ESSAY REVIEW

On the Writing of College and University History


Signs of a growing interest in the evolution of American colleges and universities are evident in the increasing number of books treating topics relevant to higher education. New ideas concerning the origins of American higher education, the importance of higher education to the republicanism of the new nation, the character of students and student life, the growth of higher education for women, the transitional phase for American universities in the inter-war years, the emergence of the modern research university, and the impact of McCarthyism on campus—all have appeared in books published during the last ten to twelve years.¹

Despite this new direction in documenting and evaluating the history of higher education, the original chronicle associated with college and university history (the institutional history) endures. Colleges and universities display a persistent enthusiasm for such tracts, regularly commissioning them, usually in connection with the observance of a significant anniversary. Bibliographies on the history of American higher education commonly contain hundreds of citations to such volumes, and there is little indication that future bibliographers will not have to record an ever-increasing production of these books.

Nearly every review of books dealing with the history of an American college begins with the obligatory assertion of the suspect character of institutional histories. It is frequently and somewhat tiresomely recalled that many institutional histories have been paeans to the glorious development of the college or university under study. It similarly has been observed that many institutional histories are a public relations officer's dream and a serious historian's nightmare. Often devoid of any pretension to objectivity, filled with saccharine celebration of the triumphs of the institution, rife with glorification of saintly professors, and crammed with anecdotes about campus characters, the institutional history as public relations document or sentimental reflection upon alma mater has a long and, some would say, sordid history.

In the past, many academic historians have shunned institutional histories and declined to write them, recognizing that there is danger for the historian who agrees to undertake the writing of an institutional history without specific guarantees about necessary objectivity in presentation from the college or university which wants its history recorded. The danger lies in the all-too-frequent inclination of some institutions to whitewash their histories, to be obsessively protective of the institution's past, and to engage in unlovely practices to ensure that institutional histories do no damage to the mythology of alma mater. Some institutions want to ensure that authors do not analyze contemporary problems too carefully and that institutional benefactors or other powerful persons (inside or outside the institution) are not offended. This approach to the control of institutional history usually derives from faculty committees and administrators unfamiliar with the serious study, research, and writing of history—groups that prefer to conceive of an institutional history as a pleasing narrative devoid of the rigorous analysis that normally characterizes other scholarly and scientific endeavors. The great irony, of course, is that some American colleges and universities with reputations as citadels of free inquiry have debased themselves by seeking to control the writing of their own histories.

Yet, some of America's finest historians have written institutional histories. One doubts that any reviewer has had the temerity to condemn as hagio-
graphic the works of Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen on Wisconsin, Thomas D. Clark on Indiana, or C.S. Griffin on Kansas. In its finest form, the institutional history becomes a critical part of the foundation upon which historians can build syntheses of the history of American higher education. Were institutional histories abandoned, American scholarship would be deprived of some exceedingly fine, recently published books.

The best and easily the most sophisticated of these is *Gone With the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University*, written by the eminent Paul K. Conkin. A gifted historian of both American ideas and politics, Conkin treats Vanderbilt as a good biographer would treat an interesting subject, carefully amassing the detail of the subject’s life, paying close attention to relevant contexts, and applying appropriate interpretive frameworks. Where Conkin’s work differs markedly from most institutional histories is in his consideration of the shifting intellectual currents at Vanderbilt. Almost no institutional histories are written with serious attention to paradigmatic movements in individual scholarly disciplines for the simple reason that few scholars are equipped to undertake such an analysis. In the case of *Gone With the Ivy*, Conkin discusses those shifts insightfully and relates them to the intellectual progress of the institution.

Conkin’s book is but one example of a new type of institutional history that seeks to develop college history thematically and contextually while demonstrating an awareness of the principal interpretive strands in American history that impinge upon higher education. Older institutional histories and an entire range of historiography emanating from colleges of education often ignore scholarship from related areas and rarely develop themes which can be related to broader historiographical contexts.

An author must answer many questions before writing an institutional history. For example, to what audience should the author direct the book—the alumni and the supporters of the institution or the scholarly community? Should the book add new dimensions to our knowledge of the history of American higher education? Is it possible to write a solid history that addresses both the popular and scholarly concerns?

The authors of the four institutional histories reviewed here have, for the most part, successfully grappled with these questions. In the end, each has chosen the larger audience, and each has succeeded in varying degrees in

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3 Paul K. Conkin, *Gone With the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Knoxville, 1985).
addressing important scholarly questions and in constructing narratives that
will have popular appeal. Part of that appeal to the non-scholarly audience
rests on the large numbers of illustrations used in all four histories. In fact,
the authors of the books on Penn State, Pitt, and Delaware have included
so many interesting and attractive illustrations that they have combined a
scholarly narrative with a pictorial history—no mean feat. Charles Glatfelter,
in his history of Gettysburg College, has chosen a more traditional narrative
format, although both of his volumes are liberally dotted with interesting
illustrations. No reviewer could quibble with the physical appearance of any
of these volumes. The books on Pitt, Penn State, and Delaware will all
gracefully adorn the coffee tables of alumni. Robert Alberts’s book on Pitt
is especially handsome and lavishly supplied with both color and black-and-
white photographs.

The best of these institutional histories is Michael Bezilla’s chronicle of
the growth and development of Penn State. Bezilla traces the history of
Penn State from its antebellum origins through its designation as a land-
grant college to its contemporary standing as a modern, diverse university
with a significant public service orientation. Bezilla is especially strong in
recounting the political relationships between the university and the people
of Pennsylvania and between the university and the state government. His
analysis of the dynamics of a developing land-grant institution of the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ranks among the best accounts of
the origins and development of land-grant education. Bezilla shows the
power of the land-grant idea upon Penn State and weaves this theme
throughout the book, never losing sight of the impact of land-grant ideals
upon the development of a cosmopolitan institution. He deftly maintains
other themes in the same manner, while attending to the necessity for
incorporating large amounts of detail about such diverse items as program-
matic development and intercollegiate athletics.

Bezilla’s revealing accounts of student disruptions throughout the uni-
versity’s history—particularly his rendering of the student strike of 1905—
will be of considerable interest to scholars exploring the history of student
activism. Also strong are his sketches of key figures in Penn State’s history,
including university presidents Milton Eisenhower and Eric Walker. The
brief discussion of the university’s acquisition of its own separate post office
during the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower is a delightful
aside.

Scholars will be disappointed, however, in the system of documentation
used in the book. Perhaps for reasons related to the technical production
of the book, no full annotations are offered scholars and students who might
wish to check through sources or perhaps to validate the research upon
which the book rests. This is regrettable, for the book is such an able treatment of an important institution.

Both Bezilla's book and Robert Alberts's history of the University of Pittsburgh clearly disclose the complexity of universities and why institutions of higher learning can be so interesting to students of history. Alberts is particularly strong in his understanding of the political complexity of a university and of the often byzantine relationships that exist between a university and the non-academic world. Alberts focuses, of course, upon an urban university with origins similar to those of Penn State and Delaware but with a significantly different contemporary character.

Alberts's volume is divided into five books with a total of thirty-six chapters. At times, these divisions seem more fitting for an encyclopedia; some chapters are very short, devoted to relatively unimportant topics, and poorly integrated into the larger story. Alberts's inclusion of paragraph-length summaries of often unrelated developments in the university's history compounds the book's organizational problems. While these news-bulletin-like nuggets are occasionally informative, they impede the development of the narrative and make it difficult to sustain themes. Many of these items could have been deleted; others might have been incorporated as sustaining evidence for themes in Pitt's history. Throughout the book, anecdotal material of doubtful importance to the history of the university creeps into the narrative. This reviewer grew tired of reading about such minutiae as the details of the courtship and marriage of President Edward Litchfield, the elements of the dinner served when Nikita Khrushchev visited the university, and the items of President Wesley Posvar's attire on an occasion of particular importance. As is the case in the Bezilla volume, the documentation style is idiosyncratic and difficult to follow.

Still, Alberts deals well with many aspects of Pitt's history. He is especially able in his discussion of the relationship between the university and the Mellon family, and he has a keen awareness of the reciprocal relationships which existed between the university and the commercial, civic, and financial centers in Pittsburgh. Alberts's recounting of the planning for the construction of the Cathedral of Learning in the 1920s and 1930s is a minor classic in and of itself; it makes an important contribution to our understanding of boosterism and fund-raising in an urban university during that period. Alberts also does a good job in explaining the academic freedom controversy during the 1930s, which developed between President John Bowman and history professor Ralph Turner over Turner's political views, and in interpreting the significance and pitfalls of the expansionist policies of President Litchfield in the 1950s and 1960s.

Alberts writes in a style which differs markedly from the authors of the other three histories. Bezilla, John A. Munroe, and Charles Glatfelter all
write in clear, straightforward prose unadorned by stylistic flairs. Alberts, on the other hand, writes in a sprightly, journalistic style that is sure to keep the reader's attention.

Munroe's solidly researched, clearly written history of the University of Delaware provides an interesting contrast to Pitt and Penn State. Both of the Pennsylvania institutions developed into complex universities much earlier than did the University of Delaware. The small size of the state of Delaware and its proximity to larger, wealthier states doubtlessly contributed to this phenomenon; so, too, did the failure of Delawareans to support in any substantial way the higher education enterprise until well into the twentieth century.

In many ways, the history of the state university of Delaware resembles more the development of small state universities in the South than the experience of Penn State or Pitt. Delaware had been a slave state; the early presidents of the university were drawn from the South; and the state had a population that was politically quite conservative. Throughout the nineteenth century, the penuriousness of the Delaware legislature and the conservative disposition of the state combined to thwart development. In the twentieth century, like southern universities, the institution also had difficulty in coming to grips with the demands of black Delawareans to be educated at the university and went through a minor trauma with integration. That is not to say that the University of Delaware, or for that matter southern universities, had monopolies on racism or ethnocentrism. Serious problems also occurred at Penn State and Pitt, as well as at most other American universities at one time or another.

Munroe offers an especially strong treatment of the nineteenth-century university, narrating with unusual clarity the near demise of the institution during the 1860s and 1870s. Munroe shows that the designation of the university as the state's land-grant institution brought it back from a period of inactivity and suspension. A continued absence of support from the state guaranteed, however, that the university would not prosper, and as late as 1888 the total enrollment amounted to only sixteen students. Increased state support after the turn of the century and a blossoming relationship with wealthy Delawareans helped to set the university on a new course in the early years of the twentieth century.

Charles Glatfelter's two volumes recount in great detail the evolution of Gettysburg College. Organized topically within a broad chronological framework, Glatfelter's comprehensive volumes will serve the Gettysburg academic community well as a definitive reference on the major and minor matters in the school's history. The first volume is thematically the stronger and effectively treats the early period in Gettysburg's history up until 1904. The first two hundred pages are especially informative with regard to the
influence of Lutheranism on Gettysburg's development. Glatfelter's account of the long connection of the college with the Lutheran pastor and scholar, Samuel Simon Schmucker, reveals the special impact that diverse groups of Lutherans had on higher education at Gettysburg and elsewhere, illuminating a little-known, but important facet of the history of denominationally related higher education in the United States.

Subsequent sections of both volumes deal serially with the activities of the trustees, the finances of the college, the functions of presidents and professors, the physical development of the campus, student life, and other topics. This organization makes for easy, handy reference, but defeats any attempt to sustain a compelling narrative. As a result, the book has neither narrative continuity nor thematic development. A prodigious amount of research in the archives at Gettysburg supports assessments in both volumes, and Glatfelter demonstrates an awareness of some of the more significant, relevant historiography. For the most part, however, these two volumes are an affectionate history, with relatively little critical analysis (especially for the twentieth century).

The four histories under review add substantially to the already extensive literature on the history of colleges and universities in both Pennsylvania and Delaware (literally dozens of institutional histories and a two-volume history of higher education survey the Pennsylvania scene alone). The books track the evolution of higher education in the Middle Atlantic region, and by their very helpful and well-written accounts of the early days of the four schools, collectively they open new perspectives on the variegated nature of higher education during the nineteenth century. All four books address, in useful ways, the relationship of the institutions to various philanthropists and philanthropies, areas often left unattended in institutional histories. Moreover, the books on Penn State, Pitt, and Delaware provide important information concerning race relations on those campuses—a topic of special importance to the state of Pennsylvania whose public system of higher education has been under scrutiny by the federal Office of Civil Rights. The treatment of the on-again, off-again system of co-education at Delaware is also valuable for the light that it sheds on the difficulties women encountered in making inroads into state universities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Most interesting are the ways in which all four histories illustrate the blurred line which historically separates public from private higher education in the United States. There are ample examples in each which point to the eagerness of so-called private institutions of higher learning to seek funding from the state during both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, culminating in the case of the University of Pittsburgh in the 1960s and the alteration of its status to a "state related" university after financial
disasters during the administration of Chancellor Edward Litchfield. In fact, an interesting case study could be made of the state of Pennsylvania in its varied attempts to support higher education by way of a dual system of public and private colleges and universities. Such a case study would likely open new windows on the shared characteristics of public and private colleges and their mutual attraction to the public larder. Moreover, it would help us to understand better the evolution of governmental influence over and participation in the affairs of private institutions.

These volumes indicate—in the variety of their scope and their methods and materials—that the genre of institutional histories is alive and well. None of these volumes will likely win wide acclaim, but with these books four more institutions of higher learning now have accurate, useful, and for the most part, objective guides to their pasts. Given the history of institutional histories, that is no mean accomplishment.

University of Georgia

THOMAS G. DYER