The Barnard Bulletin

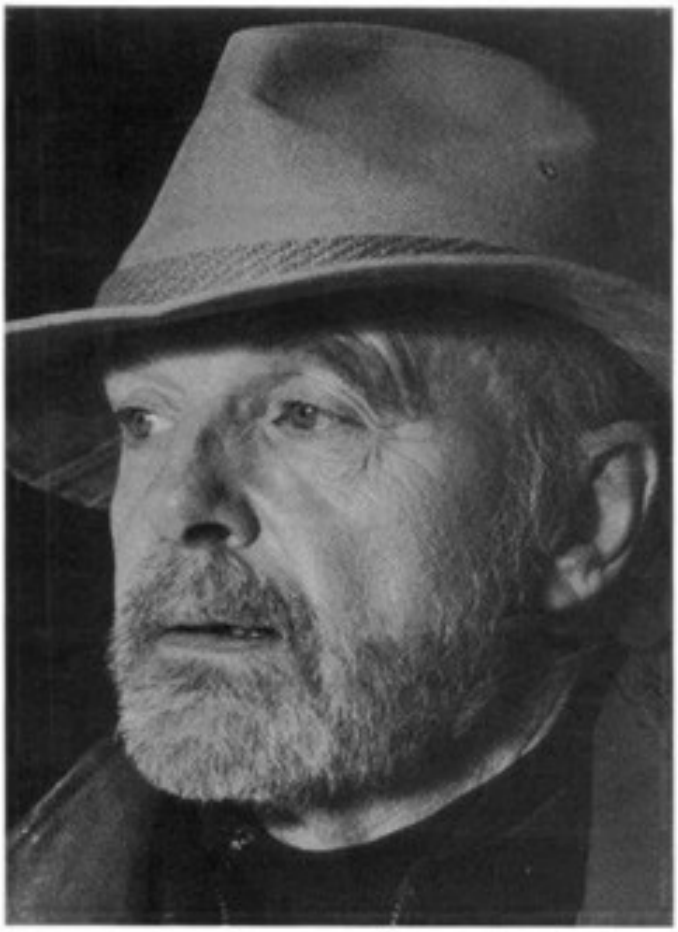
FEBRUARY 2022 Vol. XXXVII No. 2

A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce a Vermont writer who deserves wider renown.

John Engels **1931 - 2007**



John Engels in an undated photo

Any writer knows that fame in the world of the living goes only so far—and hopes there will be a robust afterlife for his or her words. If readers will only keep reading and praising the dead writer's publications, thus furthering the writer's reputation beyond the grave, that is a form of immortality that might be heaven enough.

A poet like John Engels was (and still is), so his ardent supporters will tell you, an "underappreciated" writer. But he has an edge that many mortals don't. Among his still-living friends are many literary people, and they have a way of remembering him that creates such a vivid portrait of Engels, it propels potential readers to take a look.

An obituary only outlines the general facts. When John Engels died at 76, the *Rutland Herald* was quick to hail the "long-time Professor of English at Saint Michael's College" in Colchester (near Burlington), who was "born in South Bend, Indiana," who "received a BA from the University of Notre Dame, and an MFA from the University of Iowa." In 1963, Engels came to Vermont to begin his 44-year teaching career. Eventually he became the "author of eleven volumes of poetry," was once a runner-up for a Pulitzer Prize, and earned awards, honors, and fellowships that the obituary dutifully enumerates, alongside a short list of respectable publications where some of his poetry first appeared.

The *Rutland Herald* characterizes Engels as a man whose "family was his joy"—and produces yet another list, headed up by John's second wife, Arlene, while failing to mention his first wife, Gail, mother of their five children whose names appear along with the names of their spouses and of the poet's grandchildren.

An obituary doesn't go far. To experience the writer John Engels himself, you need to read recollections of those who knew him well. John was not just a skilled carpenter, but a dedicated musician. He played the trombone quite well. One of his colleagues tells of watching a July 4th parade through the small town of North Williston, in which a small marching band from the Mater Christi Middle School was performing. And near the front of the band marched John Engels, whose daughter came along behind him playing flute. John could play much louder than the small school children, and he did so with gusto, enjoying himself. Late in life, he took up the autoharp and occasionally sang folk songs in coffee houses.

Tom Slayton, editor-emeritus of *Vermont Life* magazine, spoke of John Engels on Vermont Public Radio, saying, "I can't think of anyone who wrote poetry as incisive, layered, and evocative about the sport of fly-fishing as John Engels…some of his best poems were about that arcane, very difficult, very beautiful sport." Slayton praises Engels's *Big Water* as "packed with the beloved images and memories of a lifetime's worth of fly-fishing. And packed also with the many deeper meanings that fishing can evoke." Here is a poem by the dedicated fly-fisher:

Damselfly, Trout, Heron
by John Engels

The damselfly folds its wings
over its body when at rest. Captured,
it should not be killed
in cyanide, but allowed to die
slowly: then the colors,
especially the reds and blues,
will last. In the hand
it crushes easily into a rosy
slime. Its powers of flight
are weak. The trout

feeds on the living damselfly.
The trout leaps up from the water,
and if there is sun you see

Cont. next page - Engels

Engels - Cont. from front page

the briefest shiver of gold,
and then the river again.
When the trout dies
it turns its white belly
to the mirror of the sky.
The heron fishes for the trout

in the gravelly shallows on the far
side of the stream. The heron
is the exact blue of the shadows
the sun makes of trees on water.
When you hold the heron most clearly
in your eye, you are least certain
it is there. When the blue heron dies,
it lies beyond reach
on the far side of the river.

Slayton maintains that John Engels "has left a body of published poems that will continue to delight and enlighten all who love the natural world as long as waters flow and trout rise." At the same time, Slayton gives a nod to Engels's "deeper meanings," but does not name them.

Mortality is so often the subject of an Engels poem that one might call him death-obsessed. Even in "Damp Rot," a poem that speaks to anyone with an elderly Vermont house that always needs work, Engels explores the "rot" that sets in and overtakes all mortal things.

Damp Rot
by John Engels

Water sheets on the old stone of the cellar walls,
trickles out over the floor into little deltas of mud,
worse every year, so that now I can see daylight
at the footings, and upstairs the floors sometimes
tremble and the clothes go damp in the closets. And
sometimes
I think the whole place is about to come down, and
have begun

to dream at night of moving, unaccountably sad
to think of leaving this house which has possessed me
now
for eighteen years, in which one of us has died
and two been born, for all its elegance of detail most
everything
not right in it, or long gone bad, nothing
ever done which should have been, one hundred years
and more of water rancid in the cellars, moldings
never finished or else mitred crookedly, all

the small and growing energies of dirt and rot
wherever we care to look, whenever we do. And we
do.
But I dream also of the pine grove of my planting,
which I know I love and which is the green truth
of this place: in one day ten years ago
I dug fourteen small trees, wrapped the roots
in burlap, dragged them down from the top ridge
of the hill, spaced them carefully, watered
them each day for one whole season. Now

they are twenty feet high, thick roots
already at the cellar wall, vigorous and loud
even in little winds, only the hemlock
mournful and reluctant to do much in the way
of increasing itself. But it is clear
that if I do not freely leave this place,
it will leave me—though, as Ray Reynolds says,
digging at a powdery floor joist with his knife,
there may be more here than I think, better
than a two-by-six at least; and his blade slides
two inches in and stops at what he calls
the *heartwood*, meaning, as I take it, at the wood
which has not yet given way.

Novelist and poet David Huddle, professor emeritus of English at University of Vermont, knew John Engels particularly well. For years they team-taught a summer course in writing at UVM, and together they took two road trips to Huddle's native Virginia.

After Engels's death, Huddle wrote an extensive profile of him, a eulogy that was published in *The Hollins Critic* in 2005. Huddle maintains that "the single event in John's life that most affected his poetry was the death of a son by Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in October 1965." The poem John wrote that "most poignantly and explicitly" addresses the loss is this elegy:

For Philip Stephen Engels
by John Engels

August 23 - October 24, 1965

Swarming by your head
red plastic butterflies
danced patterns on their strings
because that night you cried

and would not sleep; and I
in my dark rooms rejoiced
to know that bright beasts moved
to the measure of your voice.

The sun came red as wings
to fix the swimming dusts
in all our rooms. My son,
your caught voice moves in us.

The house drowns in its lawns.
We watch the morning sun
thrust deep into the sky
a bright and bloody tongue

and in that roar of light
you sleep. Above your head
the blazing wings grow dull
and larval on their threads.

You were no voice at best.
I measure what I tell.
The housed and swallowed bone
grows hollow as a bell.

The breath swims in the throat,
the sun rings in the sky.
What color we remember
burns inward from the eye.

David Huddle spent hours talking about literature with his friend ("John read constantly"), and their discussions were lively:

Cont. next page - Engels

Engels - Cont. from previous page

> *He was very quick to understand difficult material, and he was impatient with others whose minds didn't work as rapidly as his. He was famous for his sighs, when students or friends or family members didn't get what he understood perfectly well.*

Huddle names with confidence some of the prose writers Engels admired—Hemingway, Thurber, Patrick O'Brian, Mary McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, and J.F. Powers—and then goes on to say:

> *[John] didn't read contemporary poetry except that of his friends and in his occasional skimming of literary journals. He did, however, greatly admire the work of Richard Wilbur, and in the teaching that he and I did together, he returned again and again to the work of Robert Frost.*

Huddle's insights, grounded in his long association with Engels, are very detailed:

> *Though it never seems adequate, "mercurial" is the word that keeps coming to mind when I want to describe the changeability of the man. John was capable of moving quickly from morose self-pitying despair into buffoonish high-spirits. What I never quite got used to was the intensity of his emotions and the extent to which his emotional life governed his behavior.*

These "high spirits" are reflected in an Engels poem entitled "Signals from the Safety Coffin." It has as its background an actual, bizarre Victorian invention: a coffin designed to allow a person in a deep coma, thought dead and buried alive, to signal to those aboveground that a terrible mistake has been made.

Signals from the Safety Coffin
by John Engels

Outside in the night in the graveyard
the awakened corpse breathes once,
Count Karnicki's patented glass ball

rolling from his chest and—
the safety spring released—aboveground
alarm bells ring, the red flag waves,

a beacon flashes. And he stares, doubtless,
up the opened breathing tube into thin
moonlight, and if I listen I hear him,

no matter how feeble his cries.
I know he is twisting his ring, his fingers
are slippery with embalmer's talcum, swollen

as oak galls, and I will not come
To save him. *Why should I?* The sky
Encloses me, I am myself a ring encircling

this bone, this bone encircling
a buried blood, and I for one unable yet to breathe
the black grains of the soil without

harm. *And O how I fill my walls,*
sweat fat, scratch at the maggoty crotch!
I think of Count Karnicki, moved

by the piteous cries of the Polish girl
interred alive, awakened just in time
by the earth and pebbles roaring

on the coffin lid. She cried,
O she cried out! Now let the dead
from all their graves cry out, and flash

their lights and ring their bells!
And this one, let him wait for someone else.
Here in the fields of lights and bells and flags,

the dead clamoring to return, I turn to this:
the raw meat between the legs, the sunken
nipples, here, home in the chilling house

with wind in the needles of the pine
now four years dead, cut down. Someone has awakened
and calls out for help: I answer that

whatever the dark volumes of the graves
from which the dead man whispers up his breathing tube
and flashes lights, in which the dead

tree speaks, the moon a soft explosion
in high mists, as I lie down to sleep
my silence is the greater.

The poem above, by turns funny and macabre, could even be called *high-spirited*.

Perhaps any portrait of an artist—but certainly of *this* artist, *this* poet—is at times most capably handled by John Engels himself. In his long poem "West Topsham," he grounds himself in where he lives: "Vermont/hairy with violets, roses, lilies, and like/ minions and darlings of the spring," a place always "working wonders" and "rousing astonishments." Here he vows:

> I shall not ever come to that discretion where
> I do not rage to think I grow decrepit,
> bursten-bellied, bald and toothless,
> thick of hearing, tremulous of leg, dry
> and rough-barked as a hemlock slab, the soft rot
> setting in and all my wheezy dreams the tunneling
> of beetles in a raspy bark…

In this same long poem Engels admits "I am of wild and changeful moods" and laments that on his journey

> …I have found my way
> with difficulty, I am confused, halfway I have suffered
> a failure of vital powers, a swoon, have been
> smirked at by the natives, and misdirected.

But having thrown himself on the mercy of an indistinct One who cares for him, the poet feels himself nurtured and forgiven for "criminal self-negligence" and "careless japeries," and finds his "brow wiped" and "wounds attended to" enough for him to "heal."

> I grow strong, I can set forth again renewed, valiant,
> sturdy, full of high spirits, lively, gay, spruce

Cont. next page - Engels

Engels - Cont. from previous page

in looks, a reveler, a merry prankster, dimpled
in the cheek from smiling, perfect Pilgrim, fit
for the chemistry of the Resurrection…

The poem's meditation circles and swells, with the poet as narrator sometimes dreaming; sometimes observing the world before him and thinking; often darkly questioning the meaning of his words, and of all words; yet also fiercely exhilarated that "this whole journey is before me."

JOHN ENGELS Photo by Rob Swanson

The Charles B. Danforth Library owns a copy of *Weather-Fear: New and Selected Poems, 1958-1982* by John Engels (published by the University of Georgia Press in Athens, Georgia, 1983). The entire, very interesting text of David Huddle's "The Life of a Poet—John Engels, for Example" is also available at the Danforth Library in a photocopy, shelved next to *Weather-Fear*.

BARNARTS AUDITIONS

FOR TENNESSEE WILLIAM'S
A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Directed by Linda Treash

Audition Dates: Sunday, Jan 23 & Monday, Jan 24
Audition Location: the Grange Theatre, 65 Stage Rd, South Pomfret, VT

Performance Dates: April 1-3, 7-10
Performance Location: The Grange Theatre

Current Covid19 Vaccination/Booster required to be in the cast.

All roles are open. We are looking for 8+ adult actors to perform 12+ roles.

Please go to our website for full audition info and a link to our audition sign-up form.

BarnArts
PO Box 41
Barnard, VT 05031

info@barnarts.org

802-234-1645 (voice mail)
www.barnarts.org

PUBLIC WARNING

TOWN OF BARNARD
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
MARCH 1, 2022

The legal voters of the Town of Barnard are hereby notified and warned to meet at the Barnard Town Hall, 115 North Road in the Town of Barnard, Vermont on Tuesday March 1, 2022 at 10:00 A.M. to transact the following business from the floor:

ARTICLES

1. To elect a Town Moderator.
2. To hear the reports of the Town Officers.
3. To elect the following Town Officers by ballot: one Selectman for three years, one Auditor for three years, a Tax Collector for one year, a Delinquent Tax Collector for one year, a First Constable for one year, a Second Constable for one year, and to elect all other officers as made necessary by law.
4. To authorize the Treasurer to collect current taxes.
5. To see how the Town will have its property taxes collected and to set the due date.
6. To authorize the Board of Selectmen to reconcile the FY21 General Fund and Highway surplus or deficit, and in the event of a surplus, the amount is to be carried forward to the next fiscal year.
7. Shall the Town raise $11,655.00 as the Town's portion for a renewal of the Intermunicipal Regional Energy Coordinator?
8. To vote a FY23 Highway budget of $1,242,077.00 of which $861,675.00 shall be raised by taxes, and a FY23 General Fund budget of $830,211.64 of which $550,652.64 shall be raised by taxes.
9. To do any other business which may come legally before this meeting.

Eligible residents can register to vote at the town clerk's office during normal business hours prior to town meeting, and at the town hall during town meeting. Early or absentee ballots are not available for votes "from the floor" at town meeting. Voters must be present to be counted.

Dated this 19th day of January 2022.
Barnard Selectboard

Rock Webster, Chair Timothy Johnson Robert Edmunds

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message R = J. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"G C Q P O N P T 19, 1942, S I L U C

T C N P S A E U S W U C V C W O L S X C

H P K C P 9066 E N I I S F A C K, N A K

L U S I E N I L U C H P K C P L U N L

W N Y Y C K G H P L U C C V W Y O I S H A

N A K S A L C P A Z C A L H G N Y Y

R N D N A C I C N Z C P S W N A I Y S X S A F

H A L U C E C I L W H N I L K O P S A F

E H P Y K E N P S S."

- V N X S C P Q C W C P P N

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Wednesdays 3:00 - 5:00 p.m., Saturdays 10:00 a.m. to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi access available .

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday & Tuesday, 8:00am-3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

YOGA CLASSES offered at Danforth Library, Mondays 9:00am - 10:30am with Amanda Anderson. Classes are by donation; for more information contact Amanda@innerliftyoga.com. Yoga Classes are also offered on Thursdays from 9-10:30 with Beth Umba. Contact Beth at: bethumba@gmail.com.

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.
https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click here for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm in 012 Oakes Hall, Vermont Law School. More information at https://www.ecfiber.net/

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

BARNARTS EVENTS - 2022

Registration is now open for BarnArts' annual Race Around the Lake 2022

The RACE AROUND THE LAKE will b e held in accordance with any penbding State rules regarding such events. The 5K and 10K races will take place on Sunday, May 22, 2022, at Silver Lake State Park, at 250 North Road, Barnard, . An alternative Start/Finish area is available, if we need it.

Event information:

Registration/Check-in will begin at 9am.

The 10K Race begins at 10:30am and the 5K Race begins at 11am

The planned post-race activities include: the Chef's Table, live music, and a Fun Run from 11:30-12:30.

The awards ceremony is to begin at 12 noon

Adults: $35, 12 & under: $20 (Through May 15)

More info and Registration sign up here:

https://runsignup.com/Race/VT/Barnard/BarnArtsRaceAroundtheLake

All funds raised directly support our Youth Programming and make this

summer's Summer Youth Theater camp possible!

BarnArts Center for the Arts

PO Box 41

Barnard, VT 05031

www.barnarts.org

info@barnarts.org

802-234-1645 (voice mail)

For tickets and more information, go to www.barnarts.org

TAX BILL REMINDER

The second 2021 Barnard Property Tax Payment is due on

February 16th, 2022

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"February 19, 1942, is the year in which Executive Order 9066 was signed, and this was the order that called for the exclusion and internment of all Japanese Americans living on the west coast during World War II."

- Xavier Becerra

WCSU SCHOOL CALENDAR

Feb 2, 2 Hour Delayed Start (students)
Feb 14-18, Winter Recess (school closed)
Feb 28, Teacher In-Service Day (No Classes)
Mar 1, Town Meeting Day (school closed)
Mar 2, 2 Hour Delayed Start (students)