

40
YEARS

People & Mountains

A Publication of the West Virginia Humanities Council

Translator
Robert Alter
Delivers the
McCreight
Lecture:

A New Look at an Old Book

With the King James Version passing its 400th anniversary several years ago, a new English translation of the Bible might seem a bit late to the game. After all, the KJV is justly celebrated for its eloquence, and the shelves are packed with more recent translations that draw on modern advances in linguistic and historical scholarship and are written in contemporary English.

But Robert Alter sees problems with all these translations, which he describes in the introduction to his own 2004 rendering of the Five Books of Moses: “Broadly speaking, one may say that in the case of the modern versions, the problem is a shaky sense of English and in the case of the King James Version, a shaky sense of Hebrew.”

Alter argues that the original KJV is frequently inaccurate, and that both the King James and its successors fail to convey in English the linguistic rhythms of the Hebrew original. It is an argument that is all the more persuasive because it is backed by groundbreaking contemporary scholarship on the literary artistry of the Bible — namely, his own.

Even to the untrained reader, Alter’s translations are both familiar and startlingly different. The language is simple, vigorous and rhythmical, and Alter prefers concrete, often tactile metaphors to the more philosophical renderings of other translators. Thus, in Psalm 63, where both the KJV and the more recent New International Version translate the poet as declaring that his “soul” thirsts for God, Alter translates the Hebrew word as “throat,” rejecting an abstract term in favor of an image rooted in the trials of desert life.

The resulting text stands as a fresh reminder that the biblical writers were not lawyers or philosophers but desert tribesmen living in a stark and often brutal world.

Alter himself, by contrast, is a courtly presence with a bushy halo of white hair and an easy manner — “a genial genius,” one friend calls him — that belies his intellectual heft. He says that he stumbled into his career as a biblical translator, but it is, in many ways, the unification of twin passions that Alter has pursued most of his life: literary scholarship and Hebrew language and culture.

Like many formative love affairs, Alter’s romance with Hebrew began during adolescence, in post-bar mitzvah classes at the synagogue in his hometown of Albany and at Jewish summer camp in Wisconsin. By the time he arrived in New York City in the 1950s to attend Columbia University, he was already conversationally fluent. He chose Columbia, in part,

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Robert Alter began his translations with the Five Books of Moses.

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2014

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Explaining Ourselves

We'll be looking for important visitors from Washington about the time this copy of *People & Mountains* hits your mailbox. They represent the National Endowment for the Humanities, and we've been preparing for their arrival for the better part of a year.

As you may know, our Humanities Council is the West Virginia affiliate of the NEH. The National Endowment provides nearly half our budget each year, and when they show up we take it seriously. Their upcoming visit is part of a five-year evaluation that all state humanities councils must undergo.

Serving 56 humanities councils from Alaska to American Samoa, the NEH faces a staggering variety of local conditions. The first thing they want to know about is the context in which a council operates. We frankly acknowledge that West Virginia is a poor state with an aging population, and more than our share of certain kinds of problems. We highlight many positive aspects as well, but it won't surprise you that the essential demographic indicators that our federal partners ask about often run toward the negative.

Against that background, it's satisfying to point out that our Council nonetheless does pretty well by comparison to others: Our budget normally ranks at about the 75th percentile among all humanities councils, meaning that we do better (financially, anyway) than three-fourths of our peers. Perhaps more tellingly, our income is consistently higher than that of the humanities councils in all but one of the states adjoining West Virginia. Our Washington visitors don't have to be reminded that those states are all more populous and more prosperous than our own. And we don't have to point out that all humanities councils, certainly including our own, could productively use more funds than are available to us.

In accounting for our relative good fortune we are quick to credit the support of the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts, and the — thank you! thank you! — regular contributions of hundreds of individual West Virginians. Altogether, these in-state funds add up to more than the much-appreciated dollars from Washington, putting "West Virginia" first in our finances as well as our name.

Stewardship of the public and private funds entrusted to us is an important matter, and we welcome the NEH scrutiny. And certainly we welcome the opportunity to explain how we do things in West Virginia.

– Ken Sullivan

People & Mountains is published three times a year by the West Virginia Humanities Council.

A state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the West Virginia Humanities Council serves West Virginia through grants and direct programs in the humanities.

We welcome letters, comments, and financial contributions. Please address correspondence to West Virginia Humanities Council, 1310 Kanawha Boulevard, East, Charleston, WV 25301 or sonis@wvhumanities.org.

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We welcome nominations to the Humanities Council board of directors. Nominees should be West Virginia residents with an interest in the humanities and willing to serve without monetary compensation. Please send the name, contact information and brief biographical details to wvhuman@wvhumanities.org.

Continued from page 1

so that he could also attend the neighboring Jewish Theological Seminary.

At the Seminary Alter studied with some of the top scholars of the day — all in classes conducted in Hebrew. His Bible teacher, H.L. Ginsberg, was one of the primary editors of the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible into English, which was published over two decades starting in 1962. Alter also decided, on his own, to master literary Hebrew, reading novels and quizzing himself with Hebrew flashcards as he rode the bus to afternoon track practice. As a result, he says, “I really acquired all the different historical strata of the language.”

Meanwhile, at Columbia and subsequently at graduate school at Harvard, Alter studied under some of the most eminent literary critics of the day, including Lionel Trilling. Many of them were practitioners of the New Criticism, a mode of literary study emphasizing close reading of texts as self-contained entities — an approach that would later have a deep influence on Alter’s study of the Bible.

In 1967, Alter moved to California to take a professorship in Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Much of his scholarly work focused on European literature and writers, in addition to extensive writings about modern Hebrew literature, and he continues to publish work on modern writers to this day.

It was not until the mid-1970s that he turned his literary gaze to the Bible.

“I knew biblical narrative was great, but I didn’t know why,” Alter said. “It seemed so barebones and ostensibly simple.”

At that time, most biblical scholarship focused on source analysis: using linguistic patterns to figure out which parts of the Bible were compiled from different historical sources and trying to analyze the differences between those sources. Alter, however, drawing on his training with the New Critics, turned his attention to the literary techniques that recur throughout the Bible — the repetition of key words, subtle variations on conventional scene types, and so on — and unite the text into a powerful whole.

The resulting 1981 book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, and its 1985 companion, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, revolutionized the way scholars read the Bible.



Robert Alter will deliver the 2014 McCreight Lecture in the Humanities on October 30 at 7:30 p.m. at the University of Charleston. An award-winning author and one of the world’s foremost Bible scholars, Alter has spent the past three decades translating and interpreting the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. He will discuss his translations and how he has worked to restore in English the clarity and literary power of the Hebrew original. The program is free and open to the public. Call (304)346-8500 for more information or visit www.whumanities.org.

“It was a revelation for people in the field,” said Professor Ron Hendel, Alter’s colleague and friend. “All of a sudden, the literary study of Bible, which barely existed prior to that, was a full-fledged, mature and compelling avenue of inquiry. And he taught everybody how to do it.”

Alter’s scholarship led, indirectly, to his translation work. Several years after *The Art of Biblical Poetry* was published, an editor at W.W. Norton & Company asked Alter to do a critical edition of either the novelist Franz Kafka or a book of the Bible. Alter picked Genesis, but, dissatisfied with all the existing translations, he decided to translate it himself.

He says that he expected the translation to be a one-time experiment, “but it turned out to be a rather closer approximation of my fantasies than I assumed it was going to be.”

It was also a hit with readers, and Alter was persuaded to continue translating until, he said, “I had become, willy-nilly, a highly visible translator of the Bible.”

To date, Robert Alter has translated nearly two-thirds of the Hebrew Bible — the Old Testament to Christians — from Genesis through Kings. Alter’s work has drawn rave reviews in virtually every major English-language publication on both sides of the Atlantic, with praise from literary luminaries such as Harold Bloom and Seamus Heaney.

Extensive scholarly notes accompany all his translations, and it is here that Alter says he connects to his translation as a Jewish, rather than a literary, endeavor. “Commentary is the Jewish mode of expression par excellence,” he says.

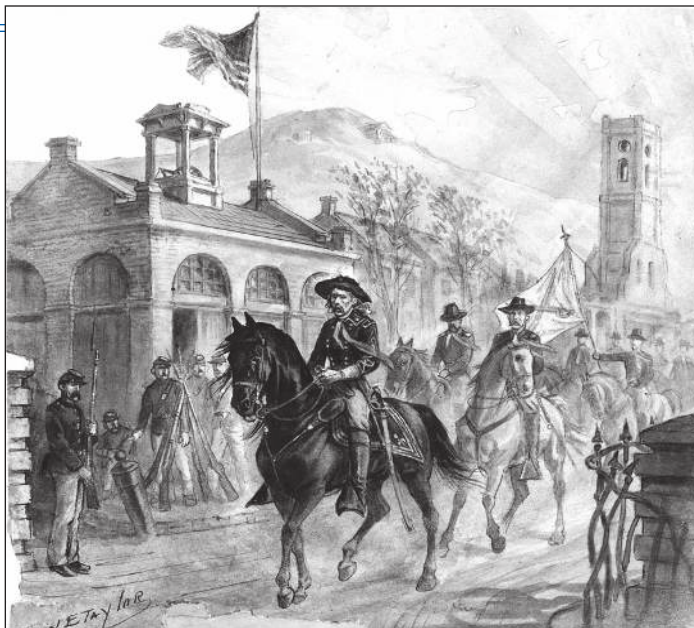
Now retired from his post at UC Berkeley, Alter remains busy in the literary field. After time out to translate the modern Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, he recently completed his translation of the Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel. This fifth volume of Bible translation will be published in March, and Alter has already started on the next one.

Alter says that he is often asked if he intends to translate the whole thing. At age 79, he explains with a wry smile that the answer is not entirely in his own hands: “That’s basically an actuarial question.”

This article by Anthony Weiss is adapted from his earlier article in The Forward and is reproduced by permission.

History at Harpers Ferry

The Harpers Ferry Historical Association is sponsoring “Thunder in the Valley” with the support of a Humanities Council grant on September 27 and 28 at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. The two-day event focuses on the town’s role as a staging ground and supply base during Union General Philip Sheridan’s 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign. Activities include discussions with authors Daniel Davis and Phillip Greenwalt on their book *Bloody Autumn: The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, family and youth programs, and an exhibit of illustrations by the contemporary artist James E. Taylor who recorded Sheridan’s campaign for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine*. His sketch at right shows General Custer leading his brigade past John Brown’s fort. For more information visit www.nps.gov/hafe.



Western Reserve Historical Society

Standing with the Vets

The Humanities Council is partnering with the West Virginia Center for the Book to present a new reading and discussion program focusing on military service, war, and issues faced by military veterans. *West Virginians Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War* is a special initiative funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Participants will read four books and take part in facilitated discussions at four sites around the state. We hope to involve West Virginia veterans, family members, and the public in dialogues that further a mutual understanding of the experiences and needs of veterans. Details will be finalized this fall with programs beginning in April of 2015. Contact program officer Mark Payne at payne@wvhumanities.org or call (304)346-8500.



The Bronze Star.



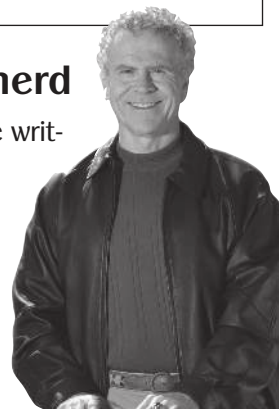
K. Wolf Photography

General Lee Heads South. A fond farewell to long-time *History Alive* presenter Al Stone of Hinton, who is retiring to Florida. He gave his first public portrayal of Gen. Robert E. Lee in 1995, and brought Lee to the Humanities Council *History Alive* program in 1999. Over the years he set a very high standard not only in West Virginia but around the country. “Now it’s time to enjoy the twilight years,” Stone said. We salute him and wish him the very best in retirement.

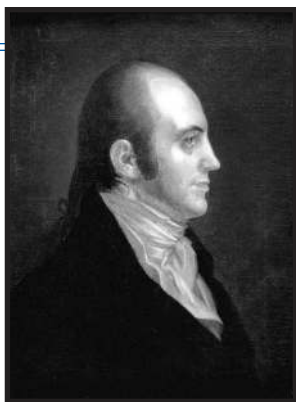
The Humanities Council recently completed auditions for new historical figures to be added to the *History Alive* roster. For more information contact program officer Mark Payne at payne@wvhumanities.org or call (304)346-8500.

Homer Hickam at Shepherd

Award-winning author Homer Hickam will serve as the 2014 Appalachian Heritage writer-in-residence at Shepherd University from September 19 to September 27. The program, which began in 1998, honors the work of contemporary Appalachian writers and is supported by a Humanities Council grant. Hickam’s week-long residency includes a screening and discussion of the film *October Sky*, based on *Rocket Boys*, his best-selling memoir; readings with high school students at the Martinsburg Public Library; and lectures about company towns, coal mining, and other subjects. For more information visit www.shepherd.edu/ahwirweb/.



The Humanities Council will accept travel assistance grant applications beginning November 1. The \$500 grants support travel to professional meetings and similar conferences for individuals associated with museums, historical societies, schools and colleges, and other nonprofit groups. Call (304)346-8500 or contact Amy Postalwait at postalwait@wvhumanities.org.



Aaron Burr by John Vanderlyn, 1802.

Aaron Burr Lecture

Marshall University's Amicus Curiae Lecture Series on Constitutional Democracy continues this fall with the support of a Humanities Council grant. The programs feature scholars who discuss issues of historical and current significance related to the Constitution. On October 7, award-winning author David O. Stewart presents "American Emperor: Aaron Burr's

Challenge to Jefferson's America," which will address Colonel Burr's Western Virginia misadventures and later trial for treason before Chief Justice John Marshall. Professor Samuel Issacharoff of the New York University School of Law follows on November 20 with his lecture, "Ballot Bedlam," on the future of voting rights in America. All lectures begin at 7:00 p.m. and take place in the Erickson Alumni Center. For more information call (304)696-2801 or visit www.marshall.edu.

The new West Virginia Mine Wars Museum will host an open house on November 8 in Matewan. The museum depicts the often violent experience of coal miners as they tried to unionize between 1912 and 1921. The exhibits

portray coal camp life; the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike; the Matewan Miners' March; and the Battle of Blair Mountain. Subjects include underground mining, company

stores, mine guards, ethnic and racial segregation, company houses, and miners' families. A recent Humanities Council grant to the West Virginia Labor History Association helped to create museum exhibits. For more details contact Lou Martin at wwulou@yahoo.com or call (724)255-0223.



Labor hero Sid Hatfield is laid to rest.

We get mail!

We recently heard from a teacher about her experience at a History Alive performance.

Last night we had Patty Cooper come and present "Eleanor Roosevelt" at First United Methodist Church in South Charleston. She was fantastic! I am a fourth grade teacher in Kanawha County, and this was my first time to see *History Alive* in person. Thank you so much.

—Sharon Byrd

Briefs

Work continued over the summer on the Council's traveling exhibit *The Hatfields and McCoys: American Blood Feud*. The newest addition to our series of exhibits designed by Professor Eve Faulkes and her WVU graphic arts students will soon be available for bookings at suitable venues throughout West Virginia. Contact Mark Payne at (304)346-8500 or payne@wvhumanities.org.

The Capon Bridge Founders Day Festival takes place with Humanities Council support on September 27-28, with lectures and demonstrations on Hampshire County history. Presentations on basket making, 18th century furniture making, medicinal herbs, and colonial surveying are included. For more information, visit www.cbfoundersdayfestival.com.

Humanities Council grant making has increased this year with 40 grants awarded from November 2013 through July 2014, compared to 32 grants during the same period in 2012-13 and 37 the previous year. See page 6 for a complete list of grant categories and upcoming deadlines.

With the support of a Humanities Council grant, the Marshall County Historical Society will host a lecture by art historian Lee Sandstead at the Strand Theatre in Moundsville on November 5 at 7:00 p.m. His lecture, "Cleaning Mona Lisa," addresses the importance of art conservation and restoration. For more information call (304)845-1411 or email cockaynehouse@gmail.com.

The Smithsonian exhibit *Hometown Teams* closes out its West Virginia tour at the Morgantown History Museum, where it will be on display from October 4 through November 15. West Virginia

was chosen as a debut state for the traveling exhibit that opened this past February in Parkersburg and went on to Gilbert, Rowlesburg, Elkins, and Weirton.

Grant Categories

The Humanities Council welcomes applications in the following grant categories.

Major Grants (\$20,000 maximum) support major humanities projects, symposiums, conferences, exhibits, lectures.

Due: Sept. 1, Feb. 1

Minigrants (\$1,500 maximum) support small projects, single events, or planning and consultation.

Due: *Oct. 1, Feb. 1, April 1, June 1

Fellowships (\$2,500) support research and writing projects for humanities faculty and independent scholars.

Due: Feb. 1

Media Grants (\$20,000 maximum) support projects intended to produce audio or video products, websites, or a newspaper series.

Due: Sept. 1

Publication Grants (\$20,000 maximum) are available to nonprofit presses and recognized academic presses, and support only the production phase of a completed manuscript.

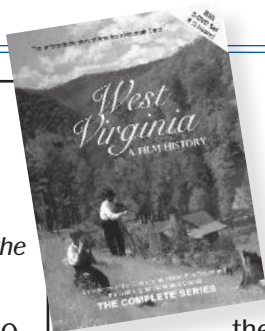
Due: Sept. 1

Teacher Institute Grants (\$25,000 maximum) are available to colleges and universities and support summer seminars for secondary and elementary teachers.

Due: Sept. 1

***Approaching Deadline!**

Visit www.wvhumanities.org for applications and guidelines, or call (304)346-8500.



Give the gift of West Virginia for the holidays. *West Virginia: A Film History*, the acclaimed public television series now available in a two-DVD set, is the perfect gift for West Virginians everywhere. The 6½-hour film, narrated by Richard Thomas, tells the unforgettable story of America's Mountain State. And

the *West Virginia Encyclopedia*, now in its second printing, remains popular. The big book is packed with more than 2,200 articles by nearly 600 expert writers, and hundreds of illustrations.

Both are available at state bookstores and at Tamarack in Beckley, or directly from the Humanities Council at (304)346-8500 or at www.wvhumanities.org. The 927-page hardbound encyclopedia sells for \$44.95 and the film history for \$29.95. West Virginians pay 6% sales tax. Shipping and handling is \$6 per book and \$3 per DVD set. Place your order today!

Join us on Friday, December 5, for the Humanities Council Holiday Open House from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. at the MacFarland-Hubbard House in Charleston. Enjoy our historic decorations along with refreshments and plenty of holiday cheer.



Donations April 1 – July 31, 2014

We thank the following generous donors and invite you to join them. If you have yet to make a gift or would like to make another, there is still time to include the Humanities Council in your year-end giving. Your support provides the base from which we launch our programs and deliver grants to educational projects statewide.

You may donate online at www.wvhumanities.org, send a check in the reply envelope included in this issue of *People & Mountains*, or contact Jamie DeYoung at deyoung@wvhumanities.org. All gifts are tax deductible.

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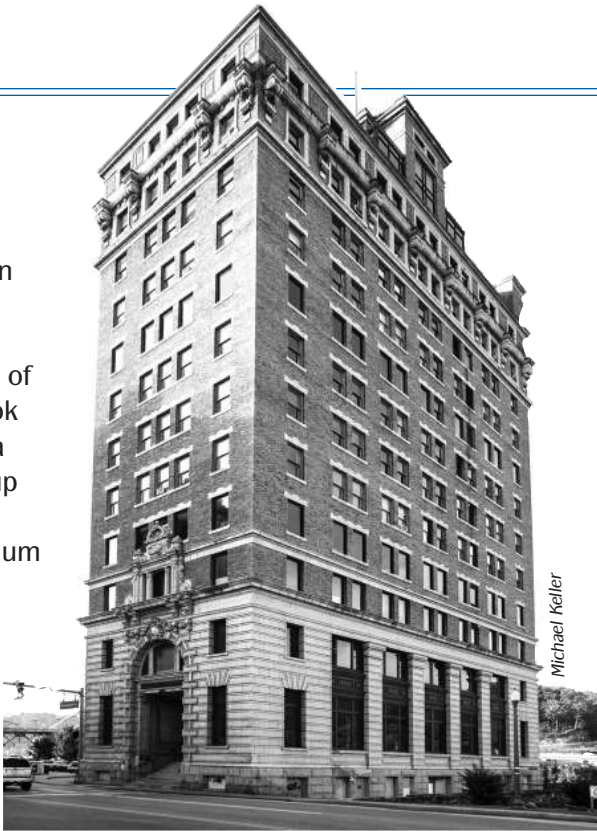
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Our 40th Year

The West Virginia Humanities Council has served the Mountain State through grant awards and educational programs since 1974. Initially located on the campus of West Virginia State University, in more recent years the Council has occupied two of Charleston’s most historic buildings. In 1990, the Council took over the 8th floor of the 1911 Union Building on the Kanawha River at the foot of Capitol Street. Ten years later, we moved up Kanawha Boulevard to our current headquarters in the 1836 MacFarland-Hubbard House, one of the city’s premier antebellum houses.

Executive director Ken Sullivan looks at it philosophically. “They say that life begins at 40,” he said, “and truly we feel youthful by comparison to the marvelous old properties we’ve been fortunate to occupy. But these places also hold the promise of longevity, and I guess that’s the message we’d like to convey: Like them, we’re here to stay.”



The Union Building.

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Cut your taxes. Last year, the Humanities Council qualified for the first time ever for Neighborhood Investment Program tax credits, and this year the NIP advisory board increased the tax credits we may award. Donors of \$500 or more to the Council receive a 50 percent credit to be applied directly to their state taxes – plus the full \$500 federal deduction. Lock in your 2014 tax savings by contacting Jamie DeYoung at (304)346-8500 or at deyoung@wvhumanities.org for details.

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Colleen Anderson and Bob Powell record “This Week in History” at West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

Michael Keller

e-WV Goes On Air

e-WV: *The West Virginia Encyclopedia* makes its radio debut on October 1 when “This Week in West Virginia History” is broadcast for the first time on Public Radio stations statewide.

The West Virginia Humanities Council, publishers of e-WV, and West Virginia Public Broadcasting have developed the two-minute radio segments for “This Week” to introduce listeners to important people, places, and events in Mountain State history. Each daily segment is keyed to the actual date in history on which it occurred. The radio scripts, drawn from the content of e-WV, were written by historian Stan Bumgardner and produced by Public Broadcasting’s operations director Bob Powell. Author and storyteller

Colleen Anderson serves as the on-air voice. “This Week” airs Monday through Friday, both morning and afternoon.

e-WV is the online version of the *West Virginia Encyclopedia*, which became a regional bestseller following its publication in 2006. It is the go-to place for concise, authoritative information on the broad spectrum of things to do with West Virginia. The history features are generated daily from a timeline of more than 12,000 items on the e-WV website.

Visitors to the online encyclopedia may dig deeper into e-WV’s 2,300 articles, interactive maps, videos, illustrations, opinion polls, and quizzes that test your “WV-IQ.” Visit www.wvencyclopedia.org.

The West Virginia Humanities Council gratefully acknowledges support from the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Office of the West Virginia Secretary of Education and the Arts; and foundations, corporations, and individuals throughout the Mountain State and beyond.