The Joint Atlantic Seminar in History of Biology

By ***Mary P. Winsor**** *with recollections by* ***Leonard G. Wilson***

I CONFESS I used to consider myself somewhat of an expert on the history of the "Joint Atlantics," even though I was not involved in the founding in 1965. I have missed only one other meeting, and after awhile people began to comment that I must hold the attendance record. On several occasions I took it upon myself to phone around before a meeting, to be sure someone was on deck to host the JAS the following year. Often I found myself explaining, either to someone who had agreed to host the meeting or to students unsure whether they were ready to speak in public, that the whole purpose of the thing was to provide a supportive environment for students inexperienced in giving papers. At the JAS they could be sure to find a small, friendly audience where they could try their wings in circumstances less daunting than the annual meeting of the HSS. Certainly the JAS has served, and continues to serve, that function. It did that for Fred Churchill and Gar Allen in 1965, for Mark Adams and Jon Hodge in 1966, for me, Bob Frank, and Jerry Bylebyl in 1967, for Ruth Cowan, Gerry Geison, and Paul Farber in 1968, for Steve Shapin in 1969, for Rob Kohler and Peter Bowler in 1970, for Phil Pauly and Sharon Kingsland in 1977, for Jane Maienschein in 1978, for Jim Secord in 1980, for Jan Sapp and Lily Kay in 1983, for Lynn Nyhart in 1985, for Betty Smocovitis in 1989, and for many others.[1]

As a mature historian, however, I should have known better than to have trusted the combination of logic, memory, and tradition that created such a neat picture in my mind of the origin of the Joint Atlantic Seminar. I had envisioned the founder, Leonard Wilson, sitting in a Yale faculty lounge with his colleagues Larry Holmes and Lloyd Stevenson, talking over the kind of experience their students needed. (See Figure 1.) Giving seminar reports in their graduate courses was not enough, I imagined them saying, to prepare them for delivering a talk at the HSS, where one needed to impress potential employers. No such thing occurred, however. Leonard remembers vividly the origin of the JAS, and job searches had nothing to do with it. (Of course not, because in those young days of our profession there were more job openings than candidates, though the market began to tighten up just a few years later.) The founders' motivation was purely to get together for

* Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto, Victoria College, 73 Queen's Park Crescent, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1K7, Canada.

[1] I saved most of my programs, begged copies from colleagues where my collection was incomplete, and produced a list, which Susan Lindee posted recently at http://www.ccat.sas.upenn.edu/hss/jas.html. That list still has a few errors, for some people are named who at the last minute were unable to attend. She or I would very much welcome corrections.

Isis, 1999, 90:S219–S225
© 1999 by The History of Science Society. All rights reserved.
0021-1753/99/90supp-0013$02.00

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figure 1. Leonard Wilson. (Photo by G. E. "Erik" Erikson.)

a stimulating day of friendly intellectual exchange. That it would also serve as a training ground was noticed by many of those Leonard invited, and Everett Mendelsohn tells me this was in his mind when he decided to hold a second one, but the wish that sparked the first meeting had less to do with the business of becoming an academic than with the ideals of the scholarly life, and perhaps this above all explains the remarkable longevity of the Joint Atlantic tradition.

In answer to my query, Leonard Wilson sent me the following account of the beginning of the Joint Atlantic Seminars:

"In December 1964, just after Christmas, the History of Science Society met in Canada, at Montreal. It was then accustomed to meet alternately with the American Historical Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The meeting at Montreal was, I believe, in conjunction with the AHA. I had driven to my parents' home in Ontario for Christmas and afterward drove through Algonquin Park and down the Ottawa Valley—a long drive through an empty, frozen, snow-covered countryside—to Montreal, where I arrived in the winter dusk. At the Sheraton Hotel I met Frederic Holmes, who had come directly from New Haven, and he introduced me to two of his friends from Harvard, Fred Churchill and Ed Collins. We four then went for dinner to a French restaurant on St. Catherine's Street, glittering with fine stores and restaurants. During dinner Ed Collins and I had a vigorous argument over whether Galileo had actually performed the inclined plane experiment and had derived from it the law of falling bodies. On the basis of Tom Settle's successful repetition of Galileo's experiments at Cornell, I contended that he had, whereas Ed Collins upheld Alexandre Koyré's view that Galileo's experiments were merely thought-experiments, never actually performed. Neither of us convinced the other, but we enjoyed the discussion. Afterward it stood out in my mind in contrast to the

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

formal program of the meeting, in which much time was taken up by prearranged symposia, with orchestrated papers and discussion.

"In reflecting, after our return to New Haven, on how pleasant the all-too-brief informal conversations with colleagues and graduate students from other universities had been at Montreal, it occurred to me that we might invite faculty and graduate students interested in the history of biology to Yale for a brief informal meeting. As a student at Wisconsin I had enjoyed Marshall Clagett's seminar in medieval science, and at Cornell it had been sheer pleasure during the fall of 1959 to share with Henry Guerlac a seminar on Charles Darwin and the history of evolutionary biology that met in the library of Henry's wonderful, rambling old Victorian house, 3 Fountain Place, in Ithaca. The house, incidentally, had belonged to Henry's grandfather and was designed by Elizabeth Thomson's uncle, William Miller, who also designed the old Cornell Library. That year Rhoda Rappaport was a member of the Cornell seminar, as was Lewis McKinney. At Yale we had tried to develop seminars along similar lines, and at Harvard and Johns Hopkins such seminars also existed. Therefore, Frederic Holmes and I thought it might be useful to have a joint seminar in which students and faculty from several universities met for a day to hear and discuss papers that would be more like seminar reports than formal papers prepared for delivery at a scholarly meeting.

"After Frederic and I had talked the matter over several times, in mid-January I wrote to Bill Coleman at Johns Hopkins and Everett Mendelsohn at Harvard to invite them to New Haven for such a meeting in mid-March, and to ask them to suggest the names of graduate students whom we ought to include. I wrote also to everyone within the area enclosed by Baltimore, Ithaca, and Boston whom I knew or had heard was interested in the history of biology. To an unexpected degree the response was prompt and enthusiastic. About fifteen people expressed interest in coming, and a smaller number, with some hesitation, agreed to give papers.

"At Yale, Lloyd Stevenson, the chairman of the Department of History of Science and Medicine, gave the idea his full support. Lloyd and Jean Stevenson gave a reception for the seminar at their house on Friday evening, 12 March, and Lloyd made department funds available for a luncheon on Saturday and a dinner Saturday evening. He personally contributed the wine served at the dinner. But everyone pitched in to help. When I looked around for accommodation for the visitors, Mrs. Fulton undertook to put up four guests at Mill Rock, Elizabeth Thomson and Gloria Robinson two each, while my secretary Betty Musgrave took one. Frederic Holmes housed Bill Coleman and Everett Mendelsohn, and I found places for others in the guest suites at Harkness Hall and the Yale Colleges. Asger Aaboe entertained Jacob Lorch from Princeton. At that first meeting such generous and spontaneous support had little precedent, and it reflected, I think, the extraordinary spirit that then permeated the department at Yale.

"People began to arrive late Friday afternoon. About six o'clock I collected all who had come so far and took them to Pierson College to dinner. Afterward we went out in various cars to Lloyd Stevenson's house at 260 Everit Street, where more people had gathered. Conversation flowed steadily, and sometime during the evening we began to suspect that the meeting might go well. Lloyd Stevenson remarked that he had never seen a happier group. Next morning the sessions around the long table in the Beaumont Room at the Yale Medical Library fulfilled that promise. Each student who gave a paper spoke on work in which he or she was deeply engaged. The topics were new; the approaches were fresh. The discussion was lively and continued through the coffee break. For lunch we went to the dining room in Harkness Hall, the medical student residence, and after the session

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ended in late afternoon, we went to the Graduates' Club on New Haven Green for dinner. The late Dr. Ira V. Hiscock, professor emeritus of public health at Yale, was a member of the Graduates' Club and sponsored us.

"The dinner was the climax of the first Joint Atlantic seminar.[2] Since people of various universities had come together for it, we had the idea of proposing toasts to each university. Lloyd Stevenson proposed the first toast to Johns Hopkins, and Donald Bates responded with humor that brought down the house. When Everett Mendelsohn responded to the toast to Harvard, he invited the Joint Atlantic Seminar to come to Harvard the following year, and the rest is represented in the record of thirty-two successive meetings.[3]

"Clearly the Joint Atlantic Seminar filled a need, unexpected but real, that was not met by national meetings. It was the need of students working in relative isolation to talk about their work, to meet others engaged in similar problems, and to exchange ideas and information. When Frederic Holmes and I were planning the first Joint Atlantic Seminar, we thought that if it were not a good idea, the meeting simply need not be repeated. So far it has been worth repeating."

Several features of this first JAS remained characteristic of all subsequent meetings. First of all, the meeting was brief, occupying only one Saturday, so that people from Harvard and Cornell and Princeton could come by car or take the train to New Haven on Friday afternoon and return home on Sunday morning. Second, the group was small, for the topic was narrower than the whole history of science. Third, the meeting was held in mid spring, when students are deep into their research papers but course deadlines are still in the future. Finally, the hosts treated the visitors as honored guests, giving them refreshment as they arrived on Friday, a place to stay, lunch on Saturday, and a fine dinner Saturday evening. A high level of hospitality has remained one of the hallmarks of Joint Atlantics meetings.

In one respect the JAS departed almost immediately from the models that had first inspired Leonard Wilson. The first meeting was the only one where people were seated around a table, and that table in the Beaumont Room was much too big to imitate a seminar. All the subsequent meetings followed a lecture format, like the HSS annual meetings. Even around the Beaumont table, speakers reported on their current research (some reading papers, some speaking from notes) rather than carrying on a dialogue like the one Leonard had enjoyed in Montreal. Yet good exchanges did occur, then and every year since. What worked from the outset was that there was plenty of time after each talk to question the speaker and even to add more comments after hearing a speaker's reply. Gar Allen still recalls how surprising and encouraging it was to him in 1965, just beginning his study of Morgan and very nervous about his presentation, to be told by established scholars how interesting they found his work.

The next year, when I was a first-year graduate student and working on a paper on the classification of barnacles, it was the discussions even more than the papers that impressed me at the Harvard meeting. The paper by Michael Ghiselin, then a postdoc with Ernst Mayr and deep into the research later published as *The Triumph of the Darwinian Method,* was followed by a lively period of questions. Mark Adams recalls that "a sharp argument erupted between Harold Fruchtbaum and Michael Ghiselin about Darwin's barnacle work;

[2] A mimeographed program confirms that the initial event was called "Joint Atlantic Seminar in History of Biology," though over the years the terms "in the History of Biology" or "in History of Biology and Medicine" have also been used.

[3] This was written before the 1997 meeting. The 1999 meeting at Penn will be the thirty-fifth.

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

there were many comments shouted from the audience, waving hands, pronunciamentos, and so on." Lloyd Stevenson, distinguished and imposing, then called time-out by wondering aloud how many of those so ready with opinions had actually read the thick Cirripedia volumes and then insisted on a show of hands. Only Harold, Michael, and I raised ours, leaving the others to steep in the message that talk is cheap. That point was made again, in various forms over the years, when discussion revealed that a youthful researcher can be a sounder authority than a well-known senior scholar.

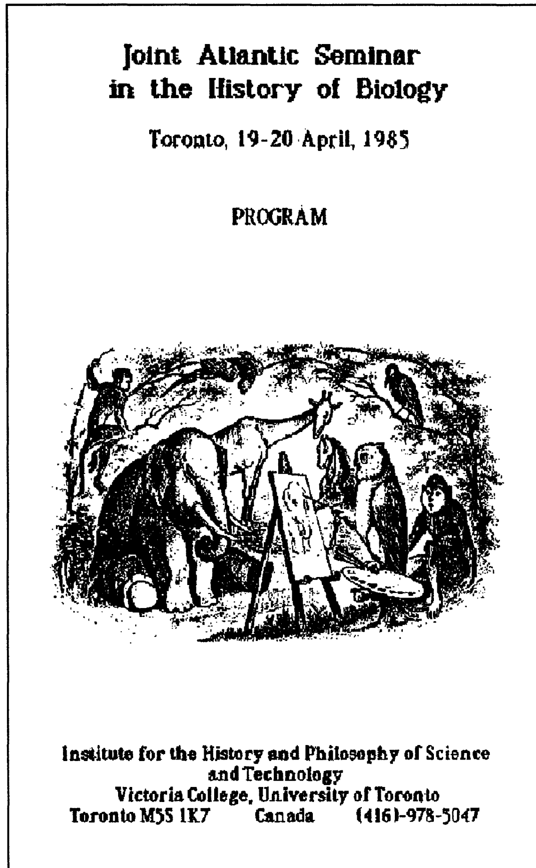
Because these interchanges are such a treasured feature of the JAS, organizers are careful to schedule a full ten minutes for discussion after each twenty-minute talk, and speakers are remarkably good at keeping within their allotted time. At the 1968 Philadelphia meeting Jane Oppenheimer, as chair of the morning session, enforced speakers' time limits with a loudly ticking alarm clock (or was it a wind-up kitchen-timer?). So disconcerting to everyone was this technique that subsequent organizers have taken pains to do their enforcing beforehand, behind the scenes, and a very high proportion of well-timed talks is the result.

In contrast to the larger professional meetings, where one can hear fine research well explained but may also be subjected to dull reports delivered incomprehensibly, every JAS has been a delightful day of mostly, or entirely, fascinating intellectual fare. Karen Reeds made the position of botany within and beyond medieval universities a seminal issue for the later growth of biology. John Farley destroyed our assumptions about spontaneous generation by teaching us about parasitic worms. Malcolm Kottler had us on the edge of our chairs with his stunning tale of how the erroneous count of 48 chromosomes gained such authority that those who saw only 46 doubted their own eyes. (Gar Allen later put this case at the front of his undergraduate biology textbook.) Ruth Cowan explained what her undergraduate students learned when they tried to build a Leeuwenhoek microscope or an ice calorimeter, or to observe sperm fertilizing a frog's egg, or to produce cell-free fermentation. Stanley Becker made the topic of hybrid corn come to life. Vernon Rosario entranced us with how French novelists used medical reports of homosexuality. Misia Landau, unforgettably sexy, enthralled us with her literary criticism. Year after year, as my students and I drove back to Toronto, we would compare our reactions and be hard put to decide which of the day's fine presentations we liked best.

With the changing financial circumstances of academic departments, maintaining the customary hospitality has often taxed the organizer, who has to locate funds to feed several dozen people. When the host institution has a graduate program, there are local students to offer their peers a bed or at least a place to spread a sleeping bag, but the nonstudents may have to check into a local motel (choosing from a list compiled by the organizer). Places for lunch are usually suggested, but the tab may be picked up only for those giving papers. The final banquet has always been held in a spirit of lively fellowship, sometimes in a university dining hall and sometimes in an ethnic restaurant. Occasionally we dined in very elegant surroundings. I recall the banquet in 1969 beside the Hope diamond in the Hall of Gems at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. Each year's hosts have been inventive in begging financing from several corners of their university (finding deeper pockets when the connection of biology to medicine is stressed, which sometimes affected the meeting's name), and in recent years the tradition of complete support for graduate students has been maintained, thanks to special grants from the Dibner Institute.

The business of organizing a meeting—sending out announcements and travel information, identifying suitable venues, arranging food and accommodation, producing programs and lists, and so on—involves challenges and skills not taught in class. Frequently the faculty member who agreed to host the meeting has depended on local graduate stu-

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms


Joint Atlantic Seminar
in the History of Biology

Toronto, 19-20 April, 1985

PROGRAM

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science
and Technology
Victoria College, University of Toronto
Toronto M5S 1K7 Canada (416)-978-5047

Figure 2. Program for the April 1985 Toronto meeting of the Joint Atlantic Seminar in the History of Biology.

dents to help or even take on most of this work. Graduate students Sara Tjossem and Nadine Weidman were responsible for the 1992 meeting at Cornell. Every year the organizers of previous meetings might pass on advice, encouragement, and mailing lists, but this network of experience has remained very informal. Larry Holmes has several times suggested that there should be some official body to oversee the business and ensure its future, but the response he gets is, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!”

Like the Midwest Junto, the JAS is a regional meeting. In its first decade or two, the organizer got in touch with the handful of historians of biology in doctoral programs in the northeastern United States—Harvard, Yale, Hopkins, Princeton, Penn—asking them which of their students were ready to give papers. If the number of proposed talks was too small, one or two faculty members would be drafted; if too great, people who had spoken before were turned down. Invitations to the meeting were usually mailed out to all who had attended the year before and to anyone else someone happened to think of who seemed appropriate. The geographical boundaries were stretched when I hosted meetings in Toronto and when Bill Coleman at Hopkins formed an alliance with Camille Limoges in Montreal; we pointed out that the St. Lawrence Seaway is really an arm of the Atlantic.

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

(See Figure 2.) The corridor from Cambridge to Washington is a fine base for the JAS because it includes a sufficient university population to supply a program of eight to ten graduate students and an audience of twenty to forty faculty and students, a perfect size for intellectual collegiality. Although Yale, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Penn, and Princeton have each hosted the meeting several times, as would be expected, nearly half of the time some other host has come forward. We watched an eclipse of the sun from the courtyard of Rockefeller University, we walked to a beach at Woods Hole, and we were honored to be welcomed to Cold Spring Harbor by James D. Watson in the role of local historian. As the meeting's reputation grows and its existence is broadcast in the HSS *Newsletter* and by email, speakers from remarkable distances have offered to give papers, and some have been accepted, but the modest size that comes with geographical limits is clearly one of the attractive qualities of the Joint Atlantic Seminar.

This content downloaded from
165.123.34.86 on Mon, 09 Oct 2023 14:41:56 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms