

John Andrew Munroe (1914 – 2006)

By Bill Williams
October 15, 2006

John Andrew Munroe was born in 1914, the year that World War I broke out. Russia was still a Czarist State, Woodrow Wilson was President, and in most states American women didn't have the right to vote. The horse-pulled wagon or buggy was far more common as a means of transportation than the automobile, and most Americans continued to reside in the small town, villages and the rural countryside. From that world to the world of today was a breathtaking journey for the intensely curious and very observant John Munroe.

And yet most of John Munroe's scholarly interest focused on an earlier era when Europeans settled Anglo-America, developed its natural resources, and then declared independence from the British crown. Even more fascinating to him was how these newly independent states, including his native Delaware, formed both national and state governments, and how Americans in general and Delawareans in particular lived out their social and economic lives in the first four or five decades of this great experiment in representative government.

As John's former student and friend, I could talk in general terms about him as [an] outstanding scholar of the colonial and early national periods of American and Delaware history. Moreover, I could talk in general terms about his as [a] fine teacher, first rate department chair, superb student advisor, and about his unusually warm and caring nature. But I will not. Rather I will mention a few incidents that happened in the years since I first met John in 1967 that may bring home a few of these traits in a more personal manner.

In the summer of 1967, I arrived in Newark with a wife, three children, and the insecurities that plague most graduate students. Because I couldn't start graduate courses in history until the fall, I immediately went to work taking census for the city of Wilmington. As a census taker, I was trained to ask some very specific and personal questions. One day I entered a Wilmington home and proceeded to ask questions in a rather persistent manner.

The lady of the house, a Mrs. Munroe, soon became irritated at my line of questioning. It was clear that she didn't like me and at least what I was about. One of my questions concerned her children. She explained that she had only one child, a son who lived in Newark. Where in Newark did he live I asked. "He lives right across from the University of Delaware." In a sinking voice I asked, "Does he by any chance work for the University?" "He is chairman of the history department." She curtly replied and then, after getting my name, she said that she had other things to do and escorted me out of the door. Oh, my!

I dreaded meeting John Munroe, but I had my first appointment with him the next day and so I had no choice but to show up. The first thing he said was “I understand that you met my mother.” And then he smiled and his eyes twinkled as they often did when he was amused. Clearly he was telling me that his mother’s opinion of me would not necessarily be his own. What came through loud and clear was that this was an unusually fair person who would judge only after all of the evidence was in. Indeed, not only was he unusually fair in dealing with students, colleagues and others, his fairness carried over into his writing of history. Unlike, so many who write to support a particularly ideology or agenda, John Munroe wrote to discover the nature of human beings and their institutions. In doing so he produced books and articles that are balanced and fair assessments of his subjects. That, along with the accuracy of his scholarship, is why John’s writing are so respected, and why they will have a very long shelf life in libraries and book stores.

One more personal anecdote:

After four years in Newark, John hired me [to] fill a history position for the University of Delaware in Georgetown, in the heart of Sussex County, in what was then called the University Parallel Program. I was quite enthusiastic about the opportunity. After-all, All John’s office was eighty-five miles away and I, who was sick and tired of writing graduate school papers, would be free to enjoy tennis, golf, going to the beach, and generally doing what I darned pleased after my teaching duties were taken care of.

But I underestimated John Munroe. Soon letters began to arrive, at least one a month, inquiring about my family and pointing out that while they were at the beach enjoying themselves, I should be doing research. He then proceeded to make research suggestions and, after I took the bait and hook, he followed up with important questions about my research topics. The letters continued to come on a regular basis through my 40s, and 50s. He just wouldn’t let go.

As time went on I began to realize that these letters were very special and I collected a small fraction in a folder. Then, when arthritis gnarled his fingers so that he no longer could write--, I was now in my 60s—phone calls substituted for letters, and they continued until almost the day he died. (The letters and phone calls covered a period of almost forty years.) For that as well as for many other things, I will always be grateful to John Munroe.

Memorial services serve many purposes. But perhaps one of the most important is to allow us to reaffirm the values that we hold dear and then use those values as guides as we live out our own individual lives. What John Munroe did with his life is to remind us all how we should conduct our lives. Indeed this broad gift may be the most important legacy of all from John Andrew Munroe.



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Jan. 23, 1985

Dear Bill,

That's a very nice review - just the sort your book deserves. Now you must take it as evidence that you should keep writing. You ought to be able to find a lot of satisfaction in doing things you are obviously good at.

We returned from an ideal climate in Mexico (Xtapa) on Monday to shivering cold here. I stumbled down a step I didn't see my last night there and am forced to use 2 canes to get around now. But it's not a bad time to stay indoors.

yours,

Alan Mumford

P.S. - Reviews like this will be worth
your attention

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June 10, 1980

Dear Bill:

I hope that by the time you get this your operation has been successfully completed. I saw Bob Robinson at a State Review Board meeting in Milford last week and he said you were about to go in the hospital then. I find it always to be a shock to go in and cease to live independently. Let's hope your time there was short.

I was pleased to see that the high school was remembering David with the dedication of its new tennis courts. We thought of him when my wife this week was helping run a state tournament for teen-agers.

In regard to Methodist records, have you ever looked at the Ezekiel Cooper Papers, which I once saw at the Garrett Theological School Library, a part of Northwestern University, in Evanston, Ill.? He was head of the Methodist Book Concern and was earlier stationed in Delaware, I believe. I looked there for McLane material but found none; I remember nothing more about them.

An autobiography of Bishop Levi Scott is hidden in a biography of him. I found it very interesting. *He comes from the Odessa area.*

Never give up hope of finding papers, particularly of distinguished people, for some descendant is likely to have squirreled some away. To find them, you have to study a little genealogy, because they are likely to descend through the female lines, women being the homemakers.

I think you are wise to be doing the sketches of Delaware physicians, because you have some reputation in the public health field and should keep your name alive there by occasional reviews and articles. Maybe your work on these sketches will suggest some article you could do.

It must be exciting to get letters from Thailand. John Beer had a daughter there for ~~w~~while--also on A.F.S., I think. We used to love to hear from my daughter when she was teaching or studying in Italy, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Taiwan--she got around. On August 23 she's being married (on Cape Cod) to a fellow who's working on a doctorate in Ottoman history at Princeton, so we have exciting events ahead this summer.

I expect to be away July 5-22 and all of August. At any other time I'd be glad to see you for lunch. Best regards,

Yours,

Jim Muraw

P.S. You ought to take the summer of 1981 off too, so you have an uninterrupted 9-month period for research & writing.