

Howard Bernhardt Adelmann

May 8, 1898 — July 25, 1988

“Professor Howard B. Adelmann represents a splendid type of scientist and scholar. He is a Cornellian if there ever was one. Born in Buffalo, he came to Cornell in 1916 and with short interruptions ... he has resided on the lovely hills of Ithaca ever since.” So wrote Henry E. Sigerist, the eminent scholar, editor, and historian of medicine, in his enthusiastic review of Adelmann’s 1942 edition of *The Embryological Treatises of Hieronymus Fabricius of Aquapendente*. Yes, Howard was indeed a Cornellian, one of Cornell’s greatest teachers and scholars. His affiliation with our institution spanned seventy-two years, sixty-seven of them as a member of the faculty—a tenure that in the entire history of Cornell is surpassed only by the seventy-three years of Walter F. Willcox! At the time of Howard’s death, at the age of ninety, only Willcox had ever served longer as a member of the Cornell faculty.

Howard graduated from Cornell with an A.B. degree in 1920, an A.M. in 1922, and a Ph.D. in 1924. He began his long and distinguished teaching career here in 1919 when he was appointed assistant in histology and embryology while still an undergraduate. Until the mid-1960s one climbed the academic ladder to a tenured position at Cornell very slowly. Even so, Howard moved upward more rapidly than many of his peers, becoming an instructor in 1921, an assistant professor in 1925, and professor in 1937. He was appointed professor emeritus in 1966.

While still an assistant professor, Howard won international acclaim as an experimental embryologist for his pioneering studies of cyclopia and the development of the amphibian and the avian eye. These attracted the attention of Professor Hans Spemann, who in 1927 invited Howard, as a National Research Council Fellow, to work in his laboratory at the University of Freiburg. Thus began a long and inspiring friendship.

In the early thirties, during a two-year sojourn in New York City as a visiting professor in the Department of Ophthalmology at Columbia’s College of Physicians and Surgeons, Howard was repeatedly urged to leave Ithaca and permanently join the department’s staff at a most tempting salary—offers he steadfastly refused, for his heart was at Cornell.

Very early in his academic career Howard began collecting rare books dealing with the history of embryology, anatomy, and general biology. His extensive private library of more than 4,800 volumes subsequently became the nucleus of the History of Science Collections established by the Cornell Library in 1961. With continuing support from Howard, the Adelmann Collection has prospered, and today it is one of the finest of its type in this country. Included in this remarkable collection are nearly all of the great classics in anatomy and embryology from the 16th

through the 19th century. A life-long friend of the University Library, Howard was also a founding member of the Library Associates and in 1942-43 served as the second chairman of that group.

Howard's respect for history was pervasive and unusual— unusual, at least, among his colleagues in the sciences. He read at least six foreign languages, including Greek and medieval Latin, and he always insisted on reading “the old masters” in their original language to be certain of the essence of their arguments. It is thus not surprising that Howard's scholarly interests turned increasingly to the history of anatomy and embryology. His handsome volume on Hieronymus Fabricius was published in 1942 by the Cornell University Press and received that year's F.S. Crofts Prize for the most distinguished work by a member of the Cornell faculty. In recognition of Howard's outstanding contributions to its collections, and to the history of anatomy and embryology in general, the University Library in 1988 celebrated Howard's ninetieth birthday by acquiring in his honor a magnificent copy of Fabricius' *De venarum ostioliis* (Padua, 1603)—one of the rarest of all the great classics in the history of science.

Extending his earlier work on Fabricius, Howard subsequently produced two internationally acclaimed studies on the life and work of another of the founders of modern embryology, the 17th-century Italian scientist Marcello Malpighi. His monumental five-volume work, *Marcello Malpighi and the Evolution of Embryology*, was published by the Cornell University Press in 1966; his second multivolume work on Malpighi, *The Correspondence of Marcello Malpighi*, was published by the Cornell University Press in 1975. For the first of these definitive studies Howard was awarded the History of Science Society's Pfizer Award in 1967 for the outstanding book on the history of science published during the previous year. Appropriately, Howard traced his own intellectual heritage directly back to Malpighi. “At surprisingly few removes he [Malpighi] was the forebear of many of us who are teaching and studying today. He was, for example (if I may be personal for a moment), the teacher of Antonio Maria Valsalva; Valsalva, of Giovanni Battista Morgagni; Morgagni, of Antonio Scarpa; Scarpa, of Ignaz Döllinger; Döllinger, of Louis Agassiz; Agassiz, of Burt Green Wilder; Wilder, of Simon Henry Gage; Gage, of Benjamin Freeman Kingsbury; and Kingsbury, whose rare qualities I take this opportunity to extol, was my teacher.”

More than twenty-five glowing reviews of Howard's magnum opus, *Marcello Malpighi and the Evolution of Embryology*, appeared in professional journals. A sampling of but a few comments is sufficient to convey the enthusiasm generated by the publication of this magnificent study which was hailed by both scientists and historians from around the world:

Imbued throughout with a passionate enthusiasm for the historical past and for the science of embryology, these five immense volumes will be a permanent monument to the underlying unity of the scientific and cultural traditions. When in future generations, men shall read *Marcello Malpighi and the Evolution of Embryology*, they may be led to remark both of science in the 17th century and of scholarship in the 20th, “there were giants in those times.” [Leonard G. Wilson, Yale University]

There can be no dispute that this is the most monumental contribution of our century to the “fine structure” of the history of biology in general and embryology in particular . . . The sheer mass of the result looks at first sight intimidating, but the writing is so lively and the facts revealed so curious and entertaining that anyone who dips into any of the volumes at random will probably be sufficiently intrigued to keep on reading. An infinite amount of unravelling has gone into this, the digging out of the details of Malpighi’s somewhat harassed life at Bologna, Messina, and Rome, the identification of the meanings of hundreds of obsolete technical terms of the old biologists to show what they intended, and the dissection of Malpighi’s own theoretical thinking, central as it was to the general unfolding of the perpetual opposition of epigenesis and preformation. The scholarship is meticulous. [Joseph Needham, Cambridge University]

Nearly twenty years later, Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress, summed it up best in his book *The Discoverers*: “A good introduction to Malpighi is Luigi Belloni’s article in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* . . . supplemented by Joseph Needham, *A History of Embryology* (1934). But there is no competition anywhere else in the history of medicine for the delights of reading and browsing than in Howard B. Adelman’s monumental *Marcello Malpighi and the Evolution of Embryology*.”

Numerous honors came to Howard for his scholarship during his illustrious career at Cornell, among them the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa* from Ohio State University in 1962, the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity in 1962, the William H. Welch Medal from the American Association for the History of Medicine in 1967, the degree of Doctor of Medicine *honoris causa* from the University of Bologna, Italy, in 1972, and the Galileo Galilei Prize from the University of Pisa, Italy, also in 1972.

Early in his career, Howard was acclaimed by his undergraduate students as the “best” and “toughest” teacher at Cornell. The full measure of his inspiration as a teacher, however, is reflected in the dozens of tributes from his former graduate students on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday and at his death. A short sample follows:

Howard never did things casually. He insisted on punctiliousness and practiced the old aphorism that if a thing is worth doing it has to be done well. [William Montagna, Oregon Regional Primate Research Center]

My association with Howard as student, colleague and friend was the most important and influential personal relationship of my professional life. [Harold F. Parks, University of Kentucky Medical School]

My memories of Dr. Adelman are personal ones; walking round and round the Arts & Sciences' Quadrangle on a summer's evening listening to him talk about Malpighi; Sunday evening dinners at his apartment with good food, Mozart, chess, and reading aloud. He was a living example of what he preached—determine what is most important and then pursue it with complete disregard for the trivialities of life. [A. Duncan Chiquoine, Hamilton College]

I have never forgotten the positive effects you had on my personal and professional life, all that I owe you for your steadfast belief in my potential, the generous and often critical advice that helped mould my personal and professional outlooks. [William A. Wimsatt, Cornell University]

Howard's love and understanding of young children was also a delight to the families of many of his graduate students and young colleagues. He would often invite a family of five or six to a Sunday evening dinner and entertain all in his apartment with good food, fine music, and readings from Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. In addition, Howard was always a source of sound counsel and sympathetic reassurance when it came to the problems a youngster of two to five posed for a young mother.

During all these years, Howard also carried his full share of Cornell committee and administrative assignments. He served as chairman of the Department of Zoology from 1944 to 1959 and was a faculty representative on the Cornell Board of Trustees from 1947 to 1951.

Howard and Dorothy May Schullian were married on July 6, 1978, each for the first time—he at age eighty, she at seventy-two! His wife was herself a distinguished historian of medicine, as well as the first curator of the History of Science Collections in the Cornell Library. Having been professional colleagues for many years, they shared together for the last decade of their lives both the burden of declining health and the continuing joy of common interests.

Howard leaves for all of us a rich legacy of scholarship that includes not only his own publications but, also, his commitment to preserving and understanding those of his predecessors. This legacy will be a source of reference and inspiration for his students—and his students' students—for generations to come.

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