

# 1982 Hemingway Society Conference

## The Writer in Context\*

### Boston, MA

At the inaugural meeting of the society there were numerous requests for a meeting in 1982, but Jo August said she was not sanguine that the John F. Kennedy Library would be willing to host another conference quite so soon. Paul Smith asked me [James Nagel] if it might be possible that I could direct the conference and hold it at Northeastern University. People could then come to the library on the subway and use the collection before, during, and after the formal meetings, and Jo was certain that she could host a reception in the Hemingway Room. It sounded great, and I said I would shake the university piggy bank and see if there was any money in it.

There was, thanks to our new Dean of Liberal Arts at Northeastern, Richard Astro, who, as chair of the Department of English at Oregon State University, had directed a Hemingway conference in 1973 that featured many scholars whose names had quickly become familiar: Philip Young, Joseph De Falco, Gerry Brenner, Peter Hayes, and Robert W. Lewis among them. For me, the only problem was money. In a heartfelt conversation, Paul made it clear that the society had no funding at all, and he had to plead with Trinity to covering mailing costs and other minor expenses. Rich Astro, always inventive about financial matters, suggested a way to fund the conference out of the grant money in his foundation budget: I would edit a book from the meeting and devote the royalties to repaying his office all the money I had spent on the meeting. In effect, his budget would provide an advance against royalties. I agreed, and indeed it worked out that way when the University of Wisconsin Press published *Ernest Hemingway: The Writer in Context*, which sold very well.

To make sure a book would be of interest to the world, I needed to do something of special appeal to Hemingway fans. I was not absolutely certain who would qualify as a “notable” person, but since I now knew Charles Scribner, Jr. I started with him, and he came and talked about Hemingway’s relationship to the firm, how gracious, and loyal, and reassuring he had been when Charles Scribner Senior passed away. Patrick Hemingway was also generous about coming back to Boston, and he presented a very important paper on the summer of 1942, when a German submarine surfaced near the Pilar and Hemingway got the bright idea that he could destroy one of them by throwing a fire extinguisher filled with explosives down the hatch. Looking for submarines also allowed Hemingway to get more gasoline for his boat so he could fish for marlins. Since he brought his three sons with him on these trips, he probably was not expecting to actually engage an enemy submarine, which would have been suicidal. Perhaps the most surprising speaker for many people was the British playwright Tom Stoppard, whom I knew slightly from another connection. On that occasion, he had told me Hemingway was a great influence on his work, and I thought everyone would be

interested in hearing about the details. He gave a very close and insightful examination of several of the early stories with an emphasis on narrative technique.

As the organizing proceeded, there were logistical problems. I had promised to cover Patrick's airfare, but I was stunned when he informed me that he had rented an entire airplane so that his daughter, Mina, could fly to Boston and satisfy some requirements for her pilot's license. I had no idea what renting an entire plane might cost, and throughout a sleepless night I envisioned an embarrassing meeting in the dean's office explaining some outrageous expense. As it turned out, it was no more expensive than three airline tickets would have been since his wife, Carol, was also coming. She was a delight for the entire meeting, and Mina turned out to be a lovely person, smart, sensitive, and a gracious presence throughout the conference. Tom Stoppard was most generous with his time and participation (he came to everything), and he instructed me to ignore his agent's continuous requests for additional compensation. Stoppard brought in the media on a level we had not expected, and I had to schedule a press conference every day and arrange interviews for all the major papers.

The scholarly side of the conference featured many of the usual suspects, among them Michael Reynolds, Millicent Bell, Paul Smith, Peter Hays, Adeline Tintner, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, and Jim Brasch, who talked about the book he was doing with Joseph Sigman on Hemingway's library in Cuba. We had a strong audience throughout the conference, and it was covered in all the major newspapers in the Boston area. The Northeastern administration was pleased at the favorable notices, especially the news that *Ernest Hemingway: The Writer in Context* earned back all the money spent for the conference. The Hemingway Society had now organized two successful meetings that established it as an important group in American literature, and we had set the stage for even more significant events in the years to come.

\*Excerpts from "Remembering Madrid: 1984" by James Nagel in *The Hemingway Society Newsletter*, Vol 69, Summer 2017