

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**WILLIAM A. MULLER**

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Neil D. Hathaway

at

Rockefeller University & The Apartment of William A. Muller  
New York City, New York

on

6, 14, 24, and 28 May 1993

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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*Carli V. Rogers*  
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## WILLIAM A. MULLER

1953 Born in New York City, New York, on 22 October

### Education

1975 B.A., Biology, Harvard University  
1981 Ph.D., Cell Physiology and Immunology, Rockefeller University  
1982 M.D., Cornell University Medical College

### Professional Experience

1987-present Rockefeller University  
Assistant Professor, Laboratory of Cellular Physiology and Immunology

1987-present Cornell University Medical College  
Adjunct Professor, Department of Pathology

New York Hospital, New York  
Assistant Attending Pathologist

### Honors

1972-1975 John Harvard Scholarship, Harvard University  
1973 Jacob Wendel Scholarship, Harvard University  
1975 Arthur Eugene Sutherland Prize, Harvard University  
1975 American Chemical Society (Northeast Section) Research Award  
1975 Phi Beta Kappa, Harvard University  
1976 Sigma Xi, Rockefeller University  
1988-1992 Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences  
1988 RJR Nabisco Research Scholars Award  
1990 Irvington Institute for Medical Research New Initiatives Award  
1994 Established Investigatorship, American Heart Association

### Selected Publications

Muller, W.A. and L.C. Klotz, 1975. Retardation time measurements on replicating *Bacillus subtilis* chromosomes: Effect of EDTA concentration. Biochemical and Biophysical

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- Xie, Y. and W.A. Muller, 1993. Molecular cloning and adhesive properties of murine platelet/endothelial cell adhesion molecule-1 (PECAM-1). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, 90:5569-73.
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## ABSTRACT

**William A. Muller** was born in Manhattan but grew up on Long Island; he is the oldest of three brothers, among whom might be found typical sibling rivalry. He is of Jewish ancestry, but his parents and his extended family are not especially observant. Muller had a childhood fear of dying that led him to want to “cure death”; he began to think of medicine as a career from that early age. He did well in school, being salutatorian in his high school. He believes, though, that his youngest brother is the most intelligent, and he discusses Toby’s academic career.

When Muller entered Harvard University he was shocked at the intense level of competition there. He describes his undergraduate curriculum and his experience purifying DNA under lab director Lynn C. Klotz. He also ran track and cross country. During his college summers he participated in a vaccination project in Central America.

Feeling that clinical and research work should complement each other, Muller chose to attend the Rockefeller University-Cornell University Medical College M.D./Ph.D. program. At that time the draft was still an important factor in Muller’s life. David Baltimore came to Rockefeller at this time, and transforming the nature of the Rockefeller community.

Muller decided to work in the Zanvil A. Cohn/James Hirsch lab, where he actually worked with Ralph M. Steinman on endocytosis-iodination techniques. He explains showing that membrane recycles and describes the reaction of the scientific community. He talks about his clinical training in medical school and the practical nature of medical education. He accepted a residency at Massachusetts General Hospital and began a pathology residency at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Muller talks about his social life during medical school and residency; how residencies differ; how clinical experience enhances research; the empirical nature of medicine; and the importance of basic research. He studied endothelial cells in the Michael A. Gimbrone Jr. lab, showing that angiotensin converting enzyme is apically polarized. His experimental methods included testing the validity of the data on slaughterhouse aortas. He took a monoclonal antibody approach and brought biochemical expertise to the Gimbrone lab. Muller discusses his work examining how leukocytes bind to endothelial cells and his fellow Pew scholars who work on endothelial cells. His research on cell adhesion molecules led to his discovery that PECAM-1 is required for transendothelial migration of leukocytes; this discovery may have clinical application. He continued researching multiple functions of PECAM and searching for unknown adhesion molecules.

Although he was anxious at first about returning to his first graduate-school lab, Muller accepted a position at Rockefeller University and in pathology at Weill Cornell Medical College. His first grant application rejected, Muller shifted the focus of his research; he now studies proteins that mediate monocyte binding and transmigration. Muller concludes his interview with a discussion of the process of scientific discovery, especially as he experienced it while establishing the role of PECAM in endothelial cell adhesion; and an explanation of the significance of the Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences award and the RJR Nabisco Research Scholars Award in his career development.

## UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

Neil D. Hathaway, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., English and History, Georgetown University; M.A. and C. Phil., History, UCLA

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Tapes I-II, Caspary Hall, Rockefeller University; Tape III, Muller's apartment, New York; Tapes IV-VI, Muller's lab, Rockefeller University.

**Dates, length of sessions:** May 6, 1993 (30 minutes); May 14, 1993 (63); May 24, 1993 (86); May 28, 1993 (217).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 6.6

**Persons present during interview:** Tapes I-II, Muller and Hathaway; Tapes III-VI Muller, Hathaway, and Muller's wife, Joan Tugendhaft Muller.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew scholars in the biomedical sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts's Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The Project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships, from 1988 through 1992.

In preparing for this interview, Hathaway, in consultation with the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants, developed a topic outline to provide an overall interview framework. Hathaway then held a telephone preinterview conversation with Muller to obtain extensive written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on a research and interviewing timetable.

Hathaway further reviewed the documentation in Muller's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including his proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members. For general background on the recent history of the biological sciences, Hathaway consulted such works as: J.D. Watson et al., *The Molecular Biology of the Gene*. 4th ed. 2 vols. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1987; Lubert Stryer, *Biochemistry*. 3d ed. New York: W.H. Freeman, 1988; *The Journal of the History of Biology*; H.F. Judson, *The Eighth Day of Creation: Makers of the Revolution in Biology*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979; and recent issues of *Science*, *Nature*, and *Cell*.

The interview begins with a discussion of science publishing and Muller's papers on platelet/endothelial cell adhesion molecules. It then proceeds chronologically through Muller's childhood and education in New York, his years at Harvard University and the Rockefeller University-Cornell University Medical College M.D./Ph.D. program, his medical residencies in

Massachusetts hospitals, and the creation of his lab at Rockefeller University. Major topics discussed include endothelial cells, cell adhesion molecules, iodination techniques, and research strategies.

#### ORIGINAL EDITING:

Vimala Jayanti, editor, edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Muller reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections.

Steven J. Novak, senior editor, prepared the table of contents, biographical summary, interview history, and index.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Pew Scholars Program Proposal	1
Results of Muller's Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences proposal on the platelet/endothelial cell adhesion molecule (PECAM). Paper on the findings. Losing the race to publish on <i>in vivo</i> PECAM.	
Early Years and Comments on Current Career	14
Childhood in Manhattan and Long Island. Jewish ancestry. Parents. Extended family. Brothers. Sibling rivalry. Working hours. Frantic pace of scientific research. Research philosophy. Early education.	
High School, College, and Graduate School	41
Why he went into science. Toby Muller. Academic performance in junior high and high school. Volunteer work in Brookdale Hospital laboratory. Attends Harvard University. Shock at the intense level of competition at Harvard. Antiwar protests. Community involvement. Undergraduate curriculum and lab experience. Lab director Lynn C. KlotzPurifying DNA. Participates in a vaccination project in Central America. Public debate about recombinant DNA research. Enters the RockefellerUniversity-Cornell University Medical College M.D./Ph.D. program. Vietnam War and the draft. David Baltimore's changes at Rockefeller. Decides to work in the Zanvil A. Cohn-James Hirsch lab. Working with Ralph M. Steinman--Becoming an independent researcher. Research on endocytosis. Iodination techniques. Consults with Bruce Merrifield. Learning that membrane recycles. Reaction of the scientific community.	
More on Graduate School Research and Clinical Training	95
Encourages graduate students to tackle tough problems and develop their own Methods. Amorphous shape of graduate education at Rockefeller. Iodinating Phagolysosomes. Experiments that are ahead of their time. Mistakenly assumes phagolysosome experiments were unsuccessful. Clinical training in medical school. Practical nature of medical education. Residency at Massachusetts General Hospital. Pathology residency at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Social life. How residencies differ. How clinical experience enhances research. Empirical nature of medicine. Importance of basic research. Studies endothelial cells in the Michael A. Gimbrone Jr. lab.	
Work on PECAM and Faculty Years	124
Showing that angiotensin converting enzyme is apically polarized. Experimental methods. Testing the validity of the data on slaughterhouse aortas. Takes a monoclonal antibody approach. Brings biochemical expertise to the Gimbrone lab. Examining how leukocytes bind to endothelial cells. Pew scholars who work on endothelial cells. Bond between scholars who trained in the same lab. Research on cell adhesion molecules. Discovery that PECAM-1 is required for transendothelial migration of leukocytesPossible clinical application. Multiple functions	

of PECAM. Redundant adhesion mechanisms. Searching for unknown adhesion molecules. Return to New York City and Rockefeller University. Shifts the focus of his research. Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences. Studies proteins which mediate monocyte binding and transmigration. Significance of the Pew award and the RJR Nabisco Research Scholars Award in career development. The process of scientific discovery.

## INDEX

### A

acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, 56, 57, 112  
Aderem, Alan A., 157  
AIDS. *See* acquired immunodeficiency syndrome  
Albelda, Steven M., 9, 11, 94  
American Chemical Society, 62  
American Heart Association, 158  
American Society of Cell Biology, 100  
American Society of Clinical Investigation, 118  
Amigos de las Americas, 62  
angiotensin, 128  
atherosclerosis, 114, 115  
autoradiograms, 131, 132, 133

### B

Baltimore, David, 12, 74, 76, 78, 121, 124  
Berman, Miriam E., 97  
Beth Israel Hospital, 33  
Bevilacqua, Michael P., 3, 132, 134, 135, 136, 140, 157  
Bishop, J. Michael, 117  
*Boston Globe*, 63  
Boston, Massachusetts, 54, 55, 63, 74, 131, 137, 147, 153, 154  
bovine serum albumin, 90  
Bowen, Frederick, 78  
Bretscher, Mark S., 70  
Brigham and Women's Hospital, 33, 66, 108, 110, 112, 114, 125, 148, 150  
Brookdale Hospital, 17, 46  
Brooklyn Bridge, 65  
Brown University, 48, 93  
Brown, Michael S., 93  
Brown, Representative George, 118, 120  
Brownsville, New York, 16  
Buck, Clayton A., 10  
Buena Vista TV, 27  
Bush, President George H.W., 119

### C

California, 11, 41  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 63, 131  
Central America, 62  
Central Park, 54, 56  
Cerami, Anthony, 80, 81  
Chancellor, John, 69  
chemotaxis, 5  
Clinton, President William J., 119  
Cohn, Zanvil A., 36, 75, 80, 82, 88, 95, 137, 147, 151, 153  
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, 72, 124  
collaboration, 9, 10, 83  
Columbia Broadcasting System, 27  
Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, 148  
Columbia University, 148  
Copernicus, Nicolaus, 103  
Cornell University, 7, 48, 67, 148  
Cotran, Ramzi S., 109  
Cronkite, Walter, 69

### D

DNA, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 65, 73, 80, 118  
Dow Chemical Company, 89  
Dressler, David, 72, 73  
*Drosophila*, 4

### E

*E. coli*, 63, 119  
EDTA, 129, 130  
ELAM. *See* endothelial-leukocyte adhesion molecules  
Ellis Island, 18  
Elmhurst, Illinois, 20  
Emerson, Beverly M., 84  
endocytosis, 84, 86, 88  
endothelial cells, 2, 4, 35, 36, 97, 125, 126, 129, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 146, 147, 150, 151,

152, 155, 156, 157, 160, 162, 163, 164  
endothelial-leukocyte adhesion molecules,  
133, 134, 135, 140  
E-selectin, 133, 134, 140, 141  
Europe, 19, 83, 95, 106

## G

Germany, 19  
Gimbrone, Michael A., Jr., 33, 93, 95, 125,  
126, 128, 132, 134, 135, 137, 140, 150,  
151, 153  
Goldstein, Joseph, 12, 93  
Gordon Research Conferences, 95  
grants/funding, 6, 78, 94, 119, 120, 121,  
122, 158, 159

## H

Harvard Medical School, 66, 109  
Harvard University, 33, 34, 47, 48, 49, 51,  
53, 54, 57, 59, 62, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 108,  
109, 110, 114, 125, 147, 148, 159  
Harvard Yard, 49  
Hewlett Elementary School, 37  
Hewlett, New York, 14, 21, 46, 54  
Hirsch, James, 82  
Hollywood, California, 27  
Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 75  
Hungary, 17  
hyperkalemia, 107

## I

ICAM. *See* intercellular cell adhesion  
molecule  
Illinois, 46  
immunoglobulin, 142  
immunology, 72, 82, 83  
integrins, 2, 4, 6, 139, 140, 141, 142, 144,  
146  
intercellular cell adhesion molecule, 35, 140  
iodination, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 126, 131, 152  
iodotyrosine, 92

## J

Jackson, Reggie, 12

Jaffe, Eric A., 140  
Jennifer (niece), 147  
Jeopardy, 28, 44  
Jordan, Michael, 12  
*Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 3, 6, 7,  
8, 132, 141, 144, 159, 164  
*Journal of Leftover Data*, 127, 130

## K

Kahn, Carl Ronald, 118  
Karnovsky, Morris, 125  
Kielian, Margaret C., 136, 137  
*King Kong*, 29  
Klotz, Lynn C., 59, 62, 72, 73  
Kushner, Phoebe (maternal grandmother),  
16  
Kushner, Solomon (maternal grandfather),  
16

## L

lactoperoxidase, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91,  
126, 130  
latex beads, 87, 90, 91, 92, 140  
Lawrence, New York, 17  
LDL. *See* low-density lipoprotein  
Leder, Philip, 121  
Lederberg, Joshua, 74  
Leggs, 27  
Leiden, Netherlands, 95, 105  
leukocyte, 2, 3, 5, 35, 36, 84, 86, 134, 135,  
136, 139, 140, 141, 142, 144, 146, 157,  
165  
leukocyte adhesion deficiency, 146  
Lewin, Benjamin, 4, 5, 6, 7  
liver-alcohol dehydrogenase, 52  
Long Island, New York, 14  
Los Angeles, California, 27  
low-density lipoprotein, 93  
Lubalin, David (maternal cousin), 21, 27  
Lubalin, Herb (maternal uncle-in-law), 27  
Lubalin, Sylvia Kushner (maternal aunt), 20  
lysosome, 85, 86, 92, 95, 101, 102

## M

macrophages, 33, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89, 95, 105, 128, 140  
Madin-Darby canine kidney, 152  
Manhattan Project, 51  
Marks, Rory M., 136  
Massachusetts General Hospital, 34, 107, 111  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 124  
McDonnell, Sonam L., 162  
Medawar, Peter B., 88, 125  
Mellman, Ira S., 86, 87, 136, 137  
membrane, 70, 81, 82, 84, 85, 86, 90, 91, 92, 93, 101, 102, 105, 126, 128, 129, 135, 139  
Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Research Center, 7  
Merrifield, Bruce, 88  
Michigan, 136  
Müller, 17  
Muller, Gillian (daughter), 55, 111, 147  
Muller, Joan Tugendhaft (wife), 34, 42, 108, 109, 111, 112, 114, 137, 147, 155, 156  
Muller, Lawrence J. (father), 16, 66  
Muller, Marion Kushner (mother), 14, 16  
Müller, Miklós, 17  
Muller, Richard (paternal uncle), 20, 26, 41, 46  
Muller, Rob (Robert) (brother), 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 38, 41, 43, 147  
Muller, Toby (brother), 21, 22, 43, 44  
Muller's Reagent, 12

## N

Nash, Leonard K., 51, 52  
Nathan, Carl, 107  
National Collegiate Athletic Association, 48  
National Institutes of Health, 6, 68, 94, 119, 120, 122, 124, 151, 154, 155, 158, 159  
neutrophils, 86, 144, 146, 161  
New York City, New York, 14, 15, 18, 54, 55, 132, 133, 147, 153, 156  
New York Hospital, 41, 105, 113

*New York Times*, 12, 29  
Newman, Peter J., 10  
NIH. *See* National Institutes of Health  
Nixon, President Richard M., 69  
Nobel Prize, 12, 80, 88, 93, 124

## P

Pasteur, Louis, 156  
pathology, 9, 33, 55, 108, 109, 110, 111, 113, 114, 115, 116, 125, 128, 147, 148, 151  
pathophysiology, 107  
PECAM. *See* platelet/endothelial cell adhesion molecule  
Pentagon, The, 120  
Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences, 2, 3, 4, 11, 94, 95, 121, 124, 133, 134, 136, 137, 138, 151, 154, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161  
phagolysosomes, 86, 87, 101  
Phi Beta Kappa, 29, 72, 73  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 9, 94  
Phillips, David, 3, 165  
pinocytosis, 84, 86, 87, 88  
platelet/endothelial cell adhesion molecule, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 97, 133, 138, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 154, 156, 157, 160, 161, 164, 165  
Pober, Jordan S., 135  
Princeton University, 48  
Puré, Ellen, 157

## Q

Queens, New York, 39

## R

Reagan, President Ronald W., 119, 122  
religion  
(Roman) Catholic, 19  
Buddhist, 19  
Christian, 19  
Golden Rule, 18, 19  
Hanukkah, 19  
Jewish/Jew/Judaism, 16, 17, 18, 19

Muslim, 19  
Orthodox Jew, 19  
Passover, 19  
Rosh Hashanah, 19  
Ten Commandments, 19  
Yom Kippur, 19  
Reserve Officers Training Corps, 70  
Rhodes, Harker, 109  
RJR Nabisco Research Scholars Award,  
159, 160  
RNA, 72, 92  
Rockefeller University, 3, 6, 7, 56, 61, 67,  
70, 71, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 80, 84, 88, 89,  
98, 99, 108, 120, 147, 148, 153, 154, 156,  
159  
University Fellows, 75, 76  
Rockefeller University-Cornell University  
Medical College M.D./Ph.D. Program, 67  
Rosenfeld, Steven, 72, 73  
Ross, Russell, 114, 115  
Russia/Russian, 16, 99

## S

San Diego, California, 138  
Schulman, Irving (father's cousin-in-law),  
41  
Schulman, Naomi Zion (father's cousin), 41  
Scotland, 135  
Seattle, Washington, 114  
Serhan, Charles N., 114  
Silverstein, Samuel C., 107, 148  
softball, 26, 36, 37, 42  
Stanford University, 41, 66, 67  
Steinman, Ralph M., 36, 76, 80, 82, 84, 88,  
95, 103, 135, 147, 151  
Stuyvesant Town, 14, 15  
supernatants, 145, 162, 163

## T

tenure, 12, 75, 76, 77, 123, 147  
track, 2, 16, 27, 39, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 52,  
53, 54, 58, 70, 71, 111, 151

## U

U.S. Congress, 72, 118, 120  
U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 117  
U.S. House of Representatives, 118  
U.S. Military Academy, 54  
United States of America, 17  
University of California, San Diego, 60  
University of California, San Francisco, 67  
University of Cambridge, 70  
University of Kansas, 48  
University of Michigan, 9, 10  
University of Pennsylvania, 109  
University of Washington, 114

## V

Varmus, Harold E., 117  
Vietnam, 69  
Vietnam War, 68  
Villanova University, 48

## W

Walt Disney Company, 27  
Ward, Peter A., 9  
Washington University in Saint Louis, 44  
Weigl, Susan A., 141, 163, 164  
Whitehead Institute, 74  
Wiesel, Torsten N., 77, 78  
Wistar Institute, 94  
*Wizard of Oz*, 30  
Woodmere, Long Island, New York, 21  
World War II, 19, 51  
Wright, Thomas, 109

## Y

Yale University, 48, 86, 137, 147  
Young Americans for Freedom, 70

## Z

Zion, Robert (father's cousin), 27, 41  
Zuker, Charles S., 2