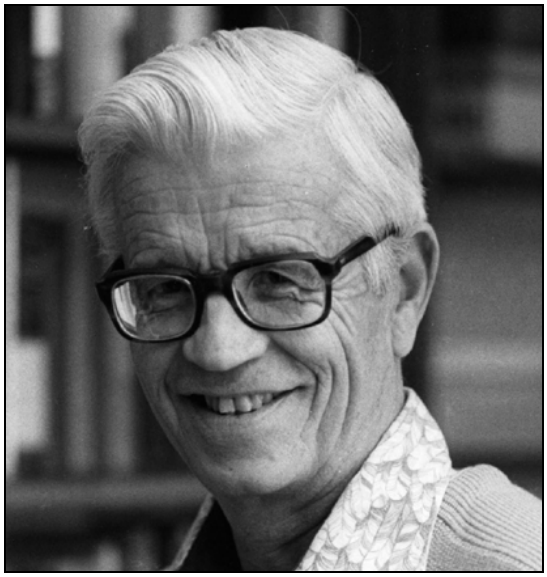

J. KENT CLARK
(1917–2008)

INTERVIEWED BY
SHELLEY ERWIN

January 24–February 17, 1989

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Abstract
An interview in three sessions, January-February 1989, with J. Kent Clark, emeritus professor of literature. Professor Clark, a specialist in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English politics and literature, received his BA at Brigham Young University in 1939 and his PhD at Stanford. In this interview, he discusses his Mormon background in Utah and his early interest in musical comedy. Graduate school at Stanford was interrupted by World War II; he eventually finished his dissertation (on Jonathan Swift) and received his PhD in 1950, by which time he had already joined Caltech's Humanities Division (1947) as an English instructor. He recalls the intellectual character of the division in the late forties under the chairmanship of Clinton Judy and the high caliber of the literature and history courses. Recollections of colleagues Harvey Eagleson, Roger Stanton, George McMinn, Beach Langston, William Huse, Hallett Smith. He talks about the extremely popular musical comedies he wrote and produced with Elliot Davis on campus for many years, beginning in 1954. Recollections of Caltech president Lee DuBridge and of the changes in the late 1960s as the division became the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences; greater emphasis on research and specialization, as opposed to teaching and survey

courses. Professor Clark also recalls his stint as Caltech's "culture czar" and the fate of the arts program instituted in the late sixties. He discusses the admission of women (1970) and the Jenijoy La Belle tenure case, and he concludes with a discussion of his work on biographies of the late-seventeenth-century figures (and brothers) Goodwin and Thomas Wharton

Administrative information

Access

The interview is unrestricted.

Preferred citation

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH J. KENT CLARK

BY SHELLEY ERWIN

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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ERWIN: Dr. Clark, let's begin with a little bit about your family background. You were born September 29, 1917, in either Utah or Idaho.

CLARK: Well, it would almost take a surveyor to tell which one. We were on the Utah side, maybe by three or four hundred yards, of the Idaho border. We got our mail in Ridgedale, Idaho. The nearest settlement of any recognizable sort was a place called Blue Creek in Utah—"Blue Crick", incidentally, in Utah. No one ever said "creek"; you'd be drummed out of the corps. And my birth certificate is "unnamed male" Clark and listed as Howell, Utah, which is another little hamlet, maybe four or five miles away. But anyway, I was born on what they called a "dry farm," that is, a no irrigated farm—a ranch, actually, about a half a square mile up on that border. My father was a wheat farmer.

Now, my folks were all Mormons. Both the Clarks and the Kents were Yankees who came to New England in the seventeenth century, and they all came west in the Mormon migrations before the railroad; that is to say, they crossed the plains. And both my Kent and my Clark grandfathers were polygamists—three wives apiece—which seems heroic to me. One is plenty. [Laughter] Anyway, they survived all of this.

ERWIN: So they came in covered wagons.

CLARK: Yes. In fact, my great grand-father Clark was a fine wheelwright. Besides everything else, he was also an expert with Indian languages. He went on the Salmon River [Idaho]

expedition, learned to talk Shoshone, and then he helped settle Cache Valley, and was finally sent out to Vernal. And when the federal marshals came to get him as a polygamist, the Indians rescued him [laughter]—and took the marshals' horses, and sent them home to Salt Lake.

But by 1917, the frontier was largely gone, although it was still a horse-and-buggy era—except my father, on the frontier of things, had a Chalmers car, a Model-T, and all that sort of stuff.

Then, Dad got bashed in the post-World War I agricultural depression, when the bottom fell out of the wheat market. He became a wheat buyer for the Globe Mills based in Ogden. This would be roughly about 1922. And we moved into Brigham City about '22 or '23. So I actually went to grade school and junior high school in Brigham City, Utah. This was a terrific break because Brigham City had tremendous schools.

ERWIN: How big a city was it?

CLARK: About 5,000. And in Utah, that's a metropolis. Then, as Dad became general wheat buyer for the whole Globe Mills, for the whole system—and a sales manager, too—we had to move to Ogden, which was then about 40,000. And I finished up at Ogden High School, which was also a terrific school. So, I had a wonderful academic education to start out with, since I was always a bookish, literary type.

ERWIN: When you say always, do you mean from very early on?

CLARK: Yes. Well, I didn't realize I was actually going to go into literature professionally, but I was always tremendously interested. I was also good at math, so I was just a good student across the board.

I went to college straight off—went to Brigham Young University, which was a marvelous place. It was a funny, little liberal arts school at that time of about 1800 people. You could know everybody on campus. And in those depression years—we're talking '35 to '39 now—believe me, we were close; people who pray together, stay together. We weren't religious, but we prayed for money to stay together. [Laughter] And there was a tremendous faculty. And the reason I became an English type was there were two particular professors, simply

marvelous—a man named Parley Christensen, who loved Milton and Shakespeare and Chaucer, and who had the ability to impart that enthusiasm. Of course, he also had the artists themselves. And the other one was Karl Young. And I think Karl, with a name like Young, was probably a descendant of Brigham Young, but I'm not quite sure.

At any rate, again, it was a fine education as far as a literary education. I was tremendously well prepared when I went to graduate school at Stanford. BYU did two things well. The students sang and danced, and it was great for show business. The Mormons, unlike the Baptists, simply love to dance; they love music and dance, and they've always been sharp at it. And they had to entertain themselves; they were out there on the frontier with professional entertainment miles away, so they had this tradition. And if you're at all extroverted, and if you can sing, and if you don't care what people think about you, you can be in show biz. [Laughter] Don Searle, a wonderful wit, the best I've ever known, Johnny Utvich and I were a trio, to put on skits and shows, some long, some short. We did a lot of that. And that led me to go down to Bryce Canyon and get jobs for Don and me—not for Johnny, because he wasn't at BYU that year. So the last two summers of my college life, I was a bellhop and a program director at Bryce Canyon, where they put on shows every night. That is how I got the background for doing shows for Caltech. By the time I was nineteen years old, I had been booed by experts. [Laughter] And I had been hissed. No one actually hit me with anything, but Don, John, and I were show biz veterans.

ERWIN: I just wonder why you didn't go straight to Hollywood, instead of Caltech.

CLARK: Well, because I was even more of an egghead than a ham, and I never considered entertainment serious business. I was always, and still am, really, an egghead. You do shows for fun, but you do research and teaching for serious, but never solemn [purposes]. If it's solemn instruction, it's worthless.

One other thing. It was at BYU I met my wife, whose name was Ora Christensen, but I nicknamed her Christie, which she then became known as.

So we went down to Stanford together. And there, again, I was tremendously lucky. Stanford, just before World War II, was small. The total student enrollment was only about 5,000. But again, it was the tag end of the Depression. The year I got there, there were only

seventeen graduate students in the Stanford English department. They had a marvelous battery of instructors; and now we're talking about very big name folk, like Hardin Craig, who taught Shakespeare, and was one of the great Shakespearean editors, as you probably know. So it meant that our classes were virtually tutorials. I should say they would average maybe half a dozen to ten people, done all on a seminar basis, all face to face. And I was even luckier in the sense that William Dinsmore Briggs, the head of the English department, besides being a fine literary scholar, was a tremendously learned philosopher. He was the only man I ever met who talked over my head. [Laughter] And I thought, "Well, I'll have to learn philosophy, too." So I minored in philosophy. And there, there probably weren't more than ten—I doubt that there were ten majors in philosophy. And again, the seminars were small. I was also lucky because the four major professors there all held different philosophical points of view. We had a sort of a neo-Aristotelian realist, we had a logical positivist, we had a pragmatist, and we had a Kantian. They held all of the positions. They were all wonderful, personable men. And, of course, the subject matter is absolutely fascinating, from the pre—Socratic philosophers up to Bergson and William James. So, while I was in the business of getting a literary Ph.D., I was also getting a lot of philosophical background, which was tremendously helpful.

Stanford at that time required three languages. I'd already had French; I had to take German and then Latin. The graduate English program was heavily weighted toward philology, that is to say, Old English and Middle English, and so on. But the classes were absolutely fascinating. And again, the place being small, you got that undivided attention from your instructors, who were first—class. And also, the sort of tight camaraderie and mutual support. That's like people who are shot over get. [Laughter]

That combination, incidentally, of philosophy and literature essentially determined my research career, and also my—for want of a better term—serious writing, because I decided to do a doctoral dissertation on Jonathan Swift, liking satirists and wits and folk of that sort. And having gone through philosophers like Hobbes and Locke and the seventeenth—century people, I already had a considerable amount of philosophic background. So when I chose to write my dissertation on Swift's political theory (Swift became propagandist for the Tory party, you know; the first two books of *Gulliver's Travels,* incidentally, are a defense of Tory policy)—anyway, when I took up that interest, I already had enough background to handle it with some degree of competence.

The Stanford experience was fun in all senses. We were all kids struggling along, but a very companionable group. And, of course, it was there I did my first teaching. I started teaching bonehead English. And incidentally, you never know grammar until you teach it. [Laughter] Rhetoric I'm really talking about. I remember we used to use the old Wooley and Scott rhetoric. Incidentally, not to leap too far ahead, when I first came to Caltech, the first term of Caltech English, which was reading and writing, was a good deal like the first term of Stanford—not bonehead, although we had some. So I got my start there teaching.

ERWIN: This was interrupted by the war.

CLARK: Yes. The war came along, and I was lucky enough to stay in Stanford until I could get my doctor's orals done, but I couldn't get my dissertation done. So then I took the three and a half years out in the United States Army.

ERWIN: I'd like to talk about your coming to Caltech. You came in 1947. And my question is, why does someone as a humanist find Caltech an attractive place?

CLARK: Well, when I came to Caltech, I came as a stopgap measure. I really didn't intend to stay here, because I had picked out my doctoral dissertation—Swift's politics—and the best research library in the Western Hemisphere is the Huntington Library. But there were a couple of other factors involved. One, I would still be working on my doctoral dissertation if I'd stayed at Stanford the way it was. Stanford, which is a private institution, too, didn't hit the financial jackpot for several years after the war. It had expanded with students on the GI Bill, and in general, it had expanded on the blood of instructors and assistant professors. The classes got huge, and salaries were unbelievably low. They hadn't made that postwar jump, and there was the postwar inflation. I taught the year I got back—'46 and '47—at Stanford, but it cost Christie and me the savings I'd made during the army. And I had done little more than collect a bibliography for my doctoral dissertation.

Caltech offered me once and a half as much money, which was still a pittance as things went then. But more importantly, it offered me classes of twenty, instead of classes of thirty. And if you're teaching composition, and at least one theme a week, 500 words a week, you figure that

out. [Laughter] It's a lot of work. So those were the main reasons.

But then, when I got here, I found things were—in a way, I had sort of stumbled, it was like throwing a junkie into a boxcar full of heroin. For one thing, the Huntington Library was even better than I thought and richer in resources, and it was simply amazing what you could find in the pamphlet literature of the seventeenth century. If it's printed and it happened before 1800, it's probably in the Huntington Library. So there was all that. The facilities for work. You have your own table or cubicle. You're immune to telephones; you can't be reached with a subpoena. [Laughter] So, what it meant was that I could do a tremendous amount of work there. But also, simply the quality of the Caltech students intrigued me. In literature, they weren't as well prepared as the Stanford students, but they were brighter. Please don't let me defame Stanford students. But the average Caltech student, as silly as this sounds, was higher on the verbal aptitude scale.

ERWIN: To some extent, was it a matter of sophistication perhaps?

CLARK: Oh, no. Stanford kids were five times as sophisticated. [Laughter] No, just raw I.Q. And one other thing about them that I loved, and still love, is, by God, they're students. Many of them are socially maladroit, and the only thing they could possibly pride themselves on is their brains. But they take a job and put all those watts on it and interesting things happen. And believe me, there's really no substitute for that sheer intelligence. You can pick up the background. And they asked interesting questions. And another thing, we had a school psychologist around here for many years, called John Weir, a wonderful guy. He has a theory—it's an engaging theory—that there is a positive correlation between sheer I.Q. and being, quote, "nice"—that is, being moral, responsible, and all that sort of thing. Well, we can all think of some hideous exceptions. In fact, I would say it's an axiom that to be truly bitched up, you've got to have an I.Q. of 150. But on the average, that ability to see connections is just wonderful. So the students were a delight to teach, they really were. And, let's say, you tackle a Caltech group with Shakespeare, it takes them three or four weeks to learn to read Elizabethan language fluently, but they will have fun and they will do it. And you get a response; you have all those watts watting, all those lights flashing on and off. [Laughter] And if you can't teach Shakespeare here, you simply can't teach, and you might as well forget it.

Then there was another thing. And that was that Millikan and company, as I just got through explaining to my English friend in a letter, were trying to bridge the cultural gap—the two cultures—long before C. P. Snow. They wanted their scientists to be literate. This is tremendously important. Not literary, you understand, but literate—to read and write. In fact, the ideal—and it's still a darn good one—is to be able to read anything that's written, whether it's written in mathematical language or in English. In England, the class system is such that people who are engineers and so on are riffraff, and decisions are made by cultured gentlemen. While here, an engineer can be president of the United states—usually not a very good one. [Laughter] And the founders of Caltech were bright enough to realize that their kids were not being trained, by and large, as ivory—tower, Nobel—Prize types, but to run corporations and so on.

Anyway, a large amount of emphasis was placed on humanities subjects. Roughly twenty to twenty-five percent of the curriculum was devoted to them. Sometimes students started with a hideous handicap in trying to be not merely literate and literary, but also sort of civilized, able to express themselves, and really, to get an education. I'll never forget Paul Eaton's wisecrack. He said, "I didn't have a college education, I graduated from MIT." [Laughter] And that's exactly what Millikan and company didn't want here.

ERWIN: So MIT, for example, did not have—

CLARK: They eventually came over to the Caltech system. There was the feeling that something had to be done to keep from turning out ivory—tower incompetents.

Now, the problem is, if you have the sort of temperament that makes you an ivory—tower incompetent, you'll have a lot of trouble adjusting to social and humanities studies. There's a terrific gap between the ideal and the actual. And that's what I've made comedy about for twenty—five years, like the automatic strike in baseball. Nevertheless, the feeling that something should be done, and [something] systematic should be done, meant that everybody got at Caltech two complete years of English. And that's a lot more than they get if they were non-English majors, let's say, at Stanford or Harvard. And every kid that went through Caltech had a term of Shakespeare. And that was unheard of elsewhere. I mean, the definition of a Caltech graduate practically is a guy who could quote Harry Hotspur, *Henry the Fourth*, I. [Laughter]

Anyway, that was fun. Now, the disadvantage is that the whole educational system in

those days was lockstep. You didn't get any choice at all; you were put in sections, and you went through with your section. Everything was handed out. The freshman year was prescribed. And the number of required courses was such that you were apt to—what's that wonderful statement, "What is permitted is compulsory." [Laughter] So there was a certain lockstep quality. And what we started with, then, in the freshman year, as far as English was concerned, was essentially, you took a quarter of straight composition, just as you would do at Stanford. Then you took the basic genres of literature—let's say, the short story, poetry, and so forth. And then the junior year you took more high—powered stuff. You did Shakespeare, and then you went on to people like Swift and so on, the Enlightenment, and the Victorians. It got up fairly modern, but it was basically a historical approach.

As the years went by—and I'm talking now, as we went from the forties into the fifties—a couple of great things began to happen. One was, Caltech became so popular, and it was so heavily oversubscribed, that it would get, say, 1500 applicants for 180 seats. This meant that they could pick people even higher up on the verbal aptitude scale. And then, concurrently with that, high school preparation got so much better that, really, we were wasting the time of two-thirds of the kids, by giving them a whole term on straight composition. We still required a lot of writing, you understand. We still worked it over, but we didn't stop and take a term to explain what sentences and paragraphs and things like that are. So this allowed us to redesign the freshman history and English course, and I did most of that myself. What we did, we started the freshman year in literature with the beginning of the Enlightenment, the post-Shakespearean period, with Sir Francis Bacon, and Descartes and company, through Swift. And we started the history at the same time. This would be the history of modern Europe.

ERWIN: So that you were in tandem.

CLARK: Exactly. And sometimes we had what was called "double jeopardy" essays—when you handed in a paper you were graded by both your history and English professors. It was unconstitutional, but it was a fine education. And the literature and history came up to the present. So by the time students got through their freshman year, they had a pretty fair idea, not only of what people were thinking and feeling, but also what political events were happening. We had *Readings in Rationalism*, a sort of basic philosophy textbook, for the first term. And then

the second term we took the romantic reaction— the romantics and the Victorians. And then finally the twentieth century. So we got everybody up to World War II.

ERWIN: Could we talk a little bit about the people in what was then called the Humanities Division.

CLARK: Oh, yes, that's about fifty times as interesting as the curriculum. [Laughter]

Well, when I came down to Caltech, I came into an atmosphere of marvelously cultured gentlemen. Now, you don't see those anymore; there just aren't any. [Laughter] Clinton Judy, who essentially founded humanities at Caltech and organized it, was what his friend George McMinn called "abysmally learned." That's almost an oxymoron; it's wonderful. He did not have a Ph.D.—I think he had an Oxford M.A., which is probably better. He was just tremendously well read. Now, some of the things he read you can see in the Judy Library to this day, and I don't think the Judy Library has a third of the books of his library in his house. It was stacked to the ceiling with bookshelves. But at any rate, Clinton Judy exuded not only learning—he wasn't in the slightest stuffy, you understand—but the attitudes of a fine, cultured, broad, receptive mind. I don't think he ever dreamed of going to the Huntington Library and writing a research paper on anything. Mostly, the books he wanted he bought. I'm sure he had a bookseller in London, one in New York, and so on. And he also helped to stock our humanities library. He was at retirement age, practically, when I came. About the last thing he did was hire me and Beach Langston. And then I guess he said, "That's enough. I quit." [Laughter]

ERWIN: He had been at Caltech since 1910.

CLARK: That's right. At any rate, to get back to his classroom teaching, people said he was marvelous, and he must have been. At least he charmed all his faculty, and that takes a lot. [Laughter]

The next man, in order of age, was a magnificent guy named George McMinn. George had graduated from Brown; he'd done advanced work at Berkeley, if I'm not mistaken. He'd never taken a Ph.D. But he, too, was abysmally learned. And he wouldn't thank me for saying this, but he was a doll. [Laughter] Just a great man. He practically took over and sponsored

Beach and me. He was good to younger professors, and he was great fun to talk to. Now, one of the things he did—and this shows you the age—was to teach a popular course called "Literature of the Bible." And toward the end of his life, he started collecting materials for a book on the poetic books of the Bible. I'm sorry that he didn't live long enough to finish it off and see it published. don't know anyone that's competent to handle it, or would have handled it in quite that way.

And along with George, there were two men that I almost thought of as a tandem—Harvey Eagleson and Roger Stanton, both bachelors.

ERWIN: Was that true of Clinton Judy and George McMinn?

CLARK: No, Clinton was a bachelor, but George was married and had a son. But the first reception at Clinton Judy's I'll never forget. I'd just come down from Stanford; I'd just been hired. And as I walked up to Roger and Harvey to be introduced, they were talking about preserving kumquats. I almost turned around and went back to Stanford. I thought, what kind of worms am I squirming in? [Laughter] But Harvey was probably the most popular classroom teacher, with the possible exception of Dick Feynman, who ever taught at Caltech. The kids just loved him. And one of the reasons was that Harvey gave no concessions to science; he thought it was a bore and not worth any educated person's time. On the other hand, he loved literature, and he liked the kids, who nicknamed him "Doc". He was Resident Associate at Blacker House for many years, and he gave what he called Doc's party. And then for a few favored kids, when he moved to South Pasadena, he had a seminar. And they would not only come, he couldn't get them out. He had an alumni seminar, too.

Also, he was the interviewer—they used to send him to interview prospective students. And his admittees had a higher rate of survival than those of any other interviewer at Caltech. As I say, he despised science, but he could pick prospective scientists.

And this reminds me—and this is a large parenthesis—speaking of interviewing, Caltech has had some notorious creeps, I'm happy to report. But perhaps none as creepy as Bernon Mitchell, boy defector, who later left to Russia with all the secrets of our codes up in the Northwest. Bernon came from Northern California and was interviewed by Foster Strong—this would be in the early fifties. Well, you know the Caltech kids are individuals themselves, and

they are as tolerant as you can possibly be. They know loners; they dig loners—they understand this. But Bernon was in a class by himself. People sort of shrank back from him. He had *creep* stamped on his forehead. He was as queer sexually as a three-dollar bill, and he was practically dyslexic. But he was supposed to be a mathematical genius.

ERWIN: Is that what got him here?

CLARK: Well, yes, but not for long. At any rate, he stumbled into my English class, and the kids used to leave a chair between him and them. He was an execrable student in literature. Anyway, he was gone at the end of the year—one of Foster's mistakes.

Many years later—this would be 1959, I guess—I got a call. "Dr. Clark?" "Yes." "This is so-and-so from Air Force intelligence. Do you know Bernon Mitchell?" [Laughter] When I said something like, "How could anyone forget Bernon Mitchell," he said, "May I come talk to you about him?" So he came, and we had a pleasant discussion. The intelligence officer wasn't in the organization that had hired that hopeless clod in the first place. How anyone in his right mind would trust Bernon with anything sensitive, or anything at all, is beyond me. It was beyond the intelligence officer, too. And I talked to him just like I'm talking to you. At any rate, Bernon and his lover—a man named Martin—defected and compromised enough secrets to last the Russians for ten years.

About a year afterwards, the intelligence officer called me again. He said, "Dr. Clark, do you remember me? May I see you? I think you'll enjoy hearing the sequel to the story." I said, "Sure, come on over." When he came to the office, he said, "Well, I want you to know that Martin, Mitchell's compatriot, just hates the Soviet Union. And within six months he was screaming to get back, but we'll never let him back; he's there, he's in the Soviet Union for life. But your friend Bernon has made a wonderful adjustment. He's married a lovely girl, a lesbian, and they're as happy as two pigs in the sun." [Laughter]

Anyway, that's a long digression from Harvey's ability to select students to the adventures of Bernon Mitchell. Harvey would never in the world have picked anyone with *creep* written on his forehead. And, incidentally, the psychotic types simply can't succeed here. There's a winnowing process that goes on.

Begin Tape 1, Side 2

CLARK: Well, we're back to discussing the people. Harvey, as I said, was just immensely popular. He was a man of strong opinions. He was often wrong, but he was never confused. And his buddy, Roger Stanton, was another very highly civilized type. I think they both went to Princeton. And you would have picked them out as Ivy League types, whether they actually were or not. But Roger became head of the library system around Caltech, and he was a good man. He was extremely well read. He, too, like Harvey, never thought of writing a research paper. I think they may have edited a textbook at one time, but it would never have crossed their minds to write a biography or something of the sort.

The other member of the Old Guard whom I loved was Bill Huse. Bill was married; his wife Eleanor was a very learned and fine lady who worked for Vroman's [a Pasadena bookstore] for years. And Bill was extremely witty. His specialty was the eighteenth century—people like Dr. Johnson and Swift and company, so we had a lot in common there. But in general, he was just an extremely broad—gauged and companionable sort of man with a good deal of character and a good deal of steel in his character. And he, too, got along fine with the Caltech students.

So these gentlemen had already set the model for teaching excellence—not for research or anything of that sort. And also, a model of manners. People cared about manners in those days. I'll never forget Jim Adams, house president of Fleming in 1955, saying, "I can't worry about their manners. I'm trying to get their faces out of the soup." [Laughter]

This reminds me, incidentally, that I think Fleming House, of which I was once a faculty associate, has the record for speed in finishing a dinner. Until you've eaten dinner in one of those student houses, you don't know what fast eating means. At any rate, Bill Huse was the last of that great triumvirate. And they did a tremendous amount for Caltech, just as models of civilization.

So I belong to the postwar age. And I came with the next wave, with my dear friend, Beach Langston. I've written a memoir about Beach in *Engineering and Science*.

We had people like Mel Brockie—a wonderful economist and great wit, great maker of martinis, great aficionado of the piano. He simply worshipped [Vladimir] Horowitz and people of that sort.

ERWIN: You haven't mentioned Hallett Smith.

CLARK: He didn't come until '49. I had met Hallett; he had been at the Huntington Library. He was then head of Williams College, before he became division head in '49. Earlier, in 1947, we got two new historians at the same time, who came down with me from Stanford, but I hadn't met them there—Henry McCreery and George Tanham. And slightly prior to that the division got Rod Paul and John Schutz, two more historians. So they were beginning to reorganize for the later push. It was in '49 that Judy retired and that Hallett took over.

Well, I hardly have to tell you how good Hallett is. He is of the next generation of scholars, where they're scholars and critics, as well as marvelous teachers. They're the hyperactive, kinetic, and productive types. And Hallett, as you know, is one of the world's foremost Shakespeare scholars, as well as a general expert in the Renaissance period. And Hallett wanted to hire, as much as possible, people on his model—that is to say, the combination of scholar—teacher. As the various people retired, he tried to fill their positions with people of that next generation's stamp.

ERWIN: Let's steer the conversation to your own interests in the early fifties. I'd like to have you talk about your novel [*The King's Agent]*, because you must have hatched the idea of that pretty early.

CLARK: Well, what happened was, in a way it grew out of my doctoral dissertation and my interest in Swift. I became an expert in the period, writing that dissertation. I'd already gone through the philosophy—and to write on politics, you have to know the history; history is the raw material of politics. So I became expert in the period of Swift's lifetime, from 1667 to 1740. And this is a tremendously exciting period because it's the period of the English Revolution and the establishment of principles, incidentally, on which the American Revolution *is* based—people like John Locke and company. And if you're interested in values, and of course that's what humanities study is, believe me, you have enough conflict to last you. So there was a theme ready-made. James II was fatal to the divine right of kings. He was such a jerk that they threw him out of England and decided that God couldn't be that much of a practical joker. And this essentially killed the theory, though it took a long time—it took till 1745—before the last stupid Scotsman died for Bonnie Prince Charlie, but essentially the theory was gone. England grew up;

Englishmen became adult in that period. The government of England was too important to be left to Stuarts.

At any rate, the Tories could have saved their theory—the divine right theory. After all, Louis was doing beautifully in France, and the French monarchy was going to last another hundred years. If some unscrupulous Tory had had the good sense to ram a sword through James II's heart, then the doctrine of hereditary right could have gone on, and England could have had divine kings at least for a hundred more years. But no one did this. The only people who conspired against James were malevolent Whigs, who didn't believe the theory in the first place. [Laughter]

ERWIN: So the idea is that essentially a loyalist, in order to save the monarchy, would have assassinated the king, which is almost paradoxical.

CLARK: Yes, but it's the only thing that would have worked. So, once I had that idea, then I worked out a plot where a loyal Tory gets the idea with the help of a conniving Whig girlfriend, and he's going to do it. And the fact that he fails costs about a million lives, because if someone had killed James and William had inherited the throne peaceably, England could have avoided the whole War of the Spanish Succession. So you get into great moral problems. The man (my protagonist) simply can't make himself do it when it comes right down to it.

ERWIN: Were you the only person here at Caltech writing fiction at that time?

CLARK: Well, I don't know of anyone else that was doing it. Not that anyone had anything against fiction, but they were so busy surviving with whatever they were doing that they weren't writing novels. So I was lucky with the novel. Scribner's published it, and it got a couple of book club adoptions and made me independently wealthy for about three weeks. [Laughter]

ERWIN: You never said the name of it.

CLARK: It's called *The King's Agent*.

ERWIN: And this was published in 1958.

CLARK: Yes, which was the same year that Elliot [Davis] and I did *Take Your Medicine*, which the Theater Americana produced, and we had so much fun with.

So, all through the fifties, I was doing two things. Incidentally, I did publish a scholarly article on Swift and the Dutch, on Swift's politics, in the *Huntington quarterly*. I was also concurrently writing shows for Caltech.

ERWIN: Yes. You started in 1954. And what got you started?

CLARK: Well, Chuck Newton got me started. He was the assistant to President DuBridge. And I've already told you that when I was in college, I did shows at BYU and at Bryce Canyon, of one sort or another. My kids were in Allendale Elementary School here in Pasadena. And among the parents was a guy named Elliot Davis, who was what he called a "kept lawyer." [Laughter] That is to say, he was claims manager of Fidelity and Deposit of Maryland. In fact, we once wrote a sort of song—chant called, "The Terms, Conditions, Limitations and Provisions of the Instrument Here Involved," which shows why you can never collect from a surety company. And the people at Allendale decided to put on a P.T.A. show. So Elliot and I agreed to write some songs for it, and we had a lot of fun. We wrote a couple of shows.

ERWIN: What were the titles of the shows?

CLARK: *Allendale Antics* was the general title. We did a composite P.T.A. show that was put on for the national convention later. Full length, it's called *Organization Woman*, but the songs came out of several P.T.A. shows. It has songs like, "Give Us Men," "The Allendale Rag," "Where Were You?," "I Love You in a Non—Committal Way," and so on.

I guess Chuck had heard about this. So he asked me to organize the [Linus] Pauling show. And we had an appallingly short time to do it—a couple of weeks. So we had to steal the melodies for our songs. And as I told Bob Oliver, there was already a tradition in the biology and chemistry departments of doing shows. They had a couple of great wits—one named Jack Dunitz, one named Ted Harold. Jack had written the finest parody on T. S. Eliot I've ever heard.

It's called "The Graduate Student's Lament," beginning, "I am an old man, sitting alone, disconsolate in a lone laboratory. My Bunsen has gone out. And I have no more matches." And so on. It's a parody on both "Gerontion" and "Prufrock." "The five—P electrons rotate in orbits of ever increasing eccentricity. And here I sit, an old man, and vainly seeking warmth from a cold Bunsen." That's the end.

And Ted had written a song that begins, "If you are a man who wants to know / How to find the entropy of H_2O," set to the tune of "The Eddystone Light." So we had those to go in with. Otherwise, we couldn't have done the show. And I wrote a parody of "Put Your Arms Around Me, Honey," that celebrates the fact that Dr. Pauling married a graduate student of his. And we had at the time a wonderful gal in the biology division named Liz Lester. Liz said that in her sexy voice she only had six notes, but they were six good ones. [Laughter] In her *bel canto* she had normal range. So this song began,

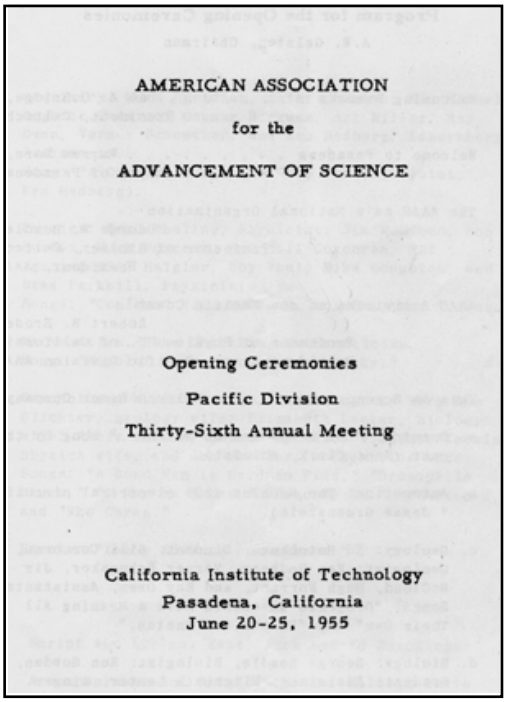
> Dr. Linus Pauling is the man for me.
> He makes violent changes in my chemistry.
> Oh, fie, when he rolls his eyes, all my atoms ionize.
> When he's near, blood molecules rush to my face.
> And I couldn't tell my acids from first base.
> Oh, joy, you'll never see such affinity.

Well, anyway. I wrote that, but I stole the tune. I didn't have time, and it takes time to make up tunes.

ERWIN: In this first show, you used pre—existing tunes.

CLARK: Yes, pretty much. But later, we got so we never used anything but our own. I wrote a couple of dialogue sequences that I like to think were funny. So the whole show was kind of cute.

So then the next year, when they had the meeting of the AAAS out here, we did a whole show from scratch. And that was a long one. It was called *This is Science*, and that's where the song, "Let's Advance on Science," comes from, only I changed it when we rewrote it for the Beckman show years later. I changed the verse, and then garbaged it in transmission. But the original verse was the one that I was talking about earlier here—"Greetings herpetologists and ardent ichthyologists" were the first words. It goes:



CLICK on the picture to listen to "Let's Advance on Science." Lyrics by Kent Clark, music by Elliot Davis. Song used by permission.

Greetings herpetologists and ardent ichthyologists,
Biologists of every kind,
Astronomers and physicists, consider that your visit is
The very sort of thing that we had in mind.
[spoken] And a special greeting to the West Coast
Phytopathological Society
Good chemists and geologists, we are your fond apologists,
We tender you a fervent greeting,
We're very glad you're here,
We send a note of cheer
And welcome to the American Association for the
Advancement of Science, Pacific Division meeting.
Now you know we greet you from the heart,
We want to say one thing here at the start:
[chant] A,A,A,S; A,A,A,S;
Let's advance on science before it advances on us,
Let's not leave it where we find it,
While we push it forward, let's stay way behind it.
Onward with caution, forward with finesse,
No delay, just join today—A,A,A,S.

I suppose that ran on for more than an hour, with Ed Hutchings, who became a star in all our shows, playing the lead. Incidentally, one of the great things about Caltech, it has a tremendous amount of theatrical talent.

ERWIN: Was that when you discovered this?

CLARK: Yes. Well, we'd already had the play-reading group. But that's slightly different. But for musical comedy, you need people who can carry a tune—they don't have to sing well, but they have to sing passionately.

ERWIN: Is this when the Caltech Stock Company came into existence?

CLARK: Yes, this was the nucleus of it, right there. We recruited the people. Bill Corcoran, for instance, Ward Whaling. Ed [Hutchings] had been in the Pauling show. Mu Harvey, Muriel

Harvey—they were the backbone of the organization forever, and later such clowns as Dick Dean, as you know, and Jim Knowles, when he came to the campus. And, of course, we made a terrific accession when Bob Oliver came in 1959. And we had a terrible loss; one of our great regular members was Dick Jahns, who was a great geologist, and who later went on to be a great geologist for Stanford, the creep. It's like desertion in the face of the enemy; he probably left so he wouldn't have to be in another show. [Laughter] And Muriel Beadle—Mrs. George Beadle—was our mainstay; and, of course, she's wonderful. You hear her on the record. So we had that group. And we've added many people in the process.

After that, there was the first DuBridge show on DuBridge's tenth anniversary in 1956, a show called *Who Is This Guy DuBridge*? And the songs that come from that have sort of remained in the Caltech memory—in fact, I had a letter just the other day, someone that wanted to have a recording or the sheet music to "For the Sake of the Republic." And the gist of the song is that people come to Caltech from a sense of duty and self sacrifice—somebody has to do it for the sake of the republic. The end of the first chorus goes [sings], "For the safety of the nation, we will stake our sanity. And although we often rue it, we know someone has to do it, for the sake of the republic." The end of the last chorus goes, "For the sake of the republic, we will take our Ph.D.'s./ And when we're the proud possessors, we'll become like our professors,! For the sake of the republic." And a song called, "Lee, Lee, Lee." And a song called, "Tranquil," which I was using concurrently with the medical show. Those were the main songs.

Then the next major show we did, I think, was the Watson show for Earnest and Jane Watson on their retirement. And I still think that's one of the best. They were fun people, and we had a great cast, and everyone excelled themselves.

I must say, among our regulars, I should have said that David and Connie Wood have been in everything—David since 1955, and Connie since the Watson show.

ERWIN: And that was called *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

CLARK: That's right. He spelled his name with an "a." And very shortly after that, in early '61, we did one for George Beadle, when he left to become head of the university of Chicago. And that's called, *What Makes Beadle Run*. And I think maybe next comes the second DuBridge show.

Fig. 1. Kent Clark front and center with cancan girls in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Caltech Archives.

ERWIN: I have written here you did two in 1966.

CLARK: That's true. We did a short one for Wes Hershey.

ERWIN: Is that the so—called "capsule comedy?"

CLARK: Yes. In fact, we have redone that twice in the last couple of years because I think it's such a fine sketch of Caltech, *A Broader View*. And that's where the song, "Down at the Burbank," comes from. And then the second DuBridge show, which was called *Lee and Sympathy*. The famous songs, "A View From DuBridge," and "Fortran," and "The Richter Scale" come from that. And "Don't Make Any Waves." Believe me, the show took a lot of time to put together. I worked all summer on the songs. It was great fun, though. We did a lot of writing and rehearsing down at the beach, where Christie, Darlene Oliver, and my daughter Kay

worked out the choreography. Ward [Whaling] did the solo on "Fortran." And that was the song where we had the great trumpet played by a kid named Cary Davids, a graduate student. On the recording of "Fortran" you hear him blasting his brains out; it's terrific.

ERWIN: So, usually the musical accompaniment here would range from just piano to a small musical ensemble?

CLARK: Yes, it's gone from just a piano in the first show, to a small combo, to a pretty good-sized orchestra. In the DuBridge show and the Beckman show, I think we had a banjo, a guitar, a clarinet, a trumpet, a drum. But you have to be careful. The band can't be very big or it will overpower the vocals.

ERWIN: And Elliot Davis did the scoring.

CLARK: Yes, always.

ERWIN: And he played the piano.

CLARK: Yes. He and I would make up the tunes together. To make up a Caltech song, the lyrics come first, of course, because that's what it's about. And you have to have a tentative tune to work with; you don't just write a poem. And sometimes, we can use my tune just as it is, but mostly we don't. We muck it around a little, until it works better. And he plays it beautifully, and he scores it.

ERWIN: Well, you're modest, because he always is the person who gets the credit for the music, on the written material anyway. And it's not so evident that you were really in there with the tunes.

CLARK: Believe me, he has a significant share in all of them. And a couple of them are essentially his. And incidentally, he's an absolutely marvelous pit piano player. So when you hear those things, things like "The Richter Scale," and all that. .

ERWIN: When DuBridge left, you did a so-called reprise.

CLARK: Yes. It wasn't a formal show in the sense that I wrote a script for it. We just selected a bunch of Caltech songs, and I M.C.'d it and introduced the numbers. So, I think the only original song from that show that was new in that show was called, "Hey, Lee." And it goes: [sings] "Hey, Lee, Hey Lee, Hi Lo, how can you stand to leave us? Hey Lee, Hey Lee, Hi Lo, how can you stand to go?" And the first verse goes: "Lee DuBridge is now the new advisor; it's a great appointment, it's nice. No one in the world could be much wiser, if he's taken half our advice." [Laughter] And it goes on with things Lee had been advised by his faculty. He became science advisor to President Nixon and left when it was obvious that the science budget was being slashed to ribbons. When no one heeded his advice, he resigned.

We did a show for Bob Bacher; it was called *The Bacher File*. And that's another full-length one. And here the format was simple. We had all our cast on the stage, and they're discussing what present to buy for Bob Bacher, and that's what the dialogue was all about.

ERWIN: He was retiring?

CLARK: Yes, as provost.

ERWIN: And then?

CLARK: The Beckman show, *Beautiful Beckman.* And that, again, is

a huge one. That took a long time to construct, all one summer— a lot of it in England, incidentally, when I was chasing around Stonehenge. [Laughter]

I started getting materials for a biography of Tom, the Earl [of Wharton], just after I finished my novel in the early sixties. Again, this stemmed out of my Swift studies. The person that Swift hated the most in the world was Thomas, Earl of Wharton. Swift ratted to the Tories from the Whigs, and he never forgave anyone he ever slandered. [Laughter] Very sensitive. And

so he called Tom "universal villain." So I got to collecting materials for that. And then there's a book. Dan Piper and I—who, incidentally, was one of the new wave English instructors— put together a drama anthology, called *Dimensions in Drama*, and it was done on the theme of crime and punishment, dramas from the ancient world to the present. So that took some time.

Anyway, I was in England in 1974 doing research for Goodwin, chasing Goodwin Wharton [younger brother of Tom] around. And when I got out to Stonehenge, a druid revealed to me the opening lines of *Beautiful Beckman*. [Laughter] For Dr. Beckman's eightieth birthday, we had a reprise of it. And I explained that I had had a block on the song. The title was automatic. You know that you have to have a title for the show, and the title song has to be "Beautiful Beckman"—sort of a sextuple pun: beautiful not only in the classic sense, but in the modern sense of the term. And the term fits both Mabel and Arnold, and of course both them and the building. But I couldn't think of an opening line. And suddenly I thought of a line. It's pedestrian, but when I thought of it, everything came, and the line is: "In Beautiful Beckman the music plays and plays," and then we're off and running. "The dancers dance, and the dialogue is clever."

ERWIN: And you said that was your absolutely last show.

CLARK: Yes, last full-length show. I wouldn't write a complete script from scratch like that for the Second Coming. [Laughter] But I have done little vignettes.

ERWIN: Could you perhaps tell about bringing back *A Broader View* with its sequel, the new sequel? Because I think that's very interesting.

CLARK: Well, that was fun to do. The play readers group in 1987 decided to renew the play-reading party, which was one of the great traditions of the fifties and early sixties. And Bob Oliver asked me if I'd dust of f *A Broader View*. Well, I looked at it and I thought of updating it. But the shift in the twenty years had been so much that updating was impossible; it's just a period piece or nothing. So we had to do it unchanged. And then I felt honor bound to write a sequel to it, which is called *Troll's Progress*. The theme of it is that the essential Caltech never changes. It's firmly founded on terror. [Laughter] And no froufrou can disguise that fact. And

people who play together pray together, twitch together, stay together. Anyway, that theme allowed for a number of wisecracks, and I like to think the dialogue is rather funny. The kids who did it were tremendous. The undergraduates, of course, we know are stars.

ERWIN: What was the origin of the troll?

CLARK: Well, that goes back into Caltech history. And it's probably Caltech's only contribution to American culture. [Laughter] If you have to ask the meaning of the word, you'll never understand what it means. But to put you sort of in the framework—that's discussed, incidentally, in the dialogue of *Beautiful Beckman* there's a segment on that. But a troll is a very high-voltage nerd. It used to be he lived "under DuBridge." The kid that never sees the light of day, really, he's so busy with his books. There are apprentice trolls at other schools, but ours are an order of magnitude more trollish. People who are compulsive and pathological students are much more so here.

ERWIN: Somewhere you referred to this as a "random troll."

CLARK: Oh, that's the worst thing you can be called. You see, it means you're just like a number; you have no personality. You might as well be a computer—nothing to distinguish. Oh, man, when you're a random troll, you're beyond the pale. [Laughter]

ERWIN: In *A Broader View*, you called the Caltech undergrad "intellectually brilliant, emotionally immature, culturally deprived, and socially gauche." And then, immediately afterward, I believe you gave the Caltech professor the identical description. That brings us to the point of what the shows were for underneath it all.

CLARK: Well, of course they're supposed to be funny. But they're based on observation and fact. Humor is the other side of the truth, and this is the other side of the truth. Caltech is wonderful and monolithic. It believes its own propaganda, and we tell each other how good we are, and what a great thing we're doing. So then, the contrast between our propaganda and our image, as we like to think of it, which is exaggerated on one side, and the "reality," which is exaggerated

on the other, produces comedy. And the lovely thing about Caltech, is that both faculty and students, they're the best audience in the world. They get all this stuff, and they laugh. They can take it. They can make fun of themselves. If they were even slightly defensive, we couldn't write and perform comic satire like this.

ERWIN: So that leads to the statement that sums it up so well that you've used before, that Caltech is a marvelous subject for comedy.

CLARK: Yes, and let me say it for about the fiftieth time: If you can't write comedy about Caltech, you can't write comedy. It was formed by serious men for serious purposes, and by God, that's what makes comedy. Presbyterians are a laugh a minute. [Laughter]

Incidentally, I don't know if I told you. This is the Clark and Naomi Greenstein theory of comedy. It explains why Jews and Mormons are such fine humorous types. And that is, since humor is essentially deviation from some norm, it's great to start with a culture that's thirty degrees deviant from the conventional culture. And the normal, in turn, is about ninety degrees deviant from any rational value system. So you have people who are used to picking up these comic degrees of difference. It well may be that there's an intelligence factor there, too. But there's a wonderful sociological factor. Anyway, there's no better subject than Caltech for humor.

ERWIN: People used to come from off campus to see these things, too. It wasn't only the Caltech community. You have some notoriety around the city and Los Angeles.

CLARK: Yes, but mostly the humor was in—group, and I never wrote for anyone outside. In fact, all comedy really depends upon an in—group knowledge of some sort. Anyone can laugh at "The Richter Scale," but it's fine if you know Charlie. [Laughter]

Incidentally, I should correct for the record an impression that Charlie went to his grave hating "The Richter Scale" and thinking it demeaned him. You know, I made a mistake. I still like "The Richter Scale." When I wrote it, along with Elliot, I thought it was really fun. I went to Charlie, and I said, "Look, be sure and come to the DuBridge show. I've written a song called 'The Richter Scale." Well, I'd forgotten that he was so morbidly shy that that was enough to

keep him away. He heard it was funny. And he was sure that this was a lampoon. In fact, I think he said publicly that the song was a slur on serious science.

ERWIN: How does that song begin?

CLARK: Charlie Richter made a scale, for calibrating earthquakes.

Gives the true and lucid reading, every time the earth shakes.
Increments are exponential, numbers 0 to 9.
When the first shock hit the seismo, everything worked fine. It measured:
One, two, on the Richter scale, a shabby little shiver.
One, two, on the Richter scale, a queasy little quiver.
Waves brushed the seismograph as if a fly had flicked her.
One, two, on the Richter scale, it hardly woke up Richter.

Years later, after the show—Winifred Freeze, who worked in the Huntington Library, was his neighbor. And Winifred took him the record and played it for him privately. And he laughed; he had fun with it. So I'm glad. It would be a terrible blot on your character not to like "The Richter Scale." In fact, it would be the definition of a nerd. If you don't like it, you're beyond the pale. Charlie was shy, but he wasn't beyond the pale.

ERWIN: Did you have any models in mind, like Gilbert and Sullivan, or were you thinking of Broadway?

CLARK: No, we never thought of imitating anybody. As I said, I had done song lyrics before, and they just seemed appropriate.

J. CLARK KENT

SESSION 2

February 13, 1989

Begin Tape 2, Side 1

ERWIN: Let's begin with a general reminiscence of the l950s.

CLARK: Let me jump back to what I hope we said about the Humanities Division after the war, the new people that came on— people like Beach Langston and me. And then, of course, Hallett [Smith] came in '49. What I didn't mention was the fine historians who came in '49 and the early '50s. Of course David Elliot, who's a marvelous guy. Peter Fay, a tremendous teacher and a fine writer. And also an English professor, Henry Dan Piper, who in the sixties went to Southern Illinois to be head of the humanities division. Incidentally, Dan did a drama anthology with me that Scribner's published in the sixties. But, in general, from 1946 to 1969 were the DuBridge years. And DuBridge himself, as we all know, is a magnificently versatile man. He has something that is common among great geniuses. He understands what he knows, and he can explain it on any level. think he could explain calculus to a kid in kindergarten, and he could explain Caltech to any possible audience. Of course, he's a marvelous, lucid speaker. But beyond this, personally, he was without any pretense whatsoever. DuBridge is the genuine article; what you see, and what you hear, is Lee DuBridge. Also, his wife—we mustn't forget Doris—who added a great deal to the campus. She, too, was Midwest, unaffected, with no highfalutin social pretensions, a very warm heart. I will never forget when Christie and I first came down to Caltech, it was during the postwar housing shortage. The only apartment we could get that we could afford was out in Azusa. It was a fine duplex, incidentally. It was a great move, in a way.

Well, at a faculty function, Mrs. DuBridge asked me where we lived. I told her. She wondered if there were any other apartments out [there]. She came out herself, in person, to Azusa, to take an apartment for a postdoctoral fellow. As I once said in a show, most presidents' wives might think that a postdoctoral fellow was a corpse in a morgue, and they wouldn't go across the street to do anything for one. And here was Doris DuBridge, out personally doing this for a physics postdoc. And this was typical of the DuBridges.

The really chief virtue of Caltech, as I said last time, is that it is small enough to be a family—a flaky family, to be sure. There's no other faintly like it. But nevertheless, it is one. And it has to be continuously recreated, you understand. But nevertheless, the DuBridges had this *gemüthlichkeit* that made us a family. We were all sort of co-opted, and we were all in the same crazy enterprise together.

ERWIN: Was this a real change from the Millikan time?

CLARK: I don't know, but I have a feeling from what I've heard my senior colleagues say—I wasn't here in the Millikan era—that Millikan was more the *grand seigneur*. While he wasn't exactly a major prophet, he wasn't exactly a minor one either. I've also heard that the Millikans were very nice people. But at the very least, we can say that Lee and Doris recreated, or created, that wonderful family spirit. They were as straight across with an undergraduate or a graduate student as they were with a Nobel Prize winner. Status didn't mean a damn thing to them—and still doesn't, as far as Lee is concerned.

Anyway, it gave a sort of relaxed atmosphere all around. And that's why, really, we got into the business of doing shows, because it's an inside family thing. And although Caltech grew, I like to think that we have saved a lot of that feeling.

Now, as far as the division goes—now we'll get back to academics—a very fine thing happened over the fifties. As I said before, so many people wanted to get into Caltech that we could be tremendously selective. We were getting, say, 1500 or 1600 people for 180 places. Beyond that, the high schools and the prep schools were improving so much in the teaching of English, for instance, that we were wasting the time of about half of our students by giving them introductory writing and reading courses. They had essentially had this in high school. So what we did, we revised the curriculum to do a history of ideas through literature course, coordinated with a political and social history course. I'm guessing now, but I would say that this shift came about in the late fifties, about 1958.

ERWIN: Did that course have a name?

CLARK: We kept the same names; it was still Lit 1 and History 1, or whatever the titles were, but

the subject matter was coordinated chronologically. We didn't put all the kids in one class and mix history and English. We kept the same general requirements—two years of both history and English—but we made the courses reinforce each other.

ERWIN: Let me introduce something here from an oral history from one of your colleagues, Rodman Paul, who made the following point about the 1950s, that "the administration as such was a kind of an invisible thing." And he felt this was quite a virtue.

CLARK: Yes, that's a very shrewd statement. That's true, there was not that gap between faculty and administration. Now, part of this is a function of size and of money. Our fund raising in the l950s consisted principally of two men—Chuck Newton, the president's secretary, and Lee DuBridge. Now we have a battalion of fund raisers. And once you get a superstructure like this—we also have a great many more alumni—you have more things to do, more buildings, a bigger plant, and so on. And inevitably, you get more bureaucracy; it's a function of size and growth. God knows that our provosts and our presidents have done their best; they've tried their hardest not to make themselves an administration as opposed to a faculty. But in places there has to be a distinction. And, of course, few people are as personable as Lee DuBridge and at once as competent an administrator as Lee DuBridge. And the shift from Lee to Harold Brown was a drastic one in personality. Let me say that Harold is as bright as it's possible to be; if he were any brighter he'd be arrested and be somewhere in jail. And I can't think of a better Secretary of Defense. I'd rather have him eyeball to eyeball with the Russians than anyone I can think of. But he was not nearly so personable as Lee. And people, to some extent, made him nervous, and he tended to want to delegate, to put a layer of people between him and the troops. And given his personality, and his way of doing business, it was probably wise to do that. But it did change the tone.

Now, he did a remarkable thing. He arrived at the time of, shall we say, the first scientific depression, which came just as he came and as Lee DuBridge went to be the science advisor under Nixon. The fifties and especially the sixties were the years of the science gravy train—typified by that wonderful wisecrack, "While you're up, get me a grant." [Laughter] No project could be too fanciful, absurd, or expensive.

But suddenly, what with the [Vietnam] war and the attempt to cut down civilian budgets,

and then the national administration wasn't too bright to begin with, this prosperity came to a screaming halt. And Brown was here to make the necessary cuts and trim things and keep us afloat and solvent. So this brought a change in the tone.

ERWIN: In the fifties, sometimes it seems as if Caltech was on a little island. It was an idyllic place, almost untouched by the outside world. Except we know that during the McCarthy hearings, there were some blips in that.

CLARK: Yes, luckily for us, we had some very live—wire types—of course, [Linus] Pauling. The first show I ever wrote for Caltech was for Pauling, as I think I told you. And there was some sequence I had to cut out. I had Oveta Culp Hobby, who was sort of the grand mistress of passports, and that sort of thing—I had her and two other lady bureaucrats as the three witches in *Macbeth*, who were refusing to issue Linus a passport. But on the very shrewd advice of Muriel Beadle, who played in the show, I took the sequence out. Linus was a very hot number in those days. In fact, I added a verse to the song, "Dr. Linus Pauling," in honor of his activities. It goes: When he writes petitions in that hand so fine,

> He can't think of anything that I won't sign.
> All my proteins turn to starch,
> All my enzymes stand and march.
> When he's so disarming, all my fears decrease;
> I can't think of war, I only think of peace.
> Oh, joy.
> And so on.

So that general, ivory-tower calm was occasionally shattered by our very gutsy scientific staff, who were not afraid to make statements. And of course, sometimes this, shall we say, disconcerted certain trustees, who wanted to banish them to Siberia. [Laughter]

ERWIN: I understand that the President stood very strongly behind Pauling.

CLARK: Oh, absolutely. And the school, in general, was very, very strongly behind—or actually in front of—Pauling and others.

ERWIN: Perhaps we could look at the Division of the Humanities, which became the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences at some point in the sixties.

CLARK: Yes. Well, in general, two things happened here. One was the advent of the hard social sciences. The Institute decided that since Caltech had all this mathematical and scientific know-how, and we were getting into the computer age, and all those concomitant things, and since science and technology are so terribly tied up with politics and economics, that we had an opportunity to introduce a social science option. Also, since we had moved higher up on the curve in verbal aptitude and verbal achievement, that we could get more social sciences and have options—have fewer humanities requirements but more options. What it came down to was that the humanities did fewer things better to fewer people. There's a trade—off there.

Now, it's the iron law of institutions—this is Clark's law—that institutions are run for the people who operate them, not for their nominal clients—we all know that. [Laughter] And it was very nice for English professors and history professors not to teach elementary courses and survey courses and so on, but do advanced courses. And in my case, for instance, to teach twentieth-century English and American poetry, and teach the great satirists of the eighteenth century, and the great poets, rather than those survey courses.

ERWIN: So, were the survey courses basically out, gone?

CLARK: Well, they weren't gone; they were simply electives. Students had "group" requirements, and they had to take so many humanities units, but they could be in history or English.

That was one of the things that happened. The other thing was—and now we're getting on into the seventies—that we began to get more and more foreign students, particularly Asian, and this meant language problems. So, while we still had a tremendous group with verbal aptitudes off the scale, we began to worry about English as a second language. And so, in a way, we had to introduce what is essentially some bonehead English courses—both bonehead for native speakers and ESL for people whose native language was Portuguese, let's say. So this complicated the picture.

Now, this specialization in the humanities made it possible for us to attract some awfully

good young professors, because they weren't going to come to do remedial writing, they were going to come, in effect, to teach their specialty.

For instance, Jenijoy LaBelle is a wonderful case in point. When she came—and I think this was in 1969—I was helping Hallett Smith with the applications. We had 125 applications for that opening, and she was the best of this group.

ERWIN: If I'm not mistaken, she was the first woman to be offered a tenure-track position.

CLARK: Certainly she was in the humanities; I'm not absolutely sure that this is true of Caltech. I think it is, but I'm not sure. For instance, there was Olga Todd, a wonderful mathematician, and there were women who were doing things in biology. But in the sort of line positions, I think this was true.

ERWIN: I'd like to go back to the period of the development of the social sciences, per se. You've basically told how they came into existence. Was there a kind of tension then felt between the old humanities and the new social sciences?

CLARK: Of course. Some of this was something like turf battles, because introducing new social science courses meant essentially reducing the amount of humanities that were offered. And in a philosophic way, this was sort of, let's say, outrageous. [Laughter] That is to say, these people are essentially applied mathematicians. And bringing more applied mathematicians to Caltech is like bringing trolls to Newcastle. This was one of the problems, the kind of people that they were. I told you that our last gentlemen were in the Judy—McMinn—Eagleson generation. Then we got the sort of hybrids, like my dear friend Dan Piper, and George Mayhew, and me, who were sort of a combination scholar—creative writer—teacher—grind. [Laughter] But in general, what you had in humanities were people of very wide reading background—God help us, sort of well-rounded in the sense that they're universal with many interests—compared to a group of what seemed even more like technicians than the scientists.

And then, of course, it was a fact that the scientists believed, in general, that to call social science of any kind a science—anything that deals with people—is a sort of contradiction in terms. And they looked upon the mathematical predictions in economics as about as

respectable as reading the entrails of the larger birds. So we had those tensions going along, and they produced some fairly spectacular fireworks from time to time. I think gradually, they've all learned to live together. The trade-off has been not too bloody. I think, perhaps, if on balance the average kid of Caltech needed more humanities the way he needed vitamin pills, from that point of view, it was a loss. On the other hand, as I said earlier, the specialized English and history courses for the fewer people that took them I think were better on the average. So, we've had some good things. And gradually, everyone learned to live together.

ERWIN: What do you feel have been the successes of this?

CLARK: Oh, the successes are that it became possible essentially to take a double major. A student who is required to take so many humanities units could take them all in English, and when he'd come out he would be able to specialize. And we've had some tremendously good students who did this. So the successes have been, let's say, in the quality of the few people who did this stuff.

Now, it's possible—and especially for these kids with language handicaps—they're never going to take an English course if they can help it. They'll take history courses and never write a paper or answer a question—anything that takes writing. So that concession, to free choice, in a way shortchanged a lot of kids. But it gave a lot of extra time and a lot of extra specialization to the people who took the course.

ERWIN: Did it put more of an emphasis on publishing for the faculty?

CLARK: Well, yes. But this was part of the general shift from more general to more special things. When we started getting all these applications for jobs, the easiest measure of candidates was how many column inches they had published. So we went from the generation before me, who had never heard the words, "publish or perish." I always felt—and I'm a writer anyway—and my colleagues and I always felt that we should publish, and we have always worked on this. But no one, really, put a gun at our heads. But as we got more and more bureaucratic, larger, more administrative, then we had this publish or perish in spades. And we almost lost Jenijoy [LaBelle], and we almost lost Stuart Ende, two very, very bright cookies, because the publishers

fooled around with their works too long. They had the books written, but they languished in desk drawers.

So now, the first thing you have to be at Caltech is not a teacher, but a publishing scholar.

ERWIN: That leads to the question of, did the whole quality of teaching, for which the humanities especially was renowned, did that seem to change?

CLARK: Yes. Bob Huttenback, who introduced the new system and who truly wanted to upgrade the division but didn't quite know how to do it—he was chairman after Hallett Smith—made the greatest mistake probably in Caltech history by forcing out one of the great teachers of our times, a professor named Bill Cozart, who was the finest classroom teacher at the time at Caltech. And, of course, we hired some people who were fine research scholars, but not good teachers. Some we got rid of; most of them went other places. So, I think right now, the people we have are both good teachers and good scholars. And, of course, that's what you want to do; you want to have the best of both worlds. And for Caltech, it's absolutely essential that they should be good teachers, because the kids don't get enough good teaching.

ERWIN: There seems to have been a sort of vision that something new was going to happen in the humanities and social sciences. There was an article in *Engineering and Science* in 1971, "Creating the Next Discipline," in which the whole idea of the multi-disciplinary within humanities and social sciences particularly was going to happen, but it wasn't entirely clear how this was going to happen or what it would be.

CLARK: Well, most of that is rhetoric in a clouded crystal ball. [Laughter] But the object of the game, as far as the social sciences were concerned, was not to have it narrowly focused, let's say, on economics, but to use analytical, mathematical methods of predictions sort of across the board and across social science disciplines. Certainly a reasonable idea. The sort of trade—off, the cooperation that can go on, say, between literature and history. But most experiments in combined teaching—a humanities course teaching a period instead of, say, literature, or history—most of these are difficult to do, because they depend so much on the cooperation and

the personalities—the people involved and the amount of effort. It's easy to construct them on paper and terribly hard to do them in fact, and often they turn out to be not very effective. Whereas the traditional disciplines are well established and coherently arranged. Let's say, a good teacher can easily do a fine course on Victorian history. When you start to dilute it or mix it in with Victorian art, with Victorian literature, with Victorian plumbing, it begins to wash away. In a small place like this, all experiments work, because the people who are interested will make them work, and the kids will make them work. Any system will work, but this won't work for long, because it depends on the personalities and the enthusiasms of the people who do it. So we've had some experiments that ultimately failed and some that succeeded permanently.

Let me give you an example of a course that I think succeeded for me. It was suggested by Oscar Mandel, just sort of off the top of his head, and that is a theme course—the hero in history, the hero in literature. Now heroes imply a value system. One way of studying a society is simply to observe the people they admire. And the ones that have come up in literature. In studying heroes, you not only have literary problems, but you also have the value system that the heroes imply. So I was able to go through western civilization in a way. Let's say, we start out with Odysseus from the classical age, Roland and the chivalric age, Hamlet, and so on. We can concentrate around a subject and do it in a fairly exhaustive way. Also, we can show how the literary techniques themselves operate to create heroes. Heroes are the product of a good press agent. [Laughter] If you don't have someone who can handle the language, you'll never be a hero. At least you'll be unsung.

This flexibility, incidentally, is a wonderful thing about Caltech. In spite of any frustrations and so forth, the school is small enough so every experiment works, and when it quits working, it can be changed. You don't have to move the whole University of California system; you don't have to go through the board of trustees. If you can convince the people in your division you have a good idea, your colleagues outside will let you fool around. The whole atmosphere is that of experimentation and "let's try something." And then, once in a while, Caltech goes through some soul searching because it feels a justifiable guilt. It knows that it loads these poor devils horribly, that if students drop a pencil, they're going to flunk out of Caltech. And, of course, you know the famous Caltech motto for the students: "*Ne illegitimis carborundum*"—don't let the bastards grind you down. Anyway, the faculty knows this, and they know that they overload the students. And once in a while, about every six or seven, sometimes

ten years, they try to unload their courses. Otherwise, material just keeps accumulating. So they go through these soul searchings, and they discover new educational principles that turn out to be old educational principles. it may not be progress, but it's action; things keep happening.

Now, one thing—while I think of this—the fact that we were offering a major in English, even though we'd have only three or four majors, sometimes one, sometimes five or six at the most, we had to get specialists in the various fields, so we had to hire with regard to specialties. Jenijoy, for instance, is a specialist in Renaissance literature besides modern poetry; Mac Pigman in the early Renaissance and the medieval period. We needed someone who could handle the Victorians. George Mayhew and I were both experts in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I'm pretty good at twentieth-century poetry. So we had to cover the waterfront, and that fact had considerable effect in a small division, where you have, say, ten English professors. That means you have only one of a kind in any specialty, or two of a kind at most. Luckily, as I think I said last time, the Huntington Library is down there where you're up to your hips in medieval scholars and Renaissance scholars and experts in, say, romanticism. So you don't lack for intellectual support.

ERWIN: In 1969, the formation of a new committee for the arts was announced. And I'd like to ask you about that because you were the chairman.

CLARK: True. This was one of the finest experiments Caltech ever did, I think. I happened to be chairman of the Beckman faculty committee on programs. Incidentally, let me say that one of the greatest things that ever happened at Caltech was the construction of Beckman Auditorium. Suddenly, it brought us into the performing arts. No one planned it this way; the building was planned in a sort of utilitarian way: "Well, here's a place we can give lectures, and we can get the students together," and so on.

We hired a genius named Jerry Willis, who is still with us, thank God. We got an active committee. Ned Munger, the first chairman, deserves a great deal of credit for this. And then me. I was the second chairman, I came on in '67. And we had tremendous luck in getting creative artists. It was simply marvelous; it changed the ambience of the school. In fact, as I wrote in some dialogue last year, from one point of view, bringing Jerry Willis to the campus was like bringing Richard Feynman to the campus—it changed things.

Since we'd already made this breakthrough, and since we were booking artists right and left and exploiting the performing arts, Chuck Newton suggested that we ought to see what we could do in the visual arts—go into them in a small, experimental way. Since I was chairman of the Beckman committee and *de facto* commissar of culture anyway, Chuck thought I should lead the investigation. And a very kind and fine lady named Virginia Steele Scott gave us 40,000 American dollars to get started with. That doesn't sound like much now, but in 1967 or '68, that was a lot of money.

Chuck Newton and I, and David Smith—at first, mostly I—went to New York and studied various college programs. I went to MIT, and places of that sort. And I fooled around with the foundations. We finally decided that we wanted to do three things: we wanted to bring an art instructor and have an art workshop for interested students—let people get their hands dirty. We wanted to get an exhibitions program, which, incidentally, became wildly successful. And we wanted to buy art for Caltech and especially for the student houses.

We didn't want to compete with Caltech for money in the usual places that finance science. But, of course, our exotic interests allowed us to go outside. So first I, and then David Smith, who was a tremendous moving spirit, went and threw ourselves on our knees before the Old Dominion, a foundation in New York, and got a couple of $25,000 grants to supplement what we already had. We organized a committee, we got a support group, and we started an art workshop program and an exhibition program.

ERWIN: So you actually went out and raised the money yourselves.

CLARK: Oh, yes. This project was free for Caltech. So for three years, we were an autonomous organization, which helped, incidentally, because it meant we could do what we wanted to. And Caltech furnished us Earhart, the wonderful plant biology greenhouse lab, which turned out to be marvelous for an art workshop. You can imagine how good the light was. We hired a mad African—Dutchman by the name of Lukas van Vuuren to run the thing—a fine artist, and perhaps the world's worst PR man. But he worked like a beaver and he was committed and he did a lot. So for three years we had a workshop.

Now, this program folded when they tore down the labs over there and built Beckman Biology Lab. So we didn't have studios anymore.

Begin Tape 2, Side 2

CLARK: As I said, we had a three-pronged program. First, the dirty and creative art things, and this involved not only Lukas, but also visiting artists of one sort or another. We had a visiting artist program, in addition to Lukas, and had special people to teach drawing and so on.

Incidentally, the workshop program was strictly a voluntary, free-time thing; it was not for humanities credit. And, of course, this was both its strength and its weakness. Its strength, because there was no foolishness about passing examinations, no bureaucracy. If you wanted to work, you went over and sat in on a class. The disadvantage was simply that without some units to protect you, about the middle of the term when everything got tough, you had to disappear from your art class. We'd start with a lot of students and end with a few. Nevertheless, a lot of people got some experience, and that was a fine thing. And some excellent artists came and worked with us.

So we had a visiting artist program. And I could combine this with Beckman programs; I could bring artists here to lecture. The other part, then, was the exhibitions program. Before we had the gallery in Baxter, we jury-rigged one in the basement of the Athenaeum, where we gave small shows, including a display of Dick Feynman's drawings, which was very successful, incidentally. And then a gallery in Dabney Lounge, which I always thought was extremely good. David Smith, who ran the program with help from Lukas van Vuuren, not only got good exhibitions, but displayed them very tastefully. Then, finally, we got the new facilities in Baxter, that were especially built for a gallery; and we had a fine gallery there.

Well, although the committee launched the art program, when we lost the workshop studios, it was much more efficient to turn the exhibitions program and the art teaching over to the division. So that's what happened. I think I quit being chairman in 1972. As I say, the workshop program died for lack of space and lack of unit protection. But the exhibition program flourished for several years. I had nothing to do with it then; David Smith was in charge of it and did a marvelous job. It was the beneficiary of the collapse of the Museum of Modern Art in town, which was taken over by Norton Simon. The members of the Pasadena Art Alliance then arranged to cooperate with the division at Caltech in producing exhibits. And this went on until, through some decision that I will never understand, President Goldberger killed the gallery program. If he had shot himself, not in the foot but in the navel, it couldn't have been a more

stupid and more disgusting decision. I would call it criminally insane, but it wasn't quite that rational. [Laughter] Because the program was practically free, and it was another tie to the community. It was a great advantage to Caltech.

At any rate, I was always pleased with our art program. I think from about 1968, before we were actually a committee, when we started doing things, until Goldberger—who, incidentally, is a nice man, and we got along fine. Everyone's entitled, I guess, to one aberration. [Laughter] I don't remember exactly what year the program was killed, about five years ago or so [1985. Ed.]. Let's say for about fourteen or fifteen years, it was, I think, a tremendous addition to the campus. Some of our kids have some artistic talent. And some of them were turned on to the visual arts in a productive way. In general, Caltech kids, like me, are eggheads and live in a world of woolly abstractions. And to actually bump up against something visual is a lovely experience. So I've been proud of my work on the arts. It cost me a lot of blood, as you can imagine. My historical and literary scholarship took about a five—year vacation while I ran the Beckman program and the arts program. And then, because of my position there, I was put on the Liaison Committee on the Creative Arts for the State of California. So I had three administrative jobs, plus teaching. Goodwin and Tom Wharton languished while I made lousy decisions on a bureaucratic level. [Laughter]

ERWIN: Around this same time, Caltech began the admission of women undergraduates. I wonder if these have any relationship?

CLARK: They didn't. We got the art before we got the ladies. But I think that with Beckman Auditorium, the other great thing that's happened in my time was the admission of women students. I have said many times that the two funniest conversations I ever heard in my life (and God knows, I've heard a lot of funny conversations; I've lived with wits and half-wits and ne'er-do-wells all my life) were here at Caltech. One was a discussion between an astronomer, Paul Routly, and a wonderful guy, Erd~lyi, on the proposition, "Do all great mathematicians twitch?" Well, it turns out they do. [Laughter] And these guys not only gave examples, but also illustrations of the kinds of twitches. The other one was the famous faculty symposium debate on the admission of women. I won't try to produce the dialogue. But when I say that one of the arguments was that there weren't bathrooms for women, you can see on how high a level it was

argued. [Laughter] And, of course, we heard the argument that these ladies will never use it [their education], you know. They will get married, they will shell out children. And here, this valuable Caltech space will be taken up. And so on. It was hilarious to me at the time—not many people were laughing, but I was laughing, not out loud, God knows.

ERWIN: Was this a full faculty debate?

CLARK: Oh, yes. But the fact that we finally admitted women meant, in the first place, that the women, to get in, had to pass exactly the same tests as the men and compete with them. And the women also had a somewhat civilizing effect on the campus. I don't want to exaggerate this; it's still not your average charm school. But the women were good students. And on the average—and this is a gut feeling—they were probably better humanities students, just because they had a wider range of interests. They weren't so apt to be trolls as their male counterparts. So I loved having them in class.

Now, I wrote for the Beckman show, as you know, two songs on that subject: "What's a Nice Girl Like You," and "I Didn't Raise My Girl to be a Troll." And Liz McLeod, who was the first female student body president, sang "Nice Girl." She was a doll, besides being a sharp cookie and a good singer, and she really belted the song out. Liz, at least, was a humanizing and civilizing influence.

ERWIN: Backtracking just a little, what finally carried the day? What made the decision happen to admit women?

CLARK: Well, just enough cool, rational scientists. A majority of the faculty finally said, "What we want is the best brains we can get, and let's get them. Sex is irrelevant." So, by George, we got women. And they were long, long overdue. Heaven knows Caltech has been paternalistic and unconsciously sexist—a sort of "Father Knows Best" organization. It must have made strong women want to kill a few people. [Laughter] I'm pleased to see that we finally have a women's organization on the campus. I've felt that Caltech's greatest weakness is that the Institute has put the professorial staff at an exalted level and has tended to treat the rest of the staff, not exactly as peons, but as people who are privileged to be around. And this is outrageous, really. The school

has not paid its secretarial and technical staff as much as it should; and it has not given them the recognition they deserve.

ERWIN: Well, the implication being that there was a greater preponderance of women in the lower ranks.

CLARK: Yes, but even among men there was a kind of discrimination; there was sexism, plus intellectual snobbery working. And I think that the improvement began, that the ice jam really began breaking, with the admission of women. We still have a long way to go, you understand. But you see hopeful signs. And, of course, in our faculty, besides Jenijoy, we have acquired more women. We have people like Eleanor Searle, and we've had some marvelous visiting historians; and we've got Annette Smith, who is really a tremendous addition. So our lady professorial staff has been proving itself hand over fist.

ERWIN: Perhaps this would be a good place to talk more about Jenijoy LaBelle. In your interview with Robert Oliver, you had dubbed yourself her "defense attorney." This was a celebrated case.

CLARK: Yes. In fact, I wrote what is called "the diatribe" that I could hand you on the subject. Let me outline the case.

As we said, Bob Huttenback wanted to upgrade the division and introduce strict publish—or—perish rules. Jenijoy, whom I've already described as the best out of 125 applicants, writes beautifully, with a fine sense of style. She did her doctoral dissertation on a poet named Theodore Roethke; but when she submitted a revised version for publication to the university of Washington Press, the manuscript sat there for a long time and no one did anything about it. She wrote some articles, but at the time she came up for tenure she hadn't gotten her book published. Well, I hadn't seen the manuscript till just about the time the division hearings were held—I was in England, incidentally, when things started happening. And when I saw it, I realized that it would be published, it was a beautiful job.

Anyway, it was unpublished when she came up for promotion. Although she was unanimously recommended by her English colleagues, her promotion was vetoed by Bob

Huttenback and the social science faculty, on the grounds that she hadn't met the publish-or-perish requirement. The meeting at which this grotesque decision was made was even sillier than the faculty debate on the admission of women. Social-science types who were about as able to judge literary quality as they were to conduct a symphony orchestra were explaining Jenijoy's lack of qualifications. Whereas literary people like Hallett Smith, the foremost Shakespearean scholar in the nation, were ignored.

So I wrote the scene up as a humorous satire. After all the tugging and hauling (and my diatribe went clear up through to the president's office), I handed it to Jenijoy, and she handed it to her lawyer. [Laughter] And suddenly, Caltech was threatened with a suit from the government for discrimination against women. And since Caltech lives on government subsidy, as we all know, horror struck the administration. [Laughter] So we had an agonizing reappraisal. Of course, while all this brouhaha was going on, Jenijoy's book actually did get published by the prestigious Princeton University Press.

It all had a happy ending. Jenijoy was reinstated. She's been spectacularly successful. Recently, she has had still another book published (and republished in paperback). And Caltech was saved making a hideous mistake. The episode was like the "Perils of Pauline." This melodrama, incidentally, cost me three or four months of biographical writing. When I got back from England in 1974, I spent that whole term writing diatribes and defenses. [Laughter]

ERWIN: Were you summarizing the case?

CLARK: Well, I wrote the case against her as a satire. I explained how the system worked. As I say, the government lawyers only had to read it, with its implications, which were so clear, that if she had been a man. .

ERWIN: And you really think that was the case.

CLARK: Well, it was one of the factors. There were many others. The whole affair was just a little bit more complicated than the Treaty of Versailles. That battle, too, took a lot of my blood. Thank God the defense worked. And while we're thanking God, we need to thank God that there have been very few things that were generally that divisive and unpleasant. In general, Caltech is

a happy place to work.

J. KENT CLARK

SESSION 3

February 17, 1989

Begin Tape 3, Side 1

ERWIN: Could you tell us about what it is like to be the bearer of the name Kent Clark in modern times.

CLARK: [Laughter] Well, when Siegel and Shuster invented "Superman," back some time around 1938 or '39, they changed my life, because it made me don blue underwear with "S's" on it and spend my life in phone booths. And believe me, it was tough learning to leap tall buildings in a single bound. But one of the wonderful things about it was coming to Caltech, where people were relentlessly witty. I suppose they have made every possible variant on the name "Superman." I never heard anyone else do anything but repeat the Tech version. My favorite, incidentally, is "Super-Prof." [Laughter] The most common transmutation of my name is "Man Super," or "Namrepus"—that's Superman backwards. Anyway, this has been a subject of great merriment and sometimes humor. Bill Corcoran, for instance, my dear colleague, who was as sharp as you can possibly be, had known me roughly six or seven years. And one day he called me on the phone and said, "Kent, did you know that your name is Superman backwards?" [Laughter] He said, "My kids told me."

One of the things Clark Kent did was make me break up the rhythm by putting in my first initial, "J." It doesn't fool anybody, but it makes it harder to deal with. My real first name is Justus.

ERWIN: But you've never gone by that name.

CLARK: Except in the United States Army. To the United States Army I'm Justus K. Clark. And to the Internal Revenue I'm Justus Kent Clark. My great-grandfather was named Israel Justus Clark—nicknamed Jess—and that name has come down. Now I like the name, and if I'd been born at the age of thirty instead of zero, I would have used it. But I would have had to fight my

way home from school every night. Anyway, it has been fun. Hardly a week goes by that some tradesman or other doesn't comment on my name.

ERWIN: Did you ever get things like, "able to leap tall epics, or tall sonnets, at a single bound"?

CLARK: Well, I didn't get as many good wisecracks about Superman, really, as about Justus. In the army, I was known as "Military Justus." I've been known as "Frontier Justus," "Evenhanded Justus," sometimes "Poetic Justus." But Superman is the one that sticks.

ERWIN: We were going to talk a little bit about the state of the Institute during the periods of Presidents Brown and Goldberger. And there was one thing in particular I wanted to ask you. President Goldberger in his inaugural address gave considerable attention to improving the division of humanities and social sciences. And I wondered if that translated into something particular in your view?

CLARK: Well, I consider the Goldberger years as part of the transition of professionalizing, for want of a better term, for the humanities and the social sciences, making them essentially research operations rather than teaching operations and service operations. I think we talked last time about the trade-offs here. It had begun in the late years of Hallett Smith's tenure; it accelerated a great deal under Huttenback with many excursions and alarms, as we were saying last time; and continued as we shook the thing down, and people got used to the new order. We did indeed get some brilliant and fine people in here—Mac Pigman, to name just one, I think is simply marvelous and a great teacher as well as a fine research scholar. John Sutherland, tremendous. I'd say the scholarly quality of the division has improved. As far as the humanities is concerned, it reaches fewer people, but perhaps reaches them better in more intense, more advanced ways.

ERWIN: Was this a real switch from breadth to depth?

CLARK: Yes. But instead of a general assault all along the line on humanities problems, it's much more spotty.

ERWIN: Did you know, for example, that president Goldberger had wanted to appoint Roger Noll, who was an economist, as provost during the early 80s?

CLARK: Well, Roger is an extremely bright guy—a former student of mine, incidentally. I do not think it would have been a bad appointment. Roger, besides being extremely bright, is full of energy. To put it delicately, Roger, however, is also quite loud, and he turns certain people off—not me. I think the science faculty might have found that a little shocking. But believe me, they could have done a lot worse.

ERWIN: Well, it seems that the general thought was that a science person is the right sort of person for that job.

CLARK: Well, Roger himself is a Techer and knows a good deal about science and is a very bright cookie and would have been a good administrator. He was a good administrator of the division, incidentally.

ERWIN: Let's come to your magnum opus, *Goodwin Wharton*, now, which is a very remarkable book. Perhaps you could tell us how you came to this subject.

CLARK: I think I outlined some of my intellectual wanderings in the early script. But as silly as it sounds, there's a natural transition from my graduate school days to Goodwin Wharton. It sounds like getting into sin. I think I told you I did my doctoral dissertation on Jonathan Swift. And I also took a minor in philosophy at Stanford. And to write about Jonathan Swift's politics, you have to become an expert in seventeenth-century political philosophy, when every political idea known to man, practically, was not only hammered out theoretically, but also on the battlefield—when, for instance, the English beat each other into toleration.

Anyway, in the course of becoming an expert on the politics and the political philosophy of the time, I also became interested in the detailed history, and of course, in Jonathan Swift's likes and dislikes. Jonathan Swift began life as a Whig, and he went over and became propaganda minister for the Tories—they didn't call him that, but that's what he was. And he

had to "libel" all his old friends, to use his term—attack them. And incidentally, the attacks that these people made on each other make the modern smear campaigns look like Sunday school picnics.

Anyway, one of the people that Swift had to smear was his old political leader, Thomas, Earl of Wharton, who was tremendously important, and whose biography I decided to write. Swift is simply a marvelous hater. And he never forgave anyone he ever slandered. Being an honest man, he had to justify himself. So, to him, Tom Wharton became a universal villain. As Swift became older and more conservative, Wharton represented everything that he detested. Tom represented enlightened modernism, whereas Swift represented the Church of England, tradition, and the old order. Swift was a gut conservative, though he'd started out with a liberal political philosophy.

Anyway, I thought that anyone who is a universal villain, who chased ladies and ran race horses and ruled the Whig party and led the English Revolution must have been a very interesting guy. So I started collecting material on him. And I ran onto the fact in dredging up documents that the autobiography of his brother was in the British Library. So I wrote the British Library and asked them to put it on microfilm and send it to me. And what I got was a half a million words of this wild and weird and wonderful tale.

ERWIN: So you hadn't really any idea of what the content of this was. This was just in passing.

CLARK: No, no. I just read it. And it got more marvelous as I went along. Goodwin, born in 1653, began life at a time when much was in flux. The new science was beginning to come in. And one of his early interests was alchemy—and incidentally, so was Sir Isaac Newton's. Newton poured a lot of useless money into it, and he was much annoyed when Boyle of Boyle's Law didn't leave him the formula for the philosopher's stone.

Goodwin was interested in this. He was also interested in deep sea diving. In fact, one of the triumphs of his life was getting the government to provide him with warships to cover two diving expeditions to Tobermory in Scotland to raise the wreck of a Spanish galleon.

In his public life, he also became Lord of the Admiralty, Lieutenant Colonel in the Cavalry, and a Member of Parliament for fifteen or sixteen years, sometimes as knight of the shire. But his private life was simply wonderful and weird. He fell into the hands of a lady

named Mary Parish, who has to be the best con lady that ever lived. She was a spiritualist. She had a familiar spirit named George. She had made contact with the fairies—the Lowlanders, they're called, because they're not like Tinkerbell, they live under the ground and control great treasures. Having a familiar spirit, she could tell where treasures were buried. And in the days before banks and banknotes, many people did indeed bury treasure. In fact, Lord Wharton, at the time of the Revolution, buried 40,000 pounds at Woburn in gold and had a hell of a time finding it. [Laughter] He dug up two acres before he found it.

ERWIN: Incidentally, weren't there very strict laws about treasure?

CLARK: Well, there were laws about retrieving and salvaging wrecks; a certain amount of tax went to the Crown. Anyway, Goodwin was a terrible unsuccess as a person up till the time he met Mary Parish. His alchemy had cost him a lot of money and got him nothing, and he had impoverished some of his friends, including John Wildman. His diving apparatus had never gained him anything. A fire engine that he'd bought the patents on never did anything. He was broke. But worst of all, he had been elected to Parliament. And being a good Whig, he made a terrifically virulent speech against the Duke of York, who later became King of England. And James II too was a marvelous hater; he never forgot an insult. So Goodwin, when James came, was not only flat broke and in debt up to his ears, but also he was *persona non grata* in the government, and he might be picked up any day by the king's officers.

Under all of this, Mary Parish took him over and promised him wonderful things: He's going to marry the Queen of the Fairies; he's going to find great treasures. She puts him in contact with the angels, and finally with God, who talks in doggerel verse. And Goodwin is always on the verge of being rich beyond imagination, or being appreciated for what he truly is instead of the despised younger son with a brother who's so personable and so important. At any rate, quickly, Goodwin and Mary Parish become lovers, although Mary is already fifty years old—twenty years older than he is. And she alleges that she's having children. Now, he never gets to see the children, but she produces them sometimes in battalions—two or three at a time. And there's always some good reason he can't see them. So the story of his private life is the story of his belief in Mary and of his trials, as one project after another fails. But Mary always has a marvelous excuse. As you and I were saying the other day, reality was doing nothing for

Goodwin. And this magical world is both literally and figuratively his salvation as he clings to these hopes.

ERWIN: In some ways, it seems to me almost medieval. It seems as if he had gone back into almost a mystic view of the world.

CLARK: Oh, yes, he had. But, of course, you must remember that we're talking about 1685. Although the Enlightenment 15 beginning, not to believe in spirits is still a sign you're probably an atheist. Samuel Johnson, you'll remember, a hundred years later believed in spirits. So Goodwin's belief in the supernatural isn't too unusual, but the extent to which he believes it and the extent to which he's manipulated by Mary, especially on such side issues as buried treasure and fairies, well, it's marvelous.

After the Revolution, of course, Goodwin's family, being good Whigs, and very important Whigs at that, came into power. In fact, just about now, three days ago, would be 300 years since officially William and Mary were declared king and queen of England. And one of the first things they did was to appoint Tom Wharton and Lord Wharton, his father, to the Privy Council, and they gave Henry Wharton a regiment. And they gave Goodwin nothing. [Laughter] However, later, after Henry dies—at Dundalk from the fever—and his younger brother William has been killed as a result of an infection from a slight wound in a duel, Goodwin's the only one left, besides Tom, to handle the Wharton interests. So he gets into parliament. And as his material and political success grows, and as the disappointments on the spiritual level continue, his faith in Mary subtly weakens. In the meantime, she's palmed off a young boy on him that she claims to be his—whom he names Hezekiah—and who ultimately inherits his property.

So the story of Goodwin Wharton is the story of this sort of gradual disillusionment, but never quite total disillusionment in the spiritual world, and his success in this second—best material world that you and I paddle about in all the time. [Laughter] Not shabby, you understand. When his father dies, he inherits from the estate something like 920 pounds a year. If you multiply that by fifty, that would be in American dollars now roughly $50,000 a year, poor devil. Plus Lieutenant Colonel in the cavalry, another 400 pounds a year—make that another $20,000 a year. And other bits and pieces. The Lord of the Admiralty, a thousand pounds a year. But that's nothing compared to marrying the Queen of the Fairies, of having the treasures.

Incidentally, he's also promised that he'll marry Queen Mary after King William dies, and Queen Anne. [Laughter] Anyway, all of this stuff is there, in his autobiography. But it's done in diary form, and it's verbose, it's repetitive. What I did was disentangle the story—tell it consecutively—but I told it from Goodwin's point of view. I don't say that he's a yo-yo, although he is a yo-yo. I never say in the book that he is a marvelous textbook case of the will to believe and the need to be deceived. In a way, he's a sort of flaky Everyman. All of us hate to face anything, and he hates it worse. [Laughter] But he has a much more talented girl friend than any of us are ever apt to have. Incidentally, she dies pregnant at the age of seventy-three—she says she's pregnant. But of course he looks for the signs of pregnancy, so they won't show up for the people who take care of the corpse, and miraculously the signs have vanished—God has taken them away.

The way I write the story, I like to think it's high comedy. It's a tragedy, too, to be deceived in this way. It's annoying. You want to kick the little clown around the block; you want to pick him up and shake him. He's like your idiot little brother. And beyond this, he's very bright, he's very competent. He runs his expeditions to Tobermory very well. He does a treasure hunting trip to the Isle of Jersey. He's a competent Lord of the Admiralty, he attends the meetings. He's a good parliamentarian. In fact, in 1696, he is essentially the majority leader in the House of Commons.

Anyway, all of this is a wonderful mixture. And I've tried to unscramble it and tell it straight on. Now, of course, this involved a tremendous amount of research. You can imagine the amount of secondary research. So it was a long, long project. And now that I have done that, and with that much research behind me, I'm tackling his brother Tom. I'm back to where I started.

ERWIN: When did you start, approximately?

CLARK: About 1960. But as I told you, I took at least five years out to be "commissar of culture" for Caltech, and to write many shows, and all the rest of this stuff. But I would say that with sort of serious, steady work, I've been working on these clowns since 1972, and that's quite a while.

ERWIN: And the book was published when?

CLARK: In ’84.

ERWIN: And about to be issued in paperback now. Perhaps you’ll be a bestseller now.

CLARK: [Laughter] Well, I want Goodwin to be widely circulated, simply because people ought to know Goodwin. [Laughter]

ERWIN: I agree. Well, does Goodwin bear any resemblance to Caltech, specifically? Is there an allegory of Caltech here?

CLARK: [Laughter] No, it isn’t, really—only in a left-handed sort of way. Caltech is also flaky, but it’s flaky in almost systematically the opposite direction. It’s going to find that nothing is real but atoms and the void, and it will chase the atom down to its last subatom. And Goodwin was always going to find something, either spiritual or wonderful, because he was always going to be a major prophet, greater than Moses and Aaron. He was always going to be a political great. And as Tommy Lauritsen said about Caltech people, the reason they’re in physics in the first place is they don’t want to be bothered with politics. So, he’s the antitype of the Caltecher. If he’s deluded, he’s deluded in the opposite direction.

I must say, I expect my readers to understand that there really aren’t any fairies, there really aren’t any spirits that guard buried treasures. That if there are angels, they don’t appear in glasses of water, and if there’s a God, he doesn’t stand behind doors and talk in doggerel verse. [Laughter]

ERWIN: It sounds like you had some reaction to the book that led you to believe that people weren’t quite as sharp on this subject as you had wanted them to be.

CLARK: Well, I had one critic, a historian, who thought that I thought that Goodwin was discovering spiritual truths. I suppose this yo-yo would read *Gulliver’s Travels* literally, too, and think it was implausible. [Laughter]

ERWIN: So you came back to Tom, and now you are working on a biography of Tom.

CLARK: Yes. I've spent the last four years. Goodwin died in 1704—that was in the early part of Queen Anne's reign and just after the battle of Blenheim, that essentially stopped the French the first time. And Goodwin died at fifty-one.

Tom, on the other hand, who was leading the Whig party at the time, lived on to bring in George I in 1714. And, incidentally, Queen Elizabeth II, in part, owes her throne to Tom and his friends. He stood solid on the Revolution foot, as it was called in those days. He helped to whistle King James out of his kingdom by writing "Lilliburlero" when he was a consistent supporter of the Revolution.

ERWIN: What's "Lilliburlero"?

CLARK: It's a song. I won't repeat it, but it begins: "Ho, Brother Teague, dost hear the decree! Lilliburlero bullenala." King James tried to bring in the Irish troops to help him hold down the English. And this was a satirical song against it—and Henry Purcell wrote the music, incidentally. It was a ballad, and it was the first song hit in history, as far as I know. The whole army was singing it, and Tom Wharton later boasted that he whistled and sang King James out of three kingdoms.

Anyway, Tom lived on until 1715. And that meant that, although I had researched Goodwin's period from the time that he picks up his autobiography in 1683 up through his death in 1704 with a very, very fine-toothed comb, I hadn't handled the Queen Anne period since I did my doctoral dissertation. In the meantime, much great research has been done, and there were a lot of things I had to do. So I had to go through all of that, including the Lords' journals—Tom was in the House of Lords all the time—and the supplementary material was staggering, incidentally—four years' worth of reading. And I also had to pick up in detail the stuff from 1673, the end of Charles II'S reign, plus many fine discoveries of documents that were lying about loose, including the letters of Goodwin and Tom's sister Mary, which is like finding gold or platinum. Anyway, there's a tremendous amount of stuff that has to be sorted through. But I should say that I'm ninety-five percent through with the research, and I'm now down to the ugly business of composing. I've run out of excuses, so I have to sit down and hack away. And my guess is it will take three or four years to get it all dredged out.

ERWIN: You retired from Caltech in 1986 with the title of emeritus. And you also had been made an honorary alumnus.

CLARK: Yes, that was about ’82.

ERWIN: What was that in recognition of?

CLARK: Oh, just because I had always been interested in the students, and I’d written a lot of shows. Earlier, in the fifties, I’d been a member of a sort of honorary faculty/student group called the Beavers. The Caltech alumni are a really fine group, and of course, their reunions are nothing but fun. I’m also an honorary member of the Class of ’51, because they and I came in ’47 and they graduated in ’51. So we all learned our business together.

ERWIN: Well, it certainly should go into the record that Hallett Smith described you as a very gifted teacher who had a very absorbing interest in the individual student, and I’m sure that has been a big part of your presence here.

CLARK: Well, of course, it’s fun. The Caltech students, as I think I’ve said earlier, are just tremendously bright. And if you can’t teach them, you can’t teach, period. And if you like your subject, you’re just bound to have a fine time. I was remembering yesterday a marvelous episode from my teaching career. I used to cast out the last act of *Henry IV, Part I*— those wonderful Harry Percy scenes—and also *Macbeth*. And I would have the boys read the scenes beforehand. I’d give out the parts a week before and have them polish up their handling of blank verse. Anyway, we did *Macbeth* one time. And the guys who were playing Malcolm’s army were doing a very lackadaisical job of reading their lines. I said, “Come on, you guys, put some life into it.” So next time, when they came to the line, “On to Dunsinane,” they marched right out of class and down the stairs, and that was the end of *Macbeth*. [Laughter]