
Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison On the Death of Professor Emeritus James G. Nelson

James G. Nelson (1929-2015) traveled the world with friends. Whether near—as in the States or Mexico or Canada—or afar—as in Australia or New Zealand or India, Jim’s friends were with him, not in person, but by way of picture postcards that he carefully filed under each of their names. These date from the 1960s to 2015, when he died on April 10th. Jim kept all his friends carefully in his mind and heart.

He himself loved to return over the years to his native Lexington, where he graduated from the University of Kentucky with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education in December 1952. He was also fond of New York, having done his doctoral degree there at Columbia University in 1961 and having also taught there at Columbia College. And eventually the Grolier Club brought him back to the city for special occasions.

London was at the top of his list of favorite cities across the Atlantic. It was there that he did his ground-breaking research on writers of the 1890s, beginning with John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 1965, which was followed over the years by many another scholarly grant. Indeed, London was close to his heart and he flew there many a September after his retirement from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, having joined the faculty in 1961, become Full Professor in 1969, and Professor Emeritus in 1995. Both before and after retirement, Jim worked in the Reading Room of the British Museum and its successor, the British Library, on the three books that made him the authority on the 1890s and early modern literature. He was also no stranger during such visits to West End theatres, and in fact collapsed with food poisoning at the Royal National Theatre in September 2004 and was taken to Guy’s Hospital, which was just about around the corner from it. He told a friend that he was privileged to be treated there overnight because even though it is up-to-date as any hospital in the UK, it had been founded in 1721 and treated many a more notable patient than Jim. Whether he ever got back to see the play he missed, Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys*, on another night remains an unanswered question.

Before James G. Nelson became a scholar of world-wide fame, he served in the Air Force for six years, becoming an assistant to the Director of Education at the Air University Command headquarters in Maxwell, Alabama. He later achieved the rank of captain in the United States Air Force Reserves. It was subsequent to his active service that he entered Columbia University.

The year 2006 saw the publication of *Bound for the 1890s: Essays on Writing and Publishing in Honor of James G. Nelson*. Why should Nelson have had a book of essays dedicated to him? Because he opened the field of publishing in the 1890s to scholarship and established for each of the three publishers he treated the definitive bibliographies of their works. The first volume, *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head*, treated John Lane, who founded the Bodley Head publishing house with Elkin Mathews; the second volume, *Elkin Mathews: Publisher to Yeats, Joyce, Pound*, examines the career of Mathews once he left the Bodley Head and founded his own business; and the third volume, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*, in a reviewer’s words, “completes James Nelson’s study of the publishers who, in the process of introducing the Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s to the reading public, elevated the art of the book to new heights.” This trilogy is the reason that Nelson’s colleagues put together a volume of essays to honor Jim’s groundbreaking and

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compellingly written work. His studies include information on conflicts and negotiations, on editing and publishing, on reception and marketing, and warehousing as well as on the price of paper, typesetting, and binding. And in doing this work, Nelson was taking on some formidable challenges. Leonard Smithers, for instance, was, in Oscar Wilde's words, "the most learned erotomaniac in Europe." The fact that Smithers published Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Jail* when no one else would touch it proves the point. One gets a sense of each book being a collaboration of author, publisher, and market conditions. The collection of essays written in honor of James G. Nelson, a reviewer rightly says, "contains deserved tributes to his achievements and influences." With his death the world of scholarship has lost one of its most adventurous and scrupulous scholars. That each of these books has sold out is an indication that libraries as well as future researchers of these 1890s publishers and their authors cannot do without the foundation that Nelson so meticulously and solidly laid.

In a certain way Jim Nelson's publishing career was eclipsed by his teaching career which his students continuously said was "wonderful." "A WONDERFUL course—greatly inspired my love for poetry." "I thought Professor Nelson was a WONDERFUL teacher." Professor Nelson is "a WONDERFULLY helpful and sympathetic teacher." Professor Nelson in a WONDERFUL man who is always willing to offer suggestions and a pat on the back." Students remark that in the classroom Nelson did not sit or stand behind a desk or a podium. He was almost always in front of both. He wanted nothing between himself and his students. This certainly influenced the number of students who said they ENJOYED his courses. A litany of ENJOY quotations is not necessary. Perhaps it is enough to say that he directed fifty doctoral dissertations. That should suffice for ENJOY. The other side of this dedication to students was outlined when Jim was nominated for the Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award, which he was granted in 1964.

The nomination noted the administrative tasks that Jim took upon himself:

- 1) Director of the Undergraduate Majors Division for fourteen years
- 2) Undergraduate Majors Advisor for twenty-four years
- 3) Departmental Honors Coordinator for eighteen years
- 4) Served for ten years on Undergraduate Student-Faculty Committee
- 5) Chaired the Ad Hoc Committee to Reexamine the Requirements for the B.A.
- 6) Chaired the Undergraduate Scholarships Committee
- 7) Chaired the Committee for an Advanced Writing Curriculum

Nothing more needs to be said about this man whose death is so much lamented by those who worked at his side, those who studied in his classroom, and those who read his books. What the Department of English did in hiring James Graham Nelson in 1961 was propel in the most formidable way its mission of teaching, scholarship, and service and strikingly amplify the Wisconsin Idea of animating the global community.