



# A Half Century of Princeton

JOHN V. FLEMING \*63,  
h45, h55, h71, h83, h06

Fairchild Professor of English and  
Professor of Comparative Literature,  
Emeritus

**N**OT EVERY CLASS is lucky enough to have presiding over its Fiftieth Reunion book a one-time editor of the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, but 1965 is, and he has invited me to contribute to it a kind of informal mini-history of Princeton during the last half century. One circumstance makes me happy to do so, and a second makes the task plausible. In the first place, Sixty-Five's half century corresponds exactly to the period of my permanent residence in Princeton—forty-one years on the active faculty and now a further nine in more or less sentient retirement. The second reason is that my essay will be a kind of revision and *aggiornamento* of one I wrote ten years ago for the fiftieth reunion of the Class of 1955, of which I am an honorary member. The topic I have been assigned is a comparative meditation on two Princetons—that of 1965, and that of 2015. I approach my task in the spirit of journalism, so that my essay might be regarded as a special instance of my weekly column in the *Daily Princetonian* and current weekly blog, “Gladly Lerne, Gladly Teche.”

I first saw Princeton on a perfect Indian Summer day in September 1961—probably about a week before most of you arrived on campus. The day was so perfect, indeed, that it has corrupted my memory in the direction of an ideal fantasy. When I am away from the place, I can never remember such Princeton realities as the ice of February or the muggy heat of July, only that fresh, bright autumn day with the pellucidly clear blue sky. Though we—meaning your class and I—arrived at practically the same time, there was little chance that we crossed paths. In those days the Graduate School and the undergraduate college were parallel rather than intersecting universes. I can barely believe, and only shamefully report, the motives that had brought me here. In truth, I knew very little of Princeton beyond the fact that one could in theory complete a doctoral degree here much more expeditiously than at Yale or Harvard. That was important to me because, having spent three lotus-eating postgraduate years at Oxford, I was twenty-five, wanted to get married, and therefore needed eventual gainful employment. My year in residence at Princeton was a blur of work. The few hours each day that I was not in seminar or sweating in the bowels of Firestone I was asleep in a room I had on Park Place, though at Baltic Avenue rent of \$11 per week.

Graduate students today frequently spend four or five years getting a degree. I took my General Examination, which like the undergraduate Comps of that era was a serious business, after a single year of course work; I then left for the manuscript archives of Europe, where I spent a year researching and writing

my dissertation. I returned to Princeton briefly for the hurried formality of a “final public oral examination” before taking my hot doctorate off to begin teaching at the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 1963. These circumstances perhaps entitled me to a minor footnote in the Guinness Book of World Records, but they left me knowing practically nothing about the institution at which I ostensibly had been “educated.” For example, I never met or knew the name of a single Princeton undergraduate!

**W**HEN, amazingly, I was invited to come to Princeton two years later as an assistant professor, I was returning to a place that in most respects I would be seeing for the first time. And I did so just in time to miss the Class of 1965, which had departed three months earlier. The Princeton in which I began now to teach was still an all-male institution. I am not sure I noticed that during my graduate years, but after two years in Madison, which was crawling with women students (most of them blonde, blue-eyed, answering to the name of Karen, and natives of places with exotic names like Fond du Lac and Oshkosh), this Princeton scene seemed quaint. Furthermore, if as a graduate student I had been unaware of undergraduates, I learned as a junior faculty member just how eccentric my earlier experience had been. The institution, and especially the senior members of the English Department, seemed focused almost exclusively on the undergraduates. It would be several years before I even taught my first graduate student. For that matter, I did very little lecturing. My job was to be a good preceptor and a committed supervisor of junior and senior independent students. This seemed to be the heart of Princeton’s educational experience, and it involved mastering the local lingo (words like “cept” and “advisee,” and a strange grading system based in numerals rather than majuscule letters). We called the students “gentlemen,” occasionally without irony.

There is a salutary lesson to be found in the fact that the Princeton I experienced in 1965 was entirely different from the one I had experienced in 1961. What we see as “change” in a beloved institution is quite likely, actually, to be change in ourselves, or a marked shift in perspective or vantage point. Alumni returning to Reunions are likely to note first of all physical change, and on our campus that has been abundant and dramatic. It may or may not say anything at all about the soul of the place, but it is certainly disorienting. Some years ago I purchased on eBay an old brochure of photogravures of the Princeton campus. It is undated, but probably comes from the second decade of the last century. Familiar McCosh and 1879 Halls stand handsome but also solitary in large, empty spaces. Newly constructed Palmer Stadium looks like a Roman amphitheatre set down in a potato field. Most of the clubhouses are immediately recognizable, but why does Cloister Inn look like a shorefront boarding house, and what are these buildings called “Arch Club” and “Gateway?”

The conservative spirit of Princeton manifests itself in the preference for moving rather than demolishing buildings whenever possible. Several private houses were moved from William Street to a back alley of Nassau Street. The very large brick building (Corwin Hall) that was on the corner of Prospect and Washington streets in the 1960s was moved about 75 yards northeast to make way for the pre-stressed columns of Yamasaki’s Woodrow Wilson School. The substantial mansion that was the domestic residence of the Dean of the Chapel, off Ivy and Roper Lanes, is now tucked away behind the row of houses on the west side of FitzRandolph. I must report, sadly, that the beautiful “double” ornamental cherries at the original site succumbed to one of the many asphalt parking lots that now seem to be everywhere. A more recent rampage of arboreal vandalism was the felling of the fabulous magnolias along the north side of the Woodrow Wilson School plaza. Still, the campus, though considerably more crowded than it was in 1965, and almost perpetually marred by one or more major building or renovation projects, remains one of the most beautiful in America.

Institutions of higher education are in fact never unchanging. They are either getting better or getting worse. Stasis is merely a peculiar form of getting worse. I think that in most ways that matter, Princeton is a finer institution in 2015 than it was in your day. By the phrase “ways that matter,” I mean to suggest a kind

of essentialism, a “Princeton-ness,” a central ethos or vision; but as we all know, few things are harder to see than vision.

I have served under four presidents, each one a person of remarkable ability, yet no two very much alike in terms of style or even temperament. From my retirement I have observed with pleasure, like so many other Princetonians, the auspicious beginning of the tenure of a fifth. I arrived midway through the presidency of Robert Goheen ’40. I never knew or even met his predecessor, Harold Dodds (M.A. 1914), but I conclude that his long tenancy through the turbulent quarter century that included the Depression and the Second World War really ushered in the age of Princeton the University, as opposed to Princeton the College. Despite the slowly growing importance of graduate education, the Princeton he inherited was still in many ways that of Scott Fitzgerald. But two major postwar investments overseen by President Dodds—Firestone Library (late ‘40s) and the Forrestal Campus (early ‘50s)—symbolized the institution’s permanent commitment to important research in the humanities and social sciences and, especially, its ambiguous and entangling alliance with Big Money Science and Technology.

**I**N MY opinion there are three great landscapes of evolution or change that really define the differences between the Princetons of 1965 and 2015. Bob Goheen was the architect of two of them: the conscious attempt to make Princeton’s elite education available to the broadest possible spectrum of qualified aspirants, and the conscious effort to exploit the educational potential of Princeton as a residential campus. While it would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of what is still oddly called “coeducation,” the admission of women to the undergraduate body was only the most dramatic feature of a principled effort to broaden the sociological base of the student body. One of the most enduring and unjust stereotypes of the Princeton alumnus, that of the moneyed, Eastern blueblood, has never been true to my own experience; but what the Administration annoyingly continues to insist on calling “diversity” was in truth not particularly thick on the greensward of McCosh Quadrangle back in 1960.

The preparations for the admission of women were conducted with a cautiousness and deference to alumni dissent that in retrospect strike me as over-elaborate. Absolutely everybody I knew on the faculty was in favor of what seemed less like an innovation than the tardy redress of an anachronism. The students were vociferous in their enthusiasm, despite the fact that it meant that overnight it became twice as difficult to gain admission as before. The evolutionary drama of coeducation had a muted rerun in a few of the clubs over the next couple of decades, but it now seems impossible for even the oldest of old-timers to credit an all-male Princeton. President Goheen was also responsible for initiating a vigorous outreach to potential students from minority groups. The long-term effects of these policies, which of course have continued under all Goheen’s successors, have greatly strengthened the intellectual fabric of campus life.

A second important Goheen initiative, actually anterior to coeducation, was the creation of Wilson College as, in effect, a club for people who didn’t want to belong to clubs. For years there had been bickering about Bicker, but here was a concrete step by which the University encouraged the integration of undergraduate social and intellectual life. Having spent terms of service as the Master of Wilson College both in its pioneering four-year incarnation and again later when it became a part of the universal two-year system, I am very well aware that the effort remains, after more than forty years, an uncertain work in progress, but it still betokens a seismic change in the social texture of undergraduate life. Most upperclass students continue to join Prospect Street clubs, and will probably continue to do so into the indefinite future; but the Street scene is far from what it was in 1965. Several clubs have folded, and most are now “open enrollment.” Though I was always a strong advocate of a residential college system, I have also been aware of the continuing positive role that the clubs play for a large number of our students. I have sadly concluded that the “alcohol problem,” which is unfortunately real, is a nearly universal blight of youthful folly rather than the product of our particular social arrangements.

This leads me to my third landscape, that of the Bowen, Shapiro, and Tilghman years. The spirit of

an institution, like your own spirit, inhabits a body. Now all this time that Princeton was evolving socially and intellectually, it was also growing in absolute physical terms. All the new buildings were needed to house new programs, which also required more people to administer and service them. I refer less to the increase in the size of the student body (fairly dramatic) or the faculty (really dramatic) than to administration and staff. I probably don't need to tell you that this cost a very great deal of money, because you have been hearing it for years from the class agents. A graph of the rising University budget reminds one of Cape Canaveral. When Bill Bowen became president in 1972, it was about \$80 million. When I wrote an essay a decade ago, the figure was \$900 million. Now the figure is 1.64 *billion*. This is very big business by any standard, and it is hardly surprising that Princeton is far and away the largest employer in Mercer County.

The essential difference between the Princeton you entered as freshmen and the one in which you will be cavorting as reunioneers is manifest in that graph, which implies also a hundred smaller differences. To explain the vast ramifications of this big change is beyond my abilities, certainly beyond your patience, but I note a few salient phenomena. The first I shall mention concerns the Graduate School and graduate education generally. I am a Princeton *graduate* alumnus, and they record graduate alumni the way they record baseball statistics that don't really count, with an asterisk (I am \*63). In 1965 the only time I ever heard an undergraduate refer to the Graduate College, it was as "Goon Castle." There has been a huge growth in the ambitions of graduate education, especially in science and engineering, and therefore increased and increasingly complex involvement with "sponsored research," often a.k.a. the U.S. Government. Since the Graduate College centenary celebrations in 2000, the Association of Princeton Graduate Alumni has become a serious part of the alumni body. We now muster a pretty big crew for the P-rade.

**B**UT THE rising profile of graduate education is not without its cultural implications. Competition for the best professors and research staff is intense, and many of the sought-after stars have but limited interest in undergraduate education. Throughout the humanities and most of the social sciences, the only way to finance graduate education, the way used everywhere else, is by getting graduate students to pay for their education by teaching the undergraduate students. When I was in graduate school here, graduate students did no teaching at all. Now it is not uncommon for a Princeton freshman to study for a year with only graduate student preceptors, seminar leaders, or lab instructors. In some departments graduate students direct upperclass independent work. Our graduate students are apprentice professors, after all, and many are excellent teachers. But this is far from the "old Princeton." It is probably an irreversible trend, part of the increasing "professionalism" that is reflected by an administrative structure that much more closely resembles that of a business corporation than it did even 20 years ago. The handwriting on the wall is the title "Vice-President." We now have quite a few of them, all of them excellent at what they do, but all of them also part of an increasingly corporate and bureaucratic ethos.

The university may still be an ivory tower, but it is a government-sponsored ivory tower. We are much closer to American society than we sometimes seem. Hence, another major change or development is the increasingly secular spirit of the place. Princeton transcended any narrowly sectarian commitments long ago. What it is doing now is distancing itself, insofar as is possible, from its Christian foundations. I say "as possible" because the whole idea of liberal education in this country has been inextricably connected to the traditions of Christian humanism. In historical terms this is a change that has come across Princeton, as across America generally, with striking speed. The date on the cornerstone of the Chapel is only 1929.

Is Princeton still "the best old place of all?" Absolutely! We don't actually *need* the magazine rankings to make the claim, but it's nice to have them. As I myself look back in reflective retirement at my long and exhilarating career here, I continue to marvel at the wonders of the place: its physical beauty, its carefully tended opulence, its administrative competence, its brilliant community of scholars, faculty and students alike, and, I should add, its uniquely cohesive, generous, and active alumni body. The place is not faultless—one of its chief faults being the occasional temptation to think it is. I consider myself not merely lucky

but actually blessed in a religious sense to have been able to spend four decades on the Princeton faculty. What a privilege it has been to be ever surrounded by fresh, vigorous, imaginative, and enthusiastic young people—each class of them so different, each class of them so much the same.

In attempting to explain the nature of historical institutions to my students, I often fall back on the hoary legend of “My Grandfather’s Old Axe.” When my great-granddaddy came to Arkansas from Kentucky the family was so poor that about the only possession he brought with him was his old timber axe. Out of familial piety we kept and used that tool over more than a century. During that time it had six new handles and two new heads—but it is still “My Grandfather’s Old Axe.” When we talk about venerable institutions and cherished ideas—such as the “Church,” the “Western Tradition,” “Democracy,” the “Feminist Consciousness,” the “English Language,” and so forth—we are talking about things that both are and are not what they once were. An axe certainly needs a cutting edge, but it’s not really sensible to be on it.

We now have a universal residential college system in which all undergraduates spend the first two years in one of the six colleges (Butler, Forbes, Matthey, Rockefeller, Wilson, and Whitman). There is a possibility to spend the upperclass years there as well, though it is not a widely exercised option. The implementation of the collegiate system brought a carefully considered and much discussed increase of 500 in the undergraduate body. The class of 2018 had a target goal of about 1300. I think it is nearly inevitable that the undergraduate body of about 6000 will before too long become “normative.” It is probably only old-timers like myself who realize how far even the current numbers have already taken us from the “old Princeton.”

**A**MERICA’S population continues to grow steadily, and although in general terms the scene in our public schools ranges from the lackluster to the pathological, there are enough “high end” exceptions to guarantee continuing pressure on the admissions offices of elite institutions as far as I can see into the future. Each year brings increasing thousands of able and worthy young people who could and would make the most of a Princeton education but who would never even dream of applying. From those who do apply I suspect that we could double, perhaps triple, the annual intake without marking a really noticeable decline in general intellectual standards.

What is more immediately visible than the expansion of the student body is the expansion of the material plant. It is hard for me to remember a time when some large building was not underway, and difficult, too, to keep their proposed functions clearly in mind. Most of the recent building has to do with Science and Technology, and most of it is magnificent. But there is not much room left “on campus,” as I can attest by anecdote. I enjoy gathering and consuming wild mushrooms. The campus was once my happy hunting grounds. Nowadays I’m lucky to find a bowl of *campestris* on the athletic training fields beyond the stadium. There is one Rubicon yet to be crossed, and it is called Lake Carnegie. I think the erection of academic buildings in the West Windsor fields is now probably inevitable. We have already transferred major book storage and several important administrative functions beyond Route One. I left Madison for Princeton with the pleasant thought that I might never again have to take a bus from one teaching venue to the next. I am not sure that future Princeton faculty will enjoy that luxury.

But remember that we shall continue to derive strength from decisions made long ago, not always with clear-sighted motives at the time of their making, *not* to do certain things, and in particular *not* to pursue professional schools of law, medicine, or business. Whether money makers or money losers, mighty professional schools always have a huge impact on the spiritual ecology of their institutions. It may be that a kind of crypto-business major will emerge. It is not surprising, especially in the last decade of economic malaise in our land, that there is a heightened sense of vocational anxiety among Princeton seniors, or that certain internal bodies—particularly the Economics Department, the Woodrow Wilson, School and the Engineering School—should have tried to address it.

Some years ago I articulated Fleming’s Iron Law of Golden Ages. This holds that the Golden Age of any institution was, roughly, ten years before you got there. When I first arrived here the constant conversa-

tional theme among my senior colleagues was the superiority in all realms of human thought and endeavor of the Good Old Days. I thought that was pretty pathetic until I noticed, about twenty years later, that it had become, without my quite ever having realized it, one of my own favorite themes. Hence, you are permitted to flavor my words with a grain of salt, maybe even two grains. You know the one about how many Princetonians it takes to change a light bulb.

**T**HE FUTURE has large debts to the past, but it cannot be owned by the past. For Princeton the challenge will be, as it has been at many earlier hours of decision, to be true to the essence of the place while setting out on paths not yet explored. The beginning of Chris Eisgruber '83's presidency coincides with a growing uneasiness in American higher education generally. I won't call it a crisis, and it may never become one. In any event, it has not yet had the time to mature. It is not hard to see an emergent "consumerist" mentality in the public's approach to colleges and universities. There is great national concern about the costs of a college education, its actual concrete vocational value, and even its efficiency as an engine of desirable social change. We are far from knowing where for-profit colleges, "distance learning," and a whole catalogue of "cyber-possibilities" might possibly lead. Princeton, like its nearest peers, is shielded by wealth and prestige from the more obvious discomforts of the moment. But even the head of the pack is part of a pack.

One particular phenomenon mentioned earlier perhaps deserves special note, for it will present a continuing challenge to the "old Princeton." We have long since unequivocally opted for what I call "Big Science." And by that phrase I hope to identify an empirical reality, not expose a humanist's jealousy. We all know that our great national educational deficit, one that presents an actual danger to our economic and political power, is in the STEM fields—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. We need STEM excellence in our K-12 schooling; and to have excellence there, we must have it also in our research universities. Princeton has always been a world leader in such fields as Mathematics and Physics. The worst slur I have ever heard leveled against our Engineering School is that it is a "boutique"—the kind of insult that a Howard Johnson might level against the Gramercy Park Hotel. But the buy-in to the "new" biological sciences, which began with Bill Bowen, has taken things to a new level. Today, more than ever, Big Science means Big Money, and Big Money means Uncle Sam. I cannot say that all aspects of the situation make my heart leap up. I began my career at a great state university. At Princeton I had many dealings with the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency. In the fifth century Martianus Capella wrote a book about liberal education oddly entitled "The Marriage of Mercury and Philology." Mercury and Philology were made for each other. A marriage of Academia and Bureaucracy may prove a good deal rockier.

Live richly in the present; plan boldly for the future. But don't forget to honor the past. Since I live in Princeton, it is an easy thing for me most years to attend Alumni Day, which always falls near the beginning of the second semester and often enough amid snow and ice. Conditions this year were pretty severe, and it was with wintry thoughts that I made my way from the celebrative luncheon in cavernous Jadwin Gymnasium to the Gothic grandeur of the cavernous chapel for the very moving "Service of Remembrance" that, for me, perfectly captures the unbreakable bond between Princeton and its alumni. The University memorializes its members who have died in the preceding year in the following dramatic way. Nearly a hundred soberly dressed people, men and women of varying hue and age, each wearing or carrying a white carnation, representatives of the undergraduate classes, the Graduate School, the faculty and staff, form a solemn procession. Moving in two columns down the long central aisle of the nave, the procession splits at the chancel steps. Its members then mount the steps and affix their carnations to a large board, which gradually swells with its whiteness. The view from the congregation is rather like that of a time-manipulated photograph of the opening of a rose. Another analogy, more recondite but perhaps almost more apt, occurs: the celestial rose of the thirtieth canto of Dante's *Paradiso*. Or maybe just this side of Paradise.