

In Memoriam
Robert McCune Kingdon
(29 December 1927 – 10 December 2010)

Robert Kolb

ONE MADISON OBITUARY CALLED HIM “beloved mentor of generations of scholars and pathbreaking historian of the Protestant Reformation” and “the preeminent American historian of the French Reformation.” That says it well, but that is hardly the half of the story of the longtime editor of *The Sixteenth Century Journal* and a friend and conversation partner for scholars around the world.

Robert McCune Kingdon was born 29 December 1927, in Chicago, Illinois, the oldest of five children, and spent his childhood years in Hawaii, where his father was a Congregational minister on Maui and Oahu. Returning to the mainland for high school in Wisconsin, he prepared for college studies at Oberlin College (1945–49). He was graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and continued his studies at Columbia University under Garrett Mattingly, from whom he learned the art of teaching and the discipline of historical research. Preparation for life in academe probably seemed not so strange. His maternal grandparents had served as missionaries in Korea before his grandfather, George McCune, an accomplished linguist, became president of Huron College (South Dakota). While a graduate student, in 1951–52, at a time when few North American graduate students were venturing into European archives, he began his nearly sixty-year association with the city of Geneva as he embarked on his never-ending exploration of its rich source material for the study of Calvin’s Reformation. His friendships with his later publisher, Eugénie Droz, and with a host of European historians began in his initial time there. During these days he and a Harvard graduate student, Lewis Spitz, formed a friendship that lasted until the latter’s death more than forty years later. The two of them helped shape “Renaissance and Reformation” as a subdiscipline at North American colleges and universities and played “doctor-uncle” for many of each other’s graduate students.

Bob began his teaching career at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1953 and received his doctorate from Columbia two years later. He left Massachusetts for the University of Iowa in 1957, where he taught for eight years, launching a number of graduate students on their way. Like him, they went into teaching and service in their profession. The University of Wisconsin in Madison offered him a professorship in 1965, where he taught in the History Department until his retirement in 1998. The University awarded him the endowed Hilldale Professorship in 1988. The Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University, the oldest humanities institute attached to a university in the country, named him a Senior Fellow, a position he held from 1974 to 1998, and he served



as the Institute's director from 1975 to 1987. As an emeritus professor and senior fellow, Bob continued to be a valuable member of the Institute community until his final illness. His international connections brought many scholars from overseas to the Madison campus to enrich the dialogue among colleagues and students. Invitations and prestigious awards took him to the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, the University of Giessen, and the Humboldt in Berlin, to Israel, and of course to Geneva and France as well as to a number of United States research centers.

When I arrived in Madison in the fall of 1968, Bob had six new students, integrating us into a group of at least a half dozen veterans in his seminar. He modeled careful analytical approaches to the sources and the literature in his gentle but insistently firm way. When one of the veterans—rightly!—tore a newcomer apart, the professor intervened on my behalf as I stuttered about, but later, in private, explained clearly and explicitly which mistakes I was never to make again! To those who later knew the urbane and witty raconteur it may come as a surprise to learn how shy the younger Kingdon had been, but through the awkward moments came always his concern, both for the development of the student and for pursuit of the historical stuff. His modeling and his tips continue to shape my own work to this day, and I often pose the question of how Bob would have approached a topic as I pursue my research. It was always a delight when he reacted to some thought with his chuckle of delight, often rubbing his hands with glee as he savored a new angle or idea. He not only modeled our research. Without explicit instruction but with a readiness to help, he taught us how to go to conferences, how to write and how to find outlets for our writing, how to work with our colleagues with both respect and a critical eye—how to be historians. Bob embodied the ability to bridge gaps separating a variety of historical perspectives. Mattingly taught him how to deal with political and diplomatic forces. Kingdon developed his own practice of Clio's art that embraced both taking theological and ecclesiastical concerns seriously and careful scrutiny of the records of the social setting and its impact on the church's activities. His way provided ground for understanding and sharing these several perspectives on and approaches to the past. This earned him respect among both secular historians and theologians. He let his students follow their own interests in choosing dissertation topics, but once we had chosen, there reigned a strict discipline over our study of the sources and our engagement with the scholarship. Bob was not just a graduate student's professor, however. We sometimes were a bit jealous of the time he spent talking with undergrads after lectures and in his office.

Service to his profession remained important to him throughout his career. He was active in a number of professional organizations, among them the American Society for Reformation Research, serving as its president 1970–71, and the American Society of Church History, serving as its president in 1980. He helped found the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, and was also active in the Commission for the Comparative Study of Ecclesiastical History and the

International Federation of Societies and Institutes for the Study of the Renaissance as well as other North American, French, and Swiss professional groups. He played key roles in both the Center for Reformation Research in Saint Louis (on its board for thirty years, president for nearly a quarter century) and the H. H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies (as a long-time member of its governing board). Bob took an active role in the First Congregational Church in Madison, was an involved member of a local Rotary Club, and participated in other civic organizations.

A number of periodicals (*Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, *French Historical Studies*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*) and publication projects (*Collected Works of Erasmus*, *Folger Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, and *Encyclopedia of the Reformation*) claimed Bob's interest and time. However, readers of this journal most remember his twenty-five years of service as the editor of *The Sixteenth Century Journal*. In 1970 Carl S. Meyer and Robert Schnucker, a former graduate student of Kingdon at Iowa, founded *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*. They transformed that annual series into a periodical, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, two years later. In late 1972 Meyer died. The task of figuring out what to do fell to Schnucker and me. We turned as first choice to our former advisor and good friend in Madison. Only much later did we tell him that we had not dared to believe he would actually accept the editorship. Only much later did he tell us that he had thought that our journal should be integrated into the *Archive for Reformation History*, and he was willing to guide that task. He quickly came to recognize that the *SCJ* had an important niche of its own. With Schnucker as managing editor, and me as associate editor, the "three Bobs" shepherded the *Journal* until the end of 1997. Schnucker managed finances, publishing arrangements, and general policies—all the technical and business details; he made the journal work. Kingdon invested a great deal of time in working with the manuscripts, both to ensure the quality of what was published and to aid authors in improving their studies. In this way he made the *Journal* a place for beginning scholars to get their publishing feet wet, and he made it a place for established scholars to share their newest with the wider community.

The opportunity to work with one's doctoral advisor on a weekly basis over the long haul is a privilege accorded to few, but with a couple manuscripts coming in each week at the beginning, and the number slowly increasing over the years, Bob and I wrote often and talked often on the telephone. He was a leader who knew how to work as a member of a team, and through our editorial activities he taught me much about the profession and about dealing with others with respect while holding to high standards of professional performance. Schnucker and I looked forward to scholarly meetings, where we joined him and Charles Nauert, who early on expanded the editorial circle by taking over the monograph series, also dubbed *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*. Bob S. remembers the evening at an American Historical Association convention we decided to initiate the monograph series over *Death by Chocolate*. Bob Kingdon showed us the

proper way to sample and savor a French Red at more than one venue; I remember particularly one such evening with the lights of New York City outside the restaurant window and AHA members in other corners of the room. And he always had some news about colleagues near and far. Such moments together were pleasant interludes in the routine that included many hours alone at the desk, moving manuscripts through evaluation and editing to press to subscribers. Those two Bobs shaped an institution, Charles created the monograph series, and I enjoyed being at their side.

While I was studying in Madison, Kingdon went off to Geneva for a year—a Guggenheim year—and Manfred Welti from Basel took his place. Welti once commented that Bob's books had contributed much to our knowledge of the Reformation but that his articles had given us insights of sterling worth, perhaps in even greater measure. His first of nearly one hundred scholarly articles appeared in the *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* in 1955, on Theodore Beza's political ideas. His dissertation came into print the next year, the first of more than a dozen books: *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion*. Editions of the *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs de Genève* followed in 1962 and 1964, and in 1967 his *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564–1571* continued the story begun in his dissertation. It continued with *Myths about the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres, 1572–1576* (1988), but interspersed were a number of other works, for beginning students, editions of texts, and bibliographies. His work with the consistory records of Geneva, in which he directed a number of students who had passed through his seminar (including Thomas Lambert, Jeffrey Watt, Wallace McDonald; Isabella Watt joined the team on location in Geneva), resulted also in the *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin*. Inaugurated with its first volume in 1996, the consistory project is continuing to the present and never fell from Bob's agenda, even after a stroke limited his mobility—but not his mind. Out of this work came Bob's *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (1995) along with the study he wrote with John Witte, Jr., the first volume of *Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin's Geneva* entitled *Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage* (2005). This published legacy will continue to guide and inspire further research and discussion and will also give future scholars models for their own work.

Generations come and go, and few of us leave enough behind to continue to make a mark. That will not be true of Robert Kingdon. His habits of mind and research and teaching are being passed on, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, by those who picked them up in Iowa City and Madison and elsewhere. His written legacy will command attention and demand treatment for generations to come. ☛