



The 2024 Everett Mendelsohn Prize

Betty Smocovitis¹ · Nicolas Rasmussen²

Accepted: 27 February 2024

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2024



We are delighted to announce the winner of the 2024 Everett Mendelsohn Prize: Jennifer Coggon, author of the essay, “Sperm-Force: *Naturphilosophie* and George Newport’s Quest to Discover the Secret of Fertilization,” published in *Journal of the History of Biology*, vol.55, no. 4 (December, 2022): 615–687.

✉ Betty Smocovitis
bsmocovi@ufl.edu

Nicolas Rasmussen
N.Rasmussen@unsw.edu.au

¹ University of Florida, Gainesville, USA

² UNSW, Sydney, Australia

The Mendelsohn Prize, named for the founding editor of this journal, honors the best article published in *JHB* in the preceding three years. For the 2024 award, the prize committee (the current Co-Editors-in-Chief and the Associate Editors, Luis Campos and Nick Hopwood) considered all articles appearing in volumes 54 (2021), 55 (2022), and 56 (2023). The committee judged the entries based on an assessment of originality, scholarship, and significance for the history of biology.

Coggon's article reassesses the research on fertilization of the British entomologist and surgeon George Newport (1803–1854). Biologists have long celebrated Newport for demonstrating that spermatozoa impregnate (rather than just contact) the frog egg and that the point of sperm entry determines the embryonic axis. Now Coggon takes what are typically presented as isolated contributions, often anachronistically, and immerses them in the program of research that Newport carried out as part of the Romantic movement in British physiology. She thus joins the historiographic project of establishing the productivity of Romanticism, once decried as a baleful influence on science. The result is a significant enrichment in understanding of the drawn-out history through which sexual reproduction came to be seen as a matter of activating sperm and receptive eggs.

Coggon thoroughly explores the resources available to Newport in more or less tamed, British adaptations of German nature philosophy, showing him in early research on insects as a participant in debates over vital forces and the emergence from matter of instincts and consciousness. She carefully places him in a growing network teasing out his own positions through a series of instructive comparisons, and by reconstructing interactions, including fierce priority disputes. Coming to the research on frogs caught in marshes west of London, Coggon pays close attention to chronology as she reconstructs how Newport's own ingenious experiments and others' work converted him from contact to impregnation. She argues that he maintained throughout a previously underestimated and firmly gendered commitment to a sperm-force that was unusual among vital forces in its creativity outside the organism. Coggon explains how Royal Society reviewers removed the more daring speculations from his published papers, and thus why it took her profound plunge into the archives to make full sense of Newport's research for the first time. The article is exemplary in its rigorous reinterpretation of a canonical episode in the history of biology.

Jennifer Coggon is pursuing a Specialist B.A. from the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto, Canada. Her research has focused on early and mid-Victorian science, particularly taxonomy and animal fertilization. The *JHB* previously published her paper, "Quinarianism after Darwin's *Origin*: The Circular System of William Hincks," in 2002. She has contributed entries to *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. She co-authored an introductory chapter with Mary P. Winsor in the 2007 reissue of Richard Owen's *On the Nature of Limbs: A Discourse*.

On behalf of the 2024 Prize Committee and Springer-Nature International Publishing, we congratulate Jennifer Coggon on receiving the 2024 Mendelsohn Prize. Her article will be freely available on the *JHB* website for eight weeks and she will receive an honorarium of \$500.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.