

What I Learned at Black Mountain – More!

by *Fielding Dawson*

I had failed so much in public school I went to a private school the last semester. Teachers were tough there, so was the headmaster, a classicist. I had to learn. I had crash courses in tutorials that covered English including the dreaded grammar, Spanish, and I think (could it *be*) geometry? I was so bad in math. But not only did I pass, I did well. So, I learned how to learn at The Taylor School. At Black Mountain, that wide open nightmare paradise I was free, but. BUT. Being free, like underdeveloped, immature people in prison, I didn't want to learn. I knew I could, if I wanted. I was divided. The loneliness, so few girls. The women were married. In constant discovery of personal problems and difficult relationships with other students, I worked my way into a discipline of drawing and writing. Drawing most. Life at school wasn't easy.

But I was so *young*. The Missouri Kid, etc., they said. Through anthropologist Paul Leser¹ (who had met Frobenius in Berlin), I became interested in the folktales of the Kalahari Bushmen and wanted to go there and study them. Leser wrote letters, thinking this pretty far out, the kid wants to

go to South Africa and do it: well, let's help him. But the Council for the something-or-other, wrote back saying things were too explosive. Not advised. Leser (was an African anthropologist/ or at least knew a lot about it) suggested I go to the Library of Congress (not being able to go to South Africa) and study books on that subject, giving me the titles and authors, so I did. After the summer school session of 1950, I went to Washington D.C. to the Library of Congress. They gave me a room with a desk. I had my own typewriter (a beautiful Smith-Corona portable), and sent up any book on the subject I wanted. I went every day for two weeks, typing up Bushman poetry, songs, chants, and stories, also a little background. . . . If I was serious about what I wanted, if I wanted to do it, I learned how.

I learned that I could do things on my own that nobody else knew about except those involved.

But Mike Rumaker² was right: we *were* tough on each other. I learned to take hard criticism at school. Being tough on each other, I learned to give it back. We hurt each other but that was part of it, too. In its cruelty, in its constant straightforward, direct hit style, there has never, ever been anything like it since. Nobody went to you, put their arm around you, and made it better. No. You suffered. If I would write a movie about that place I'd feature that unspoken, collective leaving-alone, so around the second or third day, or night (of course we spoke, said hi) the

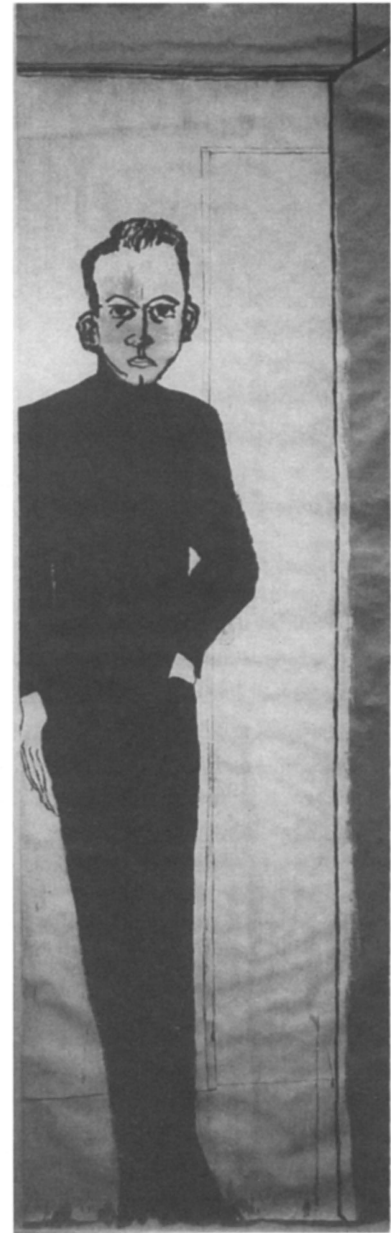


PHOTO BY MIMI FREONCZAK

Jonathan Williams (1951)

by *Fielding Dawson*. *Casein on Butcher paper.*

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Paul Leser, anthropologist, was born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1899 and known for his agricultural history of Tanzania and the history of German ethno-historical reconstruction. He was a member of the faculty at Black Mountain College from 1949 to 1951. In his letter of resignation from the college, Leser wrote: "I found here the truly democratic constitution and practice for which I had been looking when I left Olivet. My decision to leave has been forced up on me by purely personal reasons . . . I am in love with [Black Mountain] and I feel it is as it ought to be" (Leser to Board, 24 April 1951, Raleigh Archives) qtd. in Duberman, 529-530.