

William M. Hexter Memorial Minute

The year 1927 was, by the reckoning of some, an *annus mirabilis*: Charles Lindberg piloted the Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic; Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs for the New York Yankees; and William Michael Hexter, one fond of such reckoning, was born in Canton, Ohio. Last December 20th, after a career spent entirely at Amherst College, Bill Hexter passed away, aged 91.

Bill grew up in Cleveland, Ohio; Rochester, New York; and Joliet, Illinois. Just young enough to be spared from World War II, Bill majored in biology at UC Berkeley, graduating in 1949 before getting his PhD from the same institution 4 years later. Bill worked under the guidance of the great geneticist Curt Stern, examining the nature of dominant and recessive genes in the fruit fly and recording voluminous data as a basis for high resolution genetic maps. From Berkeley, Bill was recruited directly—no postdoc necessary in those days, at least for some—to Amherst by Prof. Harold Plough. During his first decade at the College, Bill produced several influential papers on genetic recombination and an esoteric but fundamentally important variant thereof, “gene conversion.” Profs. Hexter and Plough, along with Research Associate Dr. P.T. Ives, constituted a high-powered and quite prominent genetic triumvirate. Bill’s greater interest, however, turned steadily towards teaching and mentoring of students, and to college governance.

For many years Bill co-taught with Professor Tom Yost a sophomore genetics course which, while not required, was nevertheless taken by most biology majors. That was so both because of and despite the course’s reputation: it was tough, and the instructors gave little ground. The laboratory component employed the diminutive *Drosophila* and even smaller and faster replicating yeast to demonstrate universal genetic truths. Biology alumni of many decades now recount, with a mix of emotions, the long hours spent communing with those critters. Indeed, even now many of the laboratory exercises from Bill and Tom’s genetics course provide the backbone of the laboratory component of *Molecules, Genes and Cells*, a course that is required of all majors in the biological sciences--a fitting legacy for a course that taught well what was and still is important.

Bill took his teaching seriously, but that didn’t stop him from “hamming it up” on occasion: One afternoon’s lab exercise in Genetics required each student to choose one male cricket for study, from a large metal box at the front of the room, from which emanated an annoyingly loud and continuous chirping. But how to tell male from female? As only the males chirp, Bill explained, that would be easy. But when, by way of demonstration, Bill cracked the lid to grab his own male, the insect throng instantly quieted. Total silence, not a single chirp, every time. Bill loved it, and so did the class. (There is another way to “sex” crickets, as it happens.)

Bill’s contribution to education at Amherst was not confined to the Biology Department. Bill chaired the Select Committee on the Curriculum that met in 1976 and 1977, steering a high-spirited group to a conclusion whose effects are still felt at the College. The committee proposed, and the Faculty voted, the program of Introduction to Liberal Studies, first-year courses that introduced Amherst students to College-level work. Our First-Year Seminar program is a direct descendant of ILS courses, retaining not only much of the philosophy and rationale of ILS, but also some of the courses themselves. Notable among these is a course Bill

created, along with Professors Pat Williamson and John Halsted: the long-running and still thriving course on the many ramifications of Darwinian thought, “Evolution and Intellectual Revolution,” aka, “Ev and Rev.” It has been taught by colleagues from a half dozen different departments, having been offered many more years than not, for more than four decades, and shows no sign of impending extinction.

Bill’s devotion to Amherst is reflected in the various college committees on which he served; from a long list, including the curriculum committee, we cite: the Committee to Advise the President, a presidential search committee, and the Committee on Educational Policy (as chair). Bill was elected to the Committee of Six on two occasions and, perhaps most dear to the signatories of this Minute, Bill generously served as chair of Biology—a thankless task if ever there was—for a total of seven years over the decades. In that capacity, but also simply as colleague and friend, Bill offered to many of us guidance and mentorship. Though “curmudgeon” was a term Bill often chose to describe himself, if he was one, it was with an ironic sense of humor and a warm and generous spirit.

Bill’s greatest institutional impact was as chair of the College’s Premedical Committee, a duty he performed for almost thirty years, from 1965 until 1993. That position entailed the advising of students as they negotiated our curriculum and applied to medical schools, but also the composition of the official College evaluation of each applicant. The writing of such letters was a far different process in those years than at present, with much less institutional support; while of course incorporating the opinions and observations of other faculty, Bill was the primary author of at least a thousand of these letters of recommendation. Throughout those years, Bill was in contact with premedical advisors at other liberal arts colleges which have goals and concerns similar to Amherst’s. In 1983, a group of 9 liberal arts colleges came together with 6 medical schools to form the Northeast Consortium on Medical Education. Bill was a founding member of this organization, which remains active today. Its exchanges of information and points of view continue to benefit Amherst students with aspirations in the health professions.

Bill’s retirement from Amherst in 1997 afforded him time to indulge his favorite pastimes: stamp collecting, listening to jazz recordings, and above all rooting passionately for his beloved Red Sox. Time, too, for a daily walk into town accompanied by Rachel, his wife of 68 years, in order to fetch the New York Times--no need that way to worry about a missed delivery. With months spent either in Amherst or Florida, Bill and Rachel devoted themselves as well to their children and grandchildren. Ultimately, Bill succumbed to dementia, after a prolonged struggle.

For Amherst faculty, our professional legacy is measured in good part by the success of our students. Alumni of Bill’s Genetics course include the distinguished biologists and subsequent Amherst honorands David Suzuki and Gerry Fink; and the Nobel laureate Jeffrey Hall. One could do worse. We end with the words of one of those alumni, David Suzuki: “He was a superb teacher who taught genetics like a series of detective stories that peeled away layers of evidence to reveal the secrets of heredity. For the first time, I couldn’t wait to get to the next class...I fell madly in love with the precision and elegance of the science. I had already been assured of a place in medical school...When I turned down the med school to go to grad school to study fruit flies, my mother wept for weeks.”

Respectfully submitted:

Steve George
Dick Poccia
David Ratner
Patrick Williamson
William Zimmerman

President Martin, I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the Faculty in a rising vote of silence, that it be entered in the permanent record of the Faculty, and that a copy be sent to Professor Hexter's family.