

An Administrative Life

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Hanna Holborn Gray, *An Academic Life: A Memoir*. Princeton University Press, 352pp., \$30 cloth

Although I found Hanna Holborn Gray's *An Academic Life: A Memoir* frustrating to read, the book is generally well written, and her career is an instructive one. She was born in 1930 to a father who was a professor of German history at Heidelberg and then at Berlin and a mother who held a doctorate in classical philology. In 1933 her father had to leave his chair because it was funded by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which the Nazis distrusted. Especially because his wife was Jewish by race (though Lutheran by religion), he decided to emigrate to America. With the aid of the Carnegie Endowment, he soon became a professor at Yale, which he chose over Harvard and Princeton. His daughter grew up in New Haven and Washington, where he was on leave during the war as a member of the OSS.

Gray entered Bryn Mawr at sixteen, and after graduating in 1950 went to Oxford as a

Fulbright scholar for a year. She then became a graduate student at Radcliffe, where she received her doctorate in Renaissance history in 1957 after marrying a Harvard graduate student in history, Charles Gray. She held appointments as an instructor and assistant professor at Harvard, then moved with her husband to the University of Chicago in 1961. After declining presidencies of some women's colleges, she became dean of the faculty of arts and sciences at Northwestern, provost and then acting president of Yale, and president of the University of Chicago from 1978 to 1993. Her many honors and board memberships include appointment to the Harvard and Yale corporations, President Reagan's Medal of Liberty, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and more than sixty honorary degrees.

Gray remarks in her preface, "I began my training for the academic profession at a time now wistfully (and somewhat mistakenly) called a golden age, and retired in what may eventually be deemed an age of bronze." Though this sentence suggests that her book will analyze the changes in universities between 1950 and 1993, it never

even explains whether she thinks universities really did decline during this period. The first passage I found disturbing in the book was Gray's quoting her mother, "shortly before her death and failing in memory," expressing disappointment that her daughter was President of the University of Chicago because "I thought you had a talent for Wissenschaft!" Gray seems to take this remark merely as evidence of her mother's dementia. She also seems to patronize her father-in-law, a professor at the University of Illinois, because he "generally took the view—prevalent of course in the academic world...—that administrators were failed academics unable to make it in the world that mattered," that of scholarship.

She observes of the emigrant European scholars among whom she grew up, "[A]s in the case of most scholars, however distinguished their work, their most enduring influence flowed through their role as educators and cultural role models, not only for their students, but also for others with whom they were in contact." Yet I doubt that these emigrants would themselves have been so dismissive of their many books and articles, which influenced a wide readership that never met their authors. In describing her graduate study, Gray says nothing about her dissertation, which is usually an important part of graduate work. Wondering about this, I consulted the reasonably comprehensive WorldCat.org. It shows that her dissertation was on Giovanni Pontano but never records it as published (usually a bad sign) and includes a single scholarly article by Gray before she received tenure at Chicago in 1964 (not having yet held an administrative post). In fact, WorldCat lists only one scholarly book by Gray, *Three Essays*, published in 1978 by the University of Chicago Press, 73 pages long, reprinting her lone article and two later contributions to

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Festschriften. This is quite a meager scholarly record for someone who received the rank of full professor of history at Chicago, Northwestern, and Yale, even during the boom in the academic job market of the sixties.

Gray writes, "It was [at Oxford] (and afterward at Harvard) that I first really experienced what discrimination toward women in academic life could mean." At both places, however, she mentions meeting many celebrated scholars—she is an enthusiastic name-dropper—who apparently treated her well. One reason for this seeming paradox may be that some of these scholars had such low expectations of female students that they were easily impressed when they found one as urbane and articulate as Gray. She seems to have been less impressed by her fellow students, including Henry Kissinger at Harvard, whom she gained "a minor reputation" for mimicking.

As she observes, "Concern over the relatively low count of women faculty" became increasingly common in the sixties. She says she was so surprised and grateful to be offered an assistant professorship along with her husband at Chicago that "I was ready to do anything I was ever asked," like "taking on innumerable committee assignments" and chairing a "College History Group" created for her.

She gained prominence as chair of a committee appointed, in response to student protests, to investigate the failure of a feminist faculty member to be reappointed. The committee's finding that the woman had been fairly treated seems to have been justified, and must have gratified the administration. Gray writes, "I liked chairing meetings" and performing other administrative duties. She became a member of the Yale Corporation in 1970, only a year after Yale began admitting women as undergraduates. Two years later she was dean of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern; two years after that she was provost of Yale; three years after that she was acting president of Yale; and a year later she was president of the University of Chicago. Two or three years are apparently ample time for an administrator to be judged successful.

Gray's chapter on her presidency at Chicago is rather short—about an eighth of the book—and somewhat evasive. One of her first duties was to decide whether to give tenure to Allan Bloom, future author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, after a tied committee vote on promoting him. He received tenure—apparently with her assent—though she depicts him as a crank who ranted about "the collapse of Western civilization." She mentions the problem of whether to admit fewer graduate students "in the face of a collapsing academic [job] market" without saying what her decision was (but see below). She speaks impatiently of a dean whose "view of the dean's role was confined exclusively to his main goal of recruiting the most promising scholars one could find and evaluating candidates for appointment, renewal, and tenure with the utmost rigor. Nothing else mattered; he was simply uninterested in the other aspects of decanal administration." She never identifies these other aspects, except to say that he rejected "subjects that in his opinion failed to meet his requirements of a

scientific grounding and precision of method," which appear to have included the "cultural, multicultural, ethnic, and women's studies" she mentions on the next page. Her summation of her educational philosophy is vapid: "The most important task—and this is surely the central task of all academic leadership—was to identify and to keep reviewing an appropriate balance between the university's traditions and committed values on the one hand, the challenges and opportunities of change on the other."

To determine what Gray actually did as president at Chicago, I turned to the chapter on her in Arthur Padilla's *Portraits in Leadership: Six Extraordinary University Presidents* (Westport, 2005). Padilla's panegyric has much to do with Gray's being a woman, though he mentions that she was in fact not the first but the second female president of a major university (after Lorene Rogers of the University of Texas). He takes for granted that Gray is a highly distinguished scholar. Among her main achievements he lists vigorous fund-raising, increasing Chicago's endowment from \$250 million to \$1.3 billion, erecting many new buildings, and reducing administrative expenses from about 40% to 25% of the budget. This last accomplishment was both laudable and unusual (though such percentages can be misleading). Fundraising, endowments, and building are much more conventional administrative concerns that can easily become counterproductive if pursued as ends in themselves, but can also be useful and even necessary. Among Gray's more dubious achievements were increasing the number of graduate students from about 2000 to over 3100 despite the job crisis, and shortening their course of study despite their desperate need for time to build up their résumés. Gray also admitted more undergraduates, reduced the size of the faculty, and increased the faculty's teaching

load, a combination likely to harm both teaching and research. While Chicago's renowned program of general education survived her presidency, it was seriously diluted just four years afterward.

Although I have never met Gray, or studied or taught at the University of Chicago, I believe she was actually among the best of a very bad lot of university administrators who have allowed and abetted the decline of American universities since the sixties. As for defending academic freedom and academic quality against leftist attacks, Chicago also has one of the very best records, though still an ambivalent one. Gray says many of the right things, especially in her conclusion. She endorses an admirable statement by a Chicago faculty committee in 1967 that a university must "encourage the widest diversity of views" and cannot "insist that all of its members favor a given view of social policy" because this would mean "censuring any minority who do not agree on the view adopted." Yet in the next paragraph she prevaricates about academic freedom just as most contemporary administrators do: "There are and can be no precise rules to invoke; there can only be a set of principles and precedents subject to differences of opinion and judgement to guide their application to individual cases as they arise."

It was Gray's generation of administrators and faculty who allowed an academic golden age to decline into bronze. When the academic job market contracted around 1970, they could have adopted much higher standards for admitting graduate students and hiring professors (as the dean at Chicago who annoyed Gray evidently wanted to do). Instead they admitted far more graduate students than the market could bear, and hired a few minority professors, more women, and even more white males who insisted that high

academic standards and dissenting opinions were an obstacle to social justice and to a postmodern understanding of the oppressiveness of American society. While many of the finest graduate students and recent doctorates were leaving academics in disgust or despair in the seventies and eighties, I never once heard a member of Gray's generation express distress at this loss to the profession; instead they talked about the need to hire more women and minorities and to foster "innovative" work "on the cutting edge" (that is, hackneyed reiterations of postmodernism). Some professors and deans who had reached top positions with unimpressive accomplishments took evident pleasure in rejecting their most accomplished applicants, whom they pronounced "overqualified" or "too traditional."

Having grown up among major scholars, Gray occasionally sees and acknowledges that something has gone terribly wrong. For example, "It seemed as if an entire generation of leadership had gone missing, as if the profession of the humanities had failed to develop scholars who cared for the work of tending to its health and welfare." Also: "It is disturbing to see so much disregard for freedom of expression on campuses (not only in the United States) and dismaying to observe the extent to which its meaning is not only misunderstood but even distorted to justify disruptive behavior or defend rules outlawing speech deemed offensive." Gray seems not quite to understand how all this happened. But if you hire professors and administrators who care only about their ideas of social justice, they will be indifferent to the humanities and hostile to dissent. And if you choose academic administrators who like chairing meetings, raising money, and building buildings more than they like scholarship, you will get the universities we have today. A