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## Earl Coleman, Publisher and Poet, Dies at 93

By WILLIAM GRIMES  
Published: November 14, 2009

Earl M. Coleman was a fledgling short-story writer and poet fresh out of the Army when he got the idea for a custom translation business in 1946. At a poetry workshop he organized, he got to talking with two students, one a French teacher, the other a German engineer.

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Bachrach

Earl M. Coleman

Why not translate scientific material into English? Mr. Coleman suggested.

With his wife at the time, Frances, he started Consultants Bureau, a custom translation service, and over the years built it into the Plenum Publishing Corporation, one of the world's largest translators and publishers of scientific and technical material. Through Da Capo Press, founded in 1963, it developed a profitable line in reprinted books on music, art and architecture.

Mr. Coleman died of a pulmonary embolism on Oct. 12 at the age of 93, his second wife, Ellen Schneid Coleman, said. He lived in Somerset, N.J.

Mr. Coleman had started with a hundred dollars and a flash of intuition. Soon after setting up Consultants Bureau, he learned that the United States government was sitting on 21 tons of captured German scientific documents. He immediately offered to buy a ton of them, only to be told that the government did not work that way.

Instead, the Commerce Department sent out to American businesses a monthly bulletin describing selected documents in the German cache. Those interested could order a document and then translate it.

Mr. Coleman saw that companies were translating the same articles over and over — a pointless duplication of effort. "Obviously the problem was how to mass-produce translations of scientific material," he told Publishers Weekly in 1975.

He then turned to the Soviet Union as a source of material. Other companies were already translating articles from Soviet scientific journals, but Mr. Coleman decided to publish journals in their entirety, starting in 1949 with The Journal of General

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By 1956, his company was translating a dozen Soviet journals, using a stable of 50 translators. It was at this point that the British publishing tycoon Robert Maxwell, the owner of the science and medical publishers Pergamon Press, came calling with an offer to buy out Mr. Coleman for \$50,000 in cash — “more money than I had ever seen in any one place in my life,” Mr. Coleman wrote in an article in *Publishing Research Quarterly* in 1994.

Mr. Coleman turned him down flat, whereupon Maxwell threatened to start his own Russian translation service. To drive home the point, he showed Mr. Coleman a list of the journals he intended to translate. It included all the titles offered by the Consultants Bureau.

Undeterred, Mr. Coleman did an end run around his adversary. He signed a royalty agreement with the Soviet government’s copyright agency, the first such large-scale agreement between a Western company and the Soviet Union and the foundation of Mr. Coleman’s success.

When Maxwell persisted, the Soviets, at Mr. Coleman’s instigation, told Maxwell that if he did not desist, the Soviet government would prohibit Soviet learned societies and scientists from having any dealings with his company.

The threat from Maxwell evaporated.

Earl Maxwell Coleman was born on Jan. 9, 1916, in the Bronx and attended [New York University](#) and City College. He was drafted into the Army in 1941 and re-enlisted, in the Army Air Corps, after World War II broke out. He trained airmen on flight simulators in the United States and in Britain. He also won a pot of money playing poker.

After the war, Mr. Coleman, intent on becoming a writer, managed to place a short story with *Esquire* but otherwise found that the literary life was depleting his gambling winnings. He spent the next 40 years as a publishing executive, writing fiction and poetry on the side.

There was a bit of poetry in his renaming of the company in 1965. He called it Plenum “for full, rich, plentiful,” Mr. Coleman told *Publishers Weekly*. “It was either that or Nova, which I discovered was a bright star that burned out, so that wasn’t for me.”

By that time, it was a large and growing presence in scientific and technical publishing, where the profit margins on books like “Electron Spin Relaxation in Liquids” could be huge. When Mr. Coleman sold his rights to Plenum in 1977, it published 92 Russian journals in translation, nearly 75 English-language journals, and 225 scientific titles.

Mr. Coleman’s marriage to Frances Allan ended in divorce in 1965. In addition to his second wife, he is survived by his sons, Allan Douglass Coleman, of Staten Island, and Dennis Scott Coleman, of Rockville, Md.; a sister, Lucille Bandes, of Manhasset, N.Y.; and four grandchildren.

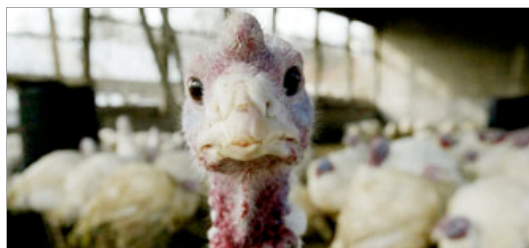
After retiring from Plenum in 1977, Mr. Coleman started a new publishing venture, Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, with his second wife as editor in chief. In 1984 he became president and publisher of National Publishers of the [Black Hills](#), provider of educational books and electronic training materials, which he sold to Prentice Hall in 1988.

Plenum was bought for \$258 million by the Dutch publishing company Wolters Kluwer in 1998. In 1999, the Perseus Books Group acquired Da Capo Press. Since 2004 it has been part of Springer.

Through the years Mr. Coleman continued to write poetry and fiction. In 2001, through Mellen Poetry Press, he finally published his first book of poems, titled “A Stubborn Pine

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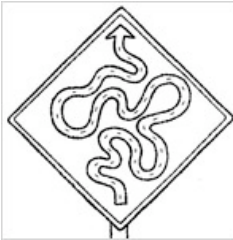


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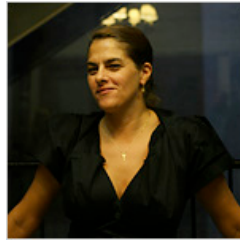
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