

quests and gifts to the Lilly Library, to this Society, to other organizations, and to her family. At AAS her kindness goes back twenty years, when she sent \$1,000 to be placed in an endowment fund for acquisitions. Later, she established the first deferred income plan at AAS in the amount of \$20,000. Still later, she gave \$5,000 to endow the Adomeit Fund to enable us to buy books not taller than four inches. In her will she made the Society a residual beneficiary of her estate, intending that half the bequest be used to establish the Adomeit Endowment Fund, the income from which shall be used to purchase and conserve miniature books or pre-1850 children's books and games. The other half of her bequest will be known as the Ruth E. Adomeit Endowment Fund, the income from which shall be used 'where most needed.'

The members of the American Antiquarian Society are grateful, and will remain so for years to come, to Ruth Elizabeth Adomeit for her legacies of joyful friendship, thoughtful concern, and astonishing generosity. We profoundly thank her for all her bounteous gifts and will cherish the memory of this remarkable lady.

Marcus A. McCorison

MERLE EUGENE CURTI

Merle Eugene Curti, Frederick Jackson Turner professor of history emeritus at the University of Wisconsin and a member of the American Antiquarian Society since 1978, died in Madison, Wisconsin, on March 9, 1996, at the age of ninety-eight. He was one of this country's most distinguished scholars of American history.

The prolific author of twenty books, texts, and edited collections, as well as some fifty articles, Curti's major works were *The Growth of American Thought* (1943) and *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier Community*

(1959). The first, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1944, reoriented the field of intellectual history, and the latter was instrumental in pioneering the development of 'the new social history' through its innovative use of manifold public records and demographic data by techniques of quantification made possible by computer technology novel at the time.

Merle Curti was born in Papillion, Nebraska, in 1897 and attended Harvard on a scholarship. He graduated in 1920 and remained at Harvard for his graduate training, first with Frederick Jackson Turner, the famed historian of the American west, and, after Turner's retirement, with Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. When Professor Schlesinger rejected Curti's Ph.D. dissertation, entitled 'The Development of American Self-Consciousness,' Curti wrote a different one on the American peace movement before the Civil War. This was accepted in 1927, and *American Peace Crusade, 1815-1860* was published in 1929. Between his graduation from college and the successful completion of his graduate degree Curti, in addition to writing out the two dissertations, had started his academic career at Beloit College (1921-22), studied at the Sorbonne (1924-25), joined the faculty of Smith College (1925), married the psychologist Margaret Wooster, and published three articles in professional journals. He was a promising young historian and the pace never slowed. After twelve years at Smith, Curti moved to Teachers College, Columbia, and in 1942 to the University of Wisconsin, where he remained until his retirement in 1968.

The scope of Merle Curti's lifetime of scholarship is truly extraordinary. Depth of analysis as well as diversity of subject characterize his writings on peace movements, education, dime novels, American loyalty, John Locke, and philanthropy. With his colleague Vernon Carstensen he wrote an outstanding history of the University of Wisconsin (1949) in commemoration of the university's one hundredth anniversary. With Lewis Paul Todd he was the author of a popular high school textbook published in several editions. With Willard Thorp and Carlos Baker of Princeton

he edited *American Issues*, a two-volume collection of historical and literary documents which through four editions introduced several generations of college students to sources of the American past. *The Growth of American Thought* is astonishingly in print after more than fifty years. Curti's last book, *Human Nature in American Thought*, was published in 1980 in his eighty-third year.

Vigorous in his commitment to the profession, Curti was a leading participant in many of its organizations. He was an early spokesman of social science methodology, and as chairman of the Social Science Research Council's important committee on theory and practice in historical study (1936) he urged more rigorous attention to the theoretical foundations of historical knowledge. The catholicity of his historical imagination led him to continually urge historians to move beyond then-conventional concerns with political and diplomatic history and to examine broader sources that would lead to an understanding of the nation's social and popular culture. In 1951 Curti was elected president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, forerunner to the Organization of American Historians, and in 1953 he was elected president of the American Historical Association. Given his interdisciplinary approach to the study of history, it is not surprising that he was also one of the founders of the American Studies Association.

Yet recitation of professional achievements and honors in no way captures the spirit of the man, for he was the most unpretentious of individuals, unfailingly gentle and courteous in manner. He had a true gift for friendship and numbered his countless friends across the generations. Especially was this the case with many of his former students with whom he maintained a lifetime of communication despite the distances of time and space. Curti was a dedicated teacher of both the undergraduates who crowded his courses and the vast numbers of graduate students who studied with him. He encouraged his graduate students to undertake work that would develop their interests, not further his own. His criticisms of their initial scholarly endeavors were often so

oblique that students new to his ways frequently missed the point of his comments entirely. But Curti's instinctively humane encouragement of beginners lacking in confidence, as well as his considerable patience with those who had more than enough, were qualities which established that lasting comradeship among those who share serious commitment to a goal. It should not go unremarked that decades before there was 'affirmative action' in law he gave encouragement and support to those for whom the doors of opportunity in the academic profession were more often closed than open. Jews, blacks, women, those who were harassed for their political beliefs during the second World War and the Cold War era which followed found with him friendly acceptance and respect for their aspirations.

In its obituary *The Capital Times* of Madison, Wisconsin (March 20, 1996), stated that for all his scholarly insights Curti's greatest contribution may have been as 'a public intellectual.' It is an apt phrase and one worth emphasis, for Curti was not a scholar isolated in his study but a committed citizen who took an active role in the great issues of his time. Yet Curti himself would have drawn no line between the active and contemplative life. His life was lived as a supporter of John Dewey's basic theory that thinking is not sharply set off from action, that thinking *is* activity, that an idea is an embryonic act. His dedication to the study of history never resided with the past alone. He drew on the strengths his scholarship located in the American experience, especially the ideas and actions of those who had been instrumental in the quest for a more just society. He made that tradition functional to the problems of his day and to his own undertakings. Intensely committed to social justice well before a civil rights movement, when he was president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in 1951, he spearheaded the fight to move the organization's annual meeting from New Orleans to Chicago because of the racially segregated conditions which obtained in hotels and other public places in Louisiana. He helped to bring to an end the discriminatory policies of clubs in Madison to which he belonged,

notably the university's faculty club. He challenged the hysteria of the McCarthy era in his presidential address to the American Historical Association and exhorted historians to defend freedom of thought and expression in its widest scope, warning that that nation's hard-won struggle for civil liberties was in jeopardy. Together with his wife Margaret, Curti participated in the 'Joe Must Go' movement, gathering signatures on a petition in an effort to rid Wisconsin of Senator McCarthy.

During his long years of retirement in Madison, Curti retained a lively intellectual presence in the community until his very last years. A delightful conversationalist, he welcomed the company of friends with whom he discussed the prodigious number of books he was reading, public issues that were being debated, and scholarly trends within academic disciplines. His engagement with liberal causes and intellectual freedom remained steadfast. During the Vietnam War he defended the civil disobedience of those who opposed the conflict.

Merle Curti's life affirmed a deep humanistic outlook. It was shaped in part by his great predecessors of the earlier generation of midwestern progressives including Turner and Parrington, Beard and Becker, now legendary figures. Like them, he shared a confidence that social problems could be solved by the application of human intelligence, and he acted with moral authority on such a belief. His hopes that the future would bring greater rationality to human affairs and an increased resolution of conflict by peaceful means were sorely tested as he struggled to retain such a vision by the end of his life at the conclusion of our terrible century. He remained to the end, in the most honorable sense of the term, a secular humanist, unillusioned, yet still believing in the possibility of a society 'with liberty and justice for all,' one in which human potential for decency and compassion in both individual and collective behavior would be realized. His was a great spirit; it will live on at his university. There, in addition to a prize established in his honor by the Organization of American Historians, the Merle Curti professorship, the annual Curti lec-

tures, and the Curti graduate fellowships all make manifest the admiration and affection in which he was so long held by his associates.

Curti's first wife, Margaret Wooster, died in 1961. In 1968 he married Frances Bennett Becker, who predeceased him in 1978. His daughter Nancy Alice Holub died in 1994. He is survived by his daughter Martha (Mother Felicitas Curti, O.S.B.), three grandsons, and a great-granddaughter.

Kathryn Preyer

DOROTHY BURNETT PORTER WESLEY

We met Dorothy Porter Wesley on October 16, 1979, at the Worcester Club dinner preceding the Annual Meeting of the American Antiquarian Society. She had recently married her longtime friend, Charles H. Wesley, and he was with her that evening. We had been eager to meet Charles, the eminent historian and former president of Wilberforce and of Central State universities. He was a wonderful raconteur and repository of information, but it was Dorothy who was the absolute delight of the evening: so much energy and dynamism packed in so small a frame! She was possessed of a keen intelligence, irreverence, wit, and charm. We became instant friends.

Dorothy was elected to membership in the Society in 1970, but she had been a researcher here for years. Librarian Robert W. G. Vail opened the library for her on evenings and weekends in 1932 while she was working on her Master's Thesis for Columbia University's School of Library Science so that she could complete her research in as short a time as possible. Her 1936 article entitled 'Library Sources for the Study of Negro Life and History,' published in the *Journal of Negro Education*, documents her high regard for AAS: 'The writer, a few years ago while trying to locate

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.