

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on May 1, 2007, the following Minute was placed upon the records.

## JAMES ROBERT HIGHTOWER

Born: May 7, 1915  
Died: January 8, 2006

James Robert Hightower, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Chinese Literature, Emeritus, who died on January 8, 2006, was born on May 7, 1915 in Sulphur, Oklahoma but grew up in Salida, Colorado, where his father was the school superintendent. James Robert, who was known as Robert or Bob, majored in chemistry at the University of Colorado, but by the time of his graduation in 1936, he had switched his interests to literature. Together with two college friends, he won a scholarship to the University of Heidelberg. He spent the post-graduate year in Heidelberg and Paris, writing poetry and working at a novel as well as continuing the study of Chinese he had begun in the United States. In Paris he managed to meet James Joyce. (The following year he escorted another literary hero, Ezra Pound, about the Yard, only to be appalled by Pound's anti-Semitism.)

One of Robert's friends at Heidelberg was Jean Stafford, who made her name as a novelist. Robert remained Stafford's loyal friend and confidant during the rest of her tumultuous life. He kept copies of their correspondence, totaling 455 pieces written over 42 years, and after her death donated it to the Jean Stafford Collection at the University of Colorado at Boulder. One of Stafford's biographers described it as "the most remarkable epistolary record" he had ever seen.<sup>1</sup>

In 1937, Robert enrolled at Harvard for graduate study in Far Eastern Languages and Comparative Literature. In June 1940, with a fellowship from the Harvard-Yenching Institute, he set off for Beijing to work on his dissertation. Interned by the Japanese, he was repatriated in 1943 in an exchange of prisoners, after which he joined the U.S. Army and worked on breaking enemy codes. Returning to Harvard, he completed his Ph.D. in 1946. He was appointed Assistant Professor in 1948, Associate Professor in 1952, and Professor in 1958. From 1960 to 1964 he chaired Harvard's Committee on East Asian Studies and from 1961 to 1965 the Far Eastern Languages Department.

His dissertation, a translation and exegesis of the Han dynasty text *Han shi waizhuan* (1946, published in 1952), showed his mastery of sinological method. His second work, modestly titled *Topics in Chinese Literature* (1950, rev. ed. 1952, 1966), in fact forms the basis for a history of Chinese literature, the first scholarly work of such a scope in a Western language. It is distinguished by its judicious choice of recommended reading in Chinese and Japanese as well as European languages, but even more by its refusal to speculate or to retail supposedly established opinion; to a remarkable degree it is the product of the author's own reading and judgment. In this and in articles written in the 1950s, he developed an approach to Chinese literature that has been extremely influential. In the 1960s he turned to work on the poet Tao Qian (365-427); that culminated in his translation of the complete poems *The Poetry of Tao Qian* (1970), a book that displays his characteristically meticulous scholarship and graceful renderings. In the 1970s he turned his attention to the *ci* or "song lyric" of the Song dynasty. In this he was joined by Yeh Chia-ying, professor of Chinese Literature at the National Taiwan University, a distinguished specialist in Chinese poetry. The work they did together is a rare instance of close collaboration between two senior scholars. Their articles on individual writers and distinctive styles may be said to have opened up a new field in Chinese literary studies. A number of such articles were collected and published in their *Studies in Chinese Poetry* (1998).

In the classroom Robert was an exacting teacher, but one whom his students soon came to appreciate. As a former graduate student, Professor Ronald C. Egan writes: "One sensed that he brought to the study of Chinese poetry

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<sup>1</sup> David Roberts, *Jean Stafford: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988), p. 474.

something of the demand for precision that he had acquired in his early training in the sciences....Page after page of recopied texts, without any Chinese notes or annotations, were distributed to students. These were accompanied by lengthy glossaries that he had compiled, giving brief English equivalents for the phrases that students were unlikely to recognize. Once the class began, students were called upon in turn to read and explicate short passages. Hightower never said anything until after the student had committed himself to an interpretation. He believed, as he sometimes observed, that ‘nothing is easier to understand than the meaning of a Chinese sentence *after it has been explained to you.*’” Another former student, Professor Eva Shan Chou, notes: “As an advisor, Professor Hightower had a succinct way of evaluating a proposed project that both opened up its scholarly potential and suggested its central paradox. He also had an unerring sense for false evidence and trite arguments.”

Robert was a man of strong and generous sympathies, as many can testify. It was entirely characteristic of him that after his former student William T. Graham Jr., died an untimely death, Robert should devote himself to completing part of Graham’s projected study of the poet Yu Xin.

At the parties for faculty and students that Robert and his wife Florence (“Bunny”) gave at their house in Auburndale, Robert was very much the genial host. He was also an active man, with a wide variety of interests. Skiing was a particular passion of his, and he and Bunny used to take their children on skiing holidays. Cycling, which he had enjoyed in Europe, was another. He began riding his bicycle from Auburndale to Cambridge and continued to do so into his eighties, to the consternation of his colleagues. Gardening, particularly of vegetables, was a late interest, but one to which, characteristically, he gave meticulous attention, even to the extent of keeping a garden log. Cooking, especially of his own produce, was another interest.

Bunny died in 1981. Robert is survived by their four children, James, Samuel, Josephine Steiner-Neukirch, and Thomas; twelve grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Edwin A. Cranston  
Philip A. Kuhn  
Howard S. Hibbett  
Rulan Chao Pian  
Patrick Hanan, Chair