

Obituary

LAWRENCE OLSON (1918–1992)

Lawrence Olson, a widely known authority on Japan and retired Professor of History at Wesleyan University, died of cancer at his home in Washington, D.C., on March 17. Decorated in 1987 by the Government of Japan with the Order of the Sacred Treasure in recognition of his role in spreading knowledge of Japan in the United States, Olson was responsible for developing the program in Asian studies at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. He served on the faculty at the school from 1966 until his retirement in 1986. He continued his scholarly work after retirement, and his new book, *Ambivalent Moderns: Portraits of Japanese Cultural Identity*, was published in the month he died.

Born on May 7, 1918, in Memphis, Tennessee, Olson was raised in Mississippi and received his undergraduate education at the University of Mississippi, graduating in 1938. He earned a master of arts degree at Harvard University in 1939 and his doctoral degree there in 1955. During World War II, Olson graduated from the U.S. Navy Japanese Language School in Boulder, Colorado. He served in naval intelligence as a lieutenant with the Pacific Fleet Radio Unit at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the unit that deciphered the Japanese military codes. From 1948 to 1950, he worked at the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington, and he served as cultural attaché at the U.S. embassy in Manila, Philippines, in 1951–52, before completing his studies at Harvard. In 1955, he joined the American Universities Field Staff, an educational foundation dedicated to providing in-depth studies of contemporary foreign societies. He lived in Japan for most of the next twelve years, serving first as a staff associate with the organization and, from 1962 to 1966, as a senior staff associate. He and his family also maintained a home in Manchester, Massachusetts, during those years.

Olson wrote many articles and reports on Japanese social, political, and economic issues that were important reading for U.S. government officials and others concerned with Japan. He also lectured extensively on Japan.

In addition to his new book, he was the author of *Dimensions of Japan* (1963) and *Japan in Postwar Asia* (1970), as well as a book of poetry, *The Cranes on Dying River and Other Poems* (1947).

Lawrence Olson was a man of the world and of the word. He knew the importance of language and history for the study of East Asia and drew upon these for his own vivid writing and teaching about Japan. As my colleague at Wesleyan, he never tired of warning me about the burden of “bearing witness” to my field in a largely Western-oriented academic community. That burden became lighter in the company of this large-hearted man.

Few of us who knew him well or read his works will forget the deep, brooding voice of the poet, of the Mississippi-bred word craftsman, who continued to inspire the scholar of Japanese intellectual life. Lawrence Olson was—to borrow some lines

from one of his favorite writers, Marianne Moore—one “who sees deep and is glad, who/accedes to mortality/and in his imprisonment rises/upon himself as the sea in a chasm, struggling to be/free and unable to be/so in its surrendering/finds continuing.”

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