

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on March 11, 2003,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late William Alfred  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## WILLIAM ALFRED

BORN: August 16, 1922

DIED: May 20, 1999

William Alfred—tutor, professor, playwright, poet, legend—was born in New York City on August 16, 1922, to Thomas Allfrey Alfred and Mary Bunyan Alfred. Among his early memories of growing up in New York was being taken to the theater by his parents to watch from the balcony as some of the greatest comedians and dramatic artists of the day performed. Bill took his Bachelor of Arts degree at Brooklyn College, a place and an experience that remained precious to him throughout his life. In later years he recalled, “Entering the rear-gate down a gauntlet of activists, America Firsters through aspiring Spartacists, all shaking their daily library of smudged broadsides, I rightly felt the exhilaration of passing out of the narrows of childhood into the open flood of life.”

When the United States entered World War II, Bill left college to serve in the Army for four years, returning to complete his undergraduate work in 1948. He entered graduate school at Harvard to specialize in the literature of Medieval England, received his doctorate in 1954, and in the same year was appointed an Instructor in the Department of English. He was tenured in 1963 and was named Abbot Lawrence Lowell Professor of the Humanities in 1980.

While teaching courses in Anglo-Saxon literature and language, modern drama, and playwrighting, Bill always sustained his love affair with the stage and continued to write. In 1954 he published a blank verse adaptation of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, after which he was named Amy Lowell Travelling Poetry Scholar in 1956 and Phi Beta Kappa Poet of Harvard University in 1957. In 1965 his play *Hogan’s Goat*, a depiction of Irish-American family and political life in the 1890’s, began a long and successful run on Broadway. Featuring Bill’s longtime friend Faye Dunaway, the play was given a New York Drama Desk Award, The Theater Club Award, a National Catholic Dramatic Conference Award, and was named Play of the Year in 1966. A musical version of *Hogan’s Goat*, retitled *Cry For Us All*, opened on Broadway in 1970.

In 1988 Bill received the Signet Society Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts. He was a member of the Dramatists’ Guild and served on the poetry panels of the National Book

Award and the Pulitzer Prize Committee.

None of Bill's laudable public achievements tell the full story of the person. While devoted to his students and to his duties as a teacher, Bill was not an institutional man. Large formal meetings and administrative details could not compete for his attention with *Beowulf* or the poetry of his friend Robert Lowell or the inquisitiveness of a really smart and persistent sophomore. It is unlikely that his colleagues ever saw him at a Faculty Meeting because it is unlikely that he ever attended one. His tutorials – held not in a Harvard building but in his house on Athens Street – became a famously unique mixture of conversation, dramatic and poetic readings, reminiscences of Brooklyn, avuncular wisdom, Irish jokes, and tea. He liked to recall the lines of the poet J. Stair, “All the questions answered, / And still time for tea.” The legions of students – aspiring poets and playwrights, medievalists and modernists – who found their way to Athens Street found a witty, learned, erudite, and entertaining professor and – even more rare – a compassionate friend.

Bill Alfred was an inspiring lecturer who wove images in the air as he spoke and he was a good enough storyteller to be on stage himself. Yet he was in some ways an extremely private man. It was impossible not to notice him crossing the Yard with old battered fedora pulled down over his eyes and his green book bag slung over his back like the sack of a medieval pilgrim. The hat seemed to say, “If you are a dean or department chair, you'll think that I am too eccentric to be of any use to you. However, if you are a poet or actor, you'll know that this is an invitation to talk.”

One more essential element of Bill Alfred's life was his religious faith. Through good and bad times, without boast or apology, he went every morning to mass at Saint Paul's Church. He sat alone, always in the same pew, absorbed in prayer, as the poet wrote, in “A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything).” To the homeless waiting outside, he was known as The Professor, not the great lecturer or famous playwright, but the good man who was always free with a handout. In “The Skilled Poet,” a poem dedicated to Bill by Seamus Heaney, there is a reference to one who “quickened the life” in all that he encountered.

William Alfred died on May 20, 1999. He is survived by a half-brother Vincent, a cousin Alison, and his foster son Donald Bourasa.

Respectfully submitted,

Larry Benson  
Robert Brustein  
Daniel Donoghue  
Robert Kiely, Chair