April 27, 2010

New Literary History Honors Founder Cohen with Tribute Issue

When Ralph Cohen came to the University of Virginia in 1967, he had goals beyond teaching. The University’s plans to celebrate its 150th anniversary provided the literary scholar to reach his goal of starting a new literary journal.

New Literary History, which is published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, debuted in 1969 and flourished under Cohen’s leadership for 40 years. He announced his retirement last year and has turned over the reins of the journal to colleague Rita M. Felski. The final issue of the 41st volume will serve as a tribute to its founder, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor Emeritus at Virginia.

“We invited Ralph’s friends, many of whom count amongst the most distinguished scholars in the profession, to reflect on the intellectual impact of the journal that he founded and to pay tribute to his accomplishments as an editor, scholar, and teacher,” Felski says in the introduction to the issue.

NLH has made significant contributions to the field of literary criticism around the world. In 1999, it became the first English language journal translated into Chinese. Twenty essays and one interview in the tribute issue help provide an in-depth look at the career and accomplishments of Cohen. Contributors include current University of Virginia President John T. Casteen III.

“His longevity as editor of this important journal is a testament not only to his personal commitment and his intellectual and physical stamina, but also to his conviction that ideas should be constantly reassessed and renewed,” Casteen wrote.

In an interview with Jeffrey J. Williams, editor of the minnesota review and a Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, Cohen says he wanted NLH to mirror his educational philosophy when he launched the journal.

“I was interested in establishing a collaborative journal, one in which it would be possible for scholars who presented particular views to have the views discussed, challenged, and debated within the context of a single issue,” he says. “I wanted a journal that made clear the collaborative nature of scholarship.”

That effort clearly succeeded as the journal has received a number of awards. Cohen was most recently honored by the Council of Editors of Learned Journals with the Distinguished Literary Editor Award last December.

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