

By Graeme Wynn

A Putative Prose Poem for Presidents Past

Or

A Punny Thing Happened on the Way to the Fortieth¹

1) John Opie	1977-1979	11) Jeffrey K. Stine	1999-2001
2) Wilbur L. Jacobs	1979-1980	12) Carolyn Merchant	2001-2003
3) Donald Worster	1980-1982	13) Douglas Weiner	2003-2005
4) Morgan Sherwood	1982-1985	14) Stephen Pyne	2005-2007
5) Clayton R. Koppes	1985-1987	15) Nancy Langston	2007-2009
6) John F. Richards	1987-1989	16) Harriet Ritvo	2009-2011
7) William Cronon	1989-1993	17) John McNeill	2011-2013
8) Martin Melosi	1993-1995	18) Gregg Mitman,	2013-2015
9) Susan Flader	1995-1997	19) Kathleen Brosnan	2015-2017
10) Donald Pisani	1997-1999	20) Graeme Wynn	Pres-elect

As a “yet-to-be,” rather than “has been” President - and a foreigner at that — I thought my contribution to this Slam should be a riff on “With a little Help from my Friends”. But certified tone deaf and lacking pitch, I feared that your answer to the question: “What would you do if I sang out of tune?” would indeed be “Stand up and walk out on me? So I reverted to plan B.

Because people often regard me as rather "earnest", I have forsaken The Beatles for a walk on the Wilde side with Oscar, in an attempt to demonstrate the Importance of Being Just That (ie Earnest), while offering some trivial comedy for serious people.²

I believe that on an occasion such as this **all** previous ASEH presidents, the quick and the dead, should be recognized in one form or another, and that the essential support received by the more recent among them from Lisa Mighetto, our Executive Director, must be acknowledged.

But that's only my **Opie-nion**. Running through the list of the distinguished leaders of this organization has proved less than straightforward. To understand our beginnings, I turned to The Book of Genesis which told me that **Jacob** was the third progenitor, but you will notice that we have him doubled up at second. Pondering Presidents 4 and 5, I began to think that it **Surewood** have been easier to pull this off if we could avoid the deep dark **copse** of difficult (unpunny) patronymics. But we can't. For some among our Presidential number, therefore it will have to be by their works that we know them – and ourselves – albeit at the cost of scandalously scant regard for chronology.

It seems well worth remembering our sixth President contemplated *An Unending Frontier*, and that our tenth set about *To Reclaim a Divided West*. Our twelfth happily perpetrated *Ecological Revolutions*, and Nancy, our fifteenth got the Blues at the mountain she had to climb as she saw *Forest Dreams* [turn into] *Forest Nightmares*. Harriet, her successor, seemed to grow reflexive at the *Animal Estate* she inherited with the

Phoenix meeting, but found her way through to the *Dawn of Green*. That gave Greg a little *Breathing Space*, and allowed Kathy to begin *Uniting Mountain and Plain*.

Some followers of celebrity culture and Bond movies have suggested that Brosnan Pierced the glass ceiling, but it is worth noting that this was done twenty years earlier by Susan whose name translates (roughly and possibly fittingly) from Swedish as “elderflower.”

At this point, I am sure, you are dying for a break, so we will pause for a **Weiner** and a **Stine**. If that is not enough respite, let me assure you that we will duly kneel before the Big Mac as we continue our journey and come in sight of the doubled golden arches of our eighth President. But by now, I suspect, you have had enough. Indeed, I hear a lot of **Cronon** in the aisles, and I can sense that you are **Pyne-ing** for something better. Let me warn you, however, that there is **Worse-t'** come: ASEH has done fabulously well to date, in a **no-Wynn** situation, and so it might seem that clear waters lie ahead, whatever the next two years have in store. Yet the sobering fact is that that although we already have a president-elect for 2019-21, we also have to **Russell** up a new **ED**.

As a last word: In question period, when someone asked why a handful of contributors to the Slam offered poems, and wondered at the logic of what had unfolded, it was observed that if the speaking order had not been determined by random draw, but orchestrated so that this contribution preceded the poetic reflections, audience members would have been able

to discern a clear and logical trajectory – from bad to verse.

¹ Echoing *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, a musical by Stephen Sondheim inspired by the the farces of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus (**not** Potus)

² Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (1895)