
Pursuit of Genius: Flexner, Einstein, and the Early Faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study

by Steve Batterson

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When the Institute for Advanced Study officially opened in 1933, it did so with a bang. Its School of Mathematics included Albert Einstein, Herman Weyl, and John von Neumann. The Institute offered unrivalled salaries for researchers, and working conditions conducive to research that were second to none. Ever since, the IAS has lived up to the expectations raised by its spectacular start. Mathematicians who have worked at the Institute famously include Kurt Gödel, Paul Dirac, and Paul Erdős, to name just a few from a truly impressive list.

In this carefully researched book, Steve Batterson chronicles the early history of the Institute, focusing on its inception and the first generation of researchers. With meticulous attention to detail, Batterson describes the vision on which the Institute was founded, the protracted efforts in diplomacy, behind-the-scenes intrigue that accompanied its establishment, and the early developments that shaped its future. Batterson's background as a mathematician is clear from the extensive footnotes providing evidence for his account with an almost mathematical level of rigour. For all those with a special interest in the IAS, because they have worked there or out of sheer admiration, this book makes a fascinating read.

Batterson starts his narrative with the birth in 1866 of Abraham Flexner, the first, and rather unlikely, director of the Institute. Flexner was not a mathematician, not even an academic, but had gained considerable prestige as the author of an influential and scathing report on the teaching standards in US medical schools. This expertise, as well as Flexner's philanthropic bent, attracted the interest of high-school dropout and department-store magnate Louis Bamberger and his sister Carrie Bamberger Fuld. In search of opportunities to build a lasting legacy from their vast fortune, the Bambergers were interested in endowing a medical school in their native Newark. Flexner skillfully redirected their ambition – it wasn't a medical school that was needed in New Jersey, but a "modern university" after Flexner's own taste: with high-calibre, highly paid researchers enjoying a maximum of academic freedom and teaching a small number of the brightest postgraduate students, all set to produce ground-breaking results.

The first half of the book describes Flexner's endeavours to make his vision a reality, backed by generous funds from the

Bamberger family. Flexner soon realised that mathematics was an ideal subject with which to start off the Institute. Not only was there a niche in the market, as no institution in the US could boast much mathematical expertise, but also the subject was cheap, only requiring chalk, blackboards, and access to a good library. While Flexner travelled extensively around Europe and the US to seek support, guidance, and contacts in a subject he knew nothing about, Hitler did his bit in Germany, driving the intellectual elite to seek positions abroad. Thus the instant mathematical prestige of the Institute was a result not only of Flexner's enlightened vision and the Bambergers' money, but also of the political situation of the day – as Batterson puts it, it was the result of the diverse aspirations of two laypeople: Hitler and Flexner.

Mathematicians will encounter many familiar names in Batterson's narrative. His scholarly style is punctuated with glimpses into his protagonists' lives, their work, and some juicy accounts of diplomacy and intrigue. Batterson carefully unravels the confusing developments in the run-up to the Institute's official opening, which see Flexner coping with a neurotic Herman Weyl, poaching mathematical talent from the Institute's neighbour, Princeton University, and even censoring Einstein's correspondence. But despite some decidedly underhanded tactics, Flexner's efforts met with enormous success: the first half of the book culminates in the official opening of the Institute with a star line-up.

The book then moves on to Flexner's efforts to establish other schools of "comparable distinction" to his triumphant start with mathematics. He set his sights on a school of Economics, and one of Humanistic Studies. However the path was not smooth, and the process of finding talented researchers and the money to fund them contained as much wheeling and dealing as you'd find in any corporate boardroom.

The book ends with Flexner's final efforts to put the Institute on a sound financial footing before his retirement. But in the midst of the Great Depression this was a profoundly difficult task. Batterson gives us a thorough account of the competing issues Flexner faced, which makes some of the compromises he had to make very understandable. And, although Batterson doesn't hide Flexner's flaws or doubtful decisions, his insight into his principles and his efforts to create the Institute paint a sympathetic picture, which is what makes the final chapter so poignant, as Flexner himself is manoeuvred out of the directorship by the faculty he brought together.

We usually think of our august academic institutions as some sort of solid edifices that exist apart from the bodies and brains that fill them. Batterson's book about the early days of the Institute for Advanced Study is a good reminder that these institutions are very much the result of the people who found them, fund them, and work in them – both academics and administrators.

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