ROY F. NICHOLS: TEACHER
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The late afternoon, from four to six o'clock, is hardly the most auspicious time to conduct a history course if one wants an alert and attentive body of students. But in the 1950's, when I was a graduate student at Penn, the university's conception of its obligations to the community required that graduate courses in history be offered at such hours, so that high school teachers who needed graduate credits could be appropriately serviced. This policy produced strangely mixed enrollments in almost every graduate course, from advanced Ph.D. candidates to beginning part-time graduate students with little undergraduate preparation in history, and it also assured that in every course except restricted seminars the enrollment would be so large that the professor would have no recourse but to lecture, whatever his preferred method of teaching. Huge enrollments were especially inevitable in the famous three-year sequence of courses in United States political history conducted on Wednesday afternoons by Dean Roy F. Nichols.

Dean Nichols' sequence was famous in part because the professor so unfailingly triumphed over all the handicaps of the hour and the size and diversity of his enrollment to produce courses so memorable that the waning hours of Wednesday afternoons are still likely to seem a time that ought to be special to those of us who were there. I was tempted to say not "courses" but "performances" so memorable; before an audience of a hundred and more, good teaching had to be a theatrical performance. How many of the students must have gone on, as I did, to try to reproduce before their own student audiences Dean Nichols' acting out of Hamilton and Jefferson in dispute in Washington's cabinet, or a campaign orator of 1828 fulminating over Andrew Jackson's alleged adultery, or Jefferson Davis and Stephen Douglas persuading Franklin Pierce that the Kansas-Nebraska Bill needed administration muscle behind it?

Of course there was much more to it than a theatrical perform-
 ance. But I do not belittle the thespian and the oratorical aspects of Dr. Nichols' teaching. The lecture method of teaching has acquired a bad name, in part for reasons no better than those involving the currents of fashion, in part also for reasons all too apparent to anyone who has listened to papers read by historians at professional meetings and wondered in dismay how bad the general run of droning bores must be in the classroom if they teach so miserably when they are trying to impress their peers. Anyone who has heard the average historian read a paper should conclude that the ability to speak with conviction and with a sense of the dramatic is no small thing; and Dr. Nichols possessed such ability in overflowing abundance. (Some might object to my aspersions against the readers of professional papers that the occasion of a scholarly meeting differs from the classroom and forbids sprightliness; no one who ever saw Dr. Nichols perform at a scholarly meeting would be likely to offer that objection.)

Beyond the dramatics, in any event, those diverse Wednesday afternoon audiences were called upon to share in an inquisitive and speculating mind's thinking about history. One of the virtues of a course conducted by the lecture method, as Dean Nichols' had to be, is that the situation requires the instructor to synthesize all his reading and thinking about the material at hand; and when the lecturer is a historian of Roy F. Nichols' caliber, that synthesis is bound to be more worth hearing than the remarks of one's fellow students would have been had discussion sessions been possible. On the other hand, the synthesis of the historian's thought does not need to be offered in lectures but can more economically be set down in books, as much of what we heard in Dean Nichols' course in the days when I was taking it eventually turned up in print in Blueprints for Leviathan: American Style and The Invention of the American Political Parties. In Dean Nichols' lectures, as in all great teaching lectures, there was something still more: the opportunity to participate while the historian thought out loud, while the historian reexamined and reshaped his conclusions, the opportunity to observe and participate in the making of the eventual books. It is difficult here to avoid seeming to plagiarize Carl Becker's essay on Frederick Jackson Turner as a teacher, for I refer in Nichols' lectures to those same qualities of exploring and calling upon students to
share in the exploration which Becker found so stimulating and challenging in Turner's lectures and which made them in the end hardly lectures at all.

The three-year sequence of courses was concerned with the evolution of the American political system—or the political "machine," as Nichols likes to call it—and especially the political parties, and with exploring to discover both what permitted the system and the parties to operate seemingly so satisfactorily in most circumstances—though there was always in the background a skeptical questioning whether the workings of the political machinery were altogether so satisfactory as in the middle 1950's they tended to seem—and what led to the breakdown of the system in the middle of the nineteenth century. The time span of the sequence ran from the planting of the colonies (and indeed the English political backgrounds) to near the First World War; but the Civil War disruption of American democracy naturally was the particular axis around which the course sequence turned, and Dr. Nichols was forever confessing that after a lifetime of study of that disruption, he still felt less understanding than puzzle-ment over why the disruption occurred. With the puzzlement in mind, he encouraged younger historians to try new methods of responding to old questions about the causes of the Civil War. Especially, of course, he encouraged the assimilation of the tools of the social sciences into the historian's craft; if some of us have remained inveterately old-fashioned narrative historians, it is not his fault.

Readers of PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY probably know that another of Dr. Nichols' consistent themes was the necessity to learn more about the individual history of each of the states. His course sequence had to concern itself mainly with the history of political parties on the level of national organization and federal elections, because most of the work available for him to synthesize had been done there, and the long time span of his course sequence also demanded it. But he was continually coming upon questions he could not answer, because the answers if available at all lay hidden in the mysteries of some state's politics which no one yet had adequately explored. The American political parties of Nichols' course were coalitions of state parties which united with some effectiveness only every four years for the Presidential con-
tests; and Dr. Nichols liked to remind us that for the most part historical research had proceeded only far enough to permit us to view the top of the political iceberg, federal politics, while the underlying state political systems remained hidden.

There was a deceptive simplicity about Dr. Nichols' course, as there is about much that he has written. So much of the course concerned personalities, occasionally curious or scandalous ones (Alexander Hamilton's Mrs. Reynolds, Peggy Eaton), so much was anecdotal (Winfield Scott's hasty plate of soup, the awful death of Franklin Pierce's little boy in the railroad accident), that it was easy to be lulled into a complacent impression that there was nothing more to it than the interreactions of these fascinating but merely human characters.

There was and there wasn't. Students with a taste for philosophical profundity sometimes felt disappointment, because the ostentatious display, at least, of such profundity was conspicuously absent. A certain kind of effort to make history philosophical was frowned upon. Despite his interest in drawing upon the methods of the social sciences, Dr. Nichols also expressed suspicions about generalizations. If one figuratively climbed a lofty mountain, he said, and looked down upon history from afar, the vista might seem to be one of grand and overwhelming forces, perhaps those of a determinist economics, sweeping all before them. The march of events toward the American civil War in particular might appear to have been irrepressible. But if the historian descended from lofty remoteness to mingle with the people who made up history, then the Kansas-Nebraska Act, for example, and all that hinged upon it, became not a necessary link in a deterministically ordained chain of events but a product of such fortuitous and human happenings and circumstances as President Pierce's emotional state after the death of his child and the suspension of his drinking, Senator David Atchison's partisan embarrassments in Missouri (state politics again), and the forcefulness of Jefferson Davis' personality, to say nothing of Stephen Douglas' well-known ambitions for himself and his section. Nichols loved to talk about the "permutations and combinations" of political history. The permutations and combinations were the complexities of history seen not as movements of impersonal forces but of history on a human scale. After all, the interreactions of the
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fascinating but merely human characters did prove to constitute the matter of Dean Nichols' course. The underlying implication was that mere men do move history, that history is something that we—even those diverse students of a Wednesday afternoon—can participate in and change.

By the time I studied at Penn, Dr. Nichols was already dean of the Graduate School, and it was another of the triumphs of the Wednesday afternoon course sequence that its freshness and its magnetism prevailed in face of the distractions of administration. The deanship meant, however, that the Wednesday afternoon lecture was the only course that Nichols was able to offer, and to my lasting regret I could not take a seminar with him. But the deanship did not mean that his door was closed. On the contrary, it was open to a beginning graduate student fresh from Albright and otherwise unproven to the History Department at Penn, who simply knew that he wanted to work on something having to do with the Civil War and that he had come to Penn because Roy F. Nichols was clearly the man under whom to do it. My interests in the war were more military than Dean Nichols' own; but such was the acuity of his perceptions both of what might be worth studying and of the interests of the people he met, that the suggestions he offered the first day he saw me led straight to an eventual dissertation on the quartermaster general of the Union army and my whole subsequent career as a historian of the United States Army.

Fortunately, though he did not conduct a seminar, Dean Nichols still undertook to direct a few dissertations, and he consented that mine should be one of them. His approach in supervising a dissertation was one of the most relaxed informality. A mutually agreeable topic for the thesis was of course a condition of being accepted to work under Dean Nichols; once Nichols had accepted both student and topic, the approach then assumed the student had achieved enough scholarly maturity that the project could be pursued as between two colleagues, the one independently doing the work, the other offering a friendly associate's critical judgments at stages along the way. The interviews between us featured characteristic reminders from the dean of the human dimensions of the historical characters with whom I had to work. ("Never forget," said he, while I tried to comprehend the uneasy relation-
ship between the President from Lancaster and the future quartermaster general who was building the United States Capitol amidst much controversy with Buchanan and his cabinet, "never forget that when President Buchanan faced Captain Meigs, he knew he was still a country boy from Lancaster dealing with a Meigs of Philadelphia."

Probably I could have profited from a more detailed and demanding direction which would have allowed me less freedom simply to do the dissertation in my own way; Dean Nichols must have believed, however, that the loss of any such profit was more than compensated for by the challenge of teaching myself to be a historian by working as one, with only enough direction to keep me on the right track. His method of training a historian was consistent with what his courses seemed to say about the nature of history: wherever men go, they take themselves there.

Roy F. Nichols took himself to the peaks of achievement as a historian. He tried to inspire his students, if they could, to follow him there; but he never drove or pushed them, he was never the taskmaster. He was never the taskmaster in part because he was always the gentleman, all the somewhat old-fashioned connotations of that term being appropriate when calling him to mind. He could be informal with students, and usually was, but he was also reserved. He could give a graduate student freedom to shape his own work and treat the apprentice as an associate and colleague; yet the graduate student was always appropriately aware that he dealt with a master historian and the dean of the Graduate School. As an old-fashioned gentleman, Dean Nichols always kept just enough distance between himself and his students that he retained the degree of remoteness which helps inspire emulation. As a gentleman, he brought us to emulate him not only as a great historian but also as a good and kindly man.