

# One Woman's Lengthened Shadow

*Pulitzer Prize–nominated English professor Millicent Bell was as “effervescent” in person as she was on the page.* | BY WESLEY T. MOTT (CAS’68, GRS’69, ’74)

In the preface to her final book, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism* (Yale, 2002), Millicent Bell stated her ambitious aim: “I have tried to mark out a pathway across a trampled field....But in the case of Shakespeare, there is always something true and important that seems not to have been said before.”

In her scholarly life, Bell, a College of Arts & Sciences professor emerita of English, demonstrated this same fusion of intellectual boldness, passion, and generosity—traits she inspired her students to discover in themselves.

Bell died on August 6, 2015. She was 95.

At age 15, Bell enrolled at New York University and went on to earn an MA and a PhD at Brown University. She joined the English department at BU in 1963 and taught English and American literature at CAS and the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences until she retired in 1993. Awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Fulbright Travel Grant to France, she was also a visiting professor at universities in France and Italy.

Among scores of journal articles, Bell penned classic essays on Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and on the “Fallacy of the Fall” in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. She wrote several critically acclaimed books



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on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, and Henry James, as well as *Marquand: An American Life* (Little,

Brown, 1979), which was nominated for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Her elegant and penetrating literary criticism also appeared frequently in the *New York Review of Books*.

Bell’s teaching interests were equally boundless, ranging from the medieval epic and romance to the modern novel. She was my

undergraduate and graduate advisor at Boston University in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and her classes sparkled with excitement. Whether presenting an academic paper, teaching, or conversing, she was effervescent—an endearing quality that kindled classroom discussions and a devoted following.

And Bell loved her students. She and her husband, renowned MIT biologist Gene Bell, hosted memorable gatherings for her classes, first at their handsome brownstone off Beacon Street (which one English professor described as “something out of a Henry James novel”), and later at their Commonwealth Avenue home near the Charles River Campus.

Devoted to the life of the mind and imagination, Bell did not consider herself a social activist, but her empathy and sense of justice were keen. On the morning after the killings of four students at Kent State on May 4, 1970, when BU canceled final exams and hordes of students roamed around campus in grief and rage, several gathered around Bell on Bay State Road. She spoke quietly through tears about having seen one of the victims, Allison Krause, on TV putting flowers in the barrel of the gun of an Ohio National Guardsman.

After the death of her

husband of seven decades, she established the Millicent and Eugene Bell Foundation to support public television and endow fellowships and projects dedicated to health, education, the sciences, and social justice.

Bell's intellectual and social energy never flagged. When in 2002 I was president of the Emerson Society and she was president of the Hawthorne Society, my casual mention of links between American writers and British culture prompted her typically animated response that we should plan a joint American author conference in London. Although others had a more significant role in working out the logistics, Bell's quick grasp of the matter materialized as Transatlanticism in American Literature, the pioneering joint international conference of the Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe societies at the University of Oxford in 2006, and in turn, *Conversazioni in Italia* at Florence in 2012. She exemplified Emerson's adage, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one [woman]."

When my wife, Sandy, and I stopped by Bell's Commonwealth Avenue home some months ago to drive her to lunch, she insisted on walking. We couldn't keep up with her as she dodged and wove her way through Boston traffic to Legal Sea Foods at the Prudential Center. It's that indefatigable, contagious zest for everything she undertook that I still see and feel when I think of Millicent Bell.

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## A Great Spirit

*CFA's Joel Sheveloff had wit and wisdom*

Musicologist Joel Sheveloff focused his scholarship on composers Domenico Scarlatti, Modest Mussorgsky, and Igor Stravinsky. But he loved J. S. Bach.

Bach is "our Shakespeare, our Pushkin, the greatest mind ever to write music," Sheveloff, a College of Fine Arts professor emeritus of music, musicology, and ethnomusicology, said in a *BU Today* profile just before he retired in 2010.

He also loved his students. When asked in the profile if he will miss them, he said, "Oh, yes, terribly. I'm very proud. My students have spoiled me rotten."

Sheveloff, who taught at BU for 46 years, died on November 8, 2015.

In a message to the CFA community, Richard Cornell, director ad interim of the School of Music, described Sheveloff as "a great spirit."

"I can think of no one else who touched so many students with his great wit and wisdom, who so brightened the light of knowledge of our art form, or who so enthusiastically challenged the conventional questions, the received bons mots, and the fundamental assumptions," Cornell wrote. "He could spin a yarn."

Sheveloff graduated from the City University of New York, Queens College, then earned a master's and a doctorate from Brandeis University. He published numerous articles on the music of Mozart, Ravel, Scarlatti, Mussorgsky, and Stravinsky; at Boston University, he



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developed and taught more than 50 courses on subjects that included medieval keyboard compositions and music in the former Soviet Union. He was known to add an hour to class descriptions to weed out students who weren't sufficiently serious about the course matter, according to the *BU Today* profile.

In 2004 Sheveloff received the Metcalf Cup and Prize for Excellence in Teaching, the University's highest teaching honor. Cornell noted that he donated the "substantial cash portion" of the prize—and required the late John Silber (Hon.'95),

then president of BU, to match the gift—to the scholarship fund named for his good friend John Daverio (CFA'75,'77, GRS'83), a CFA music professor and renowned Schumann expert, who drowned in the Charles River in 2003, at age 48.

"That was Joel's condition to accept the prize," Cornell said, "an act completely in line with his character."

"We are saddened," by his loss, Cornell wrote, "but have been enormously privileged to have had Joel Sheveloff as a colleague and friend. He leaves a deep and enduring imprint on the life of our school."

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*Donations in honor of Joel Sheveloff may be made to the John Daverio Memorial Scholarship Fund, Boston University College of Fine Arts Office of Development, 855 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215.*