

## Some Reflections on the Occasion of Passing the WICB Torch

### Doing Science Like a Man

Some memories are indelible. It was sometime in 1967. I was standing in the hallway of the Harvard Biolabs with my thesis advisor (and ASCB co-founder) Keith Porter and another professor. Keith basically terrified me, but I'd recently worked up the courage to show him some data on a cool discovery I'd made. This prompted him to crow to his colleague, "She does science like a man!"

Five years later, when I was no longer terrified of him, I might well have given Keith a piece of my mind. But in 1967, as yet untouched by the just-emerging women's movement, I was thrilled. Science like a man! Wasn't that the goal? In those days, yes.

I'd attended my first ASCB meeting in 1965, and my most salient memory was of being hustled by a University of California, Berkeley, professor. (I held out.) Role models? There was Betty Hay, and Marilyn Farquhar, and.... But no matter. The idea was to get a PhD with the vague idea that I could "go back after I'd raised my children"—the model on offer in the 60s.

### Levels of Consciousness

The women's movement came to me in 1971, when biologist Ruth Hubbard invited me, as a postdoc, to sit in with a group of women professors in the Boston area. The group fit easily into Hubbard's small living room. As each person stammered out her newly raised "levels of consciousness" (code for having noticed gender disparities), I was stunned and transformed. Another indelible memory was of someone saying that she'd changed her pattern at science-related social events. She said that she used to talk only to the men, but now she took every occasion to talk to the wives, who proved to be fascinating. I could feel the collective blush. Talk to the wives? I wasn't the only one transformed.

Coincidentally, 1971 also marks the advent of what is now the Women in Cell Biology

(WICB) Committee of the ASCB. Our history is splendidly recounted in two *ASCB Newsletter* articles by Laura Williams.<sup>1,2</sup> Mary Clutter and Ginny Walbot were the pioneers, setting up the first get-togethers and mimeographing the first newsletters and booklets. There was a palpable us-them ethos in our early approach, as in feminism writ large. If they wouldn't invite women as symposium speakers, then we'd organize our own all-women symposia. If they considered us annoying upstarts, then we were doing our job. To ensure our autonomy, we insisted on operating separately from the ASCB, collecting dues, and maintained a lively presence at the meetings for several decades.



Ursula Goodenough

### Outsiders No More

But by the late 1980s, new dynamics were afoot, again as in feminism writ large. Williams captures this well: "However, there were women in the ASCB who did not appreciate WICB. WICB Chair Jane Peterson remembers receiving letters from such women. Some were concerned that they would be labeled as 'women's libbers' if they associated with WICB. Some expressed dissatisfaction with the WICB Career Awards. They thought the award could be a blemish on the recipient's record since it was given by women to women. Both Mina Bissell and Susan Gerbi recall being warned that if they became chair of WICB, they might be labeled as radicals and might not be chosen for future positions."

While most of the WICB leadership found these concerns quaint at best (Bissell and Gerbi were subsequently elected ASCB presidents), we were also coming to understand that our "outsider" status might be needlessly fueling such impressions. As it happened, the Society hired Elizabeth Marincola as Executive Director in 1991. Marincola's commitment to the goals of WICB was beyond dispute. In the context of that trust, we brokered an arrangement that instantiated WICB as a standing committee of the ASCB.



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Happily, any fears that such a move would weaken our impact proved unfounded. In part that is because outstanding cell biologists, including men, have eagerly served on the WICB Committee. But in large part, I submit, it is because the ASCB had by that time evolved into a very different organization across the board. Activism became increasingly the norm, from congressional education to minority affairs to career mentoring to creationist pushback to K-12 outreach. The importance of Marincola's leadership in promoting this culture cannot be exaggerated, but there developed a general ASCB sensibility that being a scientist was more than the papers and the academic positions. It was also about the context in which the science took place.

To what extent did WICB have agency here? It's hard to tell, and in the end it doesn't much matter. A telling testimonial: Our pioneer annoying upstart, Mary Clutter, until recently Assistant Director for the Biological Sciences at the

National Science Foundation, was at the 2009 ASCB Annual Meeting and commented, "Why do I feel so good when I'm at ASCB meetings these days? Everything seems so warm and upbeat and good for women!"

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## Doing Science Like a Woman

Nor, happily, is doing science like a man any longer the goal. We'd all be thrilled to be doing science like Abby Dernburg, Suzanne Eaton, Ruth Lehman, Jennifer Lipincott-Schwartz, Jodi Nunnari, Christine Petit, Maja Tinnermans, Amy Wagers, or Xiaowei Zhuang, all of whom were Symposium speakers at the 2009 ASCB Annual Meeting.

To be sure, we aren't "there" yet, as Elizabeth Marincola lucidly reminded us in a WICB column she wrote shortly

after leaving her position as ASCB Executive Director.<sup>3</sup> Her closing quip: "Perhaps it's time to establish a Men in Cell Biology Committee that could devote itself to supporting men as they tackle the very serious challenges of raising children while advancing their scientific careers." ■

—Ursula Goodenough for the Women in Cell Biology Committee



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## References

<sup>1</sup>Williams L. (1996). The history of WICB: The founding and early years. *ASCB Newsletter* 19(8), 12–13. [http://ascb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=501&Itemid=296](http://ascb.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=501&Itemid=296); scroll to 08/01/1996.

<sup>2</sup>Williams L. (1996). The history of WICB: The later years. *ASCB Newsletter* 19(10), 17–20. [http://ascb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=501&Itemid=296](http://ascb.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=501&Itemid=296); scroll to 10/01/1996.

<sup>3</sup>Marincola E. (2005). Do we still need a Women in Cell Biology Committee? *ASCB Newsletter* 28(12), 18–19. [www.ascb.org/files/0512wicb.pdf](http://www.ascb.org/files/0512wicb.pdf).

## Note

Ursula Goodenough served as Chair of the WICB Committee from 2004 to 2009. She passed the torch to Sandra K. Masur in 2010.