

# RUSSELL BAKER '47

July 13, 1999

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Mame Warren,  
interviewer

**Warren:** This is Mame Warren. Today is July 13, 1999. I'm in Leesburg, Virginia, with Russell Baker. I know, from having read one of my favorite books, that you spent much of your youth in Baltimore. I want to know what your impressions were, if any, of Johns Hopkins, as you grew up in Baltimore.

**Baker:** I had no impressions at all of Hopkins, except as a hospital, until I was finishing high school. I was not aware that there was a university over there, apart from the medical side of things. I just didn't know that. In fact, when I was a senior in high school, I was astonished to learn that there was an undergraduate university that I might be able to get into. So growing up, it did not mean our kind of education to me. It just meant sawbones.

**Warren:** So you were aware of the hospital and the reputation of the hospital?

**Baker:** Yes, the hospital, of course. I think I'd seen about that in the movies, for heaven's sake, and I knew there was a medical school. There had been a movie called *Miss Susie Slagel*, if I recall.

**Warren:** Oh, tell me about that.

**Baker:** Well, I didn't see the movie. I was aware that there was such a movie, and it was about a woman who kept a boardinghouse for medical students at Johns Hopkins. It was not the kind of movie that attracted me in those days. I was more of a *Gunga Din* type movie fan, so I didn't see it. But it made a splash in Baltimore, because of the Johns Hopkins connection, and I was then in the newspaper business, delivering newspapers, so I was aware of what this movie was about. And from that, I was aware of the existence of the medical school.

**Warren:** Was it actually filmed in Baltimore, do you know?

**Baker:** Oh, I'm sure it wasn't. Nothing was filmed on location in those days; everything was filmed in studios.

**Warren:** I can remember seeing it on the afternoon matinee, on TV, when I was growing up, so I had a very vague memory of it, and then I found an allusion to it, and I said, "Oh, I know something about that." Very little at this point. So could you, one more time, tell me the story about going for your scholarship test?

**Baker:** Yes. Well, my high school career was ending. I was about to graduate. I was going to graduate that June, June of '42. We didn't have a great deal of money in our family. I lived with my mother and stepfather, who was, I think, at that time a fireman for the B&O Railroad. Money was tough in those days. It was not like now, where a million dollars is pocket change.

I hadn't thought much of going to college, but I hadn't thought that my prospects of going to college were very good, and had rather thought in terms of getting a job when I left high school. In those days, people did come out of high school and get jobs. A great majority of

people, I think, did not go to college. Now you can't get a job if you—well, you get a job digging a ditch if you haven't been to college.

So it didn't upset me much that I didn't have any college prospects, but I didn't. I didn't think I did. And among the jobs, when I was thinking about what I could do, I knew that my stepfather could probably get me a job with the B&O as a brakeman or whatever. Didn't interest me very much, because I had never had any inclination to work with my hands. I had no manual skills at all. My interest had always been in books. I was a bookish kid, a little bookish drudge.

I was asked one day by a good friend of mine at City College, where I was in high school, a boy named Charlie Sussman, what I was going to do, and I said, well, I didn't think I was going to college, and he was shocked. He came out of a culture who couldn't conceive of anybody not going to college. He later became an educator. He loved education. And he said, "That's terrible." He said, "Have you taken the scholarship exam at Hopkins?" And I said, "What scholarship exam?" It didn't mean anything to me. And he explained to me that Hopkins had some competitive scholarships and you could go over and take a written exam and you'd submit a few papers pleading poverty, they might give you a scholarship. In other words, Hopkins would accept you without any money. It was astonishing. I didn't know. So what have I got to lose?

And I went over on the appointed day, filing the papers, getting a letter or two about my heartbreaking financial situation, and I joined God knows how many other people, a depressingly large crowd of other contenders in the lecture hall, lecture room at Remsen Hall. Still remember the chemical smell of the place.

And I forget—there were a couple of tests. I think you ran an hour and a half, and then another ran another hour and a half. I forget how long it was. And they were heavily oriented toward language. There was some mathematics, but I wasn't bad at math at that time. The upshot of it was that I was granted a full tuition scholarship for two semesters. That's how I got into Hopkins, at the last minute. If you didn't apply—I hadn't applied anyplace else. As I said, I'd never thought of it.

So I went over—my last year of high school was summer of '42, and we had the graduation ceremony on the stage of the Polytechnic, Poly, the high school up there on North Avenue. Listened to the mayor speak and sang our songs, wore our white rented dinner jackets, and hot, hot as hell. And the next morning I got up and went to college. At that time, in the middle of the war—well, the war had just started, summer of '42—Hopkins was going around the calendar in those days. There was no summer let-up. I think there were three semesters, so I started out in the summer semester. That's how it came about.

**Warren:** So when you took the scholarship exam, were there people from all over the place, or was it primarily Baltimore people?

**Baker:** You mean among the people who were contending for this money?

**Warren:** Yes.

**Baker:** I have no idea. I know that Charlie Sussman, the guy who introduced me to it, took it. Whether he got one, I don't know, and I don't know where the others came from.

**Warren:** So once you arrived on campus, were there lots of commuters? Did you call yourself a commuter? I presume you lived at home.

**Baker:** Well, I don't think "commuter" was an English word in those days, like "teenager." It didn't exist until the culture changed. So I rode the streetcar. Many people did. Most of the students did in those days. And, you know, brought my lunch in a brown bag and took the streetcar home in the evening, and that was the way I went to college. I think a considerable majority of the boys at Hopkins—they were all boys in those days, don't forget, that went to Hopkins. It didn't matter to me that I wasn't living there. Good lord, I'd never had any thought of going away to college and living in a dormitory. My views of college life were shaped by old Bing Crosby and Jack Oakey musicals—playing football and singing and driving girls down the Old Ox Road. [Laughter] I never had any vision that that was possible. It always struck me as a fantasy life. So, having got this scholarship, I hopped on the streetcar the next morning and checked in up at Hopkins, and started.

**Warren:** So take me there. Tell me what happened when you first got there.

**Baker:** Well, I was utterly baffled, of course. Didn't know my way around. There was this very rigid what's now called a "core curriculum," I guess, in those days. You had to have so many credits—history, you know, what you would expect. Language, history, science, mathematics. And I went over. I had come right out of high school, and I'd been a demon drudge in high school. My grades were extremely good, but I was the kind of student who knew how to tell teachers what they wanted to hear. I perceived quite early that that was the way to get ahead in education, was not to do a lot of thinking, but to figure out what the teacher wants and then tell it to him. My

mother had been a teacher. I suppose I'd learned that from her. She was always made happy when I told her what she wanted to hear. [Laughter] So were most other teachers I'd encountered in school, public schools. I'd always gone to public schools.

In any event, when I got to Hopkins, I was signed up with a variety of professors, and I plunged into this program in which nobody told you what he wanted you to think. For example, there was a professor, Frederick Lane, I think the world's foremost authority on the Reformation, or the history of Venice, or some such thing, at the time. A wonderful, wonderful man. We freshmen were exposed to this man, who was a great professor. You know, nowadays, you go, you meet a graduate student, some incompetent. They're charging you \$30,000 to have you listen to a graduate student.

In any case, I find myself in this history section with Frederick Lane, and he assigned us a book to read and I read at it. He didn't tell me what he wanted me to read. And after a couple of weeks, he said, "I'm going to give a quiz tomorrow." A quiz to me was dates. When was the Battle of Waterloo? Such stuff as that.

I came in and sat down, and he wrote the quiz on the board, and I think I can still remember what it was. He said, "Discuss the validity of an assumption for the correlation between race and cultural progress." And writing that on the board, he left the room. I couldn't even understand the question. [Laughter] I didn't know what he was talking about, and I realized for the first time, boy, am I in trouble. I'm now playing with the big boys. I was able, because I was glib, a glib writer, I've always been a glib writer. There were a few more of these quizzes that Lane gave as the weeks went by, and I'd write something.

Finally, after a couple of months, he wrote something at the end of one of them. He always gave you a gentleman's C, you know, it was really a gentleman's F, but he'd give you a C, and he wrote something on the end that stayed with me forever after. He said, "You find it so easy to be smart that you don't bother to do any work," and I thought, you know, he put his finger right on my character.

**Warren:** He got you.

**Baker:** It's been, ever since, it's been a problem of mine. It's so easy to be smart that I haven't bothered to do enough work. So I've worried about that all my life and I think that's the first important thing I learned at Johns Hopkins, an invaluable lesson.

But we were also introduced to—what was stunning about Hopkins in those days, first of all, was how small it was. Secondly, was how many real professors the undergraduates were exposed to. That year, I also had a course with Dr. Albright. What's his first name? He was the great Orientalist scholar of biblical history in the Middle East and whatnot. What's Albright's first name? I've forgotten. In any case, he was internationally famous at the time. He excavated biblical remnants and so forth, wrote biblical history. And I found myself sitting around the table, with Albright presiding, talking to these undergraduates. You know, very cheerfully, nothing patronizing.

I remember the first class he conducted. It was a seminar, and because he was interested in religious anthropology, I suppose, he began—he was smiling, he was always a very pleasant man—he said, "What are the religious feelings of people around the table?" and everybody was silent, of course. "So," he said, "are there any Catholics? Any Muslims?" He said, "Are there any

logical positivists?" I thought, what the hell is a logical positivist? [Laughter] I sat there stunned again.

So Hopkins, that summer, was a constant series of astonishments like that to me. And I did a lot of growing up that summer. I took calculus with Francis Murnaghan, with Dr. Murnaghan. And I took physics. I forget who the professor was in physics. That was mostly lecturing. Terrible. At eight o'clock in the morning, you'd, gummy-eyed, listen to somebody going on about dines and ergs, and in both calculus and physics, I was like—there was an old radio comedian, used to talk all night long, named Gene Sheppard, and he once, reminiscing about his career in college, when he took chemistry, he said, "After two weeks in chemistry, I was six months behind the rest of the class." [Laughter] And that's the way I felt at Hopkins in both calculus and physics.

**Warren:** Was there a strong sense of the war going on in the background?

**Baker:** Very powerful. Oh, very powerful. You know, Pearl Harbor had been in 1941, just a few months earlier. There had been a huge rush of enlistments afterwards. Students had just bailed out of college and signed up for the Marines, whatever. So that was one reason the student body was so small.

There was great excitement about the war, and by that time, I was—I was only sixteen that summer when I went over there. I turned seventeen in August, and at that time, it was obvious that everybody, at eighteen, was going into the military. It was just inevitable. So the reason I took both physics and calculus so early in my career was, I wanted to equip myself to get into the Navy's flying division, and I thought that they would—having a background in mathematics and

science would improve my chances of getting in. I wanted to be accepted for flight training and so forth.

So from the very beginning, I was conscious of, you know, I'm going to go to the war and I want to be prepared, and part of the thing I'm going to do while I'm here is equip myself to be accepted for what I want to do in the war. Various professors were assigned to counsel students about the draft and consult with them about their military career, forthcoming military career. The Navy's agent was Professor Sidney Painter. Painter, he was a professor of medieval English history. Young man. Everybody loved his course, which, of course, was known as "Wars and Whores." Painter had been commissioned by the—or told by the Navy he was to counsel—I guess he'd been told by the university—he was to counsel students who were interested in going into naval service. So I went around to see Sidney Painter, told him, "Look. I want to get in the Navy Air Corps." And he was as though he'd never heard of the Navy Air Corps. [Laughter] He thought the Navy went to sea. He was astonished that they had flying machines.

**Warren:** So you gave him an education?

**Baker:** Yes, well, you know, he was puffing his pipe. He was the typical absentminded professor, sitting in his office, smelling of tobacco smoke, papers everywhere, and he said, "Yes, I think I've got some applications here somewhere," and he began rooting through his desk, and finally found some papers, gave them to me to fill out. But, yes, the war was—oh, there was a very powerful sense of the war.

**Warren:** How about on a social level? Was it an undercurrent there, too?

**Baker:** The war?

**Warren:** Yes.

**Baker:** What do you mean? There was nothing social about the war, except USOs.

**Warren:** Well, that's what I mean. I would think that—and I guess you weren't there at a normal time, and so you can't compare it, but that there might have been more of a normal social life, whereas during a war, there would be a constant awareness of it. But I don't want to put my thoughts, because I wasn't there.

**Baker:** I didn't have any social life, so I really am not competent to answer that question. You know, I was struggling just to get passing grades in my courses, and it was an all-boys' school. I was quite young. As I say, I had just turned seventeen. I wasn't engaged in the pursuit of girls. I didn't drink. I never had a good time in the way what kids would now call a good time. My idea of a good time was to go bowling or go to a movie.

One effect the war had on my social life was, because it was Baltimore and it was a big military town then, the whole town worked around the clock, was that the bowling alley stayed open all night long. You could go bowling at five o'clock in the morning if you were so minded.

**Warren:** Tell me what you mean that Baltimore was a big military town.

**Baker:** Oh, it was an industrial town. You had the Bethlehem steel mill there. They were building ships. You had the Glenn-Martin aircraft factory turning out bombers, and I suppose you probably had more than full employment in Baltimore at that time. In fact, there was a huge influx of people to take these defense jobs there. People came in from West Virginia, this part of the

country, and they were called “hillbillies” at the time. There were all these hillbillies coming to Baltimore, they were called, and blacks had jobs.

Baltimore is a terrible race town, worse race town I’ve ever seen. Boston may be even worse, but Baltimore was—and just hell for a black person to get a job in those days, but with the war on, everybody was working, these great factories turning out this stuff, and turning it out at such a rate that they worked twenty-four hours a day, and you could go bowling at five in the morning.

There was also a—I remember about Baltimore at that time, was how good the public transportation was. The gasoline, of course, was rationed in any case, but most people didn’t have cars. Well, poor people didn’t have cars, the way everybody has two cars now. And nobody needed it because the public transportation was so good. The streetcars ran—you know, you could get on a streetcar in west Baltimore and go all the way to Sparrow’s Point for ten cents. You could be at work down there making steel. Everybody got around by streetcar. It feels like a very primitive time.

**Warren:** But there weren’t the parking problems.

**Baker:** No. I went the other day to my granddaughter’s graduation from high school, and half the property at the high school was used as a parking lot for the students’ cars. [Laughter] I think there were five or six people who drove to school when I was in high school. Everybody else came on the streetcar. Same problem at Hopkins. My god, I was over at Hopkins last year and I couldn’t find a place to park. What had once been green fields where people played softball or something are now asphalt parking lots.

**Warren:** Or buildings.

**Baker:** Yes, they have put up all sorts of new buildings. But still, the campus seems fairly open.

It's a spacious campus.

**Warren:** What was your impression of the campus?

**Baker:** Oh, grand. You know, it was just a grand place. I lived down in south Baltimore, which was—it was not a slum by any means, but it was crowded. It was row housing. There would be parks around, and we could go to the park and play ball or whatever, but it was not fancy. You know, up there, the Hopkins campus is swell. You know, this great triangle, and these beautiful quadrangles, these beautiful buildings, and the old clock sounding off periodically. Just a feeling of spaciousness and luxury about it.

The old library, when I was there, was in Gilman Hall. You went in the main entrance and walked straight through, and it was in the back, with magnificent windows overlooking the park. Is that Wyman Park back there? I forget.

**Warren:** Yes.

**Baker:** It seems to be a driveway now. And these comfortable chairs. You know, I never sat in a really comfortable chair. [Laughter] I could go into the library and sit by these magnificent windows, get a book, sit in a marvelous chair, looking out on the park. Boy, I was in heaven.

**Warren:** Were there any particular—I mean, the library, I've seen pictures of that library and it—

**Baker:** What's there now?

**Warren:** It's been turned into a reading room. After they built the Eisenhower Library, they moved the bulk of the books to the Eisenhower, but that big room is still there, and it's a place where the students can go and talk, meet as groups and talk. I haven't really seen it in action, because I came June first, so I haven't really seen it in action, but I understand it's still a very vibrant place, and that students spend a lot of time there. Were there other places on campus that particularly drew you?

**Baker:** Well, Levering Hall, of course, was the great assembly hall.

**Warren:** Oh, do tell me about Levering Hall.

**Baker:** There was a cafeteria, basically, in the basement of Levering Hall. That may still be there, for all I know.

**Warren:** Well, it's changed, so I'd like to know what it was like when you were there.

**Baker:** Well, the last time I was there, they put up some plain glass structure between Gilman and Levering. I don't know what it was—I had a bad meal there. But that was open space before. It was a little woody. When you came out of Gilman on that side door, you went down to Levering Hall, which was the upstairs, the hall, a kind of foyer, meeting room that's there now. And there's a piano in there. Corbin Gwaltney could play the piano occasionally. And underneath, the *News-Letter* office was down there.

**Warren:** It was?

**Baker:** Yes, on the side of Levering Hall, on the north side. And the Student Council met down there, and you went all the way around the building then, behind it, and there was the cafeteria.

That was a cafeteria, but it was a great social center. You know, that's where everybody went to kill an hour or to shoot the breeze, to argue. That was it, you know. A cup of coffee and cigarettes. Everybody smoked. And that's all there was at Levering Hall, that I recall. There must have been something on the other side, but god knows what was over there. Quite small, and the cafeteria was not very big, either.

But I went back to Hopkins. You know, my Hopkins career was split by the war, my war service, and it was a quite a different place when I came back. Of course, I was quite a different person, but it had filled up. Wasn't filled up, but suddenly there were a lot of people there, and most of them were wearing fragments of old military uniforms. These were, for the most part, men who had been in the war, many of them had been in combat, a number were shot up, in fact, and it was a very mature group of people. Completely different, and so much more fun than it had been before. These were people who—they weren't impressed by the professors. The professors had to earn their respect.

There's someplace in one of Henry Miller's books, where he's talking, and somebody chides him for not being kind to his mother, and he replies, in a high dudgeon, he says, "Just because she's my mother doesn't mean she doesn't have to earn my respect." [Laughter] Well, professors—these people had that attitude toward the professors. Just because he's a professor doesn't mean he doesn't have to earn my respect. So they were constantly challenging and arguing, and the professors loved it. They hadn't had such a good time since they were in college, I think, and just for a couple of years there, it was wonderful, this wonderful, open atmosphere.

**Warren:** So it was a time when there were lots of vets, but I presume there were also people arriving who were sixteen and seventeen years old.

**Baker:** Yes, some. A few. But the place was dominated by veterans after the war. I mean, a lot of them, they were in their twenties, but they were starting out in college. These were people who, you know, they hadn't interrupted college careers. They'd never dreamed they'd have a chance of going to college. The G.I. Bill came along and everything seemed possible, and it produced—really, some fascinating men turned up there.

**Warren:** Tell me about what kind of people.

**Baker:** For example, my friends included a man who had been a waste gunner in a B-54, had flown something like twenty-five or thirty missions over Germany, and was a nervous wreck. Everybody laughed about him when he would go to the coffee line at the cafeteria, because the elderly woman who stood at the cash register had the shakes, and Bill would come down with his cup of coffee and he was shaking like this, and she was shaking, and it became a kind of joke, but it was not a mean joke.

These men, that was the way they had lived together. They were used to not weeping about their problems, and making light of them. Wishmeyer. Wishmeyer later became a professor. I think he had been in the Italian campaign, spent a lot of time in Rome, and highly—I don't know, he had sort of self-educated, I believe, before he came to Hopkins. He was a married man. A lot of these people were married then. You know, these were people up in their late twenties. Seemed like old people at the time.

But everybody had been someplace. There were people who had been with Patton, crossing France. I hadn't been anywhere. I had spent my time flying over Alabama, steeling watermelons out of the field, that kind of thing. And it was still very small. I mean relatively small. Universities now are bigger than cities, or Kennedy Airport, aren't they? At that time, it seemed bigger, in comparison to what it had been before the war, but by today's standards, it was minute.

**Warren:** Take me into the classroom at that time. Tell me about some of those really interesting discussions and how the professors reacted.

**Baker:** Well, there were great tales about all the professors. I had a course in Chaucer with a professor named Kemp Malone, said to be the world's foremost authority on Chaucerian English, or Icelandic English, or whatever it was, and there were maybe eight of us in that class. That's the way Hopkins was. Imagine being educated in a place where a professor of that stature is talking to eight undergraduates, and we read the stuff in Chaucerian language, and he would correct our pronunciation. [Demonstrates.]

But there was one woman in that class, and Malone had a reputation for not liking women. It was said, it was rumored, that this was because he was mercilessly henpecked at home. So there was one woman who took the course, and his method was to go around the table and have everybody read a little of *The Canterbury Tales* here and there. And when he got to those terribly, those vile, bawdy stories by the miller and the reeve and so forth, he would always have the woman read it, and then he'd kind of smile and say, "Would you read?" [Laughter] People were working out their problems like this.

I took course in Milton. There were only four of us in that course. It was given by a professor named Don Cameron Allen, and he enjoyed it because we argued constantly about free will. This was a semester-long argument about God's perfection. If God was perfect, how could we be imperfect? If everything is preordained, then how could anybody be responsible for this own actions? This went on and on as we read through *Paradise Lost*. Is that education? I don't know, but it was a good time.

These professors were available. I remember we—I had two other friends at the time who wanted to—they were interested in modern French poetry, what was then modern French poetry, and we went to a French professor named Malakis and asked if he would give a course in Baudelaire, Verlaine, a couple of moderns. And he said, "Sure. How many people can you get?" And we got three together. And he said, "Oh, that's enough." [Laughter] And we'd meet a couple of times a week, and he'd sit at a table and we'd lounge around in chairs, and he chain-smoked, smoked incessantly, one cigarette after another. He'd go through a pack and a half of cigarettes in an hour and a half. He didn't use an ashtray. He'd pull out the drawer of this desk he sat at and he'd crush out the butt in there and slam it shut and light another one. [Laughter] That's how we read Baudelaire.

There was a wonderful professor. God, his name escapes me. I'm having a senior moment here. In any event, he taught what was called Modern Continental Drama; that is, basically European plays. It was a very small class, I don't know, maybe eight or ten of us in that. I can't think of his name. In any case, the first day, we all assembled, and his first statement was, "Now, everybody in this group has an A for the semester." He said, "Now let's proceed to read plays."

He was not interested in grading; he just wanted you to think. And the place was full of people who just wanted you to think, even though you were an undergraduate. Mostly, he didn't think much of undergraduates, I suspect.

**Warren:** So were there graduate students in the classes with you?

**Baker:** Yes, often. I remember taking another French course with Dr. Lancaster, H. Carrington Lancaster, a very distinguished scholar in French. And I thought my French was pretty good. I'd been at Hopkins a couple of semesters. This was after the war. I liked French and, you know, I'd read, at some point I'd read Racine, Corneille, and Molière, and I said, "I'd like to take another course," so I signed up for this, and went in. It turned out to be almost entirely graduate students, with Lancaster and they started August 16, 1999 and they spoke French. The whole course was conducted in French. Sometimes. I mean, sometimes it would turn into Greek, sometimes into Italian, sometimes into German, and I sat there, baffled, for a week or two, making no contribution whatever, when I realized that what this was, was a course in the etymology of French words, and they were discussing it, each in his native language. Well, I had to give that up.

**Warren:** Oh, what a fascinating idea, though.

I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Warren:** So I presume that's how this woman got into this class, because she was a graduate student.

**Baker:** Frieda. I'm not sure how Frieda got into that class. She was not a graduate student, but it was possible in those days to monitor a class. You could come in and join it, but not be part of the—not be graded, not get any credits toward anything. Or there was also the night school for teachers. It may be she came in from that. Wanted to have that as an excuse to get in on Chaucer. I don't know.

**Warren:** So I'm jumping to the conclusion here that we're both English majors.

**Baker:** Well, I was an English major because, you know, what's an English major? Somebody who doesn't know what he wants to be when he grows up.

**Warren:** [Laughter] Yes.

**Baker:** But I didn't read much—you know, I'm really, practically illiterate in English literature, even when I graduated. The literature I was interested in was twentieth century American and British writing. In Hopkins, the English department stopped, English literature stopped about the time of [Dante Gabriel] Rosetti, I think. There was just nothing in the modern vein there.

**Warren:** Is that true?

**Baker:** Yes. So people who were interested in contemporary writing, or writing of the twentieth century—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dreiser, all those people you read in those days—Thomas Wolfe—they got most of their education arguing with each other in the cafeteria.

But, yes, I was an English major. I read very few of the books I should have read. I can talk it up, but I really wasn't well read, not until I came back. I've recently have taken up this Masterpiece Theater job because there's so many English masterpieces that they're presenting in

movie form. I make it a point to read the book, these books, and I'm now getting the education I should have gotten for my degree. [Laughter] I know a great deal about English literature now, late in life. In the nick of time, I'm earning my English degree.

**Warren:** That's the way I feel about books on tape. I've gotten caught up with so many classics by listening to them as I drive, to do interviews or to find photographs.

**Baker:** Good heavens, yes. How else could you read Hardy? Nobody can read Hardy.

[Laughter] You've got to listen to *Jude the Obscure*.

**Warren:** And it doesn't get any less obscure, does it?

So you were an English major. Were there many of you?

**Baker:** Yes, quite a few.

**Warren:** Or were people focusing on other kinds of careers?

**Baker:** Well, you know, we didn't have a very big graduating class. I ought to remember roughly how many there were at the time, but, you know, a fairly small number of us. In all, you know, the whole class, class of '47, I don't know, there must have been fifteen or twenty, who were interested—some of them might have been more interested in history. What you majored in wasn't that big a deal at Hopkins at that time. It's become now, generally, in colleges because college people are now preparing, at least in the liberal arts, are looking forward to getting a job becoming a professor. We weren't looking forward to becoming professors. We were looking forward to getting out of college and wondering what kind of job we could get.

But universities now are packed with historians, kids who became historians because they were trying to get out of the draft during Vietnam and went to college, which would get you out, and they could study history. They liked history. It wasn't tough, like taking mathematics or physics. And they all graduated and they became historians, and we have a spate of historians everywhere now. And I think that hangs on. So many students now, they have nothing to do, to look forward to, but to become professors in liberal arts. You take a degree in liberal arts, what are your prospects?

An old friend of mine at Hopkins, he won the Nobel Prize, Marty [Martin] Rodbell, just died a year or so ago. I ran into Marty one day down in Williamsburg, and he had won the Nobel Prize in medicine or biology or whatever the hell it was, medical biology. We fell to talking and he said he gets so many applications for graduate students in biology who want to become professors, and he said, "There's no place for them. We just can't place them, there's so many now. They're brilliant, but there's just nothing we can do."

So, being an English major, it was a way to get your degree. You know, Hopkins was—if you were really good, they'd give you a B, and if you were absolutely brilliant, they'd give you an A, but most everybody got a C, including a lot of people who should have been failed.

**Warren:** So, speaking of how a degree leads to a career, the Writing Seminars were not in existence when you were there?

**Baker:** No. In fact, my last year there, I was going to graduate in '47—I came back in like January of '46, and I'd been there a while, and I learned that there was a writing course being given. Nobody had ever taught writing. You can't teach writing, anyhow, but there had been

nothing called “Writing” at Hopkins. As I say, English literature ended with the nineteenth century. And I learned about this. Another guy I knew who was interested in writing slick magazine pieces said there was a writing course, and I investigated and discovered it was in the teachers college, being given at night, and not in Gilman Hall, but they had it hidden away over in Maryland Hall, then in engineering, a place where you buried engineers.

I signed up and went over there, and there was a group of people, who, like me, all hoped to sell stories to the *Saturday Evening Post* and become rich. The guy presiding was Elliott Coleman, who, later, who created the Writing Seminars, and ran it as the guiding spirit of the thing. And it was so refreshing to have those two sessions every week. It was at night. You had to stay on the campus till it got dark, and slink over to the engineering hall, and there was Elliott.

**Warren:** How did he conduct them? Tell me what those classes were like.

**Baker:** Well, you wrote. Everybody wrote what he wanted to write. Elliott made no attempt to teach, but you would write, and then you would read your story or he would read some of it, then people would tear it up. It’s terrible. Writing seminar is a terrible idea, because writers all detest each other, like cats and dogs, and they would tear your story apart. I learned a lot from having my stuff torn apart. Elliott would try to guide us into what we ought to be reading. He wanted us to read—he wanted people to read then Eliot, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and the moderns. They were moderns then. They’re now tired old-timers, I guess. In any case, he was trying to get us to read this, and we were all reading Fitzgerald and Wolfe and Hemingway, and we were writing like that.

You know, I got to the point where I could write a Hemingway story better than Ernest Hemingway. And everybody was writing—people were, you know, it was about disillusioned men and being brave in bars, that kind of thing. [Laughter] And Elliott was very tolerant of all this for a while. But finally, one evening, he lost his patience and he said—Elliott had a very fey way about him—and he looked over the class and he said, “Hemingway is swell, but he’s out.” [Laughter] This was, say, 1947, right? And it was like a thunderclap. Hemingway is out? And he started arranging lectures. There was Joyce, on *Ulysses*, and Proust. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t English, you know; Proust is what we ought to know. That’s the way it worked, but it was very primitive when I was there. It was just a writing thing.

And then I think the following year he got a writing program started. I wonder how Elliott did that. He got it moved over into—up there, at the feet of the English department, at least, in Gilman Hall. They had some offices down on the bottom floor, and had a seminar room down there. He got a little magazine going, and it just sort of came from that.

Then I left, and I didn’t follow it. I was aware that it had turned into a—I think it became a Department of Writing, Speech and Drama. I think that’s what it was called, and the university accepted it, probably over the steaming bones of the English department. And then it turned into—what is it now called? The Writing Seminars, quite an institution, I understand.

**Warren:** What’s the magazine that you’ve just mentioned?

**Baker:** Oh, the students wanted to have a literary magazine. I mean, everybody wants to be published, right? If you’re in writing, you want to be published. What’s the point of writing and

putting it in the trunk? So every campus wants to have its little literary magazine, and Elliott helped us get going with that one. I think it only ran, maybe ran six or eight issues, disappeared.

**Warren:** Must have, because I never heard of it.

**Baker:** We got Karl Shapiro in. We got a guy named Jack Thompson, who was a world's foremost authority on Joyce. But by that time, I had a job. I had this job in journalism. It was so much more interesting than what I was doing in writing, and I never went back to it.

**Warren:** Well, before we move on to that, you alluded a while ago to the *News-Letter* office. Do I remember that you worked on the *News-Letter*?

**Baker:** Yes. That was one of the places where you found your own kind of people, but nobody really—the *News-Letter* was not serious. You worked for the *News-Letter* to have a good time. It's appalling now to go to a campus newspaper office, like the *Yale Daily News* or the *Harvard Crimson* or *Columbia Spectator*, whatever it is, and they spend all their lives working on these damned campus newspapers. What a terrible way to spend your time in college. They're serious about it. You know, they're seriously trying to—struggling to put out what passes for serious newspaper, which you can't do in a college. The only interesting story in college is faculty politics. How low can you get?

But at that time, the *News-Letter* was—I saw a *News-Letter* not long ago, a couple of copies, and it was pretty good, actually, compared to what we did. But we went over there to have a good time, and when we had enough money, we'd put out an issue. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Are you serious? Was it not regular?

**Baker:** Well, we tried to be regular, weekly. You know, we tried to get out a weekly when the university was in session. But again, you know, the war was just ended. It had kind of fallen to pieces during the war. I believe it had stopped altogether, and we were basically putting it back on its feet. We had a very good editor there at that time, who was a man in the furniture business, but he was a good newspaper editor. He'd kind of get behind us and drive us all week to try to put together a paper, and did, most weeks. But, you know, that was because the company was good and the work was fun.

**Warren:** Do you remember anything in particular you wrote for the *News-Letter*?

**Baker:** Oh, no. I don't think I wrote anything in particular. I wrote some wise-guy stuff. I was trying to learn to write journalism at that time, and my writing tended to be—what do I want to say—burlesques of established news forms. I was fascinated by *Time* magazine, *Time* style, so I would write things in parodies of *Time*. The *Baltimore Sun* at the time, had that incredibly stuffy style. I got to the point where I could write even stuffier than the *Baltimore Sun*. That's all I was doing, but I was having a good time with it. Leo, who was the editor, was indulgent, but he really wanted you to do something serious, you know. But how could you be serious about “The new Prom Promotion Committee is Appointed” or something? It was a good time.

**Warren:** Neil Grauer said I should ask you about a column that you wrote about an editorial that you'd written for the *News-Letter*, and I didn't have time to track down what he was talking about.

**Baker:** For a brief period I did write a little column. I'd do this column and I forget—I can't even remember what it was called. I think it might have been "American Notes" or something, where I would clip something out of the newspaper, I'd take a news story, and then I would make some wise-guy comment on it, sarcasm, really sophomoric stuff. Then I'd do a whole batch of those short—if you've ever seen *Saturday Night Live*, the guy who does the news at the end. It's gotten to be terrible, but it was that kind of thing. It's not the kind of thing you'd like to have remembered.

**Warren:** Well, we will not remember it. [Laughter] So you moved quickly, just stepped right out of the *News-Letter* office into the *Sun* paper?

**Baker:** Yes, as soon as I graduated, I had the *Sun* job. But again, that was another last-minute thing. Elliott Coleman actually had gotten me into that. I mean, he had a friend who worked there, Dr. Hammond, who worked on the—I mean, money in Baltimore in those days. "Doc Hammond," as he was called, lectured on philosophy at Hopkins, and worked on the copy desk at the *Sun* at night. He was a horse-better, I think, and appreciated having the extra money to play the horses.

In any case, from Hammond—or maybe from Emmart, [Adolphus D.] Dol Emmart, who was an editorial writer at the *Sun*, lectured now and then on Eliot at Hopkins. From one of these people, Elliott learned that there was a vacancy, that they needed a police reporter, and told me, and had the appointment set up, so I went down for the interview. That's how I got the job, really—Elliott, again, as much as anybody.

Would you like to take a break?

**Warren:** Sure. [Tape recorder turned off]

So a while ago, I found in the file that Johns Hopkins paid you the honor of giving you an honorary degree.

**Baker:** Yes, I do have an honorary degree.

**Warren:** How did that feel?

**Baker:** Well, it's childhood's dream of glory, isn't it? Here's a guy who got out of Hopkins with no distinction, and you're back with an honorary degree. It is an honor. Steve Muller arranged that. I think I spoke. Did I speak at that occasion? I don't remember. It was either that or another occasion I spoke over there, and I explained at the time how unhappy my old professors would be, who had let me get any kind of degree only out of fear that if they didn't give it to me, I would be back for another year, to have this honorary degree. The great thing about an honorary degree is it's one of the great rackets. Nowadays, more and more, it's given to people who haven't done any work. Mencken wouldn't accept honorary degrees for that reason.

**Warren:** Mencken wouldn't?

**Baker:** No. He said it was unjust to accept a degree for which learned men worked all their lives, to just, because you were famous, to step in and take one. Mostly, it's given to big fundraisers these days, I guess, isn't it.

**Warren:** Or the potential.

**Baker:** Well, there was a stage when I accumulated honorary degrees. They stuck to me. I don't know how many. Ten or fifteen. Back in the '60s, when the students were rampaging on campuses and kidnapping the dean, blowing up the physics lab and all that, and so the

commencements in those days could be very raucous. Maybe you remember this. You look too young to remember the '60s.

**Warren:** Oh, you flatter me. I was in the middle of it.

**Baker:** In any event, I began getting invitations to accept honorary degrees, because I think somebody in the management thought that, oh, if you get a jerk like this to take an honorary degree, it'll ease some—you know, we won't have a big establishment figure up there for the kids to riot about. There was nothing to riot about in my case. I was known somewhat because of the *Times* column, which was pretty much anti-war and very useful in those days. So there was a brief period when I had honorary degrees falling on me like a blizzard.

**Warren:** Well, Hopkins didn't join that blizzard. They waited a while.

**Baker:** Yes. Well, Steve Muller. He's a sweet guy.

**Warren:** Tell me about him.

**Baker:** Steve? Well, I didn't really know him that well. You know, I met him socially a couple of times. He'd been a child movie actor. I believe he was a refugee from Hitler, if I recall correctly. He was a Jewish refugee who wound up in Los Angeles, as so many did, in the early '30s or '40s, and as a child actor appeared in—was it *Watch on the Rhine* or *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* or something like that, as an actor. Didn't become an actor, fortunately, after that. I don't know how he got to be a university professor—with great charm and money-raising ability, I guess. That side, I don't know much about him. His wife—well, you know who his wife is. She's a banker.

And I take it that he—I don't know the story of why he left, but I gather he ran afoul with the humanities department, or somebody, but they didn't feel they were getting a fair shake of the money. But that's university politics, isn't it?

**Warren:** Do you think that Johns Hopkins has a personality? Is there a way to describe it?

**Baker:** Well, to me, now, it seems that when I think of Hopkins, I think of a place with an inordinate interest in science. You know, I think if science is your passion, you probably ought to go to Hopkins, rather than Harvard or Yale or Princeton or one of those places. To me, it has this sense of a very difficult place academically, a place where you don't have a lot of fun, because people in science don't have time to have fun, and in most cases they don't have the kind of personalities that are fun-loving. That's not so, actually, it's not so at all. I've known too many scientists who loved fun too much, and so I take that back. [Laughter]

But it's serious. Science is serious. There's a wonderful passage, a line in a movie. It has Robert Mitchum, it has Boston gangsters, and Mitchum has been retained by these gangsters to get guns for the crime they want to do, really rough people, and Mitchum finds there's a hippie kid who has access to guns and can do it. He can get the guns that Mitchum needs, but the kid is a terrible screw-up, and there's a lot of risk in having the kid do this job. So he's trying to impress upon the kid that he can't screw up on this particular job. He says of the gangsters he's doing it for, he says, "These are serious men."

And I feel that's the way people are at Hopkins. These are serious men. Serious women, too, now. But it's serious. Hopkins is serious. Is that what you want, a one-word? You know.

When you get into these universities, of course, you discover they're all pretty much alike. I've knocked around enough to know something about most of the Ivy League schools.

I was out at Stanford not long ago and you have all these "scratches on the mind," as somebody calls it, scratches on the mind, where you sum up universities in one way. Harvard is pretentious, Yale is stuffy, Princeton is sporty, UVA—drunks. But when you get out there, you discover they're all pretty much alike. They're all interesting and complex. Pleasant places to be, you would think.

**Warren:** Just a couple more questions. Do you think Hopkins changed you?

**Baker:** Oh, sure. It would have changed anybody who was like me, because it gave me every opportunity that I've had, and it made me realize that you have to think. I still believe the world is populated mostly by people who don't think. It made me skeptical, it made me wonder, it made me ask "Why?" all the time, and when I went over there, I was not that kind of person at all. I was the kind of person who accepted the gospel from the horse's mouth. I suspect most people do. That's the great difference I think it made in me.

**Warren:** One of the things I've started to pick up on, and, like I say, I haven't been there very long, but one of the things I've started to pick up on is that there are certain stories, certain what I'm beginning to call "myths" about Hopkins.

**Baker:** You mean like urban myth stuff?

**Warren:** Yes. Are there any that you can remember?

**Baker:** I don't know of any, no.

**Warren:** No?

**Baker:** No. Not really.

**Warren:** My favorite that I heard is that the reason the Eisenhower Library is so low is because Daniel Coit Gilman pronounced that no building could be taller than Gilman Hall. Well, he was gone, he was dead before Gilman Hall was ever thought about.

**Baker:** Yes, you would certainly think so.

**Warren:** So obviously we--

**Baker:** We need to go back to the drawing board for an explanation. Well, I don't remember tales like that about Hopkins. Myths that survived in defiance of all sense.

**Warren:** All right, I have one last question. Were there any people behind the scenes that--you know, the faculty jumps out at you as being very important people. Were there any people behind the scenes who made a difference to you?

**Baker:** At Hopkins?

**Warren:** Yes.

**Baker:** Well, Charlie Sussman. Charlie Sussman, actually, you could probably find him. He lives over in Baltimore County someplace. He's retired. He's been a high school principal and something in the hierarchy over there. I have a good friend that's now a professor emeritus at Emory named Jerry Beatty [phonetic]. But the friends that I acquired at Hopkins have been lasting and important to me. Most of them, regrettably, are dead. For great Hopkins stories, you've got to talk to Sid Offit, I suppose. You've heard of Sid Offit?

**Warren:** He's on my list.

**Baker:** Sid Offitt's the best talker I know. And all the time he's talking, he gives imitations of everybody, and they're flawless. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Wonderful. Well, I look forward to that.

**Baker:** It's worth a trip to New York to nail him.

**Warren:** Well, I'm getting my New York trip organized, and there are a number of people I'm going to try to get while I'm up there, and he's definitely one of them. What haven't I asked you that I should have?

**Baker:** Well, you haven't asked me about Alger Hiss and Owen Lattimore.

**Warren:** Ah! See, I thought that all happened—was Alger Hiss still there when you were there?

**Baker:** No. But I was a member of the Student Council. You know who Alger Hiss was?

**Warren:** Yes. And see, I thought that was before and after you, so that's why I didn't ask. Please tell.

**Baker:** Well, I was a member—I guess, senior class representative on the Student Council. This was an important event to me, a shaping event in my life, so I'll tell you the whole tedious story. I think I may have written it someplace. I'm a senior on the Student Council, and this means that you have to participate in certain dreary ceremonial rites. And one day, there's going to be Lord Inverchapel [phonetic], who was the British ambassador to Washington, is going to come to Hopkins to speak, and they're going to have lunch ahead of time for him, or something to eat. And he's going to be accompanied by this brilliant young man from the Carnegie whatever, named

Alger Hiss—himself a former Hopkins man—and as a representative of the student government, I am asked—and it’s really a command performance—to come and be part of the group at lunch ahead of time.

So I go, report, terribly uncomfortable, because I have none of the social graces. You know, I’m from south Baltimore, and I just learned that you shouldn’t wear the same shirt three days in a row. Don’t know how to do anything. And I turned up very terribly nervous, just insecure. God, it’s Lord Inverchapel! I don’t care about Alger Hiss, but it’s Lord Inverchapel, who comes from London, where the nuts come from or something. [Laughter] I don’t know at the time the guy’s just an old Labor Socialist working stiff who’d been promoted by Clement Attlee.

Anyhow, he’s Lord Inverchapel, so I arrive in something like awe, and Hiss is there, and I shake hands with a rather elegant, polite-looking man, and Lord Inverchapel. And we were standing around. It turns out we’re not going to eat sitting down. We’re standing, chatting, and somebody brings plates and there’s celery on the damn plate, with cheese or something. Cheeses like that. And I’ve got my plate with the celery and the coldcuts, whatever it was. And Lord Inverchapel is talking away, and I’m standing right beside him when his plate tilts and the celery slides off and falls on the floor. And I thought, “My god, Lord Inverchapel’s celery is on the floor. What do I do now, as an agent of the student government?” And before I finished thinking this, Lord Inverchapel bends over, picks up his celery, jams it in his mouth, and takes a big bite. He’s not flustered in the least. “My god, if Lord Inverchapel could...” That’s poise.

And I've never forgotten that, because I suddenly realized, what the hell? If food falls on the floor, you just act natural. [Laughter] But that broke some kind of dam in my life. And Alger Hiss was there that day. That's the only time I ever met him. He had not yet been accused by Whitaker Chambers.

And the other great famous radical, or accusee, at Hopkins, was Owen Lattimore, of course, and he made the commencement at my graduation.

**Warren:** Really?

**Baker:** Yes.

**Warren:** Tell me about that.

**Baker:** I don't know.

**Warren:** You didn't know what he was going to be at the time.

**Baker:** No, he was not famous. At that time, it was Pat McCarran, Senator McCarran, who went after him, and again, that didn't happen until later. Because this was '47, and the Communist fear had not—the thing hadn't blown up yet.

**Warren:** Well, you gave me a surprise there at the end. I didn't expect that.

**Baker:** And all I remember about Owen Lattimore's commencement speech was, it was a hot day, and we were seated out on the quadrangle, and I hadn't the faintest notion what he was talking about. It was some disposition on the state of northern China or Outer Mongolia, with no relevance whatever to my life, and I just sort of dozed away, and he finally finished and that was it. That was the end of college.

**Warren:** And it's the end of our tape.

**Baker:** Okay, good.

**Warren:** Wonderful. Thank you so much.

[End of interview]