

IN MEMORIAM: KENNETH CMIEL

“I am an American, Chicago born,” runs the first line of a famous novel by Saul Bellow. Anyone who knew the historian Kenneth Cmiel, who died on 4 February 2006, will recognize how this blunt affirmation of Chicago identity could serve Ken as well as it served Augie March. Not that Ken played the identity game pretentiously. A capacity to live a particular persona without being captured by it was one of his countless endearing traits. But being a Chicago person, by birth and by doctorate and by a style that never left him in Iowa City or Berkeley, meant a lot to Ken, and it gave a certain tone to his skeptical, yet sensitive, responses to the conceits and aspirations of his colleagues and friends.

Within and beyond his tribe of intellectual historians, Ken was always one of the most thoroughly independent minds in any group. But unlike many people who pride themselves on their willingness to buck convention, Ken never postured. Indeed, if he agreed with you he was not afraid to say it, and enthusiastically, even if the opinion you expressed happened to be widely shared. What made Ken’s praise so precious and his criticism so worthy of attention was that once you got to know him well, you recognized how free he was of affect. He was a deeply truthful man.

His commitment to truth-telling animated the inquiries in which he was energetically engrossed at the time of his death, a series of explorations of the history of human rights, especially as understood and pursued in the North Atlantic West in the decades following World War II. Through a mere handful of vigorously composed, compellingly argued essays and conference presentations, Ken had established himself as the central figure in the rapidly growing international discussion of this episode in modern history. Although much of his research had to do with the United States, Ken’s leadership of the scholarly community devoted to this topic contributed mightily to one of the chief transformations experienced in recent years by specialists in the intellectual history of the United States: the sharply increased attention to aspects of American history that require a North Atlantic and even global perspective rather than merely a national one.

Prior to his engagement with human rights history Ken established his leadership among American historians with a book of 1990, *Democratic Eloquence*:

The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America, and with a second book, five years later, *A Home of Another Kind: One Chicago Orphanage and the Tangle of Child Welfare*. He was also a frequent contributor to reference works, to volumes of commissioned essays, and to the leading journals of the field. Hence he was a natural to serve on the board of *Modern Intellectual History* from the time of its founding. In advising the editors of that journal and many others, Ken always could be counted on for crisp and forthright analyses of manuscripts. He was sought after as a referee because his advice proved invaluable again and again. He cared about good writing all his life, as far back as his time on the editorial staff of the *Daily Californian* while an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley.

The great energy Ken devoted to professional activities was unusual in a person whose attitude toward the academic profession, including the community of historians, was so reserved. Ken espoused and exemplified a humility that caused him to marvel at the seriousness with which too many of his colleagues took themselves, and at the intellectual thinness of some well-rewarded careers built chiefly by self-promotion and by the well-timed repetition of the favored sentiments of the passing moment. Since Ken knew that I, too, was “an American, Chicago born,” although less authentic than he on account of a childhood spent largely in Idaho and Washington, he often confided in me his annoyance at the moral and political pretensions of some of our colleagues. Yet Ken did not allow his realistic sense of the limits of scholarship to diminish his own commitment to it. A moralist suspicious of moralism and a truth-teller who refused to exaggerate the role that truth could play in our violent and contradictory world, Ken Cmiel will be remembered as one of his generation’s most searching minds.

Ken died of a brain tumor, undiagnosed until his sudden death at the age of 51. Those who wish to make contributions in Ken’s memory are encouraged to contribute to a fund created to support the education of his three children: The Cmiel Children Memorial Fund, UI Credit Union, PO Box 2240, Iowa City IA 52244–2240.

David A. Hollinger