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In Memory

WHITFIELD JENKS BELL JR., executive officer of the American Philosophical Society from 1977 to 1983, died at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on January 2, 2009. For more than half a century, as a scholar and administrator, he exerted a significant influence on historical scholarship in the United States.

Born on December 3, 1914, in Newburgh, New York, he spent his boyhood in New Jersey and the Philadelphia suburbs, graduating from Lower Merion High School in 1931. Bell was from the start a voracious reader and history enthusiast. Inspired by the boys' novels of Everett Tomlinson, at age thirteen he wrote a history of the American Revolution—and soon thereafter destroyed the manuscript. It was, he later observed with his characteristic self-deprecating wit, "the only example of critical good sense I ever showed."

Bell completed his undergraduate degree at Dickinson College, where he excelled in his studies, was active socially, and became a prolific writer for college publications. After a brief foray into the law, he turned to history, earning a PhD under Richard Shryock at the University of Pennsylvania. His dissertation, "Science and Humanity in Franklin's Philadelphia," was never published but was widely respected and often cited.

Only two years into his graduate studies Bell returned to Dickinson to teach part time. He remained there through 1953, save for service in Europe with the American Field Service during World War II. Rejected for bad eyesight, Bell was determined to play his part in the war. His experiences as a carrier of wounded soldiers in Italy and at the Bergen-

Belsen concentration camp would remain a vivid memory.

From the outset of his academic career, Bell wrote widely on historical topics, mostly, though not exclusively, on early American science, medicine, natural history, and the multifaceted Benjamin Franklin. He was a mainstay at scholarly conferences in his field, delivering numerous papers, after-dinner speeches, and formal addresses to a wide range of audiences. His productivity earned him rapid promotion at Dickinson and the Boyd Lee Spahr Chair, which he resigned as he grew increasingly frustrated with the authoritarian governance of Dickinson president William W. Edel. During the 1953–54 academic year, Bell served as visiting editor of the *William and Mary Quarterly*. While in Williamsburg, he accepted an invitation to join the nascent Franklin Papers project. In New Haven, Bell worked closely with editor Leonard Labaree and a small but gifted staff. Based first in Philadelphia, then at Yale, Bell combed archives and exploited personal contacts to retrieve important Franklin documents. As a mainstay of the so-called "Franklin Factory," he established a high standard in transcribing and interpreting those documents.

In 1960, the American Philosophical Society beckoned Bell back to Philadelphia as its assistant librarian. There he stayed for the rest of his professional career. Bell gradually moved up the ranks to become librarian and executive officer. At the APS Bell secured important collections, among them papers of the great scientist Charles Darwin, expanded the physical facilities, and oversaw first-class public programs and publications. Among his most cherished collaborations with colleagues at other Philadelphia institutions was the curatorship of a bicentennial exhibit in 1976, complemented by a handsome catalog, *A Rising People*.

Throughout his years as an administrator at APS, Bell continued to write and edit at an astonishing pace. His overall corpus features more than 250 scholarly articles, essays, introductions, encyclopedia entries, prefaces, afterwards, and several books, including a well-regarded biography of Dr. John Morgan. In retirement Bell produced a three-volume biographical compendium focused on the early membership of the APS. Two volumes of *Patriot-Improvers* have so far appeared.

A modest and highly independent person, Bell had a special gift of friendship. All who knew Whit Bell will miss his warm humanity. Those who never met him can nonetheless be grateful for his efforts to promote humanistic scholarship over a long and fruitful life.

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