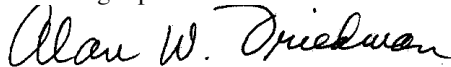


## DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
ROBERT M. PALTER**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Professor Robert M. Palter, Department of Philosophy and the Department of History, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary  
General Faculty and Faculty Council  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Arthur J. Thaman and Wilhelmina Doré Thaman Professor of English and Comparative Literature

**IN MEMORIAM  
ROBERT M. PALTER**

Robert Monroe Palter was Professor of Philosophy and History at The University of Texas at Austin from 1964 until 1983, when he left to become Charles A. Dana Professor of the History of Science at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He died in Farmington, Connecticut, on October 1, 2014.

The son of Meyer and Mildred Gilder Palter, Palter was born in New York City, in the borough of Queens, on June 19, 1924. He attended Stuyvesant High School, an elite, science-oriented public high school in Manhattan, setting a record for the highest GPA in that school's history. He then attended Columbia University, where he earned an A.B. in chemistry in 1943, shortly before his nineteenth birthday. He joined the United States Army upon graduating. Well trained in science, he served as a research assistant on the Manhattan Project from 1944 to 1946, researching techniques of uranium enrichment in laboratories at Columbia University. After World War II ended, he decided to pursue graduate work in philosophy at the University of Chicago, intending to study with Rudolf Carnap, who shortly thereafter decamped for UCLA. Palter earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy in 1952, writing a dissertation on Alfred North Whitehead, which became his first book. He then joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, initially as Instructor of Natural Sciences. He was Assistant Professor at Northwestern University during 1953–54, and then Assistant Professor of Natural Sciences at the University of Chicago. In 1957 he was promoted to Associate Professor of Physical Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Chicago, where he taught until moving to UT Austin as Professor of Philosophy and History in 1964.

Endowed with a powerful mathematical mind, Palter was competent to teach courses in the natural sciences and to discuss the theory of relativity, modern cosmology, and quantum mechanics with such “star” colleagues of his on the UT Austin campus as the physicists John Wheeler, George Sudarshan, and Ilya Prigogine. He was a National Science Foundation Fellow during 1960–61, and received a National Science Foundation Research Grant for 1966–67. In 1966, he organized a stunningly successful conference that brought to campus the world's leading authorities on Sir Isaac Newton to celebrate the tercentenary of Newton's *annus mirabilis*: the year 1666, when Newton derived the Law of Universal Gravitation and other major breakthroughs in mathematics, kinematics, and optics. For the correspondingly “marvelous” event of 1966, Palter not only coordinated the conference, he brilliantly supervised and coordinated a large-scale exhibition, from the rich holdings of the Humanities Research Center at UT (now the Harry Ransom Center), of rare books and papers that have significant connections to the discoveries just mentioned. The papers presented at the conference, which revolutionized Newton scholarship, were published first in *Texas Quarterly* and then as a book by MIT Press in 1971. To this day, Palter's *annus mirabilis* conference remains a milestone in UT's rise to academic eminence.

Palter was equally impressive as a scientifically trained philosopher and as a historian. To say that he could hold his own in a hard-driving rigorous argument with analytic philosophers is an understatement. He was

immensely learned and excruciatingly rigorous in employing the methods of historical research. His writings in the history of science stand out for their high sensitivity to context, detail, and nuance. His books include *Whitehead's Philosophy of Science* (University of Chicago Press, 1960), *Toward Modern Science* (edited, Noonday, 1961, in two volumes), *The Annus Mirabilis of Sir Isaac Newton* (MIT Press, 1971), *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots and Other Literary Fruits* (University of South Carolina Press, 2002), and *Selected Essays* (Prospect Press, 2014)

Palter was a model intellectual. His transcending of C. P. Snow's "two cultures" split reached beyond the confines of the history and philosophy of science. He knew literature and critical theory; he knew the theater, the visual arts and their history, music and its history; and he knew the social sciences other than history. An expert in the history of film, he frequently invited colleagues to join him to see films with historical significance shown in Austin-area theaters.

In his undergraduate teaching at the University, he created and taught a variety of philosophy and history courses. He also played a leading role in developing, coordinating, and himself offering a sequence of humanities courses that attracted students across the spectrum of the arts and sciences. In 1967, he founded and began directing a joint program in the history and philosophy of science involving his two departments, Philosophy and History. The Joint Program flourished under his supervision.

As stated at the opening, Palter left the University to accept a distinguished professorship at Trinity College, Hartford, in 1983. His position there gave him the freedom to teach any course he wanted. He offered courses not only in the history and philosophy of science but also in the history of food—as a metaphor for things of deeper human significance, including love, politics, time, and the divine. He retired from Trinity College in 1992, becoming Professor Emeritus, after a clogged coronary artery and angioplasty made him confront his own mortality. Even so, he remained active. The following year, he wrote, "With the delicious freedom accompanying retirement, I have been writing steadily and have three articles to show for it; the most substantial—amounting to virtually a summary of the main features of ancient Egyptian and Greek astronomy, mathematics, and medicine—should appear in the early fall."

Personal qualities made Palter a much-valued friend and colleague. He was forthcoming and conscientious when it came to performing tasks in both of his departments. Politically engaged, he was respected not only as an articulate and responsible advocate of liberal causes but also as someone with a wealth of historical knowledge who showed psychological astuteness in judging persons and movements.

His capacity for humor, both endowed and cultivated, and his keen interest in theater and film were discovered in the late 1970s by Austin stage directors, who cast Palter in leading roles in several performances. D deservedly famous was his realization of the role of Mnesilochos, the protagonist in Aristophanes' hilarious comedy *Women Celebrating the Festival of the Thesmophoria* (sometimes translated as "The Poet and the Women," but in the William Arrowsmith translation that was used on this occasion brilliantly retitled "Euripides at Bay"). This major production at UT Austin's B. Iden Payne Theater in 1980, directed by one of the leading stage directors from Greece, remains memorable to this day for its ambition and quality.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Alexander P. D. Mourelatos (Chair), Daniel A. Bonevac and Sahotra Sarkar.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts on July 13, 2017, and posted under "Memorial Resolutions" at <https://wikis.utexas.edu/display/facultycouncil/Wiki+Home>.