

Robert G.E. Murray: the consummate editor

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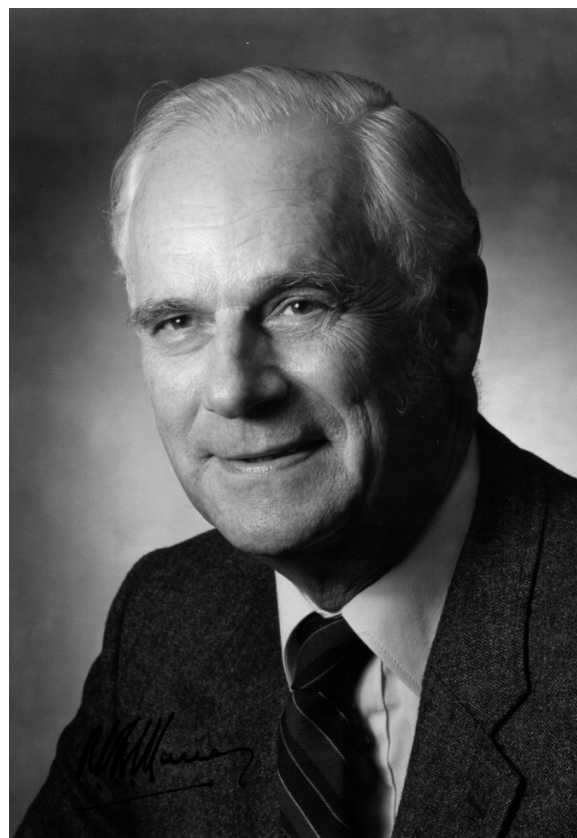
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Robert G.E. Murray (Fig. 1) was an important figure in the history of microbiology in Canada, as detailed in other articles in this collection, but he also had an outsized impact on microbiology in the United States and beyond. I must admit, when Cezar Khursigara and Susan Koval asked me to write this piece on Dr. Murray, I knew nothing of his contributions to microbiology in terms of science (covered elsewhere in this issue) and to publishing, and in particular, his service to the American Society for Microbiology (ASM).

I have often extolled the virtues of publishing in society journals. Dr. Murray walked that walk. He served as the Editor of *Bacteriological* (then *Microbiological*, and now *Molecular and Microbiological*) *Reviews* for a decade (1969–1979; Fig. 2). He served two different stints on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Bacteriology*. His service extended beyond ASM Journals—he served as the Vice President (VP) (1971–1972), and then President (1972–1973) of ASM—he kept on as Editor of *Bacteriological Reviews* during his time as VP and President. Very impressive! He was also elected to the American Academy of Microbiology (AAM, 1974), and then to the Board of Governors of AAM (1980; I wonder what he would have thought about the AAM Fellows submission track at mBio!). He was founding editor (serving from 1954 to 1960) of the *Canadian Journal of Microbiology*, further impacting microbiology in Canada and across the globe. Dr. Murray's contributions to the dissemination of scientific knowledge in the field of microbiology, one could argue, are unparalleled, and he was proud of his contributions to these endeavors—and rightly so (Fig. 2).

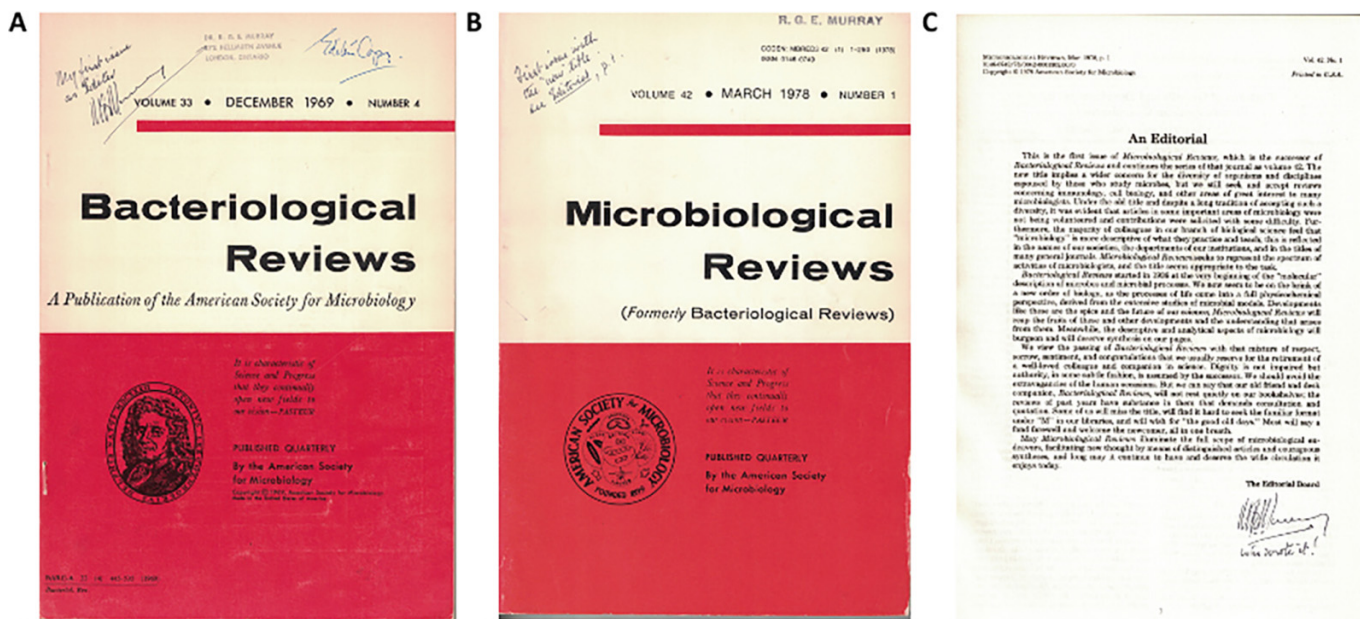
Today much of the conversation concerning publishing revolves around impact factors, open access, publishing platforms, the role of gatekeepers, etc., that is, the mechanics of publication. We often forget to consider how an editor (or reviewer, i.e., the people giving their time to evaluating manuscripts) can have a real impact on the scientific enterprise (and I would argue, more often than not, for the best!). Let me illustrate with one particularly impactful example. Dr. Murray was an editor at a time when the place of bacteria in the context of life on Earth was still an open question. One of my favorite quotes from this time comes from the textbook *The Microbial World*, by van Neil and Stanier, who stated, “Any good biologist finds it intellectually distressing to devote his life to the study of a group that cannot be readily and satis-

factorily defined in biological terms; and the abiding intellectual scandal of bacteriology has been the absence of a clear concept of a bacterium.” This statement was made prior to Woese's contribution to our current understanding of bacteria in the greater context of the tree of life, but in this regard, Dr. Murray was perhaps ahead of his time. That is, in his supporting letter for Dr. Murray's nomination for the J. Roger Porter Prize (that is awarded to a scientist who “demonstrated the importance of microbial biodiversity through sustained curatorial or stewardship activities for a major resource used



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Fig. 2. Covers of *Bacteriological Reviews* and *Microbiological Reviews*. (A) Dr. Murray's December 1969 issue of *Bacteriological Reviews*, where he has written "My first issue as Editor", followed by his signature. (B) The March 1978 issue of *Microbiological Reviews*, where Dr. Murray has written "First issue with the "new" title. see Editorial, p.1." (C) The editorial on page 1: under "The Editorial Board" he signed his name and added "who wrote it!". American Society for Microbiology Archives.



by the scientific community”), Marc-Andre’ Lachance stated, “...and he (Dr. Murray) always remained faithful to the sometimes unpopular idea that a good classification system must be based on evolutionary principles.” While this statement might feel a bit absurd today (as Theodosius Dobzhansky stated in his 1973 essay, “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution”), an editor with this point of view could really help drive conversations framing how we might think about and (or) interpret data in the field. As an editor of the premier review journal in microbiology, Dr. Murray had the opportunity to really help stir the pot!

In a 1988 article in the *Canadian Journal of Microbiology*, Robert Day, from the Department of English at the University of Delaware, used Dr. Murray as a case study for the role of an editor (and yes, you read that correctly—from the Department of *English*—now, that is a cross-disciplinary impact!). Quoting Dr. Murray about how an editor can shape the scientific discourse vis-à-vis his role as the editor of *Bacteriological Reviews*: “The scope of *Bacteriological Reviews* is, then, microbiology in its widest sense, and the aim is to attain a balance of substantial content, authoritative and discerning analysis, with clarity of expression.” That is, he articulated what a review article should do—clearly integrate information from across the field—both current and historical—to make a statement about where the field stands. Dr. Murray also clearly stated what a review should *not* be: “...a review journal must steer a clear course that avoids the fragmentary isolation of new research, the verbal enthusiasms of the symposium, the cunning distillations of the textbook, the lack of perspective of a list of contents of current journals, and an unimaginative updating of facts.” That is, avoid a laundry

list of facts, and to not include only what is currently “hot” but to also provide a broader (and historical) context for the reader. I did not know of Dr. Murray’s words, but I personally have always embraced many of these very same ideas. Murray’s words make me think that more of our conversations about publication should be about the *content* of the publications, and not the *mechanics*. I think Dr. Murray might agree.

In his nomination letter for Dr. Murray for the J. Roger Porter Prize, his colleague C.F. Robinow eloquently stated how Murray could impact microbiology in his role as an editor. Robinow stated that Dr. Murray was “...a facilitator of the exchange of experiences between labourers working out of sight of each other in microbiology’s vast vineyards.” Even in a world of social media, I still believe that this ability to connect each of us in our respective labs is, at its core, the value of publishing. Please take a moment to consider Dr. Murray’s words. Next time you sit staring at a blank page, not sure what how to start writing that manuscript, perhaps consider the text you are composing as a missive to a colleague who you would love to hear about what you’ve learned!

Tom Silhavy, my predecessor as Editor-in-Chief at the *Journal of Bacteriology*, had the opportunity to meet Dr. Murray. Tom recalls, “As it turns out, I gave the annual R.G.E. Murray Lecture at the University of Western Ontario in September 2008. I met him and had breakfast with him then. He had poached eggs on toast. He did some of the early electron microscopy of *E. coli* and my discussion with him concerned the first use of the words “outer membrane” in the literature.” I note this meeting because Tom carries on the legacy of Dr. Murray, as do all who serve as editors for society journals. As Day stated in his article about Dr. Murray, a key

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attribute of an editor is "...simple humanity. This is more than good manners, although that is part of it. The good editor remembers that [one] is deciding not only the fate of a particular manuscript, but also perhaps the product of perhaps months or years of work in the past as well as the chances of recognition, advancement and even livelihood in the future." These are words both wise and inspiring, and I am glad I had a chance to read them and share them with you. Next time I sit down to write a decision letter, I will read them because they are now hanging over my desk.

Acknowledgements

I thank Colleen Puterbaugh, the ASM archivist, for providing all the source material for this piece, Tom Silhavy for sharing his recollections of meeting Dr. Murray, and Cezar Khursigara and Susan Koval for giving me the opportunity to learn about R.G.E. Murray. I also thank Susan for sharing this personal note, "Dr. Murray was usually referred to as "Dr. Murray" or "Bob Murray". Rarely "Robert Murray". Or, in short, just "RGE". Even today the Chair of our department and I still refer to him as "Dr. Murray". It's a generational thing I guess. And a sign of respect. I couldn't bring myself to call him Bob, though that is what he wrote in his many birthday and Christmas cards to me." Thus, I have chosen to use the moniker "Dr. Murray" in this piece.

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Notes

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