

Who Are You?

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Probably all of you have heard the story of the university professor who took pride in remembering every student he had ever taught. He meets a young woman and two small children on the street and stops her.

“Didn’t you attend the State University in 1995?”

“Yes.”

“And didn’t you take the course in History 101?”

“Yes.”

“And didn’t you sit in the second row near the window?”

“Yes.”

“You’re obviously married, so I don’t know your present name, but weren’t you Mary Smith?”

“Yes. But who are you?”

I was reminded of that story a few months ago when I began the somewhat bittersweet task of cleaning out my office in the university library, a task that somehow never seems to get done. One full drawer of a file cabinet contained letters of recommendation for students dating back to

1947 and 1948, when I was just starting to teach. I was a little surprised that I remembered not all but many of the names and could even, at this late date, associate them with faint but real recollections of the young men I wrote about. Perhaps the reason was that these were students in my first couple of years of teaching. More likely I remembered them as good students because virtually all the letters were supportive. Rather pompously, I had already developed the practice, when I was less than enthusiastic about a recommendation, of calling in the student, telling him frankly that I could only write a tepid letter and giving him the opportunity to seek another professor whose judgment was more generous than mine. In any case, while I remembered many of those early students I wondered how many had any but a vague recollection of some young squirt who had tried to help them learn something about European history.

Again, a few months ago at the wedding of our grandson, a young friend said, "I bring you greetings from two of your former students, who told me how much you had influenced them when they were undergraduates." I was a little skeptical. I remember the student who told me some years after he had graduated, "I'll always remember when you

said....” And I thought to myself, “My God, did I ever say anything as foolish as that?”

But my informant brought nothing so concrete as a recollection of the dubious pontification of a young academic to an even younger undergraduate student. Instead, Steve Arshan said, “One was Mark Perlgut and –I don’t remember the other name, but he’s one of the swimming coaches at Yale.” Mark I knew. He was the son of Mildred, a colleague of my wife, who had been wonderfully supportive of Clare during her final illness. He was now an attorney in North Jersey and doing well, from all I could gather.

But, a Yale swimming coach? I googled and discovered that Frank Keefe, the head coach, had been at Yale for 27 years—and before that had graduated from Villanova, not Rutgers. None of his assistants rang a bell, either, and I still don’t know who he was and how, if at all, I had influenced him.

All this in turn got me thinking about the teachers I most remembered, sometimes more than seven decades later. Once again I’m not sure if recollection is all memory or rather memory and the distortion of

reality that often accompanies casual exchanges with children, friends, whomever.

I commented in an earlier paper on Miss Webber, with whom I was madly in love when I was in the fourth grade, just as I recalled fondly Carolyn Davis who awakened my interest in history and who taught me what integrity was years later when she spoke out against the hysteria sparked by the vulgar and dishonest charges of a second-rate Senator from Wisconsin.

Teachers come in various degrees of quality and of course in various styles. There is the frequenter of fraternities and sororities who receives high student marks for shooting the breeze and sometimes substitutes colorful anecdotes for real substance in his or her subject. There is the master of the subject who can stimulate students despite a dullness that otherwise would make a class a venue in which to catch up on one's sleep. And there is the exceptional teacher who combines the attributes of a good actor with the richness of the material to be communicated in a way that helps students explore and question and learn.

I thought of these differences as I remembered another extraordinary high school teacher who was extremely consequential for me and a small

group of my fellow students. We came to understand how really remarkable she was, teaching as she did in an all-boys high school where success in basketball and track (unlike my fellow eggheads, I was on the track team) conferred status and where demanding teachers were avoided like the proverbial plague.

Margaret Mary MacFarquahar—“Maggie” behind her back—was probably the toughest teacher I have ever had. Most students shied away from her classes whenever they could, but for those who sensed her love of language and the literature it produced to spend a year with her was—I am tempted to say—almost a life-changing experience. She was a lady of uncertain age, craggy featured, with piercing green eyes and red hair that was almost always in disarray. One would have called her “plain”—or any of the euphemisms we use when we want to be kind, until she read aloud a sonnet of Shakespeare or even a more trivial piece by, say, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Then, her face would light up, her eyes would sparkle—and she would be transformed into a beautiful woman. If the few of us who appreciated and learned from Maggie MacFarquhar, whatever our specialized later interests, continued through life to enjoy the classics of western literature and even took pleasure in the work of –imagine—dead

whiter males, then the early exposure to a knowledgeable and passionate guide had a lot to do with it.

This is not to say that, at another level, I do not owe a tremendous debt to the distinguished historians I was fortunate to study with much latter in graduate school at the University of Chicago. My mentor was Bernadotte Schmitt, a Pulitzer Prize diplomatic historian, who incidentally married the sister of Van Meter Ames, a long-time member of the Literary Club. There were Louis Gottschalk, Wilbur Jordan, Tom Hutchinson—others—names probably totally unfamiliar to all but a few—but each regarded as one of the leaders in his field of study. I even remember the worst teacher I ever had. J. Fred Rippy was a Latin Americanist and diplomatic historian who had just published a little isolationist volume called *America and the Strife of Europe*. He stood in front of the class, his oversized Phi Beta Kappa dangling from a chain stretched over his equally oversized midriff and quite literally read us his book chapter by chapter as we struggled to stay awake. Most of us, I dare say, felt cheated and trapped as we again learned the obvious lesson—prestigious scholarship and effective teaching should but do not always go together

Despite my skepticism about the exclusively anecdotal approach, I nevertheless have a host of stories about Bernadotte Schmitt. My favorite was at lunch some time after I had been offered the editorship of the *American Historical Review*. Schmitt was then on the American Historical Association's Council, which had made the appointment. I took it for granted that I had been his nominee and thanked him for his confidence in me. "To tell you the truth," he replied, "I'm an old man and have to go to the bathroom frequently. So when your name came up I was out of the room. Of course, when I got back, I was delighted with what was happening."

Gottschalk, although he was not my major professor, was always a favorite and became a good friend. In those years, one took written exams in two fields and then, about a year later, orals on three others. I had taken my written exams shortly before Pearl Harbor, then had left the university for about four and a half years to serve first in Washington and then in the Navy as a Japanese language officer in the Pacific. I returned to Chicago on March 24, 1946 after not having read much history for those four-plus years. Nevertheless I scheduled my oral exam for June 6--purely on a bluff, it goes without saying.

The day before my exam, Gottschalk called me into his office and told me the story of Walter Prescott Webb's exam. After a bad start, Webb did worse and worse and finally stood up and said, "It's obvious that I'm wasting your time, gentlemen and you're wasting mine" and walked out. A few minutes later he was in the office of Andrew C. McLaughlin, the constitutional historian, and outlined for him his thinking on what became Webb's seminal work called *The Great Plains*. "Now," said Gottschalk, "If he had only told the committee what he was working on, they would have passed him." "Do you really think so," said I. "No", was the answer.

By this time Bernadotte Schmitt has left the university to go to the Stgate Department, where he wrote, *inter alia*, a history of the San Francisco Conference that established the United Nations. In his place, was a distinguished refugee scholar, Hans Rothfels, a Christian anti-Nazi from Tubingen. I was seeing him for the first time at the exam and was surprised when he was asked to begin the questioning. "Vat can you tell us about the sources for the Protestant Reformation?" If this had been the second or third question, I might have had the presence of mind to point out that my fields of examination were to start at 1600 and that I had not really prepared myself for anything earlier. Instead, I stumbled and fumbled, until

finally Rothfels stopped me. ”Let us get on to something you know something about “ And we did.

To get back to my more or less main theme, several weeks ago I received an e-mail from another graduate student, this one a young man who had studied with me at the University of Cincinnati a few years back. .“While giving a paper at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia,” he wrote, “I met a gentleman named Thomas Kolsky who is a professor at Montgomery County Community college in Blue Bell, PA. Upon learning I was from Cincinnati, he inquired about you. He graduated from Rutgers back in ’65 as a Henry Rutgers Scholar and, although originally intent on becoming a doctor, he recounted how two professors named Winkler and Susman changed his mind! I’m not sure I want to assume the responsibility for Mr. Kolsky’s decision, but I was bemused by the combination of Susman and Winkler. Two more different people might be hard to find. Sussman was an enthusiastic, often hyperbolic lecturer and discussion leader, throwing out ideas left and right, often disagreeing with the conventional wisdom about issues of American cultural life, but very reluctant to put his ideas down on paper—presumably from nervousness about the reactions of his peers. His doctoral dissertation had been revised

as a book and accepted by the Columbia University Press, but he had withdrawn it two times and in the event, it was his student, Richard Pells, now at the University of Texas, who published a splendid book on American expatriots in France that owed a great deal to what he had learned at Susman's feet. As for Winkler, let us just say he was very different from his more demonstrative and surely more spectacular colleague.

All these maanderings finally bring me around to the trio of historians here in Cincinnati—at the University of Cincinnati—who are really the subject of this paper. In the 1930s, when I was a student at UC, the university was hardly regarded as one of the leaders in American higher education. Just as at present, it was substantially better than its reputation, but as a “commuter” institution serving a population many of whom could otherwise never aspire to a college education, it was a far cry from the major public or private centers upon which the reputation of American higher education largely rested. Still, I was fortunate to study with Paul Ellsworth, one of the earliest of the Keynesian economists, and with Harold Vinacke, whose history of modern China is still worth consulting three quarters of a century after it was published.

But to get back to my three historians. It still bemuses me that when I arrived at Graduate School in Chicago I soon found I had been as well prepared as my friends from Harvard and Emory, Princeton and North Carolina. Much was the work, as I have suggested, of an entire faculty, in literature and economics, psychology and several sciences, but for me the trio of historians had an effect that I now realize was more profound than any earlier or later pedagogy, however important that might have been

As in the case of Susman and Winkler, I find it hard to think of three more unlike people than Miriam Urban, Reginald McGrane, and George Hedger. They differed physically, politically, intellectually—and each in her or his way exemplified a particular approach to the nature and the uses of historical knowledge. Only one was a really productive scholar and certainly the only one with a national reputation. Yet as I look back it is clear that each contributed something different to what little historical know-how I managed to accumulate in my years at the University of Cincinnati.

Miriam Urban's major role in the History Department was to introduce students to the excitement and the richness of the field. Miss Urban was not particularly a distinguished scholar. Her doctoral

dissertation, written under the supervision of Carleton J, H, Hayes at Columbia, was a study of British opinion and policy toward the unification of Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. Years later, she published it and little else over a span of long years in the classroom.

But it was in the classroom that she shone. She was a chunky, even dumpy woman, dark-complected with a large and crooked nose, piercing black eyes, and black hair that never seemed to be in place no matter how hard she tried. A friend once described her as a Jewish Helen Hokinson—or maybe it should be a slightly less exuberant Margaret Rutherford. Her lectures were narrative, seldom analytical, but filled with stories of people who came alive as she described them to us.

She cultivated her idiosyncracies. One was to choose a student in the front row and use him or her as the foil for the show she was featuring that particular day.

Our friend, we'll call him Billie Baldwin, who sat in the first row, had a tendency to enjoy a short nap sometime during the course of the lecture. How he could sleep through one of Urban's lectures... but each to his own taste. One day, she came up to him, tapped him on the skull and said, "Baldwin, wake up. If you keep sleeping I'm going to lay for you in

the spring.” Those were innocent days, I think, and the class broke out into an embarrassed titter. Miss Urban cocked a knowing eye at us and went on with her lecture,

Again, she has a habit of snapping the lower edge of her girdle to signal the end of the class period. One day she neglected to do so, And we sat there waiting until she gave a hearty pull and commented. “Thought I wasn’t going to do it, eh”

But the schtich, if I may use the term, were not what made her memorable. She was the recruiter par excellence for the History major. Once students had been captured by the excitement and romance and color of her introduction to modern European history, they could go on to more probing study and perhaps more meaningful investigations.

I learned a great deal from Miriam Urban, about teaching, to be sure, but about all sorts of other matters as well. After I graduated, I stayed on and as a Taft Fellow and served as her assistant for a year. Almost every Sunday she would pick me up at the Memorial Dormitory and drive out to a little place she had along the river. We were supposedly preparing for the next week’s work, but if I remember correctly, she spent more time

showing me her latest acquisitions in kitchen ware (which I never observed her using and in which she took great pride).

A greater contrast to Miriam Urban than Reginald McGrane would be hard to find. Quiet, conservative, almost shy at times, he had none of her colorfulness and almost certainly—but never to students—regarded her tricks of the trade as somehow unworthy of a real professional scholar. He himself, unlike Urban or indeed George Hedger, of whom I'll say a few words later, was a historian of national repute. His works on the Panic of 1837 and on Foreign Bondholders and American State Debts were, and remain, standards works in the fields and he was the author of numerous other publications as well.

In his understated way he was intensely concerned about the development of his students—particularly of those whom he regarded as likely to have careers in academia after going on to graduate work at Chicago and Wisconsin, Cornell, Harvard, and the like. Dr. and Mrs. McGrane had no children and in a way, I think, those of us who chose the academic path played the role of his substitute progeny.

Some time ago, in the course of another paper, I mentioned the skill with which he dealt with the fairly common, if not very honorable, reuse of

a term paper from the files of one of the fraternities, As I wrote then, I learned a great deal simply by sharing an office with him for a year before going off to Chicago. Here I want to try to recollect what it was like to be an undergraduate student in one of his classes in American history. His style broke every rule that the “educationese” establishment regarded as appropriate in good teaching. He was neither dramatic nor addicted to witty asides. He made little use of the anecdote that illuminated a point and rarely took the time to field questions or to engage the class in the kind of discussion that usually brings a class to life and often leads to unexpected and interesting insights.

Instead, he would come into class, start talking, and finish the lecture precisely at the end of the fifty-minute period. In that era before the technological revolution of our own time, we students took note so steadily and copiously that I think I can still remember the pain in fingers and wrist at the end of each class session.

No doubt a formula for monumental boredom, yet step by step some of us slowly came to realize that what McGrane was doing was bringing us material from the latest scholarship in his field. In those days, the University of Cincinnati library was not very rich in resources. Aside from

the major historical journals, for example, there were few other journals easily accessible to undergraduate students. McGrane scoured the literature, and day after day brought into his classes the changing interpretations, the queries and controversies that form the lifeblood of historical scholarship. Certainly we were not entertained. But for a few of us, even for someone like myself for whom American history was a secondary interest, it was exciting to realize that period after period we were being exposed to the work of those who were on the cutting edge of what was going on in their fields of study.

As an aside, my last contact with Dr. McGrane was in the mid-sixties when he was in a nursing home, already terminally ill. I was at UC to give the Taft Lectures in History and Harry Stevens, who had been a roommate here, had preceded me at the University of Chicago, and was now a professor at Ohio University was also in town. We went to see our former mentor and sat in his room for perhaps half an hour watching his hand go back and forth, back and forth, obsessively, along the guard rail of his hospital bed. We could not even tell whether he was aware of our presence. When we went out into the corridor both of us broke into tears. A few years later, Bill Vogel, McGrane's closest colleague, told me that not

long after we left, he had complained to Vogel that no one from the History Department came to see him. But “Harry Stevens and Henry Winkler were here.” It was good to know that he remembered shortly before he passed away

The third of my trio of Cincinnati historians was George Hedger. Like that of Miriam Urban, his resume showed little other than a useful text on Western Civilization by way of publication. But his influence on several generations of students was profound and lasting. It is hard to define why that should have been the case. Partly, I think, it was the evidence of the sheer integrity of the man. I can close my eyes and see him, tall, ruddy-faced, white haired, as he worked his way through some question of interpretation and encouraged us to examine assumptions and be ready to reconsider easily held and sometimes mindless stereotypes.

Perhaps the stories that circulated among the History majors—and so far as I knew there was no evidence of their accuracy—nevertheless captured the reasons the best students regarded him with real respect and indeed with affection.

It was rumored that as a young instructor at a Utah university, he was horrified by what he believed to be a gross violation of the academic

freedom of another faculty member. The victim, in this scenario, was Elbert Thomas, who later became a United States Senator from the state. Hedger, for his part, abandoned his position and went back to graduate school to study history as a way of understanding why such things could happen and perhaps how they might be changed. The story may or may not have been apocryphal—I suspect it probably was—but it summed up the image of the man in the minds of a number of us.

I got to know Hedger best in the two years I remained at the University after graduation and before going on to the University of Chicago. These were the years in which Europe stumbled ever closer to war and the United States was bitterly divided over its role in the treacherous international world.

I had come back from a summer political study tour as Geneva Fellow convinced that war was inevitable and that the United States had to be involved. Hedger demurred. He was what I then called a Norman Thomas Socialist. I suppose Christian Socialist might be a slightly more accurate description. He had no illusions about the evil that was the Nazi regime, nor either about the Soviet Union where he early on condemned the purge trials that many on the Left were still trying to rationalize. But he

was also convinced that the consequences of war, in terms of lives lost, institutions devastated, society itself torn apart, would be worse even than the iniquities of a totalitarian Europe on the other side of the Atlantic. I disagreed and spent a good deal of time in his office and occasionally at his home discussing, arguing, trying to make sense of an increasingly senseless world. He didn't change my position, but I am sure it is accurate to say that he made me think that position through, honestly considering the alternatives, and in the final analysis having a surer grip on the rationale for the internationalism I still espouse these many years later.

Very likely my sense of the importance to me of the teachers I've cited is exaggerated by the fact that I've spent virtually my whole professional life in the academy, so...

A brief epilogue. Many years ago, when I was a neophyte faculty member at Rutgers, those of us in European History each taught at least one individual section of about 25 students in the introductory Modern European History course. We had a common syllabus that outlined the broad themes to be covered. Otherwise, each of us dealt with the material as he—we were then all he—saw fit. At the end of the semester we gathered all the students in the gymnasium and administered a common

examination. In the front of the room we placed a number of cardboard boxes, each bearing the name of one of us written in large block letters. As a student finished the exam, he deposited his blue books in the appropriate container.

I noticed one of my students—not one of the best, but neither one of the worst-- who seemed confused as he came up to the front. “What’s the trouble?” I asked.

“I’m looking for your class box,” he replied.

“Here it is. Don’t you see?”

“Oh. Is your name Winkler? I thought it was Maloney.”

Who am I?