

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on February 12, 2002, the following Minute was placed upon the records.

WILLIAM LAMBERT MORAN

Born: August 11, 1921

Died: December 19, 2000

William Lambert Moran was born in Chicago on August 11, 1921. In 1935 the family moved to Columbus, Ohio, where as a schoolboy Moran fell in love with languages, first with Latin, and then with Greek. At age eighteen, Moran entered the Jesuit order. He received his undergraduate education at Loyola University in Chicago, graduating with a B.A. in Classics, after which, for a few years, he taught Latin and Greek in a Cincinnati high school.

Encouraged by his order to pursue biblical studies, in 1947 Moran enrolled in a doctoral program under the legendary William Foxwell Albright at Johns Hopkins, and received the Ph.D. three years later. Moran's dissertation was a syntactical study of a corpus of Akkadian texts from the fourteenth century BCE that formed part of the international correspondence of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten. The letters studied by Moran were sent to the pharaoh from a Canaanite vassal city. Although ostensibly written in Babylonian, the lingua franca of the time, they exhibited a very peculiar grammar that had stumped interpreters for decades. In a brilliant analysis, Moran showed that although the vocabulary of the texts was Babylonian, the grammar was actually that of the Canaanite spoken by the writers of the letters, a language very much like a precursor to Biblical Hebrew. In a flurry of articles in the 1950s, Moran helped revolutionize the study of Biblical Hebrew by showing how the study of these arcane cuneiform texts could explain obscure features in the grammar of the earliest biblical texts.

After his doctoral work, Moran continued his theological education, receiving the degrees of Master of Theology and Master of Sacred Scripture. He spent summers, and one full academic year, at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, studying Assyriology and Semitic linguistics, and working on the great "Chicago Assyrian Dictionary."

In 1958, having completed his theological training, Moran was appointed Professor of Old Testament Exegesis at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, where for the next eight years he lectured on biblical Hebrew and on Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah—all in Latin, as was the rule at the time. This was not a great burden for him; during the several years of his theological training in Rome, all conversation, except for one hour a day, had been conducted in Latin. One year, for the remaining hour each day, Moran characteristically organized a conversational classical Greek table. While on the faculty of the Institute, Moran served as the editor of two monograph series and as the associate editor of the journal "Biblica," for which he would annually write up to a dozen book reviews. From 1963 to 1966, he was Dean of the Oriental Faculty at the Institute.

During this period, in addition to further studies on the early Canaanite language and its relationship to Hebrew, Moran also found time to publish important articles in the fields of Old Testament studies and Assyriology.

In 1966 Moran accepted an appointment at Harvard as Professor of Assyriology. He taught all levels

of Akkadian language and texts, mostly to graduate students, but occasionally to an intrepid undergraduate or two. He was also an enthralling lecturer, and taught a popular undergraduate course on ancient Mesopotamian history and culture. He was an inspiring teacher. In first-year Akkadian, to be sure, what he mostly inspired was anxiety, as he would stand behind students, Jesuit-high-school-teacher-style, as they nervously read their cuneiform signs. But in seminars and in undergraduate courses, what he inspired was a passion to understand the text, the literature, the culture, and the spirit of the language as deeply as possible.

Moran was a superb philologist. For nearly half a century he was recognized as the leading authority on the language and interpretation of the Canaanite Akkadian texts, and he published a magisterial translation of the entire corpus that immediately became the standard. But his greatest intellectual love was literature, especially poetry, from classical to modern. When at length he turned with his vast reading to the literature of ancient Mesopotamia, he saw depth that few others had seen before. No one wrote more insightfully or eloquently about the Epic of Gilgamesh and its view of the human condition; he called it “a document of ancient humanism.” And no one wrote more knowingly about the poetics of Mesopotamian texts: about how they worked as literature.

For many years Moran was an active associate of Leverett House. His keen interest in seeking the company of other scholars, especially in the Classics and the history of religion, was an important part of his intellectual life. In recognition of his wide-ranging scholarship, in 1985 Moran was appointed the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities. In 1996 he was made a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

By the time of his arrival in Cambridge, Moran had begun to distance himself from his religious order. Not long after arriving, he met and fell in love with Suzanne Drinker Funkhouser. They were married in 1970, beginning a wonderful partnership for the next three decades. To his five step-children Bill became a devoted father.

As a human being Bill Moran was simply one of the best. A wonderful friend, he was a modest, self-deprecating man of many and great passions, who loved to talk about literature, politics, dogs, and above all, sports; sidelined by an early football injury, he was one of the great fans of college and pro football and basketball, who could replay entire games he had seen decades earlier.

After his retirement from Harvard in 1990, Bill and Suzie moved to an ancient, welcoming house outside of Brunswick, Maine, where he continued his work on the literature of Mesopotamia. He also returned eagerly to the study of the Classics and of literature, immersing himself in Homer, Horace, Dante, and Virginia Woolf.

Bill Moran died on December 19, 2000. He is survived by his beloved wife, Suzie, and by his step-children and their families.

Respectfully submitted,

Tzvi Abusch
Frank Moore Cross
Jo Ann Hackett

Peter Machinist
Piotr Steinkeller
Zeph Stewart
Irene Winter
John Huehnergard, Chair