



World Literature Today at 60

This past January, Ivar Ivask, professor of modern languages at the University of Oklahoma and editor of its internationally literary quarterly *World Literature Today*, was in Stockholm on business and stopped by the offices of the Nobel Foundation Library for a visit with the director, Anders Ryberg. As they conversed and viewed the library's facilities and recent acquisitions, the subject of *WLT* naturally arose as well.

"You know," Ryberg told Ivask, "your journal really should be published here, in Stockholm, by the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Foundation, for it is absolutely indispensable to our work."

Such praise rings sweetly in the ear of anyone connected with OU and the state of Oklahoma, conferring as it does a certain cosmopolitanism and in-

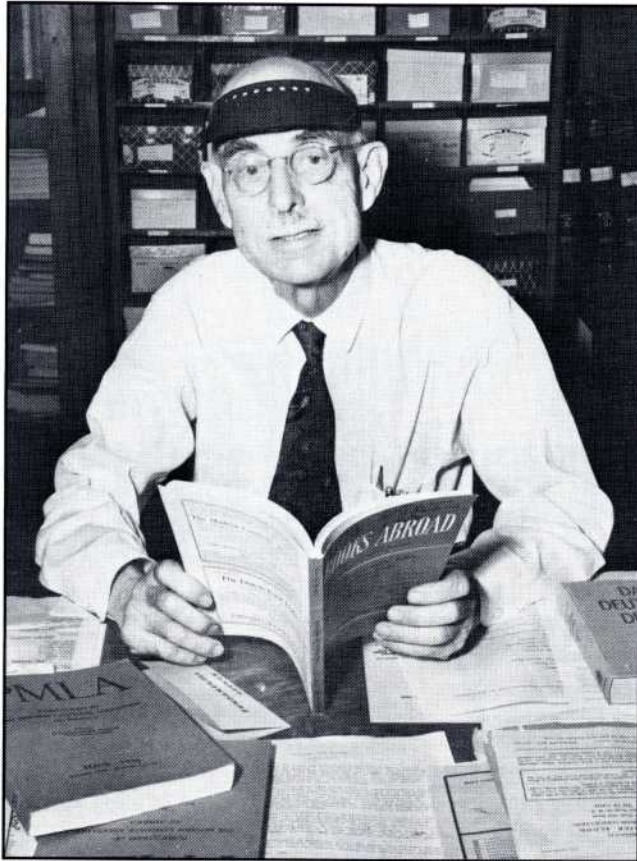
ternational stature to both. One of the world's finest and most richly endowed libraries not only consults but finds "absolutely indispensable" a journal published at the University of Oklahoma.

The story is of interest here not because it is unique. Far from it, for the *WLT* files all the way back to the late 1920s and 1930s (when the journal was known as *Books Abroad*) are replete with similar testimonials and commentaries from all possible quarters, individuals and organizations alike. Thomas Mann, Czeslaw Milosz, Joyce Carol Oates, Victoria Ocampo, Sean O'Casey — all have applauded the journal and hailed its singular efforts over the years.

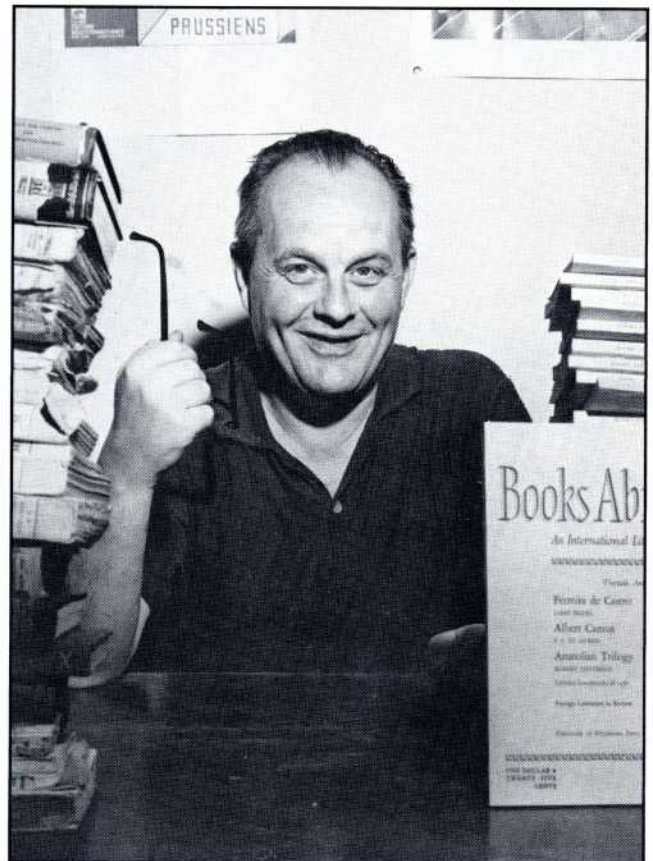
What makes the story of interest is the parallel thread of *WLT*'s relative anonymity closer to home, particularly the fact that so few Oklahomans know of the journal's work and that so many of the University's students complete four years of study without ever having even heard of *WLT* or its affiliated programs. At least once each semester, to cite but a single example, the editor has to explain the journal in toto to a new reporter from the OU student newspaper who has been assigned to the arts beat, handed the latest news release and ordered to work up a story. The *WLT* wheel is reinvented each term, only to spin idly in place in the local consciousness.

Such local anonymity is also a common theme sounded throughout the hundreds of stories, clippings and news items in the *WLT* archives. Even

By WILLIAM RIGGAN



World Literature Today founder and editor from 1927 to 1949, Roy Temple House used the world's literature to transcend cultural and socio-political isolationism.



Hand-picked by House as his successor, Ernest Erich Noth edited the journal for 10 years, making its reviews more current and focusing discussion on 20th century literature.

Sooner Magazine titled a 1961 feature on *Books Abroad* "OU's Secret Pride," following with the subtitle, "A literary quarterly that is world-renowned is virtually unknown in its own home town."

The journal's very nature is, of course, part of the reason for this circumstance, for *WLT* encompasses the entire world and its literatures — a pretty daunting challenge to anyone, whether well-read and well-traveled or not. Still, *WLT*'s existence should be known to everyone in the University community. Some rudimentary acquaintance with the journal's work should be conveyed to all who pass through, just as every student, faculty member and staff worker should be aware of such other OU centers of excellence as the OU Press, the History of Science Collections, the new Catlett Music Center and the Chaucer Variorium.

The February celebration of *WLT*'s 60th anniversary with a gala banquet

in the ballroom of the Oklahoma Memorial Union provides a fitting occasion to review the journal's growth and accomplishments during its six decades of work.

Books Abroad was founded in January 1927 by Roy Temple House, at that time chairman of OU's department of modern languages and long an avid teacher and reader of German, French and Spanish and their respective literatures. International contact and international understanding were the motivating impulses behind House's initiative, a desire to transcend the then-current regional and national trend toward cultural and socio-political isolationism via a continuing and nonideological commentary on foreign books.

Together with such now-famous local personages as Kenneth Kaufman and Stephen Scatori, House set out on what he openly acknowledged to be a difficult task. As he noted in the foreword to issue number 1:1:

► [The editors] are undertaking to ◀ distribute four times a year a little magazine of really useful information concerning the more important book publications of Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, the South American republics, and perhaps other countries. They are hard-worked modern language teachers in a modest institution, without the leisure, the equipment, or the experience to do this work as well and thoroughly as they wish it might be done. They will be criticized for their omissions and inclusions, for their lack of a hard and fast plan as to just what types of books shall be treated and what types left to other publications, for the amateurish character of some of their matter, for the opportunism which fully expects to change their policy here ► and there as circumstances may ◀

demand it. They offer their first number with fear and trembling, but with the conviction that they are undertaking a work which very much needed doing.

* * *

Remarkably enough, for the first five years the magazine was "sent without charge to the leading college and public libraries, as well as to individuals who may be interested." As best as can be determined, House and the other editors received no extra compensation or even release time from teaching and administrative duties for their work on *BA*. For a while production costs presumably were paid out of their own pockets, supplemented by donations from reader-benefactors such as Ralph Goodman of New York and by grants from various foundations.

It took a while for the journal to find its niche. In their efforts to gain the cooperation of European and Latin American publishers and assure a steady flow of books from abroad for review, the editors reviewed just about any foreign-published book they obtained during the first couple of years. Naval histories, entomological studies, language primers and reissues of classic works were accorded space along with new and recent works of good fiction and poetry by writers in the major European languages. The magazine's title was taken literally, it seems.

Within a couple of years the editors were able to narrow their focus to belles lettres, to "literature" in the modern sense of the term. They also began expanding the range of coverage to encompass occasional reviews and discussions of non-European writing as well: the Arabic world, Japan, China and India, to name but four areas. In five years' time the journal also had grown from an unprepossessing little stapled booklet of 32 pages to a hefty and perfect-bound magazine averaging 120 pages per issue and reviewing perhaps 150-175 books each quarter.

The work and expense involved by now were placing an enormous strain on the resources and resourcefulness of the editors, including Managing Editor (and subsequent OU President) Joseph Brandt. Hence the charming

"Change in Policy" statement in the Autumn 1931 issue:

For five years we have been distributing this magazine without a cent of charge. This Quixotic procedure has been rendered possible by the generosity of certain foundations and certain individuals . . . But Rosinante is growing weak in the knees, and our saddle is slipping. The bulk of our small assets are in such a shape that we cannot turn them into cash or realize income from them during the present depression; and our alternatives are suspension or a small charge to subscribers. We have on file two thousand letters, many of them signed with distinguished names, assuring us that we are useful — in fact such adjectives as "valuable," "necessary," "of inestimable value," "completely indispensable," occur with considerable frequency.

The editorial staff, local and foreign — and some of these men and women have made real sac-

position of this charge, as the editors had feared, and the journal continued publication throughout the depressed 1930s without missing a deadline. In content, House began introducing an interesting mixture of learned symposia and more popularly-oriented features — polling prominent writers on their latest projects, soliciting opinions on "the most overrated book" in literary history and the like.

Among the symposia was a 1933 discussion — the first of several to come in the decades ahead, as it turned out — of the Nobel Prize choices and their relative merits in singling out the best writers in the world. Other topics included "My Debt to Books" (famous writers discussing influences on their work), "Transplanted Writers," "Do Foreign Languages Improve Your Own?," "Women Playwrights," "Foster-Mother Tongue," and every book-review editor's favorite, "Can't Book Reviewers Be Honest?"

Shortly before his retirement in 1949, House brought on board the German novelist and critic Ernst Erich Noth (who published also in French)

Remarkably enough, for the first five years the magazine was sent without charge to leading college and public libraries and interested individuals. The editors received no compensation.

rifices in this labor of love — will continue to contribute their services without charge. But it takes money, a good deal of money, to print and distribute the magazine. The modest subscription price which we have reluctantly decided to ask — \$1.00 a year — will probably not be sufficient to meet the actual expenses of manufacturing and mailing, certainly not unless we have the support of all our present readers; but we are setting our price perilously low rather than risk limiting our usefulness in what we are convinced is a contribution to mutual understanding and good will among nations.

Happily, subscribers and supporters did not desert *BA* in droves at the im-

as his designated successor, thus initiating a series of cosmopolitan, European-born writer-editors that has continued to the present day. Noth (pronounced *note*) streamlined the reviewing process by restricting discussions to books no more than two years old and narrowing the focus more toward 20th-century writing, with less inclusion of pre-20th literature than had sometimes been the case earlier.

He also introduced a valuable feature called "Periodicals in Review," which tracked the progress and contents of a large number of literary journals from European, Third World and American (South and North) sources. Among the major items published during his ten-year tenure were a second full-scale symposium on the Nobel Prize, a wide-ranging symposium on "The Novel Today," Noth's own highly

informative firsthand reports on the European literary scene and the first-ever publication of several letters by the famed German-language poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

When Noth resigned in 1959 to resume full-time teaching at Marquette University, the reins were passed to the Austrian-born comparatist Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann. In his two brief years, the Viennese writer-scholar left his mark on the journal primarily through the publication of a continuing symposium on 20th-century Occidental poetry and through the organization of a special issue commemorating the fifth centennial of Dante's birth. He returned to the New York area in 1961, also to resume full-time teaching and research.

Robert Vlach, a Czech émigré poet who had recently been appointed OU professor of modern languages, was named Fleischmann's successor. He moved quickly to set his stamp on the journal, creating a new review section devoted to the Slavic languages and generally increasing *BA*'s attention toward that thriving family of literatures. Vlach also initiated formal *BA* symposia at the annual meetings of

the Modern Language Association, including an updated and influential session on — yet again — the Nobel Prize, this time offering thoughtful suggestions for the Swedish Academy's future consideration as well as examinations of previous choices and omissions.

Sadly, the symposium was not published until shortly after Vlach's sudden, unexpected death in 1966. As she had on previous occasions since 1949, Assistant Editor Bernice Duncan capably directed the journal until a new editor was named one year later.

Upon Ivar Ivask's arrival in the autumn of 1967, the journal underwent several major transformations within a very brief period of time. Externally, the covers were redesigned and brightened for visual appeal, and the internal layout was similarly refashioned into double columns graced by graphic vignettes for easier readability. In content, a greater emphasis than before was placed on special issues with article sections devoted exclusively to individual writers or single topics, beginning with two world-class authors with whom Ivask had nurtured longstanding literary re-

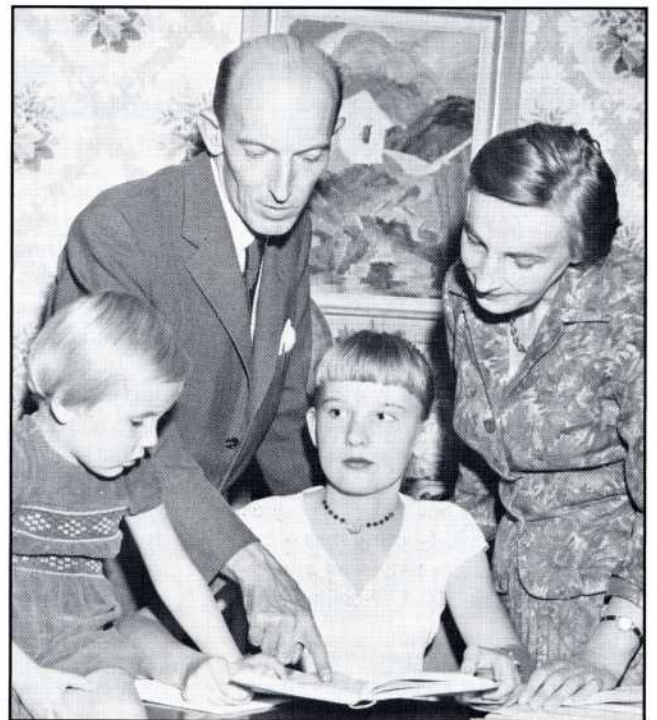
lationships: the Austrian novelist Heimito von Doderer and the Spanish poet Jorge Guillén.

East European poetry, surrealism, the literatures of India and the Latin American novel were four of the earliest symposia to grace the journal under Ivask's tenure. Ivask also continued Vlach's practice of holding *BA* sessions at the annual MLA meetings, giving rise to such further symposium issues as "Nationalism in World Literature," "The Writer as Critic of His Age," "Myth in Contemporary Literature," and "The Writer in Exile."

Meanwhile, the newly established Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the biennial Puterbaugh Conferences on Writers of the French-Speaking and Hispanic World, both founded by Ivask within three years of his arrival at OU (and discussed in earlier *Sooner Magazine* essays), led to at least one annual issue devoted to the work of a particular author, whether the recipient of that year's prize or the featured guest of the most recent conference. J. L. Borges, Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Elizabeth Bishop, Czeslaw Milosz, Carlos Fuentes and Max Frisch are but



Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann succeeded Noth as editor in 1959. A Viennese writer-scholar, he served the journal for only two years before returning to teaching in New York.



Czech émigré poet Robert Vlach came from the modern languages department to direct *WLT* in 1961. His promising editorial career was cut short in 1966 by his sudden death.



A sculpture of the Ivasks, commissioned by Allece Garrard of McAlester, center, was presented to the literary couple at the 60th anniversary party.

a few of the living classics honored by these two programs and by the journal and the university that sponsor them.

Ivask's touch was immediately apparent in the review section of the journal as well, with the addition of a separate section for the Finno-Ugric and Baltic languages and their literatures (Ivask is of Baltic — specifically Estonian and Latvian — heritage) along with other innovations and regroupings. By the 1975-76 volume years, with no increase in staff since Ivask's arrival (three editors and two clerical staff members constitute the entire operation), the journal was reviewing approximately 50 percent more books each quarter, some 300 in each issue, from every possible language of the world in which significant literature was being written.

The staff of reviewers and contributors — still unpaid — had grown to more than 800, many of them teachers of literature at American, Canadian, European and Third World universities. The scope had obviously expanded beyond Roy House's fondest dreams of simply reviewing the best "books from abroad" — meaning the principal West European literatures and languages — to encompass the entire world of contemporary literature.

Thus, after considerable deliberation, the decision was made in 1976 to retitle the magazine *World Literature Today* in order to better reflect what it had now become. The first 50 years, culminating in the Golden Anniversary issue of Autumn 1976, will always



Ivar Ivask, the editor of *World Literature Today* since 1967 who has guided the journal to unprecedented international acclaim, was honored in February at the 60th anniversary gala with his wife Astrid, a celebrated poet in her own right.

remain as *Books Abroad* and stand as a monument to its founders and their collective vision and efforts. *World Literature Today*, with its vital new design and format, is the continuation of that vision and that effort.

Now a full decade old itself and fully come of age, *WLT* represents a continuing source of pride for the University, as evidenced in remarks such as those by the Nobel Foundation librarian quoted at the outset of this survey. Similar statements from leading writers, editors, critics and organizations in many of the world's capitals and smaller outposts could be added to Ryberg's, attesting to the esteem in which the magazine is held internationally.

Its subscribers and readers include libraries, research institutions and individuals in 70 countries and six continents — a global reach that matches the global expanse of the literary

coverage. The gala banquet and celebration for *WLT* on February 27 at the Oklahoma Memorial Union, organized by members of the journal's Advisory Board under the direction of Mrs. Thomas Garrard of McAlester, honored that achievement and, by so doing, hoped to inform a new generation of students, alumni and citizens about the treasure in their midst.

The journal, like the University's many other excellent programs, need not continue forever to be OU's "secret pride." However esteemed by and essential to such august bodies as the Nobel Foundation and similar organizations around the world, *WLT* was conceived and bred at the University of Oklahoma, where it continues to thrive under the University's patronage. As such, it should be, simply, the "pride" of all associated with the institution and no longer remain "secret" for so many. 