Introduction: In Search of Miller

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The articles in this volume are published in honor of William Ian Miller, aka Bill Miller or simply “Miller,” which is how some of us habitually refer to him in retaliation for his habit of calling people by their last names. Because the many tall stories that Miller tells on himself have grown taller with each repetition, this Introduction’s preliminary remarks on his early career—which precede its review of his scholarship and notes on the articles that honor him—mix fiction and fact more freely than do the comments of Jordan Corrente Beck on Miller at Michigan Law School and Kimberley-Joy Knight on Miller at St Andrews. At the risk of interpolating false rumors, hagiography, malicious gossip, panegyric, and scurrilous innuendo into Miller’s authentic—or, at least, authorized—confessions, here is one possible story about how early phases of his professional life unfolded.

As a high school student in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Miller abandoned his fantasy of playing wide receiver for the Packers when he was denied a football scholarship to college. Instead of compensating for this early failure by going into real estate or working in a local paper mill, he began the process of picking up the credentials he needed to climb the greasy pole of academic success. His irresistible rise began when he left home for the University of Wisconsin in Madison, escaped expulsion for hurling a television set out the window of a tenth-floor dormitory room, and got a BA in History in 1969. To avoid being drafted into the Vietnam war, Miller secured another 2S deferment by entering graduate school at Yale. There, he began building his reputation for being “wild” by riding motorcycles at terrifying speeds, consuming vast amounts of alcohol, and taking multiple vows of virginity that he may or may not have broken. Miller also learned much more Old English and Middle English than anyone his age could be expected to know. Though legally barred (he later claimed) from the country where he needed to research his PhD thesis, he nevertheless got a doctorate by completing a cutting-edge dissertation entitled “The Poetry of MS. Sloane 2503: A Critical Edition” (1975).

Once Miller was fully armed with a PhD, he landed a highly coveted tenure-track assistant professorship of English at Wesleyan University in 1975. However, his chances of survival there were nil. Though he was, of course, a brilliant if unorthodox teacher of Chaucer, Langland, Beowulf, and Icelandic sagas, he seemed certain to perish, not publish. Suffering from incurable writer’s block (to name but one of the maladies he expatiated upon, to both old friends
and new acquaintances), Miller knew that even if he could get down on paper his many brilliant conjectural emendations in poems from Sloane MS 2503 and publish them all in *Notes & Queries*, they wouldn’t satisfy a tenure committee. Besides, his “colleagueship”—on which his tenure chances would depend as well—was questionable. Even if his reputation for drinking beer, playing pinball, staying off committees, and picking fights with colleagues didn’t doom him, he might well have been violating the terms of his employment when he started to moonlight as a law student at Yale.

Before Miller could be denied tenure for any number of reasons, he left Wesleyan and completed a Yale law degree (1980). He briefly practiced law back in Madison before returning to teaching, this time in law school, where, he had heard, the salaries were much higher, the publication requirements somewhat lower, and the likelihood of anyone noticing his irascibility and contentiousness virtually non-existent. But what about the old problems of writing and publication? As one can see from the bibliography at the end of this volume, neither problem was still a problem. Why not? For one thing, as soon as Miller had undergone his conversion from literature to law, he was miraculously healed of writer’s block and lost some of his perfectionist inhibitions about publication. Better yet, he had found in Icelandic sagas a subject that he not only loved, but even loved to write about. Best of all, he entered legal academia just as law schools were becoming havens for unemployed PhD’s with law degrees who could teach and publish on law and something else. So why not law and Icelandic sagas or rather, law in Icelandic sagas, especially since “law” could be construed to include blood vengeance and feud, two subjects on which Miller was already an expert?

After three years at the University of Houston Law Center, Miller got the call in 1985 to Michigan Law School, where in 1998 he became Michigan’s Thomas G. Long Professor. In the meantime he was also doing short-term teaching at Yale Law School, Chicago Law School, the University of Bergen, the University of Tel Aviv, and the University of St Andrews, where he became an Honorary Professor of History in 2011. In 2016 he celebrated (or rather, mourned) his seventieth birthday and entered semi-retirement. He is now spending the remainder of his late adolescence in Ann Arbor, while making regular visits to Scotland and Slovenia.

As one might have expected from this rapid review of Miller’s checkered, shape-shifting, and multidisciplinary career, his published work defies easy categorization by discipline or anything else; and one shudders to think how he would