DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
KURTH SPRAGUE

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Kurth Sprague, associate professor emeritus, American studies, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
KURTH SPRAGUE

Kurth Sprague (March 11, 1934 – March 18, 2007) was a poet, novelist, horseman, lover of literature, and bon vivant who was also a devoted member of The University community, which he served as teacher, wordsmith, and steward to British Studies.

Kurth was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, grew up in Manhattan, and went to St. Paul's School and Princeton. But military service introduced him to Texas, and The University drew him to Austin, where he and his second wife, Bushie, founded, owned, and operated Blackacre Stable in West Lake Hills. Their home on the top of a hill above a hunt course drew students and scholars, medieval musicians, writers and riders, and English ecclesiastics, often in overlapping categories, sometimes to the astonishment of their five children, Mark, Michael, Quin, David, and Charlotte.

His 1978 UT English department dissertation on T. H. White, the author of The Once and Future King, drew such favorable attention over the years that it was published posthumously, T. H. White's Troubled Heart: Women in 'The Once and Future King' (D.S. Brewer, 2008), edited by Bonnie Wheeler of Southern Methodist University. Kurth also edited the first publications of White's poetry (A Joy Proposed, 1980) and short stories (The Maharajah and Other Stories, 1982).

His own published writings include three volumes of poetry: And Therefore With Angels (1970), My Father's Mighty Heart (1974), and The Promise Kept, which won the Texas Institute of Letters poetry award for 1976. His deep knowledge of the American equestrian scene was displayed in his 470-page history, The National Horse Show, 1883-1983 (1985). Two of the major strands of his life, acade and horses, are brought together in his final book, a murder mystery, Frighten the Horses (2003).

Oddly, these two strands had been brought together years earlier during his service in the U.S. Army, when he was assigned to the Department of Publications and Non-Resident Training at the Artillery and Guided Missile School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. As Kurth notes in his lively autobiographical essay in Burnt-Orange Britannica (2005), a compendium of articles by University faculty and friends involved in British Studies, it was his writing ability, rather than any athletic prowess, that caused him to be appointed to the United States Modern Pentathlon Team, which trained at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

"I was assigned to the team," he writes, "because my commanding officer, John Russell, who had been the leading international rider of 1948 and had competed in the Olympic games in London (1948) and Helsinki (1952), liked the letters I wrote [for him]. 'Listen, Kurth,' Russell would tell me, his boots resting comfortably on the desk, and flourishing some correspondence that needed dealing with, 'You write that sumbidge, and you tell him . . . '"

Sprague taught at The University for 25 years in both the English and American Studies departments. He taught lower-division composition and British literature courses. Among his upper-division courses were "King Arthur in English Literature," "Medieval Literature in Translation," "American Medievalism," "American Chivalry," and a popular writing-intensive course, "How to Write about American Culture."
Among the qualities that made him a special teacher were his extreme generosity in expressing enthusiasm for good student work, his gentleness, his sense of humor and explosive laughter, and his reverence for and tireless encouragement of clear prose. A master of prose himself, he saw no reason that others shouldn't become as competent as he, and he was willing to do all the coaching students would absorb.


A lover of English poetry, Kurth was happy to spend hours passionately reciting and discussing the magic of Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “They flee from me, that sometime did me seek,” Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, Robert Herrick’s “Delight in Disorder,” or Swinburne’s “When the hounds of spring are on winter’s traces.” Friends who imagine Kurth in heaven are likely to see him in the company of poets wearing capes.

A great bear of a man, enthusiast and life-lover, Kurth was also a cynic who saw the truth behind most shams—but a cynic of such sweet heart, that, knowing the truth, he did his best to protect those who shouldn’t see it—even at the cost of his having to play straight man, even the naïf. If he was Falstaff, as many have suggested, he was the gentleman Falstaff never was.

Mark C. Smith,
Associate Professor, Department of American Studies,
on Kurth's scholarship and writing

Kurth Sprague only wrote about what he knew and loved. Luckily, that covered a lot of ground—horses, literature, chivalry, all types of codes of honor, medievalism, and, indeed, a host of anachronisms in our modern world. In his last published work, the fall 2006 special edition of the King Arthur jurnal Arthuriana devoted to his dissertation, he notes his amazement at those individuals who write huge tomes on subjects they are indifferent to or even hate. This went against one of the central lessons that he learned from T.H. White, the subject of so much of his work. In the classroom and in his own work, Kurth insisted upon what White had called “sincerity from the heart.”

He came upon the subject of White from a peculiarly oblique angle, receiving a doctorate in the English department at The University under the Celticist Ruth Lehmann and the Malory scholar Robert Wilson. He first looked at White’s The Once and Future King to see what a twentieth-century author had learned from a fifteenth-century text. Kurth’s interest in medievalism was an attempt to use it to critique the present, and he looked to White as a model.

One can see this best in his disturbing and, in some ways, most challenging creation, And Therefore with Angels (1971), a poetic retelling of the search for penitence of the fifteenth-century French marshal Gilles de Rais, a serial murderer of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children, a man whose abominations would horrify Ted Bundy. As in most of his poetry, Kurth reimagines historical fact through his own sensibilities; de Rais moves from his recital of his code and stature as justification for his actions to someone meekly submitting himself to God’s will. And while modern man cannot conceive of forgiveness for such an individual, the work’s title suggests that a time even more brutal than ours may also have been more forgiving.

In The Promise Kept (1975), which won the poetry prize of the Texas Institute of Letters, Kurth uses a similar technique to re-envision the wars between Native Americans and the American military in the nineteenth century. Even as his characters speak of such tragedies as the Trail of Tears, Wounded Knee, and Little Big Horn, Kurth never sides with one side or the other. Written in a stirring Kiplingesque style, he finds Custer’s vainglory as compelling as Crazy Horse’s brilliance and writes about both with equal passion and sympathy.

White, however, was his lodestone. Kurth’s two-volume 1978 dissertation, “From a T.H. White’s Troubled Heart: Women in The Once and Future King,” received attention, even as an unpublished work, for 25 years, which led to Arthuriana’s commitment of an entire issue to it and its subsequent book publication. Kurth notes that, with the exception of Guinevere, White was unable to develop positive or even credible female characters. Having absorbed the extensive White collection at the Harry Ransom Center, he had come to agree with White
himself that this stemmed from White’s cold and manipulative mother, who alternately seduced and abandoned her son. Her depositing him for six years in an especially brutal boarding school left him with an adult sexuality that alternated between sadism and repressed homosexuality.

One also sees the theme of parental abuse in Kurth’s edition of White’s stories, The Maharajah and Other Stories (1981), especially the gruesome, autobiographical, and blatantly Freudian “The Man.” Meanwhile, his edition of White’s poetry, A Joy Proposed (1980), showed the young White writing genuine, personal, and sincere love poetry to a person nonexistent and by definition unattainable. Throughout this tragic romance, White grapples, like his character Arthur, with the need to do the right thing, aesthetically as well as morally.

Of all his worlds, Kurth clearly felt most at home with horses. Like his admiration for the Middle Ages, horses—and especially the showing of horses—represented a connection to a superior past where men and animals truly shared an existence. As he explains in his labor of love, the officially sponsored The National Horse Show: A Centennial History 1883-1983 (1985), the National was joyfully an anachronism, a horse show held on the fifth floor of a building where all horses arrived by elevator. Such compromises were necessary and negligible, Kurth remarked, for, without them, “the quality of life goes down even further.”

He was the perfect person to handle such an assignment as he, like so many figures in the book, was “bewitched by horses.” He knew many of the leading horsemen and -women from the past 30 years and had heard stories about many of the earlier personalities. In Kurth’s hands, what could have been a litany of cups and prizes develops into a sharp-eyed, if admiring, social history of America’s social and economic elite.

While he ignores the snobbery, cruelty, and conspicuous consumption of the horse world in The National, he is surprisingly critical of it in his murder mystery, Frighten the Horses: A Rusty Coulter Mystery (2003). While the ostensible plot centers around the murder of the chair of an English department in which lecturer and horseman Stephen “Rusty” Coulter, a very thinly disguised Kurth, is a prime suspect, the real story is about training horses and their young riders and the greedy status-conscious trainers and parents who thwart the joys of horsemanship and youthful curiosity. Kurth ebulliently portrays himself as a double anachronism—a horseman concerned about children and an academic concerned about literature rather than politically correct postmodernism and multiculturalism.

In academic life, Kurth lived up to his vision of himself as an anachronism, once silencing an opponent in a conflict over the make-or-break issue of college life, office space, with, “I was mistaken in thinking that I was dealing with a gentleman.”

William H. Cunningham, The James L. Bayless Chair For Free Enterprise, on Kurth’s work for The University’s central administration

Kurth Sprague was introduced to me by Shirley Bird Perry, who was Vice President for Development at The University. Kurth played an important role in drafting the Centennial Commission Report. Shirley Bird felt that the president’s office needed a professional writer to help draft reports and speeches.

I interviewed Kurth in spring 1996. I was immediately impressed by his use of the English language and his ability to conceptualize difficult, complex issues. During the period Kurth worked for me, we would meet regularly when I was drafting a speech or an editorial. The process was always the same. He and I would meet with a few other trusted advisors, such as Gerry Fonken, executive vice president and provost; Bill Livingston, vice president and dean of graduate studies; and Shirley Bird Perry to discuss the issue. Kurth was always an active participant in the meeting.

His very difficult task following our meetings was to draft a speech or editorial that represented my position. This is not an easy job, and he did it beautifully.

I was very pleased to promote Kurth to associate professor in the English Department. I know that he always did an outstanding job in the classroom, and his University service was beyond compare.
W. Roger Louis,
The Mildred Caldwell and Baine Perkins Kerr Centennial Chair in English History and Culture, on Kurth and British Studies

Kurth Sprague played an important part in the early history of the British Studies program, which was created in the fall semester of 1975. He came to its assistance in the late 1970s and remained active until his retirement.

British Studies is essentially a faculty seminar that meets on Friday afternoons at three o’clock in the Tom Lea Rooms at the Humanities Research Center (now the HRHRC). Though it now has a regular attendance of 50 or so from members of the UT faculty throughout the humanities and social sciences (and members of the Austin community), at that time it averaged about a couple of dozen. Kurth helped to build the programs and (along with Miguel Gonzalez-Gerth) acted as “steward,” in other words helping to arrange the lectures and presiding over the sherry that has become a symbol of the Friday afternoon meetings.

More than that, Kurth took a personal interest in the lecturers and often entertained them at his home, Blackacre Stable in West Lake Hills. He must have made a unique impression on many of the British visitors because he would pick them up from the hotel in his pickup truck while wearing a bowler hat. He was gracious and always willing to talk about his interests in Arthurian literature, equestrian history, American medievalism, and detective fiction. He contributed an autobiographical essay to the British Studies publication Burnt Orange Britannia, a collection of some 60 autobiographies by members of the British Studies seminar. In his essay, he described British Studies as having been “of paramount importance to my career at The University of Texas.”

Thomas M. Cable,
The Jane Weinert Blumberg Chair in English, on Kurth as a person and a friend

If all the world’s a stage and if each man in his time plays many parts, Kurth’s multifaceted personality could populate a whole gallery of Shakespearean and Chaucerian characters.

From that gallery, here are four: Shakespeare’s greatest comic creation, Sir John Falstaff, and from The Tempest, the wizard Prospero; and two from Chaucer, the Franklin and, less obviously, the young Oxford scholar.

Falstaff, of course, was always getting into trouble, in his high-spirited and irrepressible way, and getting his friends into trouble too, including the future king of England, Henry V. Well, I am not Prince Hal, nor was meant to be, but I know this, that during the 1970s and 1980s, I got in the doghouse more than once through what might be called dissolute behavior in the company of Kurth.

I’m amazed to think back on some of those Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. The Sunday afternoons were spent watching the Dallas Cowboys, either at Blackacre or on my hilltop facing Blackacre across the valley.

I really have no interest in football. But Kurth, like a Jupiter of a planet, pulled me into the gravitational field of Sunday afternoon NFL, and for the only time in my life I talked as though I was on familiar terms with Roger the Dodger, Tony Dorsett, Randy White, Danny White, and somebody named Hogeboom. Part of it was the simple joy of seeing Kurth jump up from the couch with “Hot damn!” when Roger Staubach passed for a touchdown.

Aspects of the Falstaffian side of Kurth extended into the normally placid English department. Each year at the department holiday party, to the delight of Dorothy Rattey, our administrative associate, Kurth would bring a fifth of Wild Turkey, in flagrant violation of all University rules.

I don’t mean to say that Kurth violated rules. Maybe I do mean to say that. Oh Lord, yes, he violated rules. He once told me he went four years without paying income tax because it depressed him.
Another obvious side of Kurth is the hospitality and generosity represented by Chaucer’s Franklin, with a touch of the host of the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailey. Chaucer wrote about the Franklin, these lines:

A Frankeleyn was in his compaignye.
Whit was his berd as is the dayesye;
Of his complexioun he was sangwyn.
Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in wyn;
To lyven in delit was evere his wone,
For he was Epicurus owene sone.

Or to continue in a modernized version:

Such hospitality did he provide,
He was St. Julian to his countrysied.
His bread and ale were always up to scratch.
He had a cellar none on earth could match.
There was no lack of pastries in his house,
Both fish and flesh, and that so plenteous
That where he lived it snowed of meat and drink.
With every dish of which a man can think,
After the various seasons of the year.

The last two characters I’ll name together, and they make an unlikely pairing: the young thin, Oxford scholar riding a horse as thin as a rake, and Prospero, the mature sorcerer, living on his magic island.

Kurth’s magic island in his last years was his retirement hilltop in Sandy, Texas, Newbold Revel, named after the home of his beloved Malory.

On that hilltop, he was both the wizard Prospero and—although many may find it hard to imagine—the ascetic scholar, or clerk, because he loved being alone with his books. Chaucer said that the Clerk would rather have, at his bed’s head, twenty books clad in black or red, than to have rich robes. “And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.”

If these various aspects of Kurth seem contradictory, we can say, in paraphrase of Walt Whitman, “Very well, then, he contradicts himself. He was large. He contained multitudes.”

Or, what Kurth said of literature one could say of the man himself: “Literature resists and eludes our best efforts to reduce it, to take it to bits, down to the last infinitesimal hairspring, and to say, authoritatively, this is what it means and no more—for its variety is immense, its scope immeasurable, its profundity limitless.”

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors William Stott (chair), Jeffrey L. Meikle, and Mark C. Smith. Special contributors include Professors Thomas M. Cable, William H. Cunningham, and W. Roger Louis. The late Elspeth Rostow was the committee’s first chair.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on January 22, 2009. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, WMB 2.102, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.