

## Allan W. Eckert (1931 - 2011)

### An Exchange Between a Reader and Writer

In the afternoon of July 7th an email arrived in Ohioana's mailbox from Helene Debelak of Cleveland, Ohio. It simply stated, "I am passing this along in case you had not yet heard that Allan Eckert died this morning, July 7th."

Allan was born in Buffalo, NY, and raised in the Chicago area. After serving in the United States Air Force, Ohio became his home for many years. He attended both the University of Dayton and The Ohio State University. He was an historian, naturalist, novelist, poet, screenwriter, and playwright.



Allan Eckert

Most of us knew him best as the author of the *Frontiersmen*, the first book in *The Winning of America Series*, from which he adapted the outdoor drama *Tecumseh*, which has been performed in Chillicothe, Ohio for the past thirty-eight years. Eckert was the author of thirty-nine published books; he has been nominated on seven separate occasions for the Pulitzer Prize in literature and, in 1985, received an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Bowling Green State University. In 1998 he received his second honorary doctorate, also in Humane Letters, from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. In addition to his books, he wrote over 150 articles, essays, and short stories, as well as considerable poetry, a major outdoor drama, and screenplays for several movies.

Helena Debelak offered to share with Ohioana her recent correspondence with Dr. Eckert. The following exchange demonstrates the power books have in our lives and how

authors truly do appreciate their readers.

On July 4, 2010, Helene Debelak wrote an email to Mr. Allan Eckert:

*Dear Mr. Eckert:*

*Twenty-six years ago I was about to teach Ohio history to 7th and 8th grade students for the first time and was disenchanted by the textbook version of doing so. At a conference that summer I disclosed this to a teacher who, it turned out, drew her lectures in part from The Frontiersmen. I read the book and it began my romance with frontier Ohio. Thereafter, I cannot see forests without wondering if Blue Jacket is around the bend. I cannot walk a trail without imagining myself a frontierswoman. My children and husband made fun of me, but now that they are grown these same children have given me gifts such as: 1) "Hey, mom, did you ever read the biography of Tecumseh by Eckert?" or 2) "Here, mom, I thought you could use a new copy of the The Frontiersmen." Tecumseh became my hero ever-after.*

*I could not call my lessons with students "lectures." They are stories! Tales told with passion and fire. My paperback is marked up with start/stop points for story-telling. I re-enact Boones [sic] swooping up of Kenton outside of a fort while dodging arrows and hightailing it back through the gates in the nick of time; and I knock over any classroom chairs in my way. About 12 years ago, Ohio switched its year to teach Ohio History from the 7th grade to the 4th. I had that teacher read your book as background for herself, but by nature of their developmental level, it cannot have the same impact for 4th graders. (By the way, Conrad Richter's trilogy Trees, Fields, Town completed my love affair with the trees. If nothing else than that infusion, teachers of Ohio history must read these four books.)*

*Currently, I mostly teach reading in the junior high grades. I still tell some Frontiersmen stories during historical fiction units. Last summer I read The Conquerors in order to provide background stories for The Light in the Forest. But what I would really really like to do is to put The Frontiersmen in their hands as required reading. However, the sex scenes prevent me from doing so. As an adult reader I find they are perfectly wholesome, natural, and realistic in fleshing out Kenton's story. One reason*

*I am writing to you is that I wondered what you would think about an abridged version for schools? I would not want much taken out - the violence and graphic detail of the conflict should stay intact. If some of the elaboration of some of the paragraphs at the end of chapters were taken out, that would make them fit to put in young adolescents' hands. I could stand my ground before parents on the historical value of all the rest. But I have looked into the eyes of my students as I have told the stories and believe I could further that love and appreciation of history if the stories could survive beyond my ability to stand and tell them.*

*If you don't have the time or desire to follow that suggestion, I am content that a book of this power and merit will stand the test of time for adult readers for years to come. I have passed The Wilderness Series along to plenty of adults including my Chicago brothers who are history nuts.*

*The second and more important reason I am writing to you is to give you my thanks. You have changed my life. You have enriched it immeasurably. Incident at Hawk's Hill is one of the most beautiful books for children that has ever been written. I have been a reading teacher at all levels (grades 1-8) for 27 years. Grouped with Rascal by Sterling North and Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls, the unit shines into a child's life. You should know how your body of work has truly made a difference.*

*Very truly yours and with much appreciation,*

*Helene Debelak*

*P.S. Birchwood School is a small private K-8 school in the city of Cleveland which I co-founded with my husband, Chuck [Debelak] 26 years ago. Our background is in education for gifted students and we have utilized the research from that field to design a program which maximizes the potential of average to extremely bright children. Through a challenging curriculum our higher aim is to nurture the character virtues of hard work, perseverance, etc. This is the context for my sense of responsibility to locate the best content in history and reading.*

Though it took him some time to respond, on April 27, 2011, Allan Eckert wrote:

*Dear Helene Debelak,*

*I am absolutely mortified! I have received from Tony Stephens at The Jesse Stuart Foundation a copy of the letter you just wrote to him, complaining, with justification, that you had written an extensive letter to Allan W. Eckert last summer and that he had not responded.*

*Because I am very meticulous about responding to every letter I receive, I found your claim hard to believe, so I went back through my files and discovered you were quite correct. There was your email letter, received on my computer, Sunday, July 04, 2010 at 11:49 a.m. Then I searched for my response to it, and there was none. The only thing I found was that I had forwarded a copy of your letter to my wife (in another work-station in our house), raving about what a wonderful letter it was . . . but my records showed no response by me whatever!*

*As I say, I'm truly and very justifiably chagrined and I have set everything else aside to immediately -- and very belatedly -- respond to your so appreciated letter. I do beg your forgiveness for causing you to wait so long. So far as I know, this was the first and only time such a blunder has occurred and I am most definitely appalled that it actually happened. (I am, by the way, copying Tony Stephens with this e-mail so that he may see that I am endeavoring to correct my faux pas.) At any rate, I do thank you profoundly for your patience and beg your forgiveness for such a gaffe on my part.*

*I shall now, hopefully, answer that good letter of yours completely.*

*I'm delighted, of course, that The Frontiersmen struck home with you so profoundly and greatly appreciate your kind and generous remarks of approval. You, as many other readers have expressed, have rather "adopted" Tecumseh as your hero . . . and certainly with justification. In my opinion (and I've studied his career intently and in minute detail for many years now) he was certainly one of the more admirable individuals in all human history.*

*I delighted in how your copy of The Frontiersmen has been annotated with handwritten notations and start/stop points by you as an aid in teaching your students. I can joyfully picture your blithely knocking over classroom chairs as you reenact for your pupils Simon Kenton's arrow-dodging rescue of Daniel Boone and I most definitely concur with your appraisal of Conrad Richter's marvelous trilogy, especially Trees. I do hope, as you asserted you would really like to do, that you've made The Frontiersmen required reading for your older students, even though "the sex scene," as you put it (and the only such scene in the entire book) has heretofore prevented you from doing so (even though you admitted, as "an adult reader" that such reference was "perfectly wholesome, natural and realistic in fleshing out Kenton's story.") Thank you for that. It seems to me that my "sex scene," as written (which I initially believed -- and still do -- to be entirely justified under the circumstances) hardly comes even close to the extremely graphic things being written today for children to read.*

*As for what I would think about "doing an abridged version for schools," I believe such an idea has great merit, but I am truly convinced that you'd have a difficult time convincing today's publishers to go along with it. In addition, my own writing schedule, as always, is so cram-packed with work (usually from about 3 a.m. to 11 p.m., day-in and day-out, including weekends and holidays), that there is simply no time to consider such a project, however worthwhile. Nevertheless, I found it perfectly charming on your part as you remarked: ". . . I have looked into the eyes of my students as I have told the stories and believe I could further that love and appreciation of history if the stories could survive beyond my ability to stand and tell them." What a teacher you are! How I wish they were all like you. I'm afraid that, even long ago in my elementary and secondary schooling years, teachers with such vision and dynamism were sadly few and far between.*

*I'm delighted, as well, that you have, with such dedication, passed along The Winning of America Series to others, including your own history-loving Chicago brothers, with strong approbation. Again, my thanks. That what I have written has, as you state it, "changed my life" and "enriched it immeasurably" floods me*



*with a profound sense of appreciation that there are teachers and readers such as yourself out there still.*

*I am most grateful for your pleasant and thoughtful comments in regard to Incident at Hawk's Hill — that you consider it "one of the most beautiful books for children that has ever been written" is decidedly gratifying. It is certainly quite gratifying to me — an opinion shared by many others — that Incident at Hawk's Hill is frequently utilized as a read-aloud book by teachers to their students throughout not only North America, but in many foreign countries into which languages the book has been translated.*

*It is through the words of teachers such as yourself (though I've encountered few who are not quite so praiseworthy as thou) that I thankfully get a glimmering of how, as you put it, ". . . your body of work has truly made a difference." Such comment makes it all seem very worthwhile.*

*Finally, I extend to you my wholehearted gratitude and appreciation for the highly exemplary work you and your husband, Chuck Debelak, have done at Birchwood School in encouraging and furthering the abilities of extremely bright children. Unfortunately, all too often such children in our school systems are actually "held back" in order to conform to the abilities of their lesser-endowed contemporaries. My heartiest appreciation and congratulations to you both.*

*With warmest regards (and a further apology for my long dereliction),*

*Allan W. Eckert*

**T***he Frontiersmen* sold more than one million copies and was translated into thirteen foreign languages. It received the 1968 Ohioana Book Award for History and The Friends of American Writers, a Chicago-based national literary society, presented him with its highest award of the year for *The Frontiersmen* and *Wild Season* — the first time in that organization's forty-year history of awarding literary prizes that it could not decide between two books by the same author and therefore awarded him first prize for both. He also received the 1972 Newbery Honor

Book Award for *Incident at Hawk's Hill*. It was later made into a two-part television movie by Walt Disney under the title *The Boy Who Talked to Badgers*.

In 1999, in celebration of Ohioana's 70th anniversary, we invited all Ohioans to vote for their "all time favorite Ohio authors and their books." Ballots were sent to all public libraries in Ohio and many Ohio newspapers also participated in the event. *The Frontiersmen* was selected as Ohioans' favorite book "About Ohio or an Ohioan" and Allan Eckert shared the title of Ohio's Favorite Ohio Author with Toni Morrison.

Allan Eckert fans can look forward to at least two new books of his that are forthcoming: *The Infinite Dream* will be released in September 2011 from the Jesse Stuart Foundation, the date and title of the second book has not been determined at this time. The Foundation is also planning to soon release many of Allan's other books as eBooks.

Allan was founder and chairman of the board of the Lemon Bay Conservancy in Englewood, Florida, an organization which preserves wildlife and estuarial systems. He was a life member and former trustee of the Dayton (Ohio) Museum of Natural History and a life member of the Mazon Creek Paleontological Society. He was a member of the American Gemcutters Society and a consultant for La Salle Extension University in Chicago.

Dr. Eckert's varied writing includes over 225 television shows which he wrote for the renowned Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom series. For this writing he received, in 1970, an Emmy Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in the category of outstanding program achievement. He was also keenly interested in natural history: geology, lepidopterology, entomology, ornithology, herpetology, paleontology, archaeology, anthropology, mineralogy, and allied fields. Among his important natural history writings are his companion books, *The Owls of North America* and *The Wading Birds of North America*.