

# Edmund Fuller ... Christian teacher

By DR. LEVERETT T. SMITH

Edmund Fuller had a very small part in the continuing drama that is the history of North Carolina Wesleyan College, a somewhat larger part behind the scenes, and a much larger part in my own education.

Mr. Fuller, we called him. It was the fall of 1952, and I was 13 years old, one of 40 or so third formers, new to the Kent School, then a boarding school for boys only. Mr. Fuller was on the faculty, but he wasn't exactly a teacher. At least he didn't teach any classes. He was head of something called "the tutorial program." This perplexed us new boys. We had to read books and then write essays about them.

No one knew how to do that. Worse, we had all been assigned George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and no one knew what it was about. A devoted reader of Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny comic books myself, I was pretty sure *Animal Farm* couldn't be about anything serious.

Mr. Fuller straightened us all out. We all wrote our papers, and we all conferred — one by one — with Mr. Fuller in his office about them. Mr. Fuller's office is one of my most vivid memories of the Kent School. It had many of the characteristics of a converted closet: a long, narrow room at the end of a hallway of classrooms, a single window at the back. The room seemed narrower

because both walls were lined with bookcases, floor to ceiling, filled with books. Right in front of the window sat Mr. Fuller's desk, always piled high with student papers. Behind it sat Mr. Fuller, hair and full beard stark white and his eyes — they actually twinkled — a shocking blue.

After I graduated from Kent, I went on to Middlebury College in Vermont, but I'd not heard the last of Edmund Fuller, who turned up as one of the featured speakers at a three-day religion conference in the fall of 1958 or 1959. At Kent he'd been an adult who'd been interested in my learning how to read books. Now I discovered he'd written and edited a great many himself.

He earned his living in the literary marketplace, and at first his publications seem rather miscellaneous. But there is a thread that connects them: all of Fuller's writing is informed by a Christian vision of the human being as a fallen creature capable of good or evil.

His best known books are *Man in Modern Fiction* (1958) and *Books With Men Behind Them* (1962), controversial evaluations of twentieth century authors according to the image of humanity found in their writings. I also liked a novel of his called *The Corridor* (1962), a novel about a successful marriage. My favorite, though, was an autobiographical narrative, *Successful Calamity: A Writer's Follies on a Vermont*

*Farm*, with its oxymoronic title. Finally, there were two edited volumes on the subject of education of great interest to me: *The Christian Idea of Education: A Seminar at Kent School* (1957) and *Schools and Scholarship: The Christian Idea of Education, Part 2* (1962).

I remember particularly one statement from the first of these two volumes, from Stephen F. Bayne, Jr.: "The virtue of the Christian teacher is exactly the same as that of any teacher. It is to tell the truth, and to lead students to understand it and to learn how to master it for themselves. It is good if teachers are Christian, because it is good for all men to be Christians; but if the teacher is to teach at all, the test of his skill and his dedication, Christian or not, is the same. He is a minister of God Who is the teacher; and his primary duty is not to protect God or to add God to the curriculum but to be a good and honest teacher, which is his ministry."

But what, you may be wondering, has Edmund Fuller to do with us at N.C. Wesleyan? No much, really, and much of that behind the scenes. In the late 1970s the college's administration and trustees formulated a policy for awarding honorary degrees and published it to the faculty. Degrees were conferred beginning in the late 1970s, but of late the practice seems to have died out. The Official Guidelines

describing appropriate candidates reads as follows: "A person considered for an honorary degree shall be distinguished in some worthy field of endeavor. Such a person shall be outstanding as a business, professional, or civic leader; as a statesperson or educator; in service to mankind; and/or shall have made a significant contribution to the life of North Carolina Wesleyan College."

I thought of Edmund Fuller immediately. He had other qualities than those of a Christian educator that I thought would appeal to the administration and board. His current job was book review editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, a paper the businessmen on the board might be expected to recognize. In addition, as a child of the Depression, he not only had no college degrees, he had never been to college at all.

Awarding such a degree, I thought, would not only honor Edmund Fuller but would give the college excellent publicity among the business and religious communities so important to its institutional life. And so I filled out a form nominating Edmund Fuller and sent it to the faculty.

And the faculty sent it on to the Board, but it was not to be. The trustees did not exactly reject the nomination, but word filtered back that they had not acted on it because no one on the board knew Fuller personally. There was an easy way to solve that problem, and I worked over the

next several months both to get Fuller's name back in nomination and to get him invited to the college as 1979's Staley Christian Lecturer.

Both efforts were successful, and in 1979 Edmund Fuller played his small part in Wesleyan's history as the Staley lecturer. Over the course of three days in February, he gave three lectures and led a seminar on the subject of "The Vision of Man in Western Civilization."

But Wesleyan never awarded him an honorary degree. I don't recall exactly what happened. Though so far as I know no member of the Board of Trustees attended his lectures, I don't think they ever rejected his nomination.

I don't remember doing it, but there is evidence that I withdrew Fuller's nomination. I have in my files a copy of a letter to one of the men who wrote letters in support of Fuller's nomination in which I state that because Fuller "has received an honorary degree from the University of the South [Sewanee], ... I am going to stop pressing his candidacy here." I guess I thought we'd lost our chance to be the first to honor Mr. Fuller.

Edmund Fuller died last January at the age of 86. I am honored to have been among those many folks whom he helped to learn to read.

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## Terror in America

September the eleventh  
In the year two thousand one  
Was a day unlike all others  
For the evil that was done.

On that morning, without warning —  
Nineteen cowards had a pact  
To hijack four airliners  
That they'd use in their attack.

Both World Trade Center Towers  
In New York were first to go.  
We watched them crumble to the ground.  
A real-life horror show.

The third plane struck the Pentagon  
In Washington, D.C.  
Americans were stunned to watch  
This terror on TV.

So far three planes had hit their mark  
And thousands were left dead.  
The evil snake had struck our heels,  
But we shall crush its head.

Next we heard the news report  
About Flight 93.  
Why it crashed into the ground  
Was then a mystery.

All those brave souls aboard that flight  
(First heroes of the war)  
Had caused the fourth attack to fail!  
They numbered forty-four.

Then firefighters and rescue teams  
Police and volunteers —  
All rushed to help their fellow man  
Through smoke, and fire, and tears.

Each did his job — some even died  
While saving those they could.  
Three firemen raised the U.S. flag  
Where once the towers stood.

Then President George Bush stood up  
And to the world he said,  
"The 'evil ones' responsible —  
We'll get alive or dead."

Mr. Bush was resolute.  
No talks or compromise.  
Enduring Freedom shall prevail  
With justice as the prize.

Many countries mourned with us.  
Some played our nation's song.  
United firm against this plague —  
America stood strong.

Our goal is justice — not revenge.  
This evil must not stand.  
All terror camps shall be destroyed.  
The first — Afghanistan.

The Taliban's oppressive rule  
Was conquered in disgrace.  
Al Qaeda leaders ran and hid,  
Afraid to show their face.

But they'll be found, and that's a fact.  
Indeed, the world will know  
That terrorists cannot escape  
No matter where they go.

All those that harbor or support  
The terrorists' empire  
From here at home to foreign lands,  
Our message now is dire.

But where was God in all of this,  
Some people have inquired?  
Though we expect God to protect —  
There's things from us required.

God has not abandoned us.  
In fact, He's very near.  
The way Americans have changed  
Has made God's presence clear.

Three decades we ignored the signs  
That led to this assault.  
Although we did not start this war,  
We must accept some fault.

Our nation then must stay the course  
Until this war is won.  
United by this tragedy ...  
America is One.

— Peter West, Student  
N.C. Wesleyan College, Jan. 21, 2002