

Memorial Minute for Donald J. Olsen

To be read at the Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar College,
December 9, 1998

Donald Olsen had a passion for cities and for trains. He wrote brilliantly about the former, and rode on practically all of the latter which are still operational, in every corner of the globe.¹

Born in Seattle January 8, 1929, Don Olsen came east to attend Yale.² He received a B. A. in International Relations in 1949, along with the highest academic honor Yale could then offer, "Philosophical Orations," following a scheme devised in the mid-nineteenth century, and now regrettably fallen into disuse.³ He continued his studies at Yale, completing his Ph.D. in History in 1954, at the age of twenty-five.

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He had a vast collection of timetables, and his fascination with trains was historical and professional. He would go out of his way to ride on trains, wood burning locomotives for example, that were about to go out of service, or try out transit systems that were just being inaugurated. As late as October 1996 he traveled by train from Chicago to Seattle, with a stop over in Denver to travel on its innovative tram system.

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His intellectual talents were truly precocious. His first article was published in 1945, in a Chinese language newspaper in Seattle. He wrote it in English and the piece was then translated. Don Olsen was fluent in French, German, and Italian, and was working on Swedish.

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Honors at graduation fell into three classes: Colloquies for 'respectable students'; Disputes, for very good students; and Orations, for the top students. A very few students were awarded Philosophical Orations. Don Olsen was also a member of Phi Beta Kappa, of the Jared Elliott Associates, and of the Political Union. We are grateful to Peter Stillman, who like Don Olsen received all three of his degrees from Yale, for this information.

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Don Olsen taught at the University of Hull in England in 1952-1953, and after one year as an instructor at the University of Massachusetts joined the history faculty at Vassar in 1955, where he taught for thirty-nine years, moving steadily through the ranks. He was appointed Professor in 1970, elected Chairman in 1971, serving a three-year term, and was named to the Eloise Ellery Chair in 1972. In 1970 he served as Visiting Professor at the University of Leicester in England.

Among his many honors were a Fulbright Scholarship to England in 1951-1952; and he was a recipient of the coveted John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship not once but twice, in 1967-1968, and again in 1979-1980.

Don Olsen was a superb teacher of British and European history, famed for his rigor, patient and painstaking with his thesis advisees, who pushed his students to challenge and question existing interpretations, to re-examine familiar evidence and discover new evidence, to think independently and critically. Barbara Harris, Professor of History at UNC, Chapel Hill, recalls Don's "enthusiasm and rigor."

I remember having the sense he was flying around the classroom, as he imparted how exciting it was to read Jocelyn de Brakelond, even though he was in reality seated in front of the room all the time. The rigor came out in rules that made it clear he thought there was nothing in the world as important as our class and convincing many of us that he was right. You didn't come late to his class. Period.... If you were told to write papers of between ten and twelve pages, we knew that eight wouldn't do and

that Don meant it when he said he'd stop reading at the bottom of page 12, and then penalize us for not having a conclusion. And none of it seemed petty or arbitrary because it clearly reflected his high seriousness about us and created a marvelous sense of a common enterprise to which we all contributed and for which we were all responsible. By the time the semester was over, Don had convinced me that becoming a historian was a high calling indeed.⁴

Beyond the gates of Vassar Don was internationally known as an urban historian,⁵ a scholar of admirable depth and inventiveness, a painstaking researcher who wrote everything by hand or with his faithful manual typewriter. His first book, Town Planning in Eighteenth and Nineteenth

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Similar citations could be multiplied. Former Dean Nancy Schrom Dye was also a student of Don's and noted at the time of his retirement that many of his students, "... and I am one of them, have gone on to become professional historians, in good part because of the intellectual curiosity and the love of reading and writing history that he awakened in them.:"

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One reviewer wrote perceptively that Don Olsen's work was "neither architectural history nor urban history, but cultural history in the broadest sense." In the last analysis he was a cultural and also a social historian, endlessly fascinated by the day-to-day life of past generations; but he insisted in his modesty to describe his work -- his attempts to relate 19th century architecture and urban design to the rest of that century's history as "utter failures." But then he also set enormously high standards for our profession. In a paper that he gave some ten years ago, outlining his project on "Other Londons," he wrote: "The unsettling possibility remains that the end result of two centuries of increasingly sophisticated research and speculation may be to document and justify the low regard in which most thinkers from the ancient Greeks to the Enlightenment held history: as the record of flux, of disconnected stories of questionable accuracy and minor importance, a record of crimes and follies -- not as the key to an ultimate understanding of the human condition that I think most of us would like it to be."

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Century London, was published by Yale in 1964, with a second edition with a new preface appearing in 1982. This elegant and perceptive history of the great ground landlords of the metropolis was followed by The Growth of Victorian London, published in 1976, described by David Cannadine as "the most wide-ranging and warm-hearted celebration of the nineteenth-century world city ever written."

Then in 1986 came The City as a Work of Art, winner of the 1987 British Council Prize in the Humanities, translated into Italian, German, Japanese, and Dutch. This was Don's most ambitious and audacious work, a virtuoso study in comparative urban aesthetics, moving effortlessly from London to Paris to Vienna, blending urban, social, cultural and architectural history. Don spent several sessions with a producer who wanted to make The City as a Work of Art into a television series.

After the publication of this dramatic, one might even say visionary work, Don Olsen, despite his increasing physical disability, never slowed down for a moment, exploring the cities of New Zealand and Australia in the company of eminent local urban historians, lecturing for six weeks at the University of Amsterdam, accepting an invitation to become a regular contributor to the Times Literary Supplement. His scope of investigation was really moving to encompass any large city anywhere in the world.

Late in his career and immediately after his retirement in 1994, he had two major projects underway; the first,

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tentatively entitled Other Londons, was a study of British cities overseas, from Philadelphia to Melbourne, to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Bombay; and then a grandly conceived History of the Street. Those of us who discussed this latter project with Don were dazzled with its originality, its imaginative force, the amazing clarity with which he could construct verbally a street scene, say in 19th-century Paris, before one's eyes.

We deeply regret that Don Olsen was not able to see these splendid projects through to completion. But he did savor his all too brief retirement immensely. Rhoda Rappaport spoke with him by telephone a few months before his death on May 19, 1997, and asked him if he was enjoying his retirement. Rhoda reported that he heaved a huge sigh (and one can just hear the tonal accentuation), saying "It's WONderful!"

Each of us who was on the faculty before 1994 and knew Don Olsen has a favorite story. In December 1989 Don and David Schalk were at the American Historical Association meetings in San Francisco, interviewing candidates for a position in Russian History at the college. Don was a marvelous interviewer, deft, courteous, discovering a great deal about each candidate with a few unthreatening yet perfectly calibrated questions. At one point he took leave to attend the reception of the North American Conference on British Studies, giving me the room number and asking me to come for him when he was needed. I arrived at the right

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location, searched a large room and saw no sign of him. In one corner there was an animated crowd of eminent British historians, and I discovered that they had actually formed a circle around Don, so that he was invisible to me. Don was the center of attention; his listeners were attendant upon his every word, as Don shared with them some of his vast knowledge of cities, their structure, their configuration, their spirit.

Don Olsen's intellectual brilliance was matched only by his courage. It was a rare day when he would let one of his colleagues drive him from Swift to his apartment in Williams. We shall miss his keen sensitivity, his wit, his refusal to compromise, his triumph over adversity, his collegiality, and his dedication to academic excellence.

[Read by David Schalk]

Respectfully submitted,

Hsi-Huey Liang, Professor Emeritus
of History

Rhoda Rappaport, Professor
of History

David Schalk, Professor of History