

by Samuel Middlebrook

A Foreigner Looks at the Free Academy

What was CCNY like a century ago? While abroad, an associate dean uncovers a little known report by an English traveler on the College's early days

LONDON.

HOW DID THE "Free Academy" of New York City look to a transatlantic expert on education just a century ago? The answer can be found scattered through several hundred pages of a report presented to a Parliamentary committee by a genial clergyman (later to become a celebrated bishop), the Reverend James Fraser. His report is now on file in the State Paper Room of the British Museum.

Sent by a reform-minded commission to inspect the common school system of this country and Canada, Fraser left Liverpool by steamer just about the time Lincoln was shot. Learning of this tragedy from the pilot at Sandy Hook, he feared for a moment that landing in New York would expose him to the violence of a maddened

populace. Yet he found nothing but calm, especially in the multitudinous public schools of the North, where the effect of the Civil War on education "was not to close the schools, but to transfer them to the management of women instead of men." It was a change that he welcomed. *Vive la différence!*

Lack of space prevents me from following this energetic pilgrim on his tour through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri and New England and quoting his vigorous opinions quarried from the pages of De Toqueville, Horace Mann, Henry Barnard and many other lesser figures as well as from uncounted personal contacts. (Of Fraser later on his foes used to say: "Omnipresence was his forte, and omnipresence was his foible.") Let me pull together his observations on a school that obviously stirred him, the institution soon to be called "The College of the City of New York," then in its seventeenth year of life.

Fraser was impressed enough by the Free Academy to devote quite a few paragraphs to the faculty, the curriculum, the students. He remarked on the

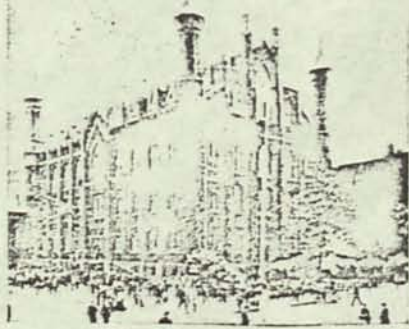
place of the Academy as the cap-stone of public education in New York City. And he ventured a guess or two about its future.

He found the head of the school to be honored above all other educators in one respect: "The highest salary, so far as I am aware, paid to any school functionary in the United States is that paid to the principal of the Free Academy in New York, which is \$4,000, or at present value of the dollar about £ 650 a year." (Civil War inflation had dropped the dollar to \$6.75 to the pound sterling.) By way of comparison he discovered that Harvard's president received only \$3,000 "including the value of his residence."

With gravity that hid a twinkle, he recounted some of the duties of this highest paid school man, Principal Webster, who was also "professor of moral, intellectual, and political philosophy." He was the chief agent of a "somewhat minutiose discipline," with punishments nicely scaled as follows: "Demerit marks; private admonition; admonition by the principal, in the presence of the section and of the instructor in the recitation room; public admonition by the principal in the presence of all the students at roll-call; final admonition by the principal in a meeting of the faculty; and dismissal for misconduct, to be directed by vote of the faculty. A 'book of discipline' is kept in which each punishment is recorded."

Who made up the faculty? They were the Principal himself, whose academic specialties have already been named, and 13 other professors: "of English language and literature; of

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The Free Academy

French language and literature; of German ditto; of Spanish ditto; of the Latin and Greek languages and literature; of history and belles lettres; of pure mathematics; of mixed mathematics; of chemistry and physics; of natural history and physiology; of drawing; an adjunct professor in the department of philosophies; another in the department of mathematics. As many 'tutors' as the number of students may from time to time require. At present [1865] there are 12 at salaries varying from \$1,250 to \$1,750 a year." (Harvard's tutors at this time were paid \$800.)

Interestingly enough, qualifications for becoming a professor were nowhere spelled out, but tutors were home grown within the Academy. "When vacancies occur in the corps of tutors, preference shall be given to the highest two on the merit roll of the Academy, provided they have sufficient qualifications for such appointment."

They all worked hard. Sections averaged 35, with 40 considered normal for recitation purposes, and no class organized with less than 20 students. "The normal school day is five or six hours, either continuous or divided; of which perhaps half the time is spent in recitations and half in study. . . . Each student is to have three recitations or lectures a day, besides drawing and also an exercise in declamation and composition about once a month. The recitations and lectures are to be so arranged in alternation with the hours of study that the professors, while not occupied themselves in instruction, may visit the recitation rooms of the tutors in their respective departments, (which it is their duty to do), to observe the manner in which instruction is given, and to become acquainted with the students, their progress and attainments."

The Principal had "to give at least one lecture or hear one recitation each day; the professor of chemistry, three; and all of the other members of the Faculty . . . and tutors, four." At other times, so as to give the professors and tutors "full employment" they watched the students in the study halls. Each student was marked daily by each of his instructors for his learning and conduct, and "this register [was] to be left with the Principal at the close of each day for his approval and returned to the teacher the following morning."

Rewards as well as punishments were spelled out. "As an appeal to emulation, a merit roll is made up after each half-yearly examination, on which the students are severally classed as 'Highest,' 'High,' 'Good,' 'Low.' Conduct as well as intellectual proficiency is considered in determining the rank."

FRASER CAST a sociologist's eye over the students themselves. In theory this school was the apex of the public system of instruction in New York

City, "a sort of *corps d'élite*." Figures showed him how minute a fraction scaled these heights. In the previous year (1864) 69,516 boys and girls had been taught in the primary and secondary schools of New York City. Yet out of this annual reservoir of approximately 35,000 boys only 648 had flowed into the Free Academy — and the seepage away from the upper grades in that school had always been enormous.

Thus "at the beginning of the year [1865] in February, the senior class consisted of 45 scholars, the junior of 40; the sophomore of 61; the freshman class of 111; the introductory class of 273. Six months later, at the July examination, the numbers in these classes had respectively dwindled to 40, 34, 50, 88, 199. . . . Indeed in no year since the establishment of the Academy has the number of pupils who have completed their course and graduated reached 50."

A table of Harvard and Yale enrollments for this same academic year of 1864-65 may be relevant at this point:

	Harvard	Yale
Seniors	80	98
Juniors	112	105
Sophomores	102	121
Freshmen	91	134
	385	458

Why should the losses recorded above for the Free Academy persist year after year? After talking to the Principal, to others of the Faculty and members of the Board of Education, superintendents, etc., Fraser reports the following:

"The Free Academy is thought by

many to have departed from its original purpose, which, I was informed, was not so much to give a classical education, qualifying for entrance upon the learned professions, as a scientific and practical course of training, fitting for the requirements of every-day life. As a consequence it is not attractive to the mass of boys in the grammar schools. One grammar school master told me that he could have sent 60 candidates for admission — he did send only three. . . .

"So too, perhaps, the fact that 'not more than half' of the children in the primary schools ever enter the doors of the grammar schools may be partly accounted for by those schools not offering to the children the education that their parents consider suitable to their prospects in life. It is all very well in a rhetorical speech for a visitor to tell a mass of boys before him, as I heard them told again and again, that in a free country like theirs it was open to any one of them to become President of the Union; the boys themselves, probably, and their parents have no such ambitious aims swelling in their bosoms. The scale is pitched too high for the lowest class of children, though, of course, an American does not like to admit that there is a 'lowest class.' . . . Grand theories not unfrequently come across stubborn facts, and must submit to be modified by them. Even Mr. Superintendent Randall, admirer as he is of the present system generally and of the Free Academy in particular, doubts whether the . . . grammar schools meet 'the growing demand for practical education adapted especially to the future requirements of life. . . .'"

Working through a mass of facts given to him about the 351 pupils admitted to the "Introductory Class of the Free Academy" (later known as Townsend Harris Hall) in July of 1864, Fraser found the following occupations listed by their parents: "Artists, 2; auctioneers, 2; brokers, 8; bookkeepers, 7; builders or contractors, 11; bankers, 3; brewer, 1; clerks or agents, 28; clergymen, 6; dealers or pedlars, 3; merchants [in America Fraser found that this elastic term might include rag-pickers] or manufacturers, 53; mechanics or artisans, 24; officers in the army, 3; physicians or medical men, 13; professors or teachers, 11; publishers, editors, or authors, 6; police inspectors, 9; storekeepers or tradesmen, 74; shopmen, 3; miscellaneous, 9; occupations not given, many of them apparently widows, 42; independent or retired from business, 8; total, 351."

HE FOUND some aspects of the situation a severe challenge to the equalitarian doctrines so proudly and publicly uttered in America and, more discreetly and privately, ignored. "Even in country districts, 'aristocratic feelings' and prejudices, very foolishly and unhappily, it must be admitted, are beginning to prevail. And in all the cities, New York, New Haven, Hartford, Providence, and even in Boston, the wealthier class, indeed all who can afford to do so, almost without exception send their children to private schools. Of the persons whose acquaintance I made in the country, most of whom I should rate at about the same level of social rank and social feeling as myself, I do not remember one who

used either for sons or daughters the common school."

And in the endowed preparatory academies of New England like Andover, Exeter and Hopkins, readying "students of a superior [social] class for the University," (i.e. Yale or Harvard), Fraser found a set-up he was familiar with at home: "I was struck with the fine appearance and frank manners of the boys; there was an unmistakable tone of the gentleman about them."

The Free Academy was almost unique in his American experience in that it "excluded the idea" of its students "proceeding to a university" by granting degrees itself. Hence its five-year curriculum, its preparatory division, its faculty of "professors" and its other university features.

FRASER ENJOYED himself as the guest of American teachers at every academic level. He was emphatic in his praise: "They certainly have the gift of turning what they know to the best account; they are self-possessed, energetic, fearless; they are admirable disciplinarians, firm without severity; patient without weakness; their manner of teaching is lively and fertile in illustrations: classes are not likely to fall asleep in their hands. They are proud of their position, and fired with a laudable ambition to maintain the credit of their school; a little too anxious, perhaps, to parade its best side and screen its defects; a little too greedy of praise; but still, as I judged them from the examples which I saw, and in spite of the numerous instances to the contrary which I read of but did not see, a very fine and capable body of workers in a noble cause."

What defects did he cite even in the more ambitious schools? An incorrigible loquacity on all occasions. Everybody "speechified." Also a soft-pedaling of Greek and Latin, begun too late and stopped too soon for his tastes as a seasoned classicist. This was a weakness in cultivated Americans generally; it was remarkable "to how small an extent conversation or even literature in America is flavoured with classical thought or coloured by classical allusions." Even our scholars rarely "suffered their intimacy to transpire." And, of course, the rising class consciousness mentioned above.

He also found a fear (which he did not quite share in spite of his clerical profession) of a "dark and uncertain future in America" for the "maintenance of religious truth," specifically Christianity. His own reaction, I think, is illustrated by this closing anecdote of a visit to the Free Academy:

"It was my fortune one day to listen to the recital of a declamation in the New York Free Academy. The subject was 'The Nineteenth Century.' The youthful essayist, after describing in glowing periods and with a good deal of vigour the material triumphs of the era, wound up an able rhetorical exercise by declaring that there remained for the 19th century a greater work even than that which Luther accomplished in the 16th, and that was to sweep away all inherited creeds, to set the conscience free, and to bring the religious thoughts of men into more perfect harmony with the progress of the age. I whispered the question to the worthy Principal at my side, 'Whether this was not rather extravagant? And whether it was prudent to

allow to opinions so unfledged and yet so daring quite so perilous a latitude?' 'Oh,' was the reply, 'that's a young German, and they are mostly somewhat radical; but we generally let them have their fling.'

"When we declaimed at Oxford, our high, rash flights of thought and fancy were apt to be pulled down un-

pitiably by a judicious censor. In America 'vaulting ambition' is allowed to 'o'erleap itself' and find its own cure."

How much has the Free Academy, now the City College of the City University of New York, changed from the spirit of that "young German" of just one hundred years ago?