James David Ebert (1921-2001)

James David Ebert studied the developmental processes of chicks and of viruses in the US during the twentieth century. He also helped build and grow many research institutions, such as the Department of Embryology in the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Baltimore, Maryland and the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. When few biologists studied the biochemistry of embryos, Ebert built programs and courses around the foci of biochemistry and genetics, especially with regards to embryology. He eventually directed the MBL's Embryology Course, and later, the MBL itself.

Ebert was born on 11 December 1921 in the town of Bentleyville, Pennsylvania. He attended public schools while growing up and then graduated from Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania in 1942. Not long after graduation he joined the United States Navy and eventually became a lieutenant. Ebert was stationed on a destroyer in the Pacific Ocean that was attacked by a kamikaze pilot. The destroyer sank and Ebert spent twenty-four hours in the ocean until being rescued. Afterwards, as a biologist, Ebert befriended and trained several Japanese developmental biologists.

In 1946 Ebert began working towards his PhD in developmental biology under the instruction of Benjamin Willier at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. In the same year he married Alma Goodwin, who was a Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency during the war. Ebert received his PhD in 1950 and immediately became a member of the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After one year at MIT, Ebert moved to Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. Ebert became an associate professor of zoology by 1955, and he had started a program of experimental embryology. He studied chick embryos and the processes by which the protein make-up of the embryos changed throughout development.

Six years after receiving his PhD, Ebert became the director of the Carnegie Institution of Washington's Department of Embryology, in Baltimore, Maryland. Prior to Ebert's term as director, the department had had three other directors. The Institution's president, Caryl Haskins, had contemplated closing the department and starting something new. However, with some persuasion from Willier, Haskins spoke with Ebert and decided to give him the opportunity to run the department. Ebert and Haskins agreed that the department needed to focus on the study of genes and their regulation as well as the ways cells influence one another. Haskins said that Ebert's youth and enthusiastic personality made Haskins believe that Ebert would provide a fresh perspective to the department.

Ebert argued that it was his job to recognize and to recruit new talent and then support them in their work. He stressed the use of biochemistry and genetics, which in the 1960s blended together to form molecular biology. During this time, Ebert started to study the relationship between muscle cell differentiation and the propensity to infection in the Rous sarcoma virus.

While still director of the Carnegie embryology department, in 1970 Ebert also became the president and nonresident director of the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) at Woods Hole. At the MBL he researched, with Keiko Ozato, the response of murine lymphocytes to mitogens.

In 1977 Ebert ended his term at the Carnegie Department of Embryology, but he remained the director of the MBL. From 1978 until 1987, Ebert lived in Washington, D.C., and he was the president of the whole Carnegie Institution of Washington. As the institution's president, he made the decision to help build a large optical telescope in Chile at Las Campanas Observatory, and he worked towards the creation of a common campus for both Carnegie departments in Washington.

Ebert remained involved with scientific institutions for the rest of his life. When leaving one institution, he found another one to join. He retired from the Carnegie Institution in 1987 and became the president of the Chesapeake Bay Institute at the Johns Hopkins University, where he was a professor of biology for six years. Ebert was elected to many societies including the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Institute of Medicine. He was the vice president of the National Academy of Sciences from 1981 through 1993 and he also chaired its Government-University-Industry Research Roundtable from 1987 through 1993. His colleagues elected him as president of the Society for the Study of Development and Growth, the American Institute of Biological Sciences, and the American Society of Zoologists.

In retirement, Ebert and his wife Alma spent half of each year in Woods Hole and at the MBL. Ebert and Alma died on 22 May 2001 in an automobile accident while en route to Woods Hole.

Sources

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