

In Memoriam: Richard Lowitt, February 25, 1922 – June 23, 2018

A Historians' Historian

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IFIRST MET DICK LOWITT WHEN I went to Iowa State on a job interview in 1980. By then, Lowitt was a major figure in his field. Trained at the knee of Columbia's Allan Nevins, Lowitt took that mentoring to heart. He valued readability in history. Like Nevins, who began his career as a journalist, Lowitt always wrote short chapters and cared deeply about flow. This was quite an ordeal; his dissertation was an exegesis on William E. Dodge, an antebellum entrepreneur of such varied affairs and complicated means that he was known as a fervent reformer as well as a merchant prince of Wall Street.

That Lowitt would receive his PhD degree from Columbia University was quite a coup. A son of Lithuanian immigrants and a Depression-era kid, Lowitt grew up in New York City. He attended City College there and ultimately claimed one of the few graduate seats at Columbia opened to Jewish students.

Lowitt took an instructor's job at the University of Maryland as he completed his dissertation. There he met and married a Johns Hopkins graduate student, Suzanne Catharine Carson. A C. Vann Woodward student and a fine historian in her own right, Suzanne chose not to publish her dissertation, "Samuel Chapman Armstrong: Missionary to the South," and she never coveted a permanent academic appointment.

Together Dick and Suzanne began the peripatetic life of academics. Suzanne did all the driving as the inveterate New Yorker Dick never learned how. Stops after Maryland included the University of Rhode Island and Connecticut College. As late as 1990, the ever-frugal Dick used the empty pages in Connecticut College blue books he had collected to take research notes. From Connecticut, the couple began a southern trek in 1966 with a brief stop at Florida State University. They relocated two years later to the University of Kentucky where they spent a decade.

There Dick joined an impressive coterie of political historians. Tom Clark still was around and Holman Hamilton, Mary W. M. Hargreaves, Clement Eaton and others had hit their stride. These national policy historians often wrote on the South and agriculture. It was at Kentucky that Dick completed his three-volume biography of George Norris. A Republican and a New

Dealer—Dick found that combination intriguing—Norris sponsored the legislation that led to the Tennessee Valley Authority and was instrumental in establishing the Rural Electrification Administration.

To work on the Norris book, Lowitt established a pattern that persisted for at least three decades. Each summer he would go off to Washington for two weeks and immerse himself in the collections of the Library of Congress or the National Archives. For lunch he would seek out the most junior scholar working at the repository and invite her/him to eat and discuss history. Gossip, professional or otherwise, did not mark Dick's lunch conversations. Lunch companions discussed new books, someone's forthcoming work, or recently published research. Dick genuinely wanted to know what his lunch mates were working on, how they framed their questions and what collections they sought to use.

At night, Lowitt turned his attention to the senior historians of the area. DuPont Circle was a particular haunt and discussions with David McCullough and other members of the DC intellectual glitterati were commonplace. Members of the House and an occasional Senator joined the mix. There never was much real argument about politics, the role of the state, and the social welfare compact. In every fiber of his body, Dick was an inveterate New Dealer. The Roosevelt administration could do no wrong.

Dick had great expectations for classroom teaching. He saw history as clear cut. Simple teaching about the New Deal would preserve not only its memory but also its reality. To his bones, he knew that any properly taught course on twentieth-century America could not help but create an entire new generation of New Deal advocates. In fact, he saw college history as the means to maintain and further American opportunity. He recognized in the Roosevelt administration the essence of social responsibility. The Public Works Administration, Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, as well as straight economic policies such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act, were a means to make America greater. Programs to preserve human dignity, to fund painting, literature, and the visual arts, to establish libraries, and to construct new architecturally significant post office buildings were to Lowitt essential to life and living. To Lowitt, it was Roosevelt's genius that in addition to providing relief to an extraordinary percentage of the American people he could take a dire situation and turn it into something that greatly enriched America.

It was during his Kentucky years when Lowitt first became active in the Agricultural History Society, annually attending the organization's luncheon

at the Organization of American Historians' yearly meeting. In those days, Wayne Rasmussen ran the society out of the USDA's history office. Lowitt served on the society's executive committee from 1973–1976. Among those most pressing duties was gathering for breakfast the day of the scheduled luncheon.

Dick moved to Iowa State in 1978 where he had tremendous administrative success. He used his extensive personal and political skills to launch the initial two PhD programs in the humanities, the first in the history of technology and science in 1980 and the second in agricultural history and rural studies the following year. To flesh out these new programs, Dick worked with Pioneer Hi-Bred—Henry A. Wallace's company—Living History Farms in Des Moines, and the Wallace family to fund a Henry A. Wallace professorship in history. He also worked with the sons and son-in-law of Wallace's cornbelt compatriot, Roswell Garst, to create an endowed fellowship for history graduate students.

At Iowa State, he delved heavily into agricultural policy. He wrote about the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, the Soil Conservation Service, and the New Deal in the West. He put together a collection of Garst's letters to farmers and politicians in Eastern Europe and in Latin and South America. Dick and I put on an Agricultural History Society Symposium in Ames to mark the centennial of the USDA as a cabinet department and published the proceedings.

During the heyday of the Reagan administration, I would occasionally question him about the rise of conservatism. Without fail, he pointed to defective history teaching as the culprit. If professors truly understood the lessons of the past, chants of getting government off our backs would cease and the public would clamor for an active, positive New Deal-like federal government. Lowitt held those truths to be self-evident.

As he approached the then-mandatory retirement age of seventy, Dick began to plot out what to do with his remaining years or as he put it, "as I drift into senility." The University of Oklahoma recruited the Lowitts. The university established a program to draw recently retired distinguished faculty to the area by providing them office space, library privileges, and a few other perks. It was there that Dick published biographies of two other senators, Bronson Cutting and Fred Harris. Lowitt was fascinated with who owned water and what that meant, an interest he shared with his good friend, Don Pisani, and he explored that avenue in several other works he wrote or edited about the West.

Even in his dotage, Lowitt's mind remained active and able. Moving back east to live with son and family after Suzanne's death in 2006, Lowitt continued to research and write. He published a slew of pieces in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* in 2006–2008. When I last talked to him a few years ago, he spent some time excitedly telling me about his recent research on Ralph Waldo Emerson's travels to the West. As he put it he had "figured out an angle" from which to approach the project. He published an article on the subject in 2011. He then went back to work. His article on Oklahoma Senator Mike Monroney appeared in 2013. His last piece, "Tilly Merrick, Merchant in a Turbulent Atlantic World," was published in 2014.

Lowitt kept his interest in agricultural history and the AHS throughout his life. He served as president in 1991–1992 and was among the first Fellows of the organization. When the society revamped its annual meeting and separated it from the Organization of American Historians, Lowitt continued to attend. As recently as 2010, the then-eighty-eight-year-old Lowitt traveled to the annual meeting at Rollins College. He stayed in the college dorms. Dick told me he did it to save money. I suspect he did it for the bright, forward-thinking professional conversation of younger scholars.