

News of the Profession: Eloge



ALISON WINTER (1965–2016)

In June 2016 brain cancer took the life of Alison Winter, age fifty, snuffing out the incandescent spirit that so brightened her professional and personal worlds. A professor of history at the University of Chicago at the time of her death, Alison was a leading scholar in the social, cultural, and legal history of the sciences of mind. She had published some two dozen articles, book chapters, reviews, and two prizewinning books—*Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (1998) and *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* (2012). In the interval between the two books, she and her husband, the historian Adrian Johns, had four children, each of whom was one of the joys of her life. Throughout her career, she imprinted her imagi-

native zest for living and learning and her love of music and literature on her colleagues, students, friends, and family alike.

Born in Connecticut, Alison was raised in Ann Arbor, where her father taught mathematics at the University of Michigan. He hoped that she would become a scientist; she preferred English literature. As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, she tried the history of science as a compromise and became a passionate devotee of the field. She astonished her teachers with her energetic intellect, insightful understandings, and poetic flair on the page. James Chandler, a scholar of English literature, vividly recalls a “dazzling” paper that she had undertaken to write on Darwin and Milton. “Once she learned that *Paradise Lost* was one of the books that Darwin carried with him on the *Beagle*, she became obsessed with figuring out what it might have meant to him.” Her principal mentor in the history of science was Robert Richards, from whom she imbibed both knowledge and a respect for technical developments even while displaying the strong-minded independence that led her to graduate work at Cambridge University, where sociocultural interpretations of science and medicine held sway.

Alison met Adrian, who was a fellow graduate student in her department, shortly after arriving there. They were married, in 1992, in the chapel of St. John’s College, where Alison then held a junior fellowship, marking the first time in St. John’s five-hundred-year history that a female fellow had been wed in its sanctuary. Alison received her doctorate in 1993, having written her dissertation, under the guidance of Simon Schaffer, on Mesmerism in Great Britain, the work that formed the core of her first book. After another year at Cambridge, as a lecturer in the history and philosophy of science, Alison came to the California Institute of Technology, in Pasadena, as an assistant professor in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division, which is where I first got to know her. She relished the pleasures of Southern California, becoming an intrepid mountain hiker, a connoisseur of Japanese grocery markets, and a consummately skilled maker of sushi exquisite in design and taste.

All the while, she revised and expanded her dissertation into *Mesmerized*. The work evenhandedly explores the boundary of the central and the marginal in Victorian science—in this case the embrace by

laypeople, as against most medical professionals, of the idea that individuals could affect other persons, even crowds, by the exercise of some physically undetectable magnetic force. The book approaches the subject without either whiggish bias or retrospective mockery, exploring mesmeric episodes (that is, apparent demonstrations) and debates through the eyes of contemporaries. Expressing Alison's multiple interests and talents, it is part history of science and medicine, part British cultural history, part history of women and society in nineteenth-century Britain. It is hallmarked with her conceptual power, including the ability to make improbable connections—for example, the inspiration that the cultural trope of organizational magnetism provided to the orchestral conductor's use of the baton. Hailed by reviewers as an original contribution to both the history of science and medicine and Victorian studies, *Mesmerized* received the Sonya Rudikoff Award, from the Victorian Studies Association; the British Council Prize, from the North American Council on British Studies; and the Arthur Shapiro Award, from the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis.

In 1998 Caltech promoted Alison to associate professor, but her mentors at the University of Chicago, not only fully knowledgeable about her range of talents but now also mindful of her rising scholarly reputation on both sides of the Atlantic, were eager to recruit her to the faculty. In 2001 they succeeded, obtaining appointments as tenured associate professors for both her and Adrian. By the time Alison got to Chicago, she had inchoately in mind a book on the history of the sciences and uses of memory, in both medical therapy and the courts. She was undaunted by the subject, even though it was complicated and largely new to her. She was aided in the pursuit of it by the award of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation. In between, a New Directions Fellowship from the Mellon Foundation enabled her to spend two semesters in the University of Chicago Law School to equip herself to deal with the intersections of science and law that her conception of the book entailed.

Memory is a brilliant, original history of the intertwined theories of memory and attempts in the laboratory and the courts to recall past experience. It treats with engaging yet critical discernment the clinic and the courtroom, trauma and therapy, truth serum and psycho-stimulation, neuroscience and neuro-speculation. It brings to revealing life disputes about the reliability of memory that have arisen in the law, the laboratory, and the media, especially in the cases of recovered memory that drew so much popular notice about a quarter century ago. The book gained admiring attention from scholars—it won the Gordon J. Laing Prize of the University of Chicago Press—and from reviewers in the general-circulation press.

During the last years of her life, Alison started work on a third book, an account of what she called the "New Age of Mind." It was an outgrowth of a chapter in *Memory* that concerned the bizarre story of Virginia Tighe, a woman living in a small town in Colorado in the 1950s who claimed to be able to recall under hypnosis a prior life as a housewife named Bridey Murphy in nineteenth-century Ireland. Tighe and her tale won widespread and credulous attention in popular culture. Taking off from that response, Alison aimed to explore an important and influential development: the sciences of self-realization—a kind of new, empirical spiritualism—in American life during the post-World War II decade. Her work showed that, contrary to received historical wisdom, these paranormal sciences began to flourish during the 1950s, laying the foundation for the "new age" clusters of thought that marked the countercultural trends of the 1960s and 1970s. Alison's book would thus have spoken not only to the history of the sciences of mind as such but also to broad trends in post-World War II U.S. history, including popular cultural attitudes toward conventional scientific authority and buttoned-down intellectual conformity.

Alison had relished the return to Chicago, her undergraduate home, and the advantages offered by a full-service university, including the opportunity to teach undergraduate majors and train graduate students in both history and history of science. In keeping with her broad knowledge and interests, she offered courses in diverse subjects, including gender and the history of science, history of medicine since the Renaissance, science, culture, and society in Western civilization, and historical topics in medical ethics. She also collaborated with Adrian in a project, called "Microcosmos," to devise Web-based material for use in teaching the history of science.

Alison was a paragon of boundless helpfulness and enthusiasm for the work of colleagues and students, a fount of ideas and suggestions who tactfully offered guidance rather than direction. Robin Scheffler, now

an assistant professor in science studies at MIT, recalls soliciting Alison's help during his junior year at Chicago when he was beginning work on his senior thesis. As they walked to the Lab School one warm afternoon—Alison wanted to say hello to one of her children—“Alison peppered me with questions, and then let loose a flood of advice. . . . I had the experience of having been washed up upon the shores of a new continent, or of being handed the keys to a new wing of a vast library.” Along with the considerable tangible skills that Alison conveyed, she “also taught me that knowledge is nothing without generosity.”

Alison was winningly playful and unpretentious, unceremoniously breaking conventions that stood unnecessarily in her way. She brought her small children to professional meetings—she and Adrian usually shared their care—and even a baby to an archive, charming the archivist, who was at first stiffly disapproving, into enthusiastic embrace of her initiative.

Adrian recalled that living alongside Alison was a “whirlwind experience,” explaining, “She was constantly sparking ideas or proposals of one kind or another, in every domain—from research ventures (that might lead to a deranged road trip to a reincarnation archive in Colorado) to family projects (like scouring the obscurest recesses of the South Side for discarded industrial materials to make a secret playground in the basement).” She took on the renovation of their decrepit Victorian house in Chicago, awing the workmen with skills from walls to wiring that she learned and applied.

Alison remained brimming with plans during the five months or so between the diagnosis of her cancer and her death. She continued to nurture her children and to teach—by Skype—from hospital or home as long as she could. She tried taking charge of her own care, much as she had managed the renovation of the house, mastering the readouts of the diagnostic technologies and advising the doctors on her treatment. In all, she made a project of her illness, intending to turn it into a study of the content and sociology of oncological medicine, including its high technologies. She had it in mind to publish the account in the *New Yorker*, calling it “My Glioma.” If Alison's glioma proved to be implacable, her courage and tenacity, curiosity and imagination, talents and voice all survive in her pages, and—it could hardly be otherwise—in individual and collective memory.

Daniel J. Kevles

Daniel J. Kevles is the author of, among other works, The Physicists (Knopf, 1978), In the Name of Eugenics (Knopf, 1985), and The Baltimore Case (Norton, 1998). His current projects include a history of innovation and ownership in living organisms. A professor emeritus at Caltech and Yale, he lives in New York City.