Who We Were: Former Department Members
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Two years ago I was assigned to the department’s scholarship committee. One of the scholarships that the committee awards is the McPeek Scholarship. I was dismayed to realize that I was the last remaining member of the department who remembered Jim McPeek as a colleague. All other members of the department could be forgiven for not even knowing that the award is funded by a former member of the department. Our names are writ in water. This realization leads me to make brief mention here of department members whom I knew, so that there is some record in our annals of who they were.

In what follows, the length of a description should not be taken as my judgment on the relative worth or importance of the person described. I select only what I think might interest current members from what I happen to remember about former ones. I have the most to say, of course, about those I knew the best.

I do not presume to describe living retirees, who can speak for themselves. I do not comment on short-term appointees, such as Stephen Spender, Elizabeth Hardwick, Jack Salamanca, Charles Olson, or Kenneth Simpson. My exchanges with them were minimal. For the same reason I do not comment on department members who toiled at a regional campus.

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I had heard of J. A. S. McPeek even before I came to UConn. In graduate school, while browsing through a bibliography on Chaucer, I happened on a reference to a McPeek essay on eel stamping. (In one of Chaucer’s lesser-known works, he refers to this vigorous activity. For the life of me, I now cannot find the passage.) The subject charmed me, so I looked forward to meeting McPeek. He turned out to be a courtly, soft-spoken, learned, rather shy medievalist, somewhat out of place in the department’s stable of larger-than-life personalities. He was well liked and appreciated, however. I remember Jack Davis’s saying to him after a committee meeting, “Jim, I never talk with you without learning something.” Who would not covet such a compliment?

When I joined the department, in the mid-1960s, there was far more personal interaction than there is now, partly because of the three-course-per-semester teaching load, which meant that faculty were on campus for the whole day, and which led them to be in their offices far more than they are now. Office doors were usually open, and stopping by to chat was almost always welcomed.

Back then, nobody was assigned to teach during the noon hour, so brown-bag lunches were a well-attended ritual not to be missed. On any given day twenty or more faculty members would be present. The topic of conversation was often literary but not always: politics, movies, sports, university gossip, and personal matters were also bandied about. The three most prominent figures at these lunches were Jack Davis, Mickey Stem, and Irving Cummings. In singling them out, I do not mean to imply that there were not other big talkers as well. I remember in particular a lunch at which the three vied with one another in a competitive exchange of boasts and insults, a sort of Anglo-Saxon flyting. To the delight and admiration of all others present, the three acquitted themselves with éclat. On another occasion Bill Clark reminisced about his tutoring, in
his youth, the children of a Procter and Gamble executive while the family was vacationing in the Caribbean. “It was a good life,” he said. “I taught the children in the morning, but I was free to do whatever I pleased in the afternoon.” “I see,” replied John Seelye: “Proctor in the morning; gambol in the afternoon.” Stony silence. Deservedly so.

Jack Davis was one of the English Department’s great conversationalists, in a department blessed with them. Jack was well versed not only in literature but also in other academic disciplines. He had close friends in the Music Department, the Philosophy Department, the History Department, and other departments on campus. The friendships reflect the breadth of his learning. He was superb at extemporaneously laying out the philosophical and historical background of a literary work. Before Wikipedia he could always be counted on to tell you just what you needed to know about Proust, or Wittgenstein, or Wayne Booth, or his most beloved composer, Mahler. Our best graduate students sought him out to advise them on their dissertations.

I was somewhat daunted by Jack, lest I say something less than profound. Not that he (like Roger Wilkenfeld, say—more on him later) would scoff at me for doing so. Against direct assault I could usually hold my own. But Jack’s manner was always hopefully expectant, as if his fellow conversationalist was about to drop a pearl. I shrank from disappointing him. Jack was unremittingly intense; his mind seemed always aglow. But except for the aforementioned joust of insults, I never heard him say an unkind word about anyone. He was one of the sunniest, most stimulating colleagues one could hope to enjoy.

Another commanding presence was Mickey Stern. He was a public figure, steeped in departmental and university politics, a de facto permanent member of the University Senate and of many of its subcommittees. On a few occasions he filled in as English Department chair. One could always count on him for a candid, articulate, well-reasoned, forcefully delivered opinion. He was also not shy about letting his feelings show. More than once he stalked out of a department meeting with fire shooting from his nostrils and smoke from his ears. I found these displays of passion less alarming by imagining him as a moody teenager in Brookline, cowing his parents into letting him have his way. On a quieter occasion I mentioned to him that I considered the Psalm 23 setting, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,” not conducive to an enjoyable meal. He sagely replied that the passage is just another way to word the old saying, “Living well is the best revenge.”

Irving Cummings was more easygoing than either Jack or Mickey, but his softer nature did not obscure his wide reading and astonishing memory. He knew inside and out all of Dickens especially, as well as all other major English novels. And because he so obviously relished reading, he could miraculously coax students into reading weighty tomes. He is the last teacher I know who routinely assigned big, fat books. He also taught a course on words: their meanings, etymologies, and so forth. Because he took such perceptible pleasure in his own discoveries, he drew students into the joys that can come from savoring words, singly and in endless combination.

More than once Irving read an essay of mine, either before or after publication. He always responded helpfully and wisely. I always felt better after talking with Irving.

Yet another forceful personality was Bob Stallman, who had a trumpet voice and a genial
manner. He spoke in short explosions. Because he did not attend the brown-bag lunches, I did not get to know him as well as I did others. One day, however, as we passed in the hall, he saluted me with a thunderous “Aha!” as if he had been waiting all day for my advent. Of course he had not, and I knew that he had not, but the clarion greeting made me feel good anyway.

Although Ken Wilson soared to the higher reaches of university administration a year or so after I arrived, he was department chair when I was hired. In the summer of 1965 I appreciated that he stepped over piles of cardboard boxes at Northwood Apartments to welcome Anne and me to UConn. Quick to see the absurd side of things, Ken was always ready with a quip. His waggery did not mask his extraordinary urbanity, organizational powers, perspicacity, and hard work. Legend had it that he was regularly in his campus office before sunup. He was an ideal administrator, although his wit and candor kept him from conforming to the stereotype. In writing about writing, Ken advocated having every level of diction on one’s palette, from the formal to the folksy. In his own deft writing he followed his own advice. In chiding me for discouraging writers from splitting infinitives, he couldn’t have expressed his disagreement more suavely.

Another member of the departmental pantheon was Joe Cary. Even-tempered, outgoing, and personable, Joe habitually approached life with bemused irony. He was the master of aplomb. Whenever I wore a milky green blazer — a jacket that I still occasionally wear, although it is now dangerously threadbare — Joe never failed to profess that he coveted it. To this day I do not know whether he meant what he said, or whether he was ragging me for being unfashionable. I suspect that he had both ends in mind. He was not as voluble as those I have already mentioned, yet he, too, was an articulate conversationalist. He was quite at home at the brown-bag table.

The English Department’s only specimen of a native Englishman was Rex Warner, novelist and translator of Greek and Roman classics. He was tall and big-boned, with a thick shock of straight hair combed across his forehead. One would not have guessed from his easy, jovial manner and ready, raucous laugh that his early novels were highly committed political attacks on the governments of Franco, Hitler, and other right-wing regimes. While attending Oxford, he had become friends with fellow students W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and C. Day Lewis, and I am sure that Spender’s and Auden’s appearances in our department were due to Rex’s agency. It was always fun to have Rex at the brown-bag lunches. He wore his politics, his Latin, and his Greek quite lightly. One could easily have enjoyed a pint with this Birmingham lad without suspecting his passions and powers.

I had heard of Charlie Owen, as I had heard of Jim McPeek, in a graduate course on Chaucer. Charlie, an expert on Chaucer manuscripts, had published an account of how the several fragmentary manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales were related to one another. According to him, the last tale on which Chaucer was working before his death was “The Cook’s Tale,” a fabliau broken off after only fifty-eight lines. The last lines mention a scoundrel who “hadde a Wyf that heeld for contentance / A shoppe, and swyved for her sustenance.” If Charlie is right, Chaucer did not end his career in a blaze of glory.

On campus Charlie co-founded the Medieval Studies Program, which continues to flourish. He was also active in local politics, serving on the town council and helping to found the local chapter of the World Federalists. Once, when he was serving as (I think) the town’s first
selectman, he executed a “rolling stop” at a stop sign. A policeman pulled him over and was about to issue him a ticket when the policeman realized that he was dealing with the first selectman. Before the policeman could let Charlie off the hook, Charlie protested that nobody is above the law and insisted that he be issued the ticket. Charlie told the story as a humorous one, but it also testifies to his basic honesty.

In person he was jolly and affable. He and Mab hosted many memorable dinner parties, and in the halls of Arjona he was always ready for small talk. He was a proud Princetonian: during his winter walks he sported a Princeton scarf. At Princeton and, later, at Oxford he ran track. However, I could never coax him to join our merry band of harriers. Every summer he would retreat to Freedom, New Hampshire. To hear Charlie describe the place, the Garden of Eden couldn’t hold a candle to it.

John Seelye was a short, full-bearded dynamo. His “proctor and gambol” remark is a fair sample of his wit. After a few years in the department, he left us for the University of Florida. Thereafter I met him by chance at one convention or another, and we shared a convivial lunch. It is hard to believe that all that feisty ebullience has been stilled.

Max Putzel, associate dean of the Graduate School, directed the design and construction of the Whetten Graduate Center. He would sometimes drop by the department and occasionally teach a course. I do not remember any conversations with him. He was always formally dressed, in keeping with his administrative duties. A student who took an independent study with him reports that Max returned the student’s paper ungraded and unannotated. “You can do better than this.” The same exchange occurred five more times. Finally, on the seventh submission, Max gave the paper an A and wrote, “Now you know what was wrong with all the previous drafts.”

Ed Manchester was seldom seen around Arjona because, I believe, he, too, held some sort of administrative position elsewhere on campus. We said very little to each other during our overlapping eight years in the department. Only after his retirement did I learn that he came from Winsted, Connecticut, not far from Litchfield, where I grew up — a missed opportunity to kindle an acquaintance. During World War II Ed was a signalman on the aircraft carrier Princeton, where he survived a Japanese attack that killed hundreds of his fellow sailors. After the war he taught at Rice University and at the American University in Beirut before coming to UConn.

Another colleague with whom I had next to no contact was George Brandon Saul. He had been in the department since 1924, and it seemed to me that he did not want to mingle with recently arrived colleagues. His manner, as I interpreted it, was stiffly formal, aloof, and downright forbidding. His main scholarly interest was Irish literature. In addition he wrote plays, short stories, and poetry. And — a side of him of which I was completely unaware — he composed works of music. From my perspective he was a proud, very reserved man who kept his talents to himself.

Rufus Blanshard was the department’s most prominent political activist. His brother, Brand Blanshard, a chaplain at Yale, was nationally famous for his activism, so left-wing politics ran in the family. Rufus was in his element during the campus uprisings at the time of the Vietnam War. Yet he was also soft-spoken and sweet natured. Once, many years after I had given up tennis for running, he asked me to fill in as his doubles partner. Opening the match, I whiffed my first serve and fell flat on my face. Things went downhill from there. Because of me, Rufus and I
went down to ignominious defeat. Throughout the fiasco Rufus could not have been more upbeat, although my play gave him every reason to rue his invitation. His political views were militant; his nature, congenial and forgiving.

No one deserves to be remembered primarily for one’s sinuses, yet such is the case with Herb Goldstone. He suffered unremittingly from allergies and consequent infections. During one such illness, I taught one of his classes. I learned later that many of his students were not at all pleased with me, because I had tried to orchestrate class discussion, whereas they were accustomed to Herb’s more freeform, anything-goes approach. Herb shared Rufus’s political views and, like Rufus, was most active during the campus protests during the Vietnam War.

In appearance and in easy, breezy manner, Tom Wilcox resembled W. C. Fields. For years he ably directed the department’s Freshman English Program. As an undergraduate, he had attended Amherst College, as had I. Although he preceded me by about fifteen years, Amherst was often a topic of our conversations. He had taken a political science course taught by a man who was still on the faculty when I was there. The teacher had a very heavy Germanic accent, and whenever he tried to call on “Mr. Wilcox,” the best that he could manage was “Mr. Veal Chops.” Telling the tale never failed to send Tom into merry gales of laughter.

Although I remember Bill Clark clearly, I cannot summon up any striking details. He was a steady, reliable, hard-working colleague. His wife, Minna, was his staunch companion. Bill’s main academic interest was, like mine, the Victorians, so he was one of my sources for information on all those minor Dickens characters.

I did not know George Hemphill well. His A Mathematical Grammar of English evinces his linguistic leanings. Once, at a brown-bag lunch, I said something meant to be clever. “Paronomasia!” George exclaimed. I was taken aback: all I thought that I had done was venture a pun.

Charlie McLaughlin had received his degree from the University of Chicago, where he was steeped in the Chicago School of criticism. Consequently he thought of himself as our department’s counterweight to all us devotees of the New Criticism. But I knew Charlie best as a tennis opponent. According to my unofficial rankings, I was the fourth-best tennis player in the department. Compton Rees was the best faculty player on campus, and Dick Reynolds was not far behind. I could not compete with either of them. But Charlie and I were more closely matched. Charlie had a tennis court very near his home, and year after year we would go there to have at it. I estimate that he won two sets to every one that I won. But the sets were hotly contested, and the hundreds of them that we played were a joy.

The most gregarious member of the department was Eric Carlson. He trolled the halls of Arjona, looking for conversation. If an office door was ajar, he would enter, plop his lanky frame down in a chair, and chat at great length. His great academic interest was Poe, but one couldn’t imagine a personality less gloomy or macabre than Eric’s, with his sweet, mischievous, elfin smile.

I believe that Joan Hall was the first female member of the department. In my first year here, she, Roger Wilkenfeld, and I shared an office. She was the only grownup in the room. While Roger and I would argue or play a silly game, Joan would look on with parental disapproval and amusement. With her sanity and tact, she was an ideal interloper into the English Department
men’s club. When she saw sexual bias, she spoke up quietly but firmly. For example, she questioned my wording, in my Style Booklet, where I advise against a student’s submitting a paper on sheets torn out of a notebook: “Those fuzzy, square-toothed edges . . . shed flakes of fibrous dandruff onto your teacher’s tweeds.” Joan let me know in the nicest way that I was perpetuating the stereotype of the professor as a tweedy male. In fact, what had occasioned my remark was seeing such paper flakes on the tweed jacket of Francelia Butler. Women, too, wear tweed. But Joan could not have been more diplomatic in raising her objection.

Francelia Butler came to UConn in the same year that I did. She lived in a self-generated aura of drama, conspiracy, mystery, and intrigue. She spoke in a breathless whisper, as if she was in a great hurry to say what she had to say and was afraid that she would be overheard. A tempest went wherever she did. Nevertheless, she was wondrously efficient and consequential. Her Kiddy Lit course, with its many famous guest lecturers, was extremely popular and drew hundreds of students every semester. Because she believed that the study of children’s literature was wrongly considered an inferior academic discipline, she founded the journal Children’s Literature. Because she believed that most games foster competition, she established conferences devoted to “peace games”—games requiring cooperation rather than antagonism. Francelia made things happen.

On my very first day on the job, a woman came into my office. “I’m Harriet Babcock. Welcome to the English Department.” How nice, I thought: the wife of the university’s president has stopped by to greet me. At the time the president was Homer Babbidge. I was right on the first syllable but wrong on everything else. In due time—maybe ten seconds—I found out that Harriet Babcock was secretary to the department’s chairman. She spoke in what I believe to be a down-Maine accent; she was a Yankee through and through. She was bright, unshakable, and superb at her job. She kept the department running smoothly. On the few occasions when I brought my first two children, then toddlers, into the department, Harriet would give each of them a quarter. Back then a quarter was money.

We all still remember Robin Worley. Let me mention just two of her assets. First, she took her job very seriously. Second, she made you hop. All too often, when I greeted her on my entering her office, she would answer, “David, where is the form that you were supposed to fill out?” or “When are you going to give me that travel voucher?” or “You’re coming to this afternoon’s meeting, aren’t you?” Robin made people do their job against their will.

I have already mentioned that Dick Reynolds was an excellent tennis player. I vividly remember hitting maybe my best serve ever, which Dick smashed back out of my reach for a winner. At least academically, he was one of the more conservative members of the department, railing against improper usage. My favorite Dick Reynolds moment came when we served together on the department’s plagiarism committee. Protesting an F received for plagiarism, a student, when he met with us, brought with him an imposing man. In an apparent attempt to overawe us, the man intoned, “I am a lawyer.” “What a coincidence,” replied Dick. “So am I.” (Before receiving his Ph.D. in English, Dick had practiced law for several years.) The legal threat thus neutralized, the well-deserved F was upheld.

For quite a few years I shared an office with Feenie Ziner, who drove up from Branford every week to teach creative writing. Her best-known work is probably Dark Pilgrim: The Story
of Sguanto. We each had a son cursed with schizophrenia, so every time we met, we bonded by bringing each other up to date on the latest crisis. By coincidence, for about a year both young men lived on the same western Massachusetts farm and knew each other fairly well. As her own children and all her students would attest, no one was more caring than Feenie.

My very first extended conversation with a member of the department was with Bill Rosen — a mark of his genial outgoingness. Bill was a Shakespearean, but he came most alive once he was appointed chair of the department and began engaging in academic politicking. He loved to machinate. His greatest triumph in this regard was his leading the campaign to persuade Aetna to establish our Aetna Chair of Writing.

David Hankins’s father and his uncle were literary scholars, so Dave’s interest in Boswell was partly genetic. Dave spent his early years in one of those indistinguishable rectangular Midwest states and then completed his youth in Maine. I never could decide whether his broad, flat accent was Kansan or swamp Yankee. In any case, his Unassuming manner and towering, raw-boned appearance vouched for his honesty and forthrightness. No jury would ever have convicted him of any crime, whatever the evidence. For years, as associate head, he determined the department’s course assignments. No matter how unhappy one might be with one’s assignments, Dave’s manifest fairness and good will kept everyone his friend. Unfortunately, fate was not his friend: a daughter was killed in a bicycle accident, and he himself was killed when a tree fell on him.

More than one department member independently labeled Don O’Hara “Eeyore.” He was indeed gloomy and caustic, with a low opinion of most of the other animals in the forest. He gave deans fits because of the abysmal grades he customarily gave his students. Faculty members too, including me, were subjected to his corrective barbs, delivered in the softest of voices. Nevertheless, he always had a fiercely loyal following among our best graduate students, who benefitted greatly from his astute oversight. Once, when Don was in his forties, he entered a low-key campus road race and, for the first and only time in his life, won his age division. His prize: a gaudy figurine. Surprised and pleased, he telephoned his mother. “What shall I do with the trophy?” he shyly asked. “Put it with all the others,” she shot back. Her remark explains everything about Don, as I never tired of telling him till the end of his days.

Hans Turley wore glasses so thick that one could not see his eyes clearly through his lenses. So one might think that he could not see out very clearly either. Not so: he was perceptive indeed. Self-assured, sociable, and kindly, he reached out to befriend everyone, faculty and administrative assistants alike. His volunteer work at the Covenant Soup Kitchen, in Willimantic, evinced his love for fellow human beings, and his ready sense of humor bespoke his self-contentment.

One of the most reclusive members of the department was Charles Boer. His chief literary interests were myth, psychology, and the classics. Two writers of especial interest to him were Charles Olson and Frank O’Hara. He was also a prominent translator of Latin and Greek works. I cannot say with certainty, but I believe that he found his closest friends outside the department and the academic world. I do, though, remember one fascinating conversation with him. Charles had just returned from the Saratoga Race Course, where he had won a good deal of money. It turned out that he was a serious habit of horse racing, and he explained in detail how he went
about evaluating the horses and placing his bets. If I had paid better attention, I might be a rich man today.

A fellow devotee of Charles Olson was George Butterick. George was a member of the department, although his heart, energies, and expertise went into being the curator of the literary archives of the university. He spent far more time in UConn’s libraries than in the department. He is mainly responsible for bringing the Olson papers to UConn. The literary world knows him best for editing Olson’s poems. George died of cancer in his early forties.

John Abbott, a student of eighteenth-century England, embodied many of the virtues of that era: intelligence, forcefulness, argumentativeness, balance, reason. During his time as department chair, he advocated vigorously for the department’s interests when they were threatened by deans and other such mischief makers. He is reputed to have had a temper, but all my dealings with him were fair and cordial. Since his too-early death, his wife, Mary, reports that his handsome family continues to thrive.

I shared an office with Tom Jambeck in his first year at UConn, and we remained good friends for the rest of his life. We shared professional interests in Chaucer and in grammar. Together we wrote A Grammar of Formal English, which I use as a textbook to this day. For decades we exchanged knotty sentences, for parsing and diagramming. Tom was always upbeat despite more than his share of hard knocks in life. He had an endless supply of Finnish jokes. Because he was of Finnish descent himself, and because no other Finns were around to be offended, the jokes passed muster within the walls of Arjona or Austin. His office was never off limits: one could barge in anytime for a visit and always be welcome.

Tom Roberts only recently died, at the age of ninety-two. I never saw Tom bored. He was always ready for conversation. No one lived for the department’s brown-bag lunches as much as Tom did. His main interest is nicely summarized in the title of his book An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction. “Junk fiction” was his term for westerns, romances, mysteries—any non-canonical writings—and he reveled in their existence. His interest in and defense of the low and overlooked extended to areas well beyond books: to advertisements, folk and country music, and especially old B movies, absolutely all of which Tom had by heart down to the minutest detail. He could overwhelm a lunch hour with his detailed, appreciative plot summaries of movies no one else knew existed.

Tom taught me how to tie my shoes. Seeing me one day with the bows of my laces pointing toward my toes and heels, he told me that if I would reverse the original half knot—if I would twist the left lace over and under instead of under and over—the bow would extend genteelly across the top of the shoe instead of gadding about. He was right. For decades now I have been shod stylishly because of him.

David McKain was probably the handsomest member of the department, with his lanky frame, abundant wavy locks, and movie-star visage. He was a poet, and certainly looked the part. In addition, he was affable and personable, with a gentle nature and easy manner. He was quite at home participating in the department’s brown-bag lunches. He did not, however, demand that the spotlight shine on him. For instance, I never heard him mention that he was adept at basketball, having attended UConn on a basketball scholarship. David retired from UConn in 1993, at the age of fifty-five, at the height of his powers. Because I did not see him thereafter, I did not
observe the damage that Alzheimer’s disease inflicted on him during the last eleven years of his life.

As I mention above, in my first year at UConn I shared an office with Joan Hall and Roger Wilkenfeld. In a department replete with striking personalities, Roger’s personality stood out. One of his letters of recommendation called him “incandescent.” Roger was also competitive. In my first year he and I invented a game, involving two wastebaskets and a super ball—a small rubber ball with extraordinary bounce to it. Sitting in our desk chairs about twenty feet apart, each of us put his wastebasket between his knees. Then, still seated, we would take turns trying to bounce the ball across the linoleum-tile floor and into the other’s basket. The number of points for a successful basket was determined by the number of bounces that the ball took en route to the opponent’s basket. A one-bounce basket was fairly easy, but one could score seven, eight, or even nine points with an expertly tossed ball. Many epic battles were fought in that room. Those in the office below complained of the noise, but we paid them no mind. Too much was at stake. I still keep the super ball in my office desk.

Roger’s competitiveness led him to be compulsively contrary. Twice he and I team taught a graduate course in Victorian nonfiction writers. I would usually begin the class by introducing the author and the work to be discussed that week. Then, without fail, Roger would disagree with me. I rather enjoyed the verbal tussles that followed, because, although I lacked Roger's panache, I did have truth on my side. Nevertheless, I decided to set a trap for him. The upcoming book of the week was Culture and Anarchy, and I knew from our conversations that Matthew Arnold was Roger’s very favorite Victorian writer. So when I introduced the work, I set my reservations aside and praised it to the skies. A helpless slave to his nature, Roger then launched into a scathing impromptu anti-Arnold diatribe.

I miss him. I miss them all.