



Everett Mendelsohn (1931–2023): Founding Editor of the *Journal of the History of Biology*

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The past decade has also seen the history of science emerge as an active field of research and teaching in the universities. New standards of scholarship have been established and new areas of interest have been explored. While the physical sciences have long served as the paradigm for work in the history of science, and several specialized journals have published articles in this field, this imbalance is now being addressed. Many historians of science are now turning their attention to the complex and often challenging problems of the history of biology, and a new generation of scholars has taken biology as the focus for their historical analyses. (Mendelsohn 1968, p. 1)

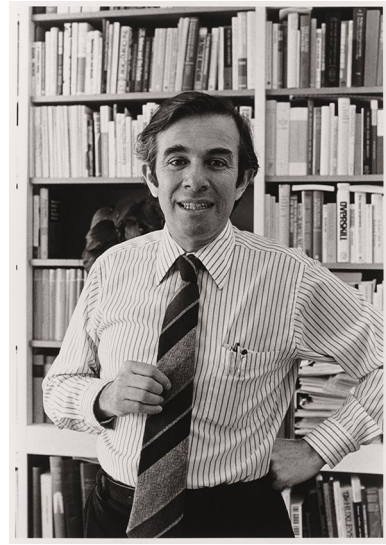
With these opening words to the Editorial Foreword of the first issue, the *Journal of the History of Biology*, was launched. Written by Everett Mendelsohn in 1968, then a young historian of science at Harvard University, they provide us with insights into the rationale for a journal specifically devoted to the history of biology (Fig. 1). Briefly put, there was too much emphasis on physics and the physical sciences, which had become paradigmatic of all science both in the popular imagination and in the professionalizing discipline of history of science. A need was therefore felt to “redress” this “imbalance,” especially by a newer generation of historians turning their attention to biology, a field of science full of special “complex” as well as “challenging” problems. The wording is fascinating to today’s student of the history of the history of biology. It could have been written by Harvard’s Ernst Mayr, a zoologist, evolutionary biologist and then Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, whose work had just turned to the history and philosophy of biology based on precisely the same kind of arguments. Indeed, the backstory to the founding of the journal involved more than a bit of rivalry between Mayr and Mendelsohn over who precisely would serve as its first editor. As Mark B. Adams in this issue notes, the roles played by Mayr and Mendelsohn as fellow historians of biology at Harvard, had to be deftly negotiated with respect to not just the journal editorship, but also to teaching and graduate advising. Whatever the deeper history of the founding of the journal reveals about

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Fig. 1 Undated photograph of Everett Mendelsohn in his study, Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute



their respective roles, however, the following statement in the same Editorial Foreword could only have been written by Mendelsohn and not Mayr: “[b]iology, in particular, must be studied in terms of its relationships with the other sciences and with the intellectual currents of its day. It may be examined as well for its interaction with the institutions of the society which spawns it” (Mendelsohn 1968, p. 1).

As nearly all the contributors to this special section of *JHB* honoring the life and legacy of its first editor note, the emphasis on “science and society,” or “biology and society” were defining features in Mendelsohn’s approach to the history of biology. To Mendelsohn, biology was always steeped in social values, and the cultural and historical context shaped the trajectory of this distinctively complex science. He taught memorable courses on the topic that drew in hundreds of undergraduates and encouraged (if not pushed) his many doctoral students to include the social dimensions of whatever specific subject area they had chosen. In the process of doing that, and in editing this journal to encourage sociological and contextual approaches, he shaped the trajectory of our field, including work that would have been deemed too controversial to publish in other venues.

And it was not just the history of biology that appeared in the pages of *JHB* under his editorship. Philosophy of biology was given nearly equal weight especially in the early years of the journal. This was deliberate, explicitly so (Mendelsohn 2017). Indeed, volume II of 1969 featured a series of foundational papers in the philosophy of biology that included David L. Hull’s famous “What the Philosophy of Biology is Not,” the essay that is thought by some to have launched the modern field of the philosophy of biology (Hull 1969).¹This, and other philosophical papers grew out of an

¹ For more on the importance of this paper and David L. Hull’s role in shaping the trajectory of the modern philosophy of biology see Pierre-Olivier Méthot (2023) and Michael Ruse (2010).

Asilomar Conference organized by Mendelsohn himself on explanation in biology that brought together some 40 philosophers, historians, and also biologists (Smocovitis 1992; 1996). As Pierre-Olivier Méthot has recently stated, furthermore, “it was Mendelsohn who initially set Hull on the path of an extensive critical review of the philosophy of biology,” and it was Mendelsohn who also first wrote that “‘there is a lot of dead wood to be cut away so that some of the basic questions can be asked,’ not Hull” (Méthot 2023, p. 26). Indeed, even a quick exploration of authors, subject areas, chronological periods, and approaches in *JHB* of those initial years shows us how much of an inclusive, ecumenical attitude characterized Mendelsohn’s 31-year editorship of this journal – notwithstanding his own deep commitment to understanding science in its sociopolitical contexts.

Nearly all the papers in this special section attest, furthermore, that broader society and politics mattered greatly to Mendelsohn, which is why he also devoted his own life to making society better by quelling conflicts informally, working formally with political organizations, and helping out vulnerable people around him – often students or individuals questioning their own self-worth as scholars or going through the usual career crises. He adopted Quakerism, as a way of life as well as of work, and tried to impart its values to his many students, collaborators, colleagues and friends. He actively engaged in the major political battles of his day, from Vietnam to the Middle East conflict to more local conflicts involving Harvard administrative policies and personalities. In short, Mendelsohn was an activist, unabashedly so, and believed that good academics ought to be. He didn’t view this as time away from scholarly work, but an integral part of his professional responsibilities, and helped produce at least one doctoral student, namely Garland E. Allen who similarly blended activism with scholarship – and became his successor as editor of this journal in the same spirit.²

There is even more to Everett Mendelsohn’s legacy, including the fact that he probably wrote more tenure and promotion letters than anyone else in the history of biology. He (and his successor editors) helped most of our generation of historians of biology achieve their earliest scholarly publications including, we gratefully disclose, the current editors of this journal. He had a capacious, generous, and charitable personality, taking the time to assist early career scholars on a wide range of professional and personal problems, and his infectious enthusiasm was instrumental in recruiting many to the field. He was a towering figure in the history of biology, and arguably the history of biology’s preeminent community-builder. For all these reasons, we have chosen to dedicate an appreciable portion of this issue to Mendelsohn’s legacy, including no less than 10 contributors to remember him. Written more in the style of tributes, than academic obituaries or eulogies,³ these essays are by former students, mentees, colleagues, collaborators, and friends. They are arranged in a loose chronological order beginning with insights into the field born during the

² See the special *In memoriam* dedicated to Garland E. Allen in *Journal of the History of Biology* 56 (2023).

³ For a traditional obituary that includes details of his family background and education see Genzlinger (2023).

turbulent politics of the 1960s that locate Mendelsohn writing in a hotel room in Vietnam while the Tet Offensive was raging, and ending with the moving image of a flag flown at half-staff in his honor at the Marine Biological Station at Woods Hole. We hope that they do some small bit of justice to the memory of someone whose life and work were dedicated to serving our community.

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