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Book Review: Henry Chauncey: An American Life by Norbert Elliot
by Bob Broad

If you want to read a history of writing assessment as it developed during the 20th century within the narrow and specialized confines of the Educational Testing Service (ETS), you can't do better than Norbert Elliot's *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America* (2005). If your curiosity about ETS is not satisfied by that enormously careful and detailed history, and if you want to gain a close-up, intimate understanding of the person one author called ETS's "first president and abiding institutional deity�� (Owen, 1985, p. 1), then you can't do better than Elliot's new biography, *Henry Chauncey: An American Life*.

Later in this review, I will re-visit those last two "ifs.��

Near the end of *Henry Chauncey*, we learn of the man's decades-long project to compile and interpret the Chauncey Family Archive. This section of Elliot's book finally answered a question that had dogged me throughout my reading: *Why write this biography in the first place*? I realized that I was reading an homage, a textual monument that was effectively Elliot's extension, elaboration, and fulfillment of Chauncey's family history. Having gained access to ETS archives, Elliot invested seven years of his scholarly life researching and crafting a remarkable book. It weaves together stunningly detailed information about Chauncey's educational, personal, professional, and economic life (and his family history) with Elliot's readings in social history and theory as well as some appealing literary flourishes from the author (such as his exploration at the start of Chapter 1 of competing interpretations of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"). If you have reason to care deeply about Henry Chauncey and ETS, this is an important and rewarding book to read.

"Mine," comments Elliot, "is a project designed to write back into history the life of a balanced man…" (p. 12). Balanced? Well, yes. Yet Chauncey was also a man who chose sides and trod his selected path with tenacity and ambition. At the dawn of his career, Chauncey was an educator: a tutor, teacher, and coach, with dreams of becoming a private-school headmaster. However, he soon turned decisively away from teaching and toward testing. The key moment in this transition is described on page 111, near the end of Chapter 3. As an undergraduate student at Harvard College in 1926, Chauncey had been assigned to administer a test to a group of students at nearby Watertown High School. "…[W]anting to make the children feel at ease," Elliot explains, Chauncey "ad-libbed the directions" to guide the students as they prepared to take the test. This creative and compassionate pedagogical move earned him a severe reprimand from the testing supervisor: "The instructions had to be delivered exactly as they said on the test booklet, and not one bit different. I'd learned a lesson."

The lesson Chauncey had learned was that, to meet the requirements of educational measurement as the ideology underpinning standardized testing, he had to relinquish his training, instincts, and gifts as a teacher. Instead of adapting the instructions for the test with the goal of putting students at ease and helping them do their best, Chauncey had to adopt the ostensibly neutral and "objective" role of test administrator. This movement from education to administration, from creativity to conformity, from humanism to mechanization, from pedagogical commitment to supposed objectivity, marks the division between the profession of education and the testing industry. Here is the moment Chauncey crossed that chasm, and he never looked back. Gladly, it seems, he traded his mission as an educator for the promise of power and success marketing multiple-choice tests. As one who has spent his entire career back on the other side of the canyon (teaching and assessing writing), I therefore find this book much more compelling as a story of "an American life", "a true tale of successful entrepreneurship in the face of adversity" than as a story about education, writing, or writing assessment.

In his "Introduction," Elliot sets the social and political stage for the main story he will tell. He describes the emergence of U.S. national identity following the Civil War: mechanization, industrialization, standardization, and the emergence what Michael Williamson calls our culture's "worship of efficiency" (Williamson, 1994). In this context, the discipline of psychology develops, and the business of mental measurement ("psychometrics") is part of that development. A brief history of standardized testing follows, capped with a thoughtful reflection by the author on the shape and structure of his own biographical-narrative technique.

Chapter 1, "Panama, 1985," takes us with the eighty-one-year-old Chauncey on a visit to Panama to explore the history of his great-grandfather, also named Henry Chauncey. As capitalist entrepreneur, the 19th-century Chauncey played a significant role in the construction of the Panama Railroad completed in 1855. Among other things, Elliot provides a detailed and often grim account of the risks and difficulties faced by the workers who died building that railroad and, to a lesser extent, by the entrepreneurs sponsoring it, including Henry Chauncey. For me, this account of workers' malaria and financiers' millions went into more detail than I ultimately found useful in understanding the 20th-century Chauncey. But it was interesting to see the risk and effort that went into the great-grandfather's eventual financial success, particularly because economic deprivation and striving is a strong theme in the life of the 20th-century Chauncey who serves as this biography's focus.

“Fathers and Sons, 1838 to 1905” introduces us to several more generations of Chauncey’s ancestors, including those who lost the family’s fortune (section heading: “The End of Privilege”) after the opening of the U.S. trans-continental railroad in 1869. This U.S. achievement competed too successfully with the Panama Railroad Henry Chauncey had helped build. Here again, the level of detail exceeds what I am able to productively use as someone interested in writing assessment. Note, for example, that the biography’s title character is not born until page 79.

Chapter 3 (“Service, 1905 to 1927”) traces the early life of Henry Chauncey’s family of origin. The focus of this chapter is Henry’s father, Egisto, a minister. Egisto’s proud embrace of his lower-middle-class socio-economic status and his passionate focus on spirituality, service, and social justice make him my favorite character in the book. He also understands joy and play: “At dinner his father [Egisto] would make the children laugh, spinning the lazy Susan faster and faster until the cream fell off” (p. 90). We witness Egisto’s fervent and humble efforts, ultimately successful, to get his son, Henry, admitted to the elite private Groton School where Egisto and all other recent male Chauncey ancestors lived and studied. We learn that young Henry Chauncey is a strong athlete, good at mathematics, but “weak in the very subjects that Groton prized: English and foreign languages” (p. 93). Henry eventually attends Harvard College, where he becomes passionately engaged with the emerging “science” of psychological measurement to which he would devote his professional life. This chapter gives us that glimpse of Chauncey, described above, at the crucial threshold between his brief early career as an educator and his long later career as a purveyor of standardized tests.

“Reorientation and Reorganization, 1928 to 1945” (Chapter 4) completes and develops this transition for Chauncey from teaching to testing. We witness the increasingly intimate and elaborate inter-twining of the standardized testing industry and U.S. war efforts. The business of psychometrics emerges fully, and Chauncey secures himself a place within that industry, working with an early form of computer (the “Mathematon”) and publishing his first research article. War rears its head again, and as was the case in World War I, the standardized testing industry is well positioned both to support the war effort and, like other war contractors, to profit generously from it. Chauncey learns important lessons from “Big Science” (including Oppenheimer’s Manhattan Project) about how to secure government contracts that provide a reliable, long-lasting, and robust funding stream for his business.

“Invention, 1946 to 1958” traces the establishment of the Educational Testing Service and Chauncey’s rise to power as that organization’s first president. Between colleges’ needs to manage booming applications and the U.S. military’s need to sort legions of cold war recruits, business flourished at ETS. “Charmed, charming, and unflappable, Chauncey realized that there would be no institutional mission without a profit margin” (p. 202).

Chapter 6, “Integration, 1958 to 1970,” relates the ever-increasing inter-twining of the fortunes of ETS with U.S. global political and military strategy. Stung by the Soviets’ launch of Sputnik and other noteworthy Soviet technological and educational accomplishments, the U.S. passed the National Defense Education Act of 1958. The general thinking was that, to win the cold war and defeat communism, the U.S. needed to identify its “creative talent” (Chauncey’s favored term) early using standardized tests to divert special educational opportunities toward the most talented. In a theme familiar to us in 2015, most of the money and attention in this effort was focused on math and science, the educational missions that could most quickly generate weaponry and/or marketable wares. This chapter relates the fascinating story of Chauncey’s trip (with others) to the Soviet Union in 1958, on which I comment below. At the conclusion of the chapter, Chauncey resigns from ETS at age 65, as required by the organization’s charter.

The book’s final chapter, “Pentimento, 1970 to 2002,” traces Chauncey’s professional and personal life from his departure from ETS to his death at age 97. Chauncey heads the new organization EDUCOM (later EDUCAUSE), works with renewed vigor on his Family Archives, and self-publishes a biography of his father, Egisto. Here, Elliot finally provides a glimpse of some of the public conflicts and controversies that have swirled around ETS throughout its history: critiques of meritocracy presented by John Rawls in A Theory of Justice; similar critiques leveled by Nicholas Lemann in his book The Big Test (a book to which Elliot’s might be seen as a rejoinder); and Ralph Nader’s full-out attack on standardized testing in the late 1970s. Oddly, there is no mention here of Allan Nairn’s (Nader-funded) attack in the form of *The Reign of ETS: The Corporation that Makes Up Minds* (Nairn, 1980) nor of David Owen’s similarly scathing *None of the Above: Behind the Myth of Scholastic Aptitude*, published in 1985. After thirty years, Owen’s book still seems to me the most incisive and illuminating account of ETS and its problems in relation to legitimate educational enterprises.

I honor Elliot’s devotion to Henry Chauncey and ETS, and I admire the detail, scope, and craft of this biography. Nevertheless, as readers will have noticed, I find myself troubled by several dimensions of the career and the industry celebrated by the book. Here is where those two “ifs” in my opening paragraph (“if you want to learn more about ETS and Chauncey…”) come back to haunt me, leaving me wondering whether the subject of the book is worthy of the sensitivity, intelligence, and craft of the biographer.

In his earlier book, *On a Scale*, Elliot makes this remarkable claim regarding ETS:

> the College Board and ETS have been two of the great educational institutions of the twentieth century, agencies that will continue to provide informed leadership in the twenty-first century. (p. 354)

Almost from the beginning of my career teaching secondary English in the 1980s, I have held the opposite view. To make it perfectly clear: I cannot think of any single organization that I believe has done more than ETS to *harm* U.S. education.

Building on Elliot's praise for ETS in *On a Scale*, one of the most powerful themes of *Henry Chauncey* is that ETS is an educational enterprise. Here again, I emphatically disagree. A salesperson for the pharmaceutical industry is neither doctor nor nurse; an arms dealer is neither soldier nor police officer; and a test vendor is not an educator. ETS is a business that makes a great deal of money off society's educational, commercial, and military enterprises. Despite moments of fiscal crisis (Elliot reports that in 1999 they underwent drastic staffing and budget cuts; p. 306), ETS has famously and regularly made multi-million-dollar profits. Like his namesake building the Panama Railroad, Henry Chauncey is impressive because he firmly established ETS's ability to make money. The key strategy for this business success was to present the organization as a sort of broker between the world of education and the world of science. I can't refute ETS's "fair broker" claim better than Les Perelman does:

> Mass-market testing organizations… do not foster education; they promote McLearning, high in sugar, salt, and fat, with low, if any, real nutritive value. But like the hamburger chain, *the aim of mass-market testers is not education*; it is an obese bottom line on the balance sheet. (Perelman, 2012, p. 435, emphasis added)

I am not someone who objects to organizations' or individuals' making a lot of money, *depending on the social consequences of their activities*. Unfortunately, I view the educational consequences of ETS and the entire standardized testing industry as profoundly destructive of education, particularly the teaching and learning of writing. A huge majority of the hundreds of educators with whom I've worked recognize that the pressure to help students succeed on standardized tests that deploy impoverished constructs of writing (and this includes virtually all standardized tests of writing) takes time away from good teaching and distorts students' and teachers' understandings of what writing is, how it works, and how it should be taught and learned.

George Hillocks's *The Testing Trap* finds that formulaic, timed-impromptu writing assessments (like those in Texas and Illinois) lead to poor writing and poor teaching, while high-quality portfolio assessments (like those in Kentucky and Oregon) lead to stronger writing and better teaching.

> When states provide for writing over more than one session, or when they provide a set of data or a text for analysis, or when criteria call for specific data… backed by benchmark papers that use evidence, persuasive writing is not so likely to be formulaic. (Hillocks, 2002, p. 201)

Problems with the testing industry are not limited to educational consequences. Sometimes ETS acts in a manner that is disturbing also from the standpoint of ethics and corporate citizenship. Chapter 6 offers a stunning (and detailed) account of Chauncey's deep involvement in an early form of what is now called "patent trolling," a practice Elliot describes as "a confidence game, complete with shills and marks" (p. 243). As Elliot frankly observes, the only tangible outcome of Chauncey's attempt at shaking down Everett Franklin Lindquist and the University of Iowa was the subsequent establishment of the American College Testing Program (ACT), ETS's chief competitor for the next fifty years. In fairness, this gangster-like behavior seems completely out of character for Chauncey. Nevertheless, it is part of the record Elliot unflinchingly lays before us, keeping his commitment to telling the full story. Perhaps as a sort of balm for the likely impact on his readers of the Iowa shakedown story, Elliot goes on to tell us about a Jewish man, a Black woman, and a former communist (renowned psychometrician Frederick M. Lord) hired at ETS; these cases illustrate that the principles of fairness and meritocracy on which Chauncey built the organization hold true in his own hiring and management practices in the pre-civil-rights era. In the case of the former communist, Chauncey earns our increased admiration by making a personal trip to Washington, D.C. at the height of McCarthyist anti-communist hysteria to advocate for this employee's fair treatment.

Behavior like the patent trolling episode appears to be the driving force behind one of the most profound and detailed critiques of ETS, David Owen's *None of the Above: Behind the Myth of Scholastic Aptitude* (1985); among other things, Owen documents ETS's harassment and intimidation of students who question or challenge its tests. Peter Sacks's *Standardized Minds* (1999) continues the indictment of the whole standardized testing enterprise:

> Standardized tests reward passive, superficial learning, drive instruction in undesirable directions, and thwart meaningful educational reform. (p. 8)

Todd Farley's recent *Making the Grades: My Misadventures in the Standardized Testing Industry* (2009) confirms that widespread fraud, not to mention comic absurdity, is still very much a part of the testing industry. (While Farley's main focus is a testing company based in Iowa City, ETS makes several appearances that are far from flattering.) Diane Ravitch's *Reign of Error* (2013) laments how standardized testing distorts U.S. education and saps its resources.

> If [students] are learning to pick the right answer rather than ask the right question, they are not getting a good education. (pp. 265-266)

Within this critical context for the historical, political, and economic project of standardized testing, it is difficult for me to be as deeply charmed by the story of the first president of ETS as I would like to be.

Some of Elliot's sources��"and at times even the author/narrator himself��"speak about (and to) critics of ETS in ways that caused me concern. At one point, for example, Elliot quotes Eugene Randolph Smith offering this wan reassurance to those worried about the educational consequences of standardized testing:

> Certainly no teacher needs to deaden her work and antagonize her pupils in order to conciliate the more or less imaginary dragon that guards the college gate. (p. 132)

First, we must note the naïvet�© of Smith's encouragement, contradicted as it is both by scores of studies showing how testing distorts curriculum and by the daily professional experiences of thousands of dedicated teachers. In fact, these teachers must constantly "deaden their work" in order to help their students perform better on standardized tests. That is the main problem��"far from imaginary��"with standardized tests. I also find Smith's tone toward anxious teachers condescending.

Along with Smith's glib imaginary dragon, I was surprised by Elliot's dismissal of those, including journalist Walter Lippman, who are not comforted by Smith's pat on the head and who continue to raise alarms about the social effects of the testing industry:

> Despite assurances [like Smith's], Lippman and others in the minority continued to sense the lingering smell of sulfur in the air. (p. 132)

Putting aside the potentially interesting question of which side in this debate is "in the minority," both Smith's use of the "imaginary dragon" metaphor and Elliot's extension of it ("smell of sulfur") strikes me as dismissive to the verge of disrespect. "Critics of standardization," they seem to suggest, "fear something mythical and illusory. In reality, there is nothing to fear." However, as I attempted to demonstrate above, the monster is quite real and it really does stink.

One other concern is the question of whose discourse is recognized in this book as "rhetorical," and what we are to make of that assessment. For example, E. G. Boring denounced Carl Brigham's forthrightly racist *A Study of American Intelligence* with brio in his 1923 commentary in *The New Republic*, employing a colorful metaphor involving mountains, mice, and leviathans. Elliot's ironic comment in response to Boring's linguistic verve is: "Everybody could write." The author goes on: "Rhetorical flourishes did little to stop the momentum, however…" (8). Repeatedly, Elliot expresses his discomfort and frustration with such "rhetorical flourishes" employed by those outside of ETS. What is puzzling is that someone as astute as Elliot doesn't also flag ETS's techniques as "rhetorical."

For those of us who accept Kenneth Burke's claim that rhetoric "is rooted in an essential function of language itself" (p. 43), complaints against "rhetorical" language are confusing. Smith's "imaginary dragon" is a colorful rhetorical riff in which Elliot himself participates. My own phrase "pat on the head" used above is equally rhetorical. Rhetoric is a topic worthy of study in this book and anywhere else. Unfortunately, in *Henry Chauncey* it is only the critics of ETS who merit censure for using rhetoric.

The episode from *Henry Chauncey* that gives me the most to think about, and that I expect to remember longer than anything else in the book, is Chauncey's 1958 visit to the Soviet Union. To Chauncey's astonishment, Soviet educational leaders (including famed developmental psychologist A. R. Luria) repeatedly told him that the Soviets had no interest in standardized testing because they were firmly committed to the educational and political principle that *every student can succeed*.

> The [Soviet education] minister replied that all students were educated equally and that students with specialized talent… were all served equally. (p. 234)
>
> > [Chauncey later wrote that in the USSR] …great care is given to the best method of teaching each particular topic, to the question of how best to get across specific subject matter concepts and facts to the students. (p. 235)
> >
> > > Faith in the student's ability to learn was absolute��"a position that was contrary to [Chauncey's] experiences in which the more able students developed faster and pulled away from the less able. (p. 236)
> > >
> > > > …the philosophy underpinning limited response testing had been rejected in the Soviet Union. (p. 237)
> > >
> > > The massive, expensive sorting system to which Chauncey devoted his career��"and on the basis of which ETS earned multi-million-dollar profits year after year��"was useless to and therefore

absent from Soviet education, seen globally in 1958 as a great success.

I know enough about Soviet history and Soviet communism to know that, like most societies, the gaps between its ideals and practices were sometimes severe. Nevertheless, I confess to feeling inspired reading about a twentieth-century society in which educational principles of equality, opportunity, individual attention, and commitment to each student's potential led to dramatic society-wide educational successes. Because of my deeply held beliefs about the social and educational harms of standardized testing, the story of Chauncey in Russia nurtured in me a vision of U.S. society that might someday outgrow its heavy reliance on standardized testing as an educational and administrative shortcut. Is my faith in U.S. democracy excessive or naïve? Perhaps.

Except that in one historical moment, at least, a group of U.S. citizens took just such a pro-democracy stand against the ideology and politics of psychometric sorting. Just before the outbreak of the Korean War, Elliot explains, a controversy broke out regarding the roles of Chauncey, ETS, and standardized tests in deciding who would be drafted into the U.S. military and who would be deferred. At the same moment Chauncey was developing a test to help the Selective Service System excuse the most talented and promising young men from military service, a group of prominent educators and journalists��"including Chauncey's former mentor, James B. Conant of Harvard University��"took a strong stand against this sorting maneuver.

> …Conant held that all young men between eighteen to twenty-two years old should be obligated to serve. "The principles established," he wrote in January 1949, "reflect the spirit with which the country wished to approach the whole question of military service, and I submit this spirit must be one of scrupulous honesty and fairness…" (p. 205)

Soon thereafter, Edward R. Murrow joined the egalitarian cause.

> "If we pursue this line of reasoning [providing deferments on the basis of test scores]… we would have to conclude that the citizen of better than average intelligence would have no obligation to fight fires, or to help pull the wounded from under buildings, or to try to stop the flow of blood… We have never proceeded in this country on the basis of giving preference to an intellectual elite." (Murrow qtd. by Elliot, p. 206)

Most readers of this journal know enough about ETS to predict correctly that ETS won this debate as it usually does, by mounting a sophisticated and well-funded campaign of radio addresses, scholarly publications, advertisements, and conference presentations to condemn such democratic principles (fairness, honesty, equality, and sacrifice) as "nostalgia." (In fact, this seems to be the historical instance in which Chauncey first learned the economic value of mounting effective propaganda campaigns.)

A decade after ETS won its long-term contract to provide Selective Service Testing, Dick Cheney would place his signature stamp of dishonor on the phenomenon of draft deferment for privileged young men. Cheney explained his astonishing five deferments during the Vietnam War with the Bartleby-esque comment, "I had other priorities in the 60s than military service." (I would love to be in the room were Cheney ever to say this to a Vietnam veteran's face.) *The New York Times* comments that "The [Vietnam-War-era] deferment process proved controversial, discriminating against men who were black or poor, and a lottery was introduced in 1969" (Seelye, 2004). Nevertheless, the moral controversy around Chauncey's Selective Service sorting project echoed loudly in the early years of the twenty-first century, when Vice President Cheney stood in the forefront of the "chicken hawks," politicians who ran from their own military service but who were eager to send less privileged young Americans off to die in Iraq on the basis of a fundamentally fraudulent casus belli.

What stays with me upon finishing *Henry Chauncey: An American Life* is the recognition that "nostalgic" U.S. ideals of educational equality, community, service, and shared sacrifice sometimes can be marshaled to contradict the ideology of sorting the "most talented" out from those inferiors who need to serve in the military��"or who need to attend a state university (like the one at which I proudly teach) or a community college (like the one where I am glad one of my children studies). Between the story of the Soviets' wholly rejecting the ideology and technology of standardized tests and the story of Conant, Murrow, and others condemning the entire project of draft deferment via psychometrics, I take renewed hope in the ongoing struggle to free our society from its self-destructive

dependency on standardized testing.

Bio

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