



Iconoclast: Abraham Flexner and a Life in Learning

Thomas Neville Bonner

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In this, the first biography of Abraham Flexner (1866–1959), distinguished scholar Thomas N. Bonner offers an engaging and insightful view of one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century American education. From his early, pathbreaking work in experimental primary schools to the founding of the prestigious Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, Abraham Flexner's influence on American education was deep, pervasive, and enduring. In Thomas N. Bonner, Flexner has at long last found the biographer that his critical role in American education deserves.

The son of poor Jewish immigrants in Louisville, Kentucky, Flexner was raised in the Reconstruction South and educated at the Johns Hopkins University in the first decade of that institution's existence. Upon earning his degree in 1886, he returned to Louisville to found four years before John Dewey's Chicago "laboratory school" an experimental school based on progressive ideas that soon won the close attention of Harvard President Charles Eliot. After a successful nineteen-year career as a teacher and principal, he turned his attention to medical education. His 1910 survey known today as the Flexner Report stimulated much-needed, radical changes in the field and, with its emphasis on full-time clinical teaching, remains to this day the most widely cited document on how doctors best learn their profession.

Flexner's subsequent projects a book on medical education in Europe and a comparative study of medical education in Europe and America remain unsurpassed in range and insight. For fifteen years a senior officer in the Rockefeller-supported General Education Board, he helped raise money more than 6 billion in today's dollars for education in medicine and other subjects. His devastating critique of American higher education in 1936 raised the hackles of educators but ultimately raised important questions as well. Three years later he created and led the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, convincing Albert Einstein to accept the first appointment at the newly created institute.

Brilliant, abrasive, tenderhearted, and fundamentally a decent, farseeing man, Abraham Flexner accomplished much good in the world. His story, based on new archival sources and told with verve and wit, is sure to become the definitive work on a man and his era.

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