

The Honorable Erich L. Lehmann

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The year 2007 marks a concurrence of important statistical anniversaries. It is the 350th anniversary of the publication of the first printed work on mathematical probability, the short tract that Christian Huygens wrote following a visit to Paris, where he learned of the investigations of Fermat and Pascal. Also, 2007 is the 150th year since the birth of Karl Pearson, father of the Chi-square test and much else. And related to both those events, it is also the year our teacher, friend, and colleague Erich Lehmann celebrates his 90th birthday. Christian Huygen's tract served as the textbook on probability for over a half century, helping to form that subject. Karl Pearson inaugurated an important species of hypothesis testing. Both then have important similarities to Erich Lehmann. But rather than further explore those analogies immediately, I would like to characterize an important part of Erich's ongoing research by looking back to a more modern document.

The University of Chicago, rare among research universities, gives honorary degrees only in recognition of scholarly contributions of the highest order. We do not use those degrees to honor movie stars, philanthropists, or even heads of state (at least not over the past 80 years). There is a partial exception: we do so honor the departing Chair of our Board of Trustees. But that is the limit of the exceptions. We do not use this device to honor work done at Chicago; our major financial supporters are recognized in other ways; and discreet inquiries on behalf of politicians, celebrities, popular artists, and several heads of state have been politely turned aside, however meritorious they may have been on other grounds. Scholarship is the only coin of our realm.

One of the fields where this practice has been actively pursued is statistics. The first degree our newly formed department granted was an honorary Doctorate of Science to Ronald Fisher, June 13, 1952. This was followed over the next 31 years by degrees to Harold Hotelling (1955), Jerzy Neyman (1959), Maurice Bartlett (1966), John Tukey (1969), and Fred Mosteller (1973). In 1990, in anticipation of our University's centennial celebration beginning the following year, the Department undertook to resume this practice after several years by proposing an honorary degree for Erich Lehmann.

The procedure for granting honorary degrees at Chicago is a bit involved. After getting departmental agreement (an easy matter in this case) it is necessary to prepare a detailed case to be submitted to a cross-university committee appointed for this task. Exacting standards are upheld and only a fraction of proposals are given the nod of approval. Local legend has it that when someone proposed the Queen of England for a degree, it was turned back with a request for her list of publications. The procedure is like that for hiring a senior scholar from outside the university: several letters of recommendation must be solicited, the evidence must be assembled and carefully presented, all with an uncertain outcome. And unlike senior hires, even if the proposal is successful and the offer accepted, you do not get to keep the candidate!