

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY  
**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
 JOHN CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for John Christopher Middleton, professor emeritus, Germanic studies, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Hillary Hart, Secretary  
 General Faculty and Faculty Council

**IN MEMORIAM  
 JOHN CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON**

John Christopher Middleton, poet, translator, distinguished professor at The University of Texas at Austin, passed away at age eighty-nine on November 29, 2015, in Austin, Texas. He was born in Truro, Cornwall, on June 10, 1926. His father was an organist and his mother a librarian, and quite aptly he devoted his life to the written word and had a profound love of music, especially that of Debussy, Ravel, and Mompou. At an early age, he fell in love with Greek and Latin literature, a love that later extended to modern European literature, especially German and French. Having attended Felsted School, Essex, Middleton served in the RAF from 1944 to 1948. He subsequently studied German and French at Merton College, Oxford, where he earned both a B.A. (in 1951) and a Ph.D. (in 1954). He taught at the University of Zurich and King's College London before he came to UT Austin.

Middleton joined the faculty of the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of Texas in 1966. He arrived early in a golden era of the humanities at the University under President Harry Hunt Ransom and Department Chair Winfred Lehmann. Germanic languages was a melting pot of prominent faculty and visitors. From 1966 to 1976, the department hosted twenty-seven visiting writers, poets, scholars from Germany, Scandinavia, Holland and elsewhere, including Hans Bender, Heinrich Böll, Barbara König and Lars Gustafsson, to mention a few. Many were attracted to the prospect of spending a semester or more in Austin because of Christopher's presence. Middleton became professor emeritus in 1998.

Middleton was interested in the inter-war period and also the poetry of such writers as Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Celan. He produced many fine translations of their poetry and that of others over the years, including selected poems by the recently deceased Swedish poet Lars Gustafsson in the collection *The Stillness of the World before Bach* in 1988. He introduced the Swiss writer Robert Walser to English readers. Middleton received the Schlegel-Tieck Translation Prize in 1987. Middleton's translations extended beyond French and German. He also translated Oktay Rifat from Turkish and some medieval Andalusian poets from Arabic by way of Spanish. Literally, too, Middleton was an enthusiastic traveler, and he traveled frequently to France, Germany, and Turkey and made trips to visit his daughters Sarah and Miranda and his son Benjamin.

But Middleton was first and foremost a poet, producing thirty volumes of poetry, beginning in 1944. In 1964, he received the prestigious Geoffrey Faber memorial prize for *Torse 3: Poems 1949-61*. His prominence is attested to by his inclusion in *Penguin Modern Poets 4* (Penguin, 1963) and the widespread interest in his poetry readings, which he gave at various venues in the United States and abroad. He continued writing poetry right up to his death. His seven-hundred and thirty-two page *Collected Poems* was published in 2008, in response to which August Kleinzahler wrote, "Middleton is amongst the most consistently inventive, original, and audacious of the so-called 'experimental' or 'innovative' poets of these past twenty-five years." That volume was followed in 2014 by *Collected Later Poems*, a work of four-hundred and twenty-four pages. Middleton has been praised for his distinctive combination of erudition and playfulness, his "lively juxtapositions" (Brian Swann), and his meticulous efforts to construct poetic structures specifically suited to their particular subject matter.

Middleton's formal experimentation extended to other forms besides poetry. He was a maker of collages, forty of which he exhibited with texts at Laguna Gloria Art Museum in 1982. His prose writings, exemplified in his 2014 collection, *Loose Canons: Selected Prose*, are, in the words of John Yau "unclassifiable." Yau observes, "He is both

scholarly and innocent and doesn't privilege one above the other. Each of the thirty-three pieces in *Loose Cannons* contains something marvelous. Each of his sentences is a seamless synthesis of perception, information and music."

Along with Lars Gustafsson, Middleton was a member of the German Akademie der Künste in Berlin. In 2001, Middleton was a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, where his stay coincided with that of the prolific young American composer Michael Hersch. Hersch was inspired by Middleton's poetry to write a massive, two-hour solo piano cycle.

Middleton and The University of Texas at Austin went through a lengthy and successful struggle to have a negative residence permit decision overturned not long after his arrival at the University. Middleton never let an opportunity for a witty reply pass without his input: in 1969 from Germany, he responded to the chair of Germanic languages on the question of an elected departmental budget committee: "an elected and representative syndicate ... would have a chance ... of creating a livelier and freer climate for students to work in ... than a patriarchal enlightened dictatorship. I prefer Bakunin to Plato, except on Sundays (when I prefer Kropotkin)." The titles of some of his books reveal his wit, inventiveness and sense of pedantic play: *Pataxanadu*, *Carminalenia*, *Two Horse Wagon Going By*, *The Lonely Suppers of W.V. Balloon*, *Torse 3*, and "Parthenogenesis In Charcoal" (a story). But most especially one finds his characteristic sensibility in his poetry. We close with one from his last collection.

#### For a Minute

Unicorn, leopard in Ash Wednesday,  
 mole, donkey, lizard and dog,  
 relish me, relish me fast and soon;  
 I'll sing of you, carp, to Poulenc's tune,  
 parked in a pond or the Caspian Sea  
 beasts of my tiny time, make free  
 to relish me, feeling in life at home,  
 bite for a minute, close to the bone.

From "Nobody's Ezekiel"

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors John Weinstock (chair), Kathleen Higgins, and David Wevill.

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