



Remembering Everett Mendelsohn, a Kind and Generous Mentor

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I vividly remember my first encounter with Everett Mendelsohn. It occurred one cold March morning in 1986, when I traveled on a red-eye train from Philadelphia to Boston to interview for the doctoral program in the History of Science Department at Harvard. After arriving at South Station, I hopped on the Red Line to Harvard Square and then trudged through the accumulating snow before finally locating the Science Center, a modernist building on the opposite side of campus from the subway station. There I was met by a genial middle-aged gentleman sporting a blue-and-white striped dress shirt and one of his signature Liberty of London floral ties.

Everett was extremely kind to this sleep deprived and more than a little nervous young man. I don't recall much about our conversation that day, but I can still picture passing through the reception area in the History of Science Department main office, where his secretary, Ruth Bartholomew, used to sit at a desk in front of a large white shelf brimming with books of various sizes and hues. One two-foot section stood out in the middle of this visual cacophony. Here all the spines were the same height, and all were colored a more-or-less uniform sage green with a neat white stripe across the top. This, I soon learned, was Everett's pride and joy, a complete run of the *Journal of the History of Biology*, which he had launched nearly two decades earlier and would continue to edit for thirteen more years. While I don't recall if he pointed out the journal to me or if I noticed it on my own, I do remember being awed by the possibility of working with the renowned scholar responsible for this impressive looking publication. I received admission offers from several other programs, but my experience that day sealed the deal. Over the next six years, I became one of more than forty-five doctoral advisees whose intellectual and professional development Everett profoundly shaped (Lemann and Shah 2023).

One of the courses Everett regularly taught during my time at Harvard was a required graduate-level introduction to the history of science. There were five or six of us in the

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class that entered in the fall of 1986, and each week we would read a book or series of articles exemplifying a particular approach to the history of science or an allied field in preparation for our class discussions. Many of the readings were classics—things like Thomas Kuhn’s 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Thomas Merton’s landmark studies in the sociology of science—but we also had the chance to grapple with cutting-edge historiography, recent work in the sociology of scientific knowledge and the feminist critique of science, to name a couple of examples that immediately come to mind. One of the more unusual readings was Thomas Gladwin’s 1970 *East is a Big Bird: Navigation and Logic on Puluwat Atoll*, a fascinating anthropological study of how Micronesian navigators, using only their brains and bodies, regularly sailed hundreds of miles across the open ocean, often in darkness, to reach the tiny islands that dotted the region. During our weekly meetings, Everett constantly pushed us to “unpack” the assumptions and arguments of the scholars we were reading.

Because he was burning the candle at both ends in his dual roles as university professor and ardent peace activist, Everett would sometimes appear to momentarily doze off during our seminar. But we quickly learned that even when this happened, he had an uncanny ability to encapsulate key points of long, complex exchanges thoroughly, accurately, and perceptively. He would also ask penetrating questions and suggest fruitful ways for moving the conversation forward. In the ensuing years I would frequently witness him do the same thing at conferences and workshops. “Let me see if I can pull together what I am hearing here,” he would often begin before launching into a masterful synthesis (Genzlinger 2023). Everett had an amazing gift for careful listening, astute questioning, and dazzling summary.

Without a couple of critical interventions that Everett made my first year, I’m pretty sure I would have been forced to drop out of the program. One was to insist that I apply for a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship, which came with three years of generous funding. I don’t recall the personal statement I wrote for the NSF application being particularly noteworthy, so I can only conclude that in addition to pushing me to apply, Everett also wrote a persuasive letter of recommendation that secured the much-needed support.

Everett soon came to the rescue again when I experienced a crisis of confidence near the end of the first term. With such a dense concentration of overachievers, Harvard was an exciting place to be. But it could also be daunting to be surrounded by so much talent and ambition. At the same time, it was hard to know where we stood in our classes because much of our final grade came from research papers that were not due until the very end of the term. Feeling anxious and a bit overwhelmed, I met with Everett to tell him I was thinking about throwing in the towel. He listened carefully and then explained that what I was going through was an entirely normal reaction that many graduate students experienced during their first year. He urged me to give the program a bit more time and to seek out professional help to begin working through my insecurities, both of which turned out to be excellent advice. But most of all, he took a significant amount of time from his hectic schedule to listen patiently to a stressed-out student, which is probably what I needed most in that moment.

I came to appreciate Everett’s many talents even more when I had the opportunity to serve as a graduate teaching assistant for one of his popular general education courses: “Science in Twentieth -Century Society.” As I recall, the course had about 150 under-

graduates that first semester and a small team of teaching assistants who were responsible for updating the course reader, constructing and grading exams, and leading discussion sections. Everett's lectures were captivating, and I remember learning so much about how to engage audiences from watching him deliver them. The compelling topics he covered—like the eugenics movement, the Manhattan Project, concern about radioactive fallout from nuclear testing, the discovery of DNA, the sociobiology debate, and genetic engineering—continue to be a part of my teaching repertoire to this day.

I also relied heavily on Everett's guidance when I had the opportunity to teach my own senior seminar after completing preliminary examinations. Although I had been apprehensive about the prospect of teaching solo, once I got into it, I found that I really enjoyed the experience. The class I offered, "Conservation, Ecology, and Environment," drew heavily on a course with similar content that I had taken with Everett, a course that had provided my first formal exposure to the emerging field of environmental history. Among other things, Everett introduced me to several classic sources, like Aldo Leopold's 1949 *Sand County Almanac*, Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*, and William Cronon's 1983 *Changes in the Land*, that I still assign in my American environmental history course. Several other students who went through the Harvard program during this period—including Peder Anker, Conevery Bolton Valenčius, Mark Madison, and Alix Cooper—also benefited from Everett's interest in environmental history and have remained active in the field.

Not long after I joined the Harvard program, I asked Everett and Shirley Roe, the associate editor of *JHB* at the time, if there was anything I could do to help with production of the journal that I so admired. I was thrilled when they hired me to undertake minor editorial work, things like tracking down responses to copy editor queries or publication information on books that were under review. I was even more delighted in 1990, when Everett and Shirley asked me to become "coordinator" and then a few years later, "editor" of the book review section of the journal.

Although book reviews had been an important part of the *Journal of the History of Biology* from the beginning, they had taken several forms over the years. The very first issue, from the Spring of 1968, contained a fascinating essay review of John Cairns, Gunther Stent, and James D. Watson's 1966 *Phage and the Origins of Molecular Biology*, written by Richard C. Lewontin, who was then at the University of Chicago. By the second issue, The "J.H.B. Bookshelf," the formal name for the book review section, was launched under the direction of Judith P. Swazey, one of Everett's early students who served as associate editor of the journal. According to the announcement, the plan at the time was to periodically publish periodic essay reviews along with "brief descriptive notes of selected books which have been received for review and of new journals or other periodicals related to the history of the biological sciences" (Swazey 1968). For many years, Swazey and her successors—Diana Long Hall and Robert G. Frank, Jr.—wrote the vast majority of reviews published in *JHB*. They initially consisted of concise summaries—about 50 words each—of a relatively large number of books covering a capaciously wide variety of topics, ranging from the history and philosophy of biology proper to the history of medicine and psychology, and from the history of science more generally to developments in modern biology. As many as 40 books might be treated in a single issue.

The third year of *JHB* saw the first “short” book review by someone other than an editor of The J.H.B. Bookshelf. For the next decade, however, reviews of this type remained rare, while longer commissioned essay reviews continued to make regular appearances in the journal. What did change, though, was the average length of reviews, which by the fifth year of publication were more likely to be in the 100- to 150-word range, and by the tenth year might reach as many as 250 words or more. Not surprisingly, as the average length of reviews increased, the total number of reviews per issue declined to around 8 or 10, while the topics of books under review began focusing more narrowly on the history and philosophy of biology proper.

The next big change came in 1981, when Shirley Roe, another of Everett’s former students, became associate editor of the journal and assumed responsibility for the book review section. The reviews Shirley commissioned tended to run to more than 250 words and many were from authors with no formal affiliation with the journal. In an attempt to free up Shirley to assume more of the general editorial duties of the journal, The J.H.B. Bookshelf Board was created in 1985. This was a group of a dozen or so historians of biology who were supposed to plan and write reviews, but in actual practice, the idea never really worked as hoped. Over the next several years board members did contribute many of the reviews, but the burden of administering the section continued to fall heavily on Shirley until 1990, when I was recruited to take over.

As editor of The J.H.B. Bookshelf for the next sixteen years, I worked to make sure that we continued to publish an average of 6 to 8 regular book reviews per issue and at least a couple of longer essay reviews each year. I also gradually increased the average length of reviews up to about 750 words. I worked closely with Everett and Shirley, until 1999, when Gar Allen and Jane Maienschein took over as co-editors of the journal.

Save for trying to extract long-overdue reviews from a very small number of recalcitrant authors, over the years things generally went smoothly. As book review editor, I not only enjoyed but also greatly benefited from the chance to stay abreast of the latest scholarship in the field and to make connections with many wonderful colleagues. One exception immediately comes to mind, though, when I naively asked a well-known historian of science to review a book that seemed right up their alley. Unknown to me, that scholar had already drafted a vicious and completely unwarranted attack on that book. When I learned what had happened, I sheepishly approached Everett with the bad news. In his usual calm and reassuring manner, he strongly supported my sense that we should withdraw the review request. Much to my relief, that proved to be the end of the matter.

In addition to providing guidance, advice, and support, Everett demonstrated his genuine kindness many times while I was a graduate student. One of those occasions was when I took a mandatory German reading comprehension test. In some ways the History of Science Department was quite old school in its approach to graduate training at the time, and one example was the requirement that every doctoral student had to demonstrate a reading knowledge of French and German, no matter what their area of study was. With a background in Spanish and Latin, I had studied for the French exam on my own using Karl Sandberg and Eddison Tatham’s *French for Reading* and managed to breeze through it. German was an entirely different story, though, and even though I sat in on a class and worked hard at it, it never really seemed to click.

My sense is that Everett, the faculty member charged with administering the reading exam that semester, was being generous when he gave me a pass.

When it came time to write our dissertations, Everett was not an overly hands-on advisor. He worked closely with us to make sure we developed a strong proposal and would check in from time to time to see how we were progressing. His comments on chapter drafts, while not extensive, were invariably helpful and supportive. And while he held us to high standards, his expectations always remained reasonable. In my case, after completing a great deal of research in archives and secondary sources, I finally moved into the active writing phase in my fifth year. I managed to mostly stick to a three-page-a-day writing plan and in the winter of my sixth year, was delighted to accept a job offer from the History Department at Virginia Tech. Soon after that, Everett and Barbara G. Rosenkrantz, the other faculty member on my committee, obligingly signed off on my somewhat bloated dissertation draft, which by that time had ballooned to more than 650 pages.

As a final example of Everett's kindness, one day I was trying to track down a reference from an earlier issue of the *Journal of the History of Biology* when I discovered a treasure trove of back issues in a department storage closet. When I asked Everett if he could take a copy of each issue for my personal library, he immediately replied "yes, of course." I thus became the proud owner of my own full run of the *Journal of the History of Biology*, a gift I continue to cherish to this day. Through that journal and his training of several generations of scholars who studied under him, Everett profoundly shaped the history of biology for more than a half century (Allen and MacLeod 2001).

Everett Mendelsohn was a generous scholar and an incredibly kind human being who positively touched the lives of countless students and colleagues. I feel both exceptionally lucky and extraordinarily grateful to have benefited from his mentoring, support, and friendship.

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