

In Memoriam:

Robert A. Divine (1929-2021)

October 16, 1963: "This is a well-written report, but you focus too much on the factual contents of the books, and do not give much critical analysis of the authors' techniques and interpretations. Avoid summarizing in future reports; instead concentrate on analyzing the book." B+.

October 30, 1963: "You give a good, concise summary of Japanese-American relations in this period, but you do not comment on the books and their value. I want more of an historiographical essay in which you analyze and evaluate the contributions of the books; rather than a summary of the subject they cover." B.

November 13, 1963: "Good. Try to give more of your own evaluation of the author's interpretation." A-.

November 27, 1963: "Good." A-.

December 11, 1963: "Very good." A.

Whew! The students in Dr. Divine's fall 1963 seminar on the history of American foreign relations had to write a five to ten page book report every two weeks. As his comments on mine suggest, they had to be critical. We weren't allowed to get by with letting him know what Tyler Dennett, or Paul Varg, or Thomas A. Bailey had said: he knew that already. He wanted to know what *we* thought about what they'd said, and that was pretty exhilarating for a first semester graduate student who'd only recently made up his mind that he wanted become a historian in the first place.

"You want to do what?" his parents exclaimed. "Why not something practical like running the ranch, or the drugstore, or becoming a librarian?" But it didn't rain often enough to keep the ranch going, he didn't have the skills for the drugstore, and he was bored stiff doing library science. So he put his foot down, announced that he was going to graduate school, and that he'd do it at the only place in the



known universe – for a kid from a small town in Texas – where that might be possible. That's how I wound up, in Austin in 1963, in the diplomatic history seminar of Dr. Divine.

I'd only vaguely heard of him as an undergraduate, and had taken none of the courses he'd offered at that level. I didn't have any clearer idea, either, of what a seminar was until I walked in on the first day, found a seat at the big table in Garrison Hall, lit a cigarette as all the other students at that moment were doing, and tried to stay cool by blowing smoke at the ceiling while wondering what all of this was going to be like. What it was like – this is the only word that

really describes it – was "electric."

This big energetic guy swept in, probably just off the phone from Washington we assumed. He sat down, spread out his notes, tilted back in his chair at an alarming angle, and began talking at an even more alarming speed. I later discovered that this was because he'd grown up in Brooklyn and studied at Yale, mysterious places where people did that sort of thing. He'd spin out ideas at twice the rate of any regular Texan, while we scrambled to take notes with one hand, while waving the other one in the air to get our questions answered, while at the same time trying to avoid setting each other on fire with all the ashes we were flinging around. That was the atmosphere – crackling – and we left the room at the end of each seminar excited, exhausted, and sometimes singing.

We soon learned the secret: that Dr. Divine's metabolism worked faster than anybody else's. Only that could have allowed him to take the time he did for us – grading our papers, rewriting lectures, updating bibliographies, making himself available in office hours – while still publishing new books almost annually, chairing the History Department, and maintaining a normal family life. It was pretty amazing.

As time went on, though, I also learned that Dr. Divine had a remarkable capacity for calm, reassurance, and long-term vision. I discovered this

on the dismal day, in 1966, when I completely blew my oral examination. He was unperturbed, negotiated a pass with the other examiners on the grounds that perhaps the candidate would amount to something anyway, and then claimed ever afterward that he'd forgotten the event entirely.

He then allowed me to pick a dissertation topic so broad that it would never have been approved in the current era of micro-monographs, and turned me loose. He'd check periodically to make sure I was on the right track, he always answered my questions promptly, and he'd write gentle comments on my drafts like "vague," or "awkward" (but never "crap!" or worse, as I've been known to inflict on my own students). Somehow, without appearing to prod or pressure, he got me from orals to dissertation defense in two years.

At which point, he took another big chance. I'd been on fellowship most of this time, but had never taught. I told him I thought I should before going on the job market. He said "OK," and immediately put me down for a full-scale lecture class – not a discussion section, not a seminar – on the history of the United States since 1865. This strikes me, in retrospect, as a great risk for all concerned, not least for the 50+ students I found myself in front of. But it went fine, despite the average grade I gave having been C. I learned from this that I loved teaching – that I could create my own occasional crackles in the classroom. But I'd had an excellent role model.

The mentoring didn't stop after I left Austin. I was surprised, looking back over our correspondence, at how much help Dr. Divine gave me in transforming the dissertation into a book, a process that took four years. When it finally came out, he noted neutrally that "it bears only a passing resemblance to the original dissertation." He was right about that, and along with my editor, Bill Leuchtenburg, deserves the credit for making that happen. They'd conspired secretly, I suspect, to keep me going.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Divine invited me to do my next book in a series he was editing, and not long after that he became "Bob," a critical transition in any mentor-mentee relationship. Another important milestone came in the mid-1970s, when he started sending *me* drafts of *his* articles and books to comment on.

My correspondence with Bob had memorable moments:

May 17, 1967: "To whom it may concern: Mr. Gaddis is a serious and mature scholar who can be relied on to use archival materials with care and discrimination."

October 2, 1968: "The university here is in full

swing again, with over 31,000 students. . . . Yet no one seems to be really grappling with the issue of enrollment limitation."

August 15, 1969: "There is always a danger in trying to perfect a manuscript. This is a laudable idea up to a point, but I have seen too many promising scholars grow old and grey putting the final touches on their dissertations."

July 21, 1972: "I found the Democratic convention stimulating, if exhausting, and was delighted with McGovern's victory. . . . His candor contrasts so strikingly with Nixon's guile that I believe he has a better chance than the pundits are giving him."

May 3, 1973: "I was very pleased to hear that *Foreign Affairs* will print your AHA paper. I wouldn't worry about being co-opted by the Establishment yet, but when you are asked to take part in a Council on Foreign Relations seminar, then I will begin to wonder."

And so it went: the advice was always better than the political predictions.

I'm often asked whether I regret not having done my graduate work at one of the more "prestigious" universities thought to cluster along the east and west coasts. My answer has always been "not in the slightest," because I believe the training I got in Austin was as good as I could have received anywhere – and certainly, during the 1960s, more *serene* than it would have been at Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Berkeley, or even Yale.

It's been a big surprise, then – but also a great privilege – to have wound up as a professinstaoor at the university where Bob Divine was a student. I've even learned to talk a little faster. But I'm also proud, and extremely grateful, to have been a student at the university where Bob Divine was my professor. For that, as a poet once said, made all the difference.

—John Lewis Gaddis