

His upbringing was marked by poverty and isolation. But inside the ramshackle farmhouse, a rich oral tradition fed a boy's imagination.

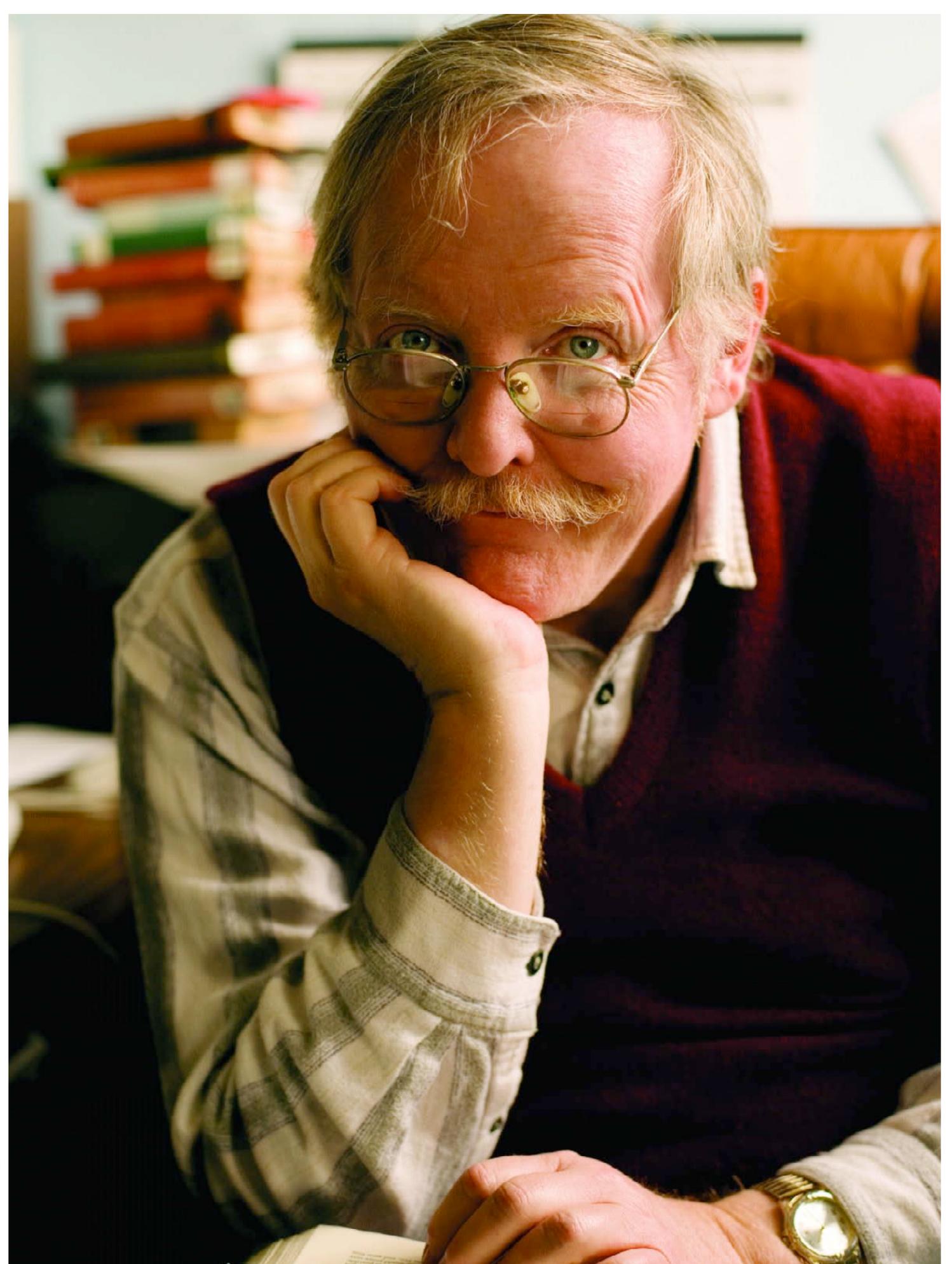
the EDUCATION *of* ROBERT HOWARD ALLEN

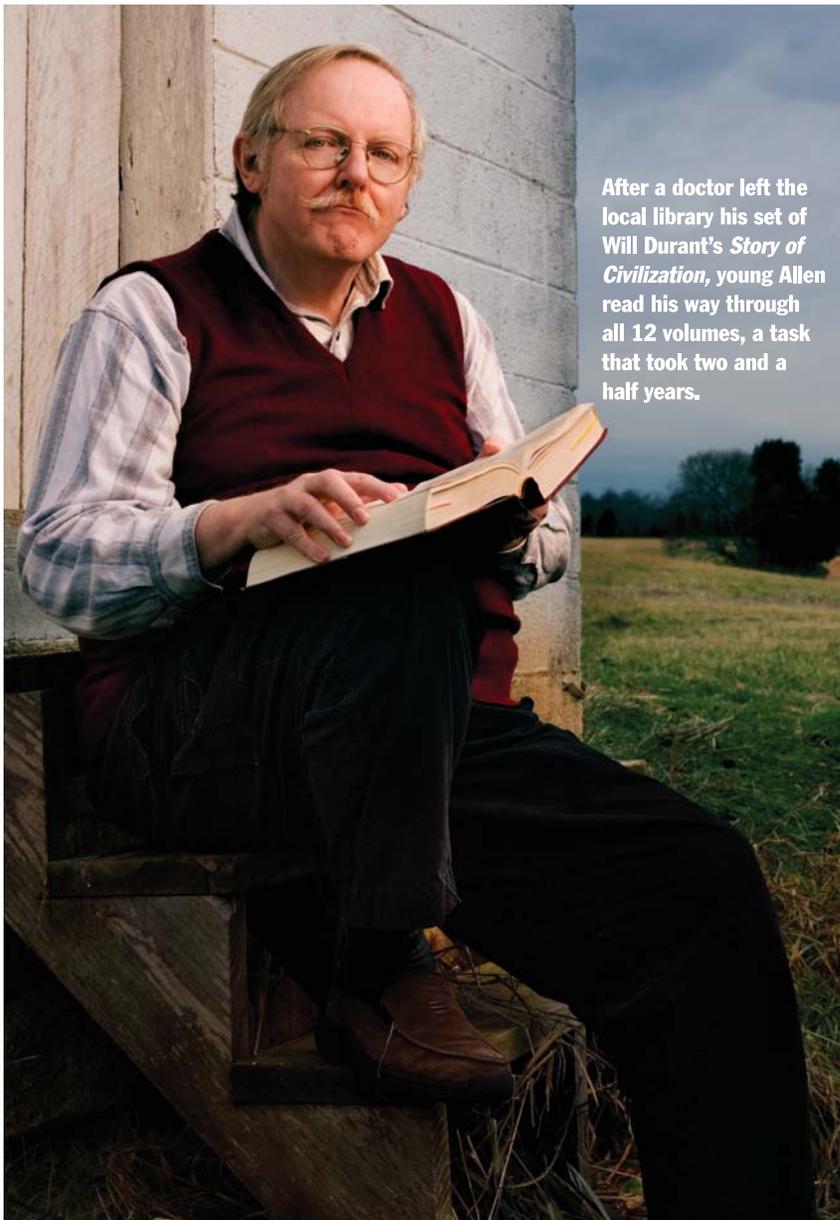
By FRYE GAILLARD, BA'68

There's a small framed portrait in Robert Allen's office, a bearded ancestor from the 19th century peering out across the clutter of the desk and the bookshelves crammed full of classical texts. It's hard to say which is more important to him—the musty hardbacks of Tolstoy and Dickens, or the dark-eyed visage of Hosea Preslar, Allen's great-great-great maternal grandfather who preached against slavery in West Tennessee and spent the Civil War hiding in a cave.

The truth of it is, all these symbols of his heritage and learning are so mixed together in Robert Allen's mind that he probably couldn't separate them if he tried. Allen is a poet, now living and teaching in East Tennessee, and his improbable story is unlike any other. He grew up poor in the hard-scrabble country northeast of Memphis, where the hills give way to the Mississippi Delta, and until he entered college at the age of 32, he had never set foot in a school.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL CUBOIS





After a doctor left the local library his set of Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*, young Allen read his way through all 12 volumes, a task that took two and a half years.

He was raised in a house full of aging relatives—his grandfather, a great-uncle and three great-aunts, including Great-Aunt Ida, a round-faced woman, gray-haired and blind, who was born in 1885 and was the self-appointed keeper of the family history. Hour after hour, he would listen to her stories, which she told with matter-of-fact precision, even though none of them had been written down. In the cumulative certainty of Aunt Ida's memory, there were heroes and scoundrels and people in between, and the old woman seemed happy to talk about them all.

"Aunt Ida fig-leafed nothing," Allen says. After a while he began to write it all down—the stories of pio-

neers and Tennessee soldiers who fought for the Union and adulteries committed in the haylofts of barns. He carried that legacy of family identity on his belated pursuit of a formal education, first to Bethel College in West Tennessee, where he received his undergraduate degree, and then to Vanderbilt University, where he earned his master's and his Ph.D.

He began writing poetry in the course of that journey, much of it about the members of his family, and he left some dazzled professors in his wake. "I thought he was a genius," says a teacher at Bethel. At Vanderbilt his adviser, Donald Davie, summarized Robert Allen this way: "He has the most single-minded appetite for learning of anyone I've ever taught. A good mind, yes, an extremely retentive memory, a very good sense of humor, all that; but the greatest thing is his unquenchable thirst for knowledge. The man simply can't get enough learning."

As Allen understands it, his thirst took hold in that rambling farmhouse in West Tennessee, last painted, he said, in 1909 and rented by his family for \$20 a month. It offered only the bare rudiments of shelter, and as the winter wind whistled across the Delta, it was easy for a boy growing up in such a place to find himself drawn to the flicker of the wood stove and the reassuring warmth of Aunt Ida's stories. There wasn't much formal education in the house. Aunt Ida had none, and his grandfather, James Ethridge Jones, was a farmer and carpenter who had never been to school and saw little reason why anyone should.

But there was a darker reason, talked about in whispers, for the old folks' decision to keep the boy at home. Robert's parents had been involved in a nasty divorce, his mother running off with a traveling shoe salesman, and the boy's new guardians were afraid the father would come back one day and steal him from the school yard. There was some wrangling for a while with the local school board, producing an agreement that Robert simply would be taught at home. A teacher did come to his house on occasion, but the arrangement didn't last, and after six months or so, says Allen, "I just sort of fell through the cracks."

By the age of 12, he had taught himself to read, mostly through the medium of comic books, and his horizons began to grow a little broader. His original introduction to the outside world came from a warm

and familiar source, the family Bible that he began to read to Aunt Ida in the evenings. They started with Genesis and worked their way through, proceeding at the rate of five chapters a night, and they were startled sometimes by the stark humanity of the biblical characters—the kings such as David, insatiable in their sexual appetites, but caught up also in that heroic odyssey of the Hebrew people.

To Robert Howard Allen, it sounded a little like the story of his family, all those people Aunt Ida talked about, who had made the journey across the Tennessee mountains looking for a place where they could build a better life. More and more in his teenage years, he felt himself drawn to nearly any kind of story. Most nights in the sanctuary of the farmhouse, he would ply his aunt for everything she remembered, and at least a couple of times a month, he made the four-mile trek to the Carroll County Library. The librarian there was a middle-aged woman by the name of Pearl Harder, who saw

Innocents Abroad. And then came the day when a prominent doctor in Carroll County died, leaving the library his 12-volume set of Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*. Allen decided to read the whole thing.

"It took me two and a half years," he says, "but I read all of it and retained a lot of it. Even today, off the top of my head, I could probably write a small book on the history of the world."

And so it was that for young Robert Allen, living without any friends his own age, his books and his family and a county librarian made up the expanding boundaries of his world. By sometime late in his teenage years, he had turned his hand to writing stories of his own—journal entries first, written in a flowing, old-fashioned script his grandfather had taught him. But the world of poetry called to him early, and by his mid-20s he was sending submissions to prestigious journals, unaware of the odds that were weighted against him.

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great promise in such an eager young mind, and for Robert Allen, she became his fellow pilgrim in the world of greater learning.

"In many ways," he says, "she was a typical librarian, but not the kind to shush an eager child."

Among other things, she introduced the boy to the collected works of William Shakespeare, a well-worn volume that became more so in Allen's eager hands. He read everything—*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*—but his favorites, he discovered, were less conventional. He loved *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, and when he read Mark Twain, it was not *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that captured his fancy, but rather the hilarity of

"That just seemed like what ought to happen," he says. "The purpose of the journals was to publish people's poems." And whatever his relative level of inexperience, he had studied the work of Longfellow and Yeats, Shakespeare and Poe, and he thought he understood what they were doing. Not that he saw himself as Shakespeare. But the intertwining power of eloquent language and a captivating story was now the primary passion of his life.

Pearl Harder, among others, couldn't help but be impressed. "I identified with Robert," she said. "He was his own person, unassuming, but very bright, and with a keen sense of humor. I knew he was exceptional."

In addition to his mind, she told a journalist in 1988, she was impressed by the dignity of Allen and his relatives, who sometimes came to the library with him. “Poor, but not ashamed,” she said. But she couldn’t help worrying that the young man’s brilliance inevitably would be cramped, circumscribed by the peculiar isolation of his family. She thought it was time for him to go to college.

She talked to Robert about it off and on, and sometime late in the 1970s, he said he began to think about it, too. He was pushing 30 by then, working as a handyman and upholsterer, and when a recession hit hard in Carroll County, drying up his work, he decided he needed to do something different. Bethel College was

just a few miles away, a little Presbyterian school that had opened its doors in the 1840s. After taking his high-school equivalency test and passing easily, Allen decided he might as well apply.

He came to Bethel in 1981, and both he and his teachers say it was a jolt. “He was pretty lonely,” remembered philosophy professor William Ramsey, “and lacking in social graces.” And English professor Bill King added, “He’s just not like anyone else—and no one is remotely like him.”

Allen himself more or less agrees, and in his memories of his early days at Bethel, one occasion in particular stands out in his mind. He was talking one day with a fellow student, a young man who was studying to go into the ministry, who seemed to be brighter than some of their peers. Having read the Bible from cover to cover, and having studied other works, including John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Allen was eager for a conversation of substance.

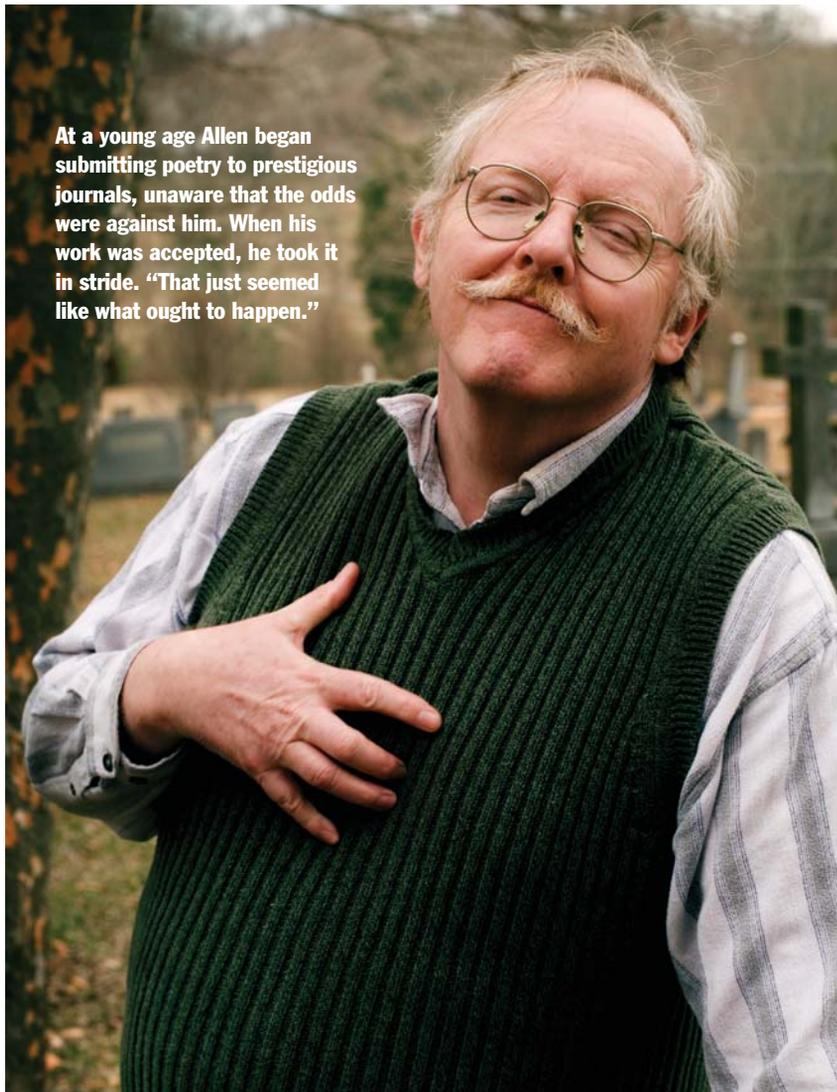
“What do you think of Milton’s theology?” he asked.

For a moment, the ministry student stared at him blankly, then finally answered with an uncertain shrug. “Milton who?”

For Allen, it was not a moment that made him feel less awkward, for it was a reminder of the chasm between himself and his peers. But it did make him feel as if he might be prepared. Like any college freshman he had wondered about it, and perhaps at first even more than many others. School, after all, was completely new to him. But he threw himself into the process of learning, just as he had as a teenaged boy, and without any trace of self-consciousness or pride, he began to show what he could do in class. Having tested out of freshman English, he took a literature course under professor Bill King, and one day when the conversation turned to poetry, he stood and recited Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”—every word of it, without missing a line.

*Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure
Nor grandeur hear with disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor ...*

In 1984, at the age of 35, he graduated after only three years, summa cum laude at the top of his class. He shared the graduation stage with commencement speaker Al



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Gore, then a U.S. senator. Cameras from *60 Minutes* arrived—not to focus on Gore, but instead to do a piece on Robert Howard Allen. The award-winning Southern journalist John Egerton also profiled Allen about that time, and summarized his story this way:

“It’s not often that middle-aged poor people finish college at all, let alone as classical scholars leading the academic procession.”

But as the years would reveal, Robert Allen was just getting started.

Allen left Bethel College for Vanderbilt to work on his master’s in creative writing. By then he had already started on a project more ambitious than anything else he had done. He wanted to write down the story of his family—the journey that began in North Carolina, back around the time of the American Revolution. It was a brutal time, as Allen understood it. In the South, especially, it was neighbor against neighbor, people forced to choose between competing imperatives—loyalty to the king, a long-held value among British subjects, and the great, intoxicating notions of liberty.

Allen’s ancestors were peaceable people, caught in the gathering fury of that choice. They fought when they had to, for after a while, there was no way to avoid it, but eventually they decided to move west. It was Allen’s ambition to document that journey in verse, expanding on the power of Aunt Ida’s stories. He relied in part on the example of the Bible. He had been reading the Old Testament one night, he said, first the Psalms and then the Book of Samuel—the psalms containing the poetry of King David, and Samuel a narrative account of his life. Allen decided to try to do both, to write the narrative of his own family’s odyssey, deliv-

ered with the lyricism of a poet.

At Vanderbilt, as he worked to find his own writer’s voice, he came under the tutelage of Donald Davie, one of the great elder statesmen in the English department. As Davie’s colleague Vereen Bell later put it, “Davie was English, a very distinguished poet of his generation, and a really important literary critic. He came to Vanderbilt after being at Stanford, and he was classically educated, which was something that he and Robert Allen shared.”

As Allen was working on his master’s thesis, he gave Davie some of his poems to read. They came back to him with a note in the margin: “This won’t do!”

“And he was right,” says Allen today, smiling his wry and enigmatic smile. “What he was trying to get me to see was that I was imitating writers I admired. His point was that I had to be original. What do I know that no one else knows?”

That question marinated for a while, as Allen earned his master’s degree and then his Ph.D., with a dissertation on William Butler Yeats. In 1990, with those milestones behind him, he started working more deliberately on the book he decided to call *Simple Annals*, taking the title from the poetry of Thomas Gray. At this point, he says, he knew he was ready.

The family stories beckoned more powerfully than ever, and at the age of 41, he was more his own person as a writer and a man. But most of all, his poems were beginning to take on a shape, not only individually but as a group. He began his collection with “Elias Butler,” an epic reminiscence about an early ancestor, who went to war reluctantly against the British king. A few poems later, there was the story of Rebecca Singleton Thomas, a Civil War-vintage relative who, by the sheer, improbable power of her defiance, cowed the

Rebel soldiers who were threatening her farm. But in addition to these heroic accounts were memories of degradation and tragedy—for example, the story of Nate, a black man lynched in West Tennessee for the simple crime of loving a white woman.

In that poem, Allen let his imagination run free—“as is every poet’s right,” he says—and he wrote about the star-crossed lovers with all the gentleness he thought they deserved.

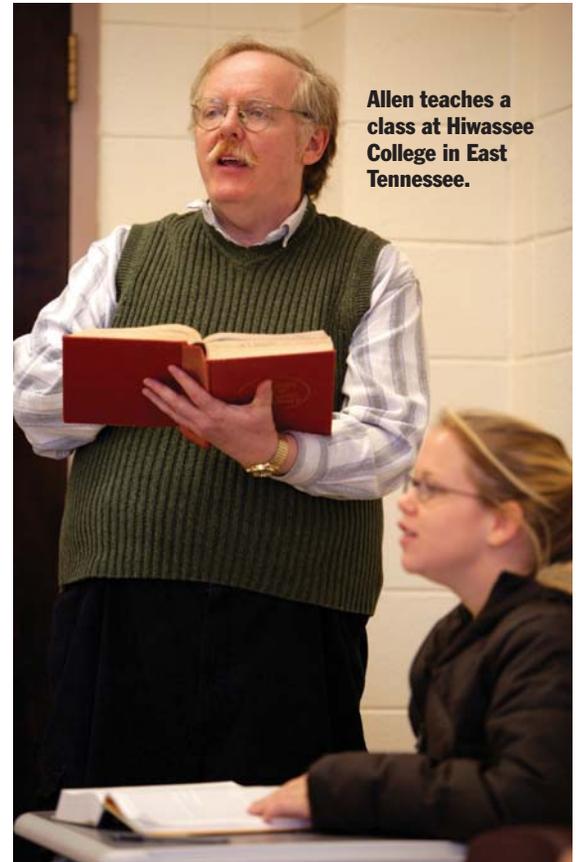
*Tell the story: a love story;
Tender touched the lovers, proper as spring;
But death was the ending of it.
For loving,
Oh, for weeping in secret and longing
When the fat red sun
Lumbered to rest,
For the caring and the dreaming,
Standing with his hoe
In the weedy corn.*

*For that
Death.*

When *Simple Annals* came out in 1997, published by the distinguished press Four Walls Eight Windows in New York City, there were those who compared it to *Spoon River Anthology*. But the reviews in the end were few and far between, and the sales, says Allen with a winsome smile, “might charitably be characterized as modest.” And so it was that in the chilly and unpredictable world of publishing, Allen’s great literary labor of love appeared and then quietly slipped away, leaving barely a trace. But Allen seemed to know, as good writers do, that this was not a reflection on himself. The stories were there, and there was art in the telling, and so he simply went on about his life.

He turned his attention, in part, to writing plays, including one soon to be staged at Murray State University, telling the story of a family maverick who built a cabin for his mistress within a stone’s throw of the one for his wife. He also has written a work of scholarship, *The Classical Roots of Modern Homophobia*, to be published this year, which traces the prejudice against homosexuals from the time of the Roman Empire forward.

In that particular book, he was returning to a subject



Allen teaches a class at Hiwassee College in East Tennessee.

he had taken on before, when a mainstream publisher, having seen the segment on *60 Minutes*, asked him to write his autobiography. He wrote it as he thought Aunt Ida would have wanted, “fig-leaving nothing,” including the difficult matter of his own sexuality. But as one of his Vanderbilt advisers later noted, this was not what the publisher had in mind, and in the end the manuscript was rejected.

Allen, as always, took it in stride and simply pushed ahead as a writer. It seemed there was always a poem or a play, and often something larger, taking its inevitable shape in his mind—and he also found new rewards as a teacher, seeking to impart his own love of learning to the diversity of students who passed through his classes.

He left Vanderbilt to return to Bethel College, a professor this time, and from there he moved to Murray State University and then to the University of Tennessee-Martin. Four years ago he made the trek eastward to Hiwassee College, a Methodist school built in the 1840s in the rolling foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays you will find him in his classes, Freshman Composition and British Literature, orchestrating far-flung discussions that range from the

shooting spree at Columbine High School to the iambic pentameter of Alexander Pope. At 56, with his tuft of a beard and his wire-rimmed glasses, he looks the part of a lifelong scholar, his seriousness tempered by a dry sense of humor his students seem to love.

“He’s a lot of fun,” says Josh Debitry, one of his Brit-Lit students. And Ashley Wise, a sophomore English major agrees. “I love Dr. Allen’s classes,” she says. “Normally, there are some pretty heated discussions, some really good arguments about all sorts of things.”

Allen seems to feel the same affection for his students, especially those who are eager and bright. “I’ve had my share of good ones,” he says.

One night in his office just before Thanksgiving, he settles back in his chair and reflects on the various ingredients of his life. His Civil War ancestor, Hiram Preslar, stares down from the wall, a flinty-eyed man in a Wal-Mart frame, an apostle of abolition in the South.

“This is his book,” says Allen, pulling out a hard-back volume from the classics. “It’s a book about slavery, but it’s also partly an autobiography.” He stops for a moment, thumbs through the pages, and then returns the book to its place on the shelf. He knows, of course, that it was much like his own, not famous or commercially successful in its time—but the writer’s reward is not a short-term thing.

He had learned long ago, in the rambling old farmhouse back in Carroll County, that there was meaning simply in handing down the story. It was a curious way to grow up, he admits, lonesome at times, but he was surrounded by members of a family who loved him and, more than that, who knew who they were. They had kept alive a history of pathos and grace, and they had given their blessing when he began to expand it—when he made those treks to the Carroll County library and filled his mind with the knowledge it contained.

“It was a good beginning for a poet,” he explains. “I couldn’t have asked for anything more.”

As the conversation winds down, he shuffles through a handful of papers on his desk, then locks up his office and shuts out the light. He nods goodnight to a student in the hall, and again reaffirms the quiet and lasting satisfactions of his work. Barring anything unexpected, he says, he plans to stay at Hiwassee for a while—writing his poems, teaching his students—doing what he thinks would make the old people proud. ▼

Going Home

By Robert Howard Allen

The wind in the pine trees is lonelier than I can stand;
It wants my arm on its shoulder, my tears
Mixed forever in the rain. I will go back.

The mountains’ gesture on the horizon undoes me,
As though their proud stone hearts unsaid
The “Be thou” of God that is me. And when I think
The words the pine trees find in the wind will wear
down

The face of the mountains
Watched by the merry stars, then my time,
With a love or without, is nothing. I will go back.

Back to rooms where there are ticking clocks,
And friends, and tea on Friday afternoons.

The desolate graves in the woods,
Marked with uncut stones, where all my fathers sleep
Tell me in the nights that the lichens
Are gnawing at my name.

And in the country churches beside them,
Old men with broken voices
Sing like wagons rolling on stony ground,
And, the word is not worship,
But dread, God of Calvin,
Who makes me doubt

If all my love could move one mote,
Eternal as a star sinking in the sunrise. I must go back.
To the miles of silent bookshelves,
And the streetlights that dome the city with glare
Safe from the killing hail
Of blue, eternal stars.

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