Alan Dawley (1943–2008): Memorial and Assessment

[*Editor's Note:* The journal requested the following two essays to commemorate and assess the career of Alan Dawley, who died suddenly while on a study trip in Mexico in March 2008. First, Ann Marie Nicolosi, a colleague and former student, provides a personal remembrance. Then, editorial board member Ian Tyrrell, an authority on the intellectual history of United States history writing, explains why Dawley's books and essays offer excellent examples of the intellectual concerns and development of his generation of United States historians.]

Alan Dawley: A Personal Remembrance

By Ann Marie Nicolosi, The College of New Jersey

Alan Dawley was many things to many people. He was a prolific and important scholar whose work has helped to define and shape the study of American history. He was a committed activist, a loving family man, a world traveler, and a man whose intellectual capacities were matched only by his generosity as a teacher and mentor. It is in this latter role that I write about Alan and in this role that Alan left his mark in a very personal sense for me.

I had the pleasure of knowing Alan in many capacities. He was my colleague, my fellow activist, sometimes my battle companion, and my friend. But it is as my teacher and mentor that I will remember him best. Indeed, even as we became colleagues and friends, there still remained the element of the wise teacher and mentor and, perhaps, the adoring student who recognized the towering accomplishments of her teacher, accomplishments greater than what she, or very few others in the profession for that matter, could ever hope to achieve.

I met Alan some eighteen years ago when I transferred from Brookdale Community College to what was then Trenton State College. As a student a few years older than the traditional undergraduate, I was closer to Alan's generation than to my peers. To Alan's delight, when he asked if anyone knew who Big Brother and the Holding Company were, I shouted out, "Ball and Chain." Now, for the life of me, I cannot remember how Big Brother and the Holding Company fit into a class focused on the early years of twentieth-century America, but I guess it reveals the eclectic nature of the man.

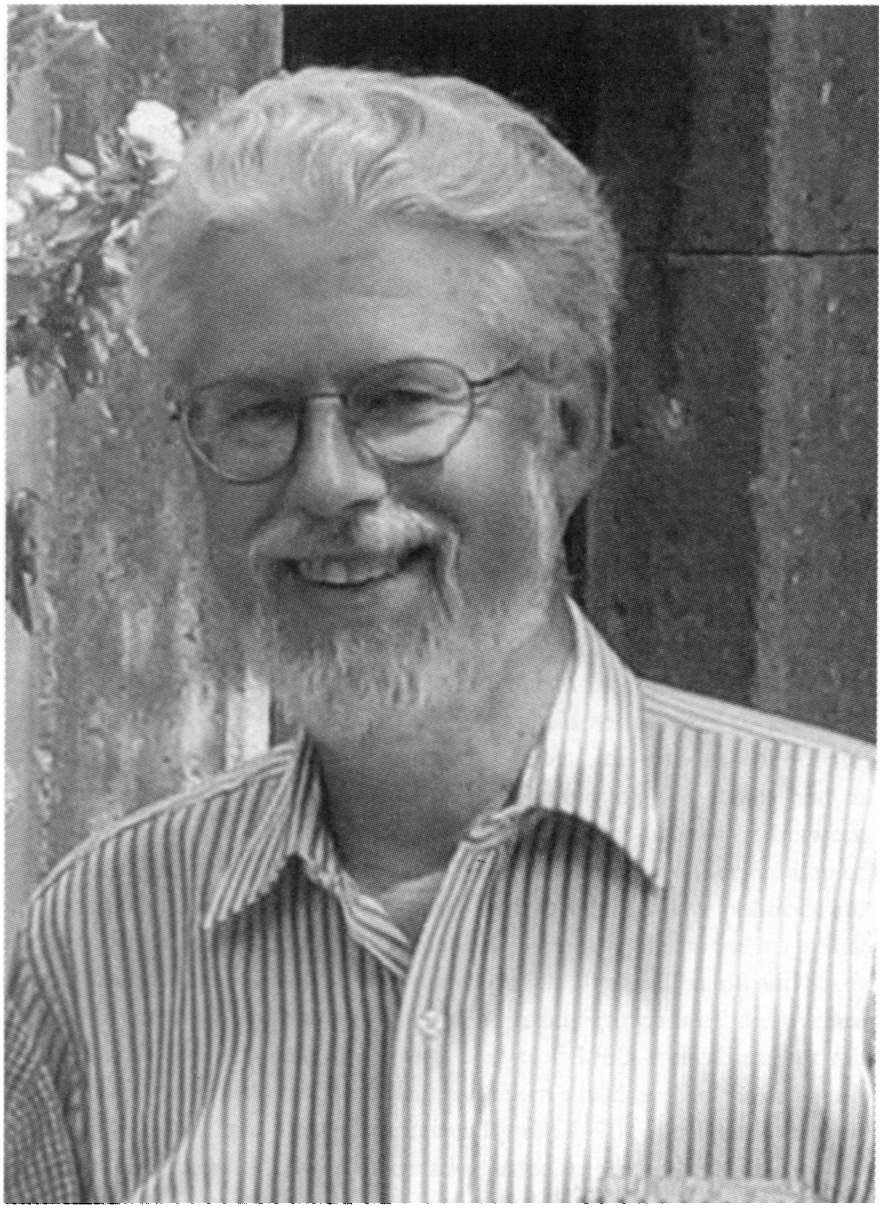
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Although I had done very well in community college, I was ill-prepared for the rigors of a four-year institution and got my first and only C from Alan. Work that would have earned me an A in community college only garnered a C at Trenton State College. I went to Alan's office, which at that time was in Forcina Hall, a classic example of mid-twentieth-century institutional architecture. As a working-class person, I was still in awe of academics (I quickly got over that) and could not believe that this windowless, airless room with cinderblock walls was his office. And of course, to his amusement, I commented on that fact. After our discussion about his accommodations, Alan sat with me and explained what was missing in my essays and why, although detailed, they were lacking in substance. I never got a C again.

After that, Alan was there for the rest of my academic career—until the day he died. Alan wrote every letter of recommendation that I ever needed and asked for, and I asked for everything to which I applied: graduate school, job applications, fellowships, and grants. He was Alan Dawley, and as his student I cashed in on that, with his permission of course. Some years after I was admitted to the Rutgers Ph.D. program, my advisor, Ginny Yans, who was the graduate vice-chair at the time of my application, told me that Alan had not only written a letter but made a phone call. He told Ginny that Rutgers, as a state institution, needed to put its money where its mouth was, so to speak, and admit a student who did not have the benefit of a middle-class upbringing and education but had the potential and determination. I saw Alan's letter when I worked in the history department office at Rutgers, and in it he stated that I had "moxie," which would enable me to overcome any other shortcomings in my education and preparation. Again he was my teacher, as his letter provided a model for writing letters of recommendation that do not effusively praise candidates but provide solid information assessing a student's strengths and weaknesses. Alan wrote his last letter for me in the fall of 2007, when I applied for an NEH grant.

Although Alan taught many things that an academic needs to know in order to survive and flourish, he taught me perhaps the most important lessons of my life—social justice and activism—and that you *can* make a difference. I was an undergrad in Alan's twentieth-century "Race, Class and Gender" course when the police beating of Rodney King occurred. When the police officers were acquitted of using excessive force, there was an outcry. Alan and I talked about it, and I expressed my anger and dismay. He asked me what I was going to do about it. "Nothing," I told him—I wasn't one for doing things like that. He looked me squarely in the eye and asked, "Don't you think it's about time you started?" Later that week, I joined with the college's Black Student Union to gather signatures for a petition to try the officers for violating Rodney King's civil rights. It was an enlightening

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Alan Dawley. Courtesy Evan Dawley.

experience that opened my eyes to the realities of white privilege and the deep-seated racism of the white community.

In September 2005, Alan, John Landreau, and I went to Washington, D.C., to protest the war in Iraq. We committed civil disobedience, and we draped yellow crime-scene tape on the White House fence. My bravado was intact while I was with Alan and John. As there were some three hundred people participating in the civil disobedience, I thought that we would be there for

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hours. But my bravado quickly evaporated when I was swept up in the first wave of arrests—they started with the women in the area where we were sitting—and I was separated from Alan and John. I panicked, and Alan saw that and walked alongside me, as near as the police would allow. He kept his eyes locked on mine to give me courage and strength, and he mouthed the words, "I am so proud of you." I knew that I had finally earned the respect I craved from the teacher I so dearly loved.

As the months go by, the magnitude of Alan's loss is only beginning to reveal itself. As his student and colleague, I know that my own scholarship and work will suffer from the absence of his keen intellect and the probing questions that always forced me to dig deeper and think more critically. But there will always remain the image of Alan's nodding head and the sound of his "mmhmm" when you got it right, or his looking to the ceiling when he was thinking and probing as he was pushing you—and that will forever inform my work. I miss Alan terribly, but I am grateful for having had the privilege of knowing such a world-class scholar and human being.

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