

Allen G. Debus (1926–2009)



Allen G. Debus was born in Chicago, Illinois on August 16, 1926 and attended Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois (1940–1944). He received his B.S. in chemistry from Northwestern University in 1947 and the A.M. in history from Indiana University (1947–1949), where he was an assistant to John J. Murray. His thesis was “*Robert Boyle and Chemistry in England 1660–1700.*” During 1950–1951 he took post-graduate courses in chemistry and then worked as a research and development chemist with Abbott Laboratories (1951–1956). Debus returned to graduate work in 1956 at Harvard University where his Ph.D. work was under the direction of I. B. Cohen. While studying at Harvard he received two Bowdoin awards in the Natural Sciences (1957–1958). During his studies for his Ph.D., he conducted research in England under Douglas McKie (University College, London) on a joint Fulbright and Social Science Research Council Fellowship and received personal supervision from Walter Pagel. He was a recipient of a Fels Foundation Fellowship from Harvard in 1960–1961 and in 1961 received his Ph.D. degree. His

thesis was *The English Paracelsians: A Study of Iatrochemistry in England to 1640*. Debus received the honorary D.Sc. degree from the Catholic University of Louvain in 1985.

Debus taught, conducted research, mentored students and staff, and organized and developed graduate and undergraduate programs in the history of science and medicine at the Department of History of the University of Chicago for over 35 years (1961–1996). He was the first director of The Morris Fishbein Center for the Study of the History of Science and Medicine at the University of Chicago (1971–1978). He was also appointed the first Morris Fishbein Professor of the History of Science and Medicine (1978–1996). Currently, he is the Morris Fishbein Professor Emeritus of the History of Science and Medicine. Debus’ research interests include: research on Renaissance and early modern science and medicine; the Scientific Revolution; early chemistry and medical chemistry (pre-Lavoisier, history of pharmacy, alchemy); and historiography.

Debus has provided the scientific community with a large body of work. In addition to several chemical patents, over the past four decades Debus has written over 300 articles and reviews and has authored or edited 20 books. His books include: *The English Paracelsians* (1965); *Science and Education in the 17th Century* (1970); *The Chemical Philosophy: Paracelsian Science and Medicine in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (2 vols. 1977); *Man and Nature in the Renaissance* (1978, translated into 7 languages); *Robert Fludd and His Philosophical Key* (1979); *Science and History: A Chemist’s Appraisal* (1984); *Chemistry, Alchemy and the New Philosophy 1550–1700* (1987); *The French Paracelsians* (1991); *Paracelso e la Tradizione Paracelsiana* (1996); and *Chemistry and Medical Debate* (2001). He has edited several early modern scientific texts, including: *Who’s Who In Science from Antiquity to the Present* (1968); *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* (1988); *Reading the Book of Nature: The Other Side of the Scientific Revolution* (1998); and *Alchemy and Early Modern Chemistry* (2004). He has served as an advisory editor for the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* and *History of Science*; he is also a member of the editorial committee of *Aries*, *Nuncius*, *Physis* and the *Rivista internazionale di storia della scienza*. A *Festschrift* in his honor, *Experiencing Nature* (1997) was edited by Paul Theerman and Karen Parshall.

Debus is an elected Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Overseas Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, and has held Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships, as well as a fellowship at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship at the Newberry Library, and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship at the Folger Library. He has also been a visiting member of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton and has been elected a foreign corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences in Lisbon. He is an elected member of both the International Academy of the History of Science and the International Academy of the History of Medicine. Debus has served as a visiting professor at Arizona State University and the Universidade de Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Debus has been awarded the Edward Kremers Award of the American Institute of the History of Pharmacy (1978), the Pfizer Prize (1978) and the Sarton Medal (1994) for lifetime achievement by the History of Science Society. Allen G. Debus was the 1987 recipient of the Dexter Award. Debus says that his "contributions to the history of science have been to show that the Scientific Revolution is more complex than the progression from Copernicus to Newton." In particular, he has "tried to show that debates over chemistry and chemical medicine in the 16th and 17th centuries played a very important role in the development of a new science. Science is an essential part of the world we live in. We cannot understand where we are today without a knowledge of the history of science."

Allen G. Debus died of cardiac arrest at his home in Deerfield, IL, on March 6, 2009. He is survived by his wife Brunilda and his sons Allen Debus and Karl Debus-Lopez.

Sources

Autobiographical information supplied by Allen G. Debus.

Allen G. Debus, interview by James J. Bohning at Deerfield, IL, 29 March 2007 (Philadelphia: Chemical Heritage Foundation, Oral History Transcript #0365).

"Allen G. Debus, 1926–2009: U. of C. researcher studied history of science, collected early 20th century musical recordings," *Chicago Tribune*, 10 March 2009; <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-hed-debus-03-mar10,0,5612964.story>.

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