Hugh McLean, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1925 – 2017

Hugh McLean, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Emeritus, and one of the nation’s most distinguished scholars of Russian literature and a member of the University of California, Berkeley, faculty since 1967, died on January 14, 2017, in Oakland.

Hugh McLean was the youngest of five children born to Hugh McLean Sr., a banker, and Rosamond Denison McLean. (His four sisters, Agnes, Barabelle, Mary and Gertrude, were all much older; his father welcomed his son’s birth, on February 5, 1925, as “the triumph of hope over experience.”) There were lawyers on both sides of the family. His father had been born in Elyria, Ohio, and had received his law degree from the University of Denver. His mother was the daughter of John H. Denison, a justice of the Colorado Supreme Court for 20 years and chief justice from 1928 to 1929. Hugh Jr. later recalled the formative influence of his maternal grandmother, Agnes Hawley Denison, who taught him to read and play the piano. Hugh McLean, who dropped the “Jr.” from his name after his father’s death in 1949, attended schools in Denver before moving to the Taft School, in Watertown, Connecticut, for his high school years.

He received his B.A. from Yale University in 1947, after interrupting his studies to serve for three years in the U.S. Naval Reserve. As a commissioned ensign, he continued his study of Russian, which he had begun learning at Yale, at the School of Oriental Languages in Boulder, Colorado, and went to Europe as a Russian interpreter on the staff of the Commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Germany. He earned his master’s from Columbia University in 1949, and his doctorate from Harvard University in 1953. A Junior Fellow at Harvard from 1950 to 1953, he taught at Harvard until 1956 and at the University of Chicago before coming to Berkeley in 1967.

At Berkeley, Hugh McLean distinguished himself as a teacher, administrator, and, above all, as a scholar. He taught an impressively wide range of courses, from the literature of the Kievan period to the eighteenth century to the work of Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, and he continued to teach freshman seminars on War and Peace, Anna Karenina and The Brothers Karamazov long after his retirement. He considered teaching the most important part of his duties, and he repeatedly declined course relief while serving in a range of senior administrative positions. Years later, many of his students recalled his classes as the intellectual highlight of their student days. One of his first graduate students at Berkeley, and later a professor of Slavic at Stanford University, Gregory Freidin recalled, “His lectures were models of eloquence, precision and organization to such an extent that one often misses not seeing them in print. His unique style—a rare mixture of skepticisim, light humor, high seriousness and uncommon expertise—leaves a very
strong impression and makes the exacting task of teaching Russian literature in California appear as an exercise in intellectual elegance.”

His service to the University included four years as years as chair of the Department of Slavic, as well as four years as dean of humanities (1976-1980), a position to which he returned as acting dean in 1993-1994. Immediately upon leaving the deanship, he stepped in for a year as the acting provost and dean of the College of Letters and Science. He also served on committees of the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate: Budget and Interdepartmental Relations (1984-87 and fall 1998, including one year as chair), Committee on Committees (1987-1990), and Academic Planning and Resource Allocation (1992-93).

Professor McLean published his first article in 1947 and quickly became a well-known and influential scholar of eighteenth and nineteenth century literature. His most important work of scholarship is surely his book on the nineteenth century Russian novelist and critic Nikolai Leskov. Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art (1977) is, in its author’s words, “an interpretive intellectual biography,” which considers Leskov’s life and work from several angles, seeking to pursue on both conscious and unconscious levels the conjunction of social, ethical and religious context with “the emotional forces partly governing the selection and shaping of the material.” Reviewing the book, Professor Clarence Brown of Princeton University praised its masterful interweaving of content and style: “McLean’s critical method is both sophisticated and free: he approaches his subject with full awareness of the multiplicity of dogmatic and mutually exclusive modern ‘schools’ of literary criticism: Freudian, mythic, formalist, structuralist, and so forth; but he himself, while making use of those insights the moderns offer, remains free to examine such ‘extraneous’ matters as the author’s biography, his family life, his relations with children and publishers and even to seek out his conscious intention (horribile dictu!) in each work. The book is a product of excellent scholarship and sensitive, sophisticated criticism.” Forty years after its publication, the book continues to be the definitive study of Leskov.

Professor McLean was the editor of six volumes, ranging in content from intellectual history to the works of Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Lev Tolstoy. His final volume of authored essays, In Quest of Tolstoy, appeared in 2008. Several of these collections — most notably, In the Shade of the Giant: Essays on Tolstoy (1989) — contained the work of his students, for whom he continued to serve as a mentor throughout his career. Many of his scholarly articles, such as “Gogol’s Retreat from Love: Toward an Interpretation of Mirgorod,” which caused a furor when McLean delivered it in Moscow in 1958, and “The Development of Modern Russian Literature” (1962), have remained canonical in our field. The quality of his work was recognized by the most prestigious fellowships in our field, including the Guggenheim, Fulbright and ACLS Fellowships.

Hugh McLean married Katharine (Kitty) Hoag in 1957. At the time, she was a doctoral student in art history at Harvard, specializing in illuminated French manuscripts of the fifteenth century. An active participant in local political
campaigns and in the shaping of Berkeley school board and environmental policies, Kitty, who died in 2015, several months after their 58th wedding anniversary, shared her husband’s love of travel, and they spent sabbatical years in parts of the world not usually frequented by Slavists. (Nikolai Leskov was completed during an extended sojourn in Kathmandu). They are survived by three children, Anna, Clara and Gregory; their spouses, Donald Holland, Ari Lathuras, and Katrina Tinti, respectively; and three grandchildren, Katharine Holland, Nicolas McLean Tinti, and Gianna McLean Tinti.

In 1989, Hugh McLean composed a remarkable and moving statement about his training and pedagogic philosophy. He saw himself as the product of two teachers – the brilliant, fiery and omnivorous Roman Jakobson, with whom he studied at Harvard, and the quietly inspirational and profoundly erudite René Wellek, who made a lasting impact on McLean during his senior year at Yale. While McLean deeply respected both men, he found that Jakobson’s seminars produced “disciples” rather than the independently-minded colleagues who shared Wellek’s vision of literature as “a treasure to be cultivated, cherished and passed on with enhanced understanding to the next generation.” McLean wrote: “One Wellek principle I try conscientiously to follow is to treat students at all levels as human equals (which they are). Their ideas and responses deserve full respect; often in an absolute sense, for their intellectual value and the freshness of their insights, but always as symptoms of their own growth. The psychologists tell us that in principle carrots are more effective motivators than sticks, and my experience bears this out. I try to encourage and praise as much as I can, and to be gentle with negative criticism, unless I sense a real lack of effort. I try to write fairly substantial commentaries on student papers, remembering my own disappointments of long ago at receiving back papers with nothing on them but letter grades.”

As a concluding thought to this pedagogic credo, Hugh McLean added a final point: “For undergraduates especially, the study of literature is often a vicarious means for the study of life. Literature articulates for them their own feelings and experiences, many only imagined or anticipated. It is a useful function, and I think one should not try to break it down by excessive concentration on technicalities from the writer’s workshop. For that same reason, I believe one should be sparing about subjecting undergraduates to heavy doses of the ‘literary theory’ so fashionable today, remembering that the greatest, life-long benefit the student can derive from the study of literature is to learn to love it, for its beauty, its human relevance and its accessibility.”

Berkeley and the field of Russian studies have lost a wonderful colleague, scholar, teacher, mentor, and friend who never lost sight of the human essence that serves as a justification for all that we do in our professional lives.

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2018