MEMORIAL

Mark R. Finlay, 15 September 1960–6 October 2013

J. L. ANDERSON

Mark Finlay was an excellent teacher, scholar, and friend. He died unexpectedly on 6 October 2013 while returning home to Savannah, Georgia, from a research trip in North Carolina.

*T&C* readers who did not know Mark personally certainly know his 2009 book *Growing American Rubber: Strategic Plants and the Politics of National Security*, for which he won the Agricultural History Society’s Theodore Saloutos Memorial Prize for the best book on agricultural history published that year. *Growing American Rubber* demonstrated Mark at his scholarly best: prodigious research and attention to detail without losing sight of the big story. The geographical scope of this ambitious work ranged from Manzanar to Indonesia, Haiti to the Soviet Union, Mexico to Detroit. Reviewers claimed that *Growing American Rubber* was “fascinating, well-written, and timely” (Kristin Ahlberg, *American Historical Review*), “broadly conceived and painstakingly researched” (Barbara Kimelman, *Agricultural History*), and a successful integration of multiple fields within our discipline. One reviewer observed that “Finlay’s narrative is at its best when he details this interface of economy, ecology, and politics” (Christopher Henke, *Isis*), reflecting Mark’s interest in the emerging envirotech perspective. These assessments matched my own view, which was shared in a review for *T&C*. Looking back, the book stands out for the way Mark fully exposed the intersection of private and public science and collapsed distinctions between agriculture and industry, not to mention diplomacy and domestic politics. It was and remains, as I claimed, “a significant contribution to many fields.”

In addition to his book, Mark authored at least eighteen journal articles and book chapters, including work currently in press. Several of these proj-

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ects followed his interest in farm chemurgy, German agricultural experiment stations, and Justus von Liebig. Mark also took advantage of archival sources in Georgia. He published an essay on the Savannah and Ogeechee Canal, an article on farm chemurgy and the Central of Georgia Railway, and edited a guidebook on historic sites in the Savannah area. Most recently, he was at work on a history of Ossabaw Island (located near Savannah), a fascinating cultural and ecological subject that involves the histories of science, technology, environment, and agriculture. He authored numerous encyclopedia entries, several review essays, and dozens of book reviews. Mark’s publishing record reflects his varied interests and ability to find stories of technology and science wherever he looked. It was always interesting to find out which archives Mark had managed to visit for a few days of research on his way to conferences and learn more about his discoveries.

Mark graduated from Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, which he
recalled with great affection. Grinnell was and remains a great place for intellectual engagement, which suited him perfectly. He played on the golf team there and excelled in sports, as well as academics. He also began to cultivate an academic appreciation for Iowa and an ongoing curiosity about its land and people.

At Iowa State University, Mark earned both the M.A. and Ph.D. in the History of Technology and Science program. He thrived under the direction of Alan Marcus, demonstrating his considerable intellectual abilities in the seminar room and in his dissertation, “Science, Practice, and Politics: German Agricultural Experiment Stations in the Nineteenth Century,” completed—all 872 pages of it—in 1992. Valerie Grim, herself a transplant to Iowa and one of Mark’s dear friends from graduate school, fondly recalls Friday-evening chili suppers and long discussions about music, sports, and the world of ideas. Most especially, however, she appreciated his great humanity: “How well he treated others as human beings.”

Before completing his doctorate, Mark taught at Drake University during 1987–88, and was an adjunct assistant professor and instructor at Johnson C. Smith University and a lecturer at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, from 1989 to 1992. He taught nine different courses in those three years at Johnson C. Smith and UNC, including surveys in both European and world history and courses as diverse as the Darwinian revolution, modern Germany, and the black experience.

In 1992, Mark accepted a tenure-track position at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, where he was awarded early tenure prior to promotion to associate professor in 1998. He published five scholarly articles prior to tenure—no mean feat given his teaching load. Mark’s colleagues recognized and utilized his talents early on at Armstrong, where he developed a reputation for teaching excellence, strong service work, and prolific scholarship. He discussed with me how quickly those first years at Armstrong passed. He felt that quite suddenly (and somewhat unexpectedly) he had become part of the life of the university. Mark founded the honors program and served as its director from 1996 to 2004. He was awarded Armstrong’s Kris Brockmeier Prize for outstanding young faculty member in 1995, and was named Distinguished Professor, Teaching and Learning for the 1999–2000 academic year. In 1999, Mark received the prestigious Regents’ Teaching Excellence Award, presented to only one professor among Georgia’s twelve four-year colleges and universities. He also served as a visiting instructor at Tallinn Pedagogical Institute in Estonia in 2000. From 2002 up to the time of his death he was the assistant dean of the School of Liberal Arts, including serving as the interim dean during 2008–09.

Mark earned a reputation at Armstrong for enthusiastic teaching and a high degree of collegiality. He took students on field trips, including a memorable muddy outing at Wormsloe Plantation for environmental his-
tory, and collaborated with colleagues to develop elaborate team-taught courses. He had high standards and pushed students to excel. After twenty years at Armstrong, he had become the “institutional memory” among fellow teachers and administrators. Laura Barrett, dean of the School of Liberal Arts and a colleague from the English department at Armstrong, said that “Mark managed to do more with his time than most people I know—keeping up with research despite a demanding administrative position, continuing to teach, traveling extensively, and spending quality time with his family.”

Mark welcomed me to SHOT at the Atlanta meeting in 2003, and over the years became a good friend through participation at SHOT and AHS conferences, as well as through his work as book review editor for *Agricultural History*, the quarterly journal of the Agricultural History Society (AHS). He was like an older brother to me, discussing projects, ideas, the state of our profession, teaching, and family. Mark’s critiques were models of professional conduct, posing difficult and thoughtful questions and making helpful suggestions; he combined intellectual rigor with an unfailing kindness.

Mark was interested in everything and had a great sense of humor, two of the attributes that made him so enjoyable to be around. In 2012, I joined him on a return journey to Manhattan, Kansas, from a field trip to The Land Institute as part of the annual conference of the AHS. We were traveling the back roads, happily engaged in conversation, when we passed a sign for a “dog farm” and supply store on the outskirts of Abilene. After a quick, shared glance, we pulled into the parking lot and spent the next hour or so with a family of dog farmers learning about the racing business—its technology and culture. We departed with free T-shirts and ample fodder for continued discussion. This was typical Mark: he was friendly, always engaged, and ready to learn. His friends could count on knowledgeable discussions about diverse topics and time periods. He had an incredible capacity to recall facts, arguments, and citations. Colleagues and students appreciated his good-natured, steady, quiet presence and powerful intellect.

Mark’s premature death stunned all of us. It is especially painful to ponder the future and how much we will miss him during the coming years. As *T&C* editor Suzanne Moon says, “I can’t believe that I won’t be able to ask him for advice or look forward to great conversation with him at SHOT.” In 2013, his colleagues in the AHS elected him to a three-year term on the executive committee, indicative of the high degree of respect he enjoyed within the profession. The scholarly community will miss a wonderful friend. We join Mark’s wife Kelly Applegate, sons Greyson and Ellis, mother Dee Ann Finlay, and sister Sharyn Finlay-Bitzer in mourning his passing. Contributions in Mark’s memory may be made to the Mark R. Finlay Visiting Lecture Series at Armstrong Atlantic State University.