

Memorial Minute for Prosser Gifford

Prosser Gifford was born on May sixteenth, 1929 in New York City and died in his home in Woods Hole, Massachusetts on July fifth of this year. He was 91. Prosser was, in the true sense of the phrase, a gentleman (quite literally, a gentle man) and a scholar. He compiled an exceptionally distinguished and broad-gauged academic record. At Yale, he wrote a summa cum laude thesis on the poetry of Wallace Stevens; he remained a lover of poetry all his life. In 1953 he earned a B.A. from Merton College, Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, then earned a degree from Harvard Law School in 1956 and a PhD in History, again at Yale, in 1964.

Prosser became an assistant professor of History at Yale, teaching African history and preparing his thesis on the Rhodesias for possible publication. One rainy day in the fall of 1966, a tall man came into his office, his poncho dripping wet, and announced, "I am Cal Plimpton. [He was president of Amherst at the time.] I believe in education and I think you believe in education." They chatted for a short while, after which Cal invited Prosser to come up to Amherst for lunch. So Prosser and his wife Shirley (universally known as Dee Dee) drove up one Sunday, expecting to have lunch with Cal and his wife Ruth. When they walked in, they discovered that six men were joining them – yes, the Committee of Six. Soon after, Prosser was offered the job of Dean of the Amherst College Faculty. He would be the first in Amherst's history.

Life was simpler then. There were only two deans: a dean of admissions, Bill Wilson, and the Dean, Scott Porter, who was, in effect, the dean of the faculty and students. When Porter died early in 1966, Cal decided to split his responsibilities. Prosser was happily situated at Yale; he imagined he would be staying indefinitely. But he accepted the job he had been offered and served, with great distinction, from 1967 to 1979. During those twelve plus years, in the words of a former colleague, he "was able to represent and defend the best traditions of Amherst – i.e., academic freedom and excellence, while simultaneously being open to the ferment of the sixties in areas of feminism, anti-war protest, and race.... He sensitively bridged the traditional college and the new world of the sixties and helped us to navigate successfully through those passionate years." A longtime friend described his "capacity to listen with deep attentiveness, to think with nuance, and to speak with insight and thoughtful generosity."

In the fall of 1969, Cal Plimpton put together a Long Range Planning Committee and under it, task forces that explored many aspects of the college's life, including one on Size and Coeducation. The Committee recommended co-education unequivocally. But it was not until November 1974 – five years after Cal had officially introduced the subject – that the Trustees agreed to move forward. Prosser was definitely in favor of coeducation: the fact he was the proud father of three daughters may have had something to do with it. As he later said in an Amherst Oral History interview, "It's a singular disadvantage to men to bring them up as undergraduates when they never encounter brighter women." Prosser was equally proud of his role in co-educating Amherst's faculty: there was one woman (Rose Olver) teaching here when he was appointed, and 26 when he left. Distinguished additions to the faculty during that time include Buffy Aries, Deborah Gewertz, Susan Niditch, Lisa Raskin, and others who are now emeritus, teaching elsewhere, or deceased.

There remained two other pressing issues of the day: the Vietnam War and race.

Bill Ward's arrest at Westover Air Force Base for civil disobedience in the spring of 1972 (the first spring of his presidency) in response to Nixon's ordering the mining of Haiphong Harbor received national attention---and among a fair number of faculty members and a large number of alumni and trustees, deep dismay. Prosser "sat in" with Ward, as did about 400 students and a sizeable portion of the faculty. At the faculty meeting immediately after Ward's announcement that he was going to get arrested, Prosser read his own letter of protest to Nixon and added that anyone who wanted should sign, which many did. His opposition to the Vietnam War was clearly evident, though he didn't play the leading role.

But he did play it in making sure -- as we now might say -- that Black Lives Mattered. In the spring of 1969 the faculty voted unanimously to establish a Black Studies Department. After Ward became president the following fall, he entrusted Prosser with the responsibilities and authority to accomplish that seemingly all but impossible task. How would you define the department's mission? What courses would be taught? Who would teach them? How could we compete with all the colleges and universities that were looking for Black faculty members?

In the fall Jan Dizard and Gordie Levin offered an Introduction to Black Studies; Prosser participated in some classes. In 1970 a chairman, a PhD from Harvard who had taught in Nigeria for nine years, was hired, as were two other faculty members. Obviously that was not enough, nor were there enough black students being admitted, nor enough black faculty members in other fields, nor enough funding of a Five College tutoring program in Springfield. Black students and their white allies applied pressure. During his twelve years as Dean there were sit-ins, occupations, confrontations, too numerous to cite. All involved meetings, some of them mass meetings in the Chapel or the gym; Prosser presided over several of them.

The last that took place during Ward's presidency, in April, 1979, the most dramatic, the climactic one, was called because he had announced that Black Freshman Orientation was going to be replaced by an "Ethnic Day," tacked on to what had been just Freshman Orientation for as long as anyone could remember. Students had occupied his and Prosser's offices in Converse and a six-foot cross had been burned (by two black students, as it turned out) on the lawn outside the Charles Drew House just before the meeting. Accusations flew back and forth. Was the decision "vicious retribution" for "actions of past days"? Ward stormed out. Prosser took over, calmly assured everyone that there had been no decision until that afternoon about Orientation and that it had been arrived at with the agreement of representatives of the black community. The crowd dispersed during the speeches that followed.

Later that spring Ward resigned. Prosser was ready to go too, but he agreed to stay on in the fall to help with the transition to the administration of Ward's successor, Julian Gibbs -- an Amherst alumnus. It had become clear that was what the Trustees wanted.

In 1979 Prosser and Dee Dee moved to Washington, D.C where he became deputy director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He worked with scholars from all over the world to facilitate their research and ran seminars and colloquia. Eight years later, he moved to the Library of Congress, where he was Director of Scholarly Programs for 15 years "bringing together hundreds of scholars from around the world to collaborate on research, writing, and discussion of national and world issues," and editing, or co-editing the proceedings of their meetings and many volumes of their essays.

Prosser was a passionate sailor. He first met Dee Dee at a sailing race when he was 11 and she was 9. He crewed for the Bermuda Race a half-dozen times and raced trans-Atlantic twice, once in a hurricane-filled trial from New York to Spain. In 2005 the Giffords moved to Woods Hole. Prosser continued to do what he was so good at: uniting people – “rising above politics,” as he said of his work in Washington and could have said about his work at Amherst – uniting people who were working for a common good. He was chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Marine Biological Laboratory, an honorary member of the corporation of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and president of the Woods Hole Public Library’s board of directors. He also served for ten years on the board of Hotchkiss, was founding president of the Merton College Charitable Corporation, and a member of the Board of Governors of the Association of Yale Alumni.

Prosser was wise, humane, and a model of equanimity. Those of us who knew him personally will never forget his distinctive laugh, a generous, unself-conscious expression of delight. At Cal Plimpton’s last faculty meeting, Prosser stood up and praised Cal, ending with these words: “He had one great strength – he never took the furor of opposition, lock-outs, sit-ins etc. personally.” There is no doubt but that one can say the same about Prosser – and be very grateful for his service to Amherst.

I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the faculty in a rising vote of silence and entered into the records of the college and that a copy be sent to Dean Gifford's family.

Respectfully submitted,
Jack Cameron
Gordie Levin
Jane Taubman
Kim Townsend