

Milton Scholar

Since undergraduate days, Kester Svendsen has studied the work of the English literary giant. Now he is ready to publish the results.

By CLYDE DAVIS

THE PROF sits atop the desk and asks a student to tell him when it is seven minutes until the end of the class period. "I have to take somebody to the dentist's at two o'clock. Now, who is it?" A short pause is followed by "Oh, it's my daughter." The class snickers.

Absent-minded professor? Not at all. It's one professor's way of holding the attention of 30 freshman students. He's Dr. Kester Svendsen, professor of English, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and charter member of the Milton Society of America.

Kester Svendsen's students, and there have been a lot of them in 15 years, remember much of what he says and how he says it. As a teacher, that's his job. One student that sat in a freshman English class in the fall of 1940 recalls, after 15 years, snatches of Svendsen's classroom comment,

his pungent prose ripping apart a first-year theme.

That year, 1940, was Svendsen's first at O.U. He was 28 then, an assistant professor of English fresh from the University of North Carolina, where he had just earned his Ph.D.

Kester Svendsen was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1912. He went to high school there, married Margaret Rae Webb there in 1933, and was graduated from the College of Charleston in 1934 with a major in English.

It was while he was an undergraduate that Svendsen became interested in John Milton, the 17th century Englishman who wrote *Paradise Lost* and a hatful of other major literary works. Why did the Charleston undergrad prefer to work with Milton? Because of something shared by many a college student today: he couldn't understand him.

"It was in my sophomore year, in a survey course. I found I couldn't understand Milton's poetic meaning. I could understand the words and most of the thought, but I couldn't get the full poetic meaning." Svendsen wondered too about Milton's scientific references because, he says, "The scientific assumptions of that day weren't known to me."

By the time Kester Svendsen took his Ph.D. at North Carolina in 1940, many of Milton's scientific references were known to him. His doctoral dissertation was concerned with Milton's use of natural science, and Svendsen's interest and work in that field since his graduation have made him a nationally-known authority.

A Svendsen milestone of sorts will come later this year, when the Harvard Press publishes his first book: *Milton and Science*. He considers it a milestone because it has been in the works such a long time. The book is the result of years of research, a composite of parts of his dissertation and more than 30 scholarly articles on Milton. As a recent O.U. publicity release puts it, "His friends had about given up hope of attending a Svendsen autograph party."

The book won't be a best-seller. It's not supposed to be. Kester says he'll be lucky to sell 5,000 copies. But he feels it will be a contribution to learning. Certainly more so than the stuff he wrote for Street and Smith publications in his undergraduate days at Charleston. (Former students don't need to bother looking up those pearls of prose. He wrote under an assumed name.)

No doubt about it. The man has a way with words. Last spring he tried one of those finish-this-statement-in-25-words-or-less contests, and won a refrigerator. A later contest netted a handsome radio-clock. In

his more serious efforts, the editor of a chess anthology says Svendsen's short fiction piece, *Last Round*, "has been acclaimed as one of the best stories, if not the best story, ever written about chess. It is a remarkable achievement."

The Svendsen literary touch isn't limited to scholarly publications and chess magazines. He is a regular contributor to the book page of the *Daily Oklahoman*, with some 1,200 reviews published in the past 15 years.

Besides his obvious love of learning, Svendsen's knowledge and skill have earned him a \$3,000 Guggenheim fellowship, and a \$2,300 faculty study fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies. In 1952 Kester won a \$500 University of Oklahoma Foundation Teaching Award for extraordinary excellence in teaching and counseling.

Dr. Svendsen hopes someday for a Fulbright scholarship, to do more Milton research in England. Additional research means more scholarly papers with scholarly titles. You have to assume a lot of inherent interest to stop a reader with a title like *Milton's Chariot of Paternal Deity*, *Cosmological Lore in Milton*, or *Milton and His Malleus Maleficarum*. Those are titles of some of Svendsen's papers. It's not the kind of stuff Joe Doakes wants to skip through after a hard day at the office. But each paper, every bit of academic digging, has its place in the world of knowledge.

Things haven't changed much in the 15 years he has been at O.U. Daughter Jenifer is going on 13 now, and the Svendsen hair that was long and dark is now grayer and close-cropped. There are more buildings on the campus, and there are more students, but they still react about the same to the Svendsen techniques. They still remember what he says, and how he says it.

Chances are many a student recalls—

Svendsen on learning: "Learning will not make you good or happy. It will make you pursue your unhappiness more intelligently."

Or Svendsen on words: "It's point of view that counts. I am firm, you are stubborn, and they are obstinate."

On students in basic English: "Students in basic English are those whose placement exams show they are barely able to pour water out of a boot."

On general student progress through the first college year: "All one gets as a freshman is a slight rearrangement of family prejudice."

Unusual comments? Perhaps. A little dramatic? Certainly. But the students learn, and they remember what they learn. That is the way Dr. Kester Svendsen does his job.