

**Oral History Interview with Dr. Edward Cohen**  
(6/15/2005)

Velez: Good morning! My name is Lily Velez. Today is June 15, 2005. With me is Wenxian Zhang, Head of Archives and Special Collections at Rollins College, and Corey Schreck, a student at Rollins College. Today we will be interviewing Dr. Ed Cohen, the William R. Kenan professor of English at the college. Starting off Dr. Cohen, could you tell us a bit more about your family background, growing up, how your childhood was?

Cohen: Sure. First of all it's Kenan.

Velez: Kenan.

Cohen: William R. Kenan Jr. That's the Kenan Foundation of North Carolina and they made their money in oil. And in fact, if you're ever driving on I-95 battling the traffic and you see these huge Kenan oil trucks, don't swear at them if they cut you off, because they're the ones who have endowed that chair.

Anyway, let's see. I grew up outside of Washington D.C. and I squandered my youth rooting for the Washington Senators. I know that dates me, all though there's a baseball team back in Washington right now. But the Washington Senators were always known as— Washington was always known as first in war, first in peace and last in the American League. So they were a terrible, terrible baseball team, but I loved them. And rooting for the senators, you could never really celebrate a win, so if they weren't shut out, you always felt grateful. So I think that that experience of growing up, rooting for the senators, has always made me a champion of the underdog. But I grew up in a suburban Maryland, right outside of D.C., as I said. And neither of my parents had gone to college so they had high aspirations for me and they always encouraged my work. They encouraged my study. They were proud of the fact that I went to the University of Maryland, then went on to the University of Iowa for my master's degree. I was in the Writer's Workshop there, which was wonderful. I got to write a novel for my thesis. And then I went on for my doctorate at the University of New Mexico.

So it was a happy childhood. Unfortunately, I was never terribly interested in D.C. proper. My wife actually grew up in D.C. also, and she was the person who took everybody to the Smithsonian, or to the Washington Monument, or to the Capital, or wherever. I hated going downtown to D.C. I'd much rather stay out in the suburbs and play baseball. But I taught for a year in Baltimore and I was writing my doctoral dissertation, and of course I discovered the Library of Congress. And then I was downtown every weekend working on my dissertation and exploring Washington and getting to know a city that I had grown up in and didn't know very well.

Velez: So could you tell us more about your formal education, any memorable teachers or significant experiences?

Cohen: Two professors at the University of Maryland were especially supportive of my work. One was a guy who taught a course called English 21. And in those days, I hate to

admit this, but in those days anyone who graduated from a high school in Maryland, was automatically admitted, if you applied, was automatically admitted to the University of Maryland. But of course, when you got there, the classes were huge. You look this way and you look that way, and you were always told that one of the three of you, the person to your left and the person to your right, would not be there next semester (laughter). So it was a little scary. But if you took a placement exam and scored highly enough, then you were exempt from Freshman Comp[osition], from English 1. In those days you had to take English 1, which was general Comp, and English 2, which was Comp[osition] and Lit[erature]. But I placed out of English 1, and so they put me in English 21, which was a kind of advanced Comp and Lit course. And the person who taught the course was a full professor. His name was Len Lutwhack (??), I know that's a funny name. And he had funny mannerisms; he was always scratching himself all over. But he would come in to class and he'd be checking his roll and didn't seem to be paying any attention to the class as we were getting ready. And then he would ask a riveting question about the assignment. And you wondered, Am I the one who's going to be called on? And I'll never forget, he called on me the day he had asked a question about a poem called "Dover Beach" by Mathew Arnold. And of course I was a freshman. I thought I was going to be a dentist one day. And low and behold, eventually, I became a professor of Victorian Literature and I teach "Dover Beach" almost every semester. But he was especially encouraging to me when I was a freshmen and when I was thinking about being an English Major.

Another professor was a guy named John Ports (??), who was—he'd got his Ph.D. at Harvard, he had taught at Maryland his entire career, and he started the honors degree program at Maryland, and encouraged me to participate in that. The other thing about him was that he would always assign students to do oral presentations in the class. And at first I was a little impatient with that, because I thought, I don't want to learn from fellow students, I want to learn from the prof[essor] himself. But I realized that preparing my own oral presentation, I can't remember the topic, helped me and probably was that first spark that one day I could be a teacher. The other thing that was great about John Ports (??) is that he arranged any number of events for the class. So he took us to the theatre to watch a Restoration play in downtown D.C.

And the reason I single those two out is that when I graduated, those were the two who knew my name (laughter). The only two who knew my name, out of all the courses that I took. And I have to say, I wasn't a brilliant undergrad[uate], so being anonymous was probably as much my fault as it was the University of Maryland's fault. But it was significant to me when I had to think about the rest of my career: did I want to be at a place where faculty and students were pretty much anonymous? Or did I want to be at a place where I would get to know my students by their names? And it really has made a profound difference for me at Rollins.

Velez: So before you taught at Rollins, though, I understand you were also a teaching assistant at the University of New Mexico—

Cohen: That's right.

Velez: —And an assistant professor at Towson.

Cohen: Towson.

Velez: How were your experiences beginning your career in the teaching profession?

Cohen: My first day of class— Well, go back a second. About two days before classes began in New Mexico— And understand I was, even though I was from the Maryland suburb, I was pretty much a city slicker. I had gone to Iowa and saw the cornfields, and the University of Iowa was a wonderful, wonderful place. But it was fairly narrow; Iowa City's a small town. When I went out to Albuquerque, New Mexico, I saw what the West was really like. I had seen lots of Westerns, movies, when I was a kid, growing up, and now I got to see all those landscapes face to face.

But I was scared to death. I had no training as a teacher and I was thrown into three sections, two or three sections, of English 101. And I remember that we had an orientation session. And I went with two or three legal pads ready to fill up with all kinds of wisdom, so that I would know what to teach the following week. We went in, we had tea, we had cookies, maybe lemonade, something like that. And the woman who was conducting the workshop, a terrific scholar and teacher of Seventeenth Century Lit[erature], said, "Now the first rule to remember is never embarrass a student in class." So I wrote that down. And then she said, "So the rest you're pretty much on your own, go for it." And so here I was sitting with three legal pads and only one comment: Never embarrass a student in class.

So I went into class the first day; I was scared to death. I wasn't used to the sunlight in New Mexico, and so I was still wearing sunglasses. And I walked in and kicked over a trashcan (laughter). And it was so loud and so raucous and, of course, the students looked up. Now I realize the students they were just as scared as I was. But I thought, Well that's an inauspicious beginning.

The other thing that happened was that when I called the roll, I did not know Spanish, and I didn't know the pronunciation of names. And so I hate to think of how I butchered the language when I was calling the names. I mean I had students— Griago I had no trouble with, but I know I had two or three students named Jaramillo and I'm sure I called them Jare-a-millo or something like that. But what was wonderful about teaching at a state university was the diversity of the student population, because I had Spanish American students, I had Native American students, I had African American students. I had students from New Mexico, and had students from all over the country. Lots of student athletes from Chicago, for some reason, came out to New Mexico.

So it was wonderful teaching there, in that environment. Also as a graduate student, but in a doctoral program and also teaching, that was the first time I developed a sense of collegiality with other teachers, grad[uate] students, and faculty members in the department. And I learned a lot from my experiences there. They were very supportive of me when I was at New Mexico.

Velez: So what made you decide to come to Rollins?

Cohen: Well, I exhausted the resources, the research resources, in Albuquerque, and I was writing my dissertation on a Victorian poet, who was also a Jesuit priest, Gerard Manly Hopkins, 1844 to 1889. And so my dissertation topic had been approved, and I realized that it was going to be advantageous for me to come work at a research university. So I applied for jobs before I actually had my Ph.D. And I got a job teaching in Baltimore at Towson State. Then it was Towson State College, now it's Towson University. And frankly the appeal, the attraction, was to be able to use the research resources in Baltimore and in Washington. I loved my students at Towson. They were almost all working class, kids of working class families. They were, almost all of them, the first ones in their families, like me, to get a college education. And so they took their education seriously. They worked very, very hard, and I love that.

The school was suffering growing pains. It had grown by about thirty-three percent in one year. And there was a good deal of disruption and friction at the institution at that time. They were generous to me. They made me an assistant professor before I even had my degree. You could do that in those days. But I decided that I really wanted to move on. And so, in those days, you had to apply through the Modern Language Association, you had to apply to a job service. And so that's what I did. I sent out probably thirty of forty letters to various colleges and universities and waited for them to contact me and say they would interview me at the MLA meeting. And Rollins did not show up. They didn't even respond to my letter then. So I went to MLA, this was in December of 1966, had five or six interviews, had a couple of job offers, but the schools were not impressive to me. They were not in places where I wanted to be.

So I decided, I'll just stay at Towson for another year or two and just see how things go. And in July of 1967, I received a telephone call from Hugh McKean, who was President of Rollins. And he said, "Now you've applied for a job here, when could you come down for an interview?" And I said, "Tomorrow (laughter)!" And so he said, "Okay." And so I flew down and I had a couple of days of interviews with him, and a couple of members of the department drove me around Winter Park. And - I can tell you the story of the interview, if you want. Well it was funny. Hugh McKean was a wonderful person, absolutely wonderful person. But I later learned that he hated to make decisions. And so we had two very long sessions, one on a Saturday afternoon. And at the end of the sessions— one of the questions he asked me, for example, did William Morris, a late Victorian aesthetic, did William Morris invent the Morris Chair (laughter)? And I had to admit, "I don't know," I said, "but it's likely that he did."

But at the end of the interview he said, "Well, thank you very much." And I said, "President McKean, my wife is in her, I think, eleventh or twelfth month of pregnancy," then, at least, that's what it seemed like. And I said, "If I going to come here in September, I'm going to have to tell people back in Baltimore that I'm coming, that I'm leaving. I'm going to have to make arrangements to move. I need to know something." And he said, "Well, we are thinking of bringing in some other candidates." And I said, "Well, I'll tell you what," I said, "If you will offer me the job right now, I will accept it right now and we'll both be very happy." And as soon as those words were out of my mouth, I thought, did I actually say that? (Laughter) Oh my gosh! And he said, "Okay, you've got the job." (Laughter) I said, "I'll take it!" And he said, "No, talk it over with your wife." I said, "Oh, I'll take it!" And he called in

the secretary and did the contract and I said, "Let me sign it." He said, "No, take it home and show it to your wife." So anyway, that's how the interview went in July of 1966 and I've always been grateful for that impulse that led me to say, Offer me the job now and I will accept it.

Velez: What was your first impression of the college and the Winter Park community?

Cohen: When I was here for the interview, I was just blown away by the beauty, not only of the campus and of Winter Park, but also of Orlando. Just driving in on I-4 and coming across Lake Ivanhoe, it was absolutely gorgeous. So that was terrific. The airport was tiny. The airport was just like a little hanger. Back then it was McCoy. And so that had been an Air Force— That was still an Air Force Base. And so, for example, on one runway, you had eastern airlines planes landing, and on the other you had U2 spy planes landing.

But my impressions of Rollins— I just loved the place. I fell in love with the campus right away. While I was there for my interview, I noticed that Park Avenue just folded up, just closed up at about seven or eight o'clock at night. And of course it's changed now, but in those days, Winter Park was a pretty sleepy community, well especially during the summer.

Velez: You've been here for nearly forty years now at Rollins—

Cohen: (Talking at the same time) That's right.

Velez: Do you see a growth or a change in the student body and the community or overall atmosphere of Rollins?

Cohen: Well, of course, there's been a growth. I think that the biggest change in Orlando came with Disney. And at first I thought that it was negative. Negative in a sense that all of a sudden people asked you for I.D. All of a sudden people in stores, you had to have I.D. We're up to that point where they just took your credit card or took your check without any difficulty. There were times when I probably locked my doors, having grown up in Washington. But there were people who—crime began to increase significantly. But of course, as Orlando has grown, so have all of the opportunities around here for culture, for art galleries, and for restaurants and things like that.

People who notice or realize that I've been here for forty years say, Well you must have seen a lot of changes at Rollins. And that's true. But what I think is important are the constants. The emphasis on students. The concern for students, the care for students, the fact that—we talk a lot right now about Rollins being a student centered college. It's always been a student centered college, so far as I know. Getting to know my students, partly because of my experience at Maryland when only two professors knew my name, I made it a point, and I discovered that I had some facility for doing this, I made it a point, in my first classes, of calling the roll, paying attention to the students' names and faces, and pretty much knowing them all by their first names by the end of the class. And that hasn't changed for me, and I think that something we take for granted at Rollins is that we know our students as individuals

and that our students know us. You don't have that at most big universities. So that's, I think that's the constant that has been most important to me.

Velez: So on the note of Rollins being a student centered college, I understand that in the spring of 1970 you were a faculty advisor during the time of the Kent State shooting.

Cohen: Yeah.

Velez: Could you tell us about your experiences with student protests or just the atmosphere of Rollins during that tragedy?

Cohen: Well, yeah, it was—it was a strange time. In some ways it was an exciting time, because there was lots of social and political energy around. Rollins seems always to have been just a few years behind times, so that when there were demonstrations early in the war, Rollins was still pretty much asleep.

But on the night of May 4, 1970, I was actually on call because one of our neighbors were about to give birth. And those were the days before cell phones, and I was a member of a committee. I guess I must have been a faculty advisor or delegate to the student assembly, what was then the student assembly. And I received a call in the late afternoon saying that there was going to be a special assembly meeting the day of the Kent State Masacre. And so I went and thought, Well I'll just check in from time to time and see if I have to make a trip to the hospital. And it was a long, long evening. And the students were trying to decide what to do. Some of them wanted to have a demonstration, some of the them wanted to have a strike. And I remember one dean in particular. Then we had a dean of men and a dean of women. And the dean of women was trying to prevail upon the students not to strike, not to demonstrate, that this was an event that was tragic but remote from their experience. Of course that just infuriated the students. They didn't want to think of it as being remote from them or from their experience. And a couple of other faculty members were sort of wringing their hands and trying to find words of wisdom for students. And I was probably uncharacteristically silent for a long time. And then one of the students said, "What do you think?" And I said, "If you feel passionately about this, you should act, not talk. If you want to strike, strike. If you don't want to strike, don't strike. But instead of sitting here debating this 'til all hours, why don't you just do something?" And, of course, the next day— And a number of them did strike, a number of them didn't strike, and so, you know, it was one of those classic examples of a meeting that just didn't want to end. But, of course, a couple of days after that, I was called into the president's office and he asked me whether I thought it was wise for me to have advised the students to do whatever they wanted to do. But I do think that it was important for them to act on their own and to act out their consciences.

Velez: What other experiences throughout your career do you feel have had a big impact on either you or the college or the student body?

Cohen: Let's see. Well, I think that—this will sound funny. During one presidency, I can't recall which one it was. I think it might have been Jack Critchfield's presidency. He decided that Fox Day— Here I'm going, shifting from Kent State to Fox Day. But I think it's

important. He decided that Fox Day was outmoded. And it may be that there were a lot of faculty members that were annoyed with Fox Day for one reason or another. Maybe not a lot, but a vocal group. I love fox day. I think most faculty members love Fox Day, but of course we wouldn't be caught dead saying that. But he simply suspended Fox Day and I don't know how long it stayed in suspension. Actually it was Fred Hicks who had been one of Jack Critchfield's assistants. When Jack stepped down and Fred was interim president, he, I guess because he was part of the Rollins tradition, had been at Rollins during Hugh McKean's time, he was the one who brought Fox Day back for a year. And then when Thad Seymour came in, he continued the tradition of Fox Day. I think that — You know, in English History, there's the Interregnum, the period between when the monarchy was suspended, and I think that that time, when we didn't have Fox Day for— You're the historians, I don't know how many years it was (laughter). But when we didn't have Fox Day, we lost something. It was almost as if we couldn't have a day that wasn't business as usual suspending Fox Day. So bringing back Fox Day was great, and I think that students still look forward to it, faculty still look forward to it. Again, it's one of those traditions that is unique to Rollins, and there's nothing wrong with just sleeping in, or going to the beach, or taking a deep breath and relaxing for a day. So that was, I think that's a significant— It taught us something, taught me something, about Rollins and tradition.

Velez: Okay, moving into the classroom.

Cohen: Okay.

Velez: You've taught a variety of courses.

Cohen: Yes.

Velez: Have there been any that you've felt were most enjoyable for you and also those you've felt were most challenging for you?

Cohen: Probably the one that was most challenging, and in some ways most enjoyable, was a course that I actually taught first in the Holt School, and then imported into Arts and Sciences. It was a course that was an interdisciplinary humanities course, and there were four faculty members involved in it. The others who taught with me were Carol Lauer who was in anthropology, Arnold Wettstein who was in religion, and Bob Thompson who was in psychology. This was a course that was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. And so we had a stipend to develop the course and so we spent a good part of one of a summer planning the course, wrangling over what should be in the syllabus.

Our topic, we agreed on our topic, was human emotions. I can't remember the first two, but they were human something. And ours was human emotions, and one reason why we selected it was that there was a provost at Rollins who had been in the philosophy department, his name was Dan DeNicola, and he taught a course in the philosophy of the emotions. And I knew that we could count on him for a keynote lecture, which was absolutely brilliant. But the reason that the course was fun was interacting with my fellow faculty members. We would, each week, one of us would lecture or conduct a course. It was a large class, it was usually two

hundred? At least a hundred students, and then we would divide into small sessions. And whenever we gave exams, for example, we would meet them on a Friday morning and we would grade sample exams and exchange them to make sure that we were all on the same page. We had lots of fun, it was hard work, but it was lots of fun and we had lots of laughs in that class. And so I think that working with colleagues on a course, doing an interdisciplinary approach and doing the collaborative course, that was terrific.

The other is I guess about ten years ago now, I rekindled an interest in Sherlock Holmes. And, in fact, I received a freebee, a book of stories and critical essays, and I realized that we had a course that was designed to introduce students to different critical approaches and theoretical approaches to literature. And I thought, If the students could read texts that they would enjoy and read them on several levels, then the reading would be fun, and then as they thought about the different critical approaches and the theoretical approaches, the readings could then become more and more challenging for them as they read for understanding or for comprehension at various levels. The other thing, of course, is that since Sherlock was a Victorian it gave me an opportunity to teach the Sherlock Holmes stories in their Victorian cultural context. And I absolutely adore teaching that course. I've taught it as a master's level course in the MLS [Master of Liberal Studies] program here at Rollins. I've also taught it as an RCC [Rollins College Conference] course for freshmen. And of course I teach at different expectations and I sort of key it to various student populations. But I've had lots and lots of fun teaching that course.

Velez: In regards to the students who've gone through those courses, or throughout each course you've taught, are there any who've stood out or who you will always remember?

Cohen: Oh, gosh. You know, the students who signed up for that course as their RCC course are the ones— those are the ones that you remember because you see them evolve: you see them come in as freshmen, sometimes they think they know it all, sometimes they think they know nothing, some of them are very well prepared, some are not so well prepared. And so it's not simply the content of the course, but the whole learning experience, the interaction among students, the whole seminar experience. But I'm also their advisor, I'm also the academic advisor when I do an RCC course. And so some of them stay with me for four years, even though they decide not to be English majors. And so I see the ones who struggled and then latched on to a major, and then have been propelled out of Rollins into careers. So I hear from those students all the time. I would say that, a student who just graduated, was in my RCC class, her name was, is Jasmine Liddington ('05), and just a terrific young woman. And in fact struggled with her writing during the Sherlock Holmes class, and low and behold decided she was going to be an English major. Was a very successful one, I just got an e-mail from her. She landed a job back home in Colorado, so she's very happy. But just watching her evolve; she was very much engaged in the Rollins College community and Winter Park, she was a member of ROC (Rollins Outdoor Club). And so, sometimes, on a Sunday afternoon, my wife and I would be walking on Park Avenue and I'd see Jasmine skate by, and with a big hello. And so that was terrific.

Another student who was in my RCC class, probably, oh, six or seven years ago, also the Sherlock Holmes, Michelle Gamber ('02). Michelle was from, and I can't remember which



one it was, and I always joked with her it didn't matter. It was either North Dakota or South Dakota (laughter). And she was a water skier, but she was a champion water skier, and when she wasn't water skiing with the Rollins team, she was actually performing down at Cypress Gardens. She loved the Sherlock Holmes stories. She wrote just unbelievably perceptive essays about the stories. She never took another of my classes because she declared an anthropology major and went over and worked with Carol and other people in the anthropology department. She did come back and serve as a peer mentor in my RCC class, my RCC Sherlock Holmes. And in fact, she was a senior peer mentor on September 11, 2001, and she was there for my students. In fact, I remember that her mom was scheduled to have surgery, and she was supposed to fly out that morning, and she couldn't get out, of course, nobody was flying. And so here she had to be in touch with her family at home on a cell-phone while her mother was having serious surgery, but at the same time she was ministering to fifteen really scared freshmen. So she's terrific. By the way, she, maybe, I like to think that it was her involvement in the Sherlock Holmes course, she became— But it was probably the fact that she had a fascination for “C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigator.” (Laughter) She completed a master's degree in forensic anthropology. And so, I think, she's on her way to being a crime scene investigator herself, so just as Sherlock Holmes was (laughter).

Velez: You mentioned earlier your specialization in Victorian literature.

Cohen: Right.

Velez: Can you tell us more about your research and contributions to that field or literature in general?

Cohen: Sure. Probably my most significant contribution, but dullest, was I served as editor of the *Annual Victorian Bibliography* for fifteen years. And if you think about those two words: Victorian and bibliography (laughter). They're pretty much designed to make people run the other way (laughter). And in fact, every three or four years, when I had to hire a student assistant, I would send a letter to a freshman, and say, to an incoming freshman, and say, “How would you like to do your work study as an assistant to the *Victorian Bibliography* (laughs)?” And I would say, “Now before you cringe at those two words, let me tell you the advantages.” And this bibliography started back in the 1930s and has been headed up by major scholars who generally were editors for about ten year increments and then gave it up. I had been recruited as a compiler, and so I served as a compiler for the bibliographer for about ten years. And when my predecessor was ready to step down, he asked the committee of compilers, “Anybody interested in taking it on?” Well, I was, and in fact, I'll never forget the day that I got the letter. It was right around Christmas time and I didn't want to commit to doing it unless I knew that I was going to have the support of the administration. So I ran over to Dan DeNicola's office, and he was gone for the holidays. And so I was walking out kind of chagrined, because I wanted to get back to the editor right away, and there was Thad Seymour's office open. So I went up to Thad's office, knocked on his door, and I said, “Look, I hate to bring this to you, but,” and I outlined what it would entail, what I would need, what kind of support. And he said, “Go for it! We'll find a way to support you!” And so that's what I love in good administrators. It's very easy for an administrator to say, No, because then they don't have to do any work, they just say, No. But the administrator who says we'll find a

way to do it, those are the ones that I've admired over the years. So when I took this over, first of all I had to computerize it. It hadn't been done on computer. So I had bibliographic software package, and I spent the entire summer putting together a master list and putting together the formatting. The other thing was that there were about ten or twelve compilers around the country and one in England. And my predecessor was at the University of Pittsburgh. I went and visited him and he was wonderful. But I saw the master list of periodicals that we scan for the bibliography was four by six cards in a shoebox (laughter). And I discovered, as I looked at his master list, that sometimes there were two or three individuals assigned to the same journal, and then there were journals that we hadn't looked at for years. And so it took a great deal of diplomacy, convincing people, Well so and so probably should do this journal because he or she has access to it. So it took an awful lot to get it going. But it was wonderful because we were reading lots and lots of journals.

So Victorian Studies is an interdisciplinary enterprise. And so I got to learn so much about the Victorian Period in those fifteen years that I was the editor because I would go through journals and I would find articles on the most obscure Victorian figures. Those were the days when Women's Studies was gearing up, and so I read all the feminist journals and made feminist approaches to the Victorians and the rediscovery of women and women's issues in the Victorian period. So it was very exciting. And that was a wonderful experience.

The other thing about the *Victorian Bibliography* is that recruiting those students. The students who stayed with me for three or four years, throughout their careers, sometimes I feel sorry for them because they had to come into my carrel and I would have a stack of bibliography cards, oh, a foot and a half high, and all they were supposed to do was simply enter them into the computer in the bibliographic program. But they could work their own hours, it didn't matter to me, whatever time the library was open they could just come in and do it. Sometimes I would see them with their headphones on, listening to CDs. And that was cool too, I thought that it was great that this was not challenging work for them. It was pretty tedious. But the students who worked with me for those four years, three of them were English majors: Sharon Downey (?), Tamra Lilian Thaw (?), Shannon Grin (?), and then Luna Anneikco (?), I think she was in politics. And they were absolutely wonderful. I stay in touch with all of them, I've been invited to their weddings, I get snapshots of their kids and what not. So those were probably the students I was closest to over the years.

Velez: What other accomplishments, aside from working on the bibliography, are you most proud of?

Cohen: Well I've published three books, all with university presses. And one was on a colonial Maryland poet, and the other two were— One was my dissertation on Gerard Manly Hopkins. The other was a study of an infamous quarrel between two writers: Robert Louis Stevenson, and a poet named William Ernest Henley, he was the author of *Invictus*. I spent most of my career working on Henley. He was a patient in the Royal Infirmary at Edinburgh for twenty months. He had TB [Tuberculosis] of the Bones in his hands and feet, and he was lucky to have survived. He wrote a series of poems about his hospital experience, and they're absolutely terrific. They would blow you away. They don't read like Victorian poems. But I've done— I've probably published, fifteen or twenty articles on Henley.

But I wrote a book called the *Henley Stevenson Quarrel*. And it was odd. I was in Edinburgh and I was doing research on Henley and working at the National Library of Scotland. And as I was going through their catalog, in those days they had old card catalogs like that one over there (points). I noticed most of the cards were old and kind of crumbly, but there were a whole bunch of fairly new ones, actually very new ones. They just had a kind of a new catalog card smell to them, and they were freshly typed. And they all had the same call number, but there were probably about eighty different cards, and they had different dates. They were related to Henley, they were related to Stevenson. But they were dated from 1888, which was not at a time of great interest to me. But I thought, Well, I oughta take a look at these. And so I filled out a call slip and asked for this collection. And I saw a young keeper whispering to an aged individual, and they were pointing at me and gesturing and what not. And then the old guy disappeared.

And in the National Library of Scotland in the rare books room, there was an elevator, but it was one of those elevators that was open, and you just walk into it and descended (laughter). And after about half an hour, I happened to look up, a light came on, and here came the old man, almost like Proteus rising from the sea. And he was carrying this huge mahogany box. And he took it over to the desk, and then there was more whispering and more pointing at me. And I thought, What have I done? And the keeper, then a young guy, came over with the box and he whispered apologetically to me, “The old gentleman asks that you take care not to scratch the box.” I said, “Okay.” And then he said, “Oh, and by the way, you realize that all of these materials have been withheld from scholars for seventy-five years, and that permission has only been granted to open them within the last week or so.” And I said, “Well, of course.” (Laughter) I lied (laughter). And I opened the box and it was letter after letter after letter between Henley and Stevenson and a mutual friend who was also a lawyer, and it was all the correspondence related to the quarrel that they had had. And as soon as I saw it— Some biographies written of Stephenson had alluded to the quarrel and said, It was Henley’s fault. Some biographies of Henley had alluded to the quarrel and said, It was Stevenson’s fault. But nobody had said what was the essence of the quarrel. And here was all of the correspondence; here was a book (laughs), here was a book that was simply put in front of me. And in fact, I had all the letters photocopied, I got permission to publish them, I came home that summer, I wrote the book called *The Henley Stevenson Quarrel*, which was published by the University of Florida Press. But I’ll never forget the gentleman saying, “The old guy says take care not to scratch the box.”

The other research project that was especially important to me was another collaboration like the humanities course that I’d taught with colleagues, and that was with a guy in the physics department named John Ross. Now, John Ross and I were probably as different as night and day, and in fact almost as different as oil and water, because once we started working together, I began to reflect and I realized that on crucial issues that came up at faculty meetings, we always voted against each other. We always canceled one another out. It’s not that I looked down to see how John Ross was voting, but I just remembered that we seemed always to be on the opposite poll of whatever spectrum was on the floor of the faculty [meeting].

I was between research projects. I wanted to do something biographical, and I thought maybe I would do something on a scientist. Who knows why? But I just wanted to take a break from literature for a time, as English majors often want to. And this was strange. I was in London with my family. My kids wanted to go to Stonehenge, and we missed the train to Stonehenge. And so I had to save the day by coming up with an alternate plan. So we went down to— We were at Waterloo Station. The train was pulling out as we were running in. But right under Waterloo bridge were boats going down to Greenwich. So I said, “Let’s take a boat trip down the Thames.” So that’s what we did. We went down to Thames. We got to Greenwich. It’s a wonderful little town. Now it’s sort of—all of London has encroached on it. But there’s a little pond where kids can—you can rent canoes and kids can go paddling around on the pond. It’s great to see them doing that. My kids got into one of the little canoes and started paddling furiously in opposite directions and (laughter) going nowhere. But I looked up on the hill and there was a strange looking old building with a dome on top. And I realized it was the Royal Observatory. So I said, “Let’s hick up to the hill and check it out.” When we got up there, we went through the observatory. It had become now a museum, and it had all these wonderful astronomical instruments, beautiful brass instruments from the seventeenth and eighteenth century, from the nineteenth century. It was gorgeous. There’s also at the Royal Observatory, there’s also a rail in the ground, and if you stand right on that rail, you’re on the prime meridian, so I guess substantially you stand with one foot in one hemisphere, and one foot in the other hemisphere. And of course everybody gets their picture taken there.

But I started reading about Edmund Haley, of Haley’s Comment thing. And I thought, Wow, this is cool, it would be great to do something out of the Victorian period and out of the literary realm. And so I started reading biographies and materials about Haley. What I discovered, unfortunately, was that there wasn’t very much about his youth. And there wasn’t really very much that was personal. But in an old, old eighteenth—seventeenth century biography, I guess, a book of short lives [*Brief Lives*] by a guy named John Aubrey, there was a one page biography of Haley and this was in an 1898 edition of Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*, and the editor had put a note at the bottom of the page that said, In the Earl of Macklesfield’s library at Sherborn Castle is an unpublished *Commonplace Book* of Haley’s. So I continued to do more research. There were a couple of other people who referred to this unpublished *Commonplace Book*, but nobody had ever looked at it. I couldn’t find any reference to anybody having seen it reported on its contents. And so I asked John Ross one day, I saw him at the mailbox, because he taught physics and he taught astronomy, and I said, “What would you expect to find in Edmund Haley’s *Commonplace Book*?” And he said, “Well, lots of things.” “What’s a *Commonplace Book*?” And so we talked about it. And so I said, “Well, would you be interested in teaming up with me?” And he said, “Sure!” So I got out, came over to the library, got *Burkes Peerage*, a great book, that lists all the earls of England and all the peers, all the peers of the realm. Looked up the Macklesfields; they still live in Sherborn Castle in Oxfordshire. I got the address for the current Earl of Macklesfield. Before I wrote to him, I asked Barry Levis, in the history department, our resident Anglophile, “If you were writing to an earl, how would you address him?” And Barry responded, “You address him my lord, and you sign your letter obediently.” (Laughter) And I said, “Well, I can’t bring myself to do that.” And he said, “Well, suit yourself, but that’s what you have to do.” So I wrote to the Earl of Macklesfield, I said “My Lord,” and I signed it “obediently.” And he gave Professor Ross and me permission to come to Oxford and to work with the *Commonplace Book*. We did so for

two summers and we actually worked on the project for three years. And at the end, our study was published by the Royal Society of London. And I have to say that that was one of the high points of my scholarly career. It was outside of my discipline. It had nothing to do with the Victorians, but having to train myself in another area, publishing the lead article in the *Journal of the Royal Society*, that was wonderful. Doing all of this as a collaborative effort with John, we became very, very close friends, by the way. I can't remember how we voted on faculty issues after that, but we did become very good friends during that whole process. So that was terrific. By the way, our research on the Haley project was supported by a grant from Hugh and Jeanette McKean. It was the McKean prize. And I think we won the very first one. And so that really is a source of accomplishment for me.

Velez: Aside from your contributions to research, can you tell us about how you contributed to the community or to the college?

Cohen: Well, I've been, let's see—you name the committee, and I've chaired it (laughter). Or I served as secretary, paid my dues. I've been president of the faculty. Actually I started off as secretary. When we first had faculty officers, I was the first secretary of the faculty. Then I was president of the faculty, I've been chair of the Academic Affairs Committee. When we put in place the current curriculum, time for a change of course, I was chair of the Academic Affairs Committee just three years ago for a two-year stint. And I also was chair of the Faculty Evaluation Review Committee, which deals with appeals from faculty members who don't feel they've received a fair shake when it's come to promotion and tenure. And so those have been important enterprises because I've always felt that it's important as a chair to set aside whatever personal feelings you have, that I've had, to make sure that the committee functions in an honorable way and in a respectable way and addresses the concerns of individuals who feel they've been hurt, addresses the concerns of departments that have acted in good faith, and is also cognoscente of consequences for the administration when somebody doesn't get tenure or get promotion. So those have been trying circumstances, just because there's lots of emotional involvement in them.

Probably the most rewarding experience in a kind of quasi-administrative context was that I served as director of the Master of Liberal Studies program for six years. And that was wonderful. What was great about it was that the MLS students are so thirsty for knowledge, and they were adults, and they're bright, they're hard working, they're opinionated, and they love to talk. And one of the things that you have to do as a teacher in those courses, and then also as a director, is to make certain that everybody understands the ground rules for the courses and for the program, and that is: we agree to disagree. So that in classes, discussion can become heated, but then there's a break and everybody has pizza together or snacks or whatever. But during those six years, I invented a new—I changed the curriculum significantly, working with a committee of MLS faculty who were very supportive. The administration was wonderfully supportive of me as well; they gave me a generous budget, they allowed me to do some fund-raising, and they were any number of alums of the program who stepped forward. I think that we now have, oh, probably eight or ten scholarships in the programs so that there's— We can recruit people in the program who otherwise couldn't afford to do it. So it was fun. I got to do lots of recruiting, I got to do fund-raising, curriculum, selecting the electives. It was very important to me to involve lots and lots of faculty from

various disciplines in the program so that more and more Arts and Sciences faculty members bought into the MLS program. Barry Levis had been the first director, and he did an absolutely terrific job of launching the program. And then I did it for six years, and, as I said, I just loved doing it.

Velez: Now looking back over the thirty-eight years that you've served at Rollins, how do you view your career?

Cohen: Well it's been a— I don't really want to look to the past, because I think of my career as evolving. I haven't given any thought to retirement, at least not very much. And so I think it's still evolving and it's still satisfying. One of the things that I have done which has worked for me, I think, and that I would recommend to junior faculty members coming along: it's important to stay connected outside of Rollins, by signing on as a compiler of the *Victorian Bibliography*, by pursuing fellowship opportunities. For example, I had a NEH summer seminar fellowship at UCLA. Another one at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I had a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Edinburgh University. And then more recently, a fellowship at the National Humanities Center. Doing my research, traveling to various research centers has kept me engaged with faculty members, colleagues, beyond Rollins; part of the whole academic profession. That's important. It's important to realize that the opportunities we have here are shared by colleagues at other colleges and universities, the problems that we have here are shared by colleagues at other colleges and universities.

I've noticed that there's a tendency at a small college to be co-opted by the institution so that it demands everything of you. Faculty members at Rollins have a wonderful ethos, but it also can be draining. It's as if we all feel that we should be super teachers, super scholars, super community servants. And that doesn't leave much time for the rooting for the new Washington National's team, for taking a deep breath, for enjoying Fox Day, for hanging out with students, gossiping with fellow faculty members, working out at the gym. Sometimes you just have to say, Time out, I don't want to be on a committee this year. Or, I'm between research projects; I think I'll just take a break. Or, Maybe I don't have to develop a new course this year, I can teach a couple that I've taught in the past. And I'm not saying do all of those three at the same time, but I do think it's important, simply to step back from time to time, disengage from something. But also it's important to be connected beyond; to stay a part of your professional organization, to take some time to read the journals in your field, and just to stay in touch with people that you like and people that you admire at other colleges and universities, remembering that beyond the sixty-five acres of Rollins, and beyond the community of Winter Park and of Orlando, there's a huge world out there.

I have been fortunate. I've taken advantage of lots and lots of opportunities that Rollins has provided. Sometimes I feel, you might want to edit this out, sometimes I feel that I've been greedy. In my second year at Rollins, when there was a good deal of internal political chaos, I had applied for a travel grant. Somebody had given Rollins, it was the HH Powers Foundation, I have no idea who they are or were, but they gave Rollins a grant to allow faculty members to travel abroad. Just to broaden ourselves. I applied to go to England because I was teaching English Romantic poets, the Victorians, but I'd never been to England. So I applied

for one of these grants, and I got it. Someone just gave me a check for a thousand dollars. Well in those days, you could travel to Europe for a month, and you could go almost first-class for a thousand dollars, and so I did. I had an absolutely wonderful time. I got to walk in the meadows where Wordsworth walked; I got to see the lakes the Wordsworth saw. I got to walk through seamy sections of Edinburgh where Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, or did the research for the *Body Snatchers*. I got to see it first-hand; it was wonderful. I got to do some work in libraries in strange little cubby holes in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. And what was then Summerset House, which was where all of the wills and birth certificates and baptismal records for London were kept. So I got to do all of those things on the Rollins dollar. I've gone to Australia twice with the Rollins group. I've actually gone five times to Australia; three times I went there and read papers at conferences. I've read papers at the University of Ghent in Belgium, just this past February at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. And twice at the University of Salzburg in Austria. And Rollins has been very generous in supporting me. But what has been terrific about those opportunities is meeting people, connecting with them, some of them I recruited as Victorian bibliographers, in the old days. But some of them I still correspond with, we still talk about Gerard Manly Hopkins and other Victorians, or we talk about various job openings or whatever at their colleges and universities. And so staying connected beyond Rollins, that's been important to me, and I think it's important to a lot of faculty members. But Rollins has actually enabled me to stay connected by providing the opportunities and the encouragement to do that.

Velez: I have one more question.

Cohen: Okay.

Velez: If you had the chance to start over again and just redo everything, is there anything that you would do differently?

Cohen: Probably I, especially in my early years, I would have listened more and said less. When I came to Rollins, I have to say that Rollins was a generous place. Let me tell you something strange that happened. In my first year at Rollins, maybe within the first three months at Rollins, my wife and I bought a house. The day we moved in, I went in the kitchen and there was an old Crosley refrigerator. You probably've never heard of Crosley. It was an old Crosley refrigerator. It had probably four inches of ice, built up all around it. It wasn't a self-defrosting. And we had a new infant, and my wife said, "I'm not putting baby bottles in that refrigerator." We had no spare cash whatsoever. And so I came over to class, and after class I was sitting in the student center drinking a cup of coffee. And the guy who was the purchasing agent at Rollins, his name was Harold Mutispaugh. I love that name, Harold Mutispaugh. He was a wonderful guy. I don't know if he's in your archives or not, but frankly, he looked like an old goat. And I said to Harold Mutispaugh, I must have had a sort of a, kind of a, downcast expression on my face and he said, "What's up?" I said, "I just bought a new house and I need a new refrigerator." He said, "Do you have anything against GE?" I said, "No, why?" And he said, "Go over to White Side's appliances," which was right on Fairbanks, next door to Miller's Hardware. He said, "Go over there, pick out the refrigerator you want, have them bill the college, and then you can pay us back whenever you can." I thought, are you kidding me? They would never have done that at Maryland, or Iowa, or New Mexico, or

even at Towson. But I ran over to White Sides, picked out a big refrigerator, it was delivered the next day. They took the Crosley away, hosed it down, sold it to somebody, and sent me half the money that they got for it. And after a couple of months, I paid Rollins back. Well, that's no way to do business, is it? That's no way to do business. But think about how generous it was for them to do that for a beginning assistant professor.

So, in a way, they were generous, but also administrators and just all of the processes in those days seemed to be kind of amateurish. Even the way the faculty went about its business seemed to be amateurish. And here I was, a young assistant professor, who knew everything, and there were lots and lots of times when I probably sounded just like that in faculty meetings, or in department meetings, and whatnot. So, if I could do anything over again, I probably would've done a lot more listening early in my career.

Another thing that— Just thinking about the future now. There was a faculty member in the philosophy department, who was actually the Kenan Professor before I was, Bruce Wavell. He was a wonderful, wonderful person, absolutely brilliant philosopher. And he always believed that faculty business, college business, should be carried out according to certain procedures. But there were lots of times when faculty and administrators wanted to cut corners, procedures be damned. And frankly lots of times it made sense for procedures to be damned, because they were cumbersome or out-moded. And Bruce Wavell would almost always get up at a faculty meeting and say, "But we're not following procedures. We have a procedure." After awhile, I noticed something sad happened: people stopped listening to him. As soon as he stood up, they closed their ears. And I think that was sad, I think that was tragic, but I think that was simply part of the natural course of events. And so, I think for the future, I'd like to be able to recognize when that's going to happen to me so that in the future I can probably do the listening that you should have done when I first came to Rollins.

Zhang: Could you give us your reflections of the different administrations that you have been through? From McKean all the way to Bornstein.

Cohen: And Duncan.

Zhang: Yes, Duncan.

Cohen: One of my neighbors used to play cards every week, I think once a week or once a month with Harland Bloland. And the neighbor would always ask me, "What do you think of President Bornstein? How do you think she's doing? What's your opinion of her?" And I thought to myself, why does he want to know that. And so what I told him, and what I'll tell you, and I'm sure it's not the insights that you're looking for, is that: every president who has come along has had lots and lots of strengths and probably a few weaknesses, and I admire every one of them. It's a huge undertaking. A huge undertaking, and if they have weaknesses, as I perceive them, who am I to judge? Who am I to judge?

Probably about twenty-five years ago now, I had an administrative internship at Duke University. And it was an American Council on Education Fellowship and the purpose of it was to take middle-level administrators and ordinary faculty members and transform us into



potential deans and provosts and presidents. And I had that experience at Duke University, which was a wonderful, wonderful place. And I got to see how an institution worked. I always had looked out Maryland and Iowa and New Mexico from a student's perspective: first an undergraduate and then a graduate student. And then at Towson for a year, and then at Rollins, I'd always looked at the institution from a faculty member's perspective. The best thing that happened to me at Duke was that I realized that there were lots and lots of perspectives. A wise dean told me one time that I should go down to the end of the hall in Allen Building at Duke, and learn something about the admission business. "Business?" And I sort of cringed; I didn't want to do that, but I did it nonetheless. And I followed the admission processes all the way through and realized that it is a business. And I worked with the president of Duke. I went to all the trustee meetings. I went on a fund-raising trip on his private jet to Wilmington, Delaware. So I had the opportunity to see the institution, Duke University, from the trustees' perspective, alumni perspective, president, everybody's perspective. And it made me realize that there's a perspective other than my own, other than the faculty members' perspective. And so I admire all the presidents who have had to look at the institution from so many different perspectives, that most of us don't really appreciate.

So, to give you my impressions of every one of them, I could point out, what I think were their great strengths, or what might have been their few weaknesses, but I would say that, as I told my neighbor, they all have their strengths, they all have their weaknesses, my personal goal has simply been to outlast every one of them.

Zhang: That's wonderful. You did— Oh, we're running out of time.

Cohen: Okay.

Zhang: I just really want to thank you for your participation and your contribution to our oral history program. We really enjoyed your conversation.

Cohen: Well thanks. I hope you'll edit this so that it makes some sense and so that when I went on and on and on— I saw a look on your face (Lily laughs). When I went on and on and on, you can truncate some of the responses. But this is great. It's been fun.