I hope Henry is happy to see me up here, representing his students at this tribute. Some professors would have to wonder what might be coming. But if there are those who would like to make their professors squirm, I am not among them. Or, if maybe there are actually some professors of mine whom I would like to roast, Henry is not among them.

And apparently I’m not alone. I wrote to others of my graduate student cohort from the late 1960s. Their memories aren’t what they used to be, of course. And if they had sent in mean stories, you wouldn’t hear them from me. But let me go on record as saying that, dig though I did, I didn’t come up with anything I will have to suppress about Henry. I won’t be tiptoeing through the innuendo.

At the university of Florida, where I teach, I have had two colleagues who were also Iowa PhDs, in various fields of history. Once in a while we would stroll across the street to have a beer, for old times’ sake. And since we don’t have much in common really, we end up reminiscing about our graduate student days, and inevitably begin griping about our instructors. Feeling sorry for ourselves, like most academics do after a few beers, we take it out on our mentors.

Now it’s probably true that most of us have had some quirky, exasperating, unreasonable, tiresome, odd, unpleasant mentors. But I had Henry Horwitz. So I don’t shine in these conversations.

I do have painful memories of my previous graduate school. But not of Iowa, and not of Henry. I do find myself rooting against the Hawkeyes wherever I see them on TV, but I have always viewed this as a displacement of the general anxiety and terror that a graduate program can generate.

Of course, it is high praise that Henry is not a favorite target. But it complicates my task today. So, without a wealth of stories from others, I want to tell you how Henry helped deliver me from my previous experience, and set me on the road to a happy and I hope productive career in a wonderful profession.

When I came to Iowa in the summer of 1965, I wanted to work with Professor Aydelotte in modern Britain, and I was prepared to do the kind of quantification that he was famous for. But when I arrived I found that he had just accepted the chairmanship, and wasn’t taking any more graduate students. I had just moved my wife and all our stuff up here, and so this was a dark day for me. But I asked around among the graduate students, and began hearing about a
new, very young, very impressive professor in the earlier period of English history. It was rumored that he had been trained at Oxford. Maybe he was my best bet.

I didn’t immediately seek out this Professor Horwitz, because I wanted to be cautious. But I did keep a look-out for him. He didn’t look all that young to me. I was fooled by a little thinning of the hair, which is a good career move when you get your doctorate at age 25, and your students are likely to be older than you.

I do remember how we met. Henry sometimes sat in on his colleagues’ lectures, which is a nice gesture. And there were plenty of people in the department then whose lectures were well worth hearing. I remember how enthralled I was in Stow Persons’ courses, and the wonderful organization of Donald Sutherland’s, for example. I was taking Rosalie Colie’s courses in early modern European intellectual, which Natalie Davis herself once took, and Henry sat in the back of the room. One day I caught Professor Colie off base with a question, and after she botched her answer I sought out Professor Horwitz to pursue the matter. After listening to me for a moment Henry declared. “Oh, I know who you are!”

So, I’d been noticed. He must have read my application file, although it probably wasn’t in his stack. I don’t remember his answer to my question, but I do remember how encouraged I was to think that somebody might take me seriously as a graduate student

I still didn’t need to commit myself to a field or a supervisor just yet. So I began taking courses. Henry’s were absolute models. They were wonderfully organized, the readings made sense, they hung together, and most importantly, we could actually get through them in the time we had. I do not remember my fellow students from those courses, partly because I was engaged with the instructor. He was all business. He might be sparing in his praise, but he was invariably encouraging and attentive.

When I proceeded to Henry’s seminars, I really felt that I was in the big leagues. I must say that it wasn’t us students that convinced me of this. How can I say this? State universities, like Iowa, like Florida, are bound by what a colleague of mine calls the “Land Grant principle” in higher education. Which, if I understand him correctly means trying to give all taxpayers’ children a chance, however unlikely, to follow their dreams. I was certainly a beneficiary of this system.

I realize now that it cannot have been easy for Henry to adjust to this environment. I realized it then. I could tell that he respected his colleagues, who
deserved it. We students were another matter. But Henry never betrayed any despair over our preparation or our progress. His interest in the material must have carried him through. And he took the rest of us along as far as he could.

Eventually it was inevitable that I should become Henry’s responsibility. I was not a perfect fit. I was not destined to be an archival scholar like Henry, if for no other reason that that I wasn’t going to get the fellowship aid to spend my summers in London. Besides that, I felt myself drawn to the kind of research that Iowa was famous for -- quantification and statistical treatment of date -- what is now called the “digital humanities.” Henry found help for me, and did me the kindness of letting me go in that direction, to the point that I have ended up as more of a historical sociologist than an historian.

Graduate mentors like to brag on their students and build empires within their research area. I hope there were those behind me that could share more of Henry’s research interests and skills. But he didn’t forget me when I was gone. One year when I managed to publish two books, doing my cultural-history thing, Henry me a postcard from Oxford to report that Blackwells had them both. I haven’t framed the postcard yet, but I may.

My fellow student Larry Bryant remembers an episode from this Viet Nam era that showed a side of Henry that I never saw. The two of them were part of an anti-war group called “Priorities for National Security,” organized to explain to Iowans the point of the demonstrations at the university. They were scheduled to meet with a Rotary Club in Mt. Pleasant, but as they pulled into the parking lot, the Rotarians were fleeing so as not to give countenance to these pointy-headed agitators. Larry says he felt like one of Cromwell’s troopers being shunned in a Royalist county.

Of course, Henry’s legacy will substantially be in the books that he has contributed over the years. It’s true that titles like CHANCERY EQUITY RECORDS AND PROCEEDINGS, 1600-1800; A GUIDE TO THE DOCUMENTS IN THE PUBLIC RECORDS OFFICE forfeit all hopes for a movie contract. Even THE PARLIAMENTARY DIARY OF NARCISSUS LUTTRELL doesn’t sound like the pilot for a series. But these books are at the very foundation of research in that pivotal period of British history. Henry is truly an historian’s historian, and reviewers always acknowledge their debt for work they couldn’t have done for themselves. One reviewer in the ENGLISH HISTORICAL REVIEW spoke of the “almost impenetrable” sources that Henry had opened up to scholars.

There is something else about Henry’s scholarship that you would only notice if you were as old as I am. His first book came out in 1968, and his latest,
so far, was in 2001. It is almost inevitable that the fires that keep our writing going until that last promotion will flicker out afterwards, sometimes long before retirement. There may still be more in Henry’s publication pipeline, but 33 years of such painstaking scholarship is a remarkable record. And the presses involved show him at the top of his profession. Cambridge University Press at age 30, the Clarendon Press, the Public Record Office itself. They don’t come more distinguished than that. I have always enjoyed telling Brits that I was a student of Henry Horwitz.

If you’ll indulge me for just one final story, there is one that epitomizes Henry’s grace toward his students. It involves my qualifying exam, which he may have known was a matter of positive terror for me, given past unpleasantness elsewhere. Henry took his turn early in the proceedings, and I suppose his colleagues were looking to him for a little guidance on my case. I remember his first question, as I sat quailing in fear. It was about whether the counting of agricultural “manors” was a meaningful measure of anything. I knew the question referred to a recent book by Lawrence Stone, and I knew that Stone had a footnote containing a formula relevant to the issue. I wasn’t sure I understood the formula, but then I didn’t know if Henry did either. But I was afraid my answer was too vague. Henry turned to the group and casually said “I have no further questions of the candidate,” letting them believe that I’d actually answered the question. And that I should pass. And that I was your standard graduate student and belonged in the profession. I’ve never thanked him for that moment. But now I can do so on behalf of all the students who got pleasure from succeeding under his generous and very professional care.

C. John Sommerville
PhD, 1970