

OBITUARY

Jack David Pressman (1957–1997)

Whatever might be the future of my *History*, the life of the historian must be short and precarious.

—Edward Gibbon

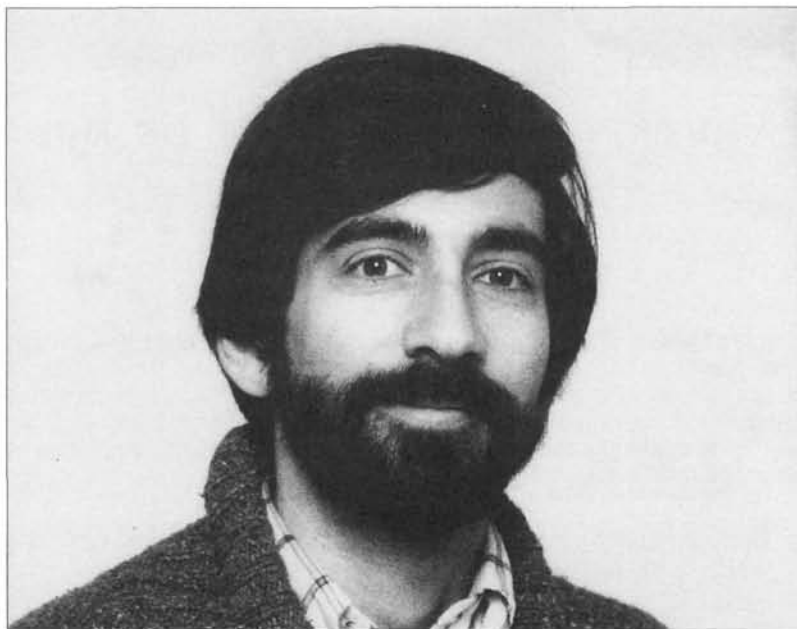
The world of scholarship lost one of its own with the passing of Jack D. Pressman on June 23, 1997, in Wading River, Long Island, New York. A specialist in the history of psychiatry, he was a tenured associate professor in the Department of the History of the Health Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco. His work explored the rise of somatic therapies in psychiatry during the 20th century, and his book, *Last Resort: Psychosurgery and the Limits of Medicine* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), was in galley proofs when he died.

Pressman was a productive scholar and an effective teacher. A graduate of Stuyvesant High School in New York City, he went to Cornell University, where he graduated in 1978 with honors in neurobiology and behavior. There he met Professor William Provine, who influenced him to pursue the history of science. After 2 years of graduate work at the University of Chicago, where he completed a master's degree in the Conceptual Foundations of Science program, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in the Department of History and Sociology of Science. There, amid the stimulation provided by the faculty and other graduate students, Pressman honed his historical skills. He became known for his analytic rigor and depth of knowledge as well as for his broad understanding of social context. Under the supervision of Charles Rosenberg he completed a dissertation in 1986 on the history of the concept and technique of psychosurgery. He subsequently won a National Institute of Mental Health Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Rutgers University–Princeton University Program in Mental Health Research before moving to the University of California in 1987.

At the University of California, Pressman joined Guenter Risse in the Department of the History of the Health Sciences. As a faculty member of a small department within a vast medical school, he soon became involved in teaching medical students as well as graduate students in history and related fields. His technical background in biology served him in good stead when he was faced with skeptical medical students who questioned the value of the historical approach. Among the medicos, Pressman was known for a popular course on "Medicine and the Movies," which examined how doctors have been portrayed by the media in the 20th century. He was also an unselfish and generous mentor to graduate students in his home department as well as to those completing their dissertations at other institutions.

In addition to his book on psychosurgery, Pressman published articles and reviews in leading journals, such as the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, *Journal of American History*, and *American Historical Review*. He won the Richard H. Shryock Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine in 1985 and was serving as consulting editor for the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* at the time of his death. Editors prized Pressman's views on recent books in the field and frequently sought him out for essay reviews, where he displayed his talent for judicious yet searching criticism.

Pressman was valued for his contributions to scholarly organizations. He joined Cheiron, the International Society for the History of the Behavioral and Social Sciences, while still a graduate student, and was a founding member of the



Jack David Pressman

Photo courtesy of University of California, San Francisco

Forum for the History of Human Science when it was organized in 1988 as a special-interest group of the History of Science Society. Active in the affairs of the American Association for the History of Medicine, he served on the Executive Council from 1993 to 1996. He was a member of the Advisory Board for the San Francisco AIDS History Project for several years. In all these multifaceted roles, Pressman eschewed the limelight, preferring to work instead behind the scenes, unobtrusively but effectively.

Pressman had embarked on another major research project that was cut short by his death. Growing out of his interest in the origins of the contemporary psychiatric profession, he had launched a study that concentrated on Adolf Meyer's role in promoting the concept of maladjustment in the early 20th century. Meyer's conception replaced the reigning paradigm of insanity with one that focused on the individual's performance within society. Coupled with developments that occurred during and after World War I, the modern psychiatrist emerged as a new kind of medical worker who was located in the social space generated in the intersection of private and public health. The book, tentatively entitled *Maladjustment and the American Citizen*, was under contract to Oxford University Press.

Although he embodied the ideals of his chosen profession, Pressman went beyond them in his huge appetite for life and experience. He had the rare ability to make everyone feel like he was their best friend, exuding a magical mixture of trust, challenge, and expectation to all. In partnership with Wendy Lea Brown, his wife, he created a nurturing environment for Abe and Zoe, their children. The world has lost a dedicated scholar, a devoted family man, and a true friend in his passing. Pressman is buried in the Home of Peace Cemetery near San Francisco, California.

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