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University History Series
Department of History at Berkeley

Henry F. May

PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, 1952-1980

With an Introduction by
David T. Bailey

Interviews Conducted by
Ann Lage
in 1998

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Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Henry F. May, 1993.

Photo by Jane Scherr.

Cataloguing information

Henry F. May (b. 1915) Professor of History

Professor of American Intellectual History, University of California, Berkeley, 1952-1980. 1999, xii, 218 pp.

Family, youth, and public school education in Berkeley; undergraduate years at University of California, social life and radical politics on campus, 1933-1937; graduate study in American history at Harvard University, 1937-1941: friendships, mentors, marriage, attitudes toward communism and the war in Europe; teaching at Lawrence College; World War II service in the Pacific as a Japanese language officer; professor at Scripps College, 1947-1952, Salzburg Seminar; professor of history at Berkeley, 1952-1980: social life of Berkeley faculty and community, faculty hiring and promotions; observations and role during the 1960s student protest at Berkeley: the Free Speech Movement, 1964, anti-war protests of 1960s-1970s, Third World strike, People's Park, impact on university teaching and society; research, writing, and teaching on American intellectual life, study of religion, family history; reflections on the craft of history.

Introduction by David T. Bailey, professor of history, Michigan State University.

Interviewed 1998 by Ann Lage for the Department of History at Berkeley series.

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PREFACE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AT BERKELEY ORAL HISTORY SERIES

The Department of History at Berkeley oral history series grew out of Gene Brucker's (Professor of History, 1954-1991) 1995 Faculty Research Lecture on "History at Berkeley." In developing his lecture on the transformations in the UC Berkeley Department of History in the latter half of the twentieth century, Brucker, whose tenure as professor of history from 1954 to 1991 spanned most of this period, realized how much of the story was undocumented.

Discussion with Carroll Brentano (M.A. History, 1951, Ph.D. History, 1967), coordinator of the University History Project at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, history department faculty wife, and a former graduate student in history, reinforced his perception that a great deal of the history of the University and its academic culture was not preserved for future generations. The Department of History, where one might expect to find an abiding interest in preserving a historical record, had discarded years of departmental files, and only a fraction of history faculty members had placed their personal papers in the Bancroft Library.[1]

Moreover, many of the most interesting aspects of the history--the life experiences, cultural context, and personal perceptions--were only infrequently committed to paper.[2] They existed for the most part in the memories of the participants.

Carroll Brentano knew of the longtime work of the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) in recording and preserving the memories of participants in the history of California and the West and the special interest of ROHO in the history of the University. She and Gene Brucker then undertook to involve Ann Lage, a ROHO interviewer/editor who had conducted a number of oral histories in the University History Series and was herself a product of Berkeley's history department (B.A. 1963, M.A. 1965). In the course of a series of mutually enjoyable luncheon

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[1]The Bancroft Library holds papers from history professors Walton Bean, Woodbridge Bingham, Herbert Bolton, Woodrow Borah, George Guttridge, John Hicks, Joseph Levenson, Henry May, William Alfred Morris, Frederic Paxson, Herbert Priestley, Engel Sluiter, Raymond Sontag.

[2]Two published memoirs recall the Berkeley history department: John D. Hicks, *My Life with History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968) recalls his years as professor and dean, 1942-1957; Henry F. May reflects on his years as an undergraduate at Berkeley in the thirties in *Coming to Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

meetings, the project to document the history of the Department of History at Berkeley evolved.

In initial discussions about the parameters of the project, during which the varied and interesting lives of the history faculty were considered, a crucial decision was made. Rather than conduct a larger set of short oral histories focussed on topics limited to departmental history, we determined to work with selected members of the department to conduct more lengthy biographical memoirs. We would record relevant personal background--family, education, career choices, marriage and children, travel and avocations; discuss other institutional affiliations; explore the process of creating their historical works; obtain reflections on their retirement years. A central topic for each would be, of course, the Department of History at Berkeley--its governance, the informal and formal relationships among colleagues, the connections with the broader campus, and curriculum and teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate level.

Using the Brucker lecture as a point of departure, it was decided to begin to document the group of professors who came to the department in the immediate postwar years, the 1950s, and the early 1960s. Now retired, the younger ones somewhat prematurely because of a university retirement incentive offer in the early nineties, this group was the one whose distinguished teaching and publications initially earned the Department of History its high national rating. They made the crucial hiring and promotion decisions that cemented the department's strength and expanded and adapted the curriculum to meet new academic interests.

At the same time, they participated in campus governing bodies as the university dealt with central social, political, and cultural issues of our times, including challenges to civil liberties and academic freedom, the response to tumultous student protests over free speech, civil rights and the Vietnam War, and the demands for equality of opportunity for women and minorities. And they benefitted from the postwar years of demographic and economic growth in California accompanied for the most part through the 1980s with expanding budgets for higher education. Clearly, comprehensive oral histories discussing the lives and work of this group of professors would produce narratives of interest to researchers studying the developments in the discipline of history, higher education in the modern research university, and postwar California, as well as the institutional history of the University of California.

Carroll Brentano and Gene Brucker committed themselves to facilitate the funding of the oral history project, as well as to enlist the interest of potential memoirists in participating in the process. Many members of the department responded with interest, joined the periodic lunch confabs, offered advice in planning, and helped find funding to support the project. In the spring of 1996, the interest o

the department in its own history led to an afternoon symposium, organized by Brentano and Professor of History Sheldon Rothblatt and titled "Play It Again, Sam." There, Gene Brucker restaged his Faculty Research Lecture. Professor Henry F. May responded with his own perceptions of events, followed by comments on the Brucker and May theses from other history faculty, all videotaped for posterity and the Bancroft Library.[1]

Meanwhile, the oral history project got underway with interviews with Delmer Brown, professor of Japanese history; Nicholas Riasanovsky, Russian and European intellectual history; and Kenneth Stampp, American history. A previously conducted oral history with Woodrow Borah, Latin American history, was uncovered and placed in The Bancroft Library. An oral history with Carl Schorske, European intellectual history, is in process at the time of this writing, and more are in the works. The selection of memoirists for the project is determined not only by the high regard in which they are held by their colleagues, because that would surely overwhelm us with candidates, but also by their willingness to commit the substantial amount of time and thought to the oral history process. Age, availability of funding, and some attention to a balance in historical specialties also play a role in the selection order.

The enthusiastic response of early readers has reaffirmed for the organizers of this project that departmental histories and personal memoirs are essential to the unraveling of some knotty puzzles: What kind of a place is this University of California, Berkeley, to which we have committed much of our lives? What is this academic culture in which we are enmeshed? And what is this enterprise History, in which we all engage? As one of the project instigators reflected, "Knowing what was is essential; and as historians we know the value of sources, even if they are ourselves." The beginnings are here in these oral histories.

Carroll Brentano, Coordinator
University History Project
Center for Studies in Higher Education

Gene Brucker
Shepard Professor of History Emeritus

Ann Lage, Principal Editor
Regional Oral History Office

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[1]The Brucker lecture and May response, with an afterword by David Hollinger, are published in *History at Berkeley: A Dialog in Three Parts* (Chapters in the History of the University of California, Number Seven), Carroll Brentano and Sheldon Rothblatt, editors [Center for Studies in Higher Education and Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1998].

INTRODUCTION by David T. Bailey

I went to Berkeley because of a book. One of my many advisors had told me that the best way to decide on graduate school is to read the books of the people you would want to direct your dissertation. So I went through a month of most demanding recreational reading, until I hit upon a peculiarly titled book, by then ten years old: End of American Innocence. It begins with a wonderful, evocative and, to me, utterly mysterious sentence: "Everybody knows that at some point in the twentieth century America went through a cultural revolution." Only a few pages in and I knew I would have no choice; if Berkeley would have me, I must learn from this man, Henry May.

We all have images of authors, pictures in our heads of what they must look like. I remember one student, coming to work with Ken Stampp, expressing horror that the great author of The Peculiar Institution was not black! The Henry May I imagined, from reading everything of his I could find, seemed to me a figure who could have sat comfortably across the dining table from Emerson, a man who might look the role of a sage. I am startled to remember, a quarter of a century later, that when I met him, (callow, twenty-two-year-old kid from Toronto and Buffalo that I was) he was precisely what I expected. A man about six feet tall, but seemingly always leaning forward to look more intensely at you, May's eyes are often the first thing which hit you. They are intense, probing eyes, just a bit the eyes of a wizard, eyes which expect a great deal of the world and look at it (and at you) to find out whatever really matters. They are made all the more prominent by a forehead which, my older daughter once remarked, just goes on and on.

Throughout the post-World War II decades, young men and women sought out sages, only to be deeply disappointed and alienated when their Merlins turned out not quite as wise as advertised. Berkeley, especially in the wake of the Free Speech Movement, had become guru-central, even in a state obsessed with the hunt for secret wisdom. Yet however Central Casting might have judged him, May resisted the sometimes desperate need of young people to tell him what to think. Indeed, he was never, in any conventional sense, a great teacher, what he refers to derisively as "the wind machine." His lectures struck me at the time as sometimes unnecessarily difficult, asking such intense concentration from the students that one told me his "brain always hurt at the end of class." For May, lectures served as opportunities to make the complicated connections necessary to see how ideas penetrated the American society, and if this required a casual mention of the Halevy thesis, a passing reference to Rousseau, or a quick precis of an Edwards sermon, the better students always had the sense to ask him to slow down. He made an implicit covenant with students: work hard, think carefully, and the difficult business of the nature of American

intellectual development will come to you, both directly as subject matter and indirectly as a way of thinking. Others at Berkeley happily fed the students easy lessons of what would ultimately prove to be limited wisdom, but perhaps the greatest liberation came from being challenged to push aside current fashions and find deeper meaning through investigations of more serious stuff. Maybe Henry May was a bit of a wizard after all, responding to a puzzled student's awkwardly phrased questions by rubbing his forehead in a circular motion and saying, "Mr. Jones, that's a very complicated matter."

While Berkeley certainly had a well-deserved reputation for its commitment to the postwar movement for personal and political liberation, the main campus of the increasingly enormous University of California delighted in describing itself as the greatest university in the world, and Clark Kerr and other leaders had good reason to crow. From Lawrence's cyclotron up in the hills, and all it had meant to the transformation of the twentieth century, to department after department ranked first or second in the nation, Berkeley was, in Margot Adler's lovely phrase, "like entering a fantasy of what the agora might have been in ancient Athens." The origin and the nature of this profound achievement are not my subject, but to understand Henry May you must understand a bit about the transformation of this place. I came to Berkeley from Buffalo, and, with no money to pay for the trip, I drove the 2700 miles in three and a half days. Although I had briefly lived in Long Beach as a small child, I learned from this trip how terribly far California is from the rest of the country, how isolated one could feel from family, friends, and, increasingly as I came to understand, professional contacts. This relative isolation had produced, for its first half-century, a nice, second-tier regional campus, sometimes with excellent individual faculty, and occasionally able to attract an off-beat but extraordinary mind, such as J. Robert Oppenheimer. Although born in Denver, May came as a young child to this Berkeley, growing up in its shadow, attending University High in Oakland and ultimately having a bucolic undergraduate experience in the thirties at Cal. As he has described in several places, he went east, to Harvard, to become the intellectual and the historian who would later be called back, in 1952, to Cal, where he would spend the rest of his career.

When it hired May, the Berkeley Department of History had begun, with most of the departments on campus, one of the most remarkable transformations in the history of higher education. The causes of that transformation are complex and still need greater research, but in the history department, the move to become a first-rate operation was led by Carl Bridenbaugh, Kenneth Stampp, and a few others. May enthusiastically joined the project of finding the brightest minds (although restricted almost exclusively to young men in the 1950s) and offering them the chance to build a rich intellectual community. By disposition, May violated one of Tocqueville's standards of Americanism: he was never much of a joiner. However, creating a great department,

and thriving on the interactions among Joe Levenson, Thomas Kuhn, William Bouwsma, Kenneth Stampp, and many others, gave May a forum in which his enormously fertile mind could, at least from time to time, be at play. As these young men matured into the leading scholars in their fields, graduate students swarmed to the department, enhancing both the richness and depth of May's community. There is a perhaps apocryphal story that two Columbia history professors had their first conversation when they ran into one another in Europe, although they had had offices across the hall from one another for over a decade. This anti-collegial mode is commonplace among historians, who are used to isolation in their work. Berkeley provided May with the opposite: an environment in which interaction came to be valued, and in which May's meditations on modernism and its American fate could cross-fertilize with Levenson's on Confucianism and its modern fate, in which his graduate seminars could probe ideas rather than simply present them. Indeed, he increasingly preferred seminars on subjects he was trying to understand, rather than on materials he had already figured out.

Of course, truly vital communities include conflict with creativity. The "old guard," including some of the professors May had learned from as an undergraduate, gradually lost power and prestige as May and the young cadre transformed the place, and for these suddenly obsolete faculty, this had the taste of a bitter pill. Disputes arising from personal matters leached into the department as well; so did debates over whether so-and-so quite measured up for tenure. But for May, the greatest challenge came from the earthquake in the fall of 1964. In the Free Speech Movement, students demanded that they too should have the rights of intellectual community. May struggled to understand Savio and his movement, briefly took a key role in the drama, and ultimately viewed the events with a mixture of hurt, outrage, and loss. He thought about these events for the subsequent thirty-five years, and this oral history serves, in many ways, as the chance finally to make sense of these complicated issues of community and conflict.

May's standing as a member of this vital community stemmed from his abilities as a scholar. He had always wanted to be a writer, and if not for the intervention of war, and marriage, and all the sense of responsibility that entailed, perhaps he would have gone to New York to try his hand at the writer's game. Yet for May, writing has never been easy. He has taken a moral stance that what he writes has to be worth something. I once praised his brief essay on the 1920s, and he looked at me as if I had gone crazy; "That's the only hack work I ever did," he said, with some outrage in his voice. His output is not enormous: one book based on his dissertation, two big books on important subjects, dozens of shorter pieces, a memoir, and a textbook. Each piece took a great deal out of him: sweat, sleepless nights, agony over structure, worry over whether it would be original enough, clear enough, strong enough. And each piece (including that essay on the twenties) made a difference. His writings never simply contributed to the conversation:

one more county study, one more biography of a governor. Instead, there is, even in a minor piece such as the introduction to the reprinting of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Old Town Folks, a sense of discovery, a window thrown open to a complicated and interesting new world.

In the corpus of May's writing lurks an even more surprising element: a consistent vision of what matters in life. Henry May's view of life stems from a complicated stew of influences: his elderly father, his English mother, his childhood reading in Victorian fiction, Karl Marx, Reinhold Niebuhr, Perry Miller, William James, the Book of Common Prayer, Henry James, Henry Nash Smith. Most important, his wife, Jean, provided him with the support, the love, the confidence he sometimes couldn't find for himself. She is, in Niebuhr's sense, a wise child of light. Putting all these influences together with his own disposition and abilities, May has developed an interpretation of intellectuals in America unrivaled for its nuance, remarkable for its complexity, but ultimately quite simple and compelling. What he says, in each of his works, amounts to three interrelated observations. First, the story of American thought, and American life, is the many ways in which creative and complicated people made European ideas their own. In this strain of his thought, he showed how the very pluralism of America became at once its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. Those, such as Jefferson, who could find American uses for European ideas, could help transform the world. Those, such as Phillips Brooks, who could not accommodate himself to the new demands of labor in the late nineteenth century, would fail to make a place for themselves. Second, he has insisted that no real understanding of American life and thought can ignore the centrality of faith. This is not simply the observation that America is a nation of believers. Rather, May argues that Americans see things through the lens of faith, and therefore as John Adams understood Enlightenment thought, he had to understand it in an orthodox Protestant manner. Third, May has demonstrated that life is complicated, filled with contradictions and ironies. Simple, or in his favorite curse-word, "conventional" analysis almost always proves to be wrong, because human life is seldom simple and what ultimately matters is seldom conventional. William James remains one of May's heroes because he is constantly filled with questions. One question May has asked me more than once over the years is, "Isn't it rather the opposite?" I have come to think of this as his habit of reversal, his unwillingness to accept an answer until he has checked its opposite.

I find it particularly wonderful that the university has undertaken these oral histories, because the most important, and the most lasting, influence Henry May has had on me, and on many others, comes from the most ephemeral aspect of life, day-to-day conversation. It is in these conversations that each of the elements I have outlined appear most clearly. There is, whether he likes it or not, a bit of the sage here. There is a lot of Berkeley and what it meant. But most importantly, there is the vision of what matters in the world: reacting

on your own terms to new ideas; basing your reactions in your beliefs, your faith; and most important, avoiding the easy, safe answers.

David T. Bailey
Associate Professor
Michigan State University

June 1999

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Henry F. May

Henry Farnham May, Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1952 until his retirement in 1980, is the fifth memoirist in the oral history series documenting the Department of History. He brings the perspective of an Americanist who developed the field of American intellectual history at Berkeley. He comments both as a major figure in developing the strengths and reputation of the department in the postwar years and as a student of history at Berkeley in the more provincial but fondly remembered 1930s. And he brings to bear his astute historical analysis as he looks back as a participant/observer at the troubling but exciting Berkeley of the sixties.

Henry May was not new to this business of personal history when we undertook the oral history project. In 1987, he published Coming to Terms[1], part family history, part memoir of his youth and early adulthood--undergraduate years at Berkeley, graduate school and marriage at Harvard, military service in the Pacific Theater, and teaching at Scripps College in Claremont, California. Coming to Terms ends with his arrival back on the Berkeley campus in 1952, this time as Professor May.

The oral history was to focus on the years 1952 to the present. But, with his historian's sensibility and knowing that Coming to Terms was out of print, Professor May began at the beginning: from recollections of his family and the social setting in Berkeley of the twenties and thirties, through the years at Scripps--always with an emphasis on themes and events which proved to be formative to his development as an historian or shaped his response to the social upheavals of the sixties.

Subsequent interviews delved in greater detail into the growth and governance of the Department of History from 1952 until Professor May's retirement in 1980; his historical research and writing in these years; and his teaching and students. Historians of higher education and of the discipline of history will find much of value in these pages, as will scholars of the history of the University of California and the social milieu of that most interesting city, Berkeley, California.

A major emphasis of the interview was a recounting of his activities and observations during the student protest events of the 1960s. One of his goals in participating in the oral history project had been "the opportunity to have my say on the sixties." In sending me his notes on the topics he wished to cover for these years, he advised,

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[1] Coming to Terms: A Study in Memory and History, University of California Press, 1987.

"I'm afraid I have quite a lot to say. This was, after all, my most important experience since 1941, and much more important than anything that came later." He commented as we talked that the book on the social and intellectual transformations of the sixties and early seventies was yet to be written; I sensed that if he were ten years younger, he would have tackled the job with enthusiasm. The account and analysis of events he gives in these pages will be a valuable resource for historians who attempt this task.

To prepare for conducting the oral history, I consulted the Henry F. May papers in the Bancroft Library and his published books. Two of Professor May's articles published in The American Scholar (Summer 1965 and Autumn 1969) on the student movement at Berkeley were instructive as accounts of events-in-progress. Previous oral histories in the Department of History series and others from the University History Series were also useful, as were consultations with Professor May's colleagues in the department.

I had been an undergraduate student in Professor May's United States history survey class in the early sixties but had not known him other than as a teacher. We met to plan the oral history at his home in Kensington, just north of Berkeley, where he and his wife, Jean, moved shortly after he was appointed to the department in 1952. Surrounded by trees, the May home perches on the upside of a steeply sloping hill. An electric tram lifts unwilling stairclimbers and their parcels up to the back door, making it feasible for the Mays to continue to live in this hillside retreat during their retirement years.

At our first meeting we talked together informally about subjects to be covered and developed a general outline for the project. Interviewing began on June 11, 1998, and was completed on September 10 after seven interview sessions. For each session, Professor May prepared his thoughts carefully, making a list of topics and notes for each area. While he responded readily to questions and additional subjects introduced by the interviewer, he was the chief historian in this enterprise, as one might expect of a man so professionally prepared to analyze the social history of his life and times.

The transcripts of the recorded sessions were lightly edited by Regional Oral History Office assistant editor Lisa Jacobson and sent to Professor May for his review. He uncovered transcription errors, clarified inaudible or confusing statements, and reordered a few passages for chronological accuracy. Once his corrections were entered, he made a final review of the manuscript in its final format. Former University Archivist Jim Kantor provided an additional review; we thank him for serving once again as ROHO's highly esteemed proofreader.

The oral history volume supplements the archival record in the Henry F. May papers in the Bancroft Library. Thirteen cartons and four

boxes of files document his career as a historian and educator from 1946 to 1983, including correspondence, working notes and drafts of books and articles, course outlines and lecture notes, and material on the Free Speech Movement and the Department of History.

The Regional Oral History Office, on behalf of future scholars, would like to thank the Department of History for providing the core funding to make this oral history possible. Additional support came from the Free Speech Movement Archives project of the Bancroft Library, funded by a generous donation from Berkeley alumnus Stephen M. Silberstein. We also thank David T. Bailey, professor of history at Michigan State University and former student of Henry May, for writing the introduction to this volume. Appreciation is once again due Carroll Brentano and Gene Brucker for initiating this series on the history of the Department of History and for their ongoing efforts in planning and securing support to continue it.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to record the lives of persons who have contributed significantly to the history of California and the West. A major focus of the office since its inception has been university history. The series list of completed oral histories documenting the history of the University of California is included in this volume. The Regional Oral History Office is a division of The Bancroft Library and is under the direction of Willa K. Baum.

Ann Lage
Interviewer/Editor

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley
September 1999

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Henry F. MAY

Date of birth 3/27/15 Birthplace Denver, Colo.

Father's full name Henry F. May

Occupation lawyer Birthplace Roxbury, Mass.

Mother's full name May Richard May

Occupation housewife; realestate Birthplace Idaho Springs, Colo.

Your spouse Jean Terrace May

Occupation Housewife Birthplace Arden, Delaware

Your children Hildegarde ~~Clark~~ May, Ann Richard May

Where did you grow up? Berkeley

Present community Berkeley

Education University High, Oakland, Univ. of California, Berk
(B.A.) Harvard University (M.A., Ph.D.)

Occupation(s) professor of history

Areas of expertise American History, esp. intellectual and
religious history

Other interests or activities some reading, writing, painting,

Organizations in which you are active at present only
St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Albany CA

INTERVIEW WITH HENRY F. MAY

I FAMILY, YOUTH, AND EDUCATION IN BERKELEY

[Interview 1: June 11, 1998] ##[1]
[Place: May's home in Kensington]

Lage: Let's start, as you said, with a reprise of Coming to Terms.[2]

May: All right. Coming to Terms is a very peculiar book because it combines autobiography and a research history of my parents, particularly my father, so the material in it is rather choppy and the chronology a little difficult to understand.

Lage: History and memory.

May: Right. I'll talk more about this book much later in the series, when I'm talking about my writings.

Lage: But we want people to know that they can go to Coming to Terms and get really a very beautifully written record of your growing up.

May: Thank you. If, that is, they can find it. [laughter] It's out of print.

Lage: Well, that's true. [laughs] That's what I forgot. But we want to be sure that in this document we get the major themes that shaped you as a historian.

May: I quite understand.

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[1] ## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

[2] Henry F. May, Coming to Terms: A Study in Memory and History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Parents

Lage: So without the depth of detail that we have in Coming to Terms, why don't you talk about your childhood and what you want to have recorded here to understand the later years.

May: Yes. All right, I'll try. Childhood, of course is a big and complicated topic. I was brought up in the Berkeley hills, and it was an important fact that during most of my childhood, the family was in some financial difficulties. They had been quite well-to-do. And I explained this in the book: how particularly in Denver--Denver was always mentioned as a great good place--my father, who was an immensely honorable and somewhat strict man with a genial side which would come out once in a while, had had a big shock in his professional life.

He had been special assistant to the attorney general in charge of public lands, and that was concerned mainly with the oil lands that belonged to the government. He had done a good job there, had been very proud of it. He was devoted to the [President Woodrow] Wilson administration. But when the Wilson administration started coming apart under the pressures of war and foreign policy, his particular enterprise came apart, too. And contrary to what he thought he had been promised, when Harding was elected, he was summarily fired. He read about this in the newspaper, crossing the bay to his office.

He never quite recovered from this, so when I knew him he was a somewhat sad man and very close to the spirit of his Massachusetts Calvinist ancestors. He was really a New Englander through and through, with the admirable and some of the difficult traits that come from that background.

Lage: I don't mean to divert you, so you can just put this aside, but I'm curious if, when you went back to Harvard, you recognized those traits?

May: Well, no, it came from research. There were some extraordinary coincidences here. We had a large box filled with old May papers, and when I got to them I found that the particular ultra-Calvinist theologian that I for one reason or another had been working hard on--Nathanael Emmons--had preached the funeral sermon over my great-grandmother. And there were various other connections between what I was working on and my family history. Now, some might say this was the hand of God, some might say it's experience, but I think that traits in me that led me to choose this material probably come to a certain extent from my father.

My mother, on the other hand, was for one thing twenty-six years younger than he was. So as he got old, in a way I had a grandfather rather than a father. My mother was warm-hearted. She was English, from a family of mining engineers who I later learned had, in the rather rigid English class structure of the period, a thoroughly intermediate status--not exactly gentlemen because they didn't have a classical education. But English mining engineers were found all over the world. So she and her three sisters eventually turned up in Colorado, where my father met her and after a long and rather curious courtship, avuncular at the start, fell very much in love with her. They got married in 1906 and were for a while, as I said, pretty affluent.

Then when my father got this government job he moved his headquarters to San Francisco, and that's why we were brought up in Berkeley, as I've said in this book, surrounded in childhood by New England eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furniture and by the books which had been inherited by my father from several generations, also. There wasn't very much in the house that dated from after 1900, but there were things that were written after that but in the style of the earlier period. In other words, I was not brought up in the modern intellectual world.

Lage: Were these books that you settled into and read as a young person?

May: Indeed, yes. I read all through even the minor Waverley novels of Scott. I read all through Kipling, I read all through Stevenson--those are about the most modern. I also read Shakespeare for pleasure but not with a great deal of understanding.

Lage: Was that encouraged by your parents?

May: Oh, sure. Yes, very much so. But I really didn't need any encouragement. I was the type of kid, I rather think now almost obsolete, that particularly in early adolescence reads absolutely anything. So when I learned to, I haunted the public libraries and got out anything that I could find, and including second-rate historical novels.

Lage: That's something you don't talk a whole lot about in Coming to Terms. I think it's quite important.

May: Yes. It is important. And that explains why it was a shock--very liberating and sometimes quite difficult, suddenly to enter the world of the 1930s at school and mostly at college.

Lage: Did you go to the picture show--the movies?

May: Only very occasionally as a child. Nanook of the North and so forth.

Lage: No Tarzan?

May: No, no Tarzan. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. My father thought nothing of taking me out of school to go and see The Thief of Baghdad. I should say this about my father: his genial side came out every now and then when he would have a special day with one of the children. He would take me to San Francisco, we would have an elegant lunch at Solari's on Maiden Lane. My favorite was probably tagliarini followed by baked Alaska. Anything went. And then we would go either out to the beach or to the Golden Gate Park museums. And we had a good time, though sometimes on the way home the conversation got a little stiff.

Lage: But still he enjoyed your company, obviously, or else felt this was his fatherly role.

May: From time to time, yes. But he was somewhat drawn into himself.

Lage: Do you have a sense of why he wasn't able to establish a career after he lost the government job?

May: Well, yes. For one thing, let's see, how old was he? He was born in 1860 and this would have been 1921. So what's that make?

Lage: Sixty-one.

May: Yes. He had, working for the government, drastically antagonized most of the dominant interests in San Francisco--shipping, oil, and so forth. That's one reason. Another is, I think, a certain growing unadaptability. In Denver, as he had been comparatively in Boston (he graduated from Harvard in '81) he had been very active socially. He was the president of the University Club and had many friends, general respect, and enough money. In San Francisco and Berkeley, though there were good times and at first there was some money, the change was never quite successful, I think, from his point of view. His friends all thought he'd made a terrible mistake when he left Denver. Why didn't he go back? I don't know.

Lage: My mother had Alzheimer's, and as you've described your father in the course of it, do you have any sense that he might have had Alzheimer's disease?

May: Later. Not in these years, not when I was growing up, but by the time I was in college it had started, and then it increased pretty rapidly.

Lage: But there was no term for it except arterial sclerosis.

May: Well, old age.

Lage: Right.

May: He didn't age pleasantly because he was so unhappy. And yet, when there was a dinner party, I can see him at the end of the table flourishing a knife and fork and handing out dishes. There was never any taboo on alcohol, except that he believed in strictly keeping the law--this is in Prohibition, of course--and mostly did. There was a little brandy in a certain nook in his den. This was used for the plum pudding at Christmas. And also at certain times, later, the Italian Swiss Colony came down and brought barrels into the basement and tampered with them, and so there was some very good Sauterne which we had at meals. And he persuaded himself that that was okay.

Lage: That was legal enough?

May: We also had an Italian cousin by marriage--Umberto Olivieri was his name--and in California there was never a very serious attempt to keep the Italians from having wine. What he brought was unblessed sacramental wine, so one way or another there was a bit and never any taboo on it. That wasn't part of that culture at all, as opposed to some of my friends' fathers and mothers.

Lage: Yes. I identified New England Calvinism to a degree with not drinking. Is that the wrong interpretation?

May: Yes, Calvinists did not concentrate on foibles. In fact, my father sent to a prohibitionist friend the description of a celebration of the installation of a minister in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century which provided rum for the quality, and for other people, "cider well worked."

There was never any opposition in early New England. That came along in the reforming thirties and forties of the nineteenth century. And it came through the evangelical churches far more than through the Congregationalists or the Presbyterians, the remaining Calvinists.

Lage: What about movies and dancing?

May: Movies--if there was anything faintly sexual about it, he'd been known to walk out, followed by the whole family. This was in the twenties. Nothing against dancing, per se, but my mother, who had certain English snobberies, cared about the kind of friends I had, though she couldn't do very much about that.

Lage: Did she care about their ethnicity or their manners?

May: Oh, ethnicity didn't come into it. There was nobody of any other than northern European background living anywhere near us.

Lage: I was thinking of high school, I guess, when you went to University High School.

May: It didn't come up much there either, really. I can talk about that when we get to high school.

Family Religion and Standard of Living

Lage: Okay, let's continue with the earlier years.

May: Yes, all right. You have said that you want to know about family religion.

Lage: Yes.

May: Episcopalian. My father had been a seeker all his life. In his youth he tried everything. He was much attracted by Swedenborgianism, as many New Englanders were, but always with much doubt and a struggle with himself. We used to go for walks together, and on these we would have pretty good talks. The established custom was we would wrestle each other for his cane that he always carried. That was okay. And once I asked him, "Dad, what would you like if you had your first choice--anything you wanted right now?" thinking maybe a million dollars or something of that sort. And he said, "Peace of mind." And that's something he didn't have.

Lage: That's an interesting answer. Did the concern with money leave a lasting mark on you at all?

May: Yes, I think so. Well, to give examples, I would hear my mother and father discussing what we were going to do and where we were going to economize. By this time he was living on investments and in the Depression, you know what happened to them.

Lage: Right.

May: Also his investments were not terribly wise, I think.

Lage: I wondered, as I read Coming to Terms, how you were able to keep it going at all?

May: People who came to the house, I was told long after, thought we were rich because of the furniture and so forth. And we had one servant who was very important in my life, who had been with the family since the Denver days. She was old and unemployable almost anywhere else and kept on at a salary of twenty-five dollars a month, which was all that could be afforded. We called her Mungie, which was baby talk for Mary. I have a chapter on her in this book--she was a really important person in my life. So when people saw good furniture and a maid, which a lot of people didn't have at that time, they thought we were rich.

Lage: But you knew this undercurrent--?

May: Yes, of worry. I was very attached to the house we lived in on El Camino in Berkeley. One time there was a for sale sign on the house in front and that made me feel bad.

Lage: After your father died--this again is jumping forward--was your mother able to continue to keep up her living standard?

May: No, she changed it and changed her whole way of life, I think rather heroically. I'll talk about that later. Let me say something parenthetical: my mother died right when I was in the navy and I came home on emergency leave for that in '46. But she had had to take over as my father declined more and more. And since she was so much younger, she had been--even more, I think, than the norm in those days--at first pretty subordinate, though she never entirely was, at least in form. It was a very affectionate couple, it was a very affectionate family.

Lage: So physically affectionate, are you saying?

May: Oh, yes. Yes, I would say so, rather more than many families I think at that time. I haven't mentioned my brother, six years older, John, and my sister, eight years older, Elizabeth. In childhood I sometimes felt as if I had four parents. And that gave me a distinctly rebellious streak from then on. My sister was very nice to me as a child. I had difficulties with her later. My brother was really not interested at all--that is to say, a boy of sixteen's not interested in a child of ten very much. But later, much later, and I'll get back to that, we became very good friends, indeed. But it was an affectionate family, stable.

We moved from a bigger and fancier house near the university in I think 1919. The house that I was brought up in was the only house I lived in from then until I went not to college but to graduate school.

Connections to the UC Berkeley Campus Community

Lage: It didn't seem as if your parents had much interaction with the university people. Did they?

May: Yes, oh yes. They did. As for their friends, there were two categories. One, neighbors in the Claremont district, which is a stuffy district of businessmen, lawyers and so forth--most of whom commuted to San Francisco. But there were also some faculty people --Professor Von Neumeyer in dramatic art, McCormac in American history (a close friend of my father's), and several others. They were always spoken of by the businessman types with a certain respect but also a rather patronizing attitude and considered terribly poor. When I got to college I wondered about this. Why was somebody who's a full professor, who had so much position on the campus, talked about that way?

Lage: Were professors poor as you look back on it?

May: Not very, in terms of the prices of those days. They had salaries at the top of five or six thousand, I guess. My father's salary working for the government had been twelve, which was an excellent salary. And most of his acquaintances were much more in that league, some of them rich. Even that one Harvard classmate who lived also on El Camino, Henry Wagner, who was a big patron of western history and The Bancroft Library, had a great deal more money.

In general, they lived among people who had more money than they did. And as the Depression came and as things tightened up, this had its pretty difficult side. For one thing, my father and hence my mother were Democrats and supported Franklin Roosevelt, and for that they got socially boycotted and even persecuted.

Lage: That's very interesting! I mean, that's a strong word, persecuted.

May: Oh, yes. It's not too strong.

Lage: What kinds of things?

May: Oh, friendships more or less dropped. Well, perhaps a sort of pity and tolerance, at best. When men of the upper middle class got together--say, if they're old fashioned and formal enough so they stayed in the dining room after the women went--they'd start in on, at best, that "god-damned cripple" in the White House. I mean, that's mild.

Lage: These are words that you recall?

May: Not to swear to it, no.

Lage: But referring to the president as a cripple?

May: Yes. Oh, yes. And there were all sorts of anecdotes about how somebody'd come into his office and found him down on the floor cutting out paper dolls. The implication was clearly that he'd lost his marbles and I think the implication beyond that was syphilis. But there was nothing they wouldn't say.

Lage: That's very interesting, particularly since one of the projects I'm involved in is the history of the disability rights and independent living movement and attitudes towards disability.

May: Yes, yes. Well, of course in Roosevelt's case, it was very carefully concealed.

Lage: But that's why I didn't realize that those who criticized him would pick on that.

May: Anything, anything. I mean there were jokes going around, from the scurrilous to the really obscene.

Lage: Well, that's very interesting. I'm glad we happened upon that. Did that push your parents any closer to the campus community, the university? Weren't they a little more liberal?

May: Perhaps so, because the campus community was liberal, yes.

Lage: Was this Professor [Eugene] McCormac?

May: Very much so. He was a very strong Democrat who would joke with his colleague, Professor Paxson, about their differences. But the whole atmosphere, north of the campus particularly, was quite different--more liberal, much more intellectual; from my point of view, just more interesting.

Lage: Was that something before you went to Cal that you were drawn towards or was this something you were aware of?

May: Well, Cal is a very old association. That is, I was taken by Mungie in the First World War to see the soldiers drilling on the campus. And my mother's best friends probably were the Misses Hilgard, the daughters of Professor Hilgard, who had been a very important figure--I've treated him in some of my writings. So the campus was always there. And my father had a good deal of great respect for the faculty. Mr. McCormac told him once he should have been a professor and would have made a good one. But as it was, he had been a lawyer from his youth.

Lage: Well, I think this fills in a little bit from Coming to Terms. We're getting some new things here and getting the important things.

May: All right, good.

Grammar School Years

May: Now we haven't gotten into school.

Lage: I'm interested in what you're interested in but also in the public school aspect of your education.

May: Yes, all right. Well, I'll be fairly frank about that. In grammar school I went to John Muir School, the neighborhood school. The students were mostly from the upper middle class, like the neighborhood. The exceptions were Shu Wong, who was treated all right but regarded as very special, and Italians--the large family that worked for the gardener of Mrs. McDuffie, the wife of the real estate tycoon.

Lage: And they lived on their estate?

May: Yes, and there was one of them in each class. When the class got together to have a party, the question was should we invite Angelina Celeste or leave her out? That was the main discrimination. Jews, I hardly knew about--that is, I had very little idea that Jewishness mattered at all. My mother was an excellent singer--professional caliber, a serious singer. Her singing teacher was Lawrence Strauss, a well-known teacher in this region, and when he was coming to dinner, my brother would make a certain number of jokes about serving bacon or ham and that kind of thing. And it was recognized that that family and their children were somehow different. But when I encountered Jews in school, I didn't have much of an idea that Rosenbaum was any more or any less an American name than say Murphy. [laughter]

Lage: Of course, there's a lot of prejudice against the Irish.

May: Not here. I didn't encounter it.

Lage: Until you went to Harvard, it sounded like?

May: Oh, yes. Very different indeed. But in grammar school, since I was a bookish boy brought up mainly by women, I naturally had a pretty tough time. Very poor at any athletics, took a good deal of beating for that. Also, bright in ways that were not popular. This was a

story of, I would say, a good 50 percent of the people who end up as professors.

Lage: Yes, right. [laughter]

Family Trip to Europe ##

May: Suddenly, shortly before I had finished grammar school, I learned with great excitement that we were going to spend the next year in Europe.

Lage: And that proved to be an important experience for you.

May: Enormously, and in a lot of ways. It was a bold decision of my parents, who now were none too well-off. I suspect that my mother had proposed it because my father was unhappy and sad about his own career and this would be a way to take his mind off it. Anyway, both of them had very good memories of being in Europe earlier. So we decided to take this year off from our usual pursuits.

Of course I loved the trip on the ship both ways. Children always do. We started by paying a visit to my mother's family in Bournemouth in England. Her stepmother and her half sister, I think rather bravely, had prepared for this unknown American family.

Lage: Was this the first time they had met you?

May: It was the first time they had met anybody in the family, the first time they had met my father. My father, of course, was about the age of my step-grandmother, which perhaps complicated things. They were awfully nice to us, tried very hard. I think that the children were not as bad as they feared. We got along pretty well and did a lot of sightseeing in Dorset and Hampshire--cathedrals, castles, and so forth--and spent some time in London, all very exciting.

But then we went to Belgium, which somehow has played a rather special role in my life [laughs] and where my father had traveled, and on to Paris, which for both of them--as for me, later--seemed the great good place. We stayed there some months, enough so that living there was beginning to be taken for granted--and not just as sightseers. We stayed in a small hotel on the Left Bank and traveled a bit in France from there, but mainly in Paris.

Lage: How receptive was Paris to Americans at that time? Do you remember any of your experiences?

May: Well, it was the great time for Americans in Paris, of course, but my family were completely unaware of Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and so forth. There were also American tourists, and the hotel had several American and English tourists. But it was still rather an exceptional thing to go for a long time.

Lage: Yes, I would think so.

May: Some did.

Lage: Did your family speak French?

May: My sister did. I did, I learned to a certain extent. My brother roughed it and my father, though he read it very easily, couldn't speak a word.

Lage: And your mother?

May: She had okay French, yes. She'd spent some time there studying singing in her youth.

Lage: Did this trip have any effect on your love for history?

May: Oh, my, yes. Sure. I already had a good deal of that, but this gave me the sort of romantic interest in the past that I think is there whether they admit it or not in most people who go in for history.

The story of this wonderful year was complicated for the whole family by the fact that I got a serious case of diphtheria--I must be one of the later sufferers from that disease. If this hadn't happened I might have been sent to school somewhere. As it was I was rushed to a very good American hospital at Neuilly, a suburb of Paris. There, as a matter of fact, I had a splendid time.

The nurses were mostly White Russian emigrés and very charming and pleasant. And then when I got in the men's ward, since I was the only kid there, I was made much of and on the whole had a better time than I was having outside and was rather sorry to leave.

Lage: Does that speak poorly for the time you were having on the outside?

May: A good question. Mostly I loved being in Europe, but what I lacked, completely and acutely, was society outside the family and particularly, of course, people my own age. We all went to Menton, on the south coast of France, for some sunshine, and then I was sent back to England to finish recuperating. My Aunt Nina did her very best to invite boys my age for tea and we had a little dog somebody

had left, so I had a pretty satisfactory time for the first time away from my parents.

Lage: You have described this year as your first great remembered experience. I loved that phrase. Do you still stick with that?

May: I'd say "first great remembered good experience." So powerful, in fact, that I had a hell of a time getting over it.

Junior High and High School

May: You can imagine, I'm sure, what it was like to come back to junior high, always a tough period, after a year in the company of adults, talking more than ever like a book, and full of memories that nobody was at all interested in. So, seventh to ninth grades were not easy. No use going into detail. Eventually, the other boys got more interested in girls than in pouring gravel down my neck. Also, I learned to adapt. I'd gotten passable at some of the sports.

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Lage: Sports was really a rite of passage?

May: Oh, it was utterly important--an hour of gym every day. I got okay at everything but baseball--couldn't catch a ball or hit one. Or tumbling: I was too weedy and long to be able to do a somersault off a trampoline. I couldn't have done that any more than I could have flown out the window. But in basketball, soccer particularly, whatever else we did, including boxing occasionally, I was all right.

And also I knew how to talk. I didn't talk like a book anymore in school, as I had. Also I met a very nice girl, brought up partly in Europe, and we had a certain calf love affair, I would say. So by the time I got out of high school things were getting distinctly better.

Lage: Where did you go to high school?

May: University High, for both junior high and high school. Six long and very formative years. It was a very special school. It was not in a good neighborhood. Eventually the school turned into Merritt College, which you've seen in a derelict condition on Grove Street [now Martin Luther King, Jr. Way]. There were some pretty tough kids there, kids of bootleggers among them. But there were also a lot of people from the hills, including some faculty kids, who got

in by petition. There was a modus vivendi between these two groups. Mostly the locals were Italians, and so you would have an Italian kid elected as chief justice if an Anglo kid was student body president. This was all very tacit.

Lage: All kind of unspoken?

May: Yes, but there was a very advanced student government--of course, largely fake and run by teachers, who helped keep the balance between groups.

Lage: Do you think that teachers were working behind the scenes? It seems like such a sophisticated thing for kids to work out.

May: Oh, kids are pretty sophisticated in things that are absolutely immediate to them. I'd say the big tough Italian fullback had campus prestige, but so did, say, the student body president who was Anglo--we didn't use that term, but who was from a prosperous family and from the hills. But when it came to dating and so forth, these divisions didn't altogether hold because you get attracted to one or another girl and boy.

Lage: So there was some dating across those lines?

May: There was some dating across those lines.

Lage: What about friendships, for going home and after school?

May: There was some of it--mostly not, because they went to different places. If it was a couple miles from where we lived I sometimes walked and usually went on the Key train, so there was a certain very loose and free kind of segregation, mostly tacit. Of course, all that we read or were taught was about democracy, and one wouldn't have said anything derogatory about the other group except maybe in private if there was somebody you really disliked or something like that. And it worked pretty well.

The other thing that was special about Uni High was that it was where the university trained all their student teachers. That meant that we had a quite splendid core of senior teachers who were in the education department at the university, ex-officio. And then we always had a succession of student teachers, some of whom were terrified and abject, and to them we gave an awful time, but occasionally somebody brilliant because it was the Depression and there were people who were in graduate school, who would have liked to have had a Ph.D. and taught in college, but had to teach high school. I had some great good luck in that respect.

Lage: With good teachers, challenging teachers?

May: Yes, very much so. There were some very good ones. One that I talk about in this book was a student teacher in Latin who had an advanced class of four, I think, that went through a great deal of Latin literature, especially poetry, which turned me on. And another was a creative writing teacher, Miss Eileen Power, who deserves to be commemorated a bit, because not only did she have us write in all forms--I wrote mainly poems and essays, too--but she encouraged us to send them to magazines and told us how to do that, what form letter to write and so forth. And I got several things published when I was in high school.

Lage: That's quite interesting. You wouldn't think of that happening now, really, unless it was sort of a special publication.

May: No, I don't think so. The whole culture was much more bookish than now. This is all long before TV. As for radio, when I was in junior high school, like most kids I had a crystal set. And by wiggling this little wire very carefully, you could get in your earphones rather clearly the dance bands from the Claremont Hotel, which was about two blocks away. And that was big stuff.

Lage: Oh, that was big stuff! You didn't hear things from more distance?

May: No--well, very seldom. In grammar school we were all taken to the assembly, I remember, in 1925 to hear the inauguration of President Coolidge. And you heard crackle, crackle, crackle with, "I do," and that's about what it came to. So books were it. If you had any taste for general information, literature, history, it was books. And an awful lot of kids--a minority but a big one--read a great deal.

Lage: Did most of your classmates from John Muir go down to University High?

May: Very few. No, they mostly went to Claremont Junior High and to Berkeley High.

Lage: And what distinguished those who chose to go to University High?

May: Well, their parents had a special wish and went out of the way and petitioned for it.

Lage: So it was serving the locale and then those who petitioned?

May: That's right, yes.

Lage: But were they ones who wanted greater intellectual stimulation?

May: I'd say they heard it was a better school. I don't know that it was. From people I knew who went to Berkeley High that was a very good school, too.

Lage: Interesting. I was struck--this is jumping ahead, also--but when you mentioned World War II, one of the experiences was being with the cross section of American society.

May: I'd learned how to get along by that time.

Lage: But in University High you had some of that?

May: I had some of that, and I'd say that was very possibly the most important part of what I got from there. I did learn how to get along with various kinds of people and what to say and what not to say.

Lage: You mentioned that people didn't refer to themselves as Anglos. How did they refer to themselves to distinguish from the Italian groups or others?

May: People from the hills, usually.

Lage: What about attitudes towards girls? Were the girls intellectual equals?

May: Well, I don't suppose the attitude toward girls was different from what it always is, but the taboos, of course, were stronger than later on. I was, I'd say because of various things in my background, particularly timid, so in my relations with girls up to this point and long after, I never got very far in the physical relations. An occasional kiss--

Lage: I was thinking of the intellectual relations. [laugh]

May: Oh yes, entirely equal. There were some very intellectual girls, one of them with whom I'm still in touch is one of the few people I know alive from there. I don't think there's any harm in saying my most important girlfriend in high school was named Helena Steilberg. She later married Ed Lawton in the music department here after spending some time at Harvard herself.

Then there was another girl, now dead, with whom I was certainly never in love, Edith Holden, who was rather homely and very bright. And she and her divorced mother--who'd lived in Europe a great deal--from high school through college--they were very poor --lived in an apartment behind the house on Ellsworth Street and served green tea on Thursdays to a sort of hyper-intellectual bunch. Green tea was all they could afford.

Lage: Oh, green tea was an economic thing, not a Buddhist thing? [laughs]

May: Yes, not a cult thing, no.

University of California, Berkeley, 1933-1937

Lage: Okay, should we move you to Cal, then?

May: All right, why not. Getting to Cal, for me, was liberation. Because we were so broke I lived at home, which I very much don't recommend and which had some bad consequences. Nonetheless, it was a different world and I quickly found myself at home there. I was delighted that none of my mixed high school reputation followed me at all.

Social Life and Extracurricular Activities

May: I also was very thrilled at the beginning when I got rushed by several fraternities. The fraternities, then, were having a very hard time paying their mortgages, so they almost immediately tried to pledge anybody who came along. But it was terribly flattering and I joined one but found after a while I didn't really need it and so was allowed to drop out without the usual letter being sent around that does social damage.

But I had immediately, almost, wonderful friends, I thought and still think. My closest friend, now dead, like most of my friends, was Burr Overstreet, who was the son of Harry A. Overstreet, the very popular psychologist professor in New York. His divorced wife, Elsie Burr Overstreet, lived on Canyon Road. She was very hospitable and Burr and I became very close friends. We went on a trip together between freshman and sophomore years in his car; I could hardly drive, and we didn't have a car. We went to a lot of places, including Yellowstone and Teton and so forth.

Lage: That's quite a trip.

May: Oh, yes. And then he and I and another friend went on a camping trip in Oregon in the next vacation. We would sometimes--innocent amusement enough--play Monopoly all night, and Mrs. Overstreet would serve us breakfast. We talked immensely about world affairs, radical politics, everything else. Then I had other close friends,

but I don't want to go over them one by one--one or two of them from high school.

Lage: Was it 1934 when you entered Cal? I just want to get a date on here.

May: '33. Then the Occident, the literary magazine, went into hard times. I was invited to become the first chairman of the editorial board and then editor. And that was an absolute high point in my college life. We, I think, put out a good little sheet. I've got copies of it.

Lage: How did you come to be editor? Had you published in it?

May: No, it was probably through the English department, where I'd had writing classes and done well enough, I think. Or word of mouth, I don't know. Anyway, we tried to get somebody outside of the campus to write and we netted contributions from, let's see, an interview with Lincoln Steffens, and through Emmy Lou Packard, an artist who died recently, we got a sort of interview with Diego Rivera. Then we got an original story from Gertrude Stein. She was a friend of a young man who was a freshman on the Occident back then, who later became a very well-known poet, so we copyrighted that issue. And anybody who ever wants to put out a complete Gertrude Stein would have to get it, I guess. It was a good story and not hard to understand.

Lage: What year would that have been?

May: I'd say '36. No, more likely '37, when I was a senior. We tried to make it a campus review rather than just a strictly literary magazine, though we did publish poems and stories.

Lage: From students?

May: Yes. The Occident gave me another social circle, and then there were other circles. One, a north Berkeley circle that I've described in the book, I was on the fringes of. Mostly faculty kids, strictly from north Berkeley, highly intellectual, rather austere--the-milk-and-graham-cracker set. And they were very musical.

Lage: So we have green tea and then we have milk and graham crackers?

May: Well, that's a totally different group. [laughs] But I tried very consciously not to confine myself to intellectual sets, but to know other kinds of people, too. And the result was, I'd say, a really pretty rich social life.

Academics

May: And also courses were important. Benjamin Lehman, whom many people remember, taught a course called "Writing in connection with reading certain great books of the nineteenth and twentieth century." And we would read, say, Whitman, or well, even Willa Cather, and then write anything we wanted--poem, story, essay. He was a rather gushy, emotional lecturer. The two teaching assistants there were literary people and not above snidely caricaturing him. They had some of the students to their apartments, where we read each other our stuff. That was a great experience, that course. It was a sophomore course.

Lage: Are you saying that he was maybe not intellectually as high level as you might have wished?

May: Well, no. He was a dramatist and that's what you want for an early college teacher. He was a Freudian: [with intoned voice] "Where did the white rabbit go? Into a hole." [laughter]

Lage: This course left an impression?

May: Yes.

Lage: Did it introduce you to literature you hadn't read it before? Or had you been exposed to all of it?

May: Oh, yes, and most exciting, too. That was the most exciting process. Of course, a very big thing was reading Whitman, as it is for all adolescents, I think. I don't remember that we read Marx, but we certainly read Marxists.

Then in my junior and senior years I took seminar sorts of courses with T. K. Whipple, who was a good writer who wrote occasionally for the New Republic and so forth. And this also attracted mostly the pretty heavy intellectual set. In general, the literary intellectuals at Cal at that time thought as a matter of course they were about the brightest people anywhere. They weren't right, but it was very good for us to feel that way, I think.

Lage: Did you find out differently when you went on to the next step, then?

May: Yes, I did. But I had, in other words, a pretty good time--not without certain hang-ups. I was awkward around girls, which I was very conscious of. And I also was inhibited in other ways and got in the habit of working rather compulsively to make A's, and I don't

think that's good for anybody. But I needed the fifty dollars or the hundred dollars in scholarships.

The money arrangement was unsatisfactory. My father was broke, but if I asked him for five dollars or ten dollars he always gave it to me. And this put, of course, a good deal of emotional pressure on me not to ask, so I had various jobs, all of which I hated: demonstrating Campbell's soup in grocery stores, reading to a skinflint old man who would have me read three hours to him and get him a glass of lemonade and not give me one, that sort of thing. That's what you did in those days. Thirty-five cents an hour was good.

Lage: Sort of demeaning type of things?

May: Yes. Oh, yes.

Lage: Had your brother and sister gone to Cal?

May: My sister went for the first two years at Cal, then when we went to Europe she stayed there and studied music. Then she came back and got a teaching credential at Mills and taught. For a while she was a student teacher at University High--and got a good many echoes of her brothers.

I've always thought I was fortunate because my brother and sister remembered when the family was very well-to-do and they associated with rich kids. I was absolutely in my element at Cal. My brother went to Stanford, had a car and an allowance, was in a fraternity.

Lage: So just six years before, your father was able to afford that?

May: Well, he did it, anyway.

Lage: Or tried to afford it.

May: It was difficult. Yes, but I would not have wanted to go to Stanford, at least I thought I wouldn't. Who knows, if I had gone there. But Cal was absolutely my happy home and I'd try to find an excuse often to have dinner at The Black Sheep and stay and study in the library at night.

Lage: I remember The Black Sheep.

May: Yes, it was where the English department hung out. Do you remember Fritzi, the owner?

Lage: No, I don't remember it that well. What was the image of Stanford then in those years? Was it a rich boy's school?

May: Well, we thought of it as that, yes.

Lage: Because at one time I thought it'd been started to--

May: Oh, it was, that's right. It was started as quite the other way, but by this time it had become--the image, from Cal anyway, was a rich man's school. And we thought we were superior. [laughs]

Lage: We still do!

May: Certainly we were more cosmopolitan, and there were more kinds of people here. I think that's so.

Lage: You've mentioned several groups, and now I'm getting back into the ethnic and rich and poor: did these groups that you were in cross the lines of social class?

May: Oh, yes. The business manager of the Occident was a guy named Sol Ivanoff--Jewish with a New York background and a pretty strict Marxist. I remember that he thought that literature or anything was not worthwhile if it didn't pertain to the class struggle. And I remember asking him one time, "Sol, isn't that just as if you were in the Middle Ages and said that nothing that wasn't relevant to Christianity was worthwhile?" And he said, "Yes, that's what they said and they were right." That stayed with me.

Lage: At that time?

May: Yes. Most of my friends, close friends, were from either the same ethnic background or Jewish. As for class, some of my best friends lived in Oakland, were quite poor, and took the streetcar to college. And you know, this didn't make any difference, particularly in an intellectual sense. Now, the milk and graham crackers group was strictly north Berkeley academic kids. Of course there were differences in background and upbringing, but that didn't make any difference in social life or, particularly, intellectual life. Not at all.

Sports and Campus Politics

Lage: What about involvement with the sports teams and going to games, that kind of thing?

May: Well, I liked going to the football games. And after I got to know Burr well, we sometimes sat in bleachers on the top of his mother's house, where you could see the game almost as if it was a map. You could see it almost as if you were in the press box. But occasionally, even then, my friends would move down into the rooting section because it was a lot of fun. Burr actually was on the fencing team and had a circle C. None of my friends were participants in major sports, but we got excited in Big Game week and went to the rallies, particularly the all-male rally in the gym before the big game, when the extremely obscene songs were all sung. There was sort of a controlled frenzy for Big Game week.

The two chronological episodes every year were the events of the Big Game week when nobody talked anything about politics and then the yearly Peace Strike at Sather Gate where a few thousand people congregated.

Lage: Was this every year?

May: Yes, yes.

Lage: What were they striking for? I mean, there wasn't a war at that time that we were involved in.

May: Not that we were involved in, directly, but remember the Spanish Civil War, also the Japanese in China. As I see it now, this was part of the extreme confusion of the movement, because on the one hand people would carry signs--"Schools Not Battleships"--and there was a strong pacifist element; on the other hand, "Aid the Spanish Republic" or "Aid China."

Lage: Were both of those elements present at the peace strike?

May: Yes, but peace in general covered opposition to ROTC on campus, belief in disarmament, and suspicion of war makers, bankers, munitions makers and so forth, but also sympathy for the Spanish Republic and/or China with generally a very respectful but pretty uninformed attitude toward the Soviet Union. But I'd like to come back to all that.

Lage: Okay, this is just the poles of experience.

May: Yes. One week the radicals had to themselves, another the sports crowd--

Lage: And you seemed to do both.

May: Oh, yes. And lots of people did. One didn't preclude the other at all.

Lage: But I'm sure there were those who didn't even pay attention to the Peace Strike. It doesn't get talked about a lot in many of the oral histories.

May: Well, doesn't it? With Cal people from this period?

Lage: Yes, it seems like it was just on the very fringes of many people's awareness.

May: Yes, well, I'm sure you couldn't help but be aware of it. Some professors canceled their classes out of sympathy, others took roll.

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May: The legend was that the ROTC sent people to cut the loudspeaker cable at one point. Another legend was that there were people from Buildings and Grounds taking photographs of all the people there. But really, what I still believe, I guess, is that groups in the smaller towns of California that really wanted the university broken up did have photographers there.

Lage: You mentioned that in the book, and that was something I wasn't aware of either, that there were people who wanted the university broken up.

May: Oh, yes. I have cartoons in my file from the Hearst Press, from the Examiner, of people with brooms sweeping commie professors out the door and so forth. In other words, there were periodically political attacks on the university.

Lage: So when you say broken up what do you mean?

May: That the money would go to a number of campuses and not just Berkeley.

Lage: I see. In the local areas?

May: Yes. In this time, of course, there was only Berkeley, plus what was called the Southern Branch.

Lage: Yes.

May: But for us, the University of California meant Berkeley.

Lage: Did you have a very strong perception of President [Robert Gordon] Sproul?

May: He had a wonderfully strong voice. He would come to rallies, university meetings, and say how he believed in free speech but not

the excesses that are sometimes called free speech. And he had a wonderful voice for singing the university hymn, which I love. "O God Our Help in Ages Past" echoed very nicely around the stadium and so forth. Walking through the campus, he greeted quite a few students by name, and if you didn't know him you'd say, "Good morning, President Sproul," or something. He was very, very good in that sort of way. And he dealt and bargained with the radical leaders. Sometimes he did what they thought he should, sometimes not, but he was pretty skillful on that kind of thing.

There was a great deal of freedom--that is, by the time I left, the Daily Cal was a radical newspaper. The ASUC executive committee was divided, but some articulate radicals were there, too. So all this wasn't anywhere near blowing up as in the sixties, but there was enough radical activity to get plenty of denunciation from certain parts of the press and from my family's acquaintances in Claremont [section of Berkeley].

I remember once a very dear friend of my parents, a couple, came to dinner--and I don't think I'll use the names. Mrs. X said she'd heard there was a poll taken on the campus that said that the three greatest men of the nineteenth century were Freud, Marx, and Darwin. And I said I didn't know anybody who didn't think so, and she was really horrified. [laughter]

Lage: Now, how did your parents accept this kind of thinking?

May: All right. When I told my father that most of my professors thought we'd made a mistake to get into the First World War and it had been a matter of British propaganda and munitions makers and bankers and so forth he said, "Henry, I'm sure you must have misunderstood them."

Lage: That's a wonderful way to respond. Did that end the discussion?

May: No. On an abstract or national level I could always talk to my father. My mother was not a political person, but she talked to me, and with great effect, about all sorts of personal matters and behavior and so forth. And I loved her very much. About my father I can't quite say that. I was somewhat afraid of him.

Lage: As you talk about your father, you tell an awful lot about the relationship between the two of you.

May: Yes.

Lage: There really was one.

May: Well, there was one, but the sad thing is that he could be somewhat tyrannical. And what I needed was a revolt, but by the time I was of an age and had enough confidence to do that, he was failing so I never--

Lage: So you couldn't do that.

May: Couldn't do that, no.

Lage: But you mentioned earlier today a rebellious streak.

May: Oh, yes.

Lage: Now, how did that manifest itself? Is that later or is that during these years?

May: No, I think I developed, in this period but still more later, almost a compulsion to be on the minority side--less so when I was at Cal because the majority there was very simpatico and very liberal in both senses.

Radical Politics at Cal

Lage: Now you mentioned talking about politics at Cal in the thirties.

May: I think there's not much doubt, though it's really at some times unpopular to say so, that at the center was the Communist party with which people were to one degree or another partly sympathetic.

Lage: The center of the radical movement?

May: Yes. There was an articulate and open Communist group. There were also people who they weren't sure whether they were or not, and there were people who were very close fellow travelers, in which I put myself at that time.

Lage: Was there not as much need to be secretive about it as there was in the McCarthy years?

May: No, not so much. Well, it's not just that, it's that in Communist history, the period of the early thirties was one of their ultra-radical periods, centering in Germany, really, where they were fighting pitched battles with the socialists. So then socialists were social fascists and any moderates or liberals were very bad people.

Then they switched in '35 with Earl Browder and developed the slogan "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism" and became very vocal with their versions of the American Revolution, the Civil War, and whatnot. And what they would say to people who were on the borders was, it really doesn't matter whether you go along with us or not, except assuming you believe in world peace and progress and the New Deal as far as it goes. Because the time is coming when there will be a choice: you'll either be a Fascist or a Communist and that'll take care of itself. That was the general line.

The organization that was most important was the American Student Union, which as I remember had the planks of world peace, support for students, racial equality. But who was against those, you know? I never could quite join that because I guess I was a little suspicious, but I went to their meetings and cooperated with it a good deal. Then there were a few religious pacifists and socialists who were sometimes in these meetings but distinct. And then, of course, a large group of students who were thoroughly unpolitical--apparently like some of the people you've talked to--but would probably be more liberal than conservative on the whole and more likely to be Democratic than Republican. But I, at this point, tried very hard to go along as much as I could with the close fellow traveler group and had some difficulties.

Lage: Now, what did it require to go along with the close fellow traveler group? Was there a lot of discipline or positions that you needed to endorse?

May: There were positions that you needed to endorse and I usually did. Let's see, what were the big dividing points? Well, everybody was for the New Deal but it didn't go far enough. Everybody was for socialism and eventually we'd have to come there. Then in foreign policy the question was following the very sharp changes of the party. But this was one of the easier periods when people like me and my friends were perhaps critical of the Soviet Union but were for having good relations with it, and for respecting it, and defending it, and denying the terrible things that some people said against it at the time of the purge trials.

Lage: Was there a lot of information about the purge trials?

May: Yes. There weren't many Trotskyites.

Lage: There were not, you say?

May: There were a few, but not many in this whole region. The center of radicalism in the region was the Longshoreman's Union, the center of the general strike of '34. Harry Bridges, the leader of the Longshoremen and the general strike, was never proven to be a

Communist, but followed their line pretty closely. I learned much later, talking to Trotskyites and other dissident radicals, that even they respected him, because he had done so much for the waterfront unions. But you know that story.

Lage: Just to put a little footnote here: I recently heard a talk by a man who's doing a biography of Harry Bridges and who's gone to the Soviet Union and looked at files of the American Communist party.

May: Fascinating. Those files put a whole different light on all this.

Lage: Absolutely, and he feels that Bridges does seem to have been in the party. Maybe not a very disciplined member.

May: He was a Communist, actually?

Lage: It appears that way from the files.

May: Yes, I see. Well, I knew later at Harvard that there were people that they preferred would not come out in the open, who were of more use otherwise. There were doubtless people like that but not on campus circles. The professors were far left to liberal almost to a person--I could almost say to a man--in those days. [laughter]

Lage: Yes, probably.

May: Now, in San Francisco, the Communist party was a real party with some real organization and some prestige. The waterfront had great prestige. You were supposed to admire the CIO and particularly the maritime unions. But the choices were not terribly hard because as long as you were essentially on the right--by which I mean the left --side, you weren't particularly pushed.

A typical instance is when John Strachey, author of the Coming Struggle for Power, which we all read, came and gave a speech here. Somebody, probably a provocateur in the audience, said, "Can we get to socialism without a violent revolution?" And he said, "That's entirely up to the capitalists," avoiding it a little bit, you see. But in general, in this period, the divisions were not as strict as they were later. And anyway, most people at Cal, including most with radical sympathies, regarded the group of well-known, more or less full-time Communists as a bit dull and rigid, and not very interesting, though essentially right. And that's as near as I can describe it.

Lage: That's an interesting time.

May: Yes.

Lage: You have the Henry F. May collection of protest handbills in The Bancroft Library. What were they?

May: Well, those were the ones that were given out every day at Sather Gate and I collected them. They were mostly of the left but there were a few of the right. There were some Trotskyite. In many, Communists were involved.

The one big incident that I took part in, and it has a lot of resonance with what happened later, was at a time when the police decided that handbills could not be handed out at Sather Gate because they cluttered the streets. And that evening a girl whom I knew to be a Communist called me up and said, "Well, Henry, what are you going to do? This is a straight free speech issue." So with many doubts I went down and handed them out. All the assistants from the philosophy department were there, for instance.

Lage: The teaching assistants?

May: Yes. We had made a point of giving pamphlets to the cops. The ordinance was dropped, and this ended the trouble on that particular bit of turf, which was later to become [laughs] rather important. So I had that in my background when it came to the Free Speech Movement.

Lage: So there were no arrests made?

May: No, there were no arrests. There had been some but they were not pushed.

Lage: Of course, at this time Sather Gate was the edge of campus.

May: Yes, that's right. But it was pretty much the same turf where things popped quite a bit later.

Lage: [laughs] Were there students from the sciences that were parts of your intellectual or radical group?

May: Honestly, not many. Nor the engineers. My next door neighbor and present very close friend, Jack Murchio, was in the same class. He was in biology. We didn't know each other until we met here much later. No, the group I'm talking about--and this should be made clear--is, I would say, perhaps three or four thousand people at the most in a campus of 15,000.

Lage: Yes, that would make sense.

A Serious Girlfriend

May: There's another topic at Cal that I discuss in Coming to Terms that's very important, and that's my girlfriend Jane. She was a pretty serious girlfriend, and we'd even talked about marriage. But she wouldn't consider that unless I left home. She saw, correctly, that living at home was partly responsible for my inhibitions. And she didn't want to be a faculty wife; I'd have had to do something else. She was very good at working in fancy department stores. I guess the thing I considered, when I dreamed about it at all, was going to New York, where I would do my best to get started as a writer and she would work, and for a while she'd bring in most of the money. Then I hoped like everybody to get on the New Yorker, as they did take editors of college literary magazines sometimes.

And well, I wasn't ready. That would have taken a certain amount of passion, not only for her but for making a big break with my family and with everything else. I wasn't ready for it. Excellent girl. When I was writing Coming to Terms I tried very hard to find her. I think she's dead. We lost touch. And to get ahead, by the time I met Jean, whom I married, I was ready. I was a rather backward young man.

Lage: Well, you were young, after all--thinking of being ready.

May: Yes, twenty-two by the time I left Cal, delayed by the year in Europe.

Hiking Experiences

Lage: You haven't told me yet about your hiking, something I always connect with Bay Area people. Tell me about what role this played in your life.

May: A very big one. My friends and I loved to go hiking in Marin County, and it was a point of honor with us that no term papers, exams, or anything stood in the way when one of these was proposed. At that time the way you got there was to take the ferry to San Francisco, then a ferry to Sausalito, then from there another train --there was a Mill Valley route and a Fairfax route--and then walk. You could walk from one to the other. We'd walk sometimes a good twenty miles. All people who know each other pretty well--boys and girls, with no great tensions about that. Then at the end we would usually come back to San Francisco and have dinner together in an inexpensive French or Italian restaurant, of which there were many,

and be rather proud of the fact that we were in dirty, sweaty, hiking clothes.

Lage: This must have been a very long day?

May: Yes. That was what was good about it. [laughter]

Lage: Is that something you kept up over the years?

May: Yes. Always loved the area and always loved to hike.

Lage: Did you start out as a younger person hiking on this side of the bay?

May: Oh, sure.

Lage: Up in the Berkeley hills?

May: Yes, oh, yes, the Berkeley hills were just fine for that.

Lage: Now was that something when you went East that people also did?

May: No. The area around Cambridge isn't particularly conducive to hiking. You have to go a long way. There are the Blue Hills, but--

Lage: But this kind of release from school?

May: No, I don't think there's any city, even now, like San Francisco in the fact that you can get from the city to wonderful country in almost any direction very easily. These hikes, the easy, casual atmosphere, the beautiful country, the singing, were an epitome of my life at Cal, and exactly what I missed most in my first years at Cambridge.

Leaving for Graduate School at Harvard University

May: Now, as for going to Harvard, I was very torn about wanting to be a historian or another kind of a writer, but I needed a means of support. My father didn't have anything except a $1000 bond which was in my name, and I could have that and then try to get scholarships. Well, I applied for scholarships and normally with the campus record I have, I should have gotten one. I have some theories about why I didn't but never mind that.

Lage: That sounds interesting.

May: Well, wrong choices of faculty sponsors, let's say. Naiveté. I competed for a Rhodes Scholarship and got to the San Francisco stage and my very close friend, Bruce Waybur, won it. I went home with him to his family celebration. It wasn't altogether easy. But he was going to Oxford and I went to Harvard. I'd learned from various people that if you went to Harvard and could get through one year, you usually got on the gravy train and got assistantships or something and would be taken care of. Turned out not to be true in my case, but anyway, with very little money Bruce and I--he going to Oxford and I to Harvard--left on the train for the East with a pretty good crowd at the station singing songs and so forth that we'd sung on our Marin hikes.

Bruce and I went East by train, by coach of course. This was the first of a lot of train trips across the continent by coach. That was a very important experience, itself, the trip. That is, the first time it was as exciting to me to go through Reno, Omaha, Chicago, as it would have been Paris or London, it was so strange.

Lage: Now why was that? Was it the times?

May: Well, because I had gotten awfully interested in American studies. That's why I tried to switch: I wasn't an English graduate student but a history graduate student.

Lage: Were you an English major at Cal?

May: No, I was a history major but I took more courses in English, I think. Anyway I was enchanted with the train experience, with the people we met. I can go into detail about that; some of them were pretty interesting. And when we got to Cambridge it looked very exciting. I didn't know the difference between an eighteenth-century red brick building or one that had been built in the twenties, but it all looked quite different from Cal--a little frightening but most exciting. But after a very short time I became extremely unhappy, homesick and in winter subject to bronchitis and so forth.

Lage: So it wasn't easy.

May: It was a tough transition, but eventually I was able to adapt to it. But you see, this is a transition that one ought to make leaving home at eighteen to go to college. I'd lived at home. That was something that I don't at all recommend. So this was a real break.

Lage: So this was a break from the West and the break from the family at the same time.

May: Yes, it was. Yes, both.

Lage: And from the happy provincialism of Cal, as you've described it elsewhere.

May: Yes, that's exactly right.

Choice of History as an Undergraduate Major

[Interview 2: June 24, 1998] ##

Lage: A topic that we missed that seems pretty central to this story is why history? We didn't really get into that last time. And why American history?

May: As an undergraduate at Cal I took somewhat more courses in English than I did in history, but I was a history major. My interests and most of my courses had been in European history. So why American history? That, I think, is part of a development connected with the left-wing popular front. In this period America seemed significant and interesting and it was still somewhat unexplored in terms of folklore, literature, and history. It seemed open and inviting. And there was, perhaps, a certain sense of duty in it--that it's what one ought to do.

Lage: Is this another kind of romantic feeling that was attached to it?

May: Oh, well, sure. [laughter]

Lage: I'd like to hear more about that romantic feeling!

May: Oh, I think it's the one word in cultural history that's the most difficult to define, but I think I'll qualify, and always have, as a romantic if it means that in the long run one follows something other than a rigid reasoning process. I think that one seldom completely understands the reasons for one's choices. I've done better when I've admitted that and taken chances. As you might guess, the writer on this kind of thing that I've found most congenial is William James.

II HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL, 1937-1941

Train Trip to Harvard

Lage: We've talked last time about your train trip back to Harvard, and that even seems to be part of this engagement with the country.

May: Well, that was great fun. It was always by coach, and there's a certain art to traveling by coach: how far you can stick a suitcase out in the aisle to put your feet on without having the conductor trip over it and that sort of thing. After a night of sitting up, particularly after two, people are very cordial and exchange all sorts of reminiscences. And there were all sorts of people. Now, for instance, one time a guy got on who'd been let out of prison somewhere. And everybody liked him. He was very popular, but then after he got off it was discovered that somebody's wallet had gone with him. In other words, it was a broadening of social experiences.

Lage: Right. [laughter]

May: As I remember, it cost eighty dollars round-trip, and you could choose any route you wanted. And I tried them all--the most exciting probably through the south, stopping in New Orleans. The south seemed very much a foreign country. And all the other routes on my way back and forth, and saw a lot of the country.

Lage: Would you stop and get off?

May: In New Orleans for three days, yes.

Lage: What about the Grand Canyon? Did it go through the Grand Canyon?

May: No.

Difficult Adjustments

Lage: Okay, shall we get you to Harvard, then?

May: Yes, to be sure. Well, going to Harvard for graduate school--it was hardly a decision. You went if you could because the rumor was that's the place that got you jobs. And also the rumor was that if you did all right your first year you got on the gravy train and got some sort of support.

Lage: So if you had ambitions towards a Ph.D. and a professorship at a college--

May: Yes, Harvard was, on the whole, where people went. As I've tried to explain, it was a hard adaptation for me, especially coming right after my happy times at Cal.

My parents had given me introductions to family, friends, and relatives in Boston, and I dutifully went and called on them rather formally and learned something there. They were cordial enough but didn't know what quite to make of me--not used to western young men. And nor was I, of course, used to them.

Lage: Could you describe how western young men were different?

May: Well, I think I can do it anecdotally as I have a bit in the book. The daughter of my father's best friend of his youth, Miss Baker, was not married and lived with Miss Lothrop in a house on Marlborough Street. It was a typical upper-class Boston house of that period: living room upstairs, a couple of maids, with family portraits, and that sort of thing. And when I went there with other guests for a Sunday dinner, Miss Lothrop would have been talking to several people about prep schools, particularly: how Groton was going to get along, now that Peabody had retired, and "Where did you go to school, Mr. May?" "University High School, Oakland." "Oh." That was the only answer she could possibly make. [laughter]

"And what is it you're studying at the college?" "History." "What kind?" "American History." "Is that all?" [laughter] That floored me because I thought it was quite a lot. But they were nice enough and somewhat educational. And later, when I found my feet, these acquaintances largely ceased to exist. [laughter]

The first years there were on the whole a pretty bad time. I was in Perkins Hall, a graduate dorm which is really pretty forbidding--granite corridors and metal steps and so forth--and rooming with a man who is really a very nice guy I met in Berkeley when he was on a visit, but a Vermonter and not similar in interests

or tastes, let's say. And I missed everything--the climate, the landscape, my family, my friends--and also was very underfinanced, didn't eat very well.

Lage: The food wasn't part of the package?

May: No, you'd eat at the Greasy Spoon on Harvard Square and try to save money. I was sick a good deal. During the winter I had bronchitis all the time. Also, people were tired: as I hadn't known it was possible to do, most of the graduate students in every field arrived at the library at nine in the morning, stayed there until noon, after a brief lunch went there for the afternoon, and came back in the evening until ten o'clock.

Lage: Did you get the sense that this was a carry-over from their undergraduate days?

May: I don't think so, no. But a part of a very competitive graduate school atmosphere. For instance, in American history, when somebody got a straight A in a seminar, the news was all over right away because that meant he'd get an assistantship next time. It was that sort of atmosphere.

Lage: Very competitive.

May: Yes. Very competitive and not very cheerful. However, there were compensations. I made some friends, particularly--this turned out to be significant--a group from Bowdoin College, which I'd never heard of, who were very much "Harvardolaters" and--

Lage: Harvard what?

May: Idolaters of Harvard.

Lage: Oh, yes.

May: --and quite different in their experience and assumptions and who regarded somebody from California as a bit outlandish. But we got along very well and there was even a literary group that wrote poetry and read it to each other--intellectuals, sort of an ambitious literary group.

Lage: Did you join that activity?

May: Sure, yes. Well, that is, my friends and I started it.

Lage: Oh, I see.

May: It was utterly informal, just in the dorm. I ate my meals at the Episcopal Theological School, not because of any religious affiliation but because they served good meals fairly cheap. There were very few divinity students at that time, so it was mostly law students with some others. Whether for these reasons or not, in my first semester I had rather mediocre results and did not get any fellowship for the following year. But since the courses were year courses, by the end of the year I'd got them all up to A or A-minus so the authorities wanted to help me.

Went home. Very happy to be home. Fine summer. And then when I went back, I had $400 left and I got a proctorship in the hall, which put me supposedly in charge of discipline in the hall.

Lage: That's a big order for somebody young. [laughs]

May: The main controversy that I had to deal with was about rolling beer cans down the metal steps which kept people from studying. And I survived that year. I wiped dishes in the theological school and refectory. There was a rather primitive dishwashing machine, and I've had a dislike for peanut butter ever since because the dishes came through with peanut butter still on them. It was all a bit on the grim side.

Lage: Was there a social outcast aspect to having to work washing dishes?

May: Well, a little.

Lage: That may be a little strongly worded.

May: Yes, a little. That is, I felt I'd rather do that than be a waiter. I'd rather be in the kitchen than giving my acquaintances food.

Lage: Waiting on your friends, that's right. You weren't the only one working your way through, I'm assuming.

May: No, but I was poorer than most at that point.

Dunster House

May: Then I had this wonderful break. I got appointed to a special job "counselor in the extracurricular study of American civilization," which meant living in a house and quite a decent salary for my age and the times.

Lage: This was for your third year?

May: Yes, and just an utterly different life altogether. The house system had the one great virtue: inside the house there was a different hierarchy from outside, so that graduate students would be on ostensibly equal terms with senior faculty members, so that I could talk with distinguished younger faculty like Paul Sweezy, the leading Marxist economist, or even with his friend and opponent Joseph Schumpeter, a great, conservative, Austrian economist.

Lage: Were the faculty associated with the house, too? Was that the idea?

May: Yes, they were in the house. Dunster House had a faculty economics forum which was of great interest. Economics at that time--this is during the struggles of the New Deal--had the status that physics had after the war, perhaps. It was a central discipline that everybody was interested in. The Dunster House forum was a pretty exciting affair.

Also I enjoyed the association with students not much older than I was. The second term I was appointed assistant senior tutor, which is the third in the house hierarchy. So occasionally I had to preside at meetings. When the master and the senior tutor were away skiing, as they were sometimes, I was in charge of the house. That was quite difficult. I was by that time living in a very friendly and egalitarian way with many of the students, and it was hard to go from a cocktail party in somebody's room to the dining room and have the job of putting down bread-throwing, for instance. [laughter]

Lage: Oh, so that's the kind of responsibility you had, kind of keeping order?

May: Yes, but there were others: taking part in the admissions process--which I go into in the book but don't want to particularly here. In this job I made some very good friends, probably the most important of them Henry Nash Smith, who was a year or so ahead of me and very obviously in a position of leadership among the graduate students; he was older, had been teaching a while. I've written a biographical study of him. He became for a long time my good angel, that is, looking out for jobs for me and so forth. And we were very good friends.

Then there was a whole circle of brilliant graduate students and young faculty. I talked in the book a lot about one of them, Jack Rackliffe, an eccentric radical and a very gifted man with a strong penchant for self-destruction. He affected my whole outlook, moved me farther to the left than I had been politically, and gave me a code of conduct which was the opposite, let's say, of prudential.

Lage: So no playing it safe?

May: Yes, taking chances. Going all out.

Lage: Which really wasn't part of your make-up, as I've gathered here?

May: Well, this helped a good deal.

Engagement and Marriage to Jean

May: And so I was very happy and, partly through Jack's guidance, much more expressive and particularly expressive of my emotions than I had been before, which I think explains the big thing that happened in that period, which was my falling very violently and suddenly in love.

Lage: That's an important part of your life, so we don't want to skip that.

May: [laughter] I should say not! Well, all right, a bit about that episode. It was a Dunster House spring dance and the girl that I usually took to dances was busy. I'd failed essentially with her, by the way, and never, let's say, got anywhere. And I remembered that one of my Bowdoin friends, Eddie Benjamin, had appeared at the dull graduate dances with a girl that seemed very lively, interesting, nice looking. So I called her up and asked if she'd go to this dance with me. She said she would. We had a particularly good time and I said, "When can I see you again?" And that was certainly within a couple of days. And the result was that within three weeks we were firmly engaged.

Lage: That's a very short time!

May: Yes. [laughter]

Lage: She must have had this code of not being prudential, as well!

May: Well, no, I think the best way to state it is that we were both ready, as I had not been with Jane, my college girlfriend. So then it was a matter of letting our parents and our families know.

She lived in Portland [Maine] and went home on weekends, and was working as a secretary at a psychological clinic in Boston. When I wrote home, I wrote in no uncertain terms that this was quite different from anything before. And I've always been proud of my mother's response. She accepted this entirely and sent Jean a small present.

It was a little more difficult with Jean's grandparents. They at first seemed to accept me, looked up a few things about my family--there were connections in Portland--and had me up there, finally, and put on a great big engagement party. But then Jean's grandmother, the powerful person in that family, decided that she wanted us to put off our marriage until the end of the summer. We had no idea of doing that and so she decided that I'd always had shifty eyes.

Lage: Oh! [laughter]

May: And there was a real break. But at that point Jean's mother came to the rescue and invited me up to Toronto where she and her husband lived--Jean's other home. She spent part of her time in Portland and part of it in Toronto. That went well, so she gave it her approval and we were married in June.

Lage: Now was this June of your third year or your fourth year?

May: Fourth year.

Lage: Was it after you were finishing at Harvard?

May: No, I wasn't finished. By this time I was assistant senior tutor and I was riding pretty high and, you know, thought I was at the top of my profession and so forth. Jean's grandmother didn't think so. That is, since I had no money and no very firm job, which is understandable.

Lage: You can probably appreciate it more now than you could then!

May: Oh, yes. And we later became very good friends. I think almost anybody would have been a bit on the wary side. But anyhow we were absolutely determined. And we did get married and found a place in Lincoln--at that time a beautiful suburb of Cambridge. Spent the whole summer there riding bicycles and eating mostly mackerel, which was six cents a pound, and having friends out from Cambridge. But then, of course, the chill came toward the end of the summer when it was necessary to figure what to do.

I should say that after we were engaged, while I had thought that I would continue to be a tutor for several years--and that was the normal impression--the chairman of the department called me in and said that while they thought very highly of me, there wasn't a vacancy and so they were giving me a traveling fellowship. And since you couldn't go to Europe at that time or anywhere else and there was no reason for me to, he thought it would be okay if I went to New York. So our plans were for Jean, who had, after all, secretarial skills, to work and me to live on this $1,200

fellowship--not too bad in those days--and work on my thesis in New York. However, that wasn't exactly how it worked out.

Mentors and Influential Professors

May: Now do you want me to go into anything else before I leave Harvard?

Lage: We haven't discussed specific professors and ones that might have influenced your thinking.

May: All right, I'm glad to do that. The three great people in American history were professors [Arthur M.] Schlesinger, [Samuel Eliot] Morison, and [Frederick] Merk. And then the great teacher and scholar in American studies in the English department was Perry Miller. I was a student of Schlesinger, who on the surface was a rather unemotional, not particularly inspiring teacher who taught American social history, which amounted to everything but politics--more or less from the invention of the detachable collar to the sewing machine and so forth.

Lage: Is that a Carl Bridenbaugh type of social history?

May: He was Bridenbaugh's teacher. Bridenbaugh's social history was Schlesinger's type of social history. Schlesinger had an enormous number of students and had a great gift for letting each person choose his own topic that he was interested in.

Lage: With guidance or with a hands-off kind of approach?

May: With conferences. First he had me thinking of doing a California project, but that didn't really work out. And then he said, "Well, one of my students is doing the churches and slavery, so why don't you do the churches and capitalism, but don't call it that. It sounds too radical."

Lage: [laughs] He was not a radical, I gather?

May: No, he was a lifelong and ardent and active liberal. He'd been a socialist--I later found out--in the early twenties but most of the time he was a fervent New Dealer. That's what he was.

Mr. Merk, his colleague, taught a very famous course in the western movement. He was an immediate student of Frederick Jackson Turner--really economic in interpretation. He was an encyclopedia of knowledge about all periods of American history and a terribly nice man; everybody was fond of him. And this course was very

famous. I audited it and I took his seminar. And how can I express it? He was naturally and obviously a good man, I'd say, and in politics, deep down rather to the left of Schlesinger, but you'd never know it from any of his teaching.

The other one, Samuel Eliot Morison, was utterly different: old Boston for one thing, arrogant in manner, a great literary historian. A typical glimpse of Morison--in his colonial history course we spent a lot of time on the discoveries because he was at that time tracing the routes of the explorers in boats. He used to say, "There was a time at Harvard when they would assume that any student had a knowledge of sailing small boats, but I think I'll have to tell you something about navigation." [laughter] Also he asked his assistant--adoring and exploited assistant--if I came from the Boston May family. And Ralph, who didn't know, said yes. So I was invited to dinner at his house and there he treated me very politely, of course, and poured the wine and so forth.

Lage: He was a true Bostonian.

May: Oh, utterly. And very deeply. Later wrote an awfully good little book about that called One Boy's Boston. The anecdotes are legion. He comes into my life again in a little bit and I'll leave that to then. Then Perry Miller was an exciting, opinionated, somewhat overbearing man, domineering.

Lage: Over his students?

May: Yes, over everybody. And a man given very much to drink and to talking, rather embarrassingly, about his sexual exploits. He--I have always thought--modeled himself a good deal on Ernest Hemingway. Remember, he was a professor of literature, but what he had discovered was the interest in American religious history, which nobody knew anything about. And so I audited--graduate students after a certain period didn't take courses but listened and did the reading--I audited his first course in American religious history, which opened up any number of things. And since I was writing a thesis somewhat in that area, he invited me to give a lecture. But you never knew with Miller, one day he would be very pally and egalitarian and the next day very icy.

Lage: Was he intellectually exciting?

May: Oh, very. Immensely. He's been much criticized. In fact, there's a whole industry of criticizing Perry Miller. But he is the person who rescued the Puritans in the first place from the hostility of people from Mencken on, including historians who thought of them as a grim and forbidding bunch. Miller put in the center stage their theological views. One of his phrases is that they dared to look

straight at the sun, that is, to contemplate the fate of man without mitigating the probability that they and other people might spend eternity in torture. And he went on right up to more or less contemporary times. That course was formative for me, but so was some of his other teaching.

Lage: You mentioned you studied American civilization. Was that something unique to Harvard? Was it new?

May: They were early in having a formal program. I was not in American Civilization. Henry Smith was, but that's something people have asked me always: why I wasn't in that. I think I had a liking for other kinds of history and thought American studies, though it was broad intellectually and in terms of its discipline, was a bit narrow in its national concentration, perhaps. I'm not sure that that's why. Anyway, I stuck to history but took a lot of courses that were taken by people enrolled in American Civilization, officially.

Dissertation

Lage: Now, let's just look a little bit more about your thesis topic choice. It just seems like it forecast later interests. Had you already delved some into church history?

May: Not at all.

Lage: Schlesinger just said, "Why don't you--"

May: Yes, he studied church history very much as a part of American social history, very much from the outside. He said that he was impervious to religious feelings. When I got to know him well, working with him, I noticed a portrait on his wall. "Who's that?" "Oh, that's Reiny [Reinhold] Niebuhr." They were associated in a lot of liberal causes.

Lage: I see.

May: But Schlesinger was interested in religion as one of the influences on American social history, worth studying as such. Of course, I did not consider myself at all religious at this time, and I had to try to get in the frame of mind of people who were. And I spent quite a lot of time reading theology and particularly books on the social teachings of the churches, starting with Ernst Troeltsch, the great German church historian.

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May: The first great break I got was when I submitted my thesis to Harper's religious department. They accepted it. It was very unusual for a thesis to be accepted for commercial publication. And that's the fact on which my next few jobs--not my next job, but after a while, after the book came out, that was the main thing that brought me, for instance, to Berkeley.

Lage: We'll come back to that, I hope, about the publication and the reception of that book.

May: Yes, right. I'm getting way ahead there because it wasn't published until well after I left Harvard.

Lage: After the war.

May: Yes.

Ethnic Prejudices at Harvard

Lage: I'm just looking to see what else we don't want to miss from Harvard besides the political. Do you want to talk about the ethnic attitudes at Harvard?

May: The traditional statement is that, "The Bostonian loves the Negro, tolerates the Jew, and hates the Irish." And that's not too far off. Of course, Harvard then, more than the other New England colleges, was in the process of becoming cosmopolitan with their national scholarships, mainly for people from the west. And there were lots of Jews from New York up there who were among the brightest and best, but still had trouble getting jobs. And all this is something that had the finest possible nuances. For instance, in Dunster House I spent a lot of time with a particular group of students without at first realizing that they were Jewish and finally learning from one of them that they were the second best Jewish group in the house. [laughter]

Lage: So they were very aware--

May: Oh, my! Were they, yes. And one wouldn't not be, not possibly.

Lage: But you came at it a little bit naively it seems?

May: I was naive when I got there but then, of course, I was a political radical utterly opposed to this sort of discrimination, as was

everybody that I knew in theory--and I think most in practice, as well--among graduate students, junior faculty, and so forth. But it was still there very strongly among the undergraduates.

Lage: Was the group of political radicals that you were involved with diverse ethnically?

May: Not particularly, no. In the houses the young faculty mostly had been Harvard undergraduates.

Lage: So they hired from within?

May: Oh, my, yes.

Evolution of Political Attitudes

Lage: Should we talk more about the evolution of your political thinking?

May: Well, as an advanced undergraduate and tutor and so forth, I was under the tutelage of Jack Rackliffe. I was very much a Communist fellow traveler, more than I had been in Berkeley. And this was a period still when that was comparably easy to be. I never joined the party, but really was fairly close in most of my thinking then.

Lage: Was the party discussed?

May: Oh, yes.

Lage: Did you know who was in the party?

May: Well, no, I wasn't sure. I had a pretty good idea, but it turned out to be partly wrong. Later, somebody I know talked to the Senate Internal Security Committee so there was a definite list and I was surprised both at some who were in the party and some who were not, who I thought were. There was a fairly thin line in those days but membership was essentially secret.

As we learned later from these revelations--I didn't know this at the time--an organizer from the party would come and talk to the group at Harvard. But he didn't tell them to slant their teaching at all--he knew that they wouldn't--but rather urged them to join the teacher's union and turn it their way.

And that brings me to the big political crisis which came with the various twists and turns of the Communist line. When I was home in Berkeley one summer, I think probably between my second and third

years at Harvard--well, let's see, we can be exact about this. In '39 came the revelation of the Stalin-Hitler pact, which shook us all tremendously, but I managed to bring myself to decide that it had been a matter of self-preservation or something like that. Anyway, I didn't leave the left then.

Lage: Did you decide this while you were still out here in Berkeley, or was this a discussion after you got back?

May: Well, both. But then that meant that during the argument that developed in 1940-41 about aid to England and Roosevelt's policy of approaching gradually full support of the Allied cause, the Communists and people who followed them were violently against this. The slogan was, "The Yanks are not coming." And I, to my later great regret, stuck with that. At Harvard this was a minority position among the faculty as well as the students. That is, most were ardently in favor of aid to England. And mixed with good sense, there was a certain amount of Anglophilia, which I didn't like.

Lage: So that turned you off.

May: That turned me off.

Lage: Even though you had the roots of family--

May: Yes, even though or because. My father had been a tremendous Wilsonian so I was an anti-Wilsonian, naturally. So I stuck with the Communist anti-war line in that period. Of course had to register for the draft in Harvard but hoped I wouldn't get drafted because I was getting married. A few days after we were married in Toronto, came the next bombshell: the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. And that turned all the Communists immediately into pro-war patriots, and most of the anti-war organization at Harvard, which I had rather naively joined, collapsed. So from then on one knew that one was going to be in the war. I theoretically was willing but in practice, of course, didn't look forward to it.

Lage: Now what about pacifist feelings that were so strong in the inter-war years? Was that part of this?

May: Not really. At Berkeley and at Harvard--but Berkeley more--there were pacifists who allied with the Communists and other radicals in things like the annual peace strike. At Harvard I wasn't aware of them. What I was aware of was a few Trotskyites. Now, it's an interesting fact, and I have commented on this elsewhere, that by this time a large part of New York intellectual life was former Communist, anti-Communist left, Trotskyite, the group in the

Partisan Review, Edmund Wilson, many others. But that was not how it was at Harvard.

I should go back here and mention one other professor, F. O. Matthiessen, who was of course a very gifted scholar of American literature and who was the patron of a lot of the people I knew in American studies, broke with Perry Miller over aid to England, which he opposed.

Lage: Against aid to England?

May: Yes. The tutors like me were mostly members of the teacher's union, which was affiliated with the Boston AFL [American Federation of Labor] of all things--a pretty different group. The climax in the whole argument about aid to England and attitude toward the war and related issues came with a motion in the teacher's union chapter to give five dollars to the American Student Union, which was in the anti-war position. And that broke up friendships. It's in any number of memoirs.

Lage: Now were you deep into that?

May: Oh, yes.

Lage: And you must have voted to give the money?

May: Yes. I was very anti-war. This was before the Nazi invasion, so people were under the influence of Communists and some others who were not were very much on the other side. Matthiessen was in all sorts of groups with Communists, for which he was later violently attacked. It had something to do with his dreadful suicide, but he was also a Christian--rather unusual in those circumstances--an Episcopal lay reader. He was his own man except he had a rather sentimental attitude, I'm afraid, toward the working class, of which he was by no means a member but of which he wanted somehow to be a part.

Lage: How do you explain this kind of fierce attachment of the fellow travelers? Did this all grow out of the Depression?

May: Yes, well, that had started, in my case as I have said, at Cal. One had to try to explain why if one was a decent guy and a liberal, one was not a Communist, why one didn't side with the people who were really committed to the socialist future. That was the line always in any period. One didn't ever know much about Russia, but kidded oneself a good deal. The attraction really, I think, most was the all-out demand--that people wanted something to which they could sacrifice themselves.

Lage: To kind of be a true believer.

May: Yes.

Lage: Was your friend Jack Rackliffe an important part of that circle?

May: Yes.

Lage: So this is part of his--

May: His ambience, very much so. And since that all came out later, there's no real harm in my saying that he was a Communist.

Lage: Did you realize it at the time?

May: Pretty much.

Lage: But it was definitely a hidden thing? People weren't able to just say, "I'm a member of the party."

May: Yes and no. In the period of the popular front some people did. For instance, there was an immense stir at Harvard during my first year in Dunster House when Granville Hicks of the New Masses, a leading communist literary intellectual and who was in the open, was appointed. He was very violently attacked in Boston, which always liked to attack Harvard for whatever reasons. As a symbol of the attitudes, the city council at one time seriously debated a proposal that the names Lenin and Leningrad should not appear in any book in the library.

Lage: [laughs]

May: Which would have been almost impossible for Harvard. That is, this was a social antagonism and the Communists and pro-Communists were very heavily upper middle class and the lower middle class very violently the other way.

Lage: That's an interesting way that it broke down. Now did this affect the course of studies? I mean, the attitude of a professor to his student? You mentioned the break between Miller and Matthiessen.

May: Well, yes. The aid to England was the center of it, and when I was against aid to England, I certainly felt a good deal of pressure. I have often wondered if the fact that I was very articulate on that, even in the local press, didn't have something to do with their decision that it would be better to give me a fellowship than a tutorship.

Lage: A traveling fellowship! [laughter]

May: Yes. Not a fellow-traveling fellowship, though. My doubts were increased during the year of my first teaching at Lawrence College, when somebody was given exactly the tutorship in Dunster House that I had had. But I can't prove this.

And may I say, parenthetically, that this position opposing aid to Britain was a fatal mistake. It shows that trusting the heart, which is right in many things, is all wrong when it comes to politics. I took this position mainly because most of my close friends did.

Lage: How did Jean fit into the political swings?

May: Oh, well, she being brought up in Portland was surrounded by Republicans, but her grandfather--a wonderful man, a professional painter, her step-grandfather, actually, somebody very influential in her life--was head of the Portland Museum of Art School and was sort of the tolerated eccentric in conservative Portland social circles. She had been influenced by him to differ from the dominant conservative political circles. And so when she met me, according to what she's often told me, she was attracted for one thing that I was the first westerner she'd met, and for another that I was the first radical. Both were entirely positives. [laughter]

Lage: So those were pluses for you.

May: Yes.

Lage: And she fit into the circle of friends that you had?

May: Yes, very much so. To summarize about Harvard, I think my first two years in Perkins Hall brought out all the compulsive and repressive part of my personality, which was plenty. And the second two years loosened me up a great deal and prepared me to trust and express my emotions a bit more. Those I think are the most important effects of that period.

Lage: You don't choose the intellectual stimulus as the important effects? [laughs]

May: That was there anyway, I think.

Lage: But the other's important.

May: Yes.

First Faculty Position at Lawrence College, 1941-1942

Lage: Okay, now you've mentioned that the thought was you'd go to New York. And did something intervene?

May: Yes, I got called in by Professor Merk. There was a job at a small good liberal arts college in Wisconsin, at Lawrence. The former head of it, now the president of Brown, was Henry Wriston. So of course I took the train down to Brown and was interviewed.

Lage: So he was former head of Lawrence, but he interviewed you for the job?

May: Yes, he still had a good deal to do with running Lawrence in absentia. We talked for a while and he said, "And I suppose you're one of these modern agnostics?" I said, "Yes, sir." And he called and got the president of Lawrence on the phone and told him to take me and to give me a salary of $2,000. And he said, "I suppose you know, May, that we could have gotten you for $1,800." And it was quite true. [laughter]

Lage: What an attitude! Jobs were not easy to find, is that correct?

May: Jobs were very hard to find right then. You didn't turn one down. So we took the train to Lawrence, were met by the president of the college. I don't know that I'll say his name, since he becomes rather the villain of the piece. He was a pretty oppressive figure and it was a very hard transition for me from the brilliant Dunster House circle to this small college. The change is epitomized by the fact that I'd been attending the history faculty meetings at Harvard, at least the less important ones, as a tutor and here the first college meeting, about the same size, was occupied a good deal with the new sprinkling system that had been put in the college lawns.

Lage: [laughs] And the faculty got involved in that?

May: Oh, yes. You got involved in what the president told you to get involved in. This was a pretty grim year--awfully cold, for one thing. Twenty below for several weeks and a bit cold in other ways, too. And I was working terribly hard. I taught two new lecture courses the first term, and the president added another the second term. Since I was utterly over-conscientious and timid about lecturing--which I hadn't done before, or hardly, and therefore was concerned as young lecturers are to have enough material--I worked awfully, awfully hard, suffered dreadfully from insomnia, and in general didn't have a very happy time.

However, we did make a handful of very good friends, all of them more or less on the left and all of them real opponents of the president. Another little point about Lawrence was that the college was a Methodist foundation. It was officially dry, so the main street was lined with bars. And if a faculty member ran into a student there, each of them knew he had something on the other. So that was more or less all right, but in faculty entertaining if you had beer on the table and somebody rang the door, always as a matter of course, you'd quickly put it in the closet before you saw who it was.

Lage: This was in a private home?

May: Yes, oh, yes.

Lage: That's quite amazing.

May: Yes, and I became one of those on whom the president had his eye as a dissenter and he started weeding them out pretty soon.

Lage: And what caught his eye about you?

May: Opposition in faculty meetings.

Lage: I see. You spoke up too strongly on the sprinkling system. [laughter]

May: No, it came to other things--drink, for instance. "I suppose there are some people here," he said one time, "who think that learning to drink should be part of your college existence." And about half a dozen of us put up our hands and that was curtains, pretty much. But of course, one wasn't fired easily. In a small college one isn't because one's part of a social nexus, even without tenure. And firing somebody is a kind of a traumatic event for the whole group, so it's done gradually.

But we had this group of very good friends. And one, named Howard Troyer, was one of a wonderful type that there is likely to be in small colleges: the patron of the young and the dissident. He could talk to the president and he could also talk to us, and so he made things a lot better than they would have been otherwise.

Lage: He was older?

May: Yes.

Lage: He must have been.

May: But the year was a strained one. We got along all right on the salary. Jean, like the proverbial bride, was learning to cook and anyway we couldn't afford much variety, so we mostly had Jean's grandmother's meatloaf. And when we entertained we had meatloaf with mushrooms and served beer. Excellent Blatt's beer was fifteen cents a quart, so we could drink a certain amount of beer.

Lage: And did Jean work?

May: No.

Lage: Did she not work because now she was married and didn't have to work?

May: Faculty wives didn't--very little--not for a long time. That was the pattern. She kept me going and that was hard enough. But we managed to get our teeth fixed, rather badly, and even save some money for going to Berkeley in the summer.

Lage: So you survived.

May: I think that's about it--survived. That was a year to survive.

III WORLD WAR II

Return to the Bay Area

May: Then in the summer [June 1942] we went to Berkeley for Jean to meet my family.

Lage: And that was the first time she'd met your family?

May: That was the first time, yes. My mother by this time was living in a smaller house than the one we'd been brought up in--a very nice and small house. And still Mungie, the servant who'd always been there, was around. Meeting her was as important as anything else.

We moved out, first to a house in Berkeley, and then later moved to San Francisco, where we found an apartment on Filbert Street, halfway up the hill to Russian Hill. And at that time Jean did get a job, and I did, too. I thought I would probably be in the armed forces one way or another pretty soon and wanted to get that over with.

Lage: Had you quit Lawrence when you moved out?

May: Not formally, no. Well, that's a little bit of a story. I had started trying to get into one thing and another because I knew I would have to get into the army or navy, and wanted to under my own power. This was a position that was not uncommon. It's the position in Saul Bellow's novel, Dangling Man, of somebody who was not in the armed forces but thought he would be. I got a whole series of labor jobs which could be had for the asking. And that was a real experience for me.

Lage: That must have been a relief after this preparing of lecture courses.

May: It was a great relief. In fact, what I had to learn about labor jobs is that when you've done something, you don't ask a foreman

what to do next, you goof off until he tells you. That kind of lesson was useful and very different. This was an all right period. I applied to various military programs and was turned down.

Recruitment and Training as a Japanese Translator

May: And then what happened was that Professor [Albert E.] Hindmarsh in Japanese history at Harvard came to San Francisco [in December 1942] to recruit people for the Japanese language school. There were very few people who knew Japanese at that time and they wanted translators and interpreters and so forth very badly. What they wanted was people who'd had some intensive experience of some kind of intellectual work. Mostly they got graduate students, some lawyers, some businessmen. So I went to be interviewed by him at his hotel and we talked a little while and he said, "Well, I think you'll find it nice. You'll like Boulder, on the whole." And I said, "Well, sir, have I any chance of getting in?" "Oh, you're in, you're in." And so that was that.

Lage: And Boulder was where the training was?

May: Yes. I was absolutely overjoyed because I had the two things I wanted: to be in the armed forces, which I thought was inevitable and wanted to get over with, and to still be with Jean for a long time, because the program was at least a year. It turned out to be fourteen months. So we went to Boulder.

Lage: You weren't eager to pick up the gun right away?

May: By no means.

Lage: [laughter] Okay. Well, you get different stories about World War II.

May: From different people. Oh, yes, well, I was all for the war, of course, by that time, as were all the radicals, with the Communists as the center of it more even than anybody else. Some Communists, incidentally, fought heroically. But it was fine with me to be doing my duty by studying Japanese and living in Boulder--a very nice place to live.

Boulder can only be described as a strange interlude. The navy had taken some Japanese out of the relocation camps on the west coast, and had prepared the townspeople, telling them the Japanese were coming, were important, and were to be treated with respect. So we had all sorts of teachers--some of them teachers of little

children from the language schools in San Francisco and Los Angeles, some of them from other professions, a few Caucasians who had lived in Japan and really spoke the language well. We were divided into sections of five and we worked very hard. We had to learn a certain number of characters every week. You're nowhere if you don't know a good thousand or fifteen hundred fairly well, so most of the work was on the written language, which is much easier to teach, of course, than the spoken language. And it was a very good lively group of people. I had good friends there.

Lage: How was the group's attitude towards the Japanese teachers?

May: Extremely respectful. That is, you would call them sensei, teacher, and you'd bow slightly when you met them in the streets and so forth. That was how it was.

Lage: And they were Japanese-American?

May: Yes, Japanese-American, or as I said, a few Caucasians who lived in Japan, but they had to have very good Japanese obviously. And there were all sorts of comic aspects to it. Some people gave their dogs Japanese names and one couple actually gave a child a Japanese name. So, while we were at war, a particular atmosphere was a <u>great</u> respect for things Japanese. The books we were using, which had been developed for embassy children, talked about how we poured out our blood on the plains of Manchuria and so forth.

Lage: Oh my goodness! That was very ironic!

May: Yes. Not all was about that, there was a lot of folklore and so forth. They posted grades every week, comparative grades, and we were under navy discipline, though the married people fared infinitely better than the people who had to live in the dorm in Boulder, where there was a strict little martinet, a former education professor, that tried very hard to be navy. The teacher would practice on our honorifics. First they would ask, "Do you respect Captain so and so?"--he was the head of the naval unit's language group--and then, "Do you respect Miss Walne"--she was a former missionary, the civilian head of the school--and then, "Do you respect Lieutenant Conover?"--and so forth, each using a different kind of honorific. It's a terrible mess of a language because it's adapted; there are Chinese characters adapted to Japanese sounds, so any character can be sounded at least three or four ways.

Lage: Depending on when it came into the language?

May: Yes. And you even do see Japanese speakers making finger gestures to show which character they mean of the syllable they're speaking.

I've sometimes thought it was as if the Chinese had conquered medieval England and then given both Anglo-Saxon and Norman French sounds to Chinese characters. It's an extraordinarily difficult language, which explains why even now the Japanese are handicapped when they are in foreign contact. Japanese is hard on the Japanese.

Lage: Even hard for the Japanese?

May: Yes. And it has something to do with the number of adolescent suicides and something to do with the discipline of the society because they have to work so hard.

Lage: Oh, isn't that interesting.

May: But anyway, we had a pretty good time: a test every Saturday morning and a very good party every Saturday night. And we all had much more money than we'd been used to having. Midway through the program it was decided that we were to be commissioned--we'd been yeoman second--so the May Company came out from Denver and fitted us for uniforms.

We were still under the charge of chief petty officers, some whom were pretty tough characters. We had an hour's compulsory workout every day and some calisthenics first. And then what I did usually was play soccer. We'd play with just a pair of shorts on in the sun, with snow on the ground. It is a marvelous climate. We also developed an interest in going around and looking at Colorado ghost towns, which were very fascinating and at that time relatively unexploited and undiscovered. So it was far from a bad fourteen months.

Lage: It sounds like sort of a peaceful interlude?

May: It was a peaceful interlude, yes. But we knew, of course, it would come to an end sometime. So then we all got sent to New York to something with the unfortunate acronym ANIS.

Lage: [laughs] I wonder who came up with that.

May: A-N-I-S--Advanced Naval Intelligence School--which was in the Henry Hudson Hotel. When we got there the officer in charge said, "Now, you boys have been working pretty hard there in Boulder. Here you are in New York and you're probably going overseas pretty soon"--in other words, pretty much telling us not to take the program too seriously. And indeed, it didn't deserve it. It was routine intelligence stuff: photo recognition, lectures about possible theaters of war taught by people who'd been in the navy. The real idea was that they thought we'd be freaks and they wanted to get us able to get along on ships with other navy people.

Lage: They thought you'd be freaks because of the way you were selected?

May: Yes, and there were a lot of waivers for eyesight and so forth; however, there were a few good college athletes. In Boulder it had been a great day when our team in water polo, one of the roughest sports there is, actually defeated the radio school, another unit there. Actually, we were already--after the time in Colorado--in good shape.

Jean and I spent plenty of time going to plays, nightclubs and so forth. For instance, at that time, if you were in uniform and went to the theater where Oklahoma! was playing--that was the big hit--if you said you were going overseas pretty soon, they'd sell you a couple of tickets even though there were a lot of people waiting. So we had a very good time in New York in that way.

But we knew the end was coming and that finally came. We were by then living upstairs in the Henry Hudson Hotel, and saying goodbye and going down in the elevator is I think possibly the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life. And, of course, getting on a train to go west.

Lage: And leaving Jean there.

May: Yes. She had a pretty good life going. She had a very pleasant roommate and plenty of activities. But on the way west, somebody asked, "Why, May, what are you doing here? You were supposed to go to Washington!" So I got off the train in Omaha or somewhere and called the commanding officer. And he said "Well, that was so, but we couldn't get hold of you, so we won't change it now. Good luck, May!"

Lage: Just so casual!

May: I didn't tell Jean about that until some time afterward. So then [June 1944] the next stop was Pearl Harbor, where by great good fortune my brother, who was by this time in the navy in communications, was also stationed. And pretty soon a person who became a close friend--Leo Marx, who had been an undergraduate when I was a tutor but I had known him in radical circles--turned up as a commander of a sub chaser. Whenever we could, Leo and I spent weekends together, exploring Oahu and talking about Harvard--and our wives. So I had some friends there, a bit more.

But on the whole, the time in Pearl Harbor was not a good one. The navy or, I think, military institutions that far behind the lines, as that was by then, are full of intrigue and petty careerism, for one thing. And the language officers were mostly in

a great big section called the Z section, which some called the Zoo Section--translating captured documents.

Amphibious Group 12 and the Okinawa Operation

May: But by good luck, somebody who had known me, or known of me, at Harvard was head of a small intelligence periodical that wanted one language man, so I got moved down there with a great deal more freedom and a great deal more interesting work. As I got onto it, and since there wasn't much translation, gradually they let me try writing pieces. I wrote pieces for this periodical--very useful because you had to go fast, you couldn't hesitate--and re-read. If you were told to come up with an article on Japanese radar, even if you hardly knew what radar was, you talked to the people who knew something about it, and did the best you could--fast.

##

May: After a year I decided that I would like to see how I stood up in a forward area. I wrote and got Jean's permission to try to make that change, talked to a powerful officer, a captain in intelligence who'd supervised the bulletin, and got myself transferred to be the language man for Amphibious Group 12. That was getting ready for the Okinawa campaign.

Lage: Tell me why you wanted to move into more active duty.

May: I didn't like it at Pearl and I think, also, I wanted to see whether I'd gotten over early timidities enough to be able to take it, for one thing. And I wanted to be in on what I thought was the big experience for my generation, to put it pompously.

Lage: But you had that thinking at the time?

May: Yes. And it turned out that I was right--that is, I had a much better time from then on to the end of my military service.

[Interview 3: July 2, 1998] ##

Lage: Last time we had you transferring to the Amphibious Group 12 and getting ready for Okinawa. So let's go on from there.

May: I was very happy to transfer from my desk job in Pearl Harbor to Phib Group 12. This was a group of about a dozen officers and enlisted men who had been together in the Battle of Britain and knew

each other very well. They were all from New England and they accepted me right away as completely one of them.

It was fascinating to be in on the planning for the Okinawa operation. Okinawa was out of bounds by Japanese military rules and had been for quite a while, so practically nobody knew anything about it. I did some research in the Honolulu public library, [laughs] reading books that had been written a long time ago with information that was obsolete. And we took along with us an elderly man from Honolulu who was a shell collector--and this was voluntary, he wasn't kidnaped or anything--and therefore had spent some time in Okinawa.

Lage: Was he of Japanese descent?

May: No, American. He, like so many, had had a Japanese mistress when he'd lived in Japan, who banked his money and treated him very well, but he kept saying, "Why don't we wipe them all out?"

Lage: Oh, my!

May: I said, "But think of your girlfriend and all the other nice people you knew." And he said, "Well, I might feel that way if I was interested in people, but I'm not. I'm interested in shells." But I'm well ahead of where I was because we did a lot of planning and got to know each other, and then before we left, in very traditional style, had a dinner with a lot of singing and so forth, naturally in a Japanese restaurant. [laughs]

And then we got under way. On the ship I found that all the traditions, and the rules, and vocabulary, and hierarchy of the navy, which were just cumbersome and a nuisance on land, seemed to make an awful lot more sense. Also, it was a common perception that the same people who might be backbiting and selfish ashore at a desk job, on a ship, especially moving toward a combat area, were just ever so much more agreeable, unselfish. That was a very good part of the experience. It was a long voyage, naturally, and the first parts of it very pleasant going through islands in the South Pacific and then the Central Pacific, where we stopped and I picked up shells for Jean. So far there was always an officer's club with drinks.

Then finally, we set out from the Philippines for Okinawa. And as far as we could tell by radio and so forth, the Japanese didn't know about where we were going, although they knew about the fleet, of course. I was on a command ship, which is sort of a communications center with an admiral's staff, and there were a lot of transports and destroyer escorts. We went through a typhoon and

I think one of the little ships foundered. Anyway, they bounced up and down an awful lot.

By the way, Okinawa is nominally a county of Japan and nominally a part of it--then a rather oppressed part. As we got nearer, they issued sheepskins and it began to get rather cold. This was in April [1945]. Then finally we got there. And I remember waking up to a tremendous din of gunfire from our ships and the sight of the landing craft taking off in large numbers.

Lage: Did it appear to be a surprise, then? You'd think the Japanese would have traced the progress of the fleet.

May: What was surprising was, considering where they had been, how far out their perimeter had been. They had been preparing for about a year for a possible attack on Okinawa, and when our people first went ashore they found practically no resistance and were in three hours where they were supposed to be in three days. Then they found that further south there was a very well entrenched line with a lot of underground fortifications and plenty of resistance. And they were stuck there for a long time with an argument between the navy and the marines. The marines wanted to go in and get it over fast, and the navy and army were somewhat more deliberate.

In the meantime, we started getting kamikaze attacks every day, sometimes more than once. And these were broadcast, usually calmly, but once the man talking said, "Oh, my god, they're right overhead," everybody rushed to one side of the wardroom and [laughs] our smallest machine guns started operating. We painted on our hull after that half of a rising sun, the symbol meant we were half responsible for shooting down an enemy plane.

My job was interviewing people that were hauled out of the drink, and that was a fascinating job.

Lage: These kamikaze pilots?

May: Yes, sometimes not only on their first operational flight, but their first flight. They had been to resorts with their parents and friends to say goodbye, and they were urged by poems from school girls, found on their persons, to dive bravely on an English or American ship. They had tried to do so. The thing that prevented them mostly was our putting up a dense fog so that some of them, every now and then, came down--having run out of fuel or for other reasons--in the water and were hauled out alive. I also went through the effects of some who were dead.

But then, when they had caught somebody, one of the ships that had got him signaled to the command ship. And I was sent out in a

small boat with one sailor to steer it to interview him. Once that was rather scary because it was terribly foggy and at night and we were in danger of being fired at--maybe we were a couple of times--by our own ships. Once we couldn't find the ship I was supposed to go to, so I came home thinking I'd be in bad trouble. The head of the intelligence unit took me aside and gave me a quite illegal drink of whiskey. That was really the kind of unit it was.

When I found these people, they would be in the brig of the ship, not mistreated. I never saw any prisoner mistreated. I had done some preparation in interrogating in prison camps in Hawaii. Though I know that when the Japanese had the air power at Guadalcanal and so forth some bad things happened. At this point they were treated according to the rules. And this was easy enough because they nearly all talked very freely. The Japanese doctrine was that you absolutely did not surrender. They regarded themselves as dead and would very often tell you details of ships they'd been on, or of districts they'd lived in, or anything you wanted.

I was after one thing in these small-boat expeditions, and that was to find out from which airport in Kyushu the plane had come because that airport would obviously be paid a visit. So I had a kit with a list of those airports. First you'd have to establish the person's dignity--how he had tried to die hitting a ship but then was picked up unconscious from the water--that sort of thing.

Lage: So you'd let him go through this kind of validating?

May: Yes. And I suppose, "And now, please have me killed." And, "Sorry, that's contrary to our rules." "Well, then, may I have a cigarette?" "Sure." They didn't really mean the former, I think--or maybe they did, I'm not sure. Then they'd almost always open right up and I'd say, "Well, how long did it take you to get down here?" And they'd say, "Well, thirty minutes or something." And I'd say, "Well, you must have come from this airport?" "No," they'd say. "Then that one?" When I had it located, the interview was essentially over.

Lage: And you felt it was an honest answer?

May: Oh, yes. The name of the airport was immediately sent back to Pearl Harbor and the place would be bombed. I had absolutely no regrets or stirrings of conscience against this sort of trickery because after all they were sinking a lot of ships, more than had been sunk in any Pacific battle so far, although Iwo Jima, which we learned about on the way to Okinawa, had been bloodier in terms of personnel.

So I had, let's say, reasonable employment. Then when things quieted down, I went ashore and lived in a tent for a while. And that was okay. Then unfortunately I had to leave my, by this time, good friends in Phib Group 12 and was sent to a couple of other ships. This was not an interesting enough experience to bother you with, but I did learn to get along in the navy and did fairly well to adapt to what it was like. One of the operations I was scheduled to go on--a small island very near Japan--was aborted. I was happy about that. I would certainly have been on the invasion of Japan had there been one.

Lage: Were you all expecting that that was going to be the next step?

May: Oh, yes. But I went back to Pearl Harbor and by this time I knew enough--when there was no accommodation for me--to bribe an enlisted man with a bottle of whiskey, which he couldn't get, and get him to put me temporarily one place or another. Finally I got a more permanent room with three southern ensigns, very young, who talked about nothing but girls all the time. Really, this second period was no good. I was back at work on the intelligence magazine that I'd been on.

Lage: The same thing you'd been working on?

May: Yes.

Bombing of Hiroshima and the Occupation of Japan

May: Finally, of course, we got the news of Hiroshima.

Lage: How did people react to that, and you, in particular?

May: The main reaction was, "We're going to get home," though some of my left-wing friends, because I certainly had them at Pearl Harbor, said that we ought to turn over the bomb to the United Nations, which, I think in retrospect, would not have been a good idea. But the long-range implications--we didn't understand enough about it, really.

Lage: Or even the power of the bomb probably wasn't fully understood? Or was that well recorded?

May: I think it was, yes. So then the next thing was when the whole apparatus at Pearl Harbor broke up and we were going to be sent to Japan. And again, of course, it took a long time. We were in the Philippines for a while--Manila utterly smashed up by the Japanese--

and then finally went to Japan. Actually, there was another typhoon.

Our convoy finally came to a small place called Waka-no-ura, near Wakayama. The early occupation was immensely fascinating. Since the emperor had given them orders and told them to obey MacArthur, they were remarkably cordial. When I first went ashore and it was found I could speak some Japanese, I had all sorts of little school children hanging onto my uniform saying, "What's that, what's that," about the ships and all that. Once in a while you'd meet a die-hard but not often.

I established social relations with a young man in the village. I'd go to his house and he'd give me tea and tangerines, which was all he had, and we'd talk about various things. Then eventually I got sent overland to help prepare for the occupation of Nagoya with two other navy people. On the road little boys would yell, "Hello Joe," and ask for candy and so forth. And then we were in Nagoya getting it ready for troops to come.

Lage: Was your role again in translation?

May: Yes, including setting up, I'm sorry to say, a district called the Bright Pleasure Garden--something like that.

Lage: This was official?

May: Yes, it was official prostitution, which really didn't have the same connotations and stigma as in the West, and was remarkably successful in preventing incidents and so forth. In the early occupation, each side had heard propaganda about the horrors of the other side and each side was remarkably favorably surprised. I heard that from later talking to Japanese in Japan. Later, of course, things weren't quite that nice, but I think it was the most successful occupation of a major defeated enemy that I know about.

I don't think I'll go into a travelogue, but I was able to get around Japan quite a bit. In those days, towns and cities were almost all smashed absolutely flat and burnt to the ground. The countryside was remarkably beautiful, not yet polluted and very rural. I traveled a certain amount by train around and then finally was stuck in a translation section in Tokyo Harbor, right near one of the Japanese battleships that had been reported sunk, but on a small craft--I don't remember exactly what variety. People were going ashore and interviewing various ministries and so forth. Not nearly the excitement of earlier duty. And I began to get even more homesick.

Lage: Were you still writing daily letters?

May: Yes. On the way up there, every now and then somebody was sent home. There was a point system for how long they'd been there, whether you'd been in combat, and that sort of thing. But the language men were outside of it.

Lage: Yes, they needed you.

May: Well, they thought they did. It turned out not. But on the way to Japan we had these shipside ceremonies where a little band would play "Sentimental Journey" and "It's Been a Long, Long Time" and people would be very envious of the guy that was going, but one of the officers would say, "Well, it's not so bad! Look at Henry--excuse me, Henry--you'll probably be patrolling the streets of Tokyo for ten years!"

Lage: Oh, [laughter] you must have been getting a little discouraged.

May: Yes. However, fortunately, General MacArthur decided that he didn't want the navy Caucasian language men, he wanted to rely on Nisei sergeants, and so gradually people were being sent home.

Lage: Do you know what he was thinking there? He thought it would be better relations?

May: Probably better Japanese. And he was probably right! [laughter] And though not necessarily better written Japanese, certainly much better spoken. Needless to say, some know the language wonderfully well and others not.

IV RETURN TO ACADEMIA AND POSTWAR ADJUSTMENTS

Return from Tour of Duty

May: Then, while we were still off Tokyo, I got a cable from my brother saying that my mother's cancer, which she had had before, was spreading and I should come home as soon as I can. That got me an emergency leave and I went back to Berkeley. Jean, who by that time had got the word, was out staying with my mother. So I came back with of course immense pleasure at reunion with Jean, but with this sadness mixed in with it. Pretty soon I learned that I would not have to go back, which was a great relief. I mean, I was through with the navy.

Lage: How long did your mother live after that?

May: Let's see, that was about Thanksgiving in '45 and she died in late spring of '46. She was extremely courageous about it, quite remarkably so. But Jean and I after a while got the great break of a wonderful apartment on Macrondray Lane on the slopes of Russian Hill in North Beach. We'd lived in that region briefly before the war while I was waiting to go overseas, also.

Lage: Apartments were not easy to find.

May: They were not. This was through somebody we knew. And for a while we were awfully rich because payments kept coming in that I didn't know I was entitled to from the navy for being in one place or another. I forgot to say--I think I'll put in this because it meant something to me--when I got back to Pearl Harbor I found that I had a commendation ribbon for the work in Okinawa and Pearl Harbor.

Completion of Dissertation

May: While we were living there and eating in the best restaurants, I was working on my thesis. I think I mentioned to you that I had actually considered changing my field.

Lage: Let's talk about that.

May: All right. Well, while I was at Boulder in language school I'd sent a chunk of my dissertation to Mr. Schlesinger and it had arrived back with no comment except on punctuation. And that irritated me so much under the circumstances that I was very disaffected.

Lage: Well, did this mean that he thought it was pretty well perfect?

May: No. It was just his way. [laughter] That is, I'd rather have had serious criticisms--he was a nice man but a little stiff in manner, more than he meant to be--and that irritated me and made me disaffected. Also, I was terribly interested in the Far East. Actually a large number of the American Japanese and Chinese experts came out of the navy and army training and I knew a number of them, so it would have been feasible. I considered trying to stay in Japan and bringing Jean over, but when I got back I found I had two fellowships offering me almost full support.

Lage: Right in this immediate postwar period?

May: Yes, because of friends at Harvard.

Lage: Were these fellowships to continue with your dissertation?

May: Yes, so I got out my cold notes and went on with it. While we were living in San Francisco, on account of my mother, I was working on my thesis for Harvard. In this apartment we had two typewriters. I would be typing on one, finishing up one chapter, and Jean would be typing the other, back to back more or less. And we got it done.

Lage: It must have been kind of an adjustment after what you'd been through?

May: It was. Sure, which everybody went through. I was active at that time in the North Beach chapter of the American Veteran's Committee, a liberal group whose slogan was, "Citizens first, veterans second." And they obviously were in competition with the Legion and the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]. They got more or less nowhere, but there was intense argument between the right and left wing and that was another diversion. But except for my mother's illness, this was an okay time.

Lage: You taught a semester at Berkeley?

May: Yes, after the death of my mother.

Lage: After the death of your mother in the fall?

May: In the spring of '46, yes. As I have said, she died very heroically, saying a special goodbye to each one of us. Shortly after her death I was still in uniform and was invited to dinner at the house of some Berkeley ladies who were friends of my mother. Professor John Hicks of Berkeley was there, too, and he said, "By the way, we've got a temporary vacancy and if you're interested go and see Professor Paxson, chairman of the department." I didn't really know whether I was interested or not, but I did finally go see him, finding him surprised that I'd taken so long. He offered me the job, so I lectured in the elementary course--in two sections of it--not terribly well. Pretty stiff as a lecturer still.

Lage: Did you get out your old notes?

May: Yes.

Lage: From your previous teaching?

May: Well, I worked very hard on bringing lectures up to date. Then Professor Larry Harper, who had known me as an undergraduate, told me how to go up to the Faculty Club more and mix with people more, which indicated that they were somewhat interested in possibly appointing me later. And there were other such indications.

So eventually I got the dissertation done. And my attitude in writing it all along was, "Well, I don't care if Schlesinger or anybody else likes it or not, I'm going to do it the way I want to do it." So we went back to Cambridge where we were greeted by Jack Rackliffe and other Harvard friends and lived in the apartment of my very good friend, Leo Marx.

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May: We lived in the Marxes' apartment on what was well known to be the wrong side of Beacon Hill. There was a drunken woman upstairs that screamed every night, and there were plenty of cockroaches, but we were awfully glad to have the apartment. Leo and I were happy to meet each other's wives, who became and have been ever since close friends, particularly in the next few years.

I went to see Mr. Schlesinger and he greeted me and we talked about this and that and I said, "Mr. Schlesinger, did you get my

thesis?" He said, "You didn't get my letter? Everything was just fine."

Lage: [laughs] Still no criticism! Of course you didn't want it at this point.

May: Well, then I had to take the special examination, which in the Harvard program comes after the thesis. They can ask you questions on anything in your field and this was very scary to me. It took place in Mr. Schlesinger's garden with Perry Miller, Mr. Schlesinger, and Richard Leopold, a young assistant professor of American diplomatic history. I passed okay, but not as well as my friends would have liked.

Lage: Was that out of the ordinary to have the exam at that point?

May: No. That was part of the rule.

Lage: I mean, was it at other universities than Harvard? Or was this the standard?

May: I don't think so, not a serious one. It was a little more serious for me because I'd been excused from earlier orals and also hadn't had the practice of it.

So then we went up to Kittery in Maine to the house of F. O. Matthiessen, which he had lent to the Marxes. Had a wonderful time there eating lobster and fishing for flounder and so forth. And then we went back to California.

Scripps College and Family Life in Claremont, California, 1947-1952

May: Before I went back to Cambridge, I had an offer of a job at Scripps College in southern California. I wasn't too eager to be in southern California, and I wasn't too eager to teach at a girl's college, but you didn't turn down jobs. After I had accepted this job, we'd both been down and liked, rather, Frederick Hard, the president, and had been shown around this very, very pretty campus.

I got an inquiry from Berkeley as to whether I would accept an assistant professorship there. They assumed of course I would, but I asked Mr. Schlesinger and he said if you break your agreements this way you get a bad name, so I told them, No, I was sorry, I couldn't just then, and went down to Claremont.

Lage: What were your feelings about that?

May: Oh, a certain amount of regret, but actually I went to Claremont as an assistant professor, and in a few years was promoted to associate professor.

Lage: Associate professor?

May: Yes. The reason for that was that I had published a book manuscript in the religious department of Harper's. That meant a great deal in terms of getting jobs. I'll talk about that in a minute about the book when it comes out.

Lage: So the book was accepted almost immediately?

May: Well, not as immediately as I've made it sound, but within a few months.

Lage: Soon enough to get promoted at Scripps?

May: Yes. But I think it also affected the inquiry from Berkeley.

Lage: How did the inquiries come from Berkeley? From the chairman of the department?

May: Yes.

Lage: Was that still Hicks?

May: No, Van Nostrand, I think.

But let me talk for a minute about the Claremont Colleges. There were, at that time Pomona, Claremont Men's College, Claremont Graduate School, and Scripps in a sort of loose federation, called by the official Pomona handbook "The Oxford of the Orange Belt." Claremont was regarded in a rather snobbish way as an oasis in the desert of industrial southern California.

It was a nice little town, only 3,500 at that time and no smog yet, and the colleges were good colleges. This meant that the social life was much better than it would have been if it had only been Scripps faculty. There were only 225 girls at Scripps, so it was a small but rather interesting faculty. The faculty at Scripps was absolutely first rate in the arts, and I would be amazed at seeing at an exhibit how well one of the girls had done who had amounted to nothing in particular in my American history classes.

But we were contented there, had some very good friends--at least one of whom was a friend for life. Others were friends for a long time. We, at first, had an absolutely dreadful little shack

for a house, then quite a decent little house with a yard and so forth and oleander trees. These were happy years.

Among my friends that I mention in my book was Golo Mann, who taught at Claremont Men's College. He was one of the sons of Thomas Mann, then living at Pacific Palisades. He was a very interesting man, my first experience of a European conservative--very different from an American reactionary, somebody who did not believe in the perfectibility of man or in progress, a stance which was rather a shock to most Americans. He and Robert Palmer in classics and I used to hike a lot in the mountains above San Bernardino. By driving and walking a few miles, you get up quickly to six, seven thousand feet, with wonderful views of the desert. So these were good years.

One of the results of these good years was that Jean got pregnant, which we had wanted for a long time. There were certain reasons why not, and we had been engaged in quite seriously trying to adopt a child by that time, and as so often happens she found she was pregnant. Then a couple years later we thought it would be much better for our daughter Hildegarde--later always Hildy--to have a sister or a brother, so we set about adopting again; she got pregnant again.

Lage: Two daughters?

May: Two daughters were born, not exactly in Claremont--Hildy was, but Ann while we were on a year's visit <u>from</u> Claremont in this period. I was officially at Scripps for five years.

Lage: Now what was your role as a father and as a struggling young professor? Did they go together?

May: I certainly took fatherhood seriously, but for then and later Jean did most of the work, as faculty wives usually did, because they didn't usually work any other way. They didn't usually have, that is, money-making work. But I did my best and was always very much interested, at least. Fortunately, because I was ambitious, I knew that angels were watching me up in the sky at Harvard. I had several suggestions of jobs that I didn't really want.

Lage: People would let you know that there were openings?

May: Yes, at least I didn't think I'd be in Claremont all the rest of my life, that is.

Lage: And you wouldn't have been happy to be there, it seems from what you have said.

May: No, it was a very contented time, but I wanted to be at a place that was a little more intellectually exciting--not that the people there weren't bright--but where serious research and writing was taken for granted rather than done by some people.

Lage: It sounds like a very different atmosphere from Lawrence, though.

May: Oh, much better, yes. And while some friends wanted to try to get me back to Lawrence I didn't want to go. The Scripps president, Frederick Hard, was a nice man. Again, the town was supposed to be dry, and we got in there the first time very, very early in the morning. And when I asked, "Where's there a liquor store?" we got, "Not in Claremont, though those folks up at the colleges certainly get it somewhere." And when we first went to the Hards' they served us sherry. We ordered our liquor from a place right outside of the town and there was no tension about that kind of stuff, and really very little tension about anything, with the good and the bad results of that.

Lage: Did the town have an economic base? Was it farming, basically, or ranching?

May: No, oranges. At that time there were oranges all around so that in the winter they'd light their fires and burn oil. Heavy black smoke would descend over the town and the colleges had to get all their sheets cleaned and our little girls would have little black noses.

An important thing about our life there was that we didn't have a car. We took taxis, which were about thirty-five cents anywhere in town.

Lage: Was that unusual?

May: Very. But that's what we did.

Lage: But they did have taxis after all.

May: Yes.

Lage: Let's go back. I've been interviewing another academic from the very same era as you. It's the first time I've asked a man if he changed diapers, and he never had!

May: I see. Really?

Lage: You know, very much a family man.

May: Well, I certainly did, regularly. Most people on generally liberal principles in the academic world were sort of vaguely feminists,

certainly didn't regard women as inferior, but it's still true women did most of the work at home.

Lage: You say that most of the faculty wives did not work outside the home. Was that kind of disapproved of?

May: No, there were even a couple of women faculty members, it just wasn't the custom. I really think that's how it was. People were very wrapped up in their husband's jobs. That is, Jean and I would make fun of people who said, "When we were doing our dissertation," and that kind of thing, but we had worked together in a way on mine.

Publication and Reception of First Book

May: Now, the other thing that happened there was the publication of my first book. My first book came out in '49, so obviously I turned it in to the publisher in '48.

Lage: You mentioned it was published by a religious division of Harper's, but it was a very academic book.[1]

May: Yes, that's right. Oh, yes. And the book broke some new ground. I had spent very long hours while I was in Cambridge in the basement of various libraries, theological and divinity schools, including Harvard's, but around the East, really going through religious weeklies. Religious weeklies in the nineteenth century were very important, had large circulations, and influenced people a lot. I went through them week by week, which is pretty strenuous. Of course, at that time there was no Xerox; you had to copy things out. And I got the industrial disease of dust in my nose and throat from these papers that had not been opened much.

In the book, among other things, I traced the change in the thinking of urban American clergy on social questions which concentrated around three violent episodes. The history of American labor is extremely violent in the nineteenth century, more so in ways than European labor because American labor had a hard time getting organized at all and was not generally socialist, although it was industrial.

Strikes were particular and for very good reasons, usually, and the employers completely ruthless. The general belief in academic

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[1]Protestant Churches and Industrial America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949).

circles, many of which were clerically influenced, was that striking was not only evil but worthless because they believed in the wage-fund theory: that there was only a certain amount to pay wages and if the workers got too much of this then the industries would close down. So the general advice was to stay very quiet and save your money, and eventually you'll get rich--and above all, avoid drink. The literalness of this is you'd have to see to believe.

Lage: Now did this message come out of the religious weeklies?

May: Well, out of that and many other sources--an awful lot of books, too. I worked very hard on this book.

Lage: Did you find things as you were researching that you didn't expect to find?

May: Oh, yes!

Lage: You just started reading and then from that came--

May: Yes, well, that's always been my practice. I think that historians, as opposed to social scientists, make their questions out of their research rather than having them before. What struck me was the immense impact of these three great crises: the railroad strikes of 1877, when flaming box cars were sent in to roundhouses and parts of cities burnt up and weapons used on both sides and so forth; then in 1886 the Haymarket bombing and the violent reaction to that and another series of heartfelt strikes; and then finally, from '92 to '94, the Homestead and Pullman strike when actually artillery was used. These were very violent episodes.

The clergy reaction to them was at first pretty definite. I'll read a quotation that was a quote picked up by Richard Hofstader in a book and has been used several times. This is the Independent, a theologically liberal congregational weekly: "A mob should be quashed by knocking down or shooting down the men engaged in it and the more promptly this is done the better. When anarchy gathers its deluded disciples into a mob, as at Chicago, a Gatling gun or two swiftly brought into position and well served offers on the whole the most merciful as well as effectual remedy." And a little later, "To talk about pity, sympathy or delight in connection with such demons is to encourage their kind. To speak of their offenses as political is to hide their character and to engender the sentiment which breeds them." [From page 100 of Protestant Churches.]

Well, as the period went on, more and more fervent clergymen decided that this wasn't quite enough and that there must be something the matter with the doctrines of laissez-faire that everybody believed in. They started dissenting on particular

matters so that by the mid-nineties, where I ended, the articulate and urban parts of the churches were liberal. They adhered to the doctrines called the Social Gospel--a reinterpretation of the doctrines of Jesus in social terms to one degree or another.

There was a long and complicated transition affected by a number of other things, too. I'm of course simplifying it a lot. When this book came out, it was universally very well reviewed. It's the most conventional of my books by far, and so for that reason, got almost unanimous good reviews, [laughs] more than any of my later books.

Lage: In what way is it more conventional?

May: Well, it follows implicitly, I'd say, an economic interpretation of events. That is, I talk about doctrines, but it's the social facts that produce them, and it sort of has one thing after another. To answer why it's more conventional I'll have to say why the other books were less so.

Lage: So we'll get to that?

May: Yes. But anyway it did me a great deal of professional good and it was reprinted several times and was my main professional stock in trade, so to speak, for a while thereafter. I wrote a few articles, but the book led to Berkeley's renewed interest.

Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, 1949

May: Now, while we were in Claremont, we were invited twice to go away--the first time, in the summer of '49, to the Salzburg seminar in American Studies, and that was a truly thrilling experience. This was before Ann was born, so we left Hildy with Jean's mother, grandmother, and grandfather in Portland. We traveled first to Paris where Jean had never been. It had always been my favorite place, that is, since I was there as a kid. And we went to Venice, which was pretty exciting, and traveled about.

And then we got to Salzburg, an immensely beautiful baroque city with no war damage. We lived in this very elaborate rococo castle which had belonged to the playwright Max Reinhardt, a castle originally of the archbishop of Salzburg, who was a feudal magnate. It had frescoed ceilings and gilt walls and the works, also a small lake.

The Salzburg seminar had been organized the year before by Harvard undergraduates wanting to bring back ties with young

Europeans. I was asked the first year--1948--through the efforts of Leo Marx and Henry Smith, but after a struggle decided not to go because that was the year I was editing my book for publication and I thought I better do that. But then I was asked the second year.

Lage: So this was the very second year that the seminar was held?

May: Yes, that's right.

Lage: Who were the students? Were they Harvard undergraduates?

May: No, the students were Europeans coming together to study American studies. They were selected from all countries of Europe that could be reached. They had a few from East bloc countries the first time. The only one that we got, not from lack of trying, was a young Czech musician and there was somebody there with him to watch him. But from every other country, from Scandinavia to Italy. And in addition to not having studied about American issues, arts and so forth, they had not met people from all these other countries, particularly, of course, people who'd been on different sides of the war. You had Austrians and Germans there as well as French, Dutch, and Scandinavians. Among the Scandinavians there was tensions between the others and the Swedes, who'd been neutral.

But they all got along very well and were tremendously lively. For instance, they learned to play baseball, and they also were taught by somebody to make apple pie beds. And they made apple pie beds for each other with the greatest of will, and were very good company. I was not so much older and meeting them was extremely exciting.

The faculty was a first-rate faculty. I was the youngest and the least prestigious of the people there. My colleague, Dexter Perkins, a senior American historian, shared the American history with me. He was a delightful man and terribly considerate of my feelings as his equal colleague. An extremely well-known pacifist economist, Kenneth Boulding, was there.

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Lage: How many faculty were there?

May: I would think about eight--I haven't counted them--and then graduate assistants. The Harvard undergraduates were an extremely lively bunch, some of whom--one couple--became very close friends.

Lage: What was the attitude of the students? I'm asking this because I happened to look at John Hicks' memoir and he was there the next year after you, 1950.

May: Is that so?

Lage: The main comment he made was that the students were extremely critical of the United States, didn't trust the Marshall Plan.

May: The students on the whole were of the left, but so, of course, was I. Mostly they were to one or another degree what we call liberal ranging toward socialist. We all lived there, of course, very happily, talking with each other all of the time about all sorts of issues--critical of the United States, yes, but immensely interested. And of the students there, a number went on to be absolutely first-rate academics and a number into politics. There were any number of distinguished careers that came out of there.

This is an example: Austria was still under occupation, and we went to--let's see, I forget to what town, not Vienna, which was in the Russian zone and not too easily approachable, but you could go there--and were entertained by the American military, who were distinctly suspicious of the seminar, particularly of F. O. Matthiessen, who'd been there that first year. We met the French and Russian attachés and then invited the officers back. And the students immediately got the idea. To our great surprise, they came to dinner wearing coats and ties and were very respectful and polite. That is, they knew that we needed military tolerance; it was very good communication, in other words. I remember that while we served wine, as usual and plenty of it, somebody stood behind the general's chair and poured whiskey. [laughter] But it all went off okay.

Lage: So it was a little bit of public relations?

May: Yes. Sitting on the steps by the lake, we had wonderful discussions--faculty, assistants, and students. And it was, as I say, interesting to see the former enemies associate. There was a handsome, young, blond Austrian, who looked like everybody's idea of a Nazi, who said, "We must <u>force</u> people to be tolerant!" [laughter] I made some acquaintances who were later correspondents.

I'll come to how this affected my changing political attitudes, but it was, as you can see, a fascinating and exciting experience, all the more because it was so improvised in those days. For instance, the students who were running it hadn't really gotten an adequate way to get home, so they had to send us by first class on a Canadian ship to Montreal. Here we were, coming aboard in this very handsome suite, with our luggage consisting of a typewriter in a knapsack and various things like that and no clothes more formal than a tweed jacket and gray flannel pants. Everybody else dressed for dinner. The person who had the suite next to us was Lady Megan Lloyd George, going to an imperial conference. So people, I think,

got the idea that we were some kind of eccentrics. The stewards all managed to conceal their rather extreme reactions. By not going to the bar, we saved enough money to tip them as they were supposed to be tipped on the last day.

But that's an example of the early haphazard seminar, which Dexter Perkins as chairman took over and reorganized. It became more orderly from then on. But I think that it was exciting in the early period.

Lage: How was it financed?

May: By contributions.

Lage: Sounds like a wonderful seminar.

May: That was a great experience.

Lage: Did Jean get to take part? Did the faculty wives get in on discussions?

May: Oh, yes, indeed. Enormously. And on the dances and so forth. Most of us seemed something more or less of an age--the students and the assistants and Jean and me.

Then we went back and picked up the kids, which was difficult because Jean's family had gotten very attached to them. Or should I say, picked up Hildy.

Lage: Yes, just one at that point.

May: Yes, it was one at that time. We went back to Claremont and to our surprise didn't mind being back in Claremont after all that glamour.

Visiting Faculty at Bowdoin College, 1950-1951

May: Then, in 1950, we went for a year to Bowdoin College in Maine, near where Jean's family was. That was an interesting experience because Bowdoin at that time was under only the second president that it had had since the 1880s and was a very traditional college. In fact, I thought it gave me some insight into what American colleges had been like, not so much in the late as in the early nineteenth century--with compulsory daily chapel, for instance, which the students would ask to have withdrawn but the alumni always insisted on. Actually, chapel was extremely nonsectarian and was a rather good way to get the college together and talk about various things, including at

that time the Korean War, which the students were very worried about.

The main thing people did through that winter was square dancing. There was a rage for it and we did it a couple of times a week. Brunswick, Maine is a very pretty place with a lot of attractive villages around it. We had a very nice house, replacing a distinguished faculty member, Edward Chase Kirkland. The house was fussily furnished and really no place for children. Ann was born in Portland Hospital while we were there.

Lage: How did that offer come? You couldn't have been further from Claremont!

May: No, it didn't really have anything to do with Jean's family, though her grandfather had some association with the college. It was the suggestion of the man whom I replaced.

Lage: I see.

Move Away from Identification with Communism

May: I was going to review my political thinking for some time back. As I told you, I was pretty radical--I would say a fellow traveler--in Cambridge. That didn't particularly change in my overseas period. I didn't talk politics, but radicals and particularly Communists more than anybody else believed in winning the war, so there wasn't much friction about that anyway. For some reason people in the Pacific theater came out of the war rather more radicalized than people in the European theater, in my experience.

Lage: Do you have an explanation?

May: Well, I think possibly because they were more isolated from politics, whereas people in Europe experienced a politics they could understand more seriously, but I'm not sure. And there were plenty of radicals from the European campaigns, too.

But in Claremont, then, I came back still pretty radical and shifted away from the far left position rather later than many people who shifted did. In Claremont I took part in the [Henry] Wallace [presidential] campaign [1948], and it was enormously to the credit of the president of Scripps that I was protected and never experienced any unpleasantness, because I made some public lectures and there were people from the Crusaders and other such southern California groups always taking notes. I never had any personal

flak, but it was impossible for me anyway to look at the Wallace campaign seriously and not know it was run by the Communist party.

Also, another thing that influenced me was correspondence from a student at Salzburg, an Austrian who was a socialist, who seriously was worried about a Russian incursion and thought if we were not pretty tough in the Far East that that was going to happen. That is, that somebody I trusted, that I knew, that was a socialist that felt that way was educational to me, too.

Lage: When you say that it was easy for you to see that the Wallace campaign was directed or infiltrated by Communists, was it easy for everyone, or was it because of your background?

May: Most people, I think, by the end of it recognized certain crucial changes in line that occurred during it. And I don't mean to say that everybody who was for Wallace was a Communist or necessarily even directly influenced by them. F. O. Matthiessen gave one of the nominating speeches. The general position was that any postwar trouble with Russia was our fault and we ought to do very differently, which I was willing to try to believe. But it became less and less plausible and the fact that I was not in the least bothered made it harder to feel like a martyr, probably.

So I began distinctly before the end of my time in Claremont to move away from the far left.

Lage: Were events in Europe, the iron curtain and all of that, affecting your point of view?

May: Oh, sure. Oh, yes. And I was reading them somewhat differently. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1948, for instance, was important, and a number of other issues. I don't need to go into all that, I think, because this is very familiar for so many people who changed. I tried not to change too far. And then what's next?

Lage: You've written about the changes in your religious beliefs.

May: It didn't happen yet. I still regarded myself, I would say, as an agnostic. And that was another reason for not being able ever completely to go along with the Communists. I found I couldn't be a systematic materialist, as of course you are supposed to be, though not all of them were. A thought about that: these days there are two interpretations of the American Communist party of those years. It's very easy to demonstrate that the party followed the changes in the Moscow line slavishly. In fact, recent documents that are now

available show exactly how much money was spent by the Soviet Union and that kind of thing.

However, there's another school that points out that there were Communists who on a local level and in particular issues were in some very good causes. For instance, there were Communists in Alabama, absolutely biracial, in their work. And to be a Communist in Alabama, whatever else you thought about it, certainly took guts. They were in all sorts of causes like the Scottsboro boys and so forth, many of which they perverted and changed to their own uses. But I say both interpretations are true: that the American Communist party, was absolutely loyal to every shift of opinion in Moscow, more so than the European parties because it had less of a real base. But also I know that there were some excellent and absolutely sincere and honorable and hardworking people in it.

Lage: Who maybe didn't have another form of expressing those views?

May: Well, I've explained what I thought the attraction was: the demand for complete, self-denying allegiance was what was attractive to some temperaments. But the attraction was abating.

Recruitment by UC Berkeley

May: I think now I'll get to Cal's renewing its interest seriously. While I was at Bowdoin, I got a letter from the chairman of the [Berkeley] department approaching me for an assistant, maybe associate professor. I didn't accept that because of the loyalty oath controversy at that time. I wrote a letter saying I didn't criticize what anybody else did at all, but I couldn't accept it. I felt that mainly it was how my friends would have looked at it. You know a good deal, I'm sure, about the loyalty oath and all that.

Lage: Yes. Again, we know it from within, the view from Berkeley, but it sounds as if the professoriate across the country were watching?

May: Oh, they were. Cal was under censure from the AAUP [American Association of University Professors] and much denounced.

Lage: It would have been a major statement almost?

May: Well, for me to go there would have been saying I didn't believe everything I'd been saying for a long time. I mean, I couldn't do it. Then, when I was on the way back from Bowdoin, teaching summer session at Minnesota, where Henry Smith and Leo Marx had gotten me a summer job, I got approached again because the oath had been thrown

out by the courts. Instead, faculty had to sign the Levering Act oath, whose great virtue was that all the state employees had to sign it. Well, I wondered about that at the time, whether you could call that exactly a victory, to extend an--I think--just about equally disagreeable oath to all the state employees. But all the non-signers had come back. I certainly didn't hold out after that and accepted with great delight.

Lage: Who made you that offer and how did it get extended?

May: Hicks again. He came by and met me and came to our house in Claremont. Oh, an amusing thing: Mr. Schlesinger was giving lectures in Claremont and came to our house and was terribly genial. I remember his holding Hildy on his lap and so forth. And I asked him, "Tell me, when you're giving public lecture like this, are you nervous at all?" And he said, "Oh, no, Henry, because it's very unlikely that anybody in our profession will talk to a hostile audience." And that was a clouded crystal ball. [laughter] A few years later, the opposite was true.

But anyway, I was overjoyed to get invited back to Berkeley. One detail I mention in the book that I think is rather funny: we did not have a car. Jean had driven in the past but I hardly had, for various reasons. Partly because my older brother tried to teach me. I knew enough--that is, how the thing ran. But I didn't have much practice, so we hired a Claremont graduate student to give us driving lessons--first out in the country and then in the scary traffic hub of the small town of Claremont. We learned okay and passed our exams and set out to go up to Berkeley with the two children--all on back roads and taking, if you can believe it, four days. [laughter]

Lage: Was this to avoid the traffic?

May: Yes. [laughter] We had a wonderful time doing that and my sister in Berkeley had found us the house that we're talking in now.

Lage: Oh! You moved right to this house?

May: Yes, we rented it then. It didn't look at all the way it does now. It's been very much remodeled, but we came here.

Lage: And you came as an associate professor?

May: I came as an associate professor--in fact, a middle-rank associate professor, which was a wonderful thing because sweating out promotion to tenure at Berkeley is a terrible experience. And I missed it, just as I missed the orals experience at Harvard.

The first time I went to the Berkeley campus, Mrs. Radke, then the one department secretary (instead of the big staff we have now), said, "Welcome home, Mr. May." I was really very moved--all the more so when I walked up to the Faculty Club and the carillon was playing Cal football songs. I really felt that I had come home, although we lived five miles from where I was brought up, in an entirely different part of the town, and had only a few friends carried over from earlier periods in Berkeley and San Francisco.

Lage: Okay, that's a nice place to stop.

V UC BERKELEY IN THE FIFTIES: HISTORY DEPARTMENT FACULTY AND PUBLICATIONS

[Interview 4: July 16, 1998] ##

Lage: So we got you to Berkeley last week. We talked about the trip and the welcome and now we want to talk about your first years and how you acclimated.

May: Well, I was thrilled to be in Berkeley. It was home, for one thing, but also to be in a major university instead of college--a completely different atmosphere, completely different emphasis. And I loved my main job which was to introduce American intellectual history at Berkeley, where it had not been taught.

Lage: [laughs] Did somebody encourage you in that direction, or did you see it as your main job?

May: No, that was what I was hired for.

Lage: Who set up those parameters? What professors said, "Come and introduce American intellectual history?"

May: John Hicks. He was chairman and a very strong chairman. I worked very hard at this, and there's no job anywhere in the world that I could have enjoyed more. I got bright students, including quite a few who knew something about the history of European thought but had no idea how rich the American past was. Also, from the start I was on many committees because people thought I might be neutral in the battles that were already beginning in the department. This turned out to be a wrong guess.

Adjustments to New Location and Standard of Living

May: However, the change from Claremont to Berkeley was less good for Jean. She had had a peaceful life. We had had many friends. And

it took a while to adjust. And even though I got a considerably higher salary, we were very poor because the expenses were so much greater.

Lage: Was housing expensive?

May: Comparatively and also we had to have a car. We didn't have a car in Claremont--had taken taxis here and there. And it was compulsory that newcomers be entertained by everybody in the department and then invite them back, and that meant fairly elaborate dinner parties with plenty to drink, which is expensive.

Lage: Had that been a tradition at Scripps?

May: No. Well, we had parties, yes, but at Scripps there weren't departments and at Pomona there were, I think, three people in history.

Lage: And there wasn't the sense that this kind of entertaining was something you had to do?

May: No, and it was done more simply anyway. So at that time, to make it more poignant, by the end of the month we couldn't shop anywhere except at the grocery store where we charged things. And quite often I had to go down to a bank and borrow fifty or one hundred dollars to tide us over.

Lage: My goodness! Didn't the professors understand what a scrimped salary you were on?

May: Well, we were all pretty poor. I remember my friends in Claremont said, "Well, maybe they'll offer you $6,000 or something like that and then you'll have to go!" Well, I had got more than that to start with, but not an awful lot more. And of course the bank was very glad to lend the money because the interest rates that they got for such short loans were very high and because our credit and the credit of all faculty members had to be good.

Also, I had less time for the children than I had had. I was under pressure to write as well as teach and be on committees. Though I always had some time. The best times we had were on mini-vacations--three or four days when we'd start out in the car, often in the evening, with the children in the back wrapped in blankets, not know where we were going and end somewhere in the foothills of the Sierras or something like that. We always had a good time.

Lage: Oh, that must have been nice.

May: And our girls remember it happily. I continued to be hard-pressed financially--gradually, less so--for about the first ten years.

Lage: Did salaries jump or was this a result of promotions?

May: No, they jumped. They went steadily up and quite drastically by the end of the fifties.

Lage: Relative to other segments of society, did professors' salaries go up, do you think?

May: Yes, but we still were not as nearly as well off as doctors and lawyers, let's say.

Relationships with Faculty Members

May: About the other members of the department and my relations with them, I must admit that there were a good many who were not particularly congenial, who had been there for a long time, and had different views than I had. And I gradually learned some had opposed my appointment. But I had also some friends. My first friend in Berkeley was Joe Levenson, a wonderful man--immensely talented. He taught Chinese history, mainly intellectual history, also commanded European history and a great deal of Jewish lore, and we talked about that to a certain amount.

Lage: When did he come on the faculty?

May: A year before I did.

Lage: So he was here when you came.

May: And we had both been to graduate school at Harvard and had a lot to talk about.

Lage: Was he looking for somebody more congenial, as well?

May: I rather think so. I would guess so, yes. And the same year that I came, Bob Brentano, who was terribly young, came--he had gotten his degree at Oxford.

Lage: Also in European history?

May: Yes. Then in a year Ken Stampp, who'd been away for a year doing research for his big book on slavery, came back. We were always

very cordial colleagues, though we didn't come to be really close friends until some time after, particularly after we both retired.

And then I learned that Henry Nash Smith, who had been an important influence on me intellectually, and a great supporter in every possible way, and a very interesting man and a good friend, was coming to the English department. And in I think '56 Bill and Beverly Bouwsma came, after a big fight in the department that you've doubtless heard about.

Lage: Right!

May: With the Bouwsmas we found ourselves immediately very compatible, indeed. We used to spend evenings discussing religion and drinking cheap whiskey until quite late at night. They were an influence on my, at that time, rudimentary religious interest. So by '56 I had--and I would say Jean had, too--a very rich life.

Also the Murchios had moved next door. He was not an academic, but he was a biochemist and his wife a very talented potter and other kinds of artist. They were very good for us, particularly because Jack, who has a wonderful sense of humor, knew a lot of people in the academic world but didn't take it too seriously and tried to persuade me not to, which was extremely useful. Also, my brother was living in San Francisco and my sister in Los Angeles visited us from time to time. So by the middle to late fifties, we lived here and were happy socially and a little bit less poor.

Life in the Berkeley Community

Lage: How did Jean and the children enjoy the Berkeley scene in the fifties? What was it like to live here just as a regular citizen, not the campus life?

May: Let me think about that a minute. I think at that time faculty wives spent an awful lot of their time on the campus life--the Section Club for all sorts of interests. And of course two young children took up a lot of it and sort of keeping the show on the road as far as I was concerned.

Lage: Were the schools adequate as far you were concerned?

May: Adequate, not better than that.

Lage: Not better than that?

May: No. Not at Kensington Grammar School, Portola Junior High, and El Cerrito High School, they were okay, mediocre schools, but I regret that we didn't look further.

Lage: You weren't in the Berkeley schools then?

May: No. Berkeley High was a more interesting school, I think. At El Cerrito there were few, if any, really distinguished teachers, though no incompetent ones, either.

Lage: Were you involved in any clubs like the Kosmos Club?

May: No, I was never invited to join the Kosmos Club. [laughter]

Lage: Did you eat at the Faculty Club for lunch?

May: Yes, usually.

Lage: Was that an important place to meet people?

May: Well, yes. I'll talk a bit later about Carl Bridenbaugh. He rather ran things in the department after he came, shortly before I did, and let it be known that one should eat in the Faculty Club. I ate usually at the same table every day with people that were reasonably congenial but not terribly. I always was very critical of the place because at that time if you sat down with somebody you didn't know, you didn't introduce yourself, which I think was a bad custom. The food was not nearly as good as it's become. And of course there was nothing to drink.

Political and Religious Attitudes of History Faculty

May: You asked, when we were talking this over, about political attitudes of the department. I can say something about that. In the Faculty Club, anybody who was not for Stevenson for president, and in general a liberal Democrat, had a pretty hard time. There were a few well-known conservatives, but they were in a distinct minority. And I felt really that people were somewhat less tolerant of difference than they had been in Claremont. Now Claremont was a place where there were a lot of ultra-conservatives, but there were others, too. And one felt when one went to the drug store that the person in charge there knew exactly who you voted for as well as what your income was.

Lage: [laughter] Oh, really!

May: Yes, and up here, since the faculty was so big, it was pretty self-enclosed. That was one of the less good things.

Lage: I'm just trying to get a sense of what it was like when you say it was sort of expected that every one would be a Stevenson supporter. Did you just not voice, "Oh, I'm to the left of that"?

May: Well, I was a Stevenson supporter and I was calming down by that time in politics.

Lage: But others? How politically correct was the atmosphere?

May: The term hadn't been coined, but it was, in terms of those days, politically correct--New Dealers.

Lage: For instance, Jack Peltason, whom I've just finished interviewing, said that he always got a kick out of putting Reader's Digest on his coffee table to sort of make people--

May: [laughter] Yes. Well, quite a bit later, when I started going to church, to refer to "our church" or something like that would cause the same jolt. There was, as in the whole profession, a tacit anti-Semitism--sometimes articulated in private. Everybody knew that it was harder for a Jew to get a job. He had to work harder and be brighter and more prolific and so forth. Even Levenson had his enemies. A much milder anti-Catholicism, but in general, liberalism and no particular interest in religion prevailed.

Lage: Well, it seems like there was also a mild anti-religion feeling from what you said about giving people a jolt by going to church?

May: I wouldn't say an intolerance toward it, but surprise that anybody'd be interested in it.

Lage: And yet you say that Bill Bouwsma--

May: He was very different--both Bouwsmas were very seriously religious. Bill was the son of a philosopher who was an ardent Calvinist. They were definitely church-going Episcopalians, but they were the people with whom we talked about it. And I talked with Joe Levenson about the difference between his religion and mine with some interest.

Lage: Would people make anti-Semitic remarks about someone like Joe Levenson?

May: Only the worst of them. Only a few in the department.

Lage: The older guard?

May: Yes, some of the older, though not necessarily the oldest.

Lage: Carl Schorske mentioned--not so much here, but in the East--a lot of anti-Catholic feeling in the academy.

May: Oh, yes. Heavens, yes! I ran into that at Harvard--especially, of course, anti-Irish.

Lage: Let me ask you while we're on these attitude things: what about attitudes towards divorce, infidelity? We're talking about the fifties now.

May: Oh, it was assumed that people stayed together. The first divorce in the department was Ken Stampp's, and that was a major shock. Then within a few years there were several more and it became almost run of the mill. But at this time it was assumed that you got married when your career started, and the husband and wife both worked on furthering the husband's career--much as it had been in Claremont, much as it was everywhere at that time.

Lage: At some point I want you to talk about attitudes about women in the profession, but this might not be the place.

May: Well, no, there hardly were any. There were only a very few and none in the history department. A good deal later, when through a series of circumstances I was championing Adrienne Koch, people came right out and said, "We'd never be able to talk freely among ourselves" and "It would destroy confidentiality," and all sorts of things like that. But for the most part in the fifties it wasn't an issue.

Lage: Because it wasn't considered?

May: Yes, that's right.

Lage: When you had your dinner parties, did the women retire to a different room?

May: I'll tell you about dinner parties.

Lage: Yes, tell me more about the dinner parties.

May: Well, that really goes with the battles of the department.

Lage: Oh, it does? Okay.

Faculty Battles over Hiring and Promotions

May: I've discussed these wars elsewhere at length and others have, too. The leader of what we regarded as more or less the side of the angels was Carl Bridenbaugh, who wanted desperately to make this department at least as good as Harvard's, which had chosen somebody else for a job he very much wanted.

Lage: [laughs] I see.

May: He was utterly devoted and no trouble too great, no ambitions too high. I don't think the department would have changed as quickly or as completely without him.

Lage: What was he like as a person?

May: I hate to say anything too bad about him. He had his generous side, but he could be a bit crass, and it all went together.

Lage: You're much too nice to give me any good stories. [laughter]

May: Well, his usual phrase was that we had to get rid of all the people who couldn't cut the mustard. And up to this point no assistant professors had ever been let go in the department.

Lage: Oh, I didn't realize that.

May: When I first came I was placed on a committee to review two of them, one of whom had been a good friend in college, which made things difficult. And much to the surprise of the people who appointed me to the committee, I held out for letting them go. During this period we let lots of people go. One thing that made that a little less painful was that it was pretty much getting to be a boom time in the profession so they always got good jobs. We made some mistakes, but the level of the department got a lot better.

Lage: When you let them go, were you evaluating the quality of their research and their publications?

May: It was usually, in fact, their research and writing, though some lip service was paid to teaching as well--perhaps more than lip service, but it was mainly their scholarship in comparison with the scholarship of their field in the rest of the country. We developed the idea that we didn't want anybody who wasn't at the top of his field and made it stick pretty much. And as we got better and better and as salaries got up, we got to a point where we could get pretty much anybody we wanted. It got to be a very high powered group. I think the crucial point was passed with the appointment, I

think in '56, of Bill Bouwsma and Tom Kuhn at the same time. But there were plenty of others.

Lage: When you say that you surprised people by moving to the side that was going to uphold the strict standards, who do you think you surprised?

May: Well, the chairman was still Hicks and I think he thought that I was a nice Berkeley boy who [laughter] wouldn't make trouble.

Lage: But was he, himself, a good scholar?

May: I'd say he was. Yes, I'd say he was. He'd written one important book.

Lage: He seemed to bring some good people to the campus. He brought you, for instance, and Ken Stampp.

May: Yes, well, there was other support. I left out a very important person--George Guttridge in English history. He was a generation older. In fact, he was one of the few connections between my university life and previous Berkeley life. He'd been a friend of my parents. They'd met at Fallen Leaf Lake and entertained each other back and forth, so I knew him when I was quite young. He was a most interesting man. He was from Cambridge and I didn't understand him really as well as I came to until I'd spent a year at Cambridge myself. He had complete contempt for all American categories of prestige or success. His own writing in eighteenth-century English history was extremely subtle. There wasn't much of it, but it was impeccable. And he could let one know what he thought with only a flick of his moustache. So he was the closest thing there was, except possibly for Henry Smith in English, to an older person that I respected.

Lage: Now how did Raymond Sontag fit into all this?

May: Ray Sontag was also a most interesting man, conservative, an increasingly ardent Catholic for one thing. He took a leave during this period to work for the CIA for a while and was completely different from most of us politically. He drifted to the opposition, that is the anti-Bridenbaugh side, though nobody could deny him a top intelligence. And he could be very agreeable when he wanted to.

Lage: How was his research and writing regarded?

May: At that time he hadn't done much since he left Princeton. Before that, very well. And then he didn't do anything much for a long, long time. To get ahead in the story, after he had retired about

six years, he completed quite a major book. And yes, he was the most formidable person among the opposition to the Bridenbaugh side in the department.

Lage: He had power on campus as I understand.

May: He and John Hicks both had close relations with President Sproul, much to the resentment of other people. [laughs]

Lage: As we go along with the story, I want you to discuss those relationships between the department and the higher administration--Clark Kerr and President Sproul. Kerr was chancellor the year you came and that was the first year of the chancellorship, I think. '52?

May: Either that or right after, I'm not quite sure. He as much as anybody wanted to build up the university and increase its prestige and excellence, and he would ordinarily give us anything we wanted. If we wanted a higher salary to bring somebody here, more and more we got it. The prosperity of the state, the support of the administration, and then gradually a critical mass of highly demanding scholars were what made the difference.

Lage: Were there end-runs around Kerr by this old guard up to Sproul? Is that what you were saying about going to Sproul?

May: This was before Kerr became president.

Lage: I know Kerr felt he had very little power as chancellor initially.

May: This sort of a battle occurred in most departments, except in departments that were absolutely first rate already--perhaps physics, perhaps anthropology, perhaps chemistry.

Lage: Was Lincoln Constance an important figure in all of this?

May: As dean? Yes, he took the unusual step in the case of the Bouwsma appointment of supporting a minority, a large minority, against the majority and that made the crucial change.

I thought I'd describe, as an example of the atmosphere, what a faculty dinner party was like in these years when this was going on. The department meetings were always at four and often lasted until six. The dinner party would be called for seven, so you'd go home and change and get there. Then you'd find that some of the people there were assistant professors, so you couldn't talk about the meeting in the afternoon and you couldn't talk about much of anything that was going on. And the wife was usually upstairs getting the children in bed and so the other thing to do was for the

host to pour a lot of martinis, which was done so that by, oh, half past eight, when you went in to eat, it didn't matter much what you ate. Things tended to be a bit overcooked, anyway. [laughter]

Lage: Oh, dear! It doesn't sound too interesting, either.

May: Not elevating, no.

Lage: Why did they always have dinner parties after the department meetings? Was that just the tradition?

May: Well, because it was Friday. I should have said that. Friday or Saturday was when they had them, and somehow more often Friday, I think.

Lage: And these were meetings that assistant professors didn't take part in?

May: No, that's right. They were about promotions and appointments.

Lage: Is that still true? The assistant professors aren't part of them?

May: Usually, yes. They're consulted more, but they don't go to the meetings that make these decisions because it's assumed that they don't have the same permanent commitment to the place. It's not true in all departments, but it was in history as long as I knew anything about it.

Lage: Okay. Do you want to say more about the Bouwsma hiring and the role you played and why you thought it was so important? What did you see in Bouwsma?

May: Well, a brilliant and also a very congenial man. I read his first book and then met him at meetings and we already knew we had a lot in common. Then it just became the test case as to who was going to win.

Lage: It was seen as the test case?

May: It was seen as the test case, yes.

Lage: You haven't read Ken Stampp's oral history, but he tells about kind of making a deal. Were you in on this?

May: Oh, not directly. I understand what you mean.

Lage: Okay. Let's see where we are.

May: I should come back to teaching. In this period, as the department and the university got filled with people who had come from eastern and somewhat smaller universities and colleges--universities mainly --and had been used to a type of teaching with smaller courses, undergraduate seminars, term papers and so forth, there was a strong emphasis on piling on the work, more papers, tougher grading, and so forth, with encouragement from the university, at least to the level of the dean. Which I thought was not all good because I think it got to where the students had to skim an awful lot of books, and had to work too hard in each course for the number of courses they were taking. I think that had something in the long run to do with the disaffection evidenced by the Free Speech Movement.

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May: I have one more comment on these department wars, too. As I hope I made clear in talking at length about these faculty wars of the fifties, I was not altogether out of sympathy with the old timers, the rest of whom I think had a vision of the university that was somewhat gentler, less competitive, less determined to be in the big time. And since I'd been at the university when it was more like that, I could understand a bit about what they felt. That was, some of them, not all of them.

Lage: But did your Harvard experience also put the other more competitive cast on it?

May: Oh, very much so, sure.

Lage: Would you have more to say about, should we call it, the "Boltonian" view?

May: Well, the losing faction were people who had been almost appointed to the department in the long chairmanship of Herbert Eugene Bolton, whose theories of American history I didn't agree with, though he had made quite a contribution.

Lage: Did you study with him when you were a student?

May: Never. No, the department was already factional. And I, through the influence of Guttridge and McCormac, another friend of my father's, went to the other group. You didn't go to both very much.

Lage: But were there other Americanists?

May: There weren't many Americanists.

Lage: Other than Bolton?

May: Yes, [Frederick L.] Paxson and then Hicks. But, let's see, what was your question? Oh, about the Boltonians. He didn't ask the best of his students to be members of the history department. And the one that was most brilliant, Woodrow Borah, was all this long time in the speech department.

Lage: That's amazing, because he couldn't be hired in the history department, I understand.

May: Yes, that's right.

Lage: Was anti-Semitism a factor there, do you think?

May: I do, yes. Well, perhaps a little of the anti-intellectualism, also.

Lage: When you got to Harvard, were people aware of Bolton? Did they have attitudes towards Bolton?

May: Oh, they were aware of him, but no, not much. That is, there in the center of early American history with monuments all around you and so forth you didn't really think that the United States should be studied in connection with Argentina or Brazil.

Lage: [laughs] Although I'm told now by young people I meet who are studying in the Bancroft Library that the research that Bolton students did is tremendously valuable. You know, they revisit those research documents.

May: There were an awful lot of them. He started sending people to the Archive of the Indies in Seville, and that was a big thing. Yes, I don't put down his work, and he had some good students.

Lage: I guess that was an era where you had patrons in the faculty?

May: I don't know that that's changed. That is, everybody tries to further the careers of his own students. It's assumed that he does and should.

Lage: And some have more power than others.

May: Yes.

Graduate and Undergraduate Students

Lage: Would you say something about your students, say compared to Scripps?

May: Oh, yes. In my intellectual history seminar, I had a lot of very good students--some not, of course--and in my seminar after about the first year or so, they got steadily better and better.

Lage: This was a graduate seminar?

May: Yes. It was also a time when more and more people were coming from excellent universities to here for graduate school as the whole tone of the place improved. Naturally you got more exciting students.

Lage: What about lecture classes?

May: My intellectual history class was a lecture class.

Lage: Did you find that satisfactory as a teaching method after the small college?

May: I'd lectured there, too, yes. I was still, I think, somewhat too stiff as a lecturer. I think one wants to interrupt and ask for questions and so forth, but lecturing is okay as one kind of teaching, so long as it isn't all there is. As we got people from eastern and smaller places, there were more and more small classes for undergraduates, too.

Lage: Isn't that when they put in the 101 and 103 proseminars?

May: That's right. A little illusory, because it's impossible to staff them except with graduate students--some of whom are very good, others not.

Lage: I guess that's still the case.

May: Yes.

Lage: Were other professors concerned that it was getting too tough and too high pressure? No one's mentioned it to me but you.

May: Not much. No, I don't think so.

Lage: Did your students complain a lot? Why were you so sensitive to it?

May: I heard some complain, but I think it was just a strong feeling that I'd always had that people don't do their best work under intense quantitative pressure.

Lage: Maybe from your experience at Harvard with all the pressure?

May: Yes.

Lage: Were the students mainly from California? Were they rural, were they urban?

May: That changes during this whole period. In this period by the mid-fifties, anti-Semitism in the East was beginning to abate, but it was still very much there, so by the middle or late fifties we had a lot of Jewish students from the East--from New York, particularly--and that raised the level of the seminars quite a lot.

Lage: So they were subjected to quotas at the eastern colleges, do you think?

May: One way or another. It got so that in my seminar in American intellectual history, quite a few of the students had had a course in that subject at Harvard or at Columbia or something like that. That is, the whole operation became not only a more intensive but a more national--even sometimes international--operation. That's partly, of course, because of air travel.

History Conferences

Lage: Did the air travel also allow the Berkeley professors to go to more of their own professional gatherings?

May: Oh, yes. I think I probably ought to say a word about conventions.

Lage: Yes, I think so.

May: Because it was a yearly or biyearly rite. I usually went to two. In this period, since there wasn't any registry of jobs, a great deal of that time was spent intriguing to get our students jobs.

Lage: Okay. Your own students or Cal students?

May: No, somebody would have a job open and we would try to get them for a Cal student before somebody else did [laughs] and to hear about where they were and then to do what we could. Then, of course, most of the time was taken up with people reading papers. I don't think

that learned papers are usually made to be read aloud. It was only very occasionally that a session would really take off and become interesting and lively. Often it was just a matter of somebody reading a paper so as to get a little more credit in his university.

As things got more high powered, there was a lot of entertainment by publishers, always with a lot to drink. It was a curious scene because here would be these publishers' representatives pouring out expensive liquor and handing out hors d'oeuvres and so forth while their wives at home were living by no means on that scale. [laughter]

Lage: That's right.

May: So the meetings were very strenuous. One would come home tired. But increasingly the main thing would be to see people that one knew and one's own former students and so forth.

Lage: Did it help nationalize the profession, do you think?

May: Oh, very much so, sure.

Lage: Which were the two you went to?

May: The American Historical Association and what was then called the Mississippi Valley Historical Association--it became the Organization of American Historians.

Lage: And everybody did it, I'm assuming?

May: Most. Not all, no.

Lage: Did you have to pay your own way or were there special funds?

May: Sometimes one, sometimes the other. More and more the department could help out with that. But A. M. Schlesinger advised his students, no matter how poor they were, to set aside enough money to go to the AHA convention, just to be seen.

Lage: [laughs] You say that with a great deal of irony now. Did you take it seriously then?

May: Not terribly.

Lage: But you had that sense of perspective at the time?

May: Yes, a good deal of it was a bore, but yet it had some excitement to it. Another thing it did was familiarize one with a lot of American cities.

Lage: Okay, I'm going to see what else I thought we missed here. Ken Stampp mentioned that the Americanists on the faculty would get together at some time on a regular basis and read papers to each other. He only mentioned five people--I think yourself, [Charles] Sellers, Bridenbaugh, [Hunter] Dupree, and himself.

May: This was a very peculiar institution founded and led by Carl Bridenbaugh. He had the idea from other precedents that it was nice to get together and read papers. Sometimes it was the Americanists, sometimes it was the people who were in his favor right at the moment.

Lage: I see, so he sort of organized it.

May: What was supposed to happen was that one's wife was supposed to prepare a very good dinner and then get out of the way and not appear. And there'd be an awful lot to drink so that sometimes people didn't pay as much attention to papers as they might. I think this was not a very successful institution here.

Lage: Did the wives bristle at this at all, or would they just as soon not have to listen to the papers?

May: I think the latter was more the case. [laughter]

More on Teaching and Faculty Battles

Lage: I wanted to ask you about the progress in introducing intellectual history--did you get opposition? Who were the people who said it was--

May: "Nailing jelly to the wall," and so forth? Well, Sontag, Hicks. Paxson, I think, coined that a bit earlier. He was no longer around.

Lage: Sontag even taught European intellectual history!

May: Oh, yes. He didn't gripe about that. But since that was what I was supposed to do and that was what I'd been hired to do, I didn't run into any of the particular flak on that. The question would be whether they'd send their students to my seminars. Some would, some would not.

Lage: So someone in political history might just tell their students not to bother with this?

May: They might.

Lage: How were you aware of that? Just by who showed up or not?

May: I heard from some of the students when I would get to know them.

Lage: Was there tension on doctoral boards between different professors?

May: I think that was usually under control. The oral examinations were --four out of five of them--pretty dreadful affairs, whether the student passed or not. And we became stricter. Once in a while it gradually evolved into a real discussion among colleagues, and then you'd know the person was going to pass, probably with distinction.

Lage: Okay, now anything else we can get out of this subject of teaching, curriculum?

May: On this whole subject of the wars of the fifties? No, in general through the fifties I was very happy in my environment, and such opposition as I ran into sometimes bothered me, but on the whole my side won on most things. I remember once that Jean pointed out that I, who used to be a radical, now liked and admired the president of the university, the chancellor, and my department chairman. [laughs] But I was happy to the point of approaching complacency, despite a good deal of strain. I'll come to the strain because that comes in the writing.

Lage: And the complacency might come in the politics?

May: Sure, yes.

Lage: Now this is the last thing I'm going to dig on: did you know President Sproul?

May: No.

Lage: Did you have social engagements with Clark Kerr?

May: No. I got to know him some, more in the period of the sixties in the controversies.

Writing and Publication of *The End of American Innocence*

Lage: Okay. Now, let's go on to Innocence.[1]

May: All right. During all this period when I was involved in teaching, department wars, committees and so forth, it was also assumed that I better write another book and pretty soon. Well, I had thought I was writing a book for a long time, almost since my first book, on the decline of radicalism in the 1920s. I spent an enormous amount of time reading files of obscure periodicals and so forth. And then I realized that if you wanted to say why radicalism declined, you don't look at the radicals, you look at the whole society. [sighs] So I started writing a book on the twenties in all aspects of literature, politics, and so forth. But gradually I got interested what I thought would be the first chapter or so--the period right before the First World War, when a lot of the movements of the twenties got going, till finally that became the subject of the book.

I think this is what happens in history that doesn't happen in social sciences: you don't set out to ask a question, and the question develops as you go. I applied for a Guggenheim to get a term off, but I didn't get it and so this book had to be written while taking full part in every other part of campus activity.

I gradually thought I found a prewar movement of thought and culture that extended to almost every field involving a premium on spontaneity and intuition in resistance to the materialism of the late nineteenth century. I read most magazines of the period, from the serious monthlies and quarterlies, which were excellent of their kind, to the many literary and eventually avant-garde periodicals. I read through those and I also noted down the books, foreign or American, that were reviewed in these various periodicals and read them as far as I could--all of them that were prominently reviewed.

Lage: Where did you find these periodicals? Were they in the Cal library?

May: Mostly in the Cal library, but I ordered some. I didn't travel. I didn't have funds to travel, and that's why I didn't use more manuscripts in this because I couldn't get to where they were. But I don't altogether regret that. I think that there was a great deal of life in the published literature of this period.

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[1]The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Time, 1912-1917 (New York: Knopf, 1959).

Lage: For this kind of work it seems like that was what you were looking at.

May: Yes. And so it gradually took shape.

Lage: How long were you working on it? It sounds like quite a long process.

May: Well, since before I came to Cal. I started on what I thought was this book on the decline of radicalism in the twenties while I was in Claremont and The End of American Innocence was published in 1959, so approximately ten years, I'd say, possibly a little more.

Lage: What kind of pressure did you feel?

May: Oh, yes. As an example, the time came for me to come up for a full professorship. I had had the great good luck to come to the university as an associate professor, and Carl Bridenbaugh told me that because I hadn't gotten my book done, I should withdraw my name so as not to be defeated and disappoint my friends. Well, I went for a morning's walk around the Berkeley hills and decided I wasn't going to do that and so my name went in. I later found that I was passed for the promotion unanimously, but that's an example of how one felt pressure. And everybody did.

Lage: And Carl Bridenbaugh as the source?

May: Well, yes, but the whole culture of the university increasingly. It wouldn't have been so in the old days, of course.

Lage: Because you would have been promoted after a period of time?

May: Sure.

Lage: Okay. Tell me more about the shape of the book.

May: It first discusses at length the old culture: its periodicals, its publications, and its essence which I define as a triptych, with moralism in the center and on one side progress and on the other side culture. Sometimes these came into conflict, but what made it such an exciting period was that the nineteenth century polite culture was still there and yet there were all sorts of rebellions against it. I suggested the figure of people busily laying powder in the cracks of the structure.

Then it goes to the antecedents, going back through the nineteenth century up to the late nineteenth century, with a big emphasis on William James, who I think was the most important. And the battles that were fought out in each publishing house and in

each magazine. And then finally the characteristics of what I call the "innocent rebellion." And then the effect of the war, on which I've been misunderstood. Saying that many of the movements were started before the war seemed as if I was making the First World War less important in the history of American culture, but I think I was making it more important because the movements were there and were fairly strong, but the breakthroughs came after the older culture had been smashed by the war. In general, it was true that partisans of genteel culture were supporters of the war because they were usually Anglophiles for one thing and some of the avant-garde people were too, but some were not. The great patron of the avant-garde, I guess, was [H. L.] Mencken, who was already important before the war and who was not so much a pacifist as a Germanophile. But the book ends with the war.

People thought that I would go on and write a book on the twenties. And so did I, but I didn't. I'll come to that later.

Then I come to the problem of getting it published. I sent it first, I think, to Knopf because he was the most prestigious publisher and published books of other members of the department.

Lage: Did you feel good about what you were sending?

May: Yes. What I sent was the first part on the older culture, somewhat less exciting. And it came back with a letter saying, "This will not do." And it came back actually postage due. It deeply insulted me.

Lage: [laughs]

May: Then a little later Blanche Knopf came to town. She always stayed in the Mark Hopkins [hotel] with her French maid. And she called up and said would I come over and talk with her. And I said, "Really, Mrs. Knopf, I don't see what there is to talk about." "Nonetheless, I would appreciate it if you did." So I came over. And she asked about the book and so forth and then offered me a contract. So I was in a rather awkward position between the husband and wife. [laughs]

Lage: So it was Mr. Knopf that had turned it down.

May: Yes, but then he came around. She pushed him to come around. But he never really liked the book. When I interviewed each of them as participants in this prewar movement--

Lage: So they were sources for your book?

May: Yes, they were that, too. I found out why Alfred Knopf didn't like the book. I asked him repeatedly about a publisher named Mitchell Kennerley, who had published a number of the bright young people in the prewar period. And he said, oh, he wouldn't pay much attention to him, he didn't matter very much. I found later that Knopf had worked for Kennerley and had left him, allegedly taking with him some of his most profitable authors. So he was very sensitive on that subject and in general on this period in which he'd played a considerable part.

However, they published the book. And in general, with some distinct exceptions, it got very well reviewed. I later found out through the indiscreet memoir of somebody who was on the Pulitzer committee that it had been awarded the Pulitzer by the professors but that was overruled by the journalists and given to somebody else. It would have made a great deal of difference to me in my professional life and otherwise if I'd gotten that, but I did get a good deal of recognition for it--rather more in England than in America.

Lage: I noticed that it was published in England shortly afterwards.

May: Yes, yes.

Lage: Now, how important are the reviews to your own faculty?

May: Very important, indeed. I've had some bad ones, and I think I mentioned to you that my first book, the most conventional, was the one that was reviewed unanimously favorably. There were some unfavorable reviews of Innocence.

Lage: What were the objections, do you recall? We shouldn't focus on the unfavorable since there weren't many.

May: I guess in general that it was too wide a subject for me to handle things with enough depth. I guess that was the main one.

Lage: In the writing of it or in the process did you solicit advice and review from your fellow faculty? Was that a standard thing?

May: It was, but I didn't do it much. I didn't get it, anyway. When I was up for full professor, of course, I had to submit what I had done thus far.

Lage: Yes, but did you seek advice while you were writing it?

May: No, if I remember--oh, yes, one big exception. Henry Smith was my mainstay and read and understood what I was doing always. One of his very great qualities and a rare one is that he was able in

reading people's manuscripts not to tell them how he would have done it but to try to make it better the way they were doing it. He was most supportive all the way through and that's part of the reason I dedicated the book to him.

Lage: And what about Jean? Did she get at all involved in it?

May: Oh, yes. She hadn't done the research, didn't know the subject matter particularly, but she'd certainly say whether she thought it was a good chapter. She's always read what I said and sort of made a general judgment on it, always a good one.

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May: After I finished a chapter, that's when we'd go on one of our mini-vacations.

Lage: Ah, something to look forward to.

May: Yes.

Lage: Did you struggle over the writing? You didn't have to learn how to write.

May: Well, no, I don't think so. I've always been more interested in writing than in anything else. I think my criticism of the book is that there are perhaps too many publishing firms, too many periodicals and all that. I think it might be a bit better book if I'd been more impressionistic, but I was trying to show that intellectual history was serious research.

Lage: You mentioned in the acknowledgments for the book the role of your graduate students and the seminars. Tell me how that worked.

May: I had my seminar doing topics in the period I was working in and often I got a lot of information from them and sometimes critical ideas, too. That worked very well.

Lage: Any particular graduate students?

May: In this period? More in the next one and for the next book, I think, for my Enlightenment[2] book, but there were a number that contributed.

Lage: Did you have women graduate students during this period?

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[2]The Enlightenment in America, 1976.

May: Yes, not many, but some.

Lage: Were they encouraged to go on at a professional level, or were they seen as dabblers?

May: No, I don't think that was case. It hadn't even been the case at Harvard. There just weren't very many. But no, I think they received equal treatment.

Lage: How did you address your graduate students, and they you?

May: Oh, in this period, this was "Mr. May." At Harvard and at Cal you were never called doctor, or seldom, because that was assumed. All through the fifties, you'd call them Mr. and Miss until, say, a student got through his orals and was in the very last period. Then sometimes you'd use his first name and he'd use yours after he got the degree, but not before. It was rather rigid.

Lage: That's an interesting little touch. I don't think today's students would understand.

May: Oh, no. Well, this had changed before I had stopped teaching.

Lage: My daughter was at Santa Cruz, but as an undergraduate, a few years ago. She would call her professors by their first names.

May: Sure, it even happened at Harvard when I was there as a graduate student. The favorite students of Perry Miller or Matthiessen would call them Perry or Matty. Nobody ever called Mr. Schlesinger anything but that, including people who'd been his graduate students twenty years before.

Lage: Now is there more about the book, or how you would have changed the interpretation as you look back?

May: No, I don't think so.

Fulbright Fellowship in Belgium

May: One thing was that by the time I got it done with all the other stresses, I was very tired. And that's a reason why I decided to apply for a Fulbright, to have a year abroad.

Lage: Tell me about that.

May: The lecturing Fulbrights in American studies were absolutely wonderful for the professors who got them. Before this it had been a very big thing and maybe once in lifetime when somebody in American history went to Europe. Now people went much more casually, much more often, and that was good.

My criticism of the Fulbright program was that it didn't build onto strength where there was strength in the foreign university but sometimes introduced the subject. It was not likely under those circumstances to be taken terribly seriously. I think there was a special kind of demand and supply situation; some of the European professors were skeptical of anything that came free. And the Fulbright secretaries in each place--for instance, in Brussels--were so eager to say, "Our man will go anywhere, and do anything you want, will lecture anywhere on anything," that it made them a little bit more suspicious, I think.

Lage: Did you go to the university without your own class to teach?

May: No, I'll tell you about that in some detail. I went to Belgium because if you went to France you had to go to two universities. And we thought, with the children, moving to Europe for a year was enough without moving also in the middle, and at Brussels you could stay where you were.

Now I taught--or lectured, anyway--in the four universities: the University of Ghent, the University of Liège, the Free University of Brussels, and the University of Louvain. These sharply differed in language and in ideology. That is, Ghent, of course, is Flemish, Liège definitely Francophone, Louvain Catholic, and the Free University of Brussels, as it was always called, distinctly anti-Catholic. You could not be a Catholic; you could not go to mass or confession and teach there, though amusingly they made an exception for Protestants because while they would believe something unreasonable, they weren't authoritarian--that was their view. But I taught in all these and learned an awful lot about Belgium.

I went back there later for another period of time. I probably learned more about Belgium than about any other European country. But there or anywhere else we went--and I'm happy to say we have traveled a lot--my concern was always not to be an American historian visiting this country, but to try to learn as much as I could about the place I was. I have a strong conviction that this sort of thing is never wasted in your work on an American subject. It's stimulating and deepening, I think.

We lived in Brussels, which is a French-speaking city, much to the anger of the Flemish-speaking part of the country. The girls

were in a good French-speaking school not far from where we lived, a private school alleged to be progressive.

Lage: Did they adapt well to that? How old were they at this point?

May: They were, let's see, ten and twelve, I think. The older one had a tough time because she was in the sixième, which is where people get sorted out as to whether they can go on to a higher school and tough work.

Lage: Did they know French?

May: They knew a bit, but they learned it. The younger one adapted very well, spoke fluent but sloppier French, had a French-speaking best friend and so forth. But they both think it was a very valuable experience. It's an experience more and more American children were having--diplomatic children, business children. But often they went to American or English schools and we decided against that and I've been glad of that.

It was something of the same experience, particularly for Hildy, the older one, as the one I had had in going to Europe in the middle of schooling. The return is a little bit hard, not as hard I think as it had been for me.

Then I had one major experience there that I have written an article about--it's not published--and that came about because there was money accorded in the Fulbright program for language study in the language of the country you were in. I had pretty good French already, so mine went for work with a teacher of diction, of correct speech and writing, but also of literature. This took me to Madame Berthe Patigny, who was a tremendous experience for me. The main thing she did was to have me read aloud. To get over the "Anglo-Saxon phlegm" I had to read à haute voix--to read dramatically everything from Villon up to contemporary poets. The primary book was an anthology, but also I bought the admirable little editions of all the major writers. This was most exciting and I thought gave me a real insight into French culture. She was French. Her husband was Belgian, and she had complete contempt for everything Belgian, I would say, including him.

Lage: Including her husband!

May: Yes. She could tell you who won the Prix Goncouurt and the other ones for the last ten years. And then recently, though it was dying out, there had been public competitions in reciting. She cared very deeply about French literature--had no knowledge and no interest in any other literature, hardly knew there was such a thing. But the intensity of her devotion was quite a revelation. And she also had

a sense of humor and knew that she and what she was doing were becoming obsolete. She could imitate young people and their current lingo quite well. So that was, I think, the biggest experience for me in Brussels.

Then we also traveled from Brussels. One time in early spring --the school vacation in Easter week, rather--we drove from Brussels to Florence, where Bill Bouwsma had a sabbatical and where the Bouwsmas were living. And that was most exciting--driving through Europe, with the fruit blossoms coming out, often sprouting out of old buildings. That was a thrilling experience.

Then there was one other thing. The heat was off and I didn't have too much to do and I didn't have any pressures, so I had some time to think and even meditate a bit walking around Brussels and this was when I became more seriously interested in religion. We went to a Church of England church there on Sunday, mostly to get the English periodicals which were sold there and to hear some English. And we found that when we didn't go, we missed it. That was a quite important beginning.

Lage: It sounds as if you and Jean sort of traveled along this route together?

May: Me ahead. I went along, at first, farther than she did. But this was the beginnings of my movement slowly towards something of a more religious commitment, although always one that was sort of borderline, I'd say. Where it ended is that I knew I believed in something but couldn't define what it was.

Lage: It's interesting that it took place in Belgium, away from home and also at this place where there was so much division between the religions in the academy.

May: Yes, that's right. The only division to amount to anything is that there are ardent Catholics and loose or French-style Catholics. It was a wonderful year for all four of us, and I think when we left we had the feeling that if we'd stayed one more year we would have really been at home. [laughs]

Lage: Did it change at all your view of American culture or American studies?

May: Yes. Getting to know some European universities and talking to other people who had Fulbrights elsewhere made me realize how wonderful American universities were. The norm, in Belgian universities particularly, was that people heard about six lecture courses and then were examined orally and perfunctorily, mainly to

give back what the professor had said. They didn't read much. The English ones were not like that.

I should say that after the Belgian year we spent the summer in England and Scotland seeing relatives and traveling about there. But the important part was the continental part.

Lage: Was there anything to say about your teaching of American studies there and the reaction of students and other professors?

May: Well, the ones that I dealt with were very supportive, particularly, I think, at Liège. At Louvain I lectured only a few times, but in French and for that Madame Patigny prepared me very carefully.

Lage: You were glad to have her?

May: Oh, boy, I sure was!

Lage: They probably wouldn't have had much tolerance for a sloppy-accented French.

May: Well, it's better if you could speak somewhat correctly and answer questions. But there were real differences in lots of things--let me give an example. At Liège I had a small class and they read Thoreau's essay "On Civil Disobedience." That always turns on American students, it echoes very deeply in their feelings, but they couldn't see what was so good about Thoreau--just a very selfish and not a great man. "Who is a great man?" "Marx."

Lage: Oh! Interesting. Were they respectful of American culture or were they contemptuous?

May: It varied person to person. And again, the ones I dealt most with had a certain stake in it themselves. Some of them were teaching American literature, particularly at Liège. That was the most venturesome of the universities in that way. And the audience at Louvain was interested in my lecture on American religions as something very bizarre and outlandish.

Lage: Hm! [laughs] That's interesting.

Work on *The Enlightenment in America*

Lage: Do you want to go back to your return to Berkeley?

May: Yes, I think so. I came back in 1960 to a very flourishing department at the height of its prestige and strength. And at this point I decided I wanted to write a book not about the twenties but a book about the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, partly because there wasn't any good book, but also because in lecturing I got immensely interested in Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and others. So I was working on that book from then on until--to get way ahead of the story--1976, because I had to reeducate myself completely in early American history, which is considered by many people--particularly those practicing it--a very special history. Indeed, it had its own bibliography and practices and ways of finding material and so forth.

The organizing principal of the book--that there are four main kinds of Enlightenment, all distinctive but related--came to me actually in the middle of a seminar when I was talking about the Enlightenment. I had about 100 or 150 pages and went back and rewrote them with that in mind.

Lage: So teaching really helps clarify your thinking, it seems?

May: Yes. So I wanted to use Widener Library to educate myself--first of all by reading the main European sources of the Enlightenment and then learning the bibliographical tricks used in early American history. So we, through a friend, got a house in Concord, Mass. and settled there. It's about an hour's drive or train ride to Cambridge.

Lage: Now when was this?

May: This is '63 to '64.

Lage: Did you have an appointment at Harvard, or you were just there for the studying?

May: For a summer I had. Some Harvard faculty members were cordial and as always some were not. But living in Concord, which is so much a center of New England culture with Emerson and Hawthorne all around you and of course the Minuteman monument at the bridge where the Revolution started--

Lage: And Walden Pond.

May: --nearby and a lot of wonderful old houses, and so forth. We lived a bit out of town in the woods. Interestingly, these woods were posted by signs saying you could walk in them if you wanted but not to pick anything, and these were signed by the owners who were named Emerson and Butterick. It was the same Emerson family, and Butterick was the major at the Concord fight, so there was a certain amount of

continuity, though the people we got to know there were not connected with this for the most part.

Jean worked in the Concord bookstore, which she enjoyed a lot. And we both found that though we loved New England and went into rhapsodies when we first started seeing New England houses and graveyards, we couldn't live there. It was too conservative and too stuffy a society. In Concord anybody who sold a house to an Irish person was regarded as treasonable. It was [laughs wryly] still pretty much like that.

Lage: Jean had come from New England, had she not?

May: Yes, but she found that she couldn't live there either anymore, though we were very fond of the place and the landscape and the artifacts and so forth. While I was there I wrote an article called "The Recovery of American Religious History,"[3] which I think is the most influential article I ever wrote and perhaps the most controversial. I had learned that ever since I'd been working on my thesis that religious history was more and more neglected except by the people who had come under the influence of Perry Miller and a few others, so that the books were very old books and all sorts of topics were neglected. This was in the middle of the fifties when there was a distinct rise in numbers--and money, at least--in American religion--lots of building of churches and all that.

I sent it to the American Historical Review, and they hesitated a long time and then sent me the correspondence that they'd had. Some of the board of editors didn't believe it was possible that there was a religious revival going on and did not think that the topic was valid, but others disagreed and they did decide to publish it. And that's been cited, I think, more and more because it happened that there were a lot of other people at the time who were going into American religious history and, indeed, who had found that you can't understand much about American culture, even American politics, unless you do know something about American religious history.

Lage: But were you talking in the article about the rise of interest in religion at the time?

May: Just mentioned it. Mainly the lack of scholarship in a great many important fields. And I mentioned that most of what there was was about Protestantism, not much about either Catholicism or Judaism at that time.

Interestingly enough, at the conventions that came right after that I was invited to be chairman of a session at the American Catholic Historical Society and also at the American Society for Church History,

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[3]Reprinted in Ideas, Faiths, and Feelings: Essays in American Intellectual and Religious History, 1952-1982 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

which is mostly Protestant seminary historians. But again, I had time there to write that article.

Lage: Did your interest in this relate to your own sort of coming towards a religious awakening?

May: Oh, certainly it did. But I didn't say that in the article.

Lage: No, but it did?

May: Oh, sure. Anything more about that time in Cambridge?

Lage: I can't think of anything.

Department Chair, 1964-1966

May: The main thing that happened to me there--not altogether unexpected --was a letter from the dean inviting me to be chairman of the department. I say not unexpected because they'd gone through most of the other plausible people. [laughs]

Lage: It was about your turn!

May: Yes, it was about my turn. I knew that.

Lage: I saw that Carl Schorske, for instance, became chairman after he'd only been here two years!

May: Yes, but was only chairman for a year, as I remember it. So I wrote to friends making appointments. Joe Levenson was one vice chairman, Richard Herr was the other. I went back to Berkeley absolutely determined to give the job of chairman my very best effort, and I enjoyed it. It was then a remarkably powerful job--that is, making recommendations to the administration not only about appointments from the outside, but changes in the status inside and even what are called merit raises.

Lage: Do you rely on the committee of tenured professors in order to do those?

May: Yes, but you also read all the stuff yourself. And I did all I could to read all the material by members of the department.

Lage: Tremendously time-consuming!

May: Yes, it was. It took pretty much my full time. I just taught one seminar.

Lage: Are we going to talk about this in the context of the sixties?

May: Yes, I will. I'm coming to that.

Lage: Because you had mentioned that you had twenty appointments to make!

May: Yes, because Clark Kerr wanted to run the university on a quarterly basis with four equal quarters. It never worked. The faculty was always against it, which had a certain amount to do with their lack of support in the crisis. When I was chairman I had a lot of discussions with the financial representative from the administration, but what it came to was that if we wanted to appoint somebody the money was always to be found.

Chancellor Edward Strong

Lage: Those were the salad days.

May: Those were indeed the salad days. [laughter] However, there turned out to be a few explosive ingredients in that salad. I was enjoying it very much and then, at the time, Ed Strong, whom I'd known when I was an undergraduate, was the chancellor. Maybe the height of the whole period was when he was inaugurated and President Kennedy came and gave the speech about it.

Lage: Now were you there for that?

May: Yes.

Lage: Yes, that was before the Harvard year. It was spring of 1962, I think.

May: I think that's right.

Lage: Tell me about how you saw that event.

May: Well, Kennedy talked about all the appointments he'd made from Berkeley, starting with Robert McNamara, but many others. And he used his wit and his Harvard irony very effectively. It was in the stadium and he said, "In my day, this sort of crowd could only have been attracted by an athletic event and now they come to hear a politician. It's this sort of thing that makes me worry about the fibe: o' American youth." Now, of course, he had us in his hand

after that pretty much. And it was sort of a symbolic occasion, partly because it was the inauguration of Ed Strong, who was to be shot down in flames so shortly afterward.

But while I was chairman and very full of being chairman--I will admit that I got some pleasure out of having a big office and a secretary and so forth--I resolved that I was going to act quite differently than I had because I realized that this was not a job you could plan, that it was a job of crises that would come up that you had to deal with ad hoc, and on the whole I did that and it was good for me.

Lage: You even realized that before the troubles, it sounds like?

May: Oh, yes. But of course that wasn't a very long time. Strong invited all the chairmen in rotation to have lunch with him. At the one that I was at he went through a great many things that were happening and said, "By the way, there was this little strip of land outside Sather Gate--"

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May: --where according to a current policy of not collecting money or making direct religious or political proselytizing, we have banned that sort of thing. And I suppose there'll be those who will talk about free speech." Everybody was supposed to laugh politely, but I later kicked myself around a good deal because as an undergraduate I'd known something about the same strip of land and the arguments about free speech then and I should have said something to the effect of, "Watch out," but I did not. So my honeymoon, you might say, as chairman was over by the fall of the year [laughter] I became chairman.

Lage: That's very interesting to me because often it's treated as more an oversight than a decision. They were told to cede that land to the City of Berkeley and it wasn't done. And this sounds almost as if it were a decision?

May: Yes, well it was treated very casually. It turned out not to be a casual matter to the students as you know. Just why things exploded and why here and not somewhere else is something I'd like to leave for next time.

Lage: Right. Could I ask you a little bit more about if you knew Strong well as a fellow faculty member and what your opinion of him had been?

May: He had been a friend when he was an assistant professor of my close college friend Burr Overstreet, and consequently he had been one of

those who was invited to sit on the bleachers on Mrs. Overstreet's roof and watch football games.

Lage: Back when you were a student?

May: Yes, I'd known him.

Lage: And was he also a student?

May: No, he was an assistant professor. That is, he was a friend of Burr's father, who had been a philosophy professor here. So I knew him, but not very well. Then he had been, also, since he taught philosophy of history, somebody that the history department always sent a lot of students to.

Lage: But you didn't have a relationship with him as a faculty member?

May: Certainly not anything like a close one. No, I didn't particularly know him well.

Campus Political Scene in the Fifties

Lage: Do you think we've set the scene for next time?

May: I think so. Do you?

Lage: Yes, very much. Maybe we should just discuss, in the context of the political scene in the late fifties, the interest in the issue of Communist speakers on campus.

May: I would say that there were certainly left students as there always had been. Not as many as when I'd been a student in the thirties. On the whole the spectrum in the faculty ran from mostly liberal to a few radical and rather fewer conservative, so that it was pretty much assumed that when the students made gestures like trying to interrupt the meeting of the House Committee for Un-American Activities at the San Francisco City Hall that the faculty were on their side. In fact, people who'd turned out to be very conservative in the later crises, in the decade of the sixties were conspicuous in that group.

Lage: Supporting the anti-HUAC activities?

May: Yes. I had made speeches about McCarthyism which didn't take any particular guts in Berkeley--not nearly as much as if you'd made speeches <u>for</u> it, certainly. But I had been so wrapped up with the

university and what I was doing and my writing that these were not intensely political years for me.

Lage: Let me ask you: I know that there'd been an effort to force the issue on Communist speakers on campus and Ken Stampp talks about that. Now, you've told me that you weren't particularly involved in that?

May: I think not.

Lage: But you did chair a lecture series on communism.

May: Oh, yes. That was when the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade was very active in Cal. So a group of us organized what were supposed to be serious and objective lectures on communism in various places.

Lage: A historic look at communism.

May: Yes, that's right. Let's see. there was Richard Webster on communism in Italy, Franz Schurmann on communism in China. Did we have a German? No, Carl Schorske gave sort of a wrap-up lecture on the subject in general. And there were big audiences. It went well. We intended to put it in a book and as a matter of fact it was announced for publication. Oh, Martin Malia and Russia! [laughs] Of course, I could hardly leave that out.

Lage: Right.

May: But unfortunately his contribution never came in and the lectures were never published. But it was an effort to make the discussion of the subject more serious.

Lage: More scholarly?

May: Yes.

Lage: But it was a very separate thing from the inviting Communist speakers on campus.

May: That's right. Actually, right before the upheaval, Clark Kerr had gotten some sort of academic freedom award for permitting Communist speakers under certain circumstances. I think there had to be a faculty sponsor or something like that. I was not active in that issue.

Lage: Okay, I think we're at a good point to continue next time.

May: All right, yes. Fine.

Throckmorton Manor ##

Lage: Before we leave the fifties, something I've heard about that I'd like to know more about is Throckmorton Manor.

May: I know a little, but really you should ask Bob and Carroll Brentano, who know much more, and were close to the people involved.

Lage: Tell me what you know.

May: It was a large, very dilapidated former mansion on Telegraph Avenue, where a bunch of students lived. They had found the name Throckmorton Manor in the British Magazine, "Country Life," and named their house accordingly. They even had cocktail napkins printed.

The students who lived there were mostly from the history department, but some from other departments. One thing that was notable about it was it was one of the first places where men and women openly lived together. And that was enough to make some professors--not most--think that it was not a place faculty members should go. The students who lived at Throckmorton had formal parties--evening dress required--and the cops were suspicious because they'd see these elderly men, some of them in evening clothes--one of them John Hicks, who was a dean--going to these parties. Some of them suspected that it was a house of prostitution.

Lage: [laughs]

May: What it was in part also was a house of disaffection; they believed as a matter of faith that all the more interesting students--and the livelier students--always were flunking their orals, so they'd have a wake whenever that happened.

Lage: Did it happen very often?

May: Oh, yes! In the fifties, sure, we were pretty tough. Sometimes somebody from Throckmorton would call up after one of their friends had failed and tell us that we'd done a terrible thing.

Lage: Did it have a beat quality?

May: Sort of.

Lage: It doesn't sound like it with the evening dress, though.

May: Oh, yes. Well, that was parody. It was <u>all</u> parody.

Lage: Yes.

May: These were graduate students who wanted to defy the mores of the fifties and also who objected to the rather strict and tough standards of the history department and others.

Lage: But they did invite their professors?

May: Oh, sure. Yes.

Lage: I would think of John Hicks as being a rather establishment figure.

May: Oh, very much so, yes.

Lage: He would show up?

May: Yes.

Lage: Would Raymond Sontag show up at Throckmorton?

May: No.

Lage: Some drew lines?

May: Well, sure.

Lage: Okay, anything else about that?

May: I don't think so. And this makes a good place to end the fifties. Throckmorton perhaps looked back to the twenties for its spirit, and certainly could not have existed in the serious, committed sixties.

Lage: Okay. Next time the sixties.

VI STUDENT PROTEST AT BERKELEY IN THE SIXTIES

[Interview 5: August 13, 1998] ##

Attitudes Toward the Student Movement

May: Okay, I'm going to start with my general assumptions going into the sixties.

Lage: Sounds very good. We're approaching FSM [Free Speech Movement].

May: First, I had some lurking sympathy for the students, and I'm quite sure that if I'd been one of them I would have taken some part, but I don't think I would have gone all the way. I had all the more sympathy because this was, as I came to realize, a romantic movement--not a rationalist or materialist movement like the one in the thirties. It was based on emotions, individual feelings, and so forth. Also, mainly through our daughters, Jean and I had some sympathy for some aspects of the youth culture, which every parent had to come to terms with one way or another. We had grown, for instance, to like the Beatles, we could tolerate Joan Baez, and particularly admired Bob Dylan, who I think is an important poet.

Lage: How old were your daughters at the time?

May: Fifteen and seventeen. But I rejected the movement both as a historian and as a person. I was never able to believe in instant liberation, which I think was what was demanded. And I had a long-standing suspicion and fear of mass movements. Very likely that goes back as far as high school and junior high school, when I was a loner, and to a certain extent, persecuted. This, and probably my family status as a youngest child, left me with strong anti-majoritarian tendencies and, indeed, rather a tendency to take the opposite of what was dominant even when it was right.

And another thing that's not to be underrated: I was very happy and contented, as I've tried to show, in the university as it was in the fifties, and I wanted to keep it that way.

Lage: Even though you have expressed some discomfort with the kinds of pressures?

May: Oh, yes, oh sure. Of course there was that. And I think it had something to do with what happened, too. Now, any questions about that, so far?

Lage: No, I think that's fairly clear.

May: All right. Then, as usual, I was divided in my feelings. As always, one might say.

Precipitating Events of the Free Speech Movement, 1964

May: Now, I don't much want to review the early development of the crisis, in which I didn't play much part. It developed, of course, from the controversy over the Bancroft strip, which I think you're familiar with and which is available in a lot of places, particularly the Lipset and Wolin book.[1] It seems to me, looking at it now--and maybe then, I'm not sure--that it was a conflict between two views of what campus freedom is. The administration believed that free speech on the campus necessitated a sort of political neutrality and also that it had to be subject to certain rules set by the administration. The students demanded free speech on and off the campus without restrictions and didn't think much of rules in general. So there was a long series of arguments and sessions, proposed settlements, demonstrations, and so forth.

One issue, for instance, that was never settled all the way through was what was called the mounting issue: whether it was permissible to organize on the campus actions that turned out to be illegal when they got off the campus. Now in all this period up to the day of the car and the day of the big sit-in I watched closely, but I don't remember that I played any particular part before that time.

Lage: Were you aware of other faculty getting more and more involved?

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[1]Seymour Martin Lipset and Sheldon S. Wolin (editors) The Berkeley Student Revolt: Facts and Interpretations (New York: Anchor Books, 1965)

May: Oh, very much so, and particularly in the history department. Anything more about that?

Lage: No, I would hope to talk a little bit more about that later.

May: All right. Then two absolutely electrifying incidents changed the course of things. The administration had arrested some students for infractions of the rules that it had set. They were in a police car and a great many students surrounded the car, lay down around it, and various people, including Mario Savio, spoke from the roof of the car. The police were all set to intervene. And nobody knows what would have happened if they had, if they'd simply dragged them away. I'm sure it's a question that President Kerr has asked himself many times. [light laughter]

Then following an off-and-on effort--and that's important--to discipline the leaders for breach of rules came the big sit-in of December 2, when a large number of students walked into Sproul Hall and Mario Savio, certainly a gifted orator, made his speech about "throwing your bodies on the machine." Joan Baez led the students in, as you doubtless remember, telling them to go in "with love in their hearts."

After Chancellor Strong had come with a public address system and warned them that they had to get out, Governor [Edmund G.] Brown sent in the police to arrest them. There were many allegations of brutality in the KPFA version. On their tapes, people were saying, "Oh, oh, my head's being banged on the stairs," and so forth, but I don't think really that there was much brutality then. There was police brutality later, but these were mostly campus cops and were not yet embittered.

Now, in these circumstances, most faculty members felt they had to take a position. Very many felt strongly about the issue of having police on the campus at all. Not everybody took a position: some faculty members throughout stuck to their work. And it may be that they were the wisest: people who never signed anything, never gave speeches, and went on teaching were not molested. For instance, Murray Emeneau, the professor of Sanskrit wouldn't even sign statements against the politicization of the university.

Lage: He just stayed out of it altogether.

May: Stayed out of it. That could be done, but most didn't.

Lage: Were there many in the Department of History that stayed out of it altogether?

May: No, hardly any. A lot of engineers and people in the hard sciences, but not in history, political science, mathematics, English and so forth.

Lage: Sociology.

May: Sociology, sure. Yes. [laughter] Some were hostile to the whole business from the beginning and stayed that way all throughout. Many were friendly to the movement, having often a leftist past and certainly being strongly against McCarthyism in the fifties.

There was another silly little factor that made a difference, and that was President Kerr's efforts to bring about--impose, I would say--a quarter system, which alienated some people from him.

Lage: Do you think that was an important factor?

May: I think it was a fairly important factor. It seems odd, but some faculty members thought they could use the movement to get what they wanted from the administration. They were totally wrong.

Lage: Maybe they sympathized with the students' charges that the university was a factory. [laughs]

May: Yes, to some extent, to some extent. So many were friendly but baffled about how far they could go. And at various times somebody or other would be bitten by the belief that he could move in and settle things or, as I've said, take over the movement and mold it to his own purpose. (I'm using the masculine pronoun deliberately because there were few women.) All of these sooner or later lost out. Some of them were badly treated.

Lage: By?

May: By the movement. Because they didn't understand it. Nobody understood it. It was always a changing entity, so that made it all the harder. I'll say much more about that later. Fortunately, I was bitten by this early and my activities were intense but fairly brief.

The May Resolutions

May: In the middle of the night one night, I dreamed up what came to be called the May Resolutions.

Lage: Were you motivated by the arrests and the sit-in?

May: Yes.

Lage: Was it cops on campus, or what?

May: No, it was just that there was an impasse and I wanted to try to help get out of it. I sent this letter to the whole faculty and the administration: "In view of the desperate situation now confronting the university, every effort must be made to restore the unity of our community and to end the series of provocation and reprisals which has resulted in disaster. With this purpose, the undersigned faculty members urge that the following actions be taken immediately: 1) that the new and liberalized rules for campus political action be declared in effect and enforced, 2) that all pending campus action against students for acts occurring before the present date be dropped, 3) that a committee selected by and responsible to the Academic Senate be established to which students may appeal decisions of the administration regarding penalties for offenses arising from political actions, and that the decisions of this committee be final." In other words, to take it away from the administration and give it to the faculty. And these got many letters of support. Then they were read by me at a special faculty meeting--you could call it an extralegal faculty meeting.

Lage: On the fourth?

May: On December 3. Eight hundred people were there. They were adopted with amplifications, mainly sponsored by [Herbert] McClosky of political science and [John H.] Reynolds of physics, calling for prompt release of students, condemning police action, and calling for a new chancellor. I didn't support these.

Lage: You say this was an extralegal meeting?

May: Well, it wasn't a regular meeting. It was a special meeting.

Lage: Of the Academic Senate.

May: Yes, it was called by the faculty themselves.

Lage: Hastily called.

May: Yes, it was hastily called. Then these resolutions were in essence adopted by a committee of department chairmen, headed by Bob Scalapino of political science.

Lage: Did you help get that committee together?

May: No.

Lage: How did the committee of department chairmen come together?

May: It was mainly Scalapino's idea. I think he called it. And I supported it very strongly. The idea was that all other authority had pretty well broken down and this was a remaining kind of authority.

Lage: It's quite a big deal for the faculty to call for the resignation of the chancellor.

May: Yes, I didn't go along with that. I've already mentioned that I knew Ed Strong fairly well. From that point on, I participated in endless meetings--sometimes all night--trying to work out terms to present to the meeting of department chairmen. These terms were essentially my early proposals, with an emphasis especially on immediate amnesty.

Lage: Did you see that as the key?

May: Yes. I think I did. Then on December 4 I held a press conference with local and national press people, saying I was speaking for the department chairmen. I have that statement here and I'll summarize it, but it can be an appendix if you want. [See Appendix]

Lage: Yes.

May: What I was trying to do was to explain to the public why many of the faculty members to some extent were sympathetic with the students, starting by saying that, "Of course, faculty members do not approve of demands for a capitulation or of invasion of buildings--courses of action that are contrary to all that we believe in." "Then why did we to some extent support the students?" And that went back to the Bancroft strip. I said that I didn't know of any violence or trouble resulting in the past from collection of money or obtaining signatures.

Then a settlement was negotiated about this which involved among other things the setting up of a tripartite faculty/student/administration committee, which discussed these problems for a long time and unsuccessfully. It didn't work.

Then the Regents accepted the recommendations of these groups that were negotiating in part, though not entirely. And at a meeting of the senate, the majority of the faculty defeated an attempt to take the enforcement of rules about political behavior from the administration and give it to the faculty. At this point, the Free Speech Movement was dwindling and losing student support quite obviously. The student government, for instance, was against it.

Then the administration announced its decision to press for disciplinary actions against students for actions taken during the crisis two months before, against the urging of some faculty members. And while this was not technically a breach of faith, it seemed to be contrary to the agreement of October 2 and subsequent negotiations. So I continued my public statement by saying, "Understandably, I think the students felt tricked." It was at this point that the biggest demonstrations took place which had ever happened. There were threats to enter Sproul Hall, no measure was taken to prevent it, it happened, the governor called in his police. Then I end, "Now the student situation is a tragic one and the university seems almost in danger of disintegration. The faculty feels, as it said in an emergency meeting yesterday, that the new rules should be enforced, that punitive actions against violation of university rules in the past should be called off, and that while the administration should continue to deal with violations of rules, a process of appeal to a faculty committee should be established--and it might well be stricter in the enforcement of the new rules than the administration." And I ended, "No settlement is possible which does not take account of the strong emotions now influencing our students and many of our faculty."

That was my major intervention, and it was carried--some of it --on national TV. Some of my former students saw it and so did various other people.

Lage: Was this something you worked out just yourself?

May: Yes.

Lage: Or was this for the department chairmen?

May: Well, that's a little ambiguous. I'd thought they'd authorized it, but some of them thought not, I think. I got a whole lot of mail, some of it violently hostile. One woman called up and said, "We're going to get you," and so forth. On the other hand, there were some statements of support from around the state.

Lage: Were you being attacked by both ends of the spectrum?

May: No, I wasn't at that time being attacked from the left. That came a bit later.

Lage: These were people thinking you were caving in.

May: Later?

Lage: Yes.

May: Oh, yes. I think the left of the faculty didn't support the line I took there, but they didn't go after me at the time. The right-wingers around the state did. And also, as I say, I got quite a few statements of support. That was my really major action.

Meeting at the Greek Theatre

May: Then, after a number of other meetings of the department chairmen, Bob [Robert A.] Scalapino took over and called for a meeting in the Greek Theatre for the seventh, at which amnesty and also the new rules would be promulgated. Both he and President Kerr said they were very optimistic that this would bring about a new period of ordered freedom.

Lage: Well, apparently they also worked with the Regents.

May: Yes, they did.

Lage: Did you get in on that at all?

May: Not working directly with the Regents, no, I never did. The procedure was that each chairman was to report the chairmen's agreement to his department and so I did. And as soon as I was on my feet in front of the faculty and graduate students--

Lage: This was the morning before the Greek Theatre meeting, as I understand?

May: That's right. As soon as I was up there, I sensed that everything that the chairmen had said was well-known to everybody there because there were people among the chairmen who reported it to the further left Committee of Two Hundred, and so I had a pretty bad time in there.

Lage: How did that go?

May: Well, it was rejected. I remember Carl Schorske, who was a very prominent figure at that time, trying to cast a little oil on the water by moving to thank the chairman for the amnesty, but not for the rest of it. And as I walked up to the Greek Theatre I encountered the other chairmen and said, "Well, how did it go in your department?" "Not so well," they all said. [laughs]

Lage: What were the people in the history department meeting objecting to about the department chairs?

May: Well, they thought it was an illegitimate institution for one thing, taking over from the Academic Senate, or so they said. It was designed to support authority of a sort and to leave things as they were rather than radically change it. The more left of the faculty, together with the students, wanted much stronger change.

Lage: It didn't deal with that mounting issue, either?

May: No. No, it didn't. So we got up to the Greek Theatre with all the chairmen sitting on the stage.

Lage: The entire group of chairmen?

May: Yes. Kerr and Scalapino spoke--Kerr in a most disastrous opening saying, "In this Greek Theatre which has seen"--these may not be his exact words--"so many dramatic spectacles, operas--" (loud applause)-- By the way, we had worked very hard to see that the people who were arrested were out of jail. They marched up there in formation, which should have said something.

Lage: Yes.

May: And then as you know, Savio took the mike. I think Scalapino said this was a programmed meeting with a definite agenda and tried to stop him from talking. He was hauled off by the cops, came back, and said he just wanted to announce a meeting later in the afternoon. And that resulted in pandemonium and the complete and permanent collapse of anything like this compromise program that I'd been trying to promote.

Lage: Had you been aware that the police were on hand?

May: Oh, sure. I think so. Well, in the circumstances of that period on the campus they would have had to be, I think, because there was every possibility of trouble.

So I was by this time in a state of a good deal of pretty violent emotion. I left a statement in the department saying I was still for the chairmen's agreement, then I went to my class in American intellectual history--which it happened that day was on the ideology of the American Revolution. So I said, melodramatically, "The lesson of the American Revolution is that liberty is worth everything, even life itself, but there is no such thing as liberty without order and that's all for today." So then I left the class and Jean met me. I was, I quite admit, in a state of some nervous crisis, partly from all-night meetings, so she took me driving around in the countryside, as it was then, near Pleasanton. Contra Costa County was still a pretty nice place. And then I went home.

There's a statement in a recent account, as I think you know, that said that Henry May, the chairman of the Department of History, went to bed for a week.[2] Well, I didn't, but I did stay home the next day, December 8. And that's the point at which the senate passed pretty much a complete endorsement of the student position, defeating all amendments, including Professor [Lewis S.] Feuer's amendment to exclude from definition of free speech, speech directed to immediate acts of force or violence. I think I would have voted for that amendment if I'd been there.

The victorious majority of the faculty emerged to the students waiting outside. There were a great many embraces, there were tears, and so forth. This was the high tide of the faculty-student phase of the movement.

Lage: And you didn't attend that meeting?

May: I wasn't there. I was back in my office the next day handling department matters. And for a while I shut up. I had had my day. And perhaps it would have been better if I had shut up from then on, but I didn't. As I see it now, my effort and the effort of the department chairmen had been to establish the status quo ante--to leave things much as they were, and this as a program didn't have a chance.

Lage: Too much had happened.

May: Too much had happened and too many emotions had been aroused.

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Lage: You said that the movement had tasted victory.

May: Yes, the metaphor I used later was that what I thought had happened was that they had marched around the walls of Jericho blowing their trumpets. And to their enormous surprise the walls came tumbling down and they didn't really know what to do next because there was never a program to take over and run the university. It wasn't a revolution, in other words.

Lage: Yet they had some pretty clearly defined goals.

May: Like what?

Lage: Being able to advocate off campus--

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[2]David Lance Goines The Free Speech Movement: Coming of Age in the Sixties (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1993).

May: Oh, well, unlimited free speech, yes, sure. Yes, that they had. And for the moment they seemed to have achieved these goals.

The Faculty Forum and Faculty Divisions over Student Protest

Lage: I would like more of your reaction to your fellow faculty's actions and how you saw the faculty breaking up into factions.

May: I'm going to talk about that, if I could, in the next period, but in general I would say I'd been a bit of a casualty and tended to blame the organized left of the faculty, and that moved me toward a somewhat more conservative position for a while. In fact, the rest of the sixties I was trying to decide how far it did move me and how far it didn't. That is, how far was my movement to the right to go.

Lage: Was this organized left the Committee of Two Hundred?

May: That's right, yes. My main effort for a while was to keep the department together. I thought of that as my main job and I think of it now as my main accomplishment in the whole period. It might have been better if I'd stuck to that alone and done that job. We had people on the pretty extreme right and left--as much divided as any department--and we never got to a point where we couldn't talk together, do our business, or when we met people weren't speaking to each other or anything like that. That was what I was working for.

Lage: Tell me how you did that. And I notice you don't mention any names of people. [laughs] I mean, there were the professional relationships, there were the friends, and all this spectrum of political opinion.

May: Well, some of the people on the left, like Reggie [Reginald E.] Zelnik, I could always get along with very well. Martin Malia, the most articulate person on the right, was quite a good friend. And then there were all sorts of people in between. But at meetings, throughout the whole period, not just when I was chairman, the department was able to stick to its business, which was still including making a great many appointments and some changes in curriculum and that sort of thing.

Lage: Did the different members of faculty try to persuade one another?

May: Well, we tried not to do that in the department. Then another event that I think is very important--Delmer Brown organized something called the Faculty Forum. That was on January 12. This purported to be just an inquiry group, but it was immediately perceived as a

relatively conservative group, which it was. I think from here on in the Academic Senate there were two sides, approximately equal in numbers, and I think anybody on either side would also say equal in academic distinction.

Lage: Did you identify with the Faculty Forum group?

May: Yes, definitely.

Lage: Delmer is a little hazy on dates and all that, but he does very clearly say he saw the Faculty Forum as a moderate group, and that there was the more extreme on the right and the more extreme on the left. Now how did you see it?

May: Well, actually the people on the right supported that group because they had nowhere else to go. There were very many moderates. That is, there were two sides as I see it, approximately equal and both of them internally divided. That is, the Faculty Forum ranged from right to moderate and, let's say, the progressive faction ranged from moderate to left.

Lage: I see.

May: Ken Stampp and I after a while found we agreed mostly. I was the left of the right and he was the right of the left and so we pretty much agreed. Something I remember at that time was I said to George Guttridge that I found the liberals just as intolerant as conservatives, and George twitched his moustache and gave me a look which said, Henry, where have you been?

Lage: [laughs] Was that a revelation for you?

May: I tried not to think so, earlier, but I certainly completely accepted it from here on. Now, after that in the Academic Senate I talked a whole lot--certainly too much. As I see it now, what I was trying to do in my long talks in the senate was to formulate my own position for myself--usually on a conservative side, sometimes--and I'll show that later--not. My friend Henry Smith made the remark that there are always three positions on all issues: the right position, the wrong position, and the Henry May position.

Lage: [laughs] Now what did he mean by that? That's a great comment.

May: What did he mean by it? Pretty much what it says. The Faculty Forum--let's say the relatively conservative side--drifted to the position that we were quite willing to let the students run their affairs. Let them run the plaza, let them run free speech--anything they wanted--so long as the faculty could hang onto control of teaching and requirements and programs, while consulting students.

Lage: Where did you see the administration fit in there?

May: That's why it wasn't a very realistic program because this was sort of a cop-out--that is, saying, "Let the students handle their own affairs." In an organization of this size and complexity there have to be some rules, and the administration's job is to enforce them. I realize that now.

Lage: What time period are we talking about with the Faculty Forum? It started January 12, 1965. Are we just talking about the '65 period or on through--

May: Oh, no, it went on through the whole works. There were these two sides pretty clearly defined. Everybody knew all the people who were articulate at all; everybody knew who was on which side. At a typical meeting the two sides would be on the phone for a long time the night before, trying to get out as many as possible of what we both called the troglodytes--that is, people who never took any part at all. And when the meeting met, there was always a test motion. Often it was a motion to let the students come in the hall and sit at the back, which meant that they would be able to interrupt and make a bit of noise. Once there had been a vote on that, one knew which side had been effective in its telephoning and pretty much what position would be taken on everything else. [laughter]

Lage: Did you have a sense of humor about it at the time, as you do now?

May: I tried, I tried. Oh, I learned. What I learned there was that in making speeches to a sometimes hostile audience, that you have to be very calm and plausible and not get excited. And I learned to do that I think pretty well. Some of my speeches were inordinately long. And sometimes I'd speak from my seat, sometimes I'd get up at the front and made a speech. I did a lot of that.

Lage: So you did more than just try to hold the department together?

May: Yes, but I say I think that may have been a mistake.

Lage: I see.

May: I might have done better if I'd stuck to the department as my job. As it is, after two years of this I resigned as chairman. There were two reasons for this. I thought under the circumstances two years were enough rather than three, not realizing that the trouble wasn't over. It waxed and waned and I thought that it might be over. And I was very tired. Also, I was getting too involved on one side in certain issues in the Academic Senate, which I'll come to. I was getting too involved to be able to preserve the neutral stance I wanted in the department. Anyway, I did resign at that

point after two years. And people were very nice about it, said nice things about my chairmanship and so forth.

Attitudes of Key Administration Officials

Lage: Did you have any relationship or opinions about changes in the administration--Martin Meyerson and then Roger Heyns?

May: First of all, about Chancellor Strong: I'd known him quite well as an undergraduate because he was a friend of my closest friend on the campus and used to sit on Mrs. Overstreet's roof to watch games and so forth. And then he was somebody that the history department knew because he taught philosophy of history and students were taken to work with him. I think he was a fairly decent but very limited man, with much too much of a penchant for petty rules. One time at the height of the campus trouble as chairman I got a release from his office objecting to staff members taking different hours for lunches without permission of a chief campus officer.

Lage: Oh.

May: So he tried, but I think wasn't adequate to it. Kerr, on the other hand, was astute and very well informed. And whenever I made a speech that the administration liked, I'd get a little handwritten note. He had his hand closely on the controls throughout.

Lage: Interesting.

May: But he never understood the movement very well because he was a pragmatic progressive and a labor arbitrator and always a rationalist, and didn't have any sympathy for this kind of romantic radicalism nor, indeed, understand it. At his best, he knew that, and said once that he didn't, but then he put together a somewhat different version, I think, after the fact.

Meyerson I saw a certain amount and I never thought really that he knew what was going on.

Lage: He was fairly new to the campus, wasn't he?

May: He was pretty new, yes. And then Heyns is a large and controversial figure. My closest faculty friend, Bill Bouwsma, was the vice chancellor. People said it was because he was also Dutch. And he admired Heyns immensely. He thought he was pretty close to a great man. I didn't. But Heyns said at one time that his effort was to keep the campus open and running one more day. I think that didn't

show me that he cared enough about what the campus was really about. He was good at his job and I'm sure helped get us all through these years.

Lage: Maybe that's all that could be done at those times?

May: Maybe that's all that could be done.

Lage: Would you have any comments on people like John Searle, who seemed to go from kind of a student sympathizer over to a more conservative position?

May: That was part of Heyns's astuteness--to appoint him and also Carl Schorske, who was his spokesman on the moderate left. His enemies had called Searle "the chaplain of the FSM," but he became very conservative and stayed that way.

Radicalization of the Student Movement

May: The next topic I want to talk about is the radicalization of the movement.

Lage: Okay.

May: The student movement everywhere, not just at Cal, became more and more radical and more and more violent. This is really not a controversial statement and one can demonstrate it almost anywhere. The later movements, ones after Berkeley, tended to be more radical, culminating in the movement at Columbia in '68, with Mark Rudd and the Weathermen and so forth coming out of that. The movement of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] went the same way. This was the national organization that had had something to do with the student movement all over but I think was never terribly powerful at Cal, though I knew some people in it rather well. The SDS started in 1962 with the moderate and very effective Port Huron Statement. Then it was more and more radicalized and ended mostly taken over by the Weathermen, who made no bones about advocating violent revolution and individual direct action.

Something like this happened everywhere and it happened in Berkeley, too. But I think in some ways Berkeley was more moderate than some of the places where things heated up later, because people had had a time to work out positions on both sides. Most of the movements from then on, through '68, took the form of nonviolent resistance and stuck to that pretty well. For instance, blocking

recruiting for the war on the campus. I'm coming to the Vietnam War later.

Lage: Right, the issues became more complex.

May: Yes, I'll come to that. And then blocking the Oakland draft registration in '67--all by nonviolent means, but blocking nonetheless.

Lage: Right.

May: By '68 it had become impossible for Robert Kennedy, though an opponent of the Vietnam War, to speak in San Francisco because he was shouted down, and very difficult for Gene McCarthy to speak on the campus. Throughout this whole period, it was always very difficult to say what sort of incident would blow up into a crisis and what would not. And I was certainly not very good about predicting that. I didn't, for instance, think that the People's Park business would.

Lage: What about the Eldridge Cleaver incident?

May: I happened to be out of town during that. It didn't produce anything very major, I think. There are many reasons for the change, why they went this way--I've thought quite a lot about the national movement and the local movement. For one thing, naturally the opposition got tougher and so there was a good deal of frustration. It mustn't be thought that the same people moved from being moderate and really friendly, at least on the surface at the beginning, to being confrontational, because different people moved in and out of the movement all the time. It was a flowing stream. David Hollinger has pointed that out and so has Reggie Zelnik.

One thing that was determined as things went on was that as the movement became rougher, it lost its faculty support. This had usually--not always--been a force for moderation. But mainly I think the radicalization came about because the student movement became associated with two major allies: the black movement from civil rights to black power is one, and the other is of course the movement against the war in Vietnam. Neither of these played much of a part, as I can see it, in the early movement in Berkeley.

Lage: In the free speech aspect.

May: Yes, though the fact that some of the leaders had been in Mississippi and had seen people denied their constitutional rights, had seen the constitutional authorities acting very violently--that had an effect, certainly. But neither race nor the war had anything

much to do with the movement here, say, from '64 for a couple of years.

With the first of these, the black movement, I was, I would say regrettably, not much more than a favorably inclined bystander. That is, I did not go and sit in in the South or anything like that. I did begin to learn a little something from some black graduate students with whom I talked pretty frankly. I opposed then and later separate black grades, which were given a good deal, and also appointments based on race.

Lage: Now, tell me about separate black grades.

May: Well, as we got black students admitted, a number of the faculty were sympathetic and gave them high grades that were not really earned.

Lage: Was this discussed among faculty?

May: It was mostly tacit. I didn't do that. I had a student once who had never gotten lower than a B+, whom I gave a D in the midterm and he was in a state of shock, but he did bring up his grade to a legitimate B- by the end, so I thought I'd accomplished something there. He actually thanked me.

Lage: And what about the black graduate students you mentioned--what was their point of view?

May: Well, one I remember talking to thought that the police functions in the inner city ought to be taken over by the Black Panthers. Well, that a very intelligent young man would think this was somewhat revelatory, but I didn't take much part in that whole thing.

Lage: But did they have an opinion on grading?

May: Oh, the few black graduate students that I encountered were able to make it on their own pretty well. But there weren't very many of them; very few. I'll talk more about that whole issue when we get to the Third World Strike in '69.

Attitudes Toward the Vietnam War and the Anti-War Movement

May: Vietnam I'd like to get to now. That became a major preoccupation for me, as for most people on the campus. And my lukewarm attitude toward the anti-war movement cost me some very good friends. I'll come to what I thought in a minute.

For the students, it meant that they were in a much, much more serious position, because their opponent now was not the relatively mild university but the U.S. government. They had to decide what they were going to do--that is, be draft resisters, go to Canada, or avoid the draft by various movements, such as signing up in a theological school or various other things.

Lage: Or going to graduate school.

May: Staying in graduate school indefinitely, yes. Although the government began to blow down their necks more than a little. I'll talk about that in a minute.

Anyway, I frequently stated that I was sympathetic to all these student options, but I did not believe in people above draft age telling students what they ought to do, as for instance in what was called the Vietnam Commencement, when one hundred sympathetic faculty stood on the steps of Sproul Hall and had a kind of a mock commencement. Now, my attitude--I'll try to explain it as I saw it then and then how it changed. For one thing, I was full of the comparison to Korea, which we had been through recently. Part of the difference was that in Korea the United States, acting for the United Nations nominally, made the decision to try to conquer the whole peninsula and invaded North Korea up to the borders of China. This led to pretty disastrous results: it got fought way back to almost out of Korea and then back up to the middle with a compromise.

In Vietnam there was never any intention to overthrow the North Vietnamese government. I was aware of what seemed to me the early atrocities of the Viet Cong, bumping off policemen and mayors, and didn't like the adulation of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese in some quarters. But as usual, I made the mistake of trying to be in the middle for a long time.

Lage: In terms of a stand on the war.

May: In terms of a stand on the war. That is, was it General [James M.] Gavin who suggested a "policy of enclaves"--to defend certain enclaves but not to try to conquer widely outside of them? And then I disliked communism. I'd been a fellow traveler and I disliked the increasing violence and intolerance of the supporters. But mainly, and I think this was very foolish, I found it hard to accept what was clearly the only choice. The only choice was to give up on South Vietnam and its government--somehow to force them out--or to carry on the war, escalate it to an unacceptably bloody and destructive level, and even then not win. I think those were the only possibilities.

Lage: Did you see that at the time, or was that what you came to see?

May: No, that's what I came to see. By '67 or '68, I was getting the point that the only way the war could be won--and it's dubious that it could even then--was to bring it to an ever more bloody and violent conclusion. Of course, the My Lai incident shook everybody quite a lot and me, too.

Lage: Were there other faculty members that you discussed these issues with that helped shape your views at various times?

May: Oh, yes. Of people you know, Nick Riasanovsky could never support having one more communist government because he knew a lot about various communist movements. My very good friends Henry Smith and Leo Marx were very strongly against the war from the very beginning, and I had some very unpleasant episodes with both of them.

Lage: Did you maintain the friendships? These were such intense times!

May: With considerable difficulty. Eventually, yes, but they were impaired and troubled at the time.

Then I switched sides in the senate once. I'd like to talk about that. It was a meeting of May 22, 1966, on the question of whether to turn in grades to the government which would then be used in determining draft status. It was part of the idea of having the war fought by people that couldn't get out of it, mainly black and without support, though there were some people who fought in it for patriotic reasons, I realize that. I hated that and believed and said in a speech that if we were going to carry it out, the draft should be decided by a lottery as elsewhere, with no exemptions for students, and that if we were in the business of grading people with the knowledge that our grade might send them to the war, that was a breakdown of all academic integrity.

Lage: Was this a new government policy that the university was being asked to follow?

May: Yes.

Lage: And the question was?

May: Would we follow it. So I called up the anti-war committee and said I would like to cooperate with them on this and they were very cordial indeed [laughs] about that. So I made another long speech on this business and said I was against cooperation with the federal government on the matter of turning in grades.

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May: I made a speech about the kind of war it was and by whom it was being fought and said it was like the policy of European nations at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when gentlemen could stay home and the press gang would pick up the unemployables, and that I thought this kind of policy would have a terrible effect on society and for the universities, among others. If we were involved in this selective service process, we'd be involved in constant incidents involving very deep feelings, so we should do everything possible, not to sabotage military policy, but to detach ourselves. I got a quite different set of phone calls [wry laugh] that night from the ones I usually got--that is, from very different people.

Lage: Were these issues that the Faculty Forum was active in?

May: Most of the people who were in the Faculty Forum didn't take a part in this. No, I don't think so.

Lage: And this wasn't the kind of thing they would garner support for?

May: No, it was the other side. By this time, the left of the faculty had been pretty much subsumed in the anti-war committee. By 1969 I was finally ready to take part in a San Francisco peace march. I did this in November 1969.

Lage: This was an anti-war march?

May: Yes, it was reportedly anti-war, but by this time it was at least two-thirds gay rights in San Francisco. Those were the slogans that people were shouting. There was a big incident on the way--the first women's incident which I knew about--in which the women in the march quite rightly insisted on de-sexing the restrooms where people stopped, because otherwise they had to wait in long lines while the men went in.

Lage: How did you happen to go to that march?

May: Well, because I went with some of my graduate students.

Lage: Maybe I'm not clear on your making this transition to actually being against the war.

May: I was against the war when I realized that it either had to be fought to a terrible end, which we'd already done to a considerable extent, or we'd have to cut the throat of South Vietnam. That was what Lyndon Johnson was utterly unwilling to do, and his administration was wrecked because of his continued support for the war.

Lage: Do you remember the point in time when you came to this decision and considered yourself anti-war?

May: Only approximately.

Lage: Did we record that?

May: I think we recorded that, but if not, by '67 to '68--quite late, in other words. Then I took one other anti-war action, which I'll come to in the part on the climax. So that's what I have to say up to then.

Graduate Students

Lage: You've mentioned graduate students just sort of in passing. I wondered--this goes way back to the Free Speech Movement [FSM] but also since--what kind of interaction did you have with your graduate students on these issues, starting with FSM?

May: Well, for one thing, this is the time when I did the best graduate teaching that I've done and had very close relations with a number of them and never any hostile relations, really, with any of them. But I want to talk about that more at the end when I talk about the upshot of the whole thing.

Lage: But did you have graduate students who were active in FSM, from whom you would get some points of view?

May: FSM was pretty much an undergraduate movement, though there were graduate students who were leaders.

Lage: In this David Goines book, he quotes quite a bit Bob Starobin as being a history department graduate student.

May: Oh, yes, Starobin. Yes, well, he was the son of one of the national Communist leaders, as some of the others were. A very sweet kid, he seemed. He was one of those who was most violent in his speech, though not in any other way. When we had the meeting in the department to put over the department chairman's proposal, he said, "Can't we all deal with all these things as friends?" Well, that turned out not to be easy.

But I didn't have as my own student anybody that was in a leadership position in the movement. I wouldn't have had. That is, they would not have chosen to work with me. At Cal they were pretty

free to choose whom they wanted to worked with. My students were sort of in the middle, I'd say, on most things.

Lage: I'm interested that you even said, "They wouldn't have chosen to work with me." How does that work?

May: After a certain point, some American history students worked with me and Ken Stampp and others with Leon Litwack, Larry Levine, and Charlie Sellers. One of the things that was good about our graduate program, as opposed to some others, is that it was a process of negotiation, almost courtship, whom you chose to work with. Also the kind of thing I was interested in--intellectual history--on the whole does not attract social activists.

Lage: I see, so people who have a social activist point of view or leaning would--

May: Who had it strongly. But on the other hand, later on, one of my very best students was Charlie Capper, who in this period was a Trotskyite and very active in that position.

Textbook with Charles Sellers

Lage: You mentioned Charlie Sellers, and we didn't talk about your textbook, which I hope we will at some point.

May: Oh, yes, all right. Charlie at that time lived a little way up the hill from us, bordering on the same lot. This was in the summer of '63. I crossed the back fence. We developed the opinion that people were assigning these immensely long textbooks in the elementary course in American history which gave the students no time to do anything else, so we developed a program of writing a very short textbook together with just the essentials--economic and politic essentials--and then a series of Berkeley readings. The textbook went very well and made a good deal of money, much more than anything else I've ever written. [laughs]

Lage: Isn't that interesting.

May: A textbook always does, unless its a flop.

Lage: You had mentioned in writings how textbook publishers were courting professors, but this didn't occur in that way?

May: No, Charlie handled the negotiations. It went to Rand McNally[3] and has changed several times since.

Lage: But you came up with the idea rather than a publisher coming to you?

May: Yes, both of us.

Lage: Now, you were quite on opposite sides on FSM and everything?

May: On everything, yes, but that wasn't clear altogether, yet. That is, this was in the early stages, when the department was holding together very well.

Lage: Was the writing of the book or the selection of Berkeley readings affected at all by different points of view?

May: I don't think so, no. I don't think we had any trouble with that at all. Eventually I decided I didn't want to go on rewriting my half of it, which was the recent half, every term and so we turned it over to somebody else who got most of the royalties. But for I forget just how many years, maybe five or six, it made a good deal of money.

Lage: That's interesting.

May: That was then, that was at that time. But usually the department managed to avoid really hostile relations. I've written about the department in this period. One time I remember specifically we were talking about the need for a second person in modern German history and could hear the tear gas popping and the sirens outside the window and went right on with the discussion. Usually that was how it was within the history department. [laughs]

New Faculty Appointments

Lage: I think we've mentioned but not really fully explored that you had twenty appointments to make during those two years, I think you said.

May: Yes, something like that. This was partly Kerr wanted to move to the quarter system and make the summer as big as the other quarters.

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[3]Charles Sellers and Henry May, A Synopsis of American History (Chicago: Rand McNally, 96?).

And that didn't work out. In fact, it was resisted a good deal by the faculty and the students, who didn't want it.

Lage: But did you still have those twenty appointments?

May: Let's say when I was chairman I learned that if I wanted to appoint somebody, money could always be found. That's how it was.

Lage: Even in the context of this extreme tension over politics?

May: We could work together on that kind of thing; there was nobody that one couldn't work with.

Lage: Now, that wasn't true in some other departments.

May: No, it wasn't. I'd say in the long run--and maybe this should be off the record--Charlie Sellers did withdraw and cease to take part, but I think he was the only one.

Lage: What about Franz Schurmann?

May: Oh, well, he was half in our department. I left him out, too, yes.

Lage: Was he more alienated also?

May: Yes.

More on the Anti-War Movement

May: I should have mentioned this under Vietnam. After the '66 affair, we arranged a public debate--this was after I had decided I was anti-war--with two anti-war stalwarts, Fred Crews in English and Franz Schurmann. I wanted to join them in the Faculty Peace Committee, the anti-war group, and told Jean when I went out that I'd probably come back a member of that group. But what happened was that Martin and I made our statements--

Lage: And was this a debate, you say?

May: It was a debate--formally arranged with Franz Schurmann and Crews on one side, and Martin Malia and I on the other. My purpose was to take a position against the war, for getting out of it--but I mentioned that we ought to take some account of the people we'd persuaded to be on our side, and that was anathema always to the strong anti-war people. I had a very bad time. That is, the audience--whether by planning or not, I'm not sure--was extremely

hostile. We got roundly denounced from the podium and then somewhat by the audience afterward. And I decided whatever position I had, I couldn't work with those people. That's the other incident about the war until right at the end. I'll tell you about another one.

Lage: Okay. It must have been very painful, this kind of thing.

May: That was very painful. Yes, oh very. Nobody likes getting a really hostile audience, and I had that a number of times and it's not pleasant. Usually in the senate there was a certain amount of decorum, but people could say fairly nasty things.

Lage: If students were invited into the rear, did that hold? [laughs]

May: Not for long. Not for long.

Lage: Did the faculty further to the left not have any objection to this sort of muzzling of people's right to speak? My sense of what you're saying is that people whose opinions weren't respected often weren't allowed to speak.

May: That's true, but not in the Academic Senate, because that was up to the chairman and we had pretty good chairmen.

Lage: Not in the senate, itself. But what about other occasions? You mentioned [Eugene] Gene McCarthy not being able to speak on campus. How did the faculty who were further to the left react to those incidents?

May: I think there would only be a few that would defend shouting down speakers, very few.

Lage: But just maybe were more tolerant of the emotions.

May: That's right and some of them would blame some of it on the speakers, on what they said.

Filthy Speech Movement

Lage: [laughs] I wanted to get some reaction--and we could save it for later if you want to continue the point of view--but we didn't even discuss the filthy speech movement, which does have some important consequences.

May: I'll tell you what I think about that.

Lage: That began March third in '65.

May: Yes. The question was whether in public speech on a campus you could say the words "shit" and "fuck." By this, the students had something on their side because both words were being used in the highbrow press--for instance, the New York Review of Books, or the TLS [Times Literary Supplement], and so forth. The faculty who spoke--like Mark Schorer in English had been very active in defense of Lady Chatterley's Lover and Ulysses and so forth. So the point was not an easy distinction to make.

Lage: And they spoke against the use of the words in public settings?

May: Yes, I think the principal consequence of it was to deepen very much the alienation of the public. President Eisenhower mentioned it: "So they talk about free speech but this is where it ends." That is an example, I think, of the ethos of the movement: that it rejected tactics and did not play to the general public.

Lage: They weren't thinking politically.

May: No, that's right.

Lage: Did it also reflect that the movement had this sort of broader counterculture element that may not have been recognized?

May: Yes, very much so. By that time, that was taking over in a big way. And I'll have more to say about that later.

Lage: Okay, good. Let's save that. Now, we've kind of lost where we were. The last anti-war march in San Francisco was the last incident we talked about.

May: Yes, okay, that's all under Vietnam. And those two topics--the black power movement and the anti-Vietnam movement--were pervasive all during this time.

The Muscatine Report on Educational Reform

May: I'll get to the Muscatine Report then. I'd like to be rather brief about that because I think quite strongly that my position and activities were pretty foolish. This was a report by a committee of nine people, mostly from the moderate left of faculty opinion, which reported to the Academic Senate in March 1966 and at the same time published a paperback book for public consumption. I didn't like that, for one thing, very much.

Lage: You didn't like that it was published?

May: Yes. The Heyns administration set great store by it because it seemed a way to mollify public opinion.

Lage: Just as background, do you want to say something about the relationship of this report to the earlier events in the Free Speech Movement?

May: None directly except that the preamble--part of it written by my colleague Dick Herr--expressed quite eloquently their analysis of what the students wanted and the books they were reading, and that part of it was pretty good.

The announced general purpose was to make Berkeley education more responsive to the needs and expressed wishes of students, particularly undergraduate students. And as I look at the recommendations now, they seem pretty mild. Although most of them I supported at the time, I went over them one by one in a series of long speeches. Some of the proposed changes were too vague to understand and a few seemed to me to have the effect of abdicating faculty responsibility for instruction or lowering intellectual standards. Whether they did or not, I don't know now, but I think about these things, this whole episode, as rather foolish on my part. I took a lot of the time of the senate, and a lot of energy and time of my own, and the reforms proposed were neither as important as the committee and its supporters thought nor as bad as I sometimes made them sound.

Lage: [laughs] Let's try to break down how you felt then and how you feel, now, too.

May: Yes, all right. At the time, it was clear to me that some increase in the relative importance given to undergraduate teaching was necessary and desirable, but I didn't like a change in a relation in faculty and students that made the students participate in functions like setting up curricula and forming standards for them. My position was that, yes, if there's something that the students very much wanted us to teach, we ought to teach it, but we ought to decide on intellectual standards and procedures. That was my position at the time. And I made one speech, I remember, trying to distinguish between what I called liberal innovation and progressive coercion. I wanted the faculty not to be coerced.

Actually I think now that this kind of thing is very hard to effect by changes in the rules. You put the students on committees --students are such a transient population that within a year or two they've forgotten why they were on those committees and don't

particularly want to be on them. And rules and regulations can only do so much.

Some change in the relation of faculty and students in the direction of permissiveness was absolutely inevitable in the whole climate. I think this is both for better and for worse, but in the long run, I think the faculty lost no necessary powers. The relations between professors and their classes depended on the individual.

I think I sounded in this rather didactic and lacking a sense of proportion and, particularly, a sense of humor. I don't feel good about my intervention on that whole business. I don't think it mattered that much.

Lage: It didn't have long-term effects?

May: Not much. I'll come to that at the end. There were long-term effects for better or worse from the whole period, from everything. The relation between faculty and students changed both for better and worse. It became different. I'll talk about that later.

Lage: But the actual Muscatine Report itself?

May: I don't think it much could be affected by these rather detailed changes in rules. Some, if I were to go over it point by point now, which I would hate very much to do, I still might find a few ideas I disliked, I might find quite a few I liked all right, and a lot that didn't make any difference. The center of it was the Board of Educational Development to which students could apply to set up courses of their design.

Lage: That was the center of your objection?

May: No, I supported that. I voted for it. But then if there were programs and new courses set up, I wanted the faculty to do it.

Lage: I see. But just to get a little more context--we have the Muscatine Report, your speeches--what was the reaction in the senate to this controversy? Were there others who took your side?

May: Oh, yes. Oh sure, there were.

Lage: It was a hot issue?

May: It was much the same line-up as for everything else.

Lage: That's interesting that questions of the educational reform broke down pretty much the same way.

May: Yes, pretty much, with some variation. I think a good many on both sides had the sense to see that it wasn't that important, which I did not.

Lage: Okay, that's good. You'd mentioned so much about debates on the Academic Senate. How much did it matter?

May: Was it sandbox politics?

Lage: Right.

May: Well, yes and no. One symptom is there'd be a delegation of the administration there--Heyns and his assistants--and while we were talking on something of major significance, involving possible sources of violence or holding the campus together, they would stay, and when we got talking about academic program matters, they'd leave.

Lage: Out of lack of interest?

May: Yes.

Lage: Or because it wasn't their place?

May: No, out of lack of interest. And yet, how the faculty felt about things was important to the whole campus community, important to the movement which kept close tabs on it, and in some ways to the administration. It was reported in the press quite often. The chairman of the senate would have an interview with the local press and they'd cover it--almost always wrong. Anytime I've had anything to do with the press on something that I knew about personally, they'd get it only partly right.

Lage: Makes you wonder why you read the newspaper at all.

May: Yes, so I think, as I've said, that it would have been very likely smarter for me to stick to keeping the department together mainly, and not have to sound off on everything that went on. But that was not to be. [laughs] It was not my temperament, let's say.

Social Relationships in the History Department

Lage: Another question occurred to me while you were talking. We talked about the social relationships in the department--the dinner parties, the formal social occasions of an earlier era. What were they like in the sixties? Did they continue?

May: They did, but mostly social relations were among members of each of the two sides. Not always, but mostly. Of course, when I was chairman, I carefully entertained everybody.

Lage: You would invite people for parties?

May: Yes, but normally the two sides were pretty distinct. I remember once there was a special effort, I think at John Searles'--I'm not sure of this, but Ken Stampp would remember it--when selected people from the two sides were invited to come in and talk things over. That happened, but it was rather rare. Entertaining was largely divided.

Of course I still maintained, sometimes with some difficulty, my friendship with Henry Smith and with others who were on the other side.

Lage: Were there just things you didn't talk about?

May: Well, no, we did.

Lage: You did.

May: Sometimes it didn't go very well, but on the whole, I think, faculty dinner parties go on and on.

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May: But I reiterate that in the department there was almost nobody that I couldn't talk to until close to the end of things.

Lage: But, aside from the political divisions and all, did you still have dinner parties, as you described in the fifties, that were sort of formal occasions and following department meetings? Did that tradition continue?

May: Not so much, I think. No, we were too busy.

Lage: And maybe too big.

May: Maybe that, too. But for instance, when Jean and I went to dinner at the Bouwsmas' we would decide whether we were going to talk about what was going on or talk about something else. I will say later, and I want to emphasize, that the activities of the university were practically never stopped.

Lage: Oh, you mean the ongoing business?

May: Yes.

VII BERKELEY IN THE LATE SIXTIES

[Interview 6: August 27, 1998] ##

Lage: Today we're talking about the later sixties.

May: All right. We had gotten to the year of '69. We haven't quite gotten into the events of that year. In quite a different way from campus events, it was a bad year for the history department because of two deaths. George Guttridge, who some of us admired more than any other older person in the department, had retired to Carmel and dropped dead walking on the beach. This is a good death and it wasn't so terribly sad an event, but the other one was the death of Joe Levenson in a boating accident on the Russian River. That was a terrible shock. Many of us thought that Joe was the most brilliant member of the history department. And he was a good friend of mine.

Lage: Was it his brilliance of mind or his force of personality that people most noted?

May: Both, I think. In one memorial, which I didn't take part in, by former students and so forth, he's referred to as the Mozartean historian. This referred to his combination of aesthetic and intellectual power, but he had also a perfectly colloquial and unpretentious side. So there were those two events that year.

Third World Strike

May: The first big public event was a Third World Strike starting in January '69. This was a product of the black activist movement, which like the other movements of the sixties got steadily more militant and had repudiated most of its white supporters by this time. The official manifesto of the strike published in the Daily Californian asked the whole student body to support a strike essentially for separate Third World departments controlled by Third

World people on and off the campus. I've the document about that if you need it. [See Appendix]

Lage: Yes, thanks.

May: I was opposed to the proposal of having departments staffed from any racial group or having faculty and staff of any department connected with an outside and undefined community.

The main means for enforcement of this strike was blocking the entrance to the campus. There would be big crowds at Sather Gate, but one could always push through and nobody got hurt. There were a lot of drastic threats. One junior department member was told that if he taught the next day, they would kick his ass and maybe cut his throat.

Lage: Wow.

May: He did teach the next day; nothing happened. There were threats to burn the chancellor's house and all sorts of things, but no real actual overt violence that I know of. Well, some we don't know where it came from. The main burning happened the first day of the Third World Strike.

Lage: Is that the Wheeler Auditorium?

May: Yes. The essentials of the third world program were granted by Chancellor Heyns. I found it interesting that in the Faculty Club the talk by the faculty was mostly against it, but in the senate meeting nobody spoke or voted against it.

Lage: Heyns's proposal was eventually adopted and I guess approved by the faculty. Did it include this outside community [in the administration of the program]?

May: Not officially, but for some that was their understanding. At least one of the departments, the African-American Department, after a while became a good department--nonmilitant and with people of various points of view in it.

Lage: It eventually went into the College of Letters and Science.

May: Yes. As I say, the faculty talked against this program, but nobody voted or spoke against it.

Lage: What do you attribute that to?

May: Fear.

Lage: Not political correctness?

May: Well, that term hadn't been coined, but fear of seeming to be racist, I would say.

Lage: I see.

May: I was not a sole voice in dissent because I had a seminar at that hour, and I always put classes ahead of campus affairs of that kind.

Lage: So you didn't take an active part?

May: No, I didn't take an active part.

People's Park Incident

May: Then the next one of course was the People's Park. I was never good at telling what would or would not produce trouble. Some episodes that I thought were dangerous were passed over and some from which I didn't see any danger created confrontation, and this one was the strangest of all. You know the story, of course.

Lage: But let's go into it here.

May: Oh, a little bit. There's a patch of land owned by the university used by student squatters for gardens and encampments. The issue of property rights came up and also neighbor complaints. There were no restrooms, for one thing. This little strip became--and to some extent has remained ever after--highly symbolic really then to both sides: property rights as against participatory democracy and the greening of America. Both sides became increasingly and surprisingly violent in the various confrontations they had about this issue. The student movement for the first time at Cal became violent. Before that it hadn't gone beyond passive resistance. And the other side--the police and authorities--were also violent. I think because things had just gone on so long and they were fed up. One bystander in one of the confrontations was killed. It was the first casualty. And there was for a while a stand-off.

I took no special part in that. From both incidents, I think, the violence escalated--violence by the students sort of echoing back from the later movements, particularly at Columbia, which were much more violent than '64 had been in Berkeley.

Lage: Kent State wasn't until '70, but we had the Columbia incidents.

May: Yes, and the very fiery rhetoric in the wake of Columbia incidents from the Weathermen. Anyway, I saw students--incidentally all white, as I remember--running along the second floor of Dwinelle Hall, smashing all the office windows with clubs. And there were rocks thrown through the windows.

Lage: This was over the People's Park incident?

May: Yes, and the Third World Strike both together--but it's hard to distinguish. But they were white students that I saw doing it. There were fires that broke out in Wheeler Hall and in the library, where my friend Bob Brentano had to get out a window rather uncomfortably. These, of course, should not be forgotten in adding things up when people are terribly nostalgic about the sixties. This was an ugly series of incidents.

One shouldn't forget the violence from the other side--from police called in from Oakland, Alameda, and San Francisco, who had no sympathy at all with the students and regarded them as privileged people who were ungrateful. The campus police, who had started pretty mild because after all what they'd been trained for was controlling parking and things like that, were by this time sore also, but not as bad as the police from outside. So there was a certain amount of indiscriminate clubbing. If you were on Telegraph Avenue, as a friend of mine was who with his wife went to the movies, and a police charge started, you couldn't stop and argue with him. You just got out of the way fast.

There was one incident that hit me, personally. I was teaching a small graduate course in the graduate humanities room in the library and the San Francisco TAC [tactical] squad came along shooting in the air. A bullet went through the window of the classroom which could have killed somebody in the class. I tried very hard to get redress on this. I sent registered letters to the San Francisco Chronicle and to the ACLU. Never was answered. Why? Well, I think I made a tactical error. I was on friendly terms with the administration and I told a member of the administration that I was going to send these letters. No action was ever taken, though the district attorney did eventually look into the incident. And it, as you can imagine, had a certain radicalizing affect on me. [laughs]

Lage: I can imagine. What was going on that they had the need to fire in the air?

May: Oh, chasing demonstrators. It'd gotten kind of rough by that time on both sides. It's hard to realize now.

Lage: It really is hard to bring it all back.

May: Yes, it is.

Lage: And the tear gas--

May: Oh, tear gas was routine by this time.

Lage: And the helicopters that [Governor Ronald] Reagan called in.

May: Yes, that's right. Reagan comes into the story. He was elected in '66 partly on anti-Berkeley rhetoric and on February 16 [1969] proclaimed an emergency on and around the campus and sent in the National Guard with orders to do what they had to do to restore order. Now aside from the inflammatory rhetoric, I don't condemn this. The National Guard were better than the Oakland-Alameda police, who by this time were pretty embittered. They were, after all, young kids, many of them in the Guard to escape the draft. So the military took over the campus.

The predicted big day--I haven't got the date, we'll have to supply it [May 15, 1969]--came when the students were going to make their move and orators at Sather Gate urged the students to "take the park," and they moved toward the park. Now, this had been expected to be a bloody day. And it might well have been. Actually, there were medical units from the San Francisco campus to attend to casualties and that brought me a slight role. So far all I'd done in this crisis was to be one of those who sat in the basement of Sproul Hall to watch the police, see if they--as charged--brought any students to beat them up.

Lage: Was that something that the faculty arranged to do?

May: Was asked to do, yes. Nothing at all happened and the police brought me coffee and so forth. In an analogous, more or less neutral act, my action was taken with Larry Harper. Now, Larry Harper was one of the mildest members of the department--usually non-political, of the older generation--but we agreed to be on the streets with armbands in order to direct casualties to the first-aid stations. So [laughs] I was in a good place to watch what was going on.

What happened was so much an epitome of the sixties. The streets were lined with troops with bayonets looking pretty formidable even if they weren't. At one point I wanted to cross Bancroft Way and go to my bank. This was a ludicrous episode.

So I asked the nearest soldier please to take me to his commanding officer in a sort of military sounding way as much as I could muster and he did. The guy furnished a detail to take me across the street to the bank, with the students cheering ironically

and saying, "Watch out for that guy, he's a hippie! Look at that beard!" and so forth. [laughter] But I was able to go to the bank.

Lage: So you had a beard at the time?

May: I had a beard after I had been on a backpacking trip in '66.

Lage: Was that a statement?

May: Yes, that was supposed to be a friendly statement. So here you have the students ready to move on the park, but these fixed bayonets looked pretty formidable, and it didn't happen. Instead what happened, as everybody knows, was fraternization between the students and the soldiers, even to the point of sticking flowers in the muzzles of their rifles. The park was not taken and remained a sore point and a symbol for a long, long time. And that is the end of the violence. That is, this was a sufficient show of force so that there weren't many who wanted a real fight of the unarmed against the armed, let's say.

Lage: On that episode, at least.

May: Yes, well, I think it's the end of violence.

Vietnam University

May: But more academic damage was done, I think, in 1970 at the time of the Cambodia bombing and invasion. A group meeting outdoors in the Greek Theatre proclaimed this a Vietnam campus. They said we were supposed to adapt all our courses to the subject of the war.

Lage: Was there any Academic Senate involvement in that?

May: No.

Lage: So this was an independent group?

May: Yes.

Lage: Was Professor Wolin the one who was connected in that?

May: Yes, he was just about to leave, for one thing. And I was distressed to see my friend Henry Nash Smith on the platform looking very uncomfortable.

Lage: What others were leaders in that?

May: I'm not sure. But it was mainly a student movement. Of course, I was wholly against this episode and this use of the university. Later, a friend who worked in the newspaper room told me what happened there. Students came up and said, very excited, "Have you got any Vietnamese newspapers?" And they had and brought them out. "But these are in French!" [laughs] It's lucky they weren't written in Vietnamese.

Lage: Oh, so they were stymied?

May: Yes.

Lage: Oh, that's funny.

May: The history community--including the faculty, graduate students, and staff--was meeting at this time and I made the strongest speech I could saying that to cripple the university wouldn't help at all to stop the Vietnam War or our participation in it. It would mean much more to send one anti-war congressman to Washington. In fact, the more the demonstration against the university, the less sympathy for the anti-war movement.

So to illustrate, I started going door-to-door with a couple of like-minded graduate students, presenting a proposal made by some senator--I forget who--asking I think for willingness to negotiate with the Viet Cong as well as the North Vietnamese or some such pretty moderate proposal. It was interesting. We went to a number of districts. In black districts we were usually received in a fairly friendly way. The test was the working-class white districts.

Lage: How were you received there?

May: Well, not too badly. We only got a few signatures, but I was surprised by how willing people were to listen--much more willing than many of my colleagues by this time. People would start by saying, "Are you the guys that are burning down the university?" And I'd say, "No, we're the guys that are in the buildings when they're burnt down," and that would sometimes be an all right opening.

But that blew over. The university was not converted to a Vietnam University, and with this episode the Berkeley sixties ended. Most people were exhausted. Do you want me to go over any of these episodes?

Lage: Well, if you can remember a little bit more about the reconstitution. Did classes end? Did they go on? How did the history department respond?

May: The history department was not in favor of that.

Lage: I see, so that didn't divide the department?

May: No, it didn't. By this time the faculty, whatever their spoken sentiments, had grown much more conservative. That is, if you have your class broken up even once it makes you think a little differently. And nobody in the department, as far as I remember, was in favor of changing the whole operation of the university. This wasn't I think a very strong movement.

Lage: Just to go back to the black studies issue and all that: how did the historians who were in that area, like Leon Litwack and Lawrence Levine, line up on that?

May: You mean about the movement for Afro-American Studies department and La Raza department? And Asian-American and Native American? Ken Stampp was very strongly against. I'm not sure about Levine and Litwack, and I certainly don't want to speak for them.

It didn't have a great deal of active faculty support. I thought that, indeed, we ought to increase study of minorities, particularly the Afro-American one if the students wanted that, but I took the same position that I had taken in the argument about the Muscatine Report, that if it was going to be done I wanted faculty to set its standards and programs. And I wasn't for connection with outside groups.

Now I'm looking back from the present. One thing to remember is that the ordinary activities of the university went on. The only place where there was any threat really of interrupting it was this Vietnam University thing. In 1969 I had students say that they couldn't get to class because of tear gas and rocks, I moved my seminar home, which worked very well and I kept it there.

Also my own life continued. For instance, between the two years of my chairmanships, in the summer of '65, the four of us went to Ireland, had a wonderful time--a delightful country--and left the vice chairman in charge.

Lage: That must have been a nice reprieve.

May: Oh, it was. [laughter] I recommend it for anybody.

Historical Assessment of the Student Movement

May: Speaking from now, I came gradually in an academic way to understand or to try to understand the typical ideology of the movement. Now, when I talk about that, I have to be pretty cautious because I'm speaking for other people and that's always dangerous. And also there were many kinds of people with different sorts of agenda in the movement and a typical view was not everybody's view.

Lage: Was there one movement?

May: Clearly not by the end of it, but the ideology proclaimed in '64 and held by some throughout seemed to me a recurrently familiar type of romantic radicalism. First of all, people talked a lot about love and trusting the feelings as against the intellect, heart against head and so forth. And there was a belief in physical expression of feelings, as opposed to cautious academic neutrality. Second, an extreme freedom of individual speech and behavior--from the point of the view of its opponents, approaching anarchism: a dislike and distrust of institutions and rules per se, a dislike of competition as contrary to the value of fraternity, and therefore of grades. Before this, a belief in instant gratification in contrast to the postponement of gratification demanded by capitalist ideology from Adam Smith on. And above all, a radical egalitarianism, which to my mind is not without its hidden elitism. That is, some people are more equal than others.

None of this is new. In my opinion it goes at least back to Rousseau. In America, the most often claimed ancestor I think was Walt Whitman, who says something like this: "I am neither for nor against institutions, except the institution of the dear love of comrades."

Emerson appealed to the students at this point--a lot once they encountered him. He didn't have that good a reputation for those who didn't know him, but in a class of mine in intellectual history, when I said of the Transcendentalists that they couldn't succeed because they had no program--by this time students were answering in class in a very good way--somebody said, "Look around you in this class. There are lots of people who think just that way."

Lage: Somebody said that to you?

May: Yes. One of the favorite poets was Blake, the enemy of commerce, science, and rationalism.

Lage: So you could see from the way your students responded to the various veins in intellectual history?

May: Sure, oh, yes. And not mainly Marx. There were some Marxists of course around, but it's too rationalist and too systematic and so forth. In the movement in Paris, which had its correspondences and its differences, they cited Berkeley a good deal. Theodore Zeldin, in his book on the French, talking about the youth revolt there, has this to say: "To be unconcerned by hierarchy and prestige, to lose interest in the problems of the class struggle, in the distribution of wealth and power, and in politics as a whole implies a greater rejection of adult values than to be left wing." At least those students who are left wing are willing to play these adults at their own game. In other words, the movement there--and I'd say here--was starting a new game.

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May: Another thing I thought the movement had a lot in common with, though it was not certainly a conscious descendent of this, was American revivalism. The series of revivals, particularly in the nineteenth century, that swept through American religion had this in common with the movement or movements of the sixties: that they're terribly powerful, almost irresistible, when they start, but they haven't much staying power and don't have a clear goal of how things are supposed to be afterward. They can't be negotiated with or limited with precise rules. When various churches tried that, they usually lost out, at least temporarily. And they're bound to produce, eventually, extreme behavior to the point of violence, as revivalism did.

Lage: I hadn't been aware of that, not knowing a whole lot about American revivalists.

May: Well, it's one of the big currents, and in the earlier period was popular and often democratic, rather than, as some kinds are now, fundamentalist and in that way conservative.

Lage: But as it progressed, it became more attractive to sort of dangerous types? I mean, did that happen in the religious revivals?

May: Yes, there'd be efforts at coercion and very violent manifestations of that--people barking, falling to the ground, all that sort of thing--and a great deal of hostility to learned clergy particularly.

Lage: I see, you can see counterparts there.

May: Yes, they're there. It's an analogy, that's all.

Lage: But were there analogous social conditions? Did you give thought to that?

May: No, I wouldn't exactly say that. The early nineteenth century's awfully different from the middle twentieth.

Lage: Hard to compare.

May: Yes, but the methods and to some extent the results--particularly, the fact that this sort of movement is almost irresistible when it's on the right turf, but it can't make institutions very easily. And indeed, one of the main characteristics, I think, of the student movement was that it wasn't revolutionary because it never had an alternative government. The students didn't have a program really for running the university. They sort of seemed to imply that it didn't need running.

Impact of the Student Movement on Social Mores and Campus Culture

May: Now I'd like to talk a bit about the effects on the campus and on middle-class society, and perhaps just a little on the effects on me since this is an autobiography or oral history.

Lage: Absolutely.

May: Institutionally the campus was not much changed. There's some loosening, both good and bad--a little less stiffness of institutions, grade inflation. But the structure of the American university which had grown up in the late nineteenth century and which my former student Larry Veysey has pointed out is unlike any other--that is, departments, courses, degrees, and so forth--didn't change much at all.

Lage: We've heard so much about grade inflation. Did you have a chance to observe how that happened or why? Did it have anything to do with Vietnam?

May: Well, there's that particular reason, yes. I supported withholding grades, but not as a part of this egalitarianism. I remember one young man on the faculty in the senate saying, "I can't relate to students through grades." That perhaps says it a little bit. But the reasons for grade inflation varied and you could resist it if you wanted to.

Lage: Do you feel like you resisted it?

May: Yes, I did. Another thing that did change was the general practice of student ratings of professors, and that of course had the effect on some people--not on everybody--of wanting to make them a little

easier on the students. Some of the young faculty who had grown up in the movement tried to remain radical in the later period, but they were likely to be pretty conservative when their privileges were involved.

Lage: You mean in the later period of the seventies?

May: Well, yes. The students continued to be excellent and I would say livelier than they had been. There was somewhat more communication between faculty and students for obvious reasons.

Lage: In the classrooms or out?

May: Both.

Lage: How did your actual classroom change? You used the term "friendly combat" somewhere.

May: Mighty little except that there was more discussion back and forth even in lecture courses, and I encouraged it more. What was really important, I think--and this is such a subtle business it's hard to talk about--was the changes in middle-class society that came about partly through the influence that sons and daughters on the campuses had on their parents.

The biggest change was in sex attitudes and rules. This, I would say, was revolutionary. That is, when I was at Harvard and was assistant senior tutor in one of the houses, one of my jobs was to enforce the proprietal rules of girls visiting boys in their rooms. Then they had to have the door open, the roommate had to be present, all this. In the seventies at Harvard, I was surprised when I went back for a visit that there was everybody living next door and obviously there was no attempt whatever to control sexual activities. Hard on some people, but that was a very big change. And it happened earlier in Berkeley than in a lot of places. I remember Jean talking about one of her friends whose daughter came back to Berkeley from somewhere else because she said here her boyfriend could walk right in the front door with no pretense.

Lage: [laughs]

May: Then also, drugs. Now what's the connection with the movement? I'm told by friends who were associated with the student movement that quite a few people in the movement had at some of the all-night meetings both their first sexual experience and their first experience of drugs. I can't vouch for that myself, but it was there on the fringes of the movement from the start and indeed has been there on the fringes of other movements of its kind that I've talked about in history.

Lage: In the revivals?

May: No, not there, but in the romantic radical movements there was often a bit of this. The changes in middle-class society are a part of big social change that's so big that I don't know how to talk about it. It needs, and has not yet found, a first-rate social and intellectual historian to talk about these changes of the sixties going on into the seventies as a whole. It's a very difficult thing to do.

Lage: Has anyone approached satisfying that requirement?

May: Not that I know and I've been through the bibliography pretty well. The book by Burner[1] on the sixties is good on politics, civil rights, Vietnam, actual episodes, but not as good I think on these subtler effects, which really everybody who lived through the period and was around before in a university community or in middle-class society knew.

Lage: So the facts are there. You don't think we need to develop more source material? Or is it the analysis only that's missing?

May: Facts about political movements and facts about social changes--I don't know the bibliography of that as well, but it's certainly been written about a good deal. But I don't think there's a single good book on the whole movement and its consequences. If there is, I don't know it. Irving Howe, I think, is about as good on the sixties as anybody, from the perspective of somebody who was a part of the movement of the thirties. He's pretty understanding, I think. But nobody's done that big job. And to do that kind of job, to talk about the social changes of any period, is an immense undertaking.

Lage: Are we too close, do you think, for someone to undertake this?

May: No, I think the time's about right. I think there'll be more and more writing on the sixties. Now, what comes after this is that these social changes didn't apply to everybody and there are lots of people who were against the whole thing--the student movement, the war protest, drugs, sex, everything. So one of the sharpest legacies, I think, is a continuing drastic division in American society between the permissive middle class and the socially conservative working class, which has dogged our politics ever since, and particularly has been the hardest question for the Democratic party to answer.

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[1] David Burner, Making Peace with the Sixties (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Lage: Why is it a class division?

May: It's a very good question. Why, I don't know, but families are stronger among a good many immigrant societies, particularly the older ones, and there's a dislike of people who are seen as privileged and not appreciating the privilege. None of the political or social movement took account of this. That is, it's part of their whole makeup that they were seldom ideologically practical or pragmatic and didn't care whom they alienated. For instance, most Southerners, the military and veterans, and particularly the immigrant working class were very hostile. It left the society so divided that it's not easy for it to function, I think.

The stereotypes of the university continue after the radical realities have pretty much past. That is, if I go somewhere else--let's say, on a cruise--people ask the conventional question, where are you from? The resulting expression makes it clear that Berkeley has still a definite connotation, even though now the university is quiet and by no means radical.

Impact of the Student Movement on Self and Other Faculty

Lage: I don't want to take you off your track, but I did want to ask if on the campus among the faculty was there a legacy of bitterness? I'm thinking about how long the loyalty oath division seemed to have had an effect.

May: Oh, there are residues, sure, but for one thing feelings change a lot over time. There were very few who supported the radical students all the way in the later period. There was certainly a resentful conservative minority throughout that stayed that way, but on the campus, in at least the departments that I'm familiar with--and I can't speak about others--the climate has been one running from certainly mostly verbal radicalism to a Democratic liberalism, let's say.

Lastly, I might say something about the effects of the sixties on me. I think the effects of the whole business on me were good much more than bad. For a while, I and other academic intellectuals were educated by events more importantly than by books. And that I think is desirable. Emerson says, "Books are for the scholars' idle moments."

Lage: But you hadn't thought that before, I would bet, or had you?

May: I never thought that. Exactly. But I always thought that your whole experience went into your books, let's say. But I'd been educated by the sixties and I think had learned how easy it was to get things wrong. I think that I learned to speak much more easily in public and express myself more. My communication with students and with younger people in general was better. I think this is true on the whole campus. There's a certain sense that we've been through something together and come out more or less on the other side, I think, in quite large parts of the campus.

Lage: So in that sense it was unifying.

May: Yes, so in that sense it was unifying. Oh, I think it was. One of the effects was that the people you knew were not necessarily the people in your department, but the people with the same political views either in the long run or in individual episodes. That is, people you called up to try to get on your side and the people that you were with in the arguments in the senate and all this sort of thing.

Lage: Did the Faculty Forum continue throughout this period?

May: It continued throughout this period but not any more as far as I know. The same with the Committee of Two Hundred; these were ad hoc.

Lage: Right, but that was one way that the people with views you shared in other fields came together?

May: Very much so, yes.

Lage: What about effects on your approach to writing about history or thinking about history? You've alluded to things.

May: Well, about the sixties particularly, everybody felt from the beginning that they were having an experience that made them understand revolutionary periods. This wasn't a revolutionary period and comparisons with the big revolutionary periods are rather absurd, but nonetheless one learned if one didn't know it before, that movements change and get out of control pretty easily, and that written programs often aren't much use and don't much matter. And then I guess, if people had been studying Aristotle's politics, they'd know that out of extreme democracy comes anarchy and from there the strong arm, though it didn't get to that stage. But people compared the movement when they first experienced it to whatever they knew about in their own field.

Lage: Carl Schorske compared it to something in Germany and Italy.

May: Oh, sure, to the 1848 movement. I thought one of the accurate comparisons of the administration's actions in the early days was to the Kingdom of Naples, one of the worst governments in Europe, where the king was likely to grant a constitution one week and then the next to put all the leaders of the constitutional movement in prison. What happened here was an experience, to put it in its least terms, when things got out of hand and were unpredictable. And that's a very powerful experience for anybody to go through--particularly people who believe in and live in institutions. You didn't know what was going to happen.

Lage: The sense of order was lost.

May: Yes, it was lost--off and on. One should always remember that this country is the only major country that has not, in the twentieth century, undergone real revolution, invasion, or even large-scale bombing. That partly explains why comparatively minor upsets like this one upset us so much.

Lage: I was struck by the sort of apocalyptic language in some of your own speeches and writing. You mentioned the university's being in danger of disintegration. That was in the press conference in December of '64. Then in '70, let's see, what did you say? "The survival of the university is in question." That was in the Moses lecture.

May: It seemed that way.

Lage: Was that a fairly common stance or perception?

May: I think so--on the far left and not always just there.

Lage: So it was also a shared vision with the far left, you say?

May: Yes. There were only a few that hoped that it would be destroyed, but there were those who wanted it to be very radically reconstituted.

Lage: But also there were those who felt that the world was crashing down around them.

May: That their world was, yes. And of course some people left.

Faculty Departures from the History Department

Lage: Tell me more about the people who left. I have a little list from history of people who left, but I don't know if they left for those reasons. Who were the people who left? Armin Rappaport?

May: He was more pushed out, but in the ordinary course of things.

Lage: He went to UCLA, did he? Or to another campus?

May: It seems to me to Davis. I'm not sure. [Rappaport went to UC San Diego in 1967--ed.]

Lage: Do you have anything to say about Thomas Kuhn leaving?

May: Tom Kuhn left because he could get a more satisfactory position at Princeton.

Lage: And that was before the unrest.

May: Yes. Then Carl Bridenbaugh left, I'd say, because he had devoted himself to running the changes of the fifties and improvement of the department and after he'd made it such a good department, he couldn't control it any more.

Lage: [laughs]

May: So far, there's very little to do with all these matters.

Lage: Right, I know.

May: Now, I don't like to speak for people--what their motives were. [Henry] Rosovsky was very important in the early mediation moves, and I think that one could say that his departure was connected with the movement.

Lage: Which side was he on when you say mediation?

May: He was trying to mediate and bargain and so forth with the FSM. That usually shifted people in the conservative direction. And then he became of course a very influential dean at Harvard. You haven't mentioned Marty Lipset or Nate Glazer. Those two I think left for somewhat ideological reasons. Louis Feuer certainly did.

Lage: These were not history department members.

May: No. Then after Bridenbaugh was at Brown, he attracted there quite a number of faculty: Bryce Lyon and Robert Padden and Perry Curtis.

That was our government in exile. So some left for all sorts of other reasons. And, of course, Bill Bouwsma left.

Lage: He did?

May: Yes, to Harvard--then fortunately came back. But this was when he was Heyns's vice chancellor and he felt rather repudiated, particularly over the ethnic departments issue--I think that's the main thing--but then came back. I know, personally, that a number of those who left, whom I've talked with later, always felt a great deal of nostalgia for Berkeley.

Lage: And for that period?

May: Not so much--for Berkeley as it had been in the fifties.

Lage: What about Hunter Dupree?

May: All right, I can give you that. He had had a running argument with Tom Kuhn and things hadn't worked out, but he was very much a favorite of Carl Bridenbaugh and so eventually followed him to Brown.

Lage: Was he a conservative on the political spectrum, too?

May: Yes, on the whole.

Lage: All right. This is going way back to FSM. This "mounting" issue--did it ever get resolved?

May: I don't think it did.

Lage: It seems to me it's part of the removing the university from acting parentally.

May: That's right. I don't remember it coming up a lot. I think in '68 the movement to block the draft board had a lot of other people beside Cal people in it. I just can't tell you whether there was an effort to crack down on the sources of that. That was one of the many issues that I think kind of went by the board. Well, of course in the People's Park, if on the campus you're telling people to go take the park, that more or less comes under that, perhaps.

Lage: But that was handled through the courts, though, not through university discipline, I don't think. The courts tried that man and I think cleared him.

May: Did they?

Lage: Dan Siegel.

May: Yes. Yes, I did know that.

Generational Politics

Lage: Before the tape flipped off we were talking about the generational aspects, which you said were so obvious maybe they're not worth mentioning.

May: No, they're so obvious that they are worth mentioning probably. Remember the slogan of "Don't trust anybody over thirty."

Lage: Right.

May: It's a part of the egalitarianism. Certainly there was a decline of deference and a belief that faculty are no more able to do the right thing in setting curricula or devising courses than students. I think it comes under radical egalitarianism more or less. And it's perfectly true that students can be more honest and more intelligent than the faculty. What I always stood for was the difference in function. But I think there were those who believed in a great deal of fraternization with students and almost definitely moving to their modes. For instance, the faculty mode of dress changed a good deal during this period. Before, jackets and ties for teaching were regarded as almost compulsory. In the past they had been compulsory when I was in college, even for teaching assistants. That went, and insignia of rank went.

Lage: Now what would be the insignia of rank?

May: Different clothes and then different speech in a way, also.

Lage: You mean between student and professors?

May: Yes.

Lage: Not between the ranks of the professors?

May: Oh, well, no. That's all theoretically equal there, though you're not actually equal to somebody who has been to a meeting you didn't attend, deciding whether you're going to be kept on. [laughter]

Lage: Right.

May: I said at one point when I was being cantankerous in a meeting called by Richy Abrams of the history department to talk about the developing crisis--this was pretty early--that I thought that universities had to be both hierarchical and elitist. I was being provocative.

Lage: Now why did you want to be provocative?

May: I don't know. Original Sin.

Lage: [laughs]

May: I think any student movement anywhere is a generational movement. But I think that this all was adjusted perfectly well through and after the movement. That is, the relation between a particular professor and his students was less protected by rules of hierarchy, but they still are formed by respect on both sides, I'd say, and that became clearer and worked on the whole very well.

Lage: Did it change? I guess not, from what you're saying. But for instance, your relationship with a graduate student that you worked closely with, was there much change?

May: A little better communication, but no. For instance, you went to first names before they were finished, or I did. Some did not.

Lage: But in terms of the intellectual relationship?

May: It's always been pretty good, I think. I don't think it changed very much. That is, I don't think students are <u>ever</u> reluctant to express opinions except in lecture courses, and it got so that in the lecture courses I was teaching I demanded more feedback from students in class.

Lage: So you initiated that?

May: Yes.

Lage: Not just responded to it?

May: No. I don't know, maybe just responded to it first. That's a matter also of generation in another sense. As you get older, the probability of actual confrontation or challenge from students becomes less likely, except in extreme circumstances--for it certainly did happen. You don't have to differentiate yourself from the students as a young instructor does.

Lage: I see, so that you can relax a little more.

May: Yes, that's right.

Lage: That's interesting.

The Margaret Byrne Chair and Outside Offers

Lage: We never talked about your getting the [Margaret] Byrne chair in the department and then the fact that you had an offer from Wisconsin. Let's start with the Byrne chair in history. How did you get that?

May: I got the chair because Carl Bridenbaugh left and I was considered by my colleagues the next in line. That's what I would say.

Lage: That was a simple matter.

May: I think that was. About those chairs, Kenneth Stampp has said very well: "It's not that they mean so much to the people who have them, but they sometimes mean a lot to the people who don't have them sometimes." [laughter]

Lage: Oh, that's interesting. What comes with having a chair, besides the title after your name?

May: Well, normally more money.

Lage: But not in terms of salary, is it?

May: It was, yes.

Lage: Oh, well!

May: But salaries went up during this period in terms of offers from outside and I didn't play that game.

Lage: What about the offer from Wisconsin?

May: At a certain point, the worst point in the period, when I was most depressed and frustrated, say, early '69, I started putting feelers out. I thought that I would like to move, halfheartedly, and I got offers from Wisconsin and Minnesota. Those were the only ones that I could drum up. And I was very conscious I didn't really want to go.

Lage: You knew that at one level or on all levels?

May: I knew that at one level. This was just sort of an angry gesture and I got over it. The only other offer I ever had came much later from Cornell for a very fancy salary--the ones they have in the New York system--and I turned that down immediately. By that time, I knew I was staying at Cal no matter what. I never mentioned any of these to the administration until I decided not to accept.

Lage: Do you remember when the Cornell came?

May: A good deal later. Seventies sometime, I'd say.

Lage: Now why do you think that you didn't want to go?

May: Because I like it here. [laughter]

Lage: In the midst of all this! The town or the gown?

May: Both. And it's awfully cold in both Madison and Minneapolis. Also in Ithaca.

Lage: The climate.

May: Yes, the climate and while I think those are all distinctly first-rate universities, the intellectual climate, too.

Lage: So even in the midst of this sort of apocalyptic thinking, you had some sense that things were going to get better, I would guess.

May: I would say I had some sense that some things were okay as they were. I think my teaching during this period--and I should have said this earlier, talking about consequences--was better than it's ever been.

Lage: In terms of you as teacher?

May: Yes, in terms of me as teacher. I had awfully good students and the upheavals didn't affect my relations with people in my seminar at all, I think.

Lage: When you talk about your teaching are you thinking of the seminar or the larger course that you taught?

May: Well, both. I haven't mentioned this but when I tried to teach History 17 again it was not a success. My lecture course was American intellectual history and then I brought in American religious history, though this is some distance ahead. Those went rather better, rather more freely, with rather more discussion, and --I hate to use the word--but they were rather more participatory.

That's later, that's the seventies, so it's not relevant to your question.

What was good here? Well, I had deep roots in the place, of course many friends--some of them off the campus--and I didn't really want to leave. That was sort of a momentary alienation.

Lage: Maybe an insurance policy.

May: Oh, not consciously, but maybe.

Lage: How about Jean? Was she content during this period?

May: I've asked her that recently. Yes, I think she found it exciting and wasn't much injured by it.

Lage: Except having to help you--[laughter]

May: Having to pick up the pieces once in a while, yes.

VIII BERKELEY IN THE SEVENTIES, PUBLICATIONS, AND RETIREMENT

[Interview 7: September 10, 1998] ##

Pitt Professor, Cambridge University

Lage: Today we're talking about the seventies and maybe getting to the eighties. We won't rush. So let's start with the way you conceive of it.

May: At the beginning of the seventies--or almost--I had a radical change of environment. I was invited to be in Cambridge, England for a year as Pitt professor. The job there was to lecture on American history. I went in as a moderate conservative from Berkeley.

Lage: In your own mind or in their minds?

May: In my mind. They didn't know anything about how I stood on that, and Cambridge turned me almost into a flaming radical, but I suppressed it because it wasn't my turf.

Lage: Tell me a little bit about how that happened.

May: I was a member of Pembroke College. As a professor, you're inducted as a fellow, just as if you were going to be there for the rest of your life. You can vote on everything such as clerical livings that the college owns, whether to build showers or baths, anything you want.

Lage: Even as a visitor!

May: Well, I was a fellow.

Lage: I see.

May: And this was a small conservative college. They couldn't have treated me more nicely and I enjoyed a lot about it, but the

difference coming right from Berkeley at that time was startling. For instance, there were at that time no women in almost any of the colleges except for the two exclusively for women. One time I asked another fellow, who was a mathematician, "Now, supposing there was a national or international mathematics meeting here, could you not invite a female mathematician to lunch at the college?" The answer was, "Not in Pembroke. Not in my time."

Lage: [laughs]

May: There was a sit-in by students. The issues were that they wanted to have less emphasis on the tripos--all-or-nothing exam--and a little more opportunity to do library research. More dangerous, they also wanted to be allowed to take more meals outside of college. This is dangerous because their not very good food paid for the excellent food of the dons. [laughter]

Lage: Oh, I see. Did the dons acknowledge that?

May: Well, they certainly knew it. I got various commiserations about Vietnam, that they fairly understood what a terrible bunch we were up against. I was also instructed by the reaction in the college to Bloody Sunday in Ireland, where I think sixteen people were killed. The first person I talked to said, "This is a terrible thing to happen. It might bring discredit on the army." [laughs] I realized I was in a still-intact establishment. That is, it was a matter of course that high court judges dined in their college. It was just assumed that they all had a college--Oxford or Cambridge--and army officers often dined also.

Lage: They just were incorporated into the--

May: Yes, although the admission of students was entirely democratized. I remember one faculty wife, a don's wife, when the students were making this pretty mild protest, saying, "They ought to be glad they're here. Lots of their brothers are down in coal mines," and so forth. Well, this is a bit of a caricature.

There are also wonderful things about Cambridge--great brilliance scattered around and immense beauty, particularly in the springtime. I think I handled the year badly because I should have relaxed and learned more and not reacted critically. Really the reason for that was that I was deep in my book on the Enlightenment[1] and couldn't do much on it there, though I did some research in London.

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[1]The Enlightenment in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Lage: Because you couldn't do your research there?

May: Not much. A lot of undergraduates elect to read American history, but it was not creatively taught and the library resources were quite poor.

Lage: What was your role as teacher there?

May: Negligible. That is, I gave lectures on American intellectual history. Very few people came--that is, they got fewer and fewer. Every visiting American has the same experience because lectures play a very small part in their program, and particularly, they think that the tripos will examine what their own faculty tell them and not some outsider. Actually, we double-crossed them because the department invited me to contribute a question on what I'd been talking about. [laughs]

But I think I handled the year badly; I thought I should have relaxed and learned what I could and not fussed about it. Anyhow, I was glad to get home. And nonetheless, we had some wonderful times, particularly continental travel.

Lage: Did your children go?

May: Oh, sure. Each of them visited--one with her boyfriend and one with her husband, but it was mainly the two of us.

Lage: So that was when? '71 and '72?

May: '71 to '72.

Impact of Affirmative Action on Faculty Appointments

May: When I got home, things had settled down since the sixties. The movements that survived from the sixties, as far as I can see, were the women's movement, affirmative action--mainly for Afro-Americans --and gay rights. I played very little part in any of these.

In terms of the department, I had a general surviving prejudice in favor of appointment strictly on merit, though I was perfectly willing to go along with a choice of women or minorities when and if the candidates are equal. They're never exactly equal of course. The department was under pressure from the federal government during at least part of this time.

Lage: Well, the whole campus was.

May: Yes, but I wasn't in campus affairs anymore; I'd gotten out of that.

Lage: Yes, I just didn't want to give the impression that it was focused on the history department.

May: You're quite right, yes. I remember there was a big fight when Bob Brentano was chairman because they wanted access to confidential records of our meetings and we wouldn't give it. The department then--speaking only for the moment--dealt quite easily with the women question because there were lots of well-qualified candidates. So there wasn't a problem after they started making any effort to appoint women. And anyway, more women were becoming graduate students.

Lage: Was there a change in how the jobs were advertised or how informal networks worked?

May: Oh, is that right, yes. They were advertised publicly instead of being purely on the old boy network, which they had been in the fifties. About gays there was no great problem because well before the government, there was a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude. Nobody inquired.

Lage: In the department?

May: In the department, yes. Only with the Afro-Americans was there some difficulty because there was not, and never has been, a large pool of qualified candidates. I think the reason for this is that the ablest black students go into things where they can make more money and have more prestige. But anyway, that was hard. It always has been somewhat difficult to find the right candidates.

Lage: Could you describe what kinds of measures were taken in that direction?

May: It was necessary to prove in making an appointment that there wasn't any minority candidate.

Lage: Oh, I see, that was built into the process.

May: That was, yes. That was pressure from the outside. Anyway, there were people in the department that very much wanted to have a black colleague. And usually we managed one after a while, but that's been difficult right along.

Lage: Right all along the way.

May: Yes.

Lage: Do you remember pressure from above? Was the Bowker administration pushing minority appointments?

May: I don't remember that, but I wasn't as active as I had been in department affairs. Yes, certainly there was some. And you'd have to make the case more strongly to the budget committee--that's where I think it came from mostly--to show that there wasn't a candidate who was one of the minorities. It was hard. And actually--well, I'll come to that--some of my own students who were white males suffered very much from this. They didn't want to be a special class.

Completion and Reception of *The Enlightenment in America*

May: My main concern was finishing my book, The Enlightenment in America. I'd been working hard on that book since 1963-64, when I was living near Harvard in order to use the Widener Library. This was a big undertaking because I hadn't been anywhere near that field. I started by reading the European sources. I remember that Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding took terribly long. I read the English and French thinkers. The Germans didn't at that time cut any weight in America, in part because so few people knew German.

I started learning the European sources and also learning the bibliographical procedure and research tools of early American history. In most departments, absurdly I think, there's a complete division between the early American historians up to the revolution or the constitution and afterward. The early Americanists regard their specialty as pretty esoteric and I had to be familiar with all that. And Harvard was a wonderful place to do that.

As opposed to the period when I was working on my last big book, The End of American Innocence, this time I could get time off and subsidy pretty easily. I shifted my seminar onto early America. That was an immense help, as seminars always had been to me. Actually, my organization, which is the basis of this book and its main contribution, occurred to me in a seminar meeting.

My problem was that I simply couldn't see all the figures that were certainly part of the Enlightenment in Europe or in America as part of one movement. Say, Voltaire against Rousseau--Rousseau's more of a revolt against the philosophes than part of the movement. Gibbon and Hume in England are pretty much real skeptics as against the very popular latitudinarian bishops. Adams or Madison--or still more, the arch-conservative Gouverneur Morris against Jefferson or particularly Paine. Yet all these seem to me quite clearly parts of

the Enlightenment in some ways. So I had to do two things: to strip my definition of the Enlightenment to an absolute minimum to include all those who for any reason believed in the use of the powers of the human mind rather than in revelation or intuition. Then I established four categories: what I called the moderate Enlightenment--mostly British and making various rather ill-fated compromises with Christianity--and then the skeptical Enlightenment, going clear off to Hume, who was skeptical of the mental processes and comes around almost to a romantic position that the passions really rule. There is first the moderate Enlightenment, then the skeptical Enlightenment, then something quite, quite different: the revolutionary Enlightenment--because you can't be a skeptic and a revolutionary very easily; you have to be a believer in something--and finally what I called the didactic Enlightenment, which was the Enlightenment tamed down for defensive educational purposes in America.

In other words, this was a very difficult undertaking. And I paid a high price in time and effort for shifting my field so radically, when most historians who knew my work at all thought I'd go on and do the 1920s.

Lage: Did you say why you shifted your field? What drew you to this period?

May: Well, one reason--like climbing Everest--was because it's there. That is, almost nobody had tried to write a book on the Enlightenment in America, particularly--not for a very long time. And second, I was tired of the people I'd been working with. When people asked me that I said, "In the eighteenth century you meet a better class of people." [laughter] And I enjoyed it. I don't regret that at all.

Lage: Was there a particular encounter you had with an Enlightenment figure that encouraged you to study the movement?

May: No, except I'd been lecturing on them in my intellectual history course all this time.

Lage: Of course, because that covers the whole time period.

May: Yes, sure.

Lage: Now one other question: you mentioned the help from the seminar in getting the idea for the organization. How does that work?

May: Just talking about it in the seminar, it occurred to me and I went home and wrote it down. That's how things do occur, I think, in my

kind of history. That is, you don't know just why. I always told the people in the seminar that.

With the help of a very good research assistant, at the same time, I published a quantitative summary of the books that were in American libraries that covered a series of four periods. And we did I forget how many libraries. We published that in a periodical.[2]

Lage: Oh, I see.

May: I also tried very hard to give absolutely full scope to American social history, which was burgeoning at the time, to explain the differences in the society and why things mutated a bit. I made I think a tactical mistake in the introduction. I said that I had first thought about it being about the Enlightenment and religion, but I finally thought rather the Enlightenment as religion, and that of course led to its dismissal right away by some.

What I meant was that, in my opinion, thinkers of this period always started their social or critical thought by a discussion of human nature and what it was like. Most of them, even pretty skeptical ones, even if it was a negative theory, they started there, which seemed to me a quasi-religious start.

As for the reception of the book, the tight circle of early American historians tended to be hostile because they didn't like people coming on their turf without their credentials--who hadn't, that is, been trained that way from the start. The reception was especially good in England and in Germany and among American historians of eighteenth-century Europe. I was very pleased at a long, highly favorable review in The New Yorker. And finally, the book won two prizes: the Merle Curti Prize in American Intellectual History and the Beveridge Prize for the best book in history of the Americas of the year.

Lage: Those must have been very gratifying.

May: Those were extremely gratifying--very much so.

Lage: Did the early American historians ever come around? They sound like a very conservative group.

May: Well, some of them were there from the start. Bob Middlekauff was extremely supportive and encouraging. And with him on your side I

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[2]Henry F. May and David Lundberg, "The Enlightened Reader in America," American Quarterly (June 1976).

don't think you have to worry about the eighteenth-century people too much.

Lage: It's interesting that he is now moving his time period forward. I think he's studying Mark Twain.

May: Oh, yes. Yes, he is.

Religious Studies Program at UC Berkeley

Lage: I wanted to ask a little bit more about teaching religion at Berkeley. You chaired a committee in '70, '71, I think, in the department, maybe, on religious studies?

May: No, that was a Letters and Science College committee, and feelings on it were very much divided.

Lage: Was the idea to have a department or a program in religious studies?

May: I was in favor of having a department. There was a department at Santa Barbara and so you couldn't say that it was impossible in a land-grant or a state university. It was absolutely assumed, of course, that it had to be neutral in views. And there was a compromise. There were some appointments made, but they were all in existing departments.

Lage: What were the objections?

May: Well, there are people who object to the teaching of religion in general, who associated it with dogma and regarded it as obsolete and all that. I remember a distinguished scientist saying to me that study of religion couldn't have any interest because you couldn't prove anything.

Lage: [laughs]

May: You could prove what people said; that's what you could prove.

Lage: He probably felt that way about history, too.

May: Well, probably. More or less. But anyway, what emerged was this compromise and there were some very good appointments. Then Bill Bouwsma started teaching a three-term history of Christianity.

Lage: That's what I was wondering.

May: I audited it one time. There's a lot of very good teaching of Buddhism and Hinduism scattered around the university, so it became, I think, an important place for people interested in history of religions to come.

Lage: So it did have an effect?

May: Yes. And in my classes, as I say, my trouble was only with the evangelicals.

Lage: What did the evangelicals object to?

May: Well, neutrality--that not enough weight was given to the possibility that what Christianity taught was absolutely true.

Lage: I see.

May: That is, biblical literalists, who can quote texts at you pretty well. I lectured on Judaism and Catholicism, of course--never had any trouble with either Jews or Catholics about that, though my knowledge was very superficial, particularly of Judaism. I did a lot of reading, but that's a subject that's immense in itself and now also has an endowed chair on the campus.

This was a much more receptive place for religious studies, particularly than Harvard, which has always held the Divinity School very much at arms length. It was also good at Yale, but we became, I think, one of the good places to come for general study of religions--not just America, of course.

First Soviet-American Historians Colloquium, 1972

May: I was invited to be one of the five people who went to the Soviet Union to meet with the historians in the Soviet Academy the first time that that happened--it became annual--and that was quite a fascinating experience.

I learned how things were organized. People lived in very considerable luxury--more than American academics.

Lage: The historians?

May: Well, the academics in general, but they took exactly the topics they were told to take. For instance, somebody would be working on the Ford strikes of the thirties and they'd go to great lengths to get him all the wall-newspapers and all sorts of sources, but he

didn't necessarily know anything at all about American history outside of that. Or they'd be working on a particular movement in Latin America but not look at the colonial period of Latin America.

Lage: How did you discover this about the way they chose topics?

May: We had these discussions with them. And then also we were taken around by very charming and pleasant graduate students and I'd ask them all sorts of questions. Everybody was tremendously cordial. One time when the discussions had been pretty tough in the morning, there was a party in the afternoon where we had caviar and good wines from the Crimea, lots of vodka, lots of everything. It was sort of as if they were trying to make up.

Bud [Bernard] Bailyn and I were both invited to speak at the Moscow State University and we got front seats at the ballet. We would go into a gallery to see pictures--there was a big exhibit of pictures from the whole of the eastern zone from all the Soviet-influenced countries--and there were lines going around several blocks, but we were shoved in at the beginning right at the start. It was like that all the time. I realized that next time, when they came to the United States, they couldn't do that--it would cause a riot. [laughter]

Lage: Yes. You said the discussions were tough. What kind of interchange was it between the two sets of historians? Were there arguments?

May: Yes. I started out by saying I was a bourgeois historian in two ways--of the middle class and also I was from the middle class. That was clear, there's no objection to that, but they wanted, for instance, to compare figures from the Russian Enlightenment with the figures from the American Enlightenment, which comparison didn't work very well really--different definitions and so forth. But it was a fascinating time.

Of course, we went from Moscow to Leningrad by the crack train and I took an extra day off for the Hermitage, one of the very greatest museums in the world. When we met the head of the Lenin Library, their equivalent of the Library of Congress, he was a medievalist and very easy to talk to. People in less controversial fields were easier to talk to than people who were in recent history.

Lage: I can imagine. You wouldn't face the same kind of pressures.

May: No, that's right. The pressures were quite obvious. For instance, one thing that had to be accepted was that the secretary of the association had been there for the preliminary discussions, and one of the people that he discussed just wasn't available and he didn't

talk about that. I tried to send books to the students who'd taken us around--very innocent, non-controversial books on American history--but I don't think they ever got there.

This was during the Nixon administration and when I skipped the official entertaining one night I went to a restaurant where I'd been before. I found myself talking to two teachers who had English--were there for a great treat--and they were full of praise for the Nixon administration and the possibility of détente.

Then I went to Poland because one of the topics of a meeting in Poland was the Enlightenment. And that was almost a more fascinating experience. Poland was still under Russian control, of course, but you could be pretty sure that any of the academics you talked to were not only anti-communist, but particularly anti-Russian. There's the great palace of peace and culture--something like that--that the Russians had presented in the usual Soviet style, and one of the jokes was, "Where's the best view in Warsaw? It's from the top of the tower of peace and culture because that's the only place you can't see the tower." [laughter] But people when they wanted to talk confidentially walked down the middle of the street. Again, there was a certain amount of caution but far less than in Russia.

Another topic of the meeting was the churches in the period of Nazi domination. People from various countries were just beginning to be able to talk about that, and it was very illuminating. The churches had had very hard choices to make when it looked as though Hitler had won the war, which it certainly did about 1940. And so what do you do? Do you try to save what you can of the situation or do you go into retirement, or do you just shut up? That was wonderfully interesting to listen to.

Lage: People were talking from their personal experience?

May: Yes, indeed, including Germans and people from other countries.

Lage: Very interesting.

May: We went to the Catholic university at Lublin, which was about the only non-state university in the Soviet zone. It had pretty close relations with Catholic universities in the west, particularly Louvain. And while there I went to Majdanek, a big death camp near there. There was a bus taking you there. Majdanek was a really shattering experience--very well-preserved, all kinds of mementos. Some of the people we were going around with were German professors, so this was extremely poignant.

We went on a bus tour of Poland after the meetings in Warsaw. And the greatest thing there was the city of Krakow, which is immensely beautiful--an Austro-Hungarian eighteenth-century city--or older--with an awful lot of a kind of baroque I'd never seen before. So this was a most exciting and illuminating time.

Lage: And not many people went to those countries at this time.

May: No. Well, there were tourists to Moscow, yes. That is, there was a cartoon in The New Yorker, I think it was, "Are you going to Moscow? No, not this summer, there are too many Americans." [laughter] It was like that. There were lots of Americans, yes, sure, but not getting this red carpet treatment.

Decision to Retire in 1980

May: So this brings me to my decision to retire. I decided to retire for both negative and positive reasons. I think I had some of the best graduate students I ever had in this period, and I had the fun of teaching a new course in American religious history organized absolutely from scratch. It got a fair number of students of all sorts of views.

Lage: You mean within the class?

May: Within the class. My whole style was much more welcoming--introductions and discussion--which is partly the influence of the sixties. But also it happens I think when you get a bit older; you don't have to worry about maintaining distance from the students, you have to worry about the other thing: communication.

Lage: You noted some place where I was searching through your life that you started out that class with discussion at the beginning. Do you remember that?

May: Oh, yes, I think I did, and stating my own religious position. I felt I had to do that.

Lage: But I mean discussion at the beginning of each session and then the lecture.

May: I think so. Well, I'd sometimes stop in the middle. Anyway, it was less rigid and I enjoyed it very much and had good students in this field.

But for the first time I was having difficulty getting jobs for my graduate students. And this is a very distressing thing. If somebody has been working with you for, say, five years and there's no light at the end of that tunnel, very bad things happen. One thing that happens is marriages break up--it takes too long, and then no job, and so forth. And people got seriously depressed and frustrated.

Lage: Yes, and you feel a responsibility it sounds like?

May: Oh, yes, indeed. Everybody does, I think. The reasons for this, I think, were first there was a decline in jobs in history in general and second, the prestige was in social history and definitely not in intellectual history, which is alleged to be elitist. I tend to think that that itself is an elitist position--it implies that ordinary people have no minds.

Lage: [laughter] Yes, it does, really.

May: These are the negative reasons. But also there were a lot of positive reasons--things I wanted to do. So I retired at sixty-five.

This was also made possible by the fact that I'd had a sizeable bequest from a very rich and rather picturesque relative on my mother's side, Sir Arthur Chester Beatty, who was originally in mining in this country, spread his activities all over the world, and fought the Guggenheims on equal terms, and was a friend of King Leopold II of Belgium--which is no recommendation.

Lage: [laughs] Right.

May: But we met him in Ireland. My sister and brother--my sister, particularly--knew him rather better, so he left each of us a chunk of money. Not enough by any means to make us rich, but I left just before very large increases in salaries, and this made it so that we were not rich but okay for money. And I've never regretted retiring early.

Some of my students when I announced I was going to quit did a wonderful thing. They rented one of the two camps at the Bears' Lair[3] and put on a three-day celebration. It was the best party of any kind I've ever been to. The main organizer was Sam Haber, with a number of excellent assistants.

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[3]Lair of the Bear--California Alumni Association camp in Pinecrest, California.

Lage: How fun! Inviting back former students?

May: Everybody who had been in my seminar was supposed to be invited. A few faculty members, including the Bouwsmas, came and our close friends the Murchios were invited and they came. I don't know how much it cost each participant--I think it would be a couple hundred, anyway--because Jean and I didn't have to pay. But they had very good food, including champagne one night. The guides took people on hikes, and the staff of the camp was there. And one day was for my students reading papers and being criticized. That was so that they could get grants to go there and make it into a seminar.

Lage: [laughs] I see.

May: But this was seriously done and these were supposed to be put into a festschrift, but that never came about.

Lage: Well, that must have been wonderful.

May: It was. It was, as I say, in all sorts of ways the best party I've ever been to. And when I get depressed, I think about that. [laughs]

Lage: Was it in the fall of the year?

May: Yes.

Lage: It must have been just off season for the Lair of the Bear.

May: Yes, and because I'd retired early, I was perfectly able to go on all the hikes and so forth--much better then than later.

Retirement Years: Academic Symposia and Travels Abroad

Lage: Okay, then let's go on to retirement.

May: All right. My early retirement was very active, indeed. I made it more or less a principle to accept invitations to go places, take part in meetings, give papers, which I had not done before. And it was a time of very extensive and intensive travel, sometimes on academic business.

Jean and I traveled a lot. To celebrate my retirement, we went on a tour of India and then we went to Japan. I went to Japan twice--to a meeting in Japan as well as as a tourist. The meeting was very interesting in Hokkaido because it was Japanese

Americanists--many of those were Christian--and that was disproportionate to the small number of Christians in the population.

Lage: So it was mainly Christians that showed an interest in American culture?

May: Not all, but a lot. And I found how very important this country had been to Japan in the nineteenth century. The university I was at was founded by an American and the missionary influence had been very great, and to a considerable extent we were the country they wanted to emulate. There was a very clear ambivalence in the present. The experiences by both sides at the end of the war were similar--that is, finding that the other people were not nearly as bad as they'd been painted.

Lage: Were these things talked about?

May: Oh, yes, very freely. Then we went to Italy several times and finally spent five months in a village in the wine country in Provence, from winter into spring--February through June.

Lage: Oh, this sounds very lovely.

May: Yes. Not only did we have a fine time--our happiest time overseas ever--

Lage: Now, where was this?

May: At a town called Cairanne, halfway between Orange and Vaison-la-Romaine--a district full of Roman ruins, but a one-crop wine place--not the greatest wine and big over-production, but a nice place to be. We were in a courtyard of a vineyard owner and had visits from most of our friends and family--one daughter and one grandson. But also in Cairanne I finished my book Coming to Terms and the environment may have affected it, I don't know.

Lage: So you did do some work over there.

May: Yes, in addition to a lot of play.

Genesis and Reception of *Coming to Terms*

Lage: Tell me more about Coming to Terms.

May: It's an odd book and oddly received. I had a long struggle with myself and discussions with others whether to write an autobiography or a study of my father and finally decided to do both and play one against the other. A couple of reviewers said that it had achieved a new form. Most reviews were favorable; just one was really hostile.

Lage: In what publication?

May: In the American Scholar. The AHR [American Historical Review] was strongly favorable. The main thing was I had much the best correspondence I'd had from any writing, both from people I knew and people I didn't know, and so that pleased me a whole lot.

Lage: What kinds of comments were drawn?

May: Oh, comments on my father's personality as I'd presented it and comments of people who'd had very similar experiences all the way through. It just goes through really up to the end of the war and with a little bit on the time before I got to Cal and then stops.

Lage: What drew you to write about this?

May: Oh, I don't know--egotism, no doubt. [laughs]

Lage: Was it something you'd been thinking about?

May: Yes, and I'd been thinking about my father a lot. The great advantage I had there is that there was a large cache of family papers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including--coincidences are amazing--funeral services preached over ancestors by exactly the people I'd been working on academically. That had a lot to do with it. And then I'd had some difficulties getting along with my father and wanted to understand him better. I wrote a good deal about my mother, too, in it. The letters were mainly from people who had the same experiences, sometimes remarkably close, or were personally interested in one way or another. However, the University of California Press, which decided to publish it with some internal division, for its own reasons would not publish a paperback when their small edition went out of print. So it's my only book to go out of print quickly.

Lage: That's too bad.

May: And there've been many inquiries about it.

Lage: Did it help you kind of lay to rest some of these troubling things about your father?

May: Oh, very much so. That was what it was about and that's what the title means.

Publication of Collected Essays

May: I published in 1983 a collection of essays called Ideas, Faiths and Feelings [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], which were all things that had been previously published throughout my whole academic career. I don't think I need comment on them because I've commented on some of them elsewhere.

Lage: As we've gone along.

May: Yes. Rather more interesting I think is the book I published in 1991 of essays called The Divided Heart [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], meaning divided between Protestantism and the Enlightenment. All the essays there were recent but one. That was my introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Old Town Folks, which I'd written in 1964 in Ireland--took a great crate of books along. [laughs] I seem to like to write--

Lage: Away from home!

May: --away from home, yes. And one was in a new form for me--an essay on my friend Henry Nash Smith, which was done entirely from interviews. We met once a week or more often, I guess, in the Faculty Club, had a carafe of wine. I asked him questions--did not use a recorder, but scribbled and then wrote it out when I came home. He approved the outcome and, with reservations, so did his sister, who was a little more critical of it. [laughs] But that I had fun with.

Lage: This must have been a nice experience also because you've mentioned this sort of strain that this time period put on your relationship.

May: Yes. That helped to restore it and it was mostly okay up to the time of his very tragic death by automobile accident.

Then in 1993 I published Three Faces of Berkeley.[4] That was really a lighter job and an awful lot of fun. I did research in the Bancroft in the papers of faculty members of Wheeler's Berkeley--

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[4]Three Faces of Berkeley: Competing Ideologies in the Wheeler Era, 1899-1919 (Berkeley, CA: Center for Studies in Higher Education and Institute of Governmental Studies, 1993).

turn of the century. And those are marvelously preserved and indexed, with the letters cross-indexed and everything one could want.

Lage: I think they did a lot more detailed indexing those days.

May: Oh, yes, and introductions and so forth. They were interesting and the period is just before my earliest memories in Berkeley and I remember some of the people who were still alive. I came to the conclusion that there's an awful lot to be done with the rather special social history of Berkeley in that period and later, which is part of what drew people here. It was a very self-contained community, of course, even in my youth up through high school, because it was such a long way to the East that people didn't go very much. Only a few went every year to conventions, so the faculty had their own discussion and poetry clubs and so forth.

Lage: Now, who will carry on that study, I wonder, because I agree with you, it's fascinating.

May: I don't know, but I'd like to talk to somebody who's going to because I have some suggestions.

Friendships, and Avocation as a Painter

May: That's all about my publications. Now, going on about my retirement, I'd like to say a word about my friends--certainly one of the main reasons why my retirement has been on the whole a happy time. Because I've lived here for so long and have a number of really close friends, both in and out of the university. I won't list them, but I'm grateful to them, and for them.

I think one of them, Ken Stampp, deserves a special word. We had always been good colleagues, though differing at times on policy. After we were both retired we started having lunch together about twice a month, and these lunches became times for amazingly frank and helpful discussions. We sometimes start by reciting in detail our various old-age symptoms. The we go on to discuss family problems, politics, personalities, pretty much everything. Ken, on the campus, was often regarded as stiff and uncommunicative, though not by people who knew him really well.

Another thing that's been a help in my retirement has been a fairly serious avocation--painting.

Lage: Yes, tell how you got into that. Or is that a long-time activity for you?

May: Well, that was going long before I retired. It started not with my party at the Lair of the Bear, but a summer visit there when there was a young woman teaching Japanese Sumi painting. And I liked that and I went on experimenting, taking courses. I took a lot of courses, but the best was private study with a man named William Gaw, who was in his eighties at the time, I think. He had been head of the department at Mills and was an awfully good painter. He was also chairman of the committee on art of the San Francisco World's Fair of '39 to '40, which gave the first prize to Braque, which was pretty far out for San Francisco, at that point pretty conservative about the arts.

Lage: Oh, yes.

May: He was himself a very able painter. He had a very fine one-man show shortly before he died. And what he taught me was technique, which isn't taught very much. I had had some classes in oils as well as watercolor.

Lage: Acrylic?

May: Acrylic, yes. But I liked watercolor partly because it was so fast; as opposed to working ten years on a book, you worked two hours and you knew whether you got it or not. And then in another two or three hours it's done. [laughs] At least, that's how it is for me. Or maybe leave it around a week and play with it. And that gave me enormous pleasure.

When I was chairman during the worst of the sixties, I went down once a week to Gaw's very quiet house and garden on Josephine Street and we painted for an hour and he'd say, "Well, they're having quite a time up at the university, aren't they?" That was all. He didn't care about it. And we'd do a fuchsia, or a bottle, or whatever was around, and he also would criticize what I had done between lessons, so that was a lot of fun. Eventually, I had so many around I tried to sell them and had a few shows in a local restaurant and finally one at the university--sold a very few. But I was a serious amateur, I worked pretty hard at it, but I'll always be an amateur, I accept that.

Lage: I gather you still paint quite a lot?

May: Yes, still do, and enjoy it enormously.

Lage: Did you paint while you were in France during that five-month period?

May: Yes.

Lage: That must have been a nice setting.

May: Yes, that was fun. Of course, in that district particularly, it was kind of hard because of the people that have painted there before, Sort of like painting in Venice. I want to mention one more thing about my retirement. I hesitated whether to mention this, but I think I will. About when I got to be eighty, I had a brief but fairly severe depression. I think this happens to a lot of people--in fact, I know it does--right when they realize that they haven't got much more time and it probably won't be very good. And it was for a while semi-incapacitating. My excellent doctor, John Swartzberg, who I got from Ken Stampp, sent me to a very good psychiatrist who works with old people mainly, though also with adolescents. I went a few times and found it very helpful. And I think within six months I was past this.

I say this because I like to tell other people that this happens and that you can get over it. My generation is a little bit unused to getting professional help for that kind of thing. Younger people take it for granted. And I'd recommend it to people. I think it's a good thing. I still go and see the man maybe once a year to talk about myself but also about younger members of my family sometimes, and I find it helpful.

Lage: And you didn't have to take medication?

May: Yes, some medication--not a lot.

Lage: Good, I'm glad you brought it up. I think it's important, too.

May: Yes, all right. Good.

Lage: In finishing, are you going to mention two nice awards: the Berkeley Citation and the OAH [Organization of American Historians] Distinguished Citizen Award?

May: Oh, well, I hadn't particularly planned to. The Berkeley Citation was brought to me by Bill Bouwsma at that Lair of the Bear celebration.

Lage: Oh, that's a very nice time.

May: Oh, yes. And the other startled me but of course was pleasant to get, quite recently.

Lage: In '97.

Reflections on the Craft of History

Lage: Could you talk about your thoughts on history? I found your introduction to Divided Heart, "Faith in History," quite an interesting essay.[5]

May: That introduction is, I think, the main time I tried to write what I thought about the writing of history. A funny thing has happened. It used to be that speculation, discussion about historiography and philosophy of history was pretty rare and rather frowned on. Now it's a roaring river, so much so that I think it's too much. I think that people sometimes write more about historiography than they do about history, which I don't find a good idea. And I think that some people make the mistake of thinking that you have to have figured out exactly what you think about the validity of historical research before you can write, and that means sometimes you have great difficulty in writing at all.

In the seventies and eighties, all the bright graduate students were reading Foucault and some of them Derrida and were questioning whether there was any such thing as any sort of reality, not only to historical research but to all mental processes. It's an old question, as old as Hume, anyway. And that particularly affected literary scholars.

Historians tend to have more confidence in what they're doing because you can be so many kinds of historian. You can be a very objective and old-fashioned diplomatic historian, you can be a social or economic historian. Intellectual history is a little less immune to this sort of problem. And what I try to say there is that you have to take a chance. It's certainly true that you can't write anything that is valid in an objective sense or valid for everybody.

Lage: You can't talk about definitive history of this or that anymore.

May: No. You certainly don't understand your own motivations completely and so you have to do the best you can, assuming there's not going to be any perfection. I've always told people in the seminar trying to write a piece of history to do a lot of research and get it really in their consciousness and then do something else--take a cold bath, go for a long walk, whatever they wanted to do to get away from it--and something will happen. It'll organize itself for the purposes that are needed, not in any definitive way.

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[5]The Divided Heart: Essays on Protestantism and the Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Lage: Something happens almost unconsciously.

May: Yes, something happens. As in the case of the The End of American Innocence, after working a long time on the twenties, I got my sudden intuition--the idea that there was something in common in many fields in the period right before the war, and that a lot of the important changes began then.

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May: I don't want to be pompous here and talk too much about what I have learned because it's a very tentative business. I believe that you have to do a lot of deep research or else the thing just doesn't look right or smell right when you've got it done. You've got to get a feeling for another period, which I think can only be done by intensive work. But unlike what social scientists do, you don't formulate questions and start in to get answers. The questions come, I think, best as you come along, and it comes out differently than you expect. This makes it take a long time, but I think it gives it vitality.

What you have is a person and a historical period or episodes, and these are two equal parts. That is, as a writer of history, you bring to bear all kinds of experience that you've had. Of course, everybody's is different, but my point is here that nothing's ever irrelevant. Anything that is interesting to you or affects you or moves you in any field at all, or just in life itself, has something to do with what goes into your writing of history. To use an example of a pretty empirical historian, say, with Kenneth Stampp, it's not entirely what slavery was like, but how a deep study of it impresses somebody with his particular upbringing and social opinions. It always has to be like that.

One of the good things about the sixties here was that for a while academics were being influenced not by books but by experience with other people. That brings to mind what Emerson, a very scholarly man, said: "Books are for the scholar's idle moments." I wouldn't want to go that far, but this experience of learning a lot from a day's happening was illuminating to whatever you were thinking about.

Lage: Was this acknowledged across the board?

May: I think so, yes. That's all I have to say, at least now, about history.

Lage: Just to think where some of these ideas may have formed themselves, you mentioned that there was a retrospective on The End of American Innocence.

May: I just described there, as I have to you, the process of writing the book at that time.

Lage: How was that book looked at in 1989 after so many years? Did this new generation get something out of it?

May: Two of them said so strongly. One, somewhat older, was a bit more negative. But I got a lot of pretty good feedback--not so much about the subject matter as about the method of the book.

Lage: What would the later generation have done differently?

May: Well, I don't know. It probably would have been less literary. There's a chapter or two where I try to bring in the social history of the period, but it probably would have been less literary. They probably would have been less elitist. This book, rather more I think than my Enlightenment book, is mostly about intellectual leaders, and most of them came from pretty upper-class backgrounds. Some said there are not enough women in the book. There are some, particularly I think I say something about Margaret Sanger that has some interest, and some others. I think I would later have tried harder to find more. Of course, there's not a great deal on black people and one could have said more, but I think they're more important in the middle twenties, probably. I say something about them, but--

Lage: So these are kinds of reflections that you got from them?

May: These are the kinds of things, yes.

Lage: That must have been an interesting experience.

May: Oh, sure. Well, it was. As for other conclusions, I said, you quoted this, that the best periods in my life were the early forties and the sixties. And I think that's because in those periods I was both emotionally and intellectually stimulated more than any other periods.

Lage: And kind of in the same breath--emotional and intellectual--it sounds like.

May: Well, somewhat, yes. Somewhat. Though there was no emotional crisis as big as getting engaged and married in the second period. But that was connected also with other things that were going on then. And both of them rather were for me very political periods. They were the periods I was most politically active. If there's another period when I think I learned something it would be with Phib Group 12 in the war, but that was more experience of relations

with other people and with new circumstances than very specific intellectual stimulation.

Lage: Would these be periods that you would want to have as a continuous occurrence, or are you glad it only happened twice?

May: Couldn't stand it. [laughter] Couldn't stand it.

Lage: Very intense.

May: Yes, that's what I think now.

Lage: Well, I think you've wrapped everything up very beautifully, especially in connection with your essays and books.

May: Well, good. And I thank you.

Transcribed by Amelia Archer
Final Typed by Sara Diamond

TAPE GUIDE--Henry May

Statement of Professor Henry F. May to a press conference on Friday, December 4, 1964.

I am making this statement with the authorization of a group of department chairmen established yesterday in an effort to establish a platform for solution of the present crisis.

It is clear that many people do not understand why faculty members are sympathetic to any extent with the rebellious students, and critical to some extent of the administration. Of course, faculty members do not approve of demands for capitulation, or of invasion of buildings -- courses of action which are contrary to all that we believe in. But the remaining question is why such large numbers of students, including many of our best students, many never involved in politics in the past, are so deeply distressed and upset. Here the faculty, with regret, has no choice but to be critical of the administration.

The whole affair started when privileges long customary -- collection of money, collection of signatures and the like were suddenly withdrawn by the administration. These privileges had before this been used in what seems to me an inoffensive way. At the beginning of the present semester there were many tables at the entrance to the Campus. For instance, there was a Goldwater table, one against Proposition 14; there was a SNCC table, a CORE table, etc. I have heard no complaint of violence or trouble resulting from collection of money or obtaining signatures. In the opinion of students and of many of the faculty, the reasons given for the withdrawal of these privileges were unconvincing and contradictory. It was said that student political action was contrary to State law, a statement with which the law professors I know do not agree. It was stated that the reason for the action was to promote an easier flow of traffic and the like. In any case, it was this action which led to the initial protest, culminating in the drastic incident of October 2. (I might say that I refer here to the incident in which students prevented an arrest.) To prevent violence, a settlement was negotiated which involved, among other things, the setting up of a tripartite student-faculty administration committee which discussed these problems for a long time. These negotiations broke down, and the faculty members of the group made public their recommendations for new rules governing student political behavior. The efforts of the faculty members in this respect were praised by the President. At the same time, another faculty group, pursuant to the same agreement, made recommendations concerning punishment of students arising out of this incident. At a Regents' meeting on November 20, the recommendations of both these groups were accepted in part, though not entirely, and at a subsequent meeting of the Academic Senate the majority of the faculty upheld the administration, and defeated an attempt to take enforcement of rules concerning political behavior from the administration and give it to the faculty. At this point, with the announcement of the new rules, the Free Speech Movement was dwindling and losing student support quite obviously. As a result, its leadership was getting more and more radical as the more reasonable students withdrew. However, during Thanksgiving week-end it seemed to most of us that peace was returning, and that it would be possible to go forward together under the new rules.

Then last Monday, the administration announced its decision to press for disciplinary action against students for actions taken during the crisis two months before. I am told that this decision was made against the urging of several highly respected members of the faculty. While technically the action did not violate previous agreements, it seemed to be contrary to the spirit of the agreement of October 2, and subsequent negotiations. These seemed to imply that there have been mistakes on all sides, and that punishments would be minimal.

Understandably, I think, the students felt tricked, and it is at this point that the biggest demonstrations took place which had ever happened. The leadership of the FSM, reassured by this new support, made some rough threats to enter Sproul Hall. No measures were taken to prevent this action. It happened, and the Governor called in the police. Now the situation is a tragic one, and the University seems almost in danger of disintegration. The faculty feels, as it said in an emergency meeting yesterday, that the new rules should be enforced, that punitive action against violations of University rules in the past should be called off, and that while the administration should continue to deal with violations of rules, a process of appeal to a faculty committee should be established. I might add that such a faculty committee might well be stricter in the enforcement of these rules than the administration, particularly if any disruption of teaching were involved No settlement is possible which does not take account of the strong emotions now influencing our students and many of our faculty.

December 4, 1964

Final summary statement at the end of a press conference today.

All of the faculty speakers in this conference have said that they are deeply critical of the FSM and its leadership. I want to make clear that this is not said in order to appease hostile sentiment. All of us here would have said the same thing at any time in the past two months. We are, however, equally critical of the administration from which we expect more firmness, and in its statements, to put it mildly, more consistency than has been shown.

I said earlier in answer to a question that I believe most of our students are critical of the FSM and its leadership. To avoid misunderstanding, may I add that most are also critical of the administration. As a purely private guess, I would say that about 300 are with the FSM through thick and thin. About 1,200 obviously sided with the FSM after the announcement this past Monday concerning retroactive punishments. Since the arrests, many more are involved in the present unrest. There is also a minority of students, I believe a small one, articulately hostile to the FSM, and pro-administration. Most, I believe, are bewildered, distressed, and in a state of extreme emotion.

May I say a word about what I believe to be the underlying causes of these sad and disturbing events. The first is the breakdown of communications on a large campus which is undertaking the immensely difficult task of trying to be at the same time a first-rate university and a mass institution. It is also part of a new kind of state-wide university made up of a number of equal campuses. This means that in many points it is not clear what level of the administration bears responsibility for a given action.

The second underlying cause is the emergence of new categories of political action on the borderline of legality. I believe that most of us on the faculty would agree that sit-ins in a restaurant which has peculiar racial standards are legal. We would agree that sit-ins undertaken in order to obtain the acceptance of political demands are not. Between these two categories there is a borderline which is very difficult for students as well as for other people to understand.

July 1999

INTERVIEWS ON THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Documenting the history of the University of California has been a responsibility of the Regional Oral History Office since the Office was established in 1954. Oral history memoirs with University-related persons are listed below. They have been underwritten by the UC Berkeley Foundation, the Chancellor's Office, University departments, or by extramural funding for special projects. The oral histories, both tapes and transcripts, are open to scholarly use in The Bancroft Library. Bound, indexed copies of the transcripts are available at cost to manuscript libraries.

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Centennial History Project, 1954-1960. 329 pp.
Includes interviews with George P. Adams, Anson Stiles Blake, Walter C. Blasdale, Joel H. Hildebrand, Samuel J. Holmes, Alfred L. Kroeber, Ivan M. Linforth, George D. Louderback, Agnes Fay Morgan, and William Popper. (Bancroft Library use only.)

Thomas D. Church, Landscape Architect. Two volumes, 1978, 803 pp.
Volume I: Includes interviews with Theodore Bernardi, Lucy Butler, June Meehan Campbell, Louis De Monte, Walter Doty, Donn Emmons, Floyd Gerow, Harriet Henderson, Joseph Howland, Ruth Jaffe, Burton Litton, Germano Milano, Miriam Pierce, George Rockrise, Robert Royston, Geraldine Knight Scott, Roger Sturtevant, Francis Violich, and Harold Watkin.
Volume II: Includes interviews with Maggie Baylis, Elizabeth Roberts Church, Robert Glasner, Grace Hall, Lawrence Halprin, Proctor Mellquist, Everitt Miller, Harry Sanders, Lou Schenone, Jack Stafford, Goodwin Steinberg, and Jack Wagstaff.

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Volume I: *The Work of Walter Steilberg and Julia Morgan, and the Department of Architecture, UCB, 1904-1954.*
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Includes interviews with Mary Grace Barron, Kirk O. Rowlands, Norma Willer, Quintilla Williams, Catherine Freeman Nimitz, Polly Lawrence McNaught, Hettie Belle Marcus, Bjarne Dahl, Bjarne Dahl, Jr., Morgan North, Dorothy Wormser Coblentz, and Flora d'Ille North.

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Robert Gordon Sproul Oral History Project. Two volumes, 1986, 904 pp. Includes interviews with thirty-five persons who knew him well: Horace M. Albright, Stuart LeRoy Anderson, Katherine Connick Bradley, Franklin M. "Dyke" Brown, Ernest H. Burness, Natalie Cohen, Paul A. Dodd, May Dornin, Richard E. Erickson, Walter S. Frederick, David P. Gardner, Marion Sproul Goodin, Vernon L. Goodin, Louis H. Heilbron, Robert S. Johnson, Clark Kerr, Adrian A. Kragen, Mary Blumer Lawrence, Stanley E. McCaffrey, Dean McHenry, Donald H. McLaughlin, Kendric Morrish, Marion Morrish, William Penn Mott, Jr., Herman Phleger, John B. deC. M. Saunders, Carl W. Sharsmith, John A. Sproul, Robert Gordon Sproul, Jr., Wallace Sterling, Wakefield Taylor, Robert M. Underhill, Eleanor L. Van Horn, Garff B. Wilson, and Pete L. Yzaguirre.

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