

2006

Letters from Lewis: Remembering Lewis P. Simpson

James A. Grimshaw Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grimshaw, James A. Jr. (2006) "Letters from Lewis: Remembering Lewis P. Simpson," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol6/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Penn Warren Studies by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

*Letters from Lewis:
Remembering Lewis P. Simpson*

JAMES A. GRIMSHAW, JR.

For thirty-six years I had the privilege of knowing Lewis P. Simpson. We met in the summer of 1969 when I took some American literature classes at LSU, a prelude to my doctoral study. Dr. Simpson became my dissertation adviser, a task he agreed to undertake although he was already heavily committed to supervise several dissertations.

Robert Penn Warren told me during one of my visits to Fairfield, Connecticut, that “Lewis Simpson is one of the best intellectual minds in literary studies in the twentieth century.” I believe him.

The extant letters span a period from 26 October 1972 to 9 April 2002—nearly thirty years—and have provided a source for my memories and reminiscences of an exceptional adviser, teacher, critic, editor, and friend. They begin after my graduation on 27 May 1972. I had returned to the USAF Academy faculty in Colorado Springs.

October 26, 1972

“I guess you are hard at work now. Midsemester for the fall term has already passed here—this new schedule is still hard to adjust to. Mimi and I went to Boston in August, since I had an NEH committee meeting there (instead of in Washington for once). We had a good time, spending a little extra time in the area and seeing more than usual by engaging in a walking tour through the old part of Boston. Went over to Cambridge and Concord on a beautiful afternoon too.

“Next week we are going over to Jacksonville, Florida, where SAMLA meets this year. I am going up to Chapel Hill to speak at the end of November. I guess we’ll go to New York during Christmas.”

April 9, 1973

"It was a real pleasure for us to be able to visit with you last week. Charles East enjoyed seeing [you] again, too, even though he had a negative report on the chances for your bibliography here. I have written to R. P. Warren this morning about you. I think enough to give some impression of your work. I hope it works out for you to see him, also for you to approach the Yale Press...

"I have put in the mail a copy of the jazz book we were talking about at dinner. I still get a book now and then from the Press when I want one to send to somebody. I have a kind of running back pay over there, so to speak, the practice to give on campus people a few books for favors rendered. Of course I don't endeavor to collect fully (as Charles says, I may own the whole back list by now!). In any event, I'm delighted to send the jazz album as a small present.

"I persuade former students to call me by first name. So please do. All best wishes—."

Lewis's letter to Warren was successful, and an invitation to visit Fairfield followed. I met Warren in February 1974, thanks to Lewis.

February 8, 1974

"The news about the acceptance of the bibliography by the University of Virginia Bibliographical Society is tremendous. By now, I trust, you have been to New Haven, or at least to Warren's place. If so, let me know how you fared. I had a card from him after Christmas sometime, in which he said he had seen your bibliography and that he 'hated to have put anybody to all that work.' It was only a post card note of course. He has been appointed Jefferson lecturer by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The lecture is given in April in D.C. I'm sure you know this. (This appointment pays \$10,000.) Somewhere back down the line I had a request as a consultant to the Foundation for nominations to this lectureship. I spent about a week getting one readied on Warren. Perhaps in some small way my discussion of his qualifications helped him to get the appointment! I never told him about this. Of course he had support

from many places obviously. Anyway I had a moment of reflected glory when I read the announcement.

"I read the discussion of naturalism with great interest. The discriminations you make are very illuminating. Do send Otis Wheeler a copy if you have not already.

"I showed Cleanth Brooks your dissertation. He looked at it with great interest and respect and is very pleased to see it and to hear that it will be printed. He will be back in Connecticut this summer and be there evidently most of the time save for perhaps a short time. If you do get up there, he will welcome seeing you. He retires from Yale at the end of the 1974 fall term—next fall, that is. This spring he is visiting here, teaching a seminar in Faulkner and the Southern lit survey. He and Red are doing a revision of *Understanding Poetry*. He told me he has a copy of the ms of Red's new book of poems due out next fall; maybe I'll get a chance to see it. I think it includes some old poems and some fresh ones. I guess the really stunning poem by Warren in a recent *NY Review of Books* is known to you."

The poem, "Ballad of Mr. Dutcher and the Last Lynching in Gupton," was in the 24 January 1974 issue of the NYRB (p. 35).

Sometimes our letters crossed in the mail. Although I had written on 21 December 1974, his letter written two days later and before my letter arrived expressed his concern and offered encouragement about my various projects and grant applications.

December 23, 1974

"In any event, you appear to be making progress with the bibliography, and this is fine to hear. No, I doubt if you blundered in speaking to Warren about an introduction. Of course he may not want to do it; but, on the other hand, he has, I know, been very heavily pushed with assignments. I had a letter from him this month, saying that at last (after about two years) he has completed the taped conversations with Brooks which are to be used in a volume on Cleanth that I am editing. He has had me on the hook about this.

It may well be that if you don't get tied up with him in any special way, your project will be expedited. I don't mean to say that something comparable to what Auden did would not be valuable. Just that Warren is under strain when it comes to schedules. (I am too, I realize! So I imply no criticism, merely indicate a practical problem.) However, if you have approached him and received no answer one way or the other, I guess you may need to clarify the situation so as to be sure of his feeling."

The book Lewis was editing was The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work, which was published by LSU Press in 1976. W. H. Auden wrote a foreword for his bibliography compiled by B. C. Bloomfield and Edward Mendelson, published by the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia. By the time his bibliography was in the final stages, Warren did write a foreword, which prompted Lewis to observe that I now had another entry for the first revision.

One of the many things I enjoyed about his letters was his willingness to share information about what he was doing. He was particularly busy during the 1970s.

April 4, 1976

"Yes, I'm trying to do too much writing at the moment. Mostly assignments, including one I've accepted to do a chapter on the Southern fiction since 1945 for the Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Literature. Accepted an advance on that one, so damn it I'm stuck sure enough. Last fall I did a good deal of TV work, for a change. On location in Mississippi for a week with a real live—and lively—crew filming 'Climate for Genius'—a kind of mixed-up talk show starring mostly the Mississippi scenery with a little of Dan Young, Louis Rubin, and Lewis Simpson mixed in, and some of Shelby Foote, Elizabeth Spencer, and others too. Louis and I also worked on a Faulkner documentary, which we won't be in: advisors. The script was done by Buzz Besserides, Faulkner's old script pal in Hollywood. The sessions were interesting. I don't know

whether the script will be funded or not—not yet. The NEH is putting a good deal of money into regional and national public television now."

He went on to mention some of the writing he had been doing: a Xeroxed interpretation of Faulkner, a longer piece on Faulkner from the Alabama symposium, one on Malcolm Cowley forthcoming in the Sewanee Review, one on Benjamin Franklin for a University of Pennsylvania Press book, one pertaining to the Revolutionary age for the Journal of Politics, and a promise to send to James Wilson (another advisee of his from the 1970s) something for his Bicentennial Studies in the Literary Imagination.

He continued to ask about progress on the bibliography and to offer consoling advice about schedules and possible pitfalls. He was also eager—perhaps anxious?—to see it published. And he would keep me posted on his other activities as well as ask about mine. His NEH Fellowship began in June 1977 with lectures already lined up at the University of Texas, Harvard University, Sewanee, South Alabama, as well as the Faulkner Conference in Oxford.

April 26, 1978

"More than delighted to have your good letter of April 19, telling about Cleanth's visit and, more importantly, about your own work and the future possibilities that are opening up to you. They are all important, but I don't know whether you can work with all of them unless you can arrange feasible deadlines... I hope you can work out all the projects—with the reservation that you don't over commit yourself. Health, leisure, and sanity are worth preservation."

Lewis would respond enthusiastically to most of my ventures, but when necessary he would add an appropriate caveat. He never said as much, but I have always felt that the possibilities that were opening up to me were directly, or at the very least indirectly, because of his support.

We were able to visit at the MLA meeting in New York in 1978; he had kindly reserved some time for us to get together in his very busy schedule at that conference. I also learned that he was "a minor but devoted" Sherlock Holmesian.

Lewis did an NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers in 1979: Southern Fiction in the Context of Modern Letters; he sent me a copy of the letter to prospective applicants and the course description and bibliography. Those students were surely fortunate to have been accepted to attend that seminar. The decade of the 1970s rounded out rather quietly. Lewis was chairing a search committee, and I was on sabbatical.

*We met again at MLA, in San Francisco in 1980. Lewis was doing an article on Brother to Dragons for what would be the book I edited: Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons: A Discussion*. In February 1980 Lewis received word that he was given a Boyd Professorship at LSU—the first to go to a member of the English faculty. In a February 17, 1980, note, he made a remark, which was so typical of his modesty: "Whatever the recognition [of a Boyd Professorship] I share it with colleagues and students, and certainly with you." And then, "I hope your sabbatical continues to go well." As the news release printed, "Simpson is widely considered the foremost authority on Southern literature and has been commended as one of the top literary critics in the South."*

*We made plans for the RPW 75th birthday celebration and Agrarian symposium in 1980 and joined up in Nashville for the symposium. He was also supportive of my poetic efforts and included in the Southern Review my poem, "Elk-Spotting in Church Park: An Eschatology" (for Robert Penn Warren, 75). About fifteen years later, I learned that Lewis was also a "closet poet" when a copy of his volume, *The Circus by the Cemetery*, arrived in the mail. His generosity in sharing copies of his books was continuous. When I returned from the Lexington-Nashville trip, a copy of his book, *The Brazen Face of History*, awaited me. It does, indeed, comprehend "some important facets of the inner history of American letters," as he hoped in the Preface.*

November 29, 1981

"I'm sure I never made any response to your letter of October 2—much appreciated in spite of my delinquency. I found myself spending all the time I could grab in October getting ready for the Elizabeth Madox Roberts conference in Springfield, Kentucky, at the end of the month and the SAML A session on EMR the following week in Louisville. The Conference was very interesting and the weather idyllic. The Washington County area—a Roman Catholic enclave in a Protestant world—beautiful; by American standards an old world. You may know it. I had never been there before in spite of the fact that my mother's family on both sides belongs to its origins, going back to the early migration across the mountains after Boone. I ran into a young historian from Green County (right below Washington and the residence of my mother's people and some of their descendants to the present day) who has sent me some information. I'd like to go back for a look around. I should explain that Green County is not part of the Catholic country. This is centered around Bardstown (where the sour mash permeates the air)—not far from the Trappist monastery that Thomas Merton lived in. I went to Springfield by myself but Mimi joined me in the trip to Louisville the next week."

*He would return to his family history and his growing up in Jacksboro, Texas, in the epilogue to his book, *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, which won the Jules and Frances Landry Award for 1993 and the Robert Penn Warren / Cleanth Brooks Award for Outstanding Literary Criticism in 1995.*

In 1982 I had started to job hunt, and Lewis was always there to offer advice, to make suggestions to improve my curriculum vitae, and to give moral support when needed. As I began to apply for positions in a market that was, as Lewis gently told me, saturated with Ph.D.'s, he generously wrote many letters of recommendation.

Besides including news about his writing, the latest on Warren, and updates on other literary matters, Lewis would share

observations about his travels, which he and Mimi were doing on a fairly regular basis: Wyoming, California, Greece, Portugal, southern Spain, Alaska, Brazil, London, St. Petersburg, Copenhagen, Stockholm—among others.

January 4, 1984

“We had a good time in Greece and out on the Aegean and on our brief excursion onto the mainland of Asia to see the ruins of Ephesus. Quite a trip altogether. I hate these damned 747’s with a passion, and that part of it is never fun. The trip to Athens is about 10 hours or more each way nonstop. You and Darlene must go to Greece one of these days if you haven’t been. Since tourism is the number one industry of Greece, you never get free of tourists at all, but even so you have a different experience of history from that anywhere else. I didn’t have any Lord Byron along. We had an excellent guide for the land part of our visit. On the islands you pick up guides. All the guides have to be licensed by the government; they are frequently well educated in archaeology. The Greeks don’t love Americans, but you don’t feel much hostility. They like American money. Costs are about the same as in Canada relative to the dollar it seemed to me. The dollar is pretty strong now and has been for a year or more. If you go in June as we did you can eat all of the most wonderful tomatoes you want, also other fine vegetables. Seafood is scarce. In spite of the fact that the Aegean retains its classic beauty as recorded in the *Odyssey*, the waters are polluted and the fishing business is way down.”

In 1985 the Dallas Morning News had a notice that then-Vice President George Bush, Lewis Pearson Simpson, and Sir Richard William Southern would receive honorary degrees from the University of the South. Often, I would not learn of an award bestowed on Lewis if I did not read it in a publication. He was too modest at times, but always a paradigm of scholarly behavior. News that he was retiring created in me a feeling of major change for LSU.

June 12, 1986

“Fred Hobson has accepted a professorship here after long negotiations and will replace me after this coming academic year. I’m not sure, or we are not sure, whether Fred will come in January or September of ’87. Through a technical change in my status, I won’t actually retire until May 1987, as I may have told you. There was some talk with the Chancellor a few months ago about my staying on part-time for an additional period beyond actual retirement. This would have to be through special arrangement, and I am doubtful about it. Meanwhile, again as I may have told you, I have been invited to give the Fleming Lectures in Southern History at LSU in the 1987-88 series. This puts me on the spot; since I’m the first local faculty member ever tapped, I had to accept, vanity requiring it, and now have to deliver something worthy of the invitation. Still have the miserable feeling of not knowing what to try to work up. In April I gave Tom Jefferson another twist for a lecture on the Mellon Colloquium at Tulane (with Gene Genovese in charge as this year’s Mellon Professor down there), worked up a whole new thing on Lionel Trilling for the Milton Rickels retirement occasion at USL. Now I’m trying to write something on the Inman diary for *Sewanee*. George [Core] is bringing out a piece on Tate I’ve done for his critics series this summer. Ahead lies some panel work at the big Tennessee literary bash in October—the state is putting on a literary festival. Kind of a mess I suspect. Also something to do for the Southern Historical in Charlotte, N.C. in November. And I guess a last trip to New York for the Library of America—thought my term had expired on that board but evidently not.”

Earlier Lewis had shared news about Tinkum Brooks’s brain tumor, Cleanth’s deteriorating eyesight, and Albert Erskine’s and C. Vann Woodward’s cancer. Tinkum died October 2nd. In December I telephoned Lewis that my doctor discovered cancer and that I would begin treatments in January. On this front, too, he was a dedicated supporter and continued to write letters in which he would inquire about my progress. My treatments ended in May of 1987; and in

August we were on the same program at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, "Robert Penn Warren: A Soviet-American Perspective." He surely had a hand in my being included in that group, as well as the Austin Peay State University program, "Robert Penn Warren: A Hometown Symposium," in October. The year 1987 was a difficult year for him on a more personal level; his wife Mimi had undergone radiation treatments for cancer that fall. When in December the NEH honored Lewis as Humanist of the Year, I thought to myself, how appropriate—but how ironic that they probably do not know to what extent. A festschrift in his honor, American Letters and the Historical Consciousness, also appeared with contributions from eminent scholars in several fields.

By the end of the 80s, Lewis had begun using a computer, a feat many of his colleagues refused to try. He was still publishing vigorously; Mind and the American Civil War was released in September 1989. That same month news of Warren's death saddened both of us.

September 29, 1989

"Warren's death brought a whole day on the phone and a session with some TV people, and finally a day or two later a call from a student reporter wanting to find out something about 'Robert P. Warner.' I am going to Nashville to speak briefly about Warren at a dinner there on the 15th in connection with the large book fair that seems to be getting established as an annual event in Nashville. I deeply, deeply regret Warren's going. I would be grateful to have some report of the deposit of the ashes in what I take to be an old cemetery in Vermont. Who is buried there? If the burying ground is old enough, I suppose some of the New England saints of the early days, maybe an odd Transcendentalist or two, and I would imagine an abolitionist or two? Warren was a nonbeliever but a 'yearner.' He was a Southerner who could not go home again. From what I gather he'll be symbolically at rest near a nonfunctioning or abandoned New England church (this from Cleanth but at second hand). In any event, as I say in the little book I sent, all Southerners are spiritual New Englanders."

After attending the October burial in Vermont, I shared my impressions with Lewis who referred to them later. The 1990s started with my getting to see Lewis at an American Literature Association meeting in San Diego where he, James Wilson (another one of his students), and I enjoyed a dinner and reminiscing one evening. He sent me a copy of his paper, "The Shadowy Hamlets of Robert Penn Warren," which was later published in the Sewanee Review. Our correspondence continued and, perhaps, even increased during the 1990s. In a November 18, 1990 letter, Lewis requested a copy of Time's Glory, a volume I had edited. Lewis wanted to send a copy with his other books for the Fellowship of Southern Writers collection at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga because "[Time's Glory] represents my association with Warren, and with you, and the others." He remained busy with lectures and articles ranging from Quentin Compson's Civil War to Walker Percy, about whom he wrote:

September 15, 1991

"Lancelot is a difficult work to deal with. My reading of it won't seem creditable to some, and would not have altogether to Walker himself. He tended more and more to read his novels as basically affirmative; at least he wanted to do so. But it seems to me he never resolved certain dilemmas he created in the complexities of his situations and interplay of characters. I would think that Percy would be a very good choice for a contemporary American author's course."

For his 75th birthday and 50th wedding anniversary, he and Mimi took a Caribbean cruise in 1991. On this cruise the starboard engine failed on the ship, "designed by the guy who did the Pompidou Center in Paris." The previous year on their cruise, Mimi and Lewis ran into stormy seas; and on yet another cruise, the ship caught fire. When I asked him once about him and cruises, he just chuckled and responded he had not really thought about all the incidents associated with the cruises they had taken. At the MLA meeting in December, one which he was unable to attend, he was awarded the

Hubbell Medal for Distinguished Contribution to the Study of American Literature. John R. May, Chairman, Department of English at LSU, read his remarks. Other events occupied our correspondence in this decade. The loss of Cleanth Brooks in 1994 was a sad one, the passing of an era. At the time I was editing the Brooks-Warren letters, and Lewis was most supportive of that project.

Sometimes we shifted gears in our correspondence. In response to the birth of our first bison calf, Lewis wrote:

August 13, 1994

“I seem to have forgotten my country upbringing, or I would have realized that you faced a problem with that bull calf. I never had a buffalo calf of course, but my father once gave me a Jersey bull calf that had been born into a small herd of milk cows we had. This was about the time Hitler was first getting into the news in America, so I named him ‘Adolph.’ Adolph was a pretty good bull and lived to father a few offspring, but he was so damn mean that he eventually had to be sold. I think he probably ended up as canned meat.”

We continued to exchange views on Warren from time to time in our letters and to send copies of our papers to each other. I had sent Lewis a copy of a paper I presented at a conference, “The Other All the King’s Men,” to which Lewis kindly replied:

March 14, 1995

“I think the suggestions you make about AKM in relation to *Coriolanus* represent a significant further tracing of the complex literary context in which the novel may be located. You mention Eliot’s rather extravagant estimate of Shakespeare’s play. Eliot, as you know, fussed around with a poem he called “Coriolan.” He included two parts of this in the ‘Unfinished Poems’ section of his collected poems in 1936. Granting the influence Eliot had on Warren and everybody else, I am sure you are right in seeing another aspect

of Warren’s contextual relationship to Shakespeare in the *Coriolanus* play.”

*In June I received a copy of *The Circus by the Cemetery*, the title poem of which I particularly admire. In the concluding stanza, the persona, referring to the Comanches, shares the following observation:*

Yet in secret they had said,
a circus entertains the soul,
bought for us our summer afternoon
of beasts and men dreaming
what was before memory made the dream,
the circus in us all;
paid no more than they had to pay:
Comanche, Kiowa, Arapahoe,
and all the land of the buffalo.

He went on to explain:

June 24, 1995

“My home town, you know, figured in the decimation of the buffalo. I think I mention in my memoir that Jacksboro was a ‘hyde’ town in the 1870s. In ‘The Ballad of the Buffalo Hunters’ is the place that Crego, whoever he was, organizes a hunt in Jacksboro: ... The town was at the edge of ‘the plains of the buffalo,’ a good place apparently to recruit a gang and start out for a slaughter. In the ballad, a true folk ballad in that it is of anonymous origin, the story is told about how Crego cheated his crew, who thereupon killed him and left his ‘bones to rot on the plains of the buffalo.’”

In 1995 he received the Cleanth Brooks Medal for Distinguished Achievement in Southern Letters from the Fellowship of Southern Writers and the Warren/Brooks Award for Outstanding Literary Criticism. By the end of 1996 we were communicating about the edition of the Brooks/Warren letters and his foreword; R. W. B. Lewis was writing the afterword. That he found time to do it with all else that he

was encountering was heartwarming and said so much about Lewis.

August 28, 1997

“I was glad to have the news, literary and otherwise, in your letter of May 14 and your more recent one. I would like to see Dick’s afterword for the volume of Brooks-Warren letters if you can pull a copy off without trouble... I think you are right about Warren’s essay in the Agrarian book. He didn’t have his heart in it, as Donald Davidson immediately recognized, saying it should not be included in the volume. My impression is that Warren’s work is really all of a piece, and, is autobiographical. My mind and my heart laid bare, but *not* quite, to paraphrase Baudelaire.”

During my several projects during this decade, Lewis was most helpful with suggestions when asked, though his comments were offered very modestly. Since I was still working on Warren projects, Lewis often added an observation about Warren.

September 11, 1999

“...[A]s far as ‘interdisciplinary criticism’ is concerned Warren’s essays are frequently excellent examples. And of course his novels combine history, philosophy, religion, and ‘literature,’ and this has to be recognized, I think, in writing about him. His imagination worked that way... [A] lot of criticism early and late has been combative, but I don’t go in much for combat. Cleanth loved it. Maybe I should have. Nor have I ever felt like adapting a doctrinal approach and belonging to a ‘school.’”

As Lewis’s health declined, we tended to write less and to talk more frequently on the telephone. The last time I saw Lewis Simpson was in May 2004. William Bedford Clark, who was a doctoral student at LSU in the early 1970s, and I interviewed him for the RWP: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies special issue, celebrating the centennial of Warren’s birth. We are grateful to have had that visit with him. He was having some difficulty getting around

physically, but mentally he was as alert as ever and gladly shared his knowledge and reminiscences about the Southern Review, Southern literature, and Robert Penn Warren as he had done thirty-five years ago in a seminar room in Allen Hall on the LSU campus. A copy of the RWP issue arrived about two weeks before he died on April 17, 2005.