

2023

## Donald R. Kelley (1931-2023)

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### Original Publication Citation

Carhart, M. C. (2023). Donald R. Kelley (1931–2023). *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 84(4), v-vi.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2023.a909531>

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## Donald R. Kelley (1931–2023)

Donald R. Kelley passed away in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on August 24, 2023, at age 92. Executive editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* from 1985 until his retirement in 2005, he was a much sought-after guide for his astonishing breadth of learning, his clarity of insight, and his reassuring confidence in the strength of intellectual history as a methodology. He cultivated and mentored young scholars who brought new methodologies and more inclusive voices in an era of increasing globalization.

Kelley's death fell on the 451st anniversary of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, the event that catalyzed the ideologies, methodologies, and mythologies at the center of his early scholarship. These he explained in a 1972 *American Historical Review* essay and then over three monographs on the development of historical methods as practiced by constitutional lawyers during the sixteenth century in France, plus a fourth on law and historicism in nineteenth-century France. In 1984, Variorum reprinted a selection of his then-forty articles, of which three had been published in the *JHI*.

Kelley assumed the executive editorship of the *JHI* in the summer of 1985, taking over from Philip P. Wiener and moving the office of production from Temple University to the University of Rochester. He soon found Robin Ladrach, who would serve as assistant and associate editor through Kelley's entire tenure, continuing as managing editor until 2015. In 1991 the operation moved to Rutgers University.

Upon taking the helm, Kelley immediately addressed the challenge to intellectual history posed by the linguistic turn, the new cultural history, the new historicism, women's and gender history, and world history. In his first five years as editor, he published three articles that set both intellectual history and the new histories deeply in the theory and methods of four hundred years of historiography. Kelley raised a skeptical eyebrow to the claims of novelty of the new histories. At the same time, he historicized Lovejoy's project. These themes he would work out in nearly ninety articles, a trilogy of monographs on the history of historiography, plus his linguistically oriented *Descent of Ideas* (2002).

Overwhelmingly the concern was whether scholars can get behind language to tease out the ideas expressed within it. “Language is the ocean in which we all swim,” Kelley concluded in 2002, “and whatever our dreams of rigorous science, we are fishes, not oceanographers.” His final project in retirement was centered on Herder’s *Metakritik* (1799) of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, but failing eyesight prevented its completion.

An example of his approach to intellectual history was a highly successful seminar at the Folger Shakespeare Library, whose scholars combined cultural, institutional, and material contexts with the close investigation of particular texts, authors, and intellectual projects. By the time he retired in 2005, intellectual history had staged a comeback that supported new journals like *Modern Intellectual History* (2004, formerly *Intellectual History Newsletter*), *Intellectual History Review* (2007, formerly *Intellectual News*), *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* (2007), and *Global Intellectual History* (2016).

Novalis observed that human beings experience life after death only in the realm of ideas, and therefore “we have a duty to think of the dead.” Kelley believed in that duty, but he added that “we do so without their complicity, in our own thoughts, which we express in the language of our place in time and space.”

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