

## Three Memorials: Rushworth M. Kidder, John Edwin Cowen, and Robert Wegner

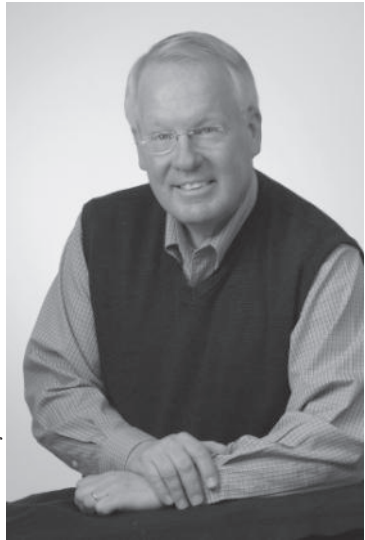
Michael Webster

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In 2012, we lost three outstanding Cummings scholars, writers, and teachers: Rushworth M. Kidder, John Edwin Cowen, and Robert Wegner. All three taught at the university level, but their lives were certainly not defined or contained by the academy. Two (Kidder and Wegner) wrote books on Cummings and two (Cowen and Wegner) were creative writers. In addition to their work on Cummings, two (Kidder and Cowen) also published criticism of the poet Dylan Thomas.

### Rushworth M. Kidder (1944-2012)

Rushworth Kidder's professional life had three phases: scholar, journalist, and ethicist. After receiving his Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University, he taught English for 10 years at Wichita State University. Kidder's dissertation was titled "Religious Imagery in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas." In 1973, it was published as a book, *Dylan Thomas: The Country of the Spirit*. Kidder's academic work then turned to Cummings. In the '70s, he published four articles on Cummings' artwork, as well as a pioneering study of the manuscripts of "Buffalo Bill 's." In 1979, he published the still massively useful *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, Kidder's interest in Thomas and Cummings was sparked by "their capacity for writing poems of praise without cynicism or sentimentality."



**Rushworth M. Kidder**

In the same year he published his introduction to Cummings' poetry, Kidder joined the staff of the *Christian Science Monitor*, a paper to which he had already contributed freelance articles. Kidder worked first as the newspaper's London correspondent, and later as features editor and a columnist. Some of his columns were collected in the volume *In the Backyards of Our Lives and Other Essays* (1992). Kidder was remembered at

the *Monitor* for his wide-ranging intellect: for example, in 1988, he wrote an award-winning five-part series on quantum physics (Yemma). The *New York Times* noted that Kidder's "interest in ethics was partly inspired by a series of interviews he did for The *Monitor* with leading thinkers like the historian Barbara W. Tuchman" (Martin). The *Monitor's* obituary of Kidder notes that he was "a skilled pianist" who loved the arts. He would also occasionally remind staff writers that in spite of Cummings' lower-case reputation, his initials should be written in capital letters.

In 1990, Kidder founded the Institute for Global Ethics, "one of the world's leading voices on corporate and educational ethics" ("In Memoriam"). Kidder's work focused on practical ethics, and found expression in speeches, books, columns, and seminars. He also commented for news stories. When asked to comment on the propriety of having disgraced former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich give a lecture on ethics in politics at Northwestern University, Kidder noted that Blago was "the logical and inevitable outcome of a society that has refused to educate the next generation about values, ethics and character. As such, he's the perfect outcome of our ethical indifference and a role model for the next generation" (qtd. in Warren). The Institute that Kidder founded "carries on [his] work through regular seminars and workshops, a Center for Corporate Ethics in New York, and publication of Ethics Newline, an internet-based ethics digest for which he wrote a weekly column for more than 14 years" ("In Memoriam"). *The Christian Science Monitor* noted that Kidder saw "ethics as an intercultural language to help people deal with challenges that in another age might have been settled by clerical decree or codes of conduct. He often noted that when faced with the choice of meting out justice or showing mercy, the world benefits more from mercy" (Yemma).

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**John Edwin Cowen (1941-2012)**



**John Edwin Cowen at Louie's Charcoal Pit,  
Teaneck, NJ, June 2012**

On September 6, Robert King wrote to say that John Edwin Cowen had died. Robert said that John had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer that “was merely controlled by chemo.” On August 23, while on vacation at his house in Florida, John suffered a massive hemorrhage, was taken to the hospital, and died there the same day. John never mentioned his illness to me. He did, however, e-mail me at the end of July to say that he was “writing poetry again after a brief hiatus” and that he would “send a small batch to you once I’m satisfied with them and they’ve fermented.”

John was extremely pleased to have published two books of poetry within two years after a lifetime of publishing scattered poems in little magazines, including, of course, *Spring*. The first, *Mathematics of Love* (2011), is something of a collected works volume. (Five poems from this collection were published in the last issue of *Spring*. See also Robert Dorsett’s review of *Mathematics of Love* in this issue.) In an interview with the *Teaneck Patch*, Cowen said of the timing of his book’s publication: “I just felt I had enough poems out there that I felt pleased with, and so if I hadn’t published until this point in time, so be it” (Pinto). John’s second book of poetry, *Poems from Dylan’s Wales*, “written feverishly at a great pace” (Distler), was sparked by his visit to the International Poetry Festival in Swansea, Wales, in 2011. Peter Thabit Jones says in his foreword to the

book that “John, using various poetic forms and always aware of the possibilities of language, the power of the individual word, truly evokes a visitor’s—and a poet at that—vision of the well-known places connected with the legend of Dylan Thomas. John focuses on the obvious and the less obvious, to quote Dylan, ‘the dismays and rainbows’ ” (11). In this issue of *Spring*, we feature six poems from this book.

True to his mentor and teacher José Garcia Villa, John’s criticism focuses on lyricism. In “E. E. Cummings’ Lyricism Today,” he astutely notes that both Cummings’ visual and his more song-like poems “begin with the sing and swing of language. . . . His language dances linguistically and visually, serving as a scaffolding to build a poem that reverberates in the senses while stimulating thought” (87). This notion of a formal yet energized music John learned from Garcia Villa. In the *Teaneck Patch* interview, John said that “Villa taught me that there are three major principles for poetry: poetry must have an excellence in form, poetry must be lyrical, and poetry must not be prose.” In fact, he said, “it’s the linguistic force that drives the poem and not meaning first. The poet discovers meaning through that linguistic force” (qtd. in Pinto).

John was a teacher in Teaneck, NJ, for over 30 years, beginning as an English teacher at Benjamin Franklin Middle School, moving on to Teaneck High School, and eventually becoming the Assistant Superintendent of the Teaneck Public Schools. “After his retirement, he continued as Professor of Literacy and Education in the Graduate Division of the Peter Sammartino School of Education, Fairleigh Dickinson University, NJ; he earned his Doctorate at Teacher’s College, Columbia University” (“Obituary”).

For the special Norman Friedman tribute issue of *Spring* (14-15), John wrote a poem in homage to Norman (and also, I think, to Cummings). Organized in four stanzas, one for each season, the poem ends like this:

we of winter more fallow like  
than they in lifelessness acquired  
who better than we in noone’s  
life than i am you are we are *spring*

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**Robert E. Wegner (1929-2012)**



**Robert Wegner and Bernard Stehle at Joy Farm**

Despite having lived in the same state for years, I never met (I am sorry to say) Robert Wegner. However, I've long admired his work on Cummings, especially his interpretation of "Buffalo Bill 's" in *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings*. In his review of that book, Norman Friedman noted that "it offers useful interpretations of Cummings's development, of his conception of 'failure' and 'nothing,' of his sense of tragedy, of the relation between satire and love, as well as illuminating readings of certain poems" (262). After his book, Wegner published in *Spring* an article on Cummings' "charged onomatopoeia," as well as the delightful and instructive "Wegner Miscellany" in *Spring* 5 (1996). From that miscellany, I find his account of his visit to Cummings to be priceless.

With the permission of his daughter Julie Wegner Arnold, we reprint here the greater portion of the obituary published in *The Morning Sun* (Midland, MI) on September 23, 2012:

**Robert Ernst Wegner**

March 1, 1929-Sept. 12, 2012

Robert E. Wegner, Ph.D., of Vestaburg, passed away at home on Wednesday, September 12, 2012 at the age of 83. Though he suffered from advancing dementia in his latter years, he led an

active, productive, and fulfilling life. Robert was born on March 1, 1929, to Ernst R. and Esther (Strebelow) Wegner in Cleveland, Ohio. He graduated from Lakewood High School, Ohio, and went on for advanced studies at Michigan State University (B.A.), the University of Iowa Writing Program, and Case Western Reserve University (M.A. and Ph.D.) in English. His early full-length critical study, *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings* (Harcourt, Brace & World 1965) made important contributions to understanding this American poet's achievement. He taught briefly at Wilmington College in Ohio before coming to Alma College in Michigan in 1957, where he was a faculty member in the English department for 34 years. Students in his classes will remember him as an engaging and challenging educator who called on them to think beyond familiar or standard responses to a writer's work—and to make full use of the power of language not just as an expressive tool but as a mode of genuine thinking and discovery. For many years he served as advisor to the student creative writing group, the Parnassians, convening students at his home to discuss works of student poetry and fiction. His own short fiction was published in a variety of venues including *The Carleton Miscellany* and *Esquire*. Perhaps his best-known story, "I'm Going Down to Watch the Horses Come Alive," was included in several collections of modern and contemporary fiction in the 1980s. He was editor, with James Tipton, of a collection entitled *The Third Coast: Contemporary Michigan Fiction* (Wayne State University Press, 1982). His most recent creative effort was a completed novel about an historical American Indian named Logan.

Robert survived cancer as a young man and throughout his life served as a source of support and encouragement to others who battled this disease. Anyone who knew him recognized his love for his dogs and the outdoors—and for the woods, lakes and streams of Michigan in particular. He was an avid camper and an accomplished trout fisherman. He enjoyed feeding the birds and deer. In 1970, he purchased a 160-acre tract of wooded land in central Michigan that included a trout stream. For 40 years this land has been his home and the site of outdoor gatherings of family and friends.

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Robert Wegner was among those members of the Cummings Society who visited Joy Farm and Silver Lake, NH in the summer of 1996. This visit is chronicled in both words and photos in an article in *Spring* 6 (1997) by Norman Friedman and David V. Forrest. We are pleased to reprint here a photo from this article, showing (as the caption reads) “Robert Wegner (left) and Bernard Stehle hold a drawing done by Cummings at the age of 12.”

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