

A Beautiful Mind

William H. Goetzmann (1930-2010)

On September 7, 2010 the *Austin American Statesman* carried two articles on William H. Goetzmann. One was his formal obituary. The other was a book review, originally published by the *Washington Post* and here republished, about my study of the Voyager mission. The review did not mention Bill Goetzmann at all but the book would not have been written without him.

Voyager the spacecraft launched in 1977. Voyager the book launched three years earlier when I listened to Bill Goetzmann interrupt his usual seminar style, a kind of stand-up intellectual improvisation, long enough to read from a short paper in which he advanced the idea of a second great age of discovery. It was the kind of thing I had gone to grad school to see unfold. He eventually published the thesis in 1986 with *New Lands, New Men*. By then I had used the idea to give some heft to a biography of G.K. Gilbert and would rely on it as the guidance system for flybys of Antarctica, Grand Canyon, and the Grand Tour of the outer planets.

I don't think anyone else ever picked up the idea, even to refute it. But the experience spoke, for me, about what was best in the few academic years I spent listening to Bill Goetzmann hold forth, which he did passionately (at times volcanically) about seemingly everything. My time in Garrison Hall didn't teach me much about the mechanics of research or educate me into historiography or train me to be a professor, unless we count gaining a conviction that a life of the mind is a life well worth leading, perhaps the grandest of all possible lives; but then that is the only lesson that has to be learned. I got it by passing through the force field of Goetzmann's mind. It has carried me to the ends of the Earth, and now, if only by proxy, to the edge of the solar system.

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"Mind" is a term long dismissed from polite academic company. But in January 1972 when I entered graduate school at the University of Texas it was still in vogue and was widely understood as part of the working lexicon of intellectual history. That field was passing its prime, though not quite into its rococo phase, and not yet caught in the riptide of social history. It was the core of the American Studies program at UT. When I applied, all I knew about William Goetzmann was that he was writing a two-volume survey of American intellectual history. Culture, intellectual syndrome, mind – all were compression algorithms for talking about ideas.

And mind was what Bill Goetzmann offered. The mind of America, the minds of William James and Thomas Jefferson, the mind of modern science, the mind of the Enlightenment and the mind of Romanticism, but above all the mind of William H. Goetzmann, for he was first and foremost an intellectual, a person for whom ideas had emotional voltage. His own mind threw off sparks like a spinning whetstone. It radiated like a force of nature.

He was most at home in the long 19th century. He appeared to know everything and everyone and never tired of discussing its historical cavalcade. He was always curious, ever bristling with ideas, endlessly encyclopedic, and at times a Romantic empiricist. He had a bottomless capacity for detail, yet managed to hold it all within a sweeping vision, like an explorer – a Humboldt, perhaps – standing at a mountain pass and surveying the landscapes ahead and behind. There was passion behind the vision, at times a manic or even trance-like quality; Goetzmannia, we called it. The historian as Humboldtian.

The minds he explored were always plural. He was skeptical of system and block universes. American Studies, he liked to say, did not have a methodology; rather, it sought to "empathize" with how other people saw the world. He was an ardent advocate for what a later generation would call "diversity," but his was not a diversity defined by race, gender, ethnicity, and a touch of class, but of ideas, personal visions (in the Jamesian sense), disciplines, and ways of imagining the world. He showed how people like naturalists and events like exploration could be incorporated into intellectual history, that the life of the

mind was not the exclusive preserve of divines, professors, and New England elites. What mattered was how people, all kinds of people, thought of their lives and how they coded their experiences into ideas.

In an era when intellectual history was honored, this made him something of a rebel, always complicating simple stories of intellectual genealogies, ideologies, and the building of systems. In an age of social history, however, he found himself more an outcast, and what he regarded as a multiverse was dismissed as the mutterings of an aging white guy speaking an archaic language. Social history brought in more varieties of people but fewer varieties of ideas. The academy became less a place in which William Goetzmann was at home.

But then there was always something to discomfort him. When I arrived he was still basking in the Pulitzer Prize for *Exploration and Empire* and sought to shape, with very mixed results, the departments of History and American Studies in his own image. He always appeared to be fighting someone about something. Naively, I wondered why he wasn't writing his next new book, particularly that promised two-volume magnum opus. Such inquiries were not my place as a journeyman academic. Don't ask, don't tell – I never put the question to him and he never volunteered an answer. But I wondered if that defining prize hadn't come too soon, that instead of galvanizing his energies it had dissipated them, that he worried that he could not exceed that achievement and so frittered away his talents on minor works, academic quarrels, and general fustiness. Whether correct or not, it's the lesson I took away.

As the years passed, I doubted he would ever recover traction, get out of the deepening mud and ruts. But he did. He completed his exploration trilogy with *New Lands, New Men*, and then moved into art history with *The West of the Imagination*. Jacob Bronowski once defined a genius as a man with *two* great ideas. Bill Goetzmann redeemed his early promise by opening a second vocation as an encyclopedist and commentator on western American art, and proved F. Scott Fitzgerald wrong; there *were* second acts in American life. Then, a year before he died, he seemingly squared the circle of his career and published *Beyond the Revolution*, which completed his long-betrothed, endlessly-deferred panorama of intellectual history's long century.

Shortly before it came out he called me with an off-the-wall question about the Sahara Desert and global warming. We had not communicated in years. He was in wretched health. (He had always been in bad shape; during seminar breaks we watched him use the elevator to go *down* a flight of stairs.) This time the breakdown was close to terminal. He was functionally blind. His body was imploding into a physiological black hole. Still he spoke of books and agreed to write a blurb, having to read the manuscript with the e-book audio of Kindle. He said *Beyond* would be his last book. Later, he thought he might write something more. That's what intellectuals did.

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His books were one legacy, the other was his students. The study and the seminar were his natural habitats. His seminars were unforgettable.

He dominated them by anticipation as much as act. He slouched, head in hands, he stared through his over-sized glasses, he ran his fingers through his stringy slicked-back hair, he smoked, he put his feet on the table. Then something would spark, his stupor instantly vanished, the words would pour out, he would dash to the blackboard. There was nothing formal in all this. He did not appeal to status or authority in order to command: he did it by an improvised almost manic brilliance. He was one of us. We were all equal, all intellectuals, all embarked on a journey of the mind. He was only the most knowledgeable among us and took center stage for that reason. The outcome was a virtuoso performance. What might begin with him posing a question would end with him answering it in spite of himself, caught up in the excitement of the idea, nervously sketching arrows on the board, tossing out allusions, making quips, dazzling.

And then there were the nights when it couldn't seem to end, when we wanted it to go on forever, and the footloose and full-throated decamped to Scholz's Beer Garden, where, as Bill

deBuys recalled, “the talk got faster and the play got deeper,” and after Scholz’s closed, those still standing might wander to the Texas Chili Parlor, and after it closed, if Dr. G was still going, to Deep Eddy, and the dawn’s early light of an intellectual jubilation. On such nights no one wanted it to end. For some of us, it never has.

That, as I knew it, was the American Studies program in cameo. It had little structure and not much of what could be called instruction or in today’s patter, mentoring. It was education by immersion; we learned American cultural history the way you might learn Spanish by living in a village in Aguascalientes. He disliked system, trusted process, and relied on massed data and insight to spot-weld them. Bill Goetzmann could admit people to American Studies on what seemed like whims – I was probably among them. To educational theorists the program, if it deserved such a label, might seem a parody of social Darwinism. If you were good, you would find a way. If not, you were not worth nurturing. True? That’s how it felt to me.

I had no complaints. It left me to pursue my own interests, as it did others. I wrote my dissertation on my own, then presented it to Bill, as supervisor, who offered two comments. He didn’t like the title, which he thought pretentious (which it was), but let me keep it. And he wanted me to replace subchapter numeration with written legends. That was the sum of comments. The episode might stand as synecdoche for the program - a lot of inspiration, not much training. Personally, I never expected much, was always grateful that they had taken me in when everyone else had rejected me, and felt well served.

If not always a welcome stimulant, Bill Goetzmann was an unavoidable catalyst. I can trace everything I’ve written in the past 35 years to the world I knew as a smokechaser on the North Rim. It is the challenge of the intellectual, however, to give experience expression. Bill Goetzmann showed how to make impressions into ideas and how to transcend the demeaning categories imposed by blinkered minds. If exploration could be analyzed as a part of its sustaining culture, so could fire, and if we could imagine a second great age of discovery, why not a third? Without the North Rim I would have had nothing worth writing about. Without Bill’s example, I would not have known how to write it.

That was our relationship. I knew him through books, seminars, and some seminar-equivalents. Bill wrote, I read. Bill talked, I observed. I didn’t always agree – often didn’t – but I always learned. I saw him in his prime in the social setting to which he was best adapted. We discussed ideas, even when he ranted and I just nodded, always hearing behind the cigarette-coarsened shouts the echo, however muted, of real ideas and honest passion. That radiant mind was always present, like a solar wind, occasionally flaring and sadly slowing with distance from the source.

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The photo in his obituary shows a man smiling and seemingly at ease. I was glad to see it, and hope it’s true, for I never knew him so. I recall someone toward the conclusion of my time at UT observing that I had a stormy relationship with Dr. Goetzmann. I hadn’t thought it so, but I doubt that anyone had other than a stormy relationship with him. I’m not sure, on a social plane, that any other kind was possible. For a man of the mind he could inspire astonishingly visceral reactions in many people.

So it may not be easy to separate head from heart. I learned early that the cost of rave reviews is to get rants. Stir up feelings and they are as likely to go one way as another. Bill Goetzmann stirred up lots of feelings, and while academic politics may not be the most lethal, they are surely among the most inane and vicious. As the years went by, the scars, both received and inflicted, added up. Perhaps he found in art the emotional satisfaction missing from a no longer collegial academy.

If someone asked about our relationship, I would have said that we had little, that after I left Austin our contact ceased. But that is a blackout of memory. We had many encounters through the years. There were books, and blurbs. There were letters of recommendation, him for me to the National Humanities Center, me for him to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. There was a spontaneous seminar when I happened to be on campus after my

season in Antarctica. There was a group he organized to study the History Department at Yale. There was a summer conference on the American West at Sun Valley. There was the occasional letter or phone call. Once, memorably, he and Mewes visited the North Rim after I had graduated and was still working on the fire crew, and he gave Sonja and me a small inlaid box from Iran as a house present. Often he talked about his children.

Occasionally I heard indirectly from old friends about his latest tantrum or his further isolation. They told of someone increasingly tyrannical, bigoted, demanding, cranky, arbitrary, volatile, insensitive, and unwanted. That fusion of passion and mind that had set seminar rooms aglow had, so they claimed, fissioned into a chain reaction that was explosive and toxic to him and everyone around him. Eventually he and the university ended in a mutually exacted exile.

I can't say. Certainly, he had a great talent for inspiring enemies. But I had found him generous and fair and had the good fortune to pass through the program before the Black Legend of Goetzmann congealed. I knew him through his mind and saw him in venues that replicated the graduate seminar. The worst tensions, the fiercest arcings between opposing charges, appeared when the university and his place in it faced off against each other. His unexpected insecurities met a generation not schooled in his talents. And behind that anxiety, he feared the university would abandon scholarship, that it would, as it were, lose its mind.

Once he had formally left the campus, he seemed to find a kind of peace in heart and home. Children and grandchildren replaced students. He nurtured his fledgling book projects to maturity. There were fewer sparks, and those stayed in the hearth. I hope so. I do know that, near the end, when he was blind and headed for cataract surgery, and suffering enough ailments to fill a wing of Banner Samaritan hospital, at a time when he owed me nothing and I had no way to reciprocate, he wrote a lovely, over-the-top blurb for *Voyager*.

There is a scene in Ellis Peters' *The Leper of Saint Giles* in which the monk Cadfael says to Guimar de Massad, once a fearsome warrior in the Crusades, now a vagabond leper, that God does not judge from the outside but looks within. He sees the heart. "And he will find it beautiful, as I do." Whatever Bill Goetzmann became, I would always see the mind, and I would find it beautiful.

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A few printed words, especially etherealized in cyberspace, are not much on which to recount a life. Yet a handful of words is a tribute that a professional historian like William H. Goetzmann would have understood and maybe approved, for he knew how sparse the material record of the past really is and how desperate is the need to interpret it, to which he added a zestful wish to make that duty into an adventure, perhaps a vision quest.

Voyager the spacecraft was launched a year after I left the program. Among its payload was a gold-plated record, a kind of time capsule to a place beyond time, that contained sights, sounds, and languages of Earth, a testimony to the world from which it came. The two *Voyagers* are now in the heliopause, that ionic surf where the solar and interstellar winds collide. They have enough power that, with a bit of luck, they will be able to signal their eventual passage beyond that final frontier.

Voyager the book includes as an afterword an account of how the idea of great ages of discovery evolved. When I wrote it, I regarded the brief essay as an attempt to keep straight the ledger of our mutual loans and borrowings. But it is possible now to imagine it doing for the book what the gold record does for the spacecraft, a testimony of where it came from. I would be pleased if it did; and so, I trust, would William H. Goetzmann. Both treks were adventures in ideas. It seems only right that they might pass through that final veil together.

