REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR JANET ANNE MEISEL

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Janet Anne Meisel, associate professor, history, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
JANET ANNE MEISEL

Janet Anne Meisel, associate professor of history, died on April 30, 2009. She was sixty-four years old and had taught at The University of Texas at Austin for thirty-four years.

Professor Meisel was born on January 30, 1944, in Dallas, Texas, and attended the Hockaday School in that city. She received her B.A., in history and religion, from Oberlin College in 1967 and her doctorate, in medieval history, from the University of California, Berkeley in 1974. She began teaching at The University of Texas at Austin in that year.

Professor Meisel was a scholar of medieval England and France and specialized in the study of towns and frontiers and the great families that dominated them. She is best known for Barons of the Welsh Frontier: The Corbet, Pantulf, and Fitz Waring Families, 1066–1272 (1980), a pioneering study of the lesser nobility and gentry in England in the Middle Ages that also influenced an emerging literature on the medieval frontier. Her detailed prosopographical approach focused not on the great border families of the Welsh frontier but on the lesser nobility and has become a valuable resource for historians in both border history and gentry studies. Her concept of a new “regicentric” politics on the frontier, in which a lesser nobility came to depend on the monarchy at the expense of formerly independent barons, helped reorient the study of the borderlands within both social and political history in England. At the foundation of Professor Meisel’s scholarship was her detailed understanding of the work of the English monarchy and her abiding interest in how social and legal innovation in general and the reliable delivery of services in particular lay at the heart of medieval English kingship and statecraft.

Professor Meisel served as the principal historical consultant for two efforts in the 1980s to create documentary historical programming for public television. In 1984, she served as the chief historical consultant for Newscasts From the Past, a series of six programs co-funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her insistence on historical accuracy and authenticity was often cited as one of the most important reasons for the large number of awards that the series won. In 1989, Professor Meisel also served as chief historical advisor and script supervisor for a series called Timeline, which was co-sponsored by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Maryland Public Television.

It was as a master teacher that Professor Meisel made her most significant and lasting contribution to UT. She regularly taught Western Civilization in Medieval Times; her version of this course for the Plan II Honors Program was a fixture of their curriculum. She also taught upper division lecture courses on Anglo-Saxon England and Norman and Angevin England, and a series of undergraduate seminars on a wide variety of topics in the political and social history of Medieval Europe. In addition, she regularly taught courses on Medieval English history in the graduate division of the Department of History. Finally, in the early 1980s Professor Meisel contributed significantly to the creation of the Honors Program in the Department of History.

In all of those courses, her love for and careful attention to primary sources excited several generations of UT students. As one of those students remembered, “Professor Meisel never met a primary document she did not love.” Graduate and undergraduate students alike were terrified by her “crusty, take-no-prisoners introduction” to her courses. But they were then rewarded by “her patience, determination, and skill in bringing out the best in
her students.” And they loved her. They were mesmerized by her storytelling and by her ability to make the past come alive in all of its grandeur, contingencies, and folly. She modeled for her students the sheer joy of the life of the mind, of close and rigorous historical analysis. And she challenged them. They were proud of their hard won grades on her wickedly constructed multiple-choice tests, notorious exams that came to live in legend, especially in the Plan II program. The same could be said about specific Meisel lectures. Her students would mark their calendars and then invite friends to hear her hold forth on the Black Death, the Battle of Hastings, and, especially, on Joan of Arc. In 1991, the Plan II students honored her with the Plan II Honors College Annual Teaching Award. Professor Meisel also won the President’s Associates’ Teaching Award and the Liberal Arts Student Council Teaching Excellence Award.

Janet Meisel loved her students. And she loved the creatures of the natural world, especially those that had been wounded or maimed. The same generosity and nurturing that marked her teaching led her to care throughout her life for a never-ending parade of animals—cats and dogs, of course, but also raccoons and, especially, birds. For years she had cockatoos and cockatiels, but her favorites were blue jays, which she rescued and raised. Remembering Professor Meisel’s ceaseless caring for all of those creatures, one of her former students penned the perfect epitaph for his teacher. He wrote: “I am sure that no undergraduate, graduate student, or stray jay ever worked with Janet without being enriched and profoundly improved by that experience.”

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Howard Miller (chair), Martha Newman, and Denise A. Spellberg.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on January 27, 2010. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.