In Memoriam: Edward L. Keenan, Jr.

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On March 6, 2015, Russian studies lost a remarkable and charismatic figure. Edward L. Keenan, Jr., Andrew W. Mellon Professor of History emeritus at Harvard University, passed away at the side of his wife, Judith, in their home in Deer Isle, Maine. Except for a two-year stay in Leningrad as a graduate student, he spent his entire career at Harvard – from the time he entered as a freshman in 1953, until his retirement in 2008.

He was a legendary and beloved figure both among his students and among his friends and colleagues, who knew him as “Ned.” Since his death, numerous testimonials have appeared or been announced. Renowned for his rare command of Russian, he was also singularly productive in a range of endeavors: in addition to his active life in teaching, mentoring, and research, he did noteworthy service in a series of administrative positions at Harvard, and was highly regarded for his national contributions to the profession and in related public service activities. And in all of them he made an unusual mark.

From the beginning he never fit any standard mold. In 1959–1961, as a participant in the US-USSR academic exchange program, in addition to his studies at Leningrad University he took off on unauthorized independent travels around

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1 See electronic notices issued by colleagues at Harvard – e.g., those by Michael Flier [http://slavic.fas.harvard.edu/news/memoriam-edward-l-keenan]; Jan Ziolkowski on H-Net; Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard [http://cmes.fas.harvard.edu/news/memory-edward-l-keenan]; published obituaries such as those by Brian Boeck (Kritika 16, no. 2 [Spring 2015]: 459–466); Russell Martin (The Russian Review 74 (July 2015): 551–554); Daniel Rowland (to appear in The Slavic Review); Nancy Kollmann (to appear in Russian History); alongside a number of less formal, more personal reminiscences posted on H-Net (H-Net Notifications <drupaladmin@mail.h-net.msu.edu>) by his friends, colleagues, and students (among the latter, my own posting [3/23/2015] unfortunately contains some errors which are corrected variously in the text of the present notice); see as well the separate electronic posting by Greg Afinogenov (n+1 [n plus one] magazine: Online only, March 17, 2015. doi: https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/in-memoriam/breaking-muscovys-silence/).
the USSR, visiting numerous places off-limits to foreigners. He would merge invisibly into the crowd with his native-sounding Russian, infuriating his Soviet handlers and leading finally in 1961 to his expulsion from the country. All his life he remained an insistent challenger of accepted but empty authority, a questioner of unquestioned commonplaces. Where others might wring their hands in dismay, Keenan grabbed a sword or pen and headed straight into the fray.

During his professional life at Harvard he served in a striking range of administrative positions. He was Master of one of the University’s student residential “houses” (1970–1975, in North House, now Pforzheimer House); Associate Director (1973–1975) and then Director (1975–1977) of the Russian Research Center (now the Davis Center); with the founding of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in 1973, he became a board member and remained an active supporter; Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (1977–1984); Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (three times from 1981 to 1994); Chair of the History Department (1988–1991); and finally a most visible tour as Director of Harvard’s Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D.C. (1998–2007). In all of these capacities he served with flair and distinction.

Nationally in service to the profession he was scarcely less active. He frequently was tapped for his unique Russian-language facility and interpretation skills as well as his expertise in Soviet affairs. In the summers of 1962–1964 in the Indiana University Summer Workshop for US exchange students preparing to go to Russia he delivered Russian-language lectures at plenary sessions for all levels of language proficiency, with the different groups breaking up daily to work on language issues raised in his lecture. In 1970 he served as interpreter for the epoch-making negotiations between the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) and the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which concluded with the granting of autocephaly to the OCA – in communion with Moscow but not under its command. During the 1970s Keenan similarly served as simultaneous interpreter for a series of national poetry-reading tours by celebrated Russian poets of the day, including Evgenii Evtushenko and Robert Rozhdestvenskii. And his experience in Middle Eastern Studies and higher Education earned him an advisory role on the Board of Governors of the Reza Shah Kabir University (now the University of Mazandaran) in Tehran, Iran, and a specially created consultative role on the Senate Select Committee on the Iran Contra Affair in 1987, to “Supervise and organize the writing of the Final Congressional Report and give it a historical perspective.”

He was also prominent and effective nationally in the field of Soviet, Russian, and Slavic studies, devoted to creating a firm base for funding and research. Among his other contributions, he actively participated in the founding in