In Memoriam: Philip D. Curtin, 1922–2009

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"This is no ordinary book," wrote Geoffrey Parker in the American Historical Review of December 1985, reviewing Cross-cultural Trade in World History, published by Cambridge University Press in 1984. This was no ordinary historian, one might write with equal justification, of the book's author, long-time member and president (in 1983) of the AHA, Philip D. Curtin, who died yesterday, June 4, 2009, in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, at the age of 87.

Born in Philadelphia in 1922, Philip Curtin grew up in West Virginia. He received his early collegiate education at Swarthmore College, graduating with a degree in history in 1948, after three years of service in the Merchant Marine. He had already fallen in love with history and decided to make it a lifelong commitment, it seems, since he joined the AHA the same year, even before he went on to Harvard University for his PhD, which he received in 1953 for his dissertation, "Revolution and Decline in Jamaica, 1830-1865."

Curtin started his long teaching career as an assistant professor back at Swarthmore College. He then moved to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Here he teamed up with colleague Jan Vansina to help launch and develop the hitherto neglected field of African history, and started a department of African languages and literature (the first such department in the United States). With a series of pathbreaking publications such as The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census, which raised new questions even as it set new standards for accurate cliometrics of a complex past, The World and the West: The European Challenge and the Overseas Response in the Age of Empire, The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History, and The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850 (which received the AHA's Schuyler Prize), Curtin made himself a name as a brilliant historian who broke away from the dominant Eurocentric models of historiography of other continents to create a critical and pioneering body of scholarship on Africa, the Atlantic world, the British empire, and comparative history. As if responding to the tug of the Atlantic (and perhaps a love of the sea rooted in his tenure with the Merchant Marines) reflected in his works, Curtin moved to the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1975, where he became the Herbert Baxter Adams Professor of History.
Curtin, it has been said, wore his scholarly distinctions -- the Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellowships, the fellowship of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, among others -- and the sheer magnitude of his scholarship, lightly and unostentatiously. Yet he insisted that his numerous graduate students meet the same high standards that he set for himself.

"The discipline of history has broadened enormously in the postwar decades, but historians have not," Philip Curtin declared in his presidential address to the AHA, lamenting the increasingly narrow specializations of too many historians who thus remained ignorant of developments in fields outside their own. He himself was an exception, almost singlehandedly (but along with his many students, surely) defying the trend toward ever-narrowing subspecializations for more than 50 years. From intellectual history to the history of pandemics, from imperialism in India to the ecological history of the Chesapeake Bay, Curtin roamed across space, time, and specializations in a time-machine of his own invention.

It is telling that he begins his recently published autobiographical work, *On the Fringes of History: A Memoir* (Ohio University Press, 2005), "Being a West Virginian is a little different from being a Californian or a New Yorker," and then, unable to repress the cliometrician in him, adds, "Part of the difference is quantitative."

This report is based on material drawn from the Johns Hopkins University's Gazette Online of May 4, 1998, an unsigned biography of Philip Curtin distributed at the December 1983 annual meeting, and the AHA's membership records.