Merton M. Sealts, Jr., the Henry A. Pochmann Professor of English Emeritus, died at age 84 on June 4, 2000, at the end of his long battle with cancer. Mert was widely recognized and honored as a leading expert on antebellum American literature, especially the career of the great American author, Herman Melville. His work on the thought and writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson was also of ground-breaking quality. In his final years and months, despite eventually being confined to his home at Oakwood, he continued to write. Just one month before his death, while bedridden, he participated in a nationally broadcast radio series in a program on Melville’s novella, *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

Born on December 8, 1915, in Lima, Ohio, where his father worked for the family’s wholesale grocery business, Mert overcame youthful health and eyesight problems to attain Phi Beta Kappa at Wooster College, where he won prizes in English and philosophy. He went on to graduate school in English at Yale where he made lasting friendships with others who would also have distinguished scholarly careers in American literature. His first academic position was as an instructor at the University of Missouri, cut short in the first year by his draft notice. He received his PhD in 1942, shortly after entering the Army Air Force. During his wartime service he had assignments on four continents, spending most of his time with the Army Airways Communications System in Brazil, India, Burma, and China. He rose from private to major and was awarded the Bronze Star “for exceptionally meritorious service.”

Mert and Ruth MacKenzie were married in Franklin, Massachusetts on November 17, 1942, a happy marriage that lasted until Ruth’s death in Madison in 1995. After he was mustered out of the Army in early 1946, he was offered an instructorship at Wellesley College, where he taught from 1946 to 1948, then becoming assistant professor of English at Lawrence College. He remained at Lawrence seventeen years, rising through the ranks to full professor and, for two years, chair of English. He was greatly valued by administrators, faculty, and students. Nine weeks into his first year there one of his classes spontaneously wrote him a note in which they praised his “kindly, liberal philosophy of teaching,” telling him, “you represent our ideal of a college professor.” In his final year at Lawrence he was honored with an award for excellent teaching.

Having been supported at different times by both Ford and Guggenheim Fellowships, Mert arrived in Madison in 1965 with a distinguished scholarly record. Once at the University of Wisconsin, his eminence as a scholar of American literature was solidified. His early book publications had included *Melville as Lecturer* (1957), the edition of Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor* (with Harrison Hayford) (1962) that has served succeeding generations of scholars as a model of textual editorial scholarship, and his edition of Emerson’s *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, Vol. 5 (1965), together with numerous essays, some of which were the beginnings of later important book-length works. One such project was a series of six essays in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* on “Melville’s Reading” (1948-50). He soon published the first book-length version of this career-long study, *Melville’s Reading* (1966), documenting all books owned or otherwise known to have been read by Melville, and identifying present locations for all extant books from Melville’s library. It is a work that only the truly dedicated scholar possessing a full respect for factual details as well as their larger implications could produce. His ongoing attention to this subject resulted in a later enlarged version (1988), but he was still updating his findings in the final months of his life. Other works included *Emerson’s “Nature”: Origin, Growth, Meaning* (with Alfred R. Ferguson) (1969; enlarged 2nd ed. 1979), *The Early Lives of Melville: Nineteenth-Century Biographical Sketches and their Authors* (1974), and, after an NEH fellowship, *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980* (1982). In a speech presenting Mert with the Jay B. Hubbell award, given annually to a distinguished scholar of
American literature, another Melville scholar said that *Pursuing Melville* contains “the greatest string of essays in Melville scholarship.” A former student who is himself an eminent Emerson scholar, declared in a posthumous tribute that Mert’s works on Emerson are “timeless.”

He retired from the faculty in the spring of 1982, but continued to teach and write. A book long in the making appeared ten years later, *Emerson on the Scholar* (1992), and a collection of lectures and essays written after his retirement followed: *Beyond the Classroom: Essays on American Authors* (1996). His alma mater, Wooster College, awarded him an honorary degree (D.Litt.) in 1994. Finally, quoting Plato’s statement that “An unexamined life is not worth living,” Mert concluded his life as a writer with an autobiography, *Closing the Books: A Memoir of an Academic Career* (1999), published exactly one year before his death. Though always dedicated to advancing the frontiers of knowledge, he chose to conclude his life story with the summary remark, “However my contributions to scholarship may ultimately be judged, I regard myself as first and last a teacher.” The loyalty of his many former students confirms that self-evaluation.

Merton M. Sealts, Jr., a subtly witty, generous man whose life always centered in the home he shared with his beloved Ruth, was a teacher-scholar who continues to serve as a model for colleagues, friends, and former students for whom he made a tremendous difference.

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