

**Don Quixote Goes to College: From the Trading Floor to the Classroom, A Memoir on Education**, by Wight Martindale Jr., privately printed, 2013, \$34.69 hardbound.

**Wight Martindale’s *Quixote*: An Appreciation**

**Peter Wood**

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Wight Martindale is a long-time member of the National Association of Scholars who has had an especially unusual career: business journalist, Wall Street bond salesman, mid-life Ph.D. in English, chronicler of urban basketball, and a Great Books college teacher. He has now *committed* a memoir. That seems the right verb. Some men commit felonies; others commit acts of self-sacrifice. Others commit memoirs—which can be risky.

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Wighty—as he is known to his friends—has braved that risk in the spirit suggested by the title of his reflections, *Don Quixote Goes to College*. It is a work of some elegance as well as late-life exuberance, but before I heap more praise on it, a disclaimer. This is not a review of the book but an appreciation of it. There are two reasons for that. First, Wighty’s memoir is privately printed in fewer than one hundred copies. Reviews are meant to assess books that a reader might wish to read. At the moment, all the roads to reading *Don Quixote Goes to College* are marked “private.” Second, I don’t intend to offer a measured account of the memoir’s strengths and weaknesses. I intend merely to admire it as a *rara avis*.

*Don Quixote Goes to College* can be counted as part of a category I call *invisible books*. Invisible books aren’t the same as failed books. A well-known publisher is no proof against a book disappearing like a pebble tossed into the roaring waves. Sometimes a pretty good book isn’t timely—or it is too timely and disappears with yesterday’s headlines. As Don Quixote could attest, there are lots of ways to fail. Invisible books are the successes that win a devoted following without ever achieving worldly fame. More on this presently.

Wighty's book bears a two-plumed subtitle: *From the Trading Floor to the Classroom, A Memoir on Education*. Among its admirable qualities is the author's restless refusal to settle into a genre. The original Don Quixote of Cervantes's teeming imagination was a man too much enthralled by *one* genre, the courtly romances of knight errantry. Only a thousand pages of misadventures brought Alonso Quijano back to his senses and a humbled recognition of his actual life. Wighty has not had a quixotic life in the sense of having lost himself in noble illusions. He is Don Quixote, however, for that Quixotic midlife decision to quit Wall Street in favor of literature.

He was in his fifties when he abandoned a career as a successful corporate bond salesman at Lehman Brothers and hived off to earn a Ph.D. in English Literature at New York University. Against considerable odds, he went on to a second career teaching Great Books to honors students, mostly at Lehigh University. Along the way he published *Inside the Cage: A Season at West 4th Street's Legendary Tournament* (2005), a riveting account of the players and the games that made up the 2002 season at a Greenwich Village outdoor basketball court.

The bare facts of Wighty's life are arresting, but a good memoir requires a voice, a sensibility, discernment, and

writerly skill. A man who parachuted behind enemy lines, wrestled with pythons, and rescued a princess may be hapless when he tries to tell his own story. Interesting lives only intermittently kindle brightly burning self-tellings. Wighty, however, has rendered an interesting life as an even more interesting book.

But, as I said, it is probably fated to be an invisible book. I don't want to fore-doom it. Invisible books sometimes become visible. There are wonderful examples. In the world of science, Gregor Mendel's 1866 essay on plant hybridization, which laid the groundwork for modern genetics, sat unnoticed in a minor journal until 1900. The British poet Thomas Traherne (1636–1674) wrote intensely beautiful and mysterious poems that lay unknown for several centuries until William Brooke happened across them in a London bookstall in the winter of 1896:

I saw new worlds beneath the water lie,  
New people; ye, another sky

So begins Traherne's best-known poem, "On Leaping Over the Moon."

Wighty, to be sure, is not a Mendel or Traherne in occlusion. He is very much a man of our age with something to say to us right now. Distilling the message is a bit counter to the spirit of

the book, but it is something like this: the division between the active and the contemplative life is overstated. To live fully, we need both. Wall Street and the Groves of Academe are much closer than the inhabitants of either are wont to think.

The book draws on Virgil's conceit of the *rota*—the wheel of life—which divides our mortal time into three periods: love, work, and war. The *rota* for Wighty, however, is more than a metaphor for the seasons of a full life. It also captures something about the structure of Western society: love corresponds to the spiritual teachings of the church, work corresponds to the marketplace, war is the business of government. The literary realization of the *rota* comes in the division of the pastoral (the domain of love and lyrical expression), the georgic (the domain of realism), and the heroic.

These triplets do not always easily line up with each other, but the *rota* is adequate to the work it has to do here. It gives Wighty license to describe the bond business at Bear Stearns in 1973 and the personalities of bond traders and Lehman executives in the 1980s in the same narrative in which he rescues the melancholic Jaques (“All the world's a stage...”) as the governing sensibility of *As You Like It*, and reads *King Lear* as Shakespeare's vision of

Good Friday, e.g., the bleakness of the world without God.

This is a book crammed with variety and with much to say about self-invention, but it is also a book that feels deeply unified. Wighty devotes six chapters to Cervantes and Shakespeare that certainly reflect twenty years of teaching them to undergraduates, but much of the charm of his literary exegesis is that it flows from the sensibility with which he unpacks credit default swaps, subprime lending, and speculation in off-balance sheet bank subsidiaries. A chapter on “The Role of Quants in the Financial Meltdown of 2008” falls between a rumination on Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, and an account of how popular readings of *Don Quixote* have changed through the centuries: amusing madman, cultural critic, heroic individualist, postmodern provocateur?

There is some genius to what Wighty has done in *Don Quixote Goes to College* in that he has fused all of these personae in himself. Not that he is mad—though it is easy to imagine that some would think him so for exchanging a lucrative Wall Street career for life as an adjunct English professor. He has, however, a lancing wit and an economy of expression that carry him through any number of scrapes with the

phantoms and muleteers of the modern academy.

*Don Quixote Goes to College* ends not with a flourish but with a few parting bows: a letter to parents about educating their children, a short chapter urging primary school teachers to pay serious attention to poetry, and a coda on his roles as a son, father, and husband. The value of a memoir is not so much in the details of the story it tells as in its warmth and humanity. As in many things, Cervantes sets a high standard. Near the end of *Don Quixote*, Sancho Panza speaks affectionately of

his wife that he loves her “better than I do my own eyelashes.” It’s a dusty world the squire has traversed, but so is ours. Wighty’s book inspires similar delight.

A coda of my own: One of the advantages of self-publishing is the control the writer can exercise over the actual production of a book. Wighty’s book has a colophon that explains it is set in Warnock type, printed on Mohawk Paper, and designed by Jerry Kelly. Translation: *Don Quixote Goes to College* is an aesthetic object, a pleasure to hold and to touch as well as to read.