

IN MEMORIAM

John N. Howard

1921–2015

In April, the OSA community lost a familiar and beloved leading light, John N. Howard—past president, OSA historian and pioneering editor. As these recollections, from fellow editor **William Rhodes**, make clear, Howard was also a man of humor and wide-ranging interests.

Many members of The Optical Society (OSA) will recognize the photo of John N. Howard accompanying this brief remembrance, for it and others like it appeared in his “From the Editor” columns in OSA’s *Applied Optics* (AO). Howard, who died on April 15th of this year at the age of 94, was AO’s founding editor and served in that capacity from 1962 until 1987, guiding the journal to its position of many years as the largest technical journal in optics. Not only was he OSA’s longest-serving editor, but in his later years he was the society’s principal historian, writing articles on the early years of OSA for publication in *Optics & Photonics News*.

Although his technical training was in optical spectroscopy, John’s interests were extremely broad, as exemplified by topics he addressed in his more than 150 editorials. In one editorial alone he touched on Galileo, Shakespeare, the metric system, Lord Kelvin and Lord Rayleigh. When I visited him at his home in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1987, John pointed to his complete collection of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta folios.

A “kindly, good-natured old editor”

John’s sense of humor, his interest in words, and his commitment to causes would show in some of his writings, as in his August 1984 AO editorial. “One of the drawbacks of

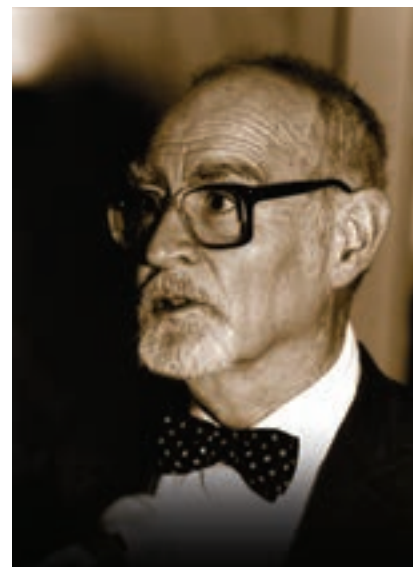
being a kindly, good-natured old editor,” he wrote, “is that one is always being put upon by various reformers to adopt their various and sundry reforms, preferably without asking why.”

John was writing in this case of the move by the United States

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postal system to introduce its set of two-letter symbols representing the American states and Canadian provinces: “Miss.,” the standard abbreviation for Mississippi, became “MS”; “Mass.” for Massachusetts became “MA,” and so forth. But, as John pointed out, “There are too many M’s, the Alabamas, Alaskas, and Albertas are too much alike; surely, there has been a harebrain loose somewhere in the design of this scheme.”

John was a recognized expert on both the Third and the Fourth Barons Rayleigh (John William Strutt and



Robert John Strutt, respectively), and was asked by the heirs of these famous scientists to serve as curator of the archival collection of their notebooks, manuscripts, working papers and correspondence. Indeed, before John ultimately had them returned to England, they were housed in the Rayleigh Collection at the U.S. Air Force Cambridge Research Laboratory, where John was chief scientist.

During a visit with him and his wife Irene in April 2011, I suggested that in his role as OSA’s principal historian he should write a column on his own singular activities in service to the optics community. His reply was simple and typically John Howard: he thought that such an article should be prepared “only for someone who has already died.” Unfortunately, in passing, he has left us without the best person by far to write it.

—William T. Rhodes
Florida Atlantic University
Editor of *Applied Optics*, 1987 to 1993

To learn more about John N. Howard, the reader is directed to the OSA website’s In Memoriam page (www.osa.org/memoriam/howard), and to a longer remembrance by William Rhodes in the July 2015 issue of the newsletter of the International Commission for Optics (<http://e-ico.org/node/310>).