Urbane, dignified, and personable, Irish speaks with quiet—but unmistakable—enthusiasm for his area of specialization. "Tax to me is the ultimate practitioner's field," he says. "In many ways it's the highest development of the law as a technical and intellectual subject. From a practitioner's point of view, it's tremendously exciting, not simply because the tax laws change all the time, but for more fundamental reasons. Tax law gets you into everything. Any human activity that people place value on winds up being taxed or exempted from tax. Consequently, as a tax lawyer, I've worked for individuals, corporations large and small, unions, museums, foreign governments, universities—all in the most amazingly diverse settings.

"As a tax lawyer, I was able to be involved in problems that went to the heart of a client's business or personal affairs. That's the ultimate challenge and reward for a lawyer—to be at the center of solving a major problem in another person's life."

Tax law, Irish feels, is "a tremendously creative field with endless opportunities for devising new ways of doing old things. You can get involved, as I did, in the legislative and administrative process through which the rules are made and changed, as well as in the more traditional areas of providing planning and advice for clients or handling their disputes. For all too many law students and lawyers, practicing law is principally analyzing words on a page. My own feeling is that nobody ought to practice law without a little better sense of how it gets made."

A former practitioner who has been involved in the pragmatics of law-making and dispute resolution, Irish employs techniques in his teaching that require students to explore problems from different points of view. "The task of the working lawyer is not to sit around and determine what is truth and justice, but to do the best he can for his client—whatever that turns out to be," he explains. "We only discover this, however, when we are required to dig deep to find the best that can be said for a client, regardless of our initial reaction or general predisposition."

Irish's extracurricular activities at the present time center around his role as chairman-elect of the largest committee in the Tax Section of the ABA (the Employee Benefits Committee) and his efforts as a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in attempting to establish a private foundation in Poland. The foundation would help revitalize the agriculture of that country, which is still predominantly conducted by independent farmers. "So far, Poland has agreed to be the first socialist country to adopt a statute permitting private foundations to exist," Irish explains. "Now we are negotiating with the Polish government over the terms of our foundation, which would seek to bring needed Western capital and technology to Polish agriculture."

In addition, Irish serves as a director and vice-chairman of VITA (Volunteers in Technical Assistance), the oldest and largest private organization providing technical assistance in connection with Third World development problems.

"Tax is the most interesting way to practice law for a living," is how Irish sums it up. "My international efforts are a way to try to use my legal skills to address broader concerns and commitments. Whether it's Third World economic development or creating a more stable order in the oceans—there's a tremendous amount of work to be done by law and lawyers."

William Miller

Medieval Iceland specialist with an "irreverence for solemnity"

Although the Law School faculty is known for its eclectic interests and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of law, people are still surprised when they learn of William Miller's specialty. Professor Miller, who began a tenured appointment at the Law School this fall, developed an interest in Viking Age Icelandic blood feuds while attending law school, and continues to do research on the topic.

Miller's work, which draws upon the perspectives of law, history, literature, and anthropology, has shed new light upon medieval law as revealed through Old Norse sagas. "I'm interested in how people don't get along and manage to get on, in spite of it all," he explains. His writings grow out of careful linguistic analyses of medieval Icelandic and Old English texts. They deal with raiding and gift-giving as forms of exchange; the submission of disputes to arbitration; and the ways in which people attributed blame when crimes were committed secretly, recruited vengeance-taking expeditions, and went about deciding who their targets were to be.

Miller received a B.A. in history from the University of Wisconsin in 1969, and a Ph.D. in historical linguistics from Yale University in 1975. He taught medieval literature at Wesleyan University while attending Yale Law School. Though he originally looked to a law degree to provide the professional security that was lacking in his academic specialty, he found law school to be an intellectually liberating experience. Suffering from post-dissertation despair—"every blank sheet of paper was a
personal threat”—Miller found new impetus to begin writing again through the study of law. "Having that new perspective and that new body of knowledge gave me a refreshing distance, as well as some new tools with which to look at the material I had studied before," he explains. "I had better things to say about what I had been working on for so long. My legal education made me a better questioner."

After completing the J.D. at Yale, Miller went to Madison, Wisconsin. There, he took the Wisconsin bar exam and went into practice briefly in a two-person firm. It took him about three months to realize he wasn't cut out to be a practicing attorney.

From 1981 to 1985, Miller taught at the University of Houston Law School. Last year he served as a visiting professor at Michigan, where student reaction to his classes was exceptionally enthusiastic. Both his teaching ability and his unusual skill in the analysis of texts caught the attention of the faculty and Miller was offered a tenured professorship.

"The wonderful thing about Michigan," Miller says, "is that they are very humane about giving you the latitude to pursue your research. You are encouraged to pursue scholarship that to some might appear unconventional, and to take the time to produce serious, thoughtful work. I like that." Miller enjoys teaching immensely, but admits that he may irritate some students with what he claims is a healthy irreverence for solemnity. His interest in the problems of textual interpretation makes him an important addition to the group within the faculty that is concerned with the relationship between law and language.

Miller regularly teaches a seminar on blood feuds, and courses in trusts and estates and property. In the seminar, students closely examine translations of over a hundred Old Norse texts and compare these with evidence from other feuding societies.

The seminar, he feels, "teaches students how to look at the artifacts of another culture to reconstruct its ways of disputing, its ways of arguing, its legal structures. It teaches intellectual skills —how to deal with difficult source material, how to put it together in a meaningful way, how to ask hard questions or questions you never even thought of, how to read closely."

In his other courses, Miller says, he doesn't go out of his way to make connections with his special interest. "I teach traditional law in a relatively straightforward way," he explains. "But what I do emphasize is picking opinions apart. I try to get the students to figure out why the judge wrote the way he did—why the opinion takes the form it does. You can 'deconstruct' any opinion and show its underlying social and doctrinal assumptions."

"The one thing that higher education should do," Miller feels, "is to make people examine critically everything they hear, read, or say."