Richard Ohmann Oral History Interview, Apr. 15, 2014

Nancy Smith
NANCY SMITH: I’ll start with a very basic question: How did you get into your field of academic study?

RICHARD OHMANN: My field changed several times, and I wanted to say sometime in this interview that Wesleyan was a great place to teach because you could change your field without changing your job.

But, to answer your question: I got interested in the formalist study of literature in college and I finally realized that you could go on reading poems and books, and actually get paid for doing it, so I went to graduate school just out of liking to do those things. This was in 1952, which meant that there was no question about getting a job—everybody got a job. So you could pursue your interest, then, without risking anything in the job market—completely unlike today, when people have to take seriously when they go to graduate school, at least in the Humanities, whether they are committing financial suicide.

So I was used to having a certain amount of exploratory permission during graduate school, and I began to get interested in language, linguistics, ordinary language philosophy. Through a fellowship I was able to pursue those interests and graft them onto my interests in literature and literary theory. When I came to Wesleyan in 1961, I would have had a hard time classifying myself—except of course I was in English and American literature. But to get more precise than that: I thought I was something of a theorist, a specialist in language and literature.

My senior colleagues at Wesleyan were very accommodating; they helped me launch a linguistics course in about 1963. Linguistics had not been taught in any consistent way at Wesleyan before then. It continued through the 1960s and eventually became a program, with Bob Whitman (Russian) as the chair for many years. I co-taught with many people: I taught with Bob, with Sam Anderson from Psychology, with Kent Bendall from Philosophy.
It was that kind of place. I could come into the English Department and teach with a psychologist or someone from Russian, someone from Philosophy, and teach the field of linguistics. So I'd already shifted from the formalist study of poetry to theories of language and style, and then when the Civil Rights Movement and the antiwar movement came along and caught me up in politics and in a kind of a critical investigation of American society and culture, my teaching took a more historical and economic turn, as well.

I don't think that would have been an easy shift to make at many colleges and universities. If you were the Milton man in the English Department, you stayed the Milton man in the English Department. I felt very fortunate to be at Wesleyan, or a place like Wesleyan (there were some others) where I could make that kind of a move and be doing almost nothing I'd been hired to do—with the exception of an introduction to literature course. I also had a stint in the administration for four years.

Smith: I read about that, and you had a title I'd not heard before. You were the “Chancellor.”

Ohmann: That was the forerunner of “Vice President for Academic Affairs.” Ted Etherington decided we needed such a person; we'd had a Provost before. Ted and the Trustees wanted to start the Chancellorship off right away and then spend a while picking the real Chancellor, who turned out to be Bob Rosenbaum. So I did it for about a year, but I was on my way out of the administration already. I’d decided that I didn’t want to do administrative work for the rest of my career. I did my stint, and then waved goodbye.

Smith: From all I’ve ever seen, administrators work by far the longest office hours.

Ohmann: Of course we got lots of free lunches and I gained weight sitting in committee meetings, and we had a lot of fun. But there were also a lot of crises and challenges too. The ‘60s movements were gathering, sometimes they were directed with considerable animosity toward the University. There were flare-ups to deal with, which were difficult for somebody who usually had strong sympathies with whoever the protesting group was. And also, in the three years I was in the Provost's office before I
became Chancellor, pro tem, I had found out that, contrary to my initial expectations, I couldn’t really do much in the administration to help shape the direction of the college. That’s partly a matter of temporary circumstances, but I think it’s also partly implicit in the job—at least it was back then, in a place governed largely by faculty—that the Provost’s job or the Chancellor’s job had a lot to do with harmonizing the interests of different faculty groups, or at least keeping them from open warfare against each other, and trying to grant their wishes as much as was possible, at least within budgetary constraints.

We were a very rich college for a while. That was gratifying: to have the Music Department come in and say: “This is what we’d like to do; we’d like to add a position, or bring in X or Y musician,” and we being able to say, “Well, we’ll propose that to the Board, these sound like a good ideas.” The “we” in that case were usually Bob Rosenbaum and I; we worked together closely through those years.

That part of it was fun, but it wasn’t matching my expectation that the place really needed a lot of directing and changing. It was the wrong expectation to have, or at least it turned out not to be possible, so I wanted to go back to the faculty and do work that was closely related my new outlook on literature and culture. What that turned into was another change in field, to what came to be called cultural studies.

The last full book that I wrote, as opposed to collections of of essays, was squarely in the middle of cultural studies, and was intended to be an exemplar of cultural studies. Such were the changes of field that I went through.

Smith: That was English in America?

Ohmann: No, that was Selling Culture, the one about magazines and advertising. English in America (1976) came out of the antiwar and the Civil Rights era, and was my political book about the profession. That is another interest that has stayed with me. I still write about the academic profession and the field of English as well.

And that completes the long trajectory of my answer to your first question.

Smith: Ah, but not how you fell in love with English.
Ohmann: Oh, that I took care of in two sentences. I loved reading poetry and novels, and I found out that you could actually do that for a living!

Smith: Like Professor Slotkin, who was surprised—"You can actually DO that?"

Ohmann: Indeed. Richie is a lot younger than I am, but came in in those same years of the post-war boom; he got his job here in 1966 or ’67. And that was before the wave had crested in 1970 and the University began having a harder time of it. Both he and I rode into Wesleyan on the post-war boom.

Smith: Nice time to be here, I gather.

Ohmann: It was. It was. Some people look back on the 1950s and early 1960s as the era of McCarthy and repression. Those things happened and were important, but for most people it was the Golden Age of the U.S. University. This was because of government funding that came in connection with Cold War and competition with the Soviet Union. Universities began enlisting as Soldiers of the Cold War along with the U.S. Government, and huge amounts of money began coming our way.

It was a good time, an expansive, confident time, and that confidence pervaded Wesleyan too. And when it was infused with the pot of money we got from selling American Educational Publications, it turned into the possibility of making this a University in something other than name. I came here early in the era of “University” fervor. “Let’s have graduate programs,” “Let’s do Ph.D. work.” That was beginning to happen during my first two or three years here.

Smith: You went to Harvard in ’52; for an MA and Ph.D.?

Ohmann: The MA was simply a ritual, it wasn’t really a usable degree, but something you got along the way to a Ph.D.

I began teaching there in 1954, but not in a literature course. I was teaching in General Education A, the freshman writing course.

Smith: Were you teaching undergraduates?
Ohmann: Yes, both Radcliffe and Harvard.

Smith: I was an English major, and I had a favorite teacher named David Ferry, whom you might have known.

Ohmann: Oh yes, and he’s still winning prizes. He referred to himself, or to something he had done recently, as “preposterously pre-posthumous.” He went on to teach at Wellesley. He was part of the group of grad students, many of whom had gone to Amherst College, who formed the intellectual center of the graduate English Community at Harvard—which meant that, even though the New Criticism was centered at Yale (and I realized soon after arriving at grad school that I’d gone to the wrong place), nevertheless, we had our own practitioners of close reading and New Criticism. Especially after Reuben Brower arrived at Harvard from Amherst and organized Humanities 6, in which a lot of people fledged their wings and learned their teaching skills. This was all very influential to me.

So, my affection for literature and my interest in working with it were strengthened in that way at Harvard—though I didn’t think much of the courses I took, partly because the faculty had paid more attention to teaching at Oberlin, where I did my undergraduate work.

Smith: You came to Wesleyan straight from Harvard in the early ’50s, when the world was fairly codified for young graduates, most of whom knew what was expected of them socially and professionally. You, however, were watching how the field of English was expanding and opening new avenues for research. What were your political interests at that time?

Ohmann: Oh, I had the same political interests as everybody else that I knew at Harvard. We were all liberals, we were all against McCarthyism and the witch hunts. We thought the Republicans were dull, the party of Big Business, and we wanted a more liberal regime. But I had liberal Democratic politics that came from my family long before I went to college.
In the ‘50s I became concerned about the bomb, and I took part in some anti-nuclear protests at Harvard. Marches and things like that. But I wouldn’t have described myself as a radical or a socialist until well into the 1960s. That was after I got directly involved in the protests against the Vietnam War that became a torrent of activity here at Wesleyan—and at just about every other college.

My politics made that turn starting in about 1965 or ’66, and then came to settle in a distinct American kind of leftism by the mid-’70s. Not vanguard, Marxist-Leninist parties, but a more empirical Marxism and of course more concerned with the American past and the movements of American culture and the American power structure.

I became, among other things, an Americanist. I guess I should have mentioned that a Ph.D. in “English” at Harvard did not mean “American Literature.” You could inflect it towards that by substituting (on your general examination), American literature for medieval Literature as one out of five areas. But you still had to do the renaissance and 17th-, 18th-, 19th-century literature of England. So I was mainly a specialist in English Literature.

By the late ’70s I was teaching courses in the American novel, and in popular and mass culture in the United States. Very different from what I had learned about in graduate school.

I was interested in contemporary U.S. politics and culture, because that’s where you were fighting, if you were in the antiwar movement. So I began teaching about contemporary American things. I taught a course around 1980 in American fiction between the first world war and the second world war. That was new for me in several ways. I had not studied fiction nor written about it nor taught it, so I was moving into fiction as well as into the U.S. Later, I went back a period and taught about the Progressive Era, then back to the 1890s. I suppose if I’d taught until I was 90, I’d have moved all the way back into Richie Slotkin’s period.

Smith: What specifically brought you to Wesleyan?

Ohmann,: I was pulled in two ways. I was drawn to small colleges because I had had a good experience at Oberlin, and I was drawn toward universities that had resources for advanced research. No institution could be both of these, but it seemed that Wesleyan
came almost half-way between the two. It certainly encouraged research: we had a wonderful sabbatical program here.

So I was partly trying to find a place that would meet both of those interests. On a more personal level, my wife, Carol Ohmann, had a sick mother in Waterbury, not far from Middletown. The first time I was job-hunting was in 1958 when I was at Harvard. I had an offer from Wesleyan then, but I decided to stay and do a fellowship for another three years at Harvard. The second time I was job-hunting, Wesleyan was the only small college that made me an offer, so I was very happy to choose it over Chicago, Cornell, and the like. Also, from that first visit in 1958, I already knew something about the place.

At Wesleyan, I began broadening my teaching expertise. The first linguistics course I taught was in the Master of Arts in Teaching program. The Chomsky revolution was underway, and I was able to teach his first book, *Syntactic Structures*, in the MAT program. That was the third time I’d read it, and I was finally beginning to understand it. That helped me to develop linguistics as a serious research interest as well as a teaching interest.

That’s another thing I would say about Wesleyan. Almost all of what I wrote about had come out of my teaching. That close relationship is often represented in the ideology of these places as one of teaching feeding on research. But I experienced the dynamic the other way around. That is to say, I taught something, and then got deeply interested and made it a research area.

Smith: Was Etherington president when you arrived?

Ohmann: No, Butterfield. By the way, he was still president when I decided to accept the Associate Provostship. I liked the idea of working with Vic. Not that he shared a lot of my own particular intellectual interests, but he had created the postwar Wesleyan I admired by hiring the people he hired in the late ’40s and early ’50s. He took a very active role in hiring, sometimes to the dismay of departments, who thought they should be the ones to make all the decisions. And they were right, too, but he had made Wesleyan the place it was. He was always very encouraging to me. I liked the idea of working in an administration under him.
But he resigned right when I came in. I was in the first year of the Etherington administration when I arrived in the Provost’s Office. Not the last year of the Butterfield administration.

Smith: My sense is that at that time, the University shifted in tone, with Etherington wanting to expand. But he wasn’t here very long.

Ohmann: Well, he was here for four years, I believe, or really three. The year that I became Chancellor pro tem, which was his last year, he virtually disappeared from the campus in two ways. One was residential. When there started being more demonstrations and building occupations, Cathy Etherington especially became distressed by what was going on and they got a place to live somewhere else. I can’t remember where. So they didn’t live in the president’s house that last year. And secondly, I could see that he clearly didn’t want a long career as president of a college or university. He decided to run for a Senate seat, and that really made it impossible for him to be President of Wesleyan at the same time.

Colin Campbell, who had worked with Ted at the American Stock Exchange before they both came here, said in effect, “You’ve got to make a decision.” It was bold of him to do, he was a lot younger than Ted and had been his Vice President at the American Stock Exchange before they came to Middletown. I don’t mean to say it was Colin’s putting it on the line that way that made Ted resign, but he did resign. And so for that year, Colin and I were kind of the “exiled presidency” split between the two of us—Colin on the financial and administrative side and I on the academic side.

I’m exaggerating a little: Ted was still part of the picture, but basically Colin and I were kind of stuck with whatever was going on for the year.

Smith: How fascinating. I never knew that that had happened. And it can’t have been easy.

Ohmann: No, it was not easy, but I’d already made my own decision to leave the administration.

Smith: Then Colin was here for 18 years, I believe, followed by Mr. Chace for six years.
I remember when I arrived in 1981, Colin was president, and the faculty was being its normal critical self, worrying over whatever came out of South College, and second-guessing most administrative decisions. The way all faculties do. But the minute he said he was going to resign and was going to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, they were fulsome with compliments and praise.

Ohmann: Everybody, or certainly almost everybody, liked Colin, even though he was the president—and that makes him from some points of view the antagonist—he was the one who had to say “no” to a lot of things. Nonetheless, I think he was personally very well liked.

Chace came and he was not a popular president. I’m not sure we’ve had a popular president since Colin left—but what do I know? I’ve been retired for almost exactly half as long as I was employed here, and a lot has happened in those years. I’m more of a retiree from Wesleyan in my mind than a I am a faculty member.

Smith; I think that is partly why they created this project to talk with retirees like yourself. You have had the time to synthesize and reflect on and assimilate your experiences of and at the University.

Ohmann: And most of the people you’ve talked to have continued with professional work and scholarship after they left Wesleyan.

Smith: And many of them have stayed in the area, but you moved away.

Ohmann: Indeed. My first wife died. My second wife, Liz Powell, and I moved up to a place in Massachusetts, which is still my seasonal home. We gave up any home in Middletown in 1997, and lived up there in the cold winters for seven years, then we got our place in New York and began splitting our time between New York and Hawley, Massachusetts. I haven’t had even a pied-a-terre in Middletown since 1997. However, it’s about midway between Boston and New York, and between Hawley and New York. The journal that we lefties founded in 1975, Radical Teacher, has had it’s board meetings here most of the time since the ‘80s. We used to have them at the English
Department, at 271 Court Street, and then that became no longer a faculty building. The Wasch Center was starting up and Karl was generous enough to say we could hold our board meetings here.

So we’ve mostly had them here, and I’m very appreciative.

I’ve never had an office here, but it’s felt like a great delayed perk to have these facilities available.

Smth: I come here for the twice monthly faculty lectures, which are wonderful.

Ohmann: Oh, I’ve given two of them. One with Richie Slotkin on the Junior Faculty Organization, and another on the history of Wesleyan—well, it was basically about when we abolished the chairmanship of the English Department. We were a very refractory department, which drove the administration crazy. This was soon after I’d ceased to be a part of the administration. I think I became chair of the English Department, for what turned out to be just a year, around 1972. I and some of my colleagues said, “Well, we don’t really need to have a chair. There are only six or seven distinct tasks, and we could divide them up, have a Board of Managers instead of a chair. Someone could be in charge of hiring, somebody could be in charge of the budget, etc.” So we abolished the chairmanship of the English Department. And we continued that way, very seriously, for five or six years—which brought certain procedures to a halt. For instance, there were the named professorships in English, and we declined to have any new named professorships, because that was un-democratic.

So we had a version of socialism in one department for five or six years, and then we began getting gradually more like a regular department again.

Smith: What were the years that you were doing that?

Ohmann: The year that I was chair, when I was the chief instigator of this administrative crime, may have been 1972.

Anyway, that was the other talk I gave at the Wasch Center: it was on how we came to abolish the English Department, and why we had to relent.
Smith: I wish I’d been here. That was your political side and your academic side coming together.

Ohmann: That was another good thing about Wesleyan. You could do a certain amount of experimentation, even in administrative structure. You could do pedagogical innovation very freely.

We had a program of undergraduate teaching apprentices for years and years. I don’t know if it still exists or not. And I did many things with groups of students through that program in which I was essentially a faculty sponsor of a student group that was doing a study project on its own. Just for one example, the first Asian American Studies course was one group tutorial that I signed for. So some things came into the Wesleyan curriculum through the group tutorial route and the T.A. route that wouldn’t have been here otherwise.

That was very encouraging, and by the way, confirmed my opinion that I could actually do more to influence the development of curriculum at Wesleyan by being a teacher than I could in the administration. It was a very exciting time to be here, in the ’70s and ’80s.

Smith: I was told when I came in ’81 that I had come after the most exciting times; the Art Center had been built, the innovative programs were all in place, the great flashy professors were in flower. That may not have really been true.

Ohmann: Well, you mention the arts. As you probably remember from Harvard, the arts had no curricular standing there. You could perform in “Hamlet,” but you couldn’t do it for credit. There were no performing arts classes. There was Art History, but not studio art. There was music, but not credit for performing it. There was the wonderful Harvard orchestra and great concerts, but no one got academic credit for them. Wesleyan was ahead of every other elite place except for some like Bennington or Sarah Lawrence in bringing the arts into the curriculum. That’s another way in which Vic Butterfield was very important for this place. I don’t think he would have initiated that movement, but he honored and followed the lead of people like Dick Winslow and David McAllester in World Music and Sam Greene in Art, who really made Wesleyan a leader in the arts.
And it continues to this day to be so—though sometimes you may think it is so only in Film.

Both Film and Dance spun off from the old Theatre Department. So that’s three different arts departments—and maybe more—that came out of the fact that we had a Theatre Department: not just History of Drama, but a department that put on performances. That all happened before I got here; I can’t take any credit for it.

Did somebody interview Dick Winslow?

Smith: I don’t know. I haven’t seen the complete list, but I can find out.

I want to hear about everything. In these interviews we are getting such different points of view, different evaluations of the rhythm and pace of change, different ideas of how or why things progressed or didn’t. It’s really fascinating.

Ohmann: Bob Rosenbaum has already been interviewed, Al Turco did that interview, and it may be in the Archive. He was another of the people in that generation who were hugely influential in the making of Wesleyan and what it became in those years.

Smith: In the course of these interviews, I’ve learned that the Wasch Center has become a remarkable attraction. That’s not an advertisement; it is just spontaneous praise.

Ohmann: Oh, yeah, its a wonderful thing. Is it worth what it cost? I have no idea. But I’m not in the administration, I don’t have to think about that.

Smith: I don’t know either. One of the things Yoshiko Samuel said was that she never had a very great sense of community here. Now, she’s a very private person, quiet, but she said that having an office here has opened up a whole new Wesleyan to her.

Ohmann: I don’t know what the procedures are for getting an office and keeping one, but she and Gene Klaaren and Jerry Long and Joe Reed have spent a lot of time over here in their offices. Do you know if there’s a limit on the amount of time you can have an office here?
Smith: No idea. I do know that Bill Wasch wanted to do something for the University. I’d heard that initially he wanted to build squash courts, but it was decided that “Wasch Squash” wouldn’t do. That’s probably just a silly story.

Ohmann: That surprises me, and I’ll tell you why. Not because Bill wasn’t interested in squash, he was part of the Wesleyan faculty squash circle for many years. But he also had a professional interest in retirement. He built an organization or informal network of retired people who had expertise in various areas and who were interested in second careers and in volunteer work. He organized their second careers in that way. So of course it makes sense that he would want a center for retired faculty members.

Smith: Of course indeed, and thank you. I’m afraid I distracted you away from your own history. Can you tell me what you have been concentrating on lately?

Ohmann: I guess a simple way to summarize is that I kept doing everything except the teaching and the local committee work. I kept on with scholarship and kept on with my professional activities, and my activism in the politics of the academic profession. I stopped teaching and I have not taken a visiting job at any time during the 18 years that I’ve been retired. Of course I ceased to be on Wesleyan committees.

Now the scholarship: I hope I’ve finished writing books. I hope I never write another book. I like writing for specific purposes, I like writing short things. A lot of what I’ve written has been about changes in higher education and changes in the way faculty members are hired and work—almost all changes for the worse—the decline of the post-war university that built up to such grandeur in the ’40s and ’50s and ’60s and then went into a slow decline that’s continued ever since.

Some people would say it’s better now than ever, because business principles are at work in it, but the commercializing of the university, the de-funding of public education, and the casualizing (that’s a lousy verb but it’s used all the time) of the academic labor force so that 75% of faculty now are not on tenure track (they’re part-timers and casual labor)—all that has destroyed the university that we knew.

If you go to a big place, say Berkeley, the buildings will still be there, there will be wonderful research going on, but if you look more closely you’ll see that a huge amount of undergraduate teaching is being done by adjuncts and grad students. A huge
amount of the research is now being funded by drug companies, and so on. So it’s sort of like the Berkeley of old, but it is different. Wesleyan and places like it are not so different from what they were, but they are different in some of those ways too.

Those are the developments that I’ve been following, with a certain special interest and intensity the last four years. I was elected to what is called the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association four years ago and I just finished my term. I was trying to join my colleagues in the MLA in fighting these tendencies. And I wrote quite often about my own discipline and my own profession in that time, in the form of internal memos and blogs, and articles in Radical Teacher.

Those are some of the things I’ve done. I try to help put the brakes on some of the changes in higher education. But it is pretty much a losing battle. I’ve felt proud about having fought the battle, but I think in general the business version of the university is now supreme. And also, the inequality is more severe than it’s ever been: not only the gap between rich and poor, which we hear about all the time, but the inequality among universities, and the people who go to different universities and colleges and community colleges. Here, at places like this, you get diversity, which is good and genuine, but it’s not an economic diversity so much as one of gender and sexuality and race.

There is more than ever a separation between these expensive, selective places and the places where most people get educated. Especially there is a difference between this and the community colleges, which, along with for-profit universities, are the most vocational. So the stratification of American higher education, which looked in the ’50 and ’60s as though it might be on the way out, has come back again in a big way.

Even in the circle of private, selective, expensive schools like Wesleyan, stratification has proceeded apace. Williams, where I taught as a visitor for a semester, and Swarthmore, where my granddaughter goes, and a few others—for instance Princeton and Harvard among the Ivies—are now very distinct from Wesleyan and a number of other places. For instance, my granddaughter will graduate from Swarthmore with no debt whatsoever. Swarthmore and Williams and Princeton don’t do student loans anymore. So they are an elite within the elite. I just mention that because it’s an example that locates Wesleyan in the picture.
Smith: Wesleyan has dropped need-blind admissions.

Ohmann: They dropped need-blind in principle quite a while ago, in the '80s, but they kept on doing it in practice.

Smith: It's a tough scene for young people.

Ohmann: It is tough to emerge with a lot of debt and find out that your BA in English is not worth much in the market. If you decide, “Well, I'll go to law school,” you find that a very large number of law school graduates are not getting full-time jobs in the law either. Doctors are coming out of medical school and earning a lot less than they used to proportionally, and most of them are working for salaries, not on their own.

There's a whole issue of *Radical Teacher* that I've just finished co-editing, on the decline of the professions. It is a decline not just of the academic profession, but also most of the others that were previously strong.

Smith: I'd like to see that.

Ohmann: You can see it, you just can't hold it. Google *Radical Teacher*; we are entirely open-access and on line.

Another one I worked on, issue 96, is called “Occupy and Education.” It's about the educational implications of the Occupy Movement.

So I've been following these interests partly through guiding *Radical Teacher* to one topic or another and taking on editorial tasks.

Smith: It sounds to me as though you haven't slowed down very much.

Ohmann: Oh, I have. I do everything a half speed, but have fewer things to do.

Smith: Not the past couple of weeks.

Ohmann: True, I would readily accept that characterization. I have been going much too fast and I don't like it. I need to slow down more now.
Smith: We'll slow down right now. We covered a lot of territory today, and what I'd like to suggest is that when you've read the transcript from today, you decide whether there is more you wish to say.

(Interview concluded.)