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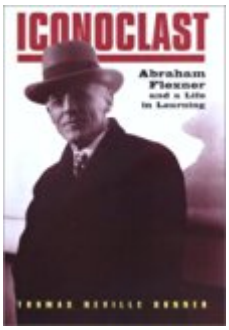

Thomas Neville Bonner. *Iconoclast: Abraham Flexner and a Life in Learning.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xvi + 376 pp. $36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-7124-5.

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The Development of Educational Philanthropy

Author Thomas Neville Bonner is justifiably surprised that, prior to his excellent *Iconoclast: Abraham Flexner and a Life in Learning*, no full biography of this versatile educator has appeared. Everyone in higher education seems to know a little about Flexner. The most common recollection is his powerful influence in redefining American medical education through his 1910 report for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. So dominant was Flexner's role that the report, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*, is generally referred to simply as "The Flexner Report."

Less broadly known are Flexner's other educational efforts, which ranged from studying progressive schools to distributing over a billion dollars (in today's currency) for the Carnegie and Rockefeller philanthropies over several decades. Most amazing, from a biographer's point of view, is that Flexner (1866-1959) achieved all this after the age of forty. As Bonner summarizes Flexner's prolific and concentrated accomplishments: "Into a decade and a half he had crowded a series of pioneering surveys of state educational systems, the creation of a model progressive school, a major reorganization of the nation's medical schools, a campaign to promote clinical research in medicine, a landmark study of medical training in Europe and America, important steps to further the education of African Americans, fundamental challenges to the direction and purposes of the American college and university, and a broad program for foundation support of the humanities" (p. 213). And all of this preceded his final task: creating the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey, with Albert Einstein among its inaugural faculty.

Flexner is not a figure in whom, as biographers frequently suggest, we can see the issues of an era writ large. For Flexner rarely followed educational tendencies; instead, he persistently took the lead, pushing schools, colleges, universities, professional institutions, and philanthropies into whole new approaches to education. In doing so, he presented an odd mix of conservator and radical. Flexner championed the liberal arts and sci-

ences as the base for undergraduate and professional training, decrying the collegiate tendency to add everything to the curriculum, and then leave students adrift in their choices. Swarthmore College's honors program was a favored ideal. But at the same time, Flexner promoted progressive ideals in teaching and learning, believing that students learn through activities of both the mind and body, through observation, experimentation, and self-paced learning. In fact, his rise to national prominence began with his success in creating a progressive school in his native Louisville, Kentucky.

Louisville provided a strong backdrop for Flexner's life, and historian Bonner succeeds particularly well in laying out the context of this Southern city emerging from the Civil War. Flexner's personal story complicates the issues of race, ethnicity, and class in a city like Louisville; he was the sixth of nine children born to Jewish immigrants Morris and Esther Flexner. Although Morris Flexner was reasonably successful as a merchant early in his married life, his financial situation wavered over time. Morris was ruined in the Panic of 1873, and died nine years later broken in both health and finances. Even before his death, however, several of the children had assumed parental roles. Abraham's older brother Jacob sacrificed for his siblings, setting a pattern that would continue among members of this large, impoverished family.

The Jewish heritage affected the siblings differently, and Bonner finds Abraham the least attentive to his Jewishness. Although he became active in refugee work during the 1930s and 1940s, Flexner generally avoided direct discussion of his background and preferred to ignore anti-Semitism when he observed it. And, as Bonner shows, prejudice did appear during his career. The ability to selectively focus his attention was a hallmark of this ambitious man.

Difficult family circumstances kept Flexner close to Louisville for longer than he might have wished. Through brother Jacob's efforts, and in a bid to move at least some of the siblings into better straits, Abraham attended the new Johns Hopkins University, establishing a connection that would affect his entire life as an educator. Jacob's example of limiting his own ambitions to support the family was one that Abraham assumed over time. Abraham felt free to leave Kentucky only after establishing himself as a schoolmaster, clearing the debts of several family members, and finally turning to his own needs, including marriage in 1898 to Anne Crawford, his former student and now a graduate of Vassar College.

It was Anne's success as a playwright that ultimately gave Flexner the financial and emotional support to break away from Louisville. He had begun his own career traditionally enough by founding a school in his home city. The Flexner School embodied his interests in progressive education, becoming successful enough to catch the eye of Harvard's president Charles William Eliot. Even as Flexner began to acquire a taste for mingling with important people, Anne found phenomenal success with her first play. ***Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*** ran for seven profitable years on Broadway. Although Anne would never repeat such success, her early profits and long-term theatre connections provided the couple financial support and social opportunities.

The Flexners moved to Massachusetts where Abraham spent three years in graduate study at Harvard and in Europe. He also began to job hunt in a most peculiar way. As Bonner explains, Flexner realized he was too old and too little-known to secure a prominent professorial post. But, wanting a role in influencing education, he decided to write a book that would highlight his views on collegiate education. The appearance of ***The American College*** (1908), when combined with help from his now-influential scientist brother Simon, finally brought Flexner to the attention of educators with money.

Henry Pritchett, president of the Carnegie Foundation, tapped Flexner for what Bonner calls "one of the strangest appointments in education history" (p. 68). With no experience in educational surveys, little known around the country, and only one weakly-received book to his name, Flexner was hired by Pritchett to examine the state of medical education throughout the United States and make recommendations for its possible reorganization. The study would be supported by one of the newest players in American education, the philanthropic foundation.

Bonner correctly seizes upon the development of educational philanthropy as the key parallel to Flexner's personal story. Through deeply researched, carefully presented chapters, Bonner weaves three themes through his exploration of Flexner's life and successes: the continuing importance of family, his consuming interest in changing educational institutions, and his goal of creating a ***sui generis*** career as educator, critic, and philanthropist. The growth of educational philanthropy in the United States, especially its effects on higher education, frames the story of this fascinating educator.

As an expert in the history of medicine, Bonner is at his best in describing Flexner's best-known accomplishment--the reform of medical education, begun with the Carnegie report but carried out for many decades. Embedded in a thorough investigation of medical training, Flexner's 1910 report, in short, recommended a firmer scientific base for the clinical training of doctors and a stronger research focus among medical educators. Flexner's ongoing insistence--which polarized the field of medicine--that medical school professors eliminate their private practices and devote themselves to full-time teaching and research was supported over decades by both the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations.

The potent combination of Flexner's ideas and Carnegie's money signaled a new lever for affecting American education. As a country with no centralized educational bureaucracy, the United States has had few organized ways to effect change. With the exception of land grant funding, the federal role in higher education was minimal through much of the century. Nor was accreditation a powerful tool in these early decades. But the foundations, with their vast resources newly turned to education, became important players, with people like Flexner, Pritchett, and the Rockefellers directing the efforts.

Flexner's story is deeply tied to the growth of educational philanthropy. He stayed with the Carnegie Foundation as Pritchett's favorite, conducting a series of influential studies until 1912, when Rockefeller's General Education Board offered him his first full-time position. From his post at the GEB, Flexner launched a set of studies and programs that greatly influenced American education and expanded the impact of Rockefeller philanthropy. He led studies of public education in the South, with particular attention to schools for African Americans; he planned the progressive Lincoln School in New York City, finding there a chance to finance his long-held views about curriculum; and he convinced the Rockefellers to invest millions in the restructuring of American medical schools.

Bonner stresses Flexner's role in the "social engineering" practiced by these large philanthropies in the first half of the twentieth century, and he credits Flexner with recognizing "the possibilities of philanthropic management" (p. 213). Although the story of Flexner's growth as philanthropist has been told before (Bonner carefully credits Steven Wheatley's 1988 study), Bonner's particular contribution is to connect the philanthropic work with Flexner's ongoing educational ideas.[1] Bonner reminds readers that Flexner's autobiography strongly downplayed his contribution to philanthropic impact, and, he notes, "scholars have largely accepted the erroneous description of his many roles at face value" (p. 292). With the growth of new research on the history of phi-

lanthropy, Bonner's work to clarify Flexner's participation and influence is most valuable.

The book's last chapters focus on a significant but less well-known Flexner contribution, the creation of the Institute for Advanced Study. As Bonner explains, many know Flexner as "the man who brought Einstein to America," but few know that the Institute was intended as the realization of all Flexner's educational ideals, created at a time when he had been shunted aside by a new generation of philanthropists less patient with his brusque style and officious approach.

Again crediting previous work, but expanding through voluminous primary research, Bonner tells a powerful story of Flexner's post-Rockefeller relationship with philanthropists Louis Bamberger and Caroline Bamberger Fuld, the department store magnates.[2] Finding a much different relationship with these hands-on donors, Flexner worked to parlay their contributions into an ideal university that, without the burdens of teaching and academic politics, would free resident faculty to be researchers focused solely on investigation, experimentation, and collaboration. Turning this vision into reality would wear Flexner out.

What differentiated Flexner's Institute role from all his previous work (save running the Flexner School) was his administrative job as on-site director. He had gone, in the words of his beloved brother Simon, "from critic to actor." In detailing Flexner's tribulations at the Institute, Bonner's own extensive experience as collegiate president (at University of New Hampshire, Union College, and Wayne State University) undergirds his analysis in charming ways. A reader senses his sympathy for Flexner, in his late sixties, balancing the personal wishes of the Bambergers with the self-serving demands of the Institute faculty. As events played out, the Bambergers' pockets were not as deep as Flexner had hoped, and the brother and sister insisted on approving his faculty choices and his administrative decisions. Meanwhile, the faculty that Flexner had so tried to insulate from academic politics proved all too adept at both advocacy and scheming. In addition to presenting a fascinating story, again Bonner's strength is tying Flexner's work in Princeton with the trajectory of his own and the country's educational thinking. If the Institute ultimately fell short of Flexner's own goals, it nonetheless created a powerful scholarly model that blended American opportunity with German devotion to research.

This thorough, creative biography adjusts our view of this powerful man so engaged in an astounding array of twentieth-century educational developments. Were I to seek any changes, I might ask the author to stop longer in a few places to better lay out the groundwork for the higher education world that Flexner was working to change. Given the sweep of Flexner's involvements, a reader needs a clearer map of extant collegiate and university education, akin to what Bonner provides so well for medical education. Perhaps the author was simply keeping pace with Flexner, who, even at age 93 was still actively involved as educational critic and advocate.

Notes:

[1]. Steven C. Wheatley, "Abraham Flexner and the Politics of Educational Reform," ***History of Higher Education Annual***, 8 (1988).

[2]. Laura S. Porter, "From Intellectual Sanctuary to Social Responsibility: The Founding of the Institute for Advanced Study, 1930-1933" (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton University, 1988); and Beatrice M. Stern, "A History of the Institute for Advanced Study, 1930-1950," manuscript, Institute for Advanced Study.

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