

## **Book Review**

**An Academic Life  
by Hanna Holborn Gray**

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### **Introduction**

In her informative memoir, *An Academic Life*, Hanna Holborn Gray (b. 1930) reflects on experiences in higher education that span more than sixty years. Gray achieved an array of “firsts” in women’s history, including becoming the first woman in the United States to serve as President of a major university, a role she held at the University of Chicago from 1978 to 1993. Gray describes changing opportunities for women that shaped her life as a student, faculty member, and administrator. Yet the text transcends one leader’s thoughts on her meaningful career. It is a generative vehicle for highlighting changes in higher education as well as a reminder of, in tumultuous times, the fundamental role of universities to support academic freedom. Nourished by these undercurrents, Gray’s memoir is a substantive contribution to scholarship in educational biography, women’s leadership, and the history of universities.

### **Overview**

The memoir consists of eleven chapters that provide a chronological account of Gray’s experiences in institutions she attended or in which she worked. Each chapter title bears the name of a place or institution, such as “A Year at the University of Oxford.” Gray, a Professor emeritus of history, frames each chapter with attention to historical context. The first three chapters describe Gray’s socialization into an “academic life”

in Germany with family members who were accomplished faculty. Gray's mother, Annemarie, also held a PhD, hers in philology, which she earned in 1926. Devoted to classical study, Annemarie was "opposed to superficiality and materialism where she thought seriousness and profundity of thought should prevail" (5), clearly believing that gender should not limit intellectual pursuits. An ominous force that did, however, was the growing Anti-Semitism in Germany during Gray's early years. She details the effect of Hitler's rise to power as academic freedom became increasingly imperiled during the 1930s, when her father, along with other German scholars, was forced into exile. The effect of this governmental intrusion lays bare the roots of Gray's lifelong commitment to academic freedom.

The family's move to New Haven, Connecticut, further immersed Hanna in academic culture and helped her accrue academic capital. Her parents' support helped prepare her "with hard work and commitment for whatever seemed my career choice of the moment. It never occurred to me, or I think to them, that I might not come to have a profession" (83). As a child, Hanna crossed paths with an array of notable scholars, including Paul Tillich, Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and Friedrich Meinecke, the latter with whom she trained as a historian (6). Despite their fortune in escaping Germany, Gray details the adjustments necessary for émigrés and the lasting effects of second-generation membership in this unique group. She negotiated German and American culture and pursued a liberal arts education with intimidating teachers who "wasted no words in cataloging our deficiencies" (81). Later, at Bryn Mawr, she felt the enduring influence of the institution's formidable feminist president, M. Carey Thomas, long after her death, and teachers' confidence in students' ability to "act on the incontestable knowledge that we were intellectually equal to men" (105).

Gendered educational dynamics shaped Gray's experiences, subtly so in her early years (Chapters 4 and 5), and overtly when Gray attended Oxford (Chapter 6) and taught at Harvard (Chapter 7). It was at Oxford, she writes, "that I first really experienced what discrimination toward women in academic life could mean" (115). Similarly, at Harvard, women could not access the undergraduate library until 1967, and were "at-best, second-class citizens" (136). She describes graduate school, teaching, meeting her husband, and structural issues that bear the imprint of retrospective reflections from her administrative career. The chapter provides insights into entrenched sexism; changes at Harvard, apparently, moved like "molasses" (137). The final chapters detail Gray's leadership roles at Northwestern (1970), Yale (1974), and the University of Chicago (1978-1993), which were full of surprises. She

“looked forward to getting to the office and to what might happen next” (197). She describes complex decisions to increase donations, renovate, build, shift personnel, reorganize programs, and expand student life, using the words “mess” and “nightmare” (266)—a slight shift in tone that hints to emotional registers of the role.

### Reflections

As the title suggests, Gray’s memoir is a carefully-constructed history of her academic life. It is by no means a *common* academic life; her perspectives emerge from socialization into an academic family and privileged positioning within elite institutions across decades. And the memoir is not “personal” in revealing gritty details or psychological nuances. For example, we do not encounter Gray’s husband, Charles, until page 147. Yet in focusing on ideas, people, events, and institutions, the memoir reflects the centrality of the academy to Gray’s life. The book is packed with anecdotes about quirky academics and institutional dynamics from the perspective of an accomplished student, professor, and administrator.

Gray’s primarily succinct writing at times unfolds generously into artful phrasing that displays her affection for language and characters she encountered. Her subtle wit is threaded throughout, describing an “execrable poet,” (123), a “majestically corseted” dean with “fashionably purplish hair” (135), and an instructor poised to lecture who, having “forgotten her teeth,” instructed Hanna to race through the snow to retrieve them (140). In navigating Harvard sexism, she describes meeting male professors who “appeared to be giving each other support in case I should faint or become hysterical” (156). Gray’s wit is also self-directed; she describes her early sense of graduate students “as a rather strange and unusually pale tribe from a distant planet” (111), a group she would later join.

Those with methodological interests in the craft of memoir will find little information to satisfy them regarding Gray’s process of constructing her narrative. Her straightforward style, woven with humor, bears no evidence of narrative experimentation or angst-ridden decisions about which material to highlight or purge, a process that vexed even the great Virginia Woolf as she lamented, ““My God, how does one write a biography?” (Lee 1999). The memoir follows a conventional chronological structure that recounts events, relationships, and endeavors shaping Gray’s textured experiences. One must also discern her theoretical allegiances from her style; with no mention of methodology, theory, or struggles, hers is a realist account in which precise wording performs

as vehicle for the real. Discreet silences are evident, to be sure, as is inevitable in any memoir, and necessarily so in the case of a leader recounting complex institutional matters to which she bore witness.

Memoirs can personalize cultural histories. Although this is no fist-raising feminist account, Gray notes challenges for female academics within sexist institutions. Peppered by colorful anecdotes, Gray's memoir maintains steadfast attention to the weighty mission of universities, their complex operations, and the satisfaction of an academic life. She pays tribute to influential teachers, "intellectual accomplishment" (44), "breadth of learning" and the value of a "classical education" (54). As she remarks in her preface, "I hope that through these histories one can discern ... an academic universe always in flux ... confronting anew the enduring questions and challenges of institutional purpose and intellectual integrity, creativity, and freedom for which universities exist" (xiii). Although many will not relate to Gray's advantages, all can appreciate her message about the profound value of intellectual endeavors in a democracy—and the necessity of protecting them.

### **Reviewed Book**

Gray, H. H. (2018). *An academic life: A memoir*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

### **Reference**

Lee, H. (1996). *Virginia Woolf: A biography*. New York, NY: Random House.