Ernest Henley: An Appreciation

As the current Dean of the UW College of Arts and Sciences, it is an honor to be asked to speak to you today about one of my predecessors as dean, Ernest Henley. I shall confess at the outset that I do so with some trepidation. Many of you here today were close friends of Ernest and Elaine; and although I knew and admired them both, I cannot claim to have known either of them as well or as long as many of you did. Nor can I add anything at all to this symposium's assessment of Ernest's contributions to particle physics – or indeed to any of the other branches of physics to which his work made contributions. My own education in physics ended, unhappily, after the first semester of my freshman year in college. The best I can say about that experience was that it was clarifying; and from it, I went on to become an historian of the European middle ages.

Despite my many shortcomings as a physicist, as a dean and a historian I do also have some modest advantages in speaking about Ernest Henley. As dean, I have access to the records of Ernest's 60 year career as an active faculty member at the University of Washington; and as an historian, I have some experience with using such records to tell the story of a life. I also have some personal understanding of the frustrations that eventually drove Ernest to resign after eight years as dean. I shall have more to say about those frustrations in a few minutes. They will sound familiar.

Like every historian who sets out to tell a story, my remarks this morning have a theme. That theme is my appreciation, bordering on awe, at the astonishing range of Ernest Henley's accomplishments, including but by no means limited to his achievements as a theoretical

physicist. He was, to be sure, an extraordinary physicist, and in emphasizing the other areas of his life I do not mean to diminish in any way the importance of his research accomplishments. But in addition to his work as a scholar and teacher, he also served as Acting Chair of Physics; as Chair of the UW Faculty Senate; Chair of the Physics Department; Associate Dean and then Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; founding Director of the UW Institute of Nuclear Theory; an NAS and AAAS fellow; a husband to Elaine, and a father to two highly accomplished children, Brad and Karen; a lover and patron of the arts; a pianist; and a philanthropist. He was, in short, a deeply cultured man with a wonderful mind and a capacious intelligence. There are not many that can compare to him in any generation; and however many there are, there are never enough.

His path was not easy. Born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1924, he was a member of the last generation of German young people educated in the pre-war German *Gymnasium* tradition that combined a high-level education in the sciences and mathematics with literature, languages and the arts. He was also among the last to escape the gathering clouds of the Holocaust, arriving in New York as a 15 year old boy in 1939. Two years later, at the age of 17, he entered City College. Three years after that, he graduated with a degree in Electrical Engineering and enlisted as a radio technician in the United States Navy. When his naval service ended, he worked for two years as a researcher at Airborne Instruments Lab on Long Island while attending classes at Brooklyn Polytechnic (now Brooklyn College) on a part time basis. In 1948, he and Elaine were married, and they moved to California, where Elaine entered the University of California Medical School and Ernest began his PhD work at Berkeley. In a sign of things to come, Ernest completed his PhD in three and a half years, graduating in 1952.

After two years of post-doctoral research at Stanford and Columbia, in 1954 he accepted an appointment as Assistant Professor of Physics at the University of Washington, at the princely salary of $516/month. Traits that would mark his entire career appear to have been already well established. One of his recommenders commented that [quote] "his interest in the experiments going on in the laboratory and his ability to work closely with the experimental people" were unusual and valuable qualities in a theorist, and that his interest in experimental work would fit in well with the interests of the University of Washington Physics Department. This was quite a prescient assessment, it seems to me. Another of his recommenders commented on a different, but equally prescient, element of his character and inclinations. "His performance before a joint MIT-Harvard seminar," this recommender wrote, "showed that he can't be talked into anything by his seniors." I believe this was intended as a compliment; but anyone who had occasion to experience Ernest's confidence in his own judgments will recognize the truth of this assessment also.

Ernest did not remain long an assistant professor. Three years later, in 1957, he was promoted to Associate Professor, with a salary increase to $780/month (a 50% salary increase in three years, for those of you who are counting!). And three years after that, in 1960, the Physics Department recommended his promotion to full professor – although for reasons that surpass all understanding, the recommendation was turned down in 1960 by the dean and provost, and so had to be repeated (this time successfully) in 1961. Hints as to why this promotion had been turned down the previous year are few; but in 1961 the Chair made a point of noting that although Henley had so far taught mainly at the graduate level, he was currently teaching "Physics for Engineers" at the 200-level with great success; and that "while

his manner might appear to be brusque at times, he is sympathetic with his students and devotes his time generously to their questions during and after class."

The department's confidence in Henley's qualities as a teacher at all levels of the Physics curriculum was well-earned and well-deserved. His Chair praised to the dean Henley's willingness to teach with distinction at all levels of the curriculum, from introductory physics to the highest graduate level. He also spoke, gratefully, of his willingness to take on overloads; and in a 1967 letter to then-Dean Philip Cartwright, he commented that "No member of the Physics Department is so prolific of thoughtful ideas for improvement, nor is anyone more willing to put energy and time into projects for the general benefit of the Department, the University, or of education in general" than was Ernest Henley.

Now this is the sort of praise for a colleague that a chair should never offer to a dean, because it is sure to mark the unsuspecting colleague out for an unending series of administrative assignments. And so it proved in Henley's case also. After a term as Acting Chair of Physics during the 1960s, and as Chair of the Faculty Senate from 1971-72, Henley served again as Chair of Physics from 1973-1976; as Acting Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences in 1978; and in the fall of 1979, he was appointed Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences by then-president Charles Odegaard (also a medieval European historian, by the way!). But despite this heavy service load, Henley's research productivity never faltered. In 1967 he won a Guggenheim Fellowship; in 1976, a NATO fellowship to Israel; and in 1979 he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Henley's term as Dean began in 1979 and ended in 1987. It coincided with one of Washington State's periodic budgetary meltdowns. For five years, the entire country wrestled

with the consequences of double-digit inflation and 15% to 20% interest rates, while struggling through the worst recession since the late 1940s. As usual in Washington State, higher education in general, and the University of Washington in particular, bore the brunt of the massive cuts in state spending that resulted from the state's hard times. Salaries stagnated and hiring was frozen, as the University struggled with the state-imposed budget cuts. By 1984, the worst of the national crisis was over. But state funding for UW recovered very slowly, and by 1987 Ernest had had enough. He resigned as Dean in protest of the state's continuing failure to fund the University adequately, and sent a letter to then-Governor Booth Gardner explaining his resignation and excoriating the Governor for undermining the University of Washington.

Many deans have contemplated resigning to protest state budget cuts; but most have concluded that no one in state government would take the slightest notice if they did so. After all, in a state whose governor fired a past UW president for spending too much money on the library, no governor was likely to care much about losing a mere dean. Ernest, however, received a response from Governor Gardner that is still in his personnel file. In this letter, Governor Gardner offered the usual excuses for the university's budget woes. I suspect they will sound familiar: K-12 was the highest priority for funding; cuts to higher education were how the legislature balanced a budget that was perpetually short of revenue; and the legislature didn't much care about higher education even at the best of times. But in his letter to Henley, Governor Gardner did promise to put together a five-year plan to restore at least some of what had been cut from the UW budget and from higher education more broadly. And even more remarkably, Gardner did ultimately follow through on his promise to increase the University budget. When the history of the Gardner administration is written, it will be

interesting to see what role, if any, historians ascribe to Ernest Henley's letter in accounting for the Governor's change of policy. But I like to think that it did have an impact.

And perhaps the University of Washington thought so too. When Ernest stepped down as Dean of Arts and Sciences, he returned to the Physics faculty and resumed his research and teaching. But uniquely, so far as I know, when he stepped down as Dean he was immediately awarded the title "Dean Emeritus", even though he would not retire from the University of Washington for another 7 years.

Certainly he deserved this recognition. Although his tenure as dean was scarred by budgetary problems, Henley was a steadfast and occasionally stern champion for hiring and promoting outstanding faculty members. Nor was Ernest's capacity to judge faculty talent limited to the natural science departments. Building upon his excellent humanities education in Germany, as dean Ernest hired and promoted an uncommonly large number of all the University of Washington's Macarthur "genius" award winners. He also oversaw the appointment of David Thouless, the University's most recent Nobel Prize winner, to the faculty of the Physics Department. No less remarkably, he was also able to continue his own research work during and after his eight years as dean. In 1989 he received the Tom W. Bonner Prize in Nuclear Physics from the APS. In 1992 he was elected president of the APS, and in 1995 was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Ernest retired officially from the University of Washington faculty in 1994 at the age of 70. But he did not entirely retire until 2014, when at the age of 90 he taught his final introductory physics class in the UW's Transition School, by then a part of the Robinson Center for Capable Youth. He also continued his involvement in other University activities. As

founding board members of the UW World Series (now the Meany Center for the Performing Arts), Ernest and Elaine were passionate enthusiasts for music and dance. In 2011 they established the Henley Endowment for Classical Music to support live performances at Meany Center, an endowment that remains a lasting tribute to a truly remarkable couple. The arts and the sciences were both fundamental to their lives, as they are to the College to which Ernest devoted his entire professional career. Their example is one to admire and to emulate, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak of my own admiration for them this morning.

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