colleague who died sixteen years ago. Merritt was then a precocious eminence in my department, an admired researcher who was also a cherished friend gifted with a wickedly droll sense of humor and a passion for his adopted century of study. He was honored even in historic Williamsburg for his purchase and loving restoration of an eighteenth-century home in Smithfield, Virginia. My memories are still fresh of the sudden onset of the cancer that finally took him and all the details of the quiet heroism that surrounded his final days. There was valid reason for disappointment in the medical care he received: lost X-rays never transmitted among his various doctors, a bothersome case of diverticulitis which led his physicians to stop checking on his incipient prostate cancer until it became systemic and untreatable. But Merritt never allowed his justified pique at some of his medical consultants to undermine his warm relations toward his friends, colleagues and students. Despite the uncontrollable growths attacking organs throughout his body, Merritt gamely hobbled the halls of our modern languages building as he doggedly continued to teach Spanish literature through his final semester. His partner, Dick Austin, supervised the streams of traffic through their household and sagely organized the troops of family and friends who delivered gifts of food, happy conversation laced with raunchy jokes, and words of fond encouragement day by day. Death came on yet another crisis trip to the hospital, but swiftly and without rancor.

After Merritt's passing, on July 2, 1987 at age 48, we gathered outdoors in a Richmond cemetery under an oppressive heat,

fogged and unfocused and hoping to feel his spirit one last time. The presider was no help at all: a stray Baptist minister who had visited his room during one of Merritt's hospitalizations and who admitted during his remarks that they had only met once—and not by any invitation from the patient. His words were generic and saccharine, and not at all what would have comforted us, until he stumbled into a delicious misquotation from (of all things) Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." We were told that although they had never met before, their sole conversation had allowed the minister and "Ralph" (as he continued to call him, to our distress) "to speak of many things, of cabbages and queens." Merritt's intimates, both gay and straight, desperately avoided each other's gaze for fear of breaking into howls of laughter on the spot, something we did with joyful relief later on as we conducted our own memorials over drinks.

Merritt died as a true Alonso Quijano el Bueno after a life of noble striving, stumbles which never defeated him, and even a mock theatrical funeral service which left his admirers grinning at the transcendent humor of it all.

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Merritt and I met in 1971, when he was at Duke and I at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This was the time when, after an article in the UNC-based *Studies in Philology*, the UNC Press published his first book on Bowle. Merritt and I shared stories about our mistreatment by our respective institutions—he telling me, incredibly, how Richard Predmore had

asked if he knew enough about Cervantes to teach a course on him. We were both on the job market simultaneously, and he turned down, on Ted Beardsley's good advice, an offer at City College of New York—subsequently offered to me, seven years Merritt's junior and at that time without a published book. Merritt went to William and Mary, and I lasted one year at CCNY, in the midst of New York City's bankruptcy and severe and open intradepartmental warfare.

Merritt and I had more contact when I edited Bowle's correspondence with Thomas Percy, and Merritt was very generous in sharing both materials and his expertise. In fact the project would have never happened, would never even been thought of, but for Merritt. He had a microfilm of the Bowle letterbooks from Cape Town, and he let me have it copied. I was offered Merritt's work materials after his death, but they never arrived and now cannot be located.

Merritt and I saw each other at MLA meetings, and I recall his frustration that Bowle's edition of *Don Quijote* could not be reprinted, a frustration that grew after the 1977 facsimile of the Academia's 1780 edition. Some steps toward this end have been made: a microfilm of Bowle's edition can now be purchased, and a digital facsimile will be available from the Proyecto Cervantes.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Merritt's dream of a reprint on paper will become possible in 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> For information on these resources, see note 3 of my article in this issue.