

2014-03-26

Donald Meyer Oral History Interview, Mar. 26, 2014

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Nancy, "Donald Meyer Oral History Interview, Mar. 26, 2014" (2014). *Wesleyan University Oral History Project*. Paper 11.
<http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/oralhistory/11>

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Interview with Professor Donald Meyer

26 March, 2014

Recorded in his home in East Haddam, Connecticut

NANCY SMITH: I'm going to begin by asking you what it was that got you interested in your academic field.

DONALD MEYER: I date my own interest in becoming an historian clear back to high school. I had a history teacher, a remarkable woman named Emma Beekman, who made it come alive. She also identified me as someone who was likely to become a person who could enter into that world of research. I don't know that I was interested in research in high school, but I soon understood myself to be aimed in the academic direction.

After high school, I went out to a tiny school in California called Deep Springs, about twenty students, all young men. Out there, I understood that I was essentially going to become an academic. I knew that was my interest and I assumed I might have some talent.

I didn't like it there, I quit after a year. This was in 1940-41, and I had a sense that I would need to get as much in as I possibly could before I went off to war. This was before Pearl Harbor, but at that time the war was on and we were—or at least I was—well aware of the fact that we were likely to go to war. I wanted to get everything in while I could.

I was 16 years old when I went out there, 17 when I moved with my family to Evanston, Illinois. At that point I entered the University of Chicago. While I was there, I took the Hutchins Program, basic courses in Biology Sciences, Physical Sciences, Humanities, Social Sciences and so forth. So I wasn't required to make a choice.

And I went off to war. When I came back, I had to make a choice, which I did on negative grounds: I didn't want to become an anthropologist, I didn't want to become a sociologist, I didn't want to become a psychologist. What was left was History.

I was also determined to leave Chicago and go to Harvard, despite the fact that I was encouraged to stay there by the Committee of Social Thought, led by a professor named Napier Wilk. I also had a professor in Literature who was anxious that I stay, but I wanted to go off to Harvard. And I did.

At Harvard, I entered the graduate school—

Smith: You had graduated?

Meyer: I had graduated in Chicago, in '47, three years late because of my three years in the Army. I entered the History Department at Harvard. I knew that I wanted to take a course from the rising young star there, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who had just published *The Age of Jackson*, making his fame.

After two or three years, I was taken on as a Tutor, lived in Lowell House, and got my degree. I wrote my thesis on Reinhold Niebuhr, and that was what eventually became my first book.

I became interested in the issue of the reluctance of the Protestant ministry to identify enough with the war to want to go to war. The book I wrote begins the story with World War I, where most of the Protestant ministers were strongly identified with the war, and then were extremely disillusioned by the post-war peace, and what happened at the Treaty of Versailles. Many of them became anti-war and pacifistic. Of the ones I talked about, most of them were from the New England Puritan heritage, and I gradually became more and more interested in the argument that developed between them and Niebuhr. Niebuhr of course was not one of them. Niebuhr was from German background, not the New England background.

He became the voice of intervention, and attacked Isolationism. That was my first book, which I finished some years later; I published it finally in 1960.

Smith: What was the title?

Meyer: It was called *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*. The Harvard thesis was the Protestant social liberals at Harvard—but I changed the title for the book. That was where I got my first strong orientation toward religion in America. I was not brought up religiously in Lincoln, Nebraska. We rarely attended church. Oddly enough, it was a Wesleyan Methodist church there. My mother went to Nebraska Wesleyan, in Lincoln. There are of course other Wesleyan schools in the country: Ohio Wesleyan, and I believe there is a Georgia Wesleyan. So coming to Wesleyan here in 1967 was not all that strange to me.

In any case, I came from UCLA, where I had been for 12 years. At UCLA I had taught courses in what they called Intellectual and Social History, divided into two. When I was at Harvard, I took Intellectual and Social History as a unified course under Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., but my predecessor at UCLA had divided the courses—which I enjoyed very much because then I got more into Social History.

One of the things that I enjoyed very much at UCLA was the fact that it was co-educational. I had not liked the all-male population at Deep Springs. I had always thought of the girls in my high school class as just as smart as the boys, and many of them were, so I had no sense of a difference. At UCLA I ran into a very interesting group of older women, many of them coming back to finish their college degrees after they had raised their families. Some of them from Beverly Hills, rich women. I got to be friends with several of them.

One of the things that I wanted to be sure about when I came to Wesleyan was that it would stop being an all-male school, and would integrate. I don't believe I knew at that time that Wesleyan had already had girls way back when. Did you know this?

Smith: Yes. Early in the 1900s.

Meyer: Yes. And a bunch of Wesleyan alumni, men, got together and drove them out because they were humiliated by the failure of Wesleyan to compete in football. There were stories about Wesleyan losing to Yale by something like 120 to nothing, and they blamed it on the fact that Wesleyan had women students. So they got rid of women.

I didn't know that when I went there, but there was talk about bringing women in when I started considering coming to Wesleyan. And the other thing I wanted to be sure about was that Wesleyan was considering PhD programs in History. Those two things were crucial.

[interview interrupted by guest leaving]

I think I don't have a complete understanding about how I came to Wesleyan. It may have been because Victor Butterfield interviewed me. I remember one interview in particular. It was at the Los Angeles airport, and he seemed to be eager to get me. Later I had a sense that I was a special case because I came as a Full Professor; many of the hirings at Wesleyan came in as junior people, and they had to work their way up.

Why he was interested in me I am not sure. I think it was because of his own commitment to Wesleyan's religious tradition, and he knew that my first two books had much to do with religion. The first book, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*, and the second book, *The Positive Thinkers*. My most important figure there from the standpoint of its commercial success was Norman Vincent Peale, but I also talked about Mary Baker Eddy and a group of women involved in the New Thought Movement. So women were in the book, but it concentrated heavily as well on secular figures like Dale

Carnegie, so it wasn't all religion. Still, I think he got the impression that I was somebody who would fit the Wesleyan tradition, having some sort of religious attachment and identity.

I knew that Wesleyan had a Religion Department, with David Swift, Steve Crites and others, whom I admired and liked. I don't think he could possibly have read my two books, otherwise he'd have realized what the real approach was. The first one was basically an attack upon the broad mainstream liberal Protestant ministerial tradition of the mainline churches—the Methodist, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and all the rest. They had failed badly, and it was a book that in effect highlighted Niebuhr as the great figure, but not for religious reasons. For reasons, as the book's title suggests, of Political Realism. And he might well have decided that I was not one of them, not of the traditional old fashioned Protestant pastorate in this country.

And if he had read the second book, he might have realized that it was an attack upon the more soft, sentimental tradition of Protestantism, evinced in Norman Vincent Peale, as well as in Mary Baker Eddy, whom I wrote about, but critically. So I've never been sure that he knew who I was.

But I also knew that he was retiring, and would not be a problem for me if I did come to be recognized for my critical approach. I was interviewed by Butterfield two or three years before that, once, and apparently he was interested enough to keep the pressure up. I held them off: I was newly married and we had plans to go to England and Europe for a year—which we did in 1966, and I wanted to complete that before I considered leaving UCLA.

And for other reasons, more personal than professional, we decided that we wanted to leave Los Angeles, and Wesleyan was an opportunity. I had been invited by the Harvard department, after I went to UCLA, to consider going back there on what they had then as a five-year program for Associate Professors. I decided that I didn't want to go back to Harvard, and have never regretted that. I didn't want to join what I could recognize as the intense private culture of the Harvard faculty. It's an exalted faculty, but nevertheless inbred.

So I arrived at Wesleyan knowing that they would be opening to girls soon, and they did: by 1970 it was fully co-educational. And that there would be consideration of PhD programs. There was a committee formed, called COGI, Committee on Graduate Instruction, and I sat on that for a while. We talked and planned and had visitors come in and look at our proposals for a PhD program. We knew that there were competing departments—the Psychology Department in particular, where there was somewhat of a conflict because they liked to think that they were first, ahead of us, going for our

program, so there was a certain amount of jealousy. I don't know whether Karl would agree or not, but we felt that it was there. And we were aware of the fact that Wesleyan had a strong Science wing that was more or less independent. I rather quickly became aware of the reputation of the pre-med students concentrated in the science departments.

I was also asked to become part of—or at least for a year or two to join—one of Butterfield's inventions, the College of Social Studies, CSS. I served for a year, but I knew I didn't want to stay there. I was also asked to help start American Studies, which I did, but I knew I didn't want to carry on to be in charge of American Studies, and Rich Slotkin soon arrived to take over that.

I wanted to be a Department man. I believed in Departments, I believed in the History Department. Hugh Brockunier was their senior man; I knew he was retiring, and I would take his place. Dick Buel was already there. So, in retrospect, I have always wondered if I was working against Butterfield's ambitions, because he took great pride in being the inventor of these two Houses, which became three Houses: CSS, the College of Letters, and the Center for Quantitative Studies

I think he was anti-Department. I think he felt the Departments represented hostility to new things. I'm not sure that that makes any real sense, but that's the way I felt it.

And I will never forget the shock I felt at my first faculty meeting at Wesleyan. There we were in that little amphitheater over in the Science Center, and down below looking up at us as the chair of the meeting, was the President of the University. This was unheard of at UCLA. The faculty meetings there were conducted by a member of the faculty who was elected to be their head, and the Administration was an entirely separate operation. So I quickly got the idea that Wesleyan would be very much influenced by the President, in a way that I had never felt at UCLA.

This gets us to Ted Etherington, who was the President during my first three years here.

Smith: So Butterfield was firmly on his way out when you arrived.

Meyer: He was leaving, but he was still very active in interviewing and making decisions and bringing people in. I don't remember the exact dates of his resignation, but my strong impression is that my first three years here were under Etherington.

We all understood that he was not an academic figure. He had no particular reputation as a scholar or an academic. He had made his reputation as the highly successful head of the American Stock Exchange.

My assumption was, and I think a lot of us agreed, that he was using Wesleyan to build up his reputation politically, because he soon revealed that he was considering making a run as a liberal Republican for the Senate. I could easily imagine how some of his backers might fantasize that he might well become a presidential candidate: a young, handsome, bright, intelligent candidate for President, and he would use his position at Wesleyan to bolster that image.

As I understand it, his bet was called. He was told—I guess, this is only hearsay on my part, he was told by the Wesleyan Board that he had to choose: “You either run for office and resign as President, or you stay as President here and don’t run for office.” And he chose to run. He lost to Weicker, of course, in the Republican primary, rather tragically.

I liked Ted Etherington, I thought he was a perfectly plausible man, sincere and honest, so that I had nothing against him. But it was quite clear that he was not taking any interest in our plans for the graduate programs, and it became gradually clear to me that we needed support from the Administration at the highest level if we were going to get anywhere. We could go through the motions of COGI meetings and bring in outsiders for discussions—Bernard Bailyn came from Harvard, for instance—and a couple of other people to “evaluate our program,” and I remember Bernard being skeptical: “Why do you feel you need to do this?”

Smith: Was this the professor known as Bud Bailyn?

Meyer: Yes, a big figure in his profession. He’s still alive, in his early 90s, and has just come out with a new book. He and I were at graduate school together. He chose to stay at Harvard.

All I can say in retrospect is that his skepticism was correct. He knew, and I gradually realized too that it was probably a very good thing that Wesleyan did not undertake to offer PhDs in History or Psychology or any of these other Social Science or Humanities Departments. Because the job market was collapsing. There were fewer and fewer people being hired. I was already aware of the competitive aspect of academic life at UCLA because, while I had graduate students there and was able to help some of them get very nice jobs, and am still friendly with several of them, we were

always aware that the Big Bear was Berkeley. And that our market was severely crimped by the competition from Berkeley.

We had a local market in southern California and a few outlying areas, and now and then would place people further away, but it was a strain. And UCLA was always aware that Berkeley outranked it, in all those rankings that ever were. I don't know whether it's really caught up; if it has, it's because of Berkeley's decline, beginning with Ronald Reagan. But when I was there, we were aware that we were Number Two dog. I enjoyed UCLA a lot and had a good time both in and outside the institution in southern California and made a lot of friends, and enjoyed both my graduate and undergraduate students, but I was ready to leave for other reasons,

And I always knew that, when I came to Wesleyan, the one aspect of Wesleyan that I felt was very strong—namely, its concentration on teaching as distinguished from research—would not bother me. I knew I would go on enjoying teaching at Wesleyan.

Butterfield tried to reassure me that the fact that we didn't have graduate students would make no difference because the Wesleyan undergraduates were just as good as many graduate students. Well, I just sort of laughed at that.

But I came to Wesleyan, assuming that I would teach, and that I would enjoy teaching as much as I had at UCLA, but I also assumed that I would be involved in research for another book.

That has worked out. And this has been one of the best things about Wesleyan, at least so far as I'm concerned, that I was able to teach and enjoy it and at the same time do research. It took me a long time to write my last book, longer than I expected, but that was because of the way the book took shape, not because of frustrations with Wesleyan. I gradually got my idea of the shape of the book in hand, which explained why we took the Sabbaticals we did.

In 1966 we went to England and I was thinking that I should compare England and America in areas like Marriage, Women, Women at Work, etc. I had a research assistant who helped me at the British Library. I gradually became aware, however, of the fact that I didn't really want to do that, that I had another angle in mind, and it still had something to do with Religion. I wanted to study a Catholic country, which England was not, and I didn't want to do France, because the French, while they are not anything else than Catholic—if they are that—are also very bad Catholics, and skeptics, and secular-minded. So I chose Italy for one of my countries, then I chose Sweden for another, because it had a Social Democratic reputation of long standing; the Social Democrats had been running Sweden for decades and were always very favorable to the interests of women. Or so they said.

Then I was aware of the ideology maintained by the Communists, that they had solved the Women's Problem. And that meant Russia. I had to take a chance, because the two languages that I knew, other than English, with any facility at all, were German and French. So I had to learn Italian, which I did to a degree.

I learned enough Swedish to read those articles and books that were not in translation, but I became aware of the fact rather early that in Sweden they translate practically everything into English because they recognize that English is the World Language, and they want to be heard. So there was a huge amount of material that I was able to use in English—but I did use some in Swedish itself.

But I knew no Russian and never did learn any, but I was also aware of the fact that the Communists were also eager to be heard. There was a large amount of their material that was translated into English, and there was a large amount of scholarship on Russia that I was able to access. Norton Dodge, for example, is a scholar whom I knew and was able to use.

So Rome was where we went in 1970 on a Sabbatical. Very nice for Wesleyan to allow me to go on a Sabbatical after only three years there. They made no problem about it at all. Wesleyan has always been very permissive for me in that regard. So we went off to Rome, and I began the process of research for what became *Sex and Power*.

When I came back, I could tell that the PhD plans were dead. Now this involves how Etherington spent his money. Wesleyan had the reputation when I arrived of being the richest school in the country. Per capita. This involved huge funds. We understood that it was because of the University's arrangement with the Xerox Corporation; some have suggested other sources as well, but it made huge amounts of money out of Xerox.

Well, what we got for that money was 50 million dollars at least spent on those new buildings across Lawn Avenue, the Center for the Arts. I didn't really realize this at the time, but in retrospect I realize it was also part of the business of disbursement of money to Wesleyan Hills, a large expensive investment in housing, with the clear aim of providing more opportunities for faculty to live.

Many faculty have moved there. When we moved to Middletown, we looked for a house—we have five children—and the only house available was up off the edge of the campus. But it was scheduled to be torn down for the expansion of the campus within a few years, and we didn't want that. So we ended up in East Haddam. All I can say again was that Wesleyan was very generous, they not only allowed us a good mortgage, five percent, but also allowed us to add to the mortgage in order to build this addition to the

house. This large kitchen was not here; we had it built and added the cost to the mortgage.

Smith: It looks as though it was built with very old materials.

Meyer: We wanted to keep the Old House feeling, and the integrity of the original; the floorboards creak and have holes in them, but we love it.

So the PhD program was dead. I would have to say that Butterfield was never for it. He was apparently never all that enthusiastic about bringing in women either, but none of this concerned me. I was never involved at that level of the administration. Dick Ohmann was, and he can tell you more about it.

I became chairman of the Department—surprisingly—in my second year in order to help lead the effort for a PhD program. So, whether it ended under Etherington or ended under Colin in his first years, I would not know. I never was able to find out. All I can say is that we never had the support that we would have needed to bring that program about from the Administration. It was clear it was a dead issue.

Smith: Now, we are up to Colin.

Meyer: I'm trying to think of other things that happened of an institutional nature. One was that Sheila Tobias came in to head a Women's Program; not a Department, but a Program. I got entangled in that to some extent because of my known interest in women in history. Then I also got to know Jeanine Basinger and taught a course with her—on the movies of Joan Crawford, of all things.

I had no particular interest in Joan Crawford, but Jeanine being Jeanine was able to persuade Joan Crawford to come to campus. The students made a celebration of it, the young men got into tuxedos, and the young women wore evening gowns. I think Crawford was a bit bewildered by it all. She couldn't pronounce Jeanine's name properly—Gee-ann-ine, she kept calling her. But she was there, and the course went on.

I lectured on the history side of the course, and Jeanine lectured on the studio side of it. I loved movies and well understood what she was trying to do. She certainly succeeded in getting her program established, and is the head of a very distinguished Archive now.

Smith: And she managed to bring a great deal of glamor to the campus as well.

Meyer: Yes. A South Dakota girl—which fact attracted me, being a Nebraska boy.

I kept up a variety of joint-teaching relationships with American Studies. I am not able to date all these things. My next Sabbatical was in '76-'77, and my last one was in '82-'83. At one point, Dick Buel and I were sort of “roving recruiters” for young faculty in the History Department. We hired Neal Coughlan quite early in this period, from Wisconsin. He came with Philippa and their little boy. Neal was a lively presence, but he later resigned in order to become a lawyer.

Smith: I knew them, but never knew that he had been a faculty member before his legal career.

Mayer: He was indeed a teacher in History. He gradually just became more interested in the prospects of the law, and went ahead and earned his degree. Philippa, of course, continued to serve the University as the fine psychologist she was.

Sheila Tobias—I don't know the circumstances of her leaving. I think she had ambitions that didn't quite fit here.

Smith: I think I had heard that she was lured away.

Meyer: Yes, that could be.

I was not a political figure in the University. I was not interested in gossip in the University. My main conversational partner was Phil Pomper in the Department; he was teaching Russian History. He and I would spend long lunch hours talking, more or less in the same spirit. He was well aware of the deficiencies of the country he studied, and I would acquaint him with the deficiencies of the country I studied—America.

Incidentally, I should say that, when I came here I decided that I should teach a course in Diplomatic History. Which would be a great shift from what I had been teaching before. I needed to identify myself as an Intellectual Social Historian, but somehow I became deeply interested in the history of American Diplomacy, and wars. That was my lecture course, which went over pretty well, I guess.

The other aspect I should recall is the Black issue. This began under Etherington. I'm pretty sure that, in Etherington's own mind, one of the things he would be able to demonstrate, he thought, was that an enlightened college President could solve the Black problem. Which had arisen of course with considerable energy in this period. The Malcolm X House I think dates from his tenure.

There was an idea that Wesleyan could somehow get on better terms with the Blacks of Middletown. There are two proletariat classes, or let's say working classes, in Middletown. One is Italian, and they have absolutely nothing to do with Wesleyan. Never had. Never did. Not today. And they keep renewing their Italianity through their association with their church, St. Sebastian, which is modeled on the one in Sicily.

And the other group is the Blacks. They had no association with the University at all.

So, to a certain extent, Wesleyan looked as though it were camping out in a town where it didn't belong. Middletown was not really a college town, the way Amherst is or Williams is. We are part of the Little Three, Amherst, Williams, and Wesleyan, but we are not at all like either of those other two schools in terms of our location. I'm pretty sure this would be in the '70s—bad things happened. Local Blacks, welcomed into Wesleyan, used the opportunity to steal television sets and property from the students.

It became evident, too that there were no Blacks on the faculty. Edgar Beckham was here in the Administration. Then we hired Clarence Walker, I'm not exactly sure when. I liked him very much. Clarence was a character in his own right. He has since left, of course, and gone to Davis, where he really belonged. He was a son of that university. He was our Black faculty member. And we had Ollie Holmes, who was one of these non-Black Blacks; he didn't radiate any Black culture of his own, spoke the King's English, and had a lovely white wife.

Smith: Edgar Beckham was Dean of Students when I arrived in 1981.

Meyer: He always seemed to me to be an unusual figure. Not a recognizable type of Black, such as those who lived in town. Then they began to recruit other Black faculty. Manning Maribel was one I remember clearly. One of two or three who came for a short time. These were militant Black people, in the sense that they were insisting upon more courses about Blacks, about Afro-Americans. I never felt that there was enough sheer quantity here to support that. I was not opposed to it, and was sympathetic to their hopes, but I could never believe that Wesleyan was going to do much about it, in the same way that Wesleyan could not do much about a PhD program.

Malcolm X House was there. I never had anything to do with it. I regarded it more as a curiosity than anything else. Who was responsible for it I don't know. I think this was during Etherington's tenure, but I'm pretty sure that he had hopes that Wesleyan would succeed in doing something that many other schools were known to have failed

to do: Bring Blacks in and make something of it. Truly integrate the institution on racial grounds, the way it had happened with women.

There was an article on integration in a recent issue of *Atlantic* magazine, and it surprised me that Wesleyan was mentioned. It discussed a struggle with the three fraternities located on High Street. Apparently the University wanted them to accommodate women students in their living quarters—not as members, but simply using their rooms as dormitory space. Two fraternities agreed, but one resisted. And at the one that resisted there had been an episode of rape committed by a young man who was not a Wesleyan student but was visiting in the Frat house.

Apparently it got very nasty, and there were suits, and money changed hands. But the most amazing thing I found in that story was that the author prefaced it by describing Wesleyan as “one of the most high-class institutions in the country, with a renowned faculty of national prominence” [I have no idea who those people might be!], “and students of such high quality that it is useless for normal students to apply.”

I’m not sure if this was under Bennet or Roth, but I was astonished, first, by the encomium given by this writer. I don’t know who she is or where she got her ideas, but she talked about Wesleyan in a way that I’ve never heard before. I’ve always assumed that Wesleyan rated third in the Little Three. Amherst and Williams have an old history; Wesleyan comes later, in 1832; Wesleyan was never known for eminence, though it had noted faculty—Karl Schorske, Nobby Brown, who came before I arrived. They might be thought of as nationally renowned, but were not here when that episode happened. So—who has come since who is nationally renowned, I don’t know.

In any case, this whole issue of Blacks gradually wound down, as so many things do, without any clear resolution.

Smith: I think that the last serious disruption occurred during Chace’s tenure.

Meyer: Was there a big flare-up under Chace? Well, I was still here when Chace arrived.

Smith: It was in the late ‘80s, I believe. They bombed the President’s office, and shots were fired.

Meyer: I never quite understood that. Yes, that was true. I was on my way out. I retired in 1991; I had to retire, I was still under that age proscription, where you had to retire at

age 68, I guess it was. But I also availed myself of the chance to take partial retirement, to see if I liked being retired. And I did. Indeed, Chace was there then.

Colin was there 18 years, Etherington was there 3 years, that's 21 years; I was there 24 years, but my last few years were sort of broken up with partial retirement. So I was aware of the fact that there was real trouble, yes, and I gather that Chace is remembered as a failure at Wesleyan.

He became President of Emory. He was ambitious, didn't want to be a Provost anymore out in California. I never got to know Chace at all. I never got to know Colin, either, for whatever purpose. I certainly liked Colin, but I never had a meeting with him in the Administration building. When I read Bill Barber, he was talking to Colin all the time. And Rich Slotkin also talked to him many times. I never had that experience at all. I was perfectly happy in my Department, teaching my courses, going on Sabbaticals, working toward this book which finally came out. I thought Wesleyan was an institution that, so far as we were concerned, my wife and I, treated us very well. The mortgage terms were good, they supported our kids in college to some extent very well. My salary was—I never had to argue about it. I was never greedy about it.

Smith: Didn't you have to serve on committees?

Meyer: Yes, you had to serve on committees, but I don't remember much about that side of it. The committee that I remember most distinctly would be COGI, but then I served on committees that would talk about things like Womens' Studies.

Smith: Weren't you involved with deciding about tenure? You said you were never political, but I thought there were a lot of committees to which faculty had to present their cases

Meyer: I have to confess that I really paid little attention to what you might call the Higher Politics of Wesleyan—the fundraising, the Trustees—I had nothing to do with them, ever, never talked with them, never even thought about them, never gave presentations to them. It's funny, because my own sense of my commitment is from public schools. I went to public schools in Nebraska, then I went to Deep Springs, which is a private school founded by an old Robber Baron called J.J. Nunn who set it up with his money. He was in energy, ACDC generation and transmission. He founded a senior branch at Cornell, Teluride Foundation, which is distinguished on that campus.

Then I went to another pair of private universities, Chicago and Harvard. But I don't know, I felt I was in the right place at UCLA, which is of course public. And at Wesleyan, which is of course private, I simply was here when they went through what you might call their "high point" and their "collapse," when they became on the one hand the richest school in the country, and then—in my understanding of it—blew all the money.

I think Ted Etherington promised that if he spent 50 million dollars on those new buildings he would collect 50 million dollars to replace it. And he never did. So it never affected me one way or the other, I didn't feel that I was being starved in any way. On the other hand, I had nothing that I wanted to do that required huge amounts of money, except support the PhD program, which would have required a major investment. and that was ended.

I've never regretted it, because I've been able to see what it would have been like if we had had a program. We'd have been competing unsuccessfully with much mightier institutions for jobs for our graduates. That's what I was doing at UCLA, to some extent, finding jobs for my graduate students, and I didn't really see that we were in a great position for that.

I guess I was always aware of the way Harvard did it, and Harvard had all of the advantages. It had prestige, money, networks of people—Oscar Handlin's network was there. Only a few people like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., led their own independent lives—and of course he ended up leaving Harvard. Working for Kennedy, and leading CUNY.

Smith: And founding an extremely good library, with his father, at Radcliffe: the Library of the History of Women in America.

Meyer: And that's a very good thing.

I'm very lacking in knowledgeability about Wesleyan as an institution.

There is one aspect that I became acquainted with, which was sad. That's the Press, headed by Jeannette Hopkins. Jeannette Hopkins was my editor. We became good friends, she was a good editor, she together with a fellow named Bill Leach helped me improve my final presentation. Leach was a very bright guy. Jeannette helped see me through the big book.

I think the circumstances of her leaving are not pleasant to recall. Apparently she was regarded as an overbearing and demanding woman. She had a significant career as an editor in New York before she came here, she may have picked up some bad habits there, but apparently she managed to annoy a number of people here and

they managed to get her out. They gave her a package that she couldn't refuse, so she was able to retire in good order up to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. We've visited her up there now and then.

The end result was that the Press itself was liquidated, so that there is no longer a Wes Press.

Smith: When I left Wesleyan, I understood that it had been taken over temporarily by the University Press of New England. That Wes Press could be revived in the future.

Meyer: No, I don't think it has been revived. I don't keep my eye on anything that goes on at Wesleyan. I don't go up there, but to my knowledge there is no Wes Press left. I think the ending to that story could have been better. They didn't mistreat Jeannette, but they got rid of her.

Smith: I had a feeling that Colin did not want to be the man who carried out that execution. He really turned that over to Bill Barber, when Professor Barber was Acting President before Mr. Chace arrived. Which wasn't very long.

Meyer: Well, it's the old question about Wesleyan—is it a University or is it not?

It's not a university, but nobody wants to call it Wesleyan College. I don't know that I'd have gone to it if it hadn't been called a University. Out of some sort of snobbery, perhaps. I rationalized it because I thought it could have PhD programs. That's what I had in mind. But how it ended up being known as a University I don't know, because in Ohio, it's Ohio Wesleyan College.

Smith: but from its founding, Wesleyan has always been called a University.

Meyer: Yet it is part of the Little Three, and the other two are Amherst College and Williams College.

Smith: It seems to me that it is the mirror image of Dartmouth College—which has a Law School, and a Medical School, while Wesleyan, called a University, has not.

Meyer: It does have PhD programs in Astronomy and more, but is that enough to justify calling it a University? I don't know.

I did not have a feeling that I was leaving a situation at UCLA that I disliked in order to enter a sweet little college. I didn't have that feeling at all, and never have had it. So there we are. I am sure that if Wesleyan had gone in for a PhD, it would have been a weak program, or a difficult program because of the problem of placement, and of recruitment.

The history department was never as big as the one at UCLA. There, you always had to be aware of what your colleagues were teaching, and that they might be covering material that you might have liked to teach.

And that's what I did at Wesleyan. I taught not only Foreign Policy, but I taught seminars in all sorts of subjects. I remember a seminar in which we discussed "Lolita." Well, that couldn't have happened at UCLA. Somebody else's turf would have been invaded.

The same is true for Harvard. Harvard is not as big as UCLA, but it had a distinguished and large faculty. Well, we never did have one and never would have one. It would have been a small program. And what is a small PhD program worth? I think, in all honesty, it would have been worth less and less over the years. Because the whole research enterprise has been expanded overwhelmingly by all these machines. Nowadays people are doing things they would never have dreamed of doing in the academic world. And we couldn't have done them. If I had stayed at UCLA, the chairman who was there when I left, Hans Rogger, wanted me to be his assistant, and that meant I would have taken over as chairman in two or three years, I would have had a hell of a time trying to take care of all those different people with their fresh PhDs trying to find placements for them.

I have to selfishly agree that I am better off never having had to do that.

What I wanted to do was teach and do research, and I did both here. And as far as I'm concerned it was good, and Wesleyan allowed it. Never put pressure on me insofar as committees were concerned. Well, they came along, but Committee duty is just a permanent weed in the garden of the community.

I have a very warm feeling for Wesleyan, but at the same time I can't forget the troubles it has had, and I don't think I can say that it succeeded in solving the problem of Blacks. I'm not sure that I can say that it has solved the problem of Women; in some departments there are more women than men. Well, that's all to the good. Some of them may leave and go into the Peace Corps, if there still is such a thing. Some will go into helping little children in Africa. But a lot of them will go on for further professional training.

Wesleyan is probably a very good place to come from for professional training. You will be respected in your law school or your medical school or your graduate school. And now, with what Jeanine has succeeded doing, in the realm of film and professional theatre. As I said, I can't begin to narrate about the history from the standpoint of institution building.

Smith: But opinion is equally important. You say you were not involved with politics or the development of new courses or new programs.

Do you, however, have any sense that Wesleyan has gone off in a wrong direction in any way? I don't necessarily mean reprehensible, but perhaps ill-advised?

Meyer: What I could say is that perhaps this is an institution that is still relatively small. I was initially surprised at the numbers—800 students and 100 faculty. It's much larger now, but still relatively small, and maybe one could argue that it is spread a little too thin. You have on the one hand Jeanine's program, which is a success. On the other hand you have these science programs—pre med and the things that Bill Firshein does—and I think it's possible that part of the faculty and the community in between—faculty in history, psychology, economics, anthropology— have been a little bit starved. Maybe not.

I still think about that 50 million dollars that went into those great big building blocks, and wonder if more might have been achieved with that investment.

I have little to do with Wesleyan. I retired from Wesleyan in 1991 and I totally retired, I've not been back to the campus, and have never been to the Wasch Center, for instance. Not that I'm hostile, it's just that that was what I wanted to do. I have a new life.

Smith: Thank you so much for agreeing to be part of this Oral History Project. It has been a huge pleasure spending time with you in this glorious old house.

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