

In Memory of Robert J. Connors



In Memoriam: Robert J. Connors, 1951-2000

Patricia A. Sullivan

Bob Connors died early Thursday evening, June 22. He was driving home from the University of New Hampshire on his motorcycle when a late afternoon thunderstorm darkened the sky and then unleashed a fury of rain. Bob was struck by a young driver in a pickup truck only a mile from his house and died from his injuries en route to the hospital. Still conscious at the accident scene, he spoke to his wife Colleen on a cell phone. The last words she said to him were: “I love you. I’ll see you at the hospital in a few minutes.” As Colleen clutched me Friday morning, sobs wracking her body, she said, “Pat, I never imagined for one second that Bob would die!”

Who among us could have imagined that Bob Connors would die at forty-eight, with so much of life still ahead of him? Even as I write these words, two weeks after the funeral I attended with several hundred other mourners, I am struggling to accept the fact that he is gone.

Bob would say that I’m struggling with the wrong entity: facts are famously remiss—drearily empty—when it is meaning we need and seek. Bob knew this in his marrow. As a historical scholar, Bob Connors had a respect for fact, to be sure: he often labored for days in a university archive to uncover the precise data upon which a scholarly essay—some small mystery or wonder he was tracking—turned. But for Bob, it was what he and we might make of facts that mattered, and making them matter was the province of rhetoric—and Bob’s remarkable gift.

Bob’s affinity for the nineteenth century is legendary. Indeed, he attributed to “pure dumb luck” and to “karma, cruel bastard!” the great misfortune of his birth date: he was born a hundred years later than the schoolmasters, rhetoricians, public orators, and skilled artisans who were

his kindred spirits. He knew that for most of us the nineteenth century was little more than a crypt whose bones he was excavating on the chance that he might find something to instruct us or give us pause or even charm our jaded souls. But Bob himself *dwelled* in the nineteenth century—its moral sensibilities, its codes of discursive decorum, its latinate locutions, its aesthetic (especially its aesthetic), its prescriptions and proscriptions for a life of letters. I would venture to say that it was Bob's felt sense of existential dislocation—his inhabiting of two disparate eras—that gave rise to his singular and celebrated career as a historical scholar. He possessed not only a researcher's curiosity but an inborn need to connect the present with the past. His quest to discover how things were—from the social and civic milieus of oratory and written rhetoric to particular classroom practices and pedagogies—invariably began in the present. The vital question, he said, was, "How did things come to be this way?"

What Bob Connors made of the facts he gleaned so assiduously from archives often vexed colleagues who insisted on more contemporized, more consciously politicized accounts. He was far more comfortable than many of us were with the conclusions he rendered because he had a deep and abiding faith in historical reality: this happened, then this, for this reason. Even his appreciation of contingency and exigence, the narrative twists and turns of historiography, was infused with a desire to tell us something certain, something we could take away from his scholarship and say we know. His approach to history and its underlying epistemology placed him at odds with ideological theorists and historians like James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, Susan Miller, and Pat Bizzell. A walking anachronism (and self-professed antiquarian), he could never fully countenance ideologically inflected histories of rhetoric and composition. He eschewed postmodernism, social constructionism, anti-foundationalism, and to an appreciable extent, feminism. He was an unabashed, unrepentant essentialist. "How things came to be this way" applied to a complex web of social interactions, political circumstances, technological inventions, and pedagogical interventions, but not to our essential, inescapable selves.

On these points, he and I argued—respectfully, affably, always with a good measure of humor—but, to my mind, too infrequently. Bob preferred to work and write in solitude and I respected that, though I wish we engaged more often in face-to-face conversations when he and I were contemplating similar issues from notably divergent viewpoints (for example, gender, the place of personal writing in first-year composition, the first-year writing requirement, the working conditions of writing

teachers). As a teacher he practiced and modeled agonistic modes of argument—holding classroom debates and embracing a literal definition of the thesis defense—but in his personal life and demeanor he harbored a deep distaste for confrontation.

Like nearly everyone I've talked to in the days since Bob's death, I found Bob complicated—all the more so, perhaps, because he and I worked together and because so much of work life is play. The Robert J. Connors who could wax so imperiously on a listserv about the deplorable state into which composition has fallen was the same man who would meet his classes wearing a day-glo tie and "Hello Kitty" socks. The Bob who flirted with joining the National Association of Scholars and found much to admire in the Promise Keepers was also an ex-hippie, a shroomie, a Deadhead, a lifelong Democrat, a collector of underground comics, an apologist for the schmaltz-fest of professional wrestling, a Simpsons and Dilbert fan, an ardent biker. Bob could fix a truck engine and craft a Tiffany lamp from stained-glass pieces he made. He planted orchards, loved animals, relished vast rural spaces. He once drove to three McDonald's restaurants in a single day—and consumed three Happy Meals—to get his daughter the Beanie Baby she coveted. He was far and away the funniest man at any English department meeting I attended. It may well be Bob's sense of humor and his own hearty gust of a laugh—a sound I was always thrilled to provoke—I will miss most.

In the conclusion to his essay on historical method, "Dreams and Play," Bob said that "we write histories to define ourselves on the stage of time." In his own brief hour on the stage, Bob Connors undertook the demanding role of defining us to ourselves, and he performed this role, over and over again, with conviction, perspicacity, and quiet eloquence. We have lost a wise soul and a devoted friend. Our loss is truly profound.

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Remembering Dr. Bob

David Edwards

When I first heard the news of Bob Connors' passing, a darkness swept over me and blocked my view of the future. I hated myself for being so selfish in that moment. My loss certainly could not compare to that of his