

Memorial Minute for Stanley Elkins  
Read by Rick Millington at the January 29, 2014 Faculty Meeting

Early in *The Iliad*, Nestor, the wise and voluble King of Pylos, somewhat advanced in years, rises to address the assembled heroes (Odysseus and the lot), hoping to quell the dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles that endangers the Greek mission to Troy. “You dudes are all right,” he says [this is a fairly free translation from the Greek], but back in the day, we had some real heroes around here.” In trying to capture the career of Stanley Elkins—and in thinking of the great academic generations that have preceded my own, especially those who, like Stan, came into the academy on the GI bill, or those (some retired, some now nearing retirement) who have brought about the feminist transformation of many scholarly fields—it’s hard not to feel the sense of self-diminution that Nestor was recommending to the assembled Greeks.

Stanley Elkins died on September 16<sup>th</sup> of 2013 , at the age of 88; he was born in Boston on April 27, 1925. Upon his graduation from Boston English High School in 1943, he enlisted in the US Army, and fought in Italy with the 362<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment. After the war, he entered Harvard under the GI Bill, managing, along the way, to meet and marry Dorothy Adele Lamken, the woman who would be his wife for the next 65 years. After finishing at Harvard in 1949, he entered graduate school in American History at Columbia, receiving his M.A. in 1951 and his Ph.D. in 1958. By the time he received his Ph.D, he had already assumed a position as an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Chicago. He came to Smith as an Assistant Professor in 1960; in 1968, he became the Sydenham Clark Parsons Professor of History, an honor he held until his retirement in the spring of 1993. Smith was not

Memorial Minute for Stanley Elkins  
Read by Rick Millington at the January 29, 2014 Faculty Meeting

alone in conferring honors upon him: he held fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the NEH, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and was Visiting Fellow of St. Catherine's College, Oxford.

There are enough essays and reviews on his c.v. to compose a solid scholarly career—but the narrative of his scholarly achievement must be built around two remarkable books. The first, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, which grew out of his doctoral dissertation, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1959, with second and third editions following in 1968 and 1976, respectively. Motivated by his sense of an unproductive stasis in the current scholarship on slavery, Elkins's book at once enacted and provoked a stunning transformation of that scholarly field. In the context of its era, and in both the methods and content of its arguments, this was a work of great boldness: proposing that the particular brutality of American slavery—visible in its production of profound internal damage to the personality of the slave—could be glimpsed via the “Sambo” stereotype of Southern pro-slavery lore, Elkins used cross-cultural comparisons to argue that American slavery--unlike its South American counterparts, where the power of the slave holder was controlled by countervailing institutions like the Catholic Church—was a uniquely “closed” and totalitarian system, with no authority but that exercised by the masters; he argued that the power of American slavery to create a ‘slavish personality’ could be inferred from the insights emerging from the discipline of psychology and understood via

Memorial Minute for Stanley Elkins  
Read by Rick Millington at the January 29, 2014 Faculty Meeting

analogy with from the wrenching recent history of the Nazi concentration camps; and he proposed that American abolitionism was shaped, perhaps to the detriment of its political effect, by a failure to place slavery in the context of the politics of institutions. If this was bold work, it was also to become—on almost every ground of its methods and arguments—controversial and provocative, and I think it's no exaggeration to say that the often brilliant work of the next generation of slavery scholars was generated by the necessity of dealing with what came to be known as "the Elkins thesis."

The story of Stanley's second major book—*The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800*, published by Oxford in 1993—is less complex to narrate—though I think it has an appealing drama of its own. For one thing, it is the story of a friendship. The book is the product of a 30-year collaboration with its co-author, Eric McKittrick. The two met in graduate school at Columbia, were simultaneously appointed as assistant professors at Chicago, and collaborated on early, seminal scholarly essays; they seem to have been regarded by their peers as a kind of twin entity, the Batman and Robin of American historical scholarship. Though they each produced distinguished solo scholarly work, they seem to have been working . . . and working . . . and working all along on the immense project that would become *The Age of Federalism*. If this is an inspiring story of academic friendship, it is also a story that offers hope to those of us who may be engaged in big projects that seem always to be "in progress." In preparing to write this minute, I was able to look at Stan's faculty record sheet. The book first appears, after what

Memorial Minute for Stanley Elkins  
Read by Rick Millington at the January 29, 2014 Faculty Meeting

had already been years of genesis, in the “in progress” section of his faculty record sheet, as ““The Age of Washington” (with Eric McKittrick)’ in 1982, with a projected publication date of 1985. Here is how it appears—still in the “in progress” section-- in the faculty record sheet submitted by one Stanley Elkins, soon-to-be-emeritus professor of history, in 1992, some ten years later. “The Age of Federalism”: to be published by Oxford, in 1993—really.” In a review, the great historian Gordon Wood called it “a truly remarkable book,” a “revival of the once noble but now presumably dying dream that history can be an accumulative science, gradually gathering truth” through the untiring and exhaustive efforts of its practitioners. “No historian,” Wood writes, “or pair of historians, is likely to do again what they have done.” In 1994, *The Age of Federalism* won the Bancroft prize, the most prestigious award in the fields of American history and biography.

Though his name is written in fire in the annals of American historical scholarship—and though he was a writer who could throw a scholarly elbow (sheathed in elegant and lucid prose) with the best of them, his presence as a teacher was very different. While I became Stan’s colleague when I came to Smith, I also became his student, sitting in on his “Introduction to American Society and Culture,” as I tried to inform my work and teaching in American literature with American Studies perspectives. He was, around that seminar table, relaxed, witty, bemused, avuncular—no less acute than in his written work about the stakes of a scholarly argument but visibly delighted by insights of his students; one sees this part of him, too, in his full slates of advisees. He taught the late, lamented American

Memorial Minute for Stanley Elkins  
Read by Rick Millington at the January 29, 2014 Faculty Meeting

history survey, courses in “America as a new Nation,” a celebrated seminar on “The American Revolution.” He was an institutionalist in his life as well as his scholarship—helping to build the Jewish Studies Program, exerting a shaping influence on American Studies—and he was a valued member of our community, for many years a member of the B’nai Israel Congregation, and performing unflagging service as a member of the Board of Trustees of Historic Northampton. Because I learned so much from him, I’m especially moved that one of his last wishes was that contributions in his name be sent to Smith College, and directed to the American Studies Program.

Richard Millington, Professor of English