

REVIEW

ADVANCED ACADEMIC GOSSIP

Steve Batterson, *Pursuit of Genius: Flexner, Einstein, and the Early Faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study*. Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters, Ltd, 2006. Pp. 301 + ix. US\$39.50 HB

By Naomi Pasachoff

When I learned about the publication of Batterson's history of the early years of the Institute for Advanced Study, I knew I must read it. My family was privileged to be part of the Institute's heady research community during the academic year 1989–1990. John Bahcall, then Richard Black Professor of Natural Science and head of the astrophysics research group at the Institute's School of Natural Sciences, had invited my husband as a temporary member. Shortly after we left Princeton, I was asked to prepare an article about the Institute for the section on Institutions in the *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook of Science and the Future*. My article appeared under the title 'Science's 'Intellectual Hotel': The Institute for Advanced Study', in the 1992 *Yearbook* (pp. 472–488).

My interest in the Institute's history did not end with that assignment. In 2005, I was asked by World Book to help launch a new series of 'Biographical Connections' by writing a short biography of Albert Einstein, one of the first professors at the Institute, flanked by profiles of Isaac Newton and of J. Robert Oppenheimer – who became the third Institute director in 1947. That book appeared in 2007. Beyond my continued scholarly interest in the Institute, our family remained friendly with colleagues and administrators there. We attended the 75th Anniversary celebration of the School of Natural Sciences in the autumn of 2005, which included a remembrance of John Bahcall, who had died suddenly a few months earlier. We continue to receive and read *The Institute Letter*, an official publication that appears several times a year.

As a result of my work and our social ties, I thought I knew a lot about the Institute in general; about Abraham Flexner, its first director; about the Institute's sibling founders and benefactors, Louis Bamberger and Carrie Fuld, heirs to the Bamberger department store fortune; and about the vexed decision of Einstein joining the Institute faculty. As soon as I started reading Batterson's informative book, however, I knew his research in the Institute archives, at the Library of Congress, and elsewhere, had taken him much further than mine had.

The book's main focus is on the oldest of the Institute's four schools, the School of Mathematics. Batterson, a professor of mathematics at Emory University in Atlanta, went as a newly minted PhD to the School of Mathematics at the Institute in 1980. The author of *Stephen Smale: The Mathematician Who Broke the Dimension Barrier* (American Mathematical Society, 2000) – about another former Institute member who went on to win the Fields Medal in 1966 (often called the Nobel Prize for mathematicians) – Batterson had the cooperation of the Institute staff while he did the research for this book, though the outcome, he informs us, “should neither be construed as authorized or unauthorized” (p. 265).

Thus many of the facts in this book were both new and fascinating to me, but I will mention only a few. Reading encyclopedia entries on Flexner, one learns only of the significant role he played in introducing, as *The Britannica* (15th edition) puts it, “modern medical and science education to American colleges and universities”. From Batterson, however, we learn of the insecurities that plagued this towering figure in American education because, even as he shaped the 20th-century American scholarly landscape, he was no scholar himself. As he wrote to Frank Aydelotte, his successor as Institute director, after Flexner himself was forced out of the directorship in summer 1939, “you had one great advantage over me – you are in your own right a scholar... I, alas, have never been a scholar, for two years at the Johns Hopkins between 1884 and 1886 do not produce scholarship, though they do produce and did produce a reverence for it” (p. 241). One also learns the charming fact that Flexner's wife, Anne Crawford Flexner, was a successful playwright, whose *Mrs Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* made enough money in its two Broadway productions to enable unscholarly Abe to “resume his education at Harvard and abroad” (p. 13).

Clearly, one of Flexner's proudest achievements was bagging Einstein – "the most coveted intellectual appointment in the world" (p. 88) – for the fledgling Institute. What this book makes clear, however, is that Flexner wanted the Institute to be primarily an American institution. In putting together the roster of Institute professors, Flexner worked extremely hard to balance refugees from Europe with American citizens. The failure of Flexner's lengthy attempt to lure George D. Birkhoff – generally described as the greatest American mathematician of the early 20th century – from Harvard to the School of Mathematics struck him "a devastating blow" (p. 101).

The first American whom Flexner did succeed in attracting to the School of Mathematics was the topologist Oswald Veblen, nephew of economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (a title that has led many a wag to classify research gigs at the Institute and other academic perks as 'the leisure of the theory class'). It turns out that it was actually Veblen, not Flexner, who initiated the visitor program that now brings postdoctoral scholars at various stages of their career for short-term stays at the Institute. Flexner's original vision for the Institute was to bring promising young people to the Institute to work with professors toward their PhDs. According to Batterson: "Since their verbal and written offers and acceptances had occurred within days of each other, it is fitting to regard Einstein and Veblen as having equal seniority as the original members of the faculty" (p. 116) – though according to *The Institute Letter of Winter 2007* – "Oswald Veblen...became the Institute's first Professor in 1932" (p. 7).

Much of Batterson's book is devoted to Flexner's problems in bringing mathematician Hermann Weyl from Germany to the Institute, about which I knew nothing, and which I found both interesting and extremely sad. Knowing more about the Einstein appointment, I feel Batterson's coverage of Einstein's acceptance of the professorial appointment at the Institute and his difficulty in adjusting to his new surroundings omits some important background (not to mention Einstein's deliciously dismissive description, in a letter to his friend Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, of his new hometown and its inhabitants: 'A quaint ceremonious village of puny demigods on stilts'). Nonetheless, I was astonished to learn that in August 1939, shortly after Einstein agreed to sign Leo

Szilard's letter warning President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the prospect that the Nazis might be first to produce an atomic weapon, Einstein threw himself into what Batterson describes as the faculty's coup to oust Flexner from his administrative post. Who knew that the battle for saving the world from the fascist dictator Hitler and the battle for saving the Institute from its own dictatorial leader went hand in hand?

Aside from my quibbles about Batterson's Einstein coverage, I found a few other shortcomings with his book. Despite his access to so much archival material, Batterson engages in quite a lot of conjecture, such as: "By June 1931, Flexner must have received some indication that Princeton was receptive to hosting the Institute under his terms" (p. 70). He credits "Professor Morgan" (p. 88) at Caltech with bringing about the first meeting between Flexner and Einstein but fails to identify him as the soon-to-be (1933) Nobel Laureate in Physiology or Medicine, Thomas Hunt Morgan, whose work with fruit flies helped advance the science of genetics. Batterson's writing is occasionally inelegant to the point of obscurity, leading to remarks like "The prospects for solving the depression problem remained hung up on finding the right personnel, and even then success, if ever realized, would be deferred through years of work" (p. 88). While I was willing to chalk up "breach of faith" (p. 195) to a typo, the subsequent "breach of academic protocol" (p. 212) indicates editorial sloppiness at the very least, as does the grammatical error in "each devoted to their own project" (2003). Occasionally I also found the level of technical jargon too complex for non-mathematician readers, as in this passage:

Algebraic topology is an interdisciplinary field with algebraic tools being employed to identify topological differences. Poincaré's approach was to take a topological object, now known as a manifold, and decompose it into more basic pieces, called a cellular decomposition. The algebraic features were the Betti numbers and torsion coefficients obtained from the decomposition. For the program to make sense, it was vital that employing different decompositions of the same manifold would result in the same Betti numbers and torsion coefficients (pp. 128–129).

Despite these reservations, I can recommend Batterson's book to anyone more interested in the schemes involved in setting up an institution capable of nurturing minds like Einstein's and Weyl's

than in trivia about Britney Spears and Anna Nicole Smith. If you like academic gossip, you need search no farther.

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