

A Slant of Light

Whether it was in the classroom or the Bison, **John “Jack” Wheatcroft ’49** nurtured generations of budding writers, putting Bucknell on the national literary map in his 45 years of teaching. With the encouragement of President and Professor of Biology Emeritus Gary Sojka, two of Wheatcroft’s stellar students – **Bruce Smith ’68** and **Peter Balakian ’73** – have gathered contributions from 18 former students who have gone on to be writers, academics and teachers as well as colleagues and friends such as former presidents Sojka and Dennis O’Brien. The collection celebrates the professor emeritus of English, who published 25 books of fiction, poetry and plays before his death in 2017. Wheatcroft’s most notable work was *Catherine: Her Book*, a 1983 prequel to Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.

BY RICHARD ANDERSON



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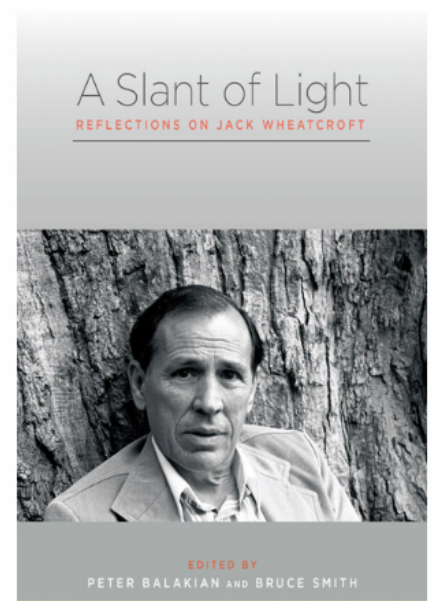
THE PUPILS BECOME THE EDITORS

Longtime friends Smith (a professor of English at Syracuse University and two-time National Book Award finalist) and Balakian (a professor of English and director of creative writing at Colgate and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2016) worked with Sojka to envision the project.

“We were moved and honored to put together a collection of pieces to pay tribute to Jack for his five decades at Bucknell,” says Smith. “His role as a prolific writer, teacher and builder of a literary community in Lewisburg and Bucknell is being celebrated in this collection,” adds Balakian.

SERIOUSLY NURTURING

“Among the wonderful qualities Jack had was extraordinary patience,” Balakian says. “He took everything you did with ultimate seriousness and had endless amounts of time to spend working through what you were doing. Those nurturing qualities are very special,



and they make a big difference to a young writer, especially somebody starting out.”

‘A PRIEST OF LITERATURE’

Wheatcroft’s longtime friend **Philip Roth ’54**, who died May 22, contributed an essay (first published in *Bucknell Magazine* in fall 2017) for the collection in which he referred to Wheatcroft as “a priest of literature.” Says Balakian, “After Jack’s death, I got in touch with Roth, and we had a nice afternoon together — we talked a lot about his Bucknell days, and he spoke passionately about how much his years at Bucknell meant to him.”

A Slant of Light: Reflections on Jack Wheatcroft, edited by Peter Balakian and Bruce Smith (Bucknell University Press, 2018).

Released in November, the essays in this tribute book, by former students, colleagues and friends are a testimony to an extraordinary teacher and writer.

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