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*INVENTING NORMAN CANTOR:
CONFESSIONS OF A MEDIEVALIST*



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I was an early victim of this hard line Conant policy. I published my doctoral dissertation in 1958, a year after taking my degree. It was controversial. It was staunchly praised by one of the three or four best American medievalists, Sidney Painter at Johns Hopkins, and by a prominent church historian in Germany, and severely criticized by a couple of Oxbridge dons. It was good enough to pass muster as a work of significant scholarship and it was also well written. Princeton University Press's too modest print run of one thousand copies of the book sold out within ten months of publication. It was then taken up by another publisher and remained in print until 1994.

I made token gestures to preparation of a scholarly sequel but instead devoted my time to teaching (including a course in modern British history, outside my original field, drawing heavily on what Stewart Reid had taught me at United College) and public communication.

In 1959 I accepted an offer of a contract from New York Macmillan to write a new culturally focused survey of the Middle Ages that could be used not only as a textbook (thereby competing with Strayer's two textbooks in the field), but also be accessible to the educated reader in general. The book appeared in 1963, got a rave review in *The New Yorker*, and was a main selection of the History Book Club.

But Princeton did not wait to see if I could achieve my goal of bringing medieval history to the middle-class lay reader. The majority of the tenured faculty led by Jinks Harbison—but not including Joe Strayer—decided I was not Princeton History material: Not only did I have no private means like half of the departmental faculty, and I couldn't play poker and was socially gauche in general, but I was not going to be the ready producer of conventional research monographs, which under Harvard influence was now their main currency of academic value.

Between January and May of 1960 I got tenured associate professor offers, with a substantial raise in my very modest and unlivable salary, from Johns Hopkins and Columbia. Hopkins wanted me to replace Sidney Painter who died suddenly in January 1960 of a heart attack. I commuted to Baltimore and taught his graduate students in the spring semester of 1960. They hated me, somehow feeling I had caused their beloved master's death.

Columbia wanted me to teach the required course on the history of the common law for eighty pre-law students a semester. This course had been taught by the American aristocrat Robert Livingston Schuyler for thirty years. He retired in 1958 and the instructors tried out in the course during the next two years had bombed. The Department Chair, Richard B. Morris, the son of a Brooklyn rabbi, the first full-blooded Jew aside from the holder of an endowed chair in Jewish history to teach in the Columbia History Department (beginning in 1947), heard about me from his son, who was in my course at Princeton.

Under pressure from the Dean to find a good teacher for the important course on English legal history, Morris invited me to have lunch with him in the Columbia faculty club on Morningside Drive. An hour later he offered me an untenured associate professorship. I said not only would he have to give me tenure, but he would also have to intervene with the U.S. Immigration Service who on abstruse technical grounds were making it hard for me to get a permanent immigration visa.

The immigration problem arose because of a mistake in the Dean's office at Princeton, who told Strayer they could not rectify their error and I would sooner or later have to go back to unwelcoming, still anti-Semitic Canada for two years before getting a green card. Frederick Lane, the Hopkins Chair, offered me tenure but could not see how to solve my immigration problem.

Richard Morris, a Jew who got things done, said, "Go back to Princeton and start preparing to move to New York. I will get you tenure from the provost and I will get my friend Harry N. Rosenfeld, the best immigration lawyer in the country, to solve your little immigration problem."

I went back to Princeton that April day with my head swimming and was in Strayer's office the next morning. "How much money did Dick Morris offer you?" he said, sucking on his cigar. "Nine thousand," which was \$1,500 more than I was getting at Princeton. Without cracking a smile, Strayer remarked: "Those people at Columbia will stop at nothing." He told me he would discuss the matter of tenure with the Department's full professors. A week passed and nothing happened. I sent him a note saying I had to know by tomorrow or I would accept the Columbia offer. I had not told Strayer that Morris had promised to resolve my visa problem, which the Princeton bureaucracy claimed they couldn't do.

The next day passed into late evening without a word from Strayer. Finally at 10:30 P.M. on Thursday—it was poker night at Elmer Beller's and I suppose the call came from there—Jerome Blum called. "Joe wanted me to tell you that the Executive Committee did not reach a decision in your case. You have been here only five years. This would be a premature tenure case. You have another year before your tenure decision has to be made. Joe wants you to turn down Hopkins and Columbia and stay here another year and then we will make a decision," said Jerry with some hesitancy.

"Will Strayer promise me a positive decision on tenure next year?"

"Norman, you know he cannot do that. You need a majority vote of all the full professors."

The next morning at 9:00 A.M. I phoned a delighted Dick Morris and told him I was coming to Morningside Heights and handed Strayer's secretary a letter of resignation effective August 31. Strayer did not speak to me again for ten years and then only after, as editor of a history book series for the Dial Press, I arranged a big advance for him for a book on the Albigensian Crusade—a classic that is still in print.

The day after I accepted Morris's offer, Harry N. Rosenfeld, Deputy Commissioner of Immigration in the Roosevelt Administration, phoned me from New York. Like all big lawyers he preferred to deal with small clients by phone rather than face to face. I explained my situation. He asked me to send him several documents and told me his fee would be \$500 (ten times that in 2002 dollars). I asked him what his regular fee was for a case like mine. "At least \$5,000."

"How do you know," I asked, "that you can win my case?"

"Your case will go to a three-man review board in Washington in the Justice Department's Immigration Section. When I was Deputy Commissioner I appointed all those three guys; they owe me plenty." Two months later I had my visa approval. Even then it was only a 2-1 vote of the board. One of the members of the board had dared to vote against his benefactor, Harry Rosenfeld.

While I was packing the books in my office early in July and the campus was deserted, Elmer Beller came by, "I am very sorry to see you leave, you are a very good teacher and a good scholar, even if some of my colleagues think otherwise. This is a big loss for us. I am sure in a few years we will invite you back." Of course that didn't happen.

In the mid-1960s after Strayer quit as Chair, control of the Department was taken over by the Oxford Marxist Lawrence Stone. Jerry Blum, for reasons I never learned, engineered this coup. Stone brought

in from Berkeley his feminist leftist ally, Natalie Zemon Davis. Together they conducted a twenty-year vendetta against me, telling their graduate students I was a phony and a reactionary.

When Strayer retired from teaching in the late 1970s, he was succeeded by one of his two African American graduate students, William Chester Jordan, who was also very close to Lawrence Stone and who also spoke to his students about me in contemptuous terms. Yet Strayer at one point told Bryce Lyon, the medievalist at Brown University, that I was the best student he ever had—and also the best pitcher on the departmental softball team.

Dick Morris's appointment of me to tenure without a formal review by the tenured faculty was probably irregular. But he got the support of another history professor, Jacques Barzun, who was also the Provost and decided on tenure appointments. Columbia required for promotion or appointment to tenure not only a departmental recommendation but also the recommendation from an ad hoc Committee of five full professors from outside the Department of the nominee.

There was, however, a loophole in this apparently austere system. The ad hoc panel was chosen by the Provost. Among the large Columbia faculty he knew who were the hard-liners and who were the softies. He could, if he wanted, put together a panel that would have caviled at the appointment of Albert Einstein, and one that would approve of any name put before them. I suppose that the panel selected in my case by Jacques Barzun leaned more toward the latter than the former complexion.

Yet I was not an unworthy candidate. I had published a highly visible, if controversial, dissertation and I had an important interpretive article on medieval monasticism coming out that very summer in the *American Historical Review*, which did not publish many medieval articles.

In any case, as far as the Columbia History Department was concerned, support for me by both Dick Morris and Jacques Barzun would have easily gotten me a majority vote of the history faculty for tenure if a formal vote had been held.

Morris ran the department with an iron hand and he was a great historian of colonial America and early American law. Barzun was not only a much admired teacher but also an important historian of modern European culture and a prominent critic. He and his friend in the English Department, Lionel Trilling, were the power brokers in the Columbia humanities departments and Barzun also had the authority of the Provost's office to exercise his choices.

My appointment may not have been entirely conventional but it was justified. In June 1960, at the age of thirty, I received an embossed card from the Secretary of Columbia University, an obscure functionary, informing me that the Trustees had approved my appointment to tenure. It had all the imperial, confident tone of a Governor of India appointing a commissioner in the Punjab.

Nevertheless when I started to move into my office at Columbia that summer, several faculty asked me: "What are you doing here?" I was a bit taken aback to now surmise that Morris had never consulted the whole department; I said I was a tenured associate professor and had been hired to teach the English common law course and medieval intellectual history. There were gasps of astonishment, especially from John Mundy, the senior medievalist, whom Morris held in contempt, although not in as much contempt as he held the professor of ancient history, the phenomenally learned Russian Jew Elias J. Bickerman—"a damned fool in six languages" Morris called him. Mundy, in Morris's eyes, was simply mediocre; he lacked the "national visibility" that a senior Columbia historian should have. I have no doubt that Morris

secretly hoped that in time I would displace Mundy as senior mediator. Certainly Mundy suspected as much.

My courses at the college level at Columbia were immensely popular. Five years later the full professors, even John Mundy, voted my promotion to their level. My first three years (1960–63) at Columbia were intellectually the most creative in my academic career. It was in every way what a great university ought to be. I got a new education in behavioral science from the sociologists and anthropologists.

I should have stayed at Columbia the rest of my professional life. After my first glorious year at Columbia, as the applause in my common law course after my final lecture died, Princeton seemed small, remote, and far away. In the 1980s I used to drive down to Princeton two or three times a month to work in the newly expanded—not very successfully—Firestone Library.

I stood in front of the Library across from the Gothic chapel, the marvelous Romanesque Chancellor Green Building to my right and it could have been the first week of September 1951. The University had greatly multiplied its outlying buildings but the core in front of Firestone remained exactly the same. At lunchtime I went to the Annex Restaurant across Nassau Street from Firestone. I had been there in 1951 and it was cheap. The menu had not changed in thirty-five years. The Annex was still overrun by professors at lunchtime, even though Princeton now had a lavish Faculty Club, which it did not have in the more austere fifties. At the table next to mine, a professor was engrossed in conversation with a young woman, possibly his daughter. I thought that if things had turned out differently, that could be me, talking with my daughter, now a successful bilingual journalist in Miami.

It was one of those very hot Princeton July days. Princeton's elevation is lower than New York City. In the eighteenth century it was a site of a huge malarial swamp. I drove over to the Graduate College, with its imitation Magdalen tower. The tower was smaller than I remembered. It had been de-Demillized. I drove down to the junior faculty housing development on Stanworth Drive, about a mile from the campus. There I had lived from 1957 to 1960 with my wife, and after 1958, my son, today a maple syrup farmer in Vermont. When my wife and I got an apartment there after being on the waiting list for three months, we considered ourselves privileged, even though the rent consumed a third of my monthly after-tax salary. Now Stanworth looked desiccated, rundown, obsolete. So in a sense did the whole university. It had been the proud culmination of the old academic order. But that era had passed.

What historians and commentators have stressed with regard to the causation of changes in academic culture after the mid-1960s was the changed composition of the student body. It was not just much larger in numbers but it included many students ill-prepared both by high school in cognitive training and family-shaped behavioral patterns to absorb readily the conventional text-based liberal arts curriculum and its intellectual challenges. So there was a watering down of standards, introduction of easier courses, grade inflation on a large scale, and new majors that were relatively undemanding.

This indictment had plausible grounds in the large state colleges and even in some smaller private colleges. But in the Ivy League and the other top thirty colleges in the country, the cognitive capacity of the undergraduate has, in my experience, changed only modestly since the 1950s and not always adversely. It is true that by 1980 it was obvious that many of my students did not like to read and the reading as-