DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
WILLIAM REA KEAST

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for William Rea Keast, Professor Emeritus, English, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
WILLIAM REA KEAST

William Rea Keast, professor emeritus of English, died June 27, 1998. Rea, as he was called by friends and family, came to The University of Texas as professor of English and chair of the Department of English in 1972 after a distinguished career of teaching, scholarship, and administration at the University of Chicago, Cornell University, and Wayne State University, which he served as president from 1965 to 1971.

Rea was born on November 1, 1914, in Malta, Illinois, and graduated from York Community High School in 1932. He went on to the University of Chicago, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received his bachelor’s degree in 1936. His doctoral studies were interrupted by World War II. From 1941 to 1946 Rea was on active duty in the armed forces, rising to the rank of major. Returning to the University of Chicago on a Rockefeller Postwar Fellowship, he completed his PhD in 1947 and joined the faculty of the Department of English as an assistant professor. In 1951 he moved to Cornell University as an associate professor and was promoted to professor in 1957. The focus of his scholarship and teaching was English literature of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, and his greatest love was for Samuel Johnson. Later, when he came to The University of Texas, he liked to tell young assistant professors in the field that the surest way to an understanding of this period was to read straight through Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. The essays he wrote on the *Dictionary* are models of scholarly inquiry and set a gold standard for all later studies of Johnson and lexicography. In recognition of his scholarship Rea was named a Ford Fellow for 1955-56 and a Guggenheim Fellow in 1958-59.

By this time Cornell had discovered Rea’s exceptional administrative talents, naming him chair of the Department of English in 1957. Five years later he became dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and in another two years vice president for academic affairs. In 1965 he was chosen as president of Wayne State University. His inaugural address to the academic community at Wayne State concentrated on the role of the urban university in a rapidly changing society. The tumultuous later sixties in American cities and on American campuses were especially challenging to university presidents, but Rea Keast faced them with courage, conviction, and grace. At a critical moment in May of 1968, he articulated his vision in an important address whose very title reveals a lot about the man and the times: “The Object of the University is not Power, but Truth.” That such a view was not popular in all quarters may be gauged from a novel of that period, *Them*, by Joyce Carol Oates, in which the Wayne State president is proposed by one character as a target for assassination. It is said that Rea later queried Oates about this: “What made you imagine that?” The story goes that she replied: “Imagine it? I heard it.” During his presidency, Rea gave a great deal of thought to problems of academic administration, and at the end of his term as president was chosen to chair the Commission on Academic Affairs for the American Council on Education. One result was an important book on university governance, *Faculty Tenure: A Report and Recommendations by the Commission on Academic Tenure in Higher Education*, that came out in 1973 during Rea’s first year as chair of the Department of English at UT.
At UT, Rea was especially dedicated to promoting the careers of younger faculty, especially those without tenure. For someone who had achieved such distinction in academic life, he was very sensitive to the needs of those just starting out and generous with his time in reading drafts of articles, offering encouragement, and suggesting avenues for publication. He was very conscious that a department is not only an academic unit, but also a social one. He and his wife Mary Alice opened their home for gatherings, small and large, to which the most junior faculty were as welcome as the most senior. He was unusually engaging in conversation, amiable and charming in ways that seemed to acknowledge the ideals of the historical period that he studied. One of the greatest luminaries of the eighteenth century, David Hume, once wrote that life’s two greatest pleasures are study and society. This is a view that Rea must have shared, for he not only excelled in both but also combined the two pursuits in ways that made him a splendid friend, colleague, and mentor. He brought to the Department of English knowledge and experience that served to broaden departmental horizons and encourage the faculty to set the highest standards of scholarship, teaching, and service. For this legacy, the Department of English will always be grateful, counting Rea Keast as one of its most distinguished members.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors James D. Garrison and Larry Carver (co-chairs), and Lance Bertelsen.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on February 21, 2000. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/
Honors

LLD (Honorary), the University of Michigan, 1967
University of Chicago Alumni Distinguished Service Award, 1970
Who’s Who in America
President, Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, 1969-70

Scholarly Publications


The Shakespeare Folios in the Cornell University Library (Ithaca, N.Y., 1954).


“The Language We Speak” with L. F. Powell, J. H. Sledd, and J. R. Sutherland, University of Chicago Round Table, May 1955.


“Johnson as a Subscriber” with J. D. Fleeman and Donald Eddy, Johnsonian News Letter, XXV (December 1965), 2-3.