

Princeton Retrospectives - *Twenty-Fifth-Year Reflections on a College Education*
By Roy Heath

Chapter Six of this book, prepared in recognition of the 25th Reunion of the Class of 1954, is entitled “The Impact of the Senior Thesis”. Presented below are selected reflections about their theses from interviews Dr. Heath conducted with the 36 participants in The Class of 1954 Advisee Project. The aim of the project was to identify how a liberal arts education produces its benefits. The Project led to Heath’s publication of *The Reasonable Adventurer*.

Jim Braham: “ The thesis was growth-promoting, maturing. For a lot of people. For me it was a real chore. It was hard, hard work....I really learned from it how to get organized, how to apply myself. I couldn’t wait to get it done but looking back on it, it was “the” experience. I bet I have one of the most standard recurring dreams. I wake up in the middle of the night and say, 'Hey, this is the day my thesis is due and I have forgotten even to start.' You wake up in cold sweat. Maybe I have had that dream a dozen times in my life. It would be interesting to see how many other guys have had the same dream.”

Eddie Stimpson :”I wrote a thesis on Virginia Woolf. ...So my work on Virginia Woolf became a matter of personal philosophy that I have followed from that day. I said this is the way to live, this is my guideline, this what I am up to.”

Sandy Weiss “Another experience was really key to my entire education at Princeton. I literally recall sitting in a precept, I remember the office, and I remember the gentleman as he spoke, saying there were several topics in his field that he wished someone would do some research on. One of the topics was fingernail biting. At first I thought it was some kind of joke, but it became my major interest for two years. I spent two whole years on that one subject, that was a neat experience.”

Charlie Terry: ”The other end of my Princeton experience — the senior year. My senior thesis is the best scholarly work I have done. I will be immodest — it was excellent. I knew it was good when I turned it in. Paul Ramsey, when he finished reading the thesis, commented to Jim Hurlock that while he didn't know Terry, he did know that the writing of that thesis was a religious experience. And that was true.”

Tommy Powell “In my own case, at least, I would point out that the thesis was an enormously important means of making a credulous person more aware of the limitations of knowledge and of the limitations of one's ability. I profited greatly from Princeton in an intellectual way, and mostly from that last year with the thesis.”

Hap Fuller: "Of course the senior thesis was a major challenge and satisfaction, a test of self-discipline and perseverance to do something of that magnitude. The discipline required was good for me. To this day I am pleased with my thesis. So from an academic and disciplinary viewpoint the thesis was important. From the viewpoint of satisfaction it was tremendously important.

Recent Reflections:

John Vanderzee (11/12/2019): “I recently dug out my senior thesis, ‘The Automatic Factory’ and re-read parts of it. My immediate reaction was how much technology has advanced in the last 65 years. My thesis on automation really covered the very birth of automatic control of manufacturing processes using analog computers and the early use of primitive digital computers.

“Thirty years later, in the mid-80's, someone showed up at my office at Ford Motor Company with a "desktop computer". I had no idea what to do with it! A few years later, my "portable telephone" arrived - - - about the size of a carton of cigarettes!

“Now another 30+ years have passed and we have I-Phone 11, the advent of 5G communication and Artificial Intelligence, almost all in the 65 years since Princeton graduation. It has been a fascinating period to live through....It has been quite a journey since the ‘Automatic Factory’ of 1954.”

Bill Gatley – (December, 2019) “I got a late start on my senior thesis, and spent most of Christmas vacation on the Campus. The experience from developing an outline, researching the literature, and forming conclusion has been invaluable. During graduation, I received an award (given by his parents in memory of a Princetonian who had died in WWII, for the best thesis in Economics. I am still proud of that.”

Richard Steinmetz – (March, 2020) I was a geology major at Princeton. My 115-page thesis was based on field work I did in north-central Wyoming on the flank of the Bighorn Mountains. The intense six weeks of outdoor work gave me an appreciation for larger geologic problems. I utilized aerial photos, did sketching,

drafting, map-making and observation. Stop, look again, think, write, condense, re-think, re-write, and so forth.

During my life long geologic career with Amoco I did the same as above: define the problem, clearly and succinctly report my solutions, lead field parties, teach seminars and courses, as well as contribute to Amoco's global successes. Excelsior!

Joe Johnson: (Oct. 17, 2019) “My thesis in 1954 for the Department of History was “Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.” In it I emphasized some of the prominent themes of Gibbon’s work, including his description of the empire at its peak in the second century A.D. when it “comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind,” his controversial and critical treatment of Christianity and his detailed and lucid description of the empire’s decline. The thesis also emphasized the influence of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and in particular the rationalism of the French *philosophes*, on Gibbon’s philosophy of history. There was no single cause of Rome’s decline; many interrelated natural and human conditions combined to bring about the empire’s demise. The empire was over-extended; the Roman government became authoritarian, bureaucratic and corrupt; and the economy was unable to support the vast armies needed to defend an empire stretching from Britain to the Euphrates from hordes of barbarian migrants. There are many lessons to be learned from this story.

“As a result of my research on the thesis, I developed a lifelong interest in the decline of empires and nations. Over the years, I read works by Hegel, Spengler, Toynbee, Ibn Khaldun and more recent historians including Paul Kennedy, Pierre Chaunu, Romano Guardini and others. From Gibbon and other great historians I learned that historical causation is not a simple process but is quite complex, and it is not deterministic.

“After I retired from the practice of law, having some time on my hands, I decided to write a book, called *The Decline of Nations*, which will be published some time next year by Republic Book Publishers. It was a long road but it is fair to say that it began with my senior thesis at Princeton. Of course, I should also give credit to the great teachers in the history department in those years, including E.H. Harbison, R.R. Palmer, Gordon Craig and many others. All of this amounted to an invaluable experience.

I am afraid that the teaching of history is not what it used to be. We must continue to study the past which, as Faulkner said, is not really past at all.”