

# Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members  
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by  
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

# Contents



## ***Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status***

Robert Choate Darnton (2007)	Page 1
Peter Raymond Grant	Page 5
John Joseph Hopfield	Page 8
William Louis Howarth	Page 10
Hisashi Kobayashi	Page 14
Joseph John Kohn	Page 18
Ralph Lerner	Page 21
Eugene Perry Link Jr.	Page 24
Guust Nolet	Page 27
Giacinto Scoles	Page 29
John Suppe (2007)	Page 33
Abraham Labe Udovitch	Page 36
Bastiaan Cornelius van Fraassen	Page 40

# William Louis Howarth



Will Howarth was born in Minneapolis in November 1940 and grew up in Abraham Lincoln's home town, Springfield, Illinois. Will's British and Norman-Irish ancestors settled New England in the 17th century, then migrated to the Great Lakes states, where the family tree ran strongly to agrarians, dissenters, inventors, and progressives. A grandfather designed Chicago's Wacker Drive; a cousin was Justice Learned Hand; and Will is the eldest son of Nelson Howarth, an attorney who served as fighter-director on the USS *Lexington*, and later as Springfield's best-known reform mayor, an early advocate of civil rights and urban renewal.

Will entered the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1958 and worked his way through college as a tractor driver, construction worker, and dishwasher, graduating with highest distinction in English and an NDEA fellowship for doctoral study at the University of Virginia. There he studied British and American literature after 1800. He published his M.A. thesis, won a Woodrow Wilson dissertation fellowship, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa with *summa cum laude*.

Will reached Princeton in 1966, three years before coeducation. In that vanished era, freshman courses met on Saturdays, cigarette smoke filled classrooms, and on fine spring days, a steady rattle of typewriter keys poured from open windows. The English department then averaged more than 250 majors, taught by an all-male, mainly Ivy faculty. Preceptors covered all literary fields; in his early years Will lectured on Shakespeare, Gibbon, and Austen, as well as Melville and Poe. Over the next four decades, his courses featured intellectual history and textual criticism, ranging from pre-colonial America to postmodern fiction and the writings of Charles Darwin. Will's hallmark is inclusion and innovation: he served on the original committee that created Princeton's Program in African American Studies, added

over 50 new courses to the University curriculum, and pioneered in humanities computing, training graduate students to design websites and teach with multimedia. His legendary devotion to advisees appears in the acknowledgment pages of dozens of books published by former students. (“To Will Howarth,” wrote Richard Preston \*81, “assassin of the mediocre phrase.”) In 42 years, Will supervised 100 dissertations and 256 senior theses, a record likely to stand for some time.

His research falls into three interlocking phases. The early scholarship was on American romantics, especially Henry D. Thoreau. In the 1960s most scholars saw Thoreau as a minor transcendentalist who died early and published little. Will’s dissertation argued that Thoreau’s central work is a 2-million-word journal, unpublished until 1906. Evidence for this view lay in his scattered papers. From 1968 to 1970, Will visited over 70 library collections to compile *The Literary Manuscripts of Henry D. Thoreau* (1971), the first comprehensive account of Thoreau’s writing methods. Soon he became the youngest-ever editor in chief of an NEH-sponsored project, the 25-volume *Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, published by Princeton University Press. Will reorganized the Thoreau Edition by creating at Firestone Library a textual center that trained a generation of scholars in documentary editing. From 1972 to 1980 the Edition published four volumes. All the while, he taught full time and directed the large undergraduate program. He then resigned from editing to complete two books, published in 1982: *Thoreau in the Mountains* and *The Book of Concord: Thoreau’s Life as a Writer*. The latter study argues that Thoreau’s career did not halt after publication of *Walden* (1854), but was a process of continuous intellectual and literary growth. The book won a biography award from the Library of Congress, and its “natural history” of Thoreau’s life has become an Americanist classic.

Forms of nonfiction, especially autobiography and literary journalism, comprise a second phase in Will’s scholarship. In his essay “Some Principles of Autobiography,” he argues for a cross-genre typology to illuminate how the authorial self observes and participates in a story. As editor of *The John McPhee Reader* (1976), his meticulous

introductory account of McPhee's background, themes, and artistic methods remains the gold standard for criticism of literary nonfiction. In the late 1970s, Will began to field-test his ideas by writing more than 90 essays and reviews for major periodicals, including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Smithsonian*. He also followed the tracks of American authors as a contract writer for *National Geographic*, spending weekends rappelling down cliffs to interview eagle biologists or horsepacking into the Sierras, then catching red-eye flights back to New Jersey to deliver Monday-morning lectures. During one such research trip in Maine his party wrecked two canoes on a wilderness river. He recalls standing waist-deep in freezing water, silently asking why he was not on the trail of Henry James. He continued his National Geographic Society work for 16 years, writing a dozen articles and book chapters on history, literature, natural science, and physical geography, then driving a camper-bus from Newfoundland to British Columbia to produce *Traveling the Trans-Canada* (1986), a book honored by the government of Canada.

In the 1990s, his field experiences created a third phase in Will's teaching and research. He introduced the University's first courses on literary geography, environmental history, American places, and the relations of race and place. He was the sole humanist to participate in forming the Princeton Environmental Institute (1991), which he served for 16 years, both on the executive committee and in teaching environmental studies courses. Beyond Princeton, he wrote for journals devoted to environmental humanities and became a primary voice in ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary movement that examines the role of human values in environmental issues and frames the non-human in historical and cultural contexts. His essays on wilderness, biodiversity, and biogeography shaped the field, by insisting that humanists acquire ecological literacy.

In retirement, Will continues to teach and write. He looks back on a career of honors, fellowships, grants, and offices: president of the Thoreau Society of America, trustee of Princeton University

Press, chairman of the Center for American Places, board member of 12 scholarly associations and journals. He wrote and edited 13 books, delivered hundreds of papers and lectures on nature-culture issues, served Princeton on 45 faculty committee assignments and led 51 alumni seminars and colleges, recently on journeys to New Zealand and Tanzania. Most of all, he values his years of contact with Princeton's students. "They made it all worthwhile," he says. His two proudest achievements in life: his daughter Jennifer, an international banker based in Brazil, and his son Jeffrey, who teaches geography at Middlebury College.