

Obituary: Louis J. Budd (1921–2010)

Louis J. Budd (formerly Budrewicz), who died in Patagonia, Arizona on 20 December 2010, was a well-known and much-respected American literary critic and the foremost Mark Twain scholar of his time.

Lou (as all his friends knew him) was born on 26 August 1921 in St. Louis, Missouri, the son of Polish Lithuanian immigrants who came to America just before the First World War. He had a working-class background, with an illiterate father who worked in a shoe factory and a mother with no more than basic literacy who worked in a commercial bakery (known as the “pie-factory”). Growing up in such circumstances in the Depression inevitably had a long-lasting effect on Lou and his view of the world. But he was clearly something of a “golden boy” in his youth – I use his own phrase here, taken from an “oral history” of Lou published in 1996 (*American Literary History* 28, 3) – majoring in English at the University of Missouri (his favourite authors were Thomas Wolfe and Dos Passos) and taking an MA there too. He then went on to his PhD under the GI Bill after serving in the US Army Air Force as a navigation instructor during the Second World War. His dissertation was on William Dean Howells: as Lou said, “He was a Christian socialist and more socialist than Christian – it followed rather naturally that I should write on him.”

Budd studied for his PhD (awarded in 1949) at the University of Wisconsin. Then, after three years at the University of Kentucky, he went to Duke University, where he taught – more or less continuously – from 1952 through to his retirement. He played a major role at Duke, chairing Afro-American studies in the early years that the subject was taught there (1968–70) and then chairing the English Department from 1973 to 1979 (he was proud that he had introduced film studies into its teaching). He took on the managing editorship of the journal *American Literature* in 1979, and edited (for Duke University Press) a good number of literary collections taken from its back issues. He retired in 1991, as he put it, “netted” by the “law for then mandatory retirement,” but remained professionally active till his death. David E. E. Sloane tells of Lou walking into Duke’s library the morning after he retired: “Someone turned to him and said, ‘You’re retired,

what are *you* doing here?’ His response was simple, and smiling, ‘Well, where else should I be? When you tell me some *better* place to be, I’ll go and *be there!*’” He did finally move from North Carolina to Patagonia, Arizona in September 2009 – some three years after the death of Isabelle, his wife of more than sixty years – to be near his son David’s family. Typical of Lou, he took a lively interest in his new local neighborhood and was meanwhile kept on his toes by granddaughter Exelee.

Lou is best known for his work on Twain, and especially for his two monographs, *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher* (1962) and *Our Mark Twain: The Making of His Public Personality* (1983). The first, though written almost half a century ago, remains the best study of Twain’s changing social and political views, grounded in extensive research in newspaper archives and in Twain’s correspondence, as well as in careful analysis of the author’s relevant published works. A comment in *Mississippi Quarterly* nicely catches the book’s (and Lou’s) qualities:

Budd is one of those rare and highly-to-be-prized people who consistently say good things in a graceful way. Writing about Mark Twain in a fashion that would not make Mark Twain swear if he read the result is a test not often passed. Professor Budd passes it with flying colors.

Our Mark Twain has been described as “the definitive study of Twain as lecturer/performer, interview subject, and celebrity,” and contained (for Lou was very interested in visual representations of the author) cartoons and caricatures recovered from a range of nineteenth-century publications.

Lou wore his learning lightly but knew an enormous amount about Twain. His “A Listing of and Selection from Newspaper and Magazine Interviews with Samuel L. Clemens, 1874–1910” (1977; Supplement 1996) has been an invaluable resource to other scholars, while his Library of America two-volume edition of Twain’s *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays* (1992) is both a masterly scholarly achievement and a brilliant illustration of Twain’s own literary breadth, variety and comic flair. But Lou wrote so much else on Twain beside, in recent years, writing on “Mark Twain’s Reputation” for Gregg Camfield’s *The Oxford Companion to Mark Twain* (2003) and co-editing and contributing to Blackwell’s *A Companion to Mark Twain* (2005). He was much more than a Twain scholar, though, with a particular interest in American realism and naturalism, and countless essays and articles on Howells, Joel Chandler Harris, Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, and many others. He also wrote the first full-length study of American realist novelist Robert Herrick (1971). Lou was founding president of the Mark Twain Circle of America and received numerous awards for his scholarship, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Fulbright, and the 1998

Jay B. Hubbell Medal. In responding to this last award, Budd spoke presciently of the economic downturn on the horizon and of the continued importance of the humanities in such a context:

some harder times are coming on for *homo* not so *sapiens* ... Harder times are ahead globally, if they're not already here despite whatever record the Dow-Jones index may top in 1999 ... American humaneness and fortitude are going to be challenged. That humaneness will need all the help that we can give. By "we" I especially mean those of us who profess, who teach literature. As for what we can teach the body politic and economic, some of our prescient colleagues are laying out the particulars – easy to find if you start looking for, listening for them.

But I've not really caught the essence of Lou in what I've said so far (though I fully recognize the partial and subjective nature of my own view). His love of Twain, and especially of Twain's humour, was reflected in his own quietly spoken and dry wit. And he was a deeply humane man who celebrated the sheer pleasure of literature and the intelligence and insight it offered. "A lot of graduate students," he said, "are disappointed because they enjoy literature, and they find out, no, they're supposed to write a book about it. Rather than learning something more about it." Lou wrote books, but he was always looking to learn something more about the authors he read. He was, in many ways, an old-fashioned humanist (with no insult intended in that adjective), suspicious of much contemporary theory for its distance from the social and political realities of our lives. He had little truck for conventional academic hierarchies, happier to spend his time listening to a graduate student or young scholar working in his area, learning from them and advising them (always wisely) where he could. He knew he was lucky to have the job he did, and if his outlook on life was stoic (conditioned by the Depression of his boyhood, by the Second World War, by the history of his original Polish "homeland") it was certainly in no way despairing. He had an astute political mind, kept his left-wing principles, applauded Obama's election. But he knew his own luck in life was in part accidental, a product of circumstance. So he would paraphrase the verse of Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska: "Well, yes, you were lost and I was saved,' she says, 'because I was late. Or was it because I was early? No, wait a minute,' she says, 'you were lost and I was saved because it was raining. Or, no, was it because it was sunny?'"

Extracts from an email of 2010 give some sense of Lou's wit, his style, his interests:

I've been distracted by my birthday [89] and also by password trouble from the Duke system, which I'm still using. Without telling me, it (they?) cancelled my password as too "old." And therefore, I guess, vulnerable to terrorists who know of my key role in world realpolitik ... Our rainy season – technically a desert is allowed

up to, I think, twelve inches of rain annually without dishonour – is about over. But it continues to germinate an astonishing range of weeds that have not only grown enthusiastically but have already gone to seed. The standard work on Arizona weeds furnishes little guidance for me because it includes so many ... My reading is keeping me squarely in England right now. First, the new biography of Friedrich Engels settles him in London, which he felt comfortable in, just like Marx. Second, a history of anarchists between roughly 1870 and 1915 makes much of London as the city which they preferred over Paris and Berlin and of course Moscow, all with aggressive secret police.

Lou Budd was a deeply honest, wise and witty man. He was the mentor to any number of younger Twain scholars, both American and British (including myself), always patient with their failings, always encouraging when it was most needed. He will be greatly missed.

University of Nottingham

PETER MESSENT