

# Introduction

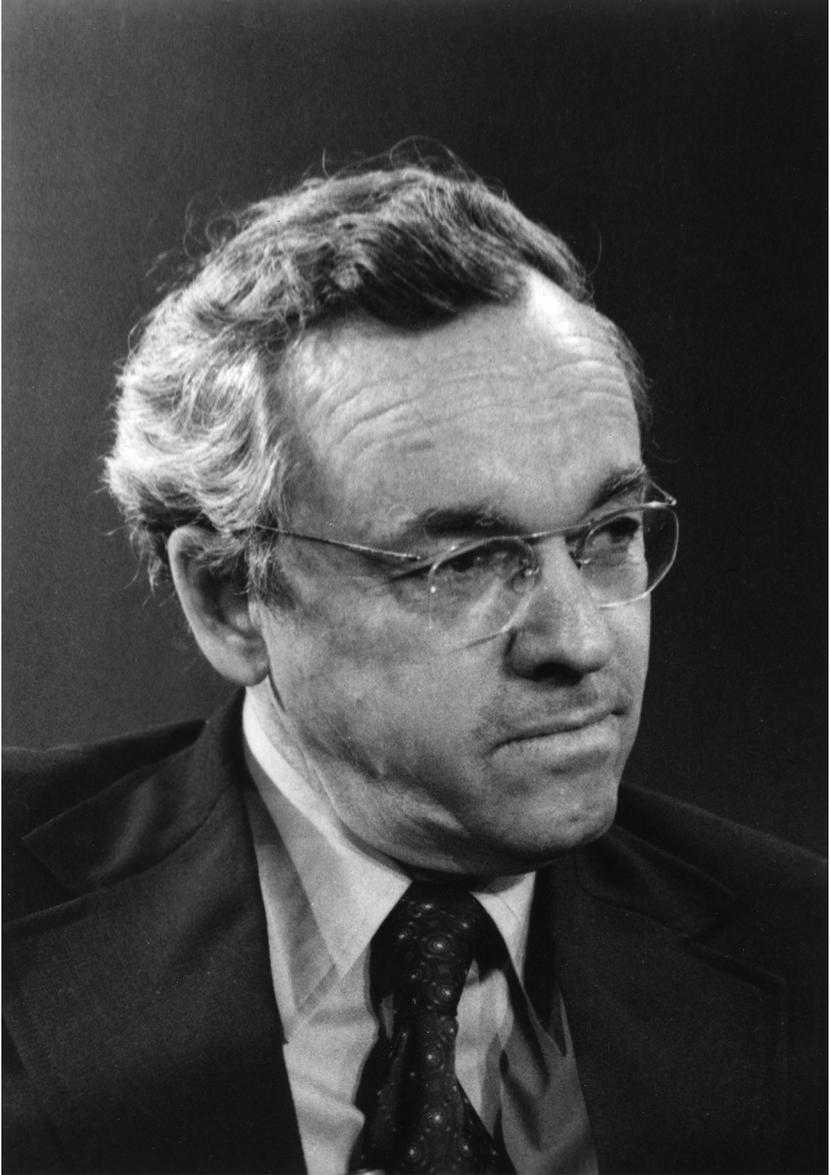
*During my student years at Ohio University (1958-64), I was fortunate to encounter two Harvard-trained scholars who arrived on the campus the year before I did and departed for more sympathetic positions shortly after I was graduated. Professor Roy P. Fairfield pulled back the curtain to reveal the alluring possibility of an academic career, and librarian Walter W. Wright infected me with a passion for rare books.*



Serendipity is defined as the facility for making fortunate discoveries by accident—a word derived from the characters in a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*. I've often thought of my career as serendipitous—whether through sagacity or dumb luck remains unclear—probably some of both. I was the only child of a bookish and musical family of modest means; my grandmother, mother, aunts, and uncles on both sides were teachers. Most attended Ohio University, in Athens. Without demonstrating any especial talent to presage a promising academic future, I fortunately received scholarships to attend the family alma mater where I expected to major in American history. Before long, however, I heard stories of a recently hired professor in the government department who engaged his students with a Socratic method to encourage critical thinking. After one class with Roy P. Fairfield, I changed my major.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the curse of dyslexia—from which I suffer—was not widely understood. Roy Fairfield seemed undaunted by my mediocre class work in the early years; he labored over term papers and exams, filling margins with corrections to spelling, syntax, and reasoning—something none of my other professors bothered to do. Simultaneously, he nudged me in both oral presentations and in writing to express myself forcefully, thoughtfully, and—most important—to think critically: to examine my assumptions and those of others, and always to document thoroughly. Perhaps Fairfield saw in me a challenge; he must have thought, if I can keep this unpromising

ATHENÆUM PROFILES



Author's Collection

*Roy P. Fairfield*

## INTRODUCTION

boy in college, he just might amount to something. Where other students found his probing and confrontational classroom style disconcerting—the antithesis of lecture hall regurgitation—I responded both to the challenge and from a desire to please him.

Roy Phillip Fairfield was born in 1918, descended from “two old Yankee families” of Saco, Maine.<sup>1</sup> He attended the co-educational Thornton Academy in Saco, graduating in 1936 as class salutatorian. In 1939 he married Maryllyn Rumery, a trained nurse and Thornton Academy graduate; together they would have one daughter. Encouraged by the Academy faculty, Roy entered Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, from which he was graduated, Phi Beta Kappa, with the class of 1943. Judged physically unable to serve in the military, he entered Harvard University to pursue M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in American Civilization where he studied with F. O. Matthiessen (1902-1950), whose best-known book, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), was a seminal work in the then new field of American cultural history. Fairfield’s doctoral dissertation was directed by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. (1888-1965), a progressive intellectual who stressed economic, social, and demographic trends in American history. While not yet the Humanist he would become in later years, Fairfield’s Harvard experience both informed and shaped what he would later call “person-centered education.”

In 1947 Fairfield returned to Bates College as an instructor where he helped develop an innovative Cultural Heritage Program which he described as having “three broad aims: to expose each student to the major fields of knowledge, to lay the foundation for a career, and to help [the student] develop attitudes and skills for creative living.” The Bates Plan was a four-semester course required of all juniors and seniors—regardless of their major—to include in their curriculum “historically important books, documents, and artwork to fill in knowledge gaps among general education subjects.”<sup>2</sup> Fairfield would later admit, “nobody knew enough to teach [cultural heritage] in the traditional way, but I erred on the side of teaching to learn rather than memorize.” For a year (1953-54) Fairfield was on leave from Bates as a Fulbright Fellow teaching American history at Athens College, Greece; following which he returned to the Bates campus. While he now had tenure, it became increasingly obvious that Bates offered little opportunity to advance

in rank and salary, prompting Fairfield's move to Ohio University in 1957 as an associate professor of government where he was expected "to teach in the learning by memorizing mode."<sup>3</sup>

To say that Roy Fairfield's preferred teaching style was unconventional for the time and place would be an understatement; he would later write, "I never did fit as a square peg into a round hole. I came along when interdisciplinary programs in American Studies and Social Sciences came into being; and, as long as I was able to tolerate and sometimes violate standard practices of academia, I managed to survive." Survive, yes; but not conform. In 1964 he gave voice to his frustration in an article critical of American higher education, entitled "An Individualist Manifesto," wherein he warned: "A specter haunts American higher education, the triple-head specter of conformity, anti-intellectualism, and mediocrity.... These monsters threaten to swallow every iota of individuality, every genuine intellectual impulse, every urge to excel."<sup>4</sup>

Late that same year Fairfield was invited to become director of an experimental program offering a master of arts in teaching of social sciences by Antioch College, based in Putney, Vermont. Over the next six years, in both Yellow Springs, Ohio, and Putney, he worked with graduate students, "evolving courses with the proverbial learner on the other end of the log, having opportunities to follow students into the classroom, encourage them to evolve their own learning modalities and means of realizing both practical and theoretical objectives." Then, in 1969, Fairfield became coordinator of the newly formed Union Graduate School Ph.D. program, working closely with founder Goodwin Watson (1899-1976), psychologist and professor at Columbia University. After nearly a decade with the Union Graduate School (the history of which is recounted in his book *Person-Centered Graduate Education*),<sup>5</sup> Fairfield returned to the coast of Maine to devote himself to writing, working from an office in the Dyer Library, Saco.<sup>6</sup>

But I'm getting ahead of the story. By 1962 my academic performance had substantially improved, allowing me to contemplate graduate school. Unfortunately, the government department considered Fairfield's students his acolytes; there would be no financial aid for my master of arts degree. The specter of life as a high school civics teacher in southern Ohio loomed ominously.

In the meantime, Fairfield hired me as a research assistant as he prepared

## INTRODUCTION

an introduction to a new edition of *The Federalist Papers*.<sup>7</sup> My tasks consisted mainly of running down citations for the published works of the political theorists who had influenced James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay during the debate over the ratification of the Federal Constitution. One morning while on this quest, I plunged into Chubb Library to locate several titles Fairfield wanted to review. One of these was James Harrington's seventeenth-century treatise, *The Common-Wealth of Oceana*. The copy I located in the open stacks turned out to be a small folio in a paneled-calf leather binding. The age-browned title page read: LONDON, 1656. With a flush I realized this was a first edition.

Previously, I had taken a seminar on the history of books and printing offered by the University Librarian, Walter Woodman Wright (1915-1995). Emboldened by that brief association, I walked into his office. "Look what I found in the open stacks," I said, placing the *Oceana* on his desk. Walter Wright was first of all a bookman. He barely tolerated the administrative politics of a rapidly expanding university library system that required him to grapple with architects designing a new building and upgrade the long-entrenched professional staff, while shepherding the entire book collection from the Dewey Decimal to the Library of Congress classification system. As with Roy Fairfield, Ohio University was not a good fit for Walter Wright. After seeing his children through college, he resigned from the university in favor of a position as chief curator of special collections at Dartmouth College, where he would happily remain for the balance of his career.<sup>8</sup>

Walter examined the *Oceana*, gently turning the pages. "A nice early copy, possibly a first edition," he remarked.

"But," I sputtered, "It shouldn't be in the open stacks. It's rare, fragile, and valuable. There ought to be a separate rare book collection."<sup>9</sup>

Walter was still examining the *Oceana*. Without looking up, he turned another page and said, "Perhaps you could set one up?"

Had I just heard chuckles from the Princes of Serendip?

Growing up with books probably predisposed me to this encounter. In my early teens I often attended house sales with my grandmother, who was an inveterate collector of antiques. These auctions often included leather-bound books being sold by the yard. On one occasion I bid a dollar of my earnings from mowing lawns for a four-volume set of Hippolyte Taine's *History of*

ATHENÆUM PROFILES

*English Literature*, quarter-bound in green leather with marbled boards and gold-leaf tooling. I coveted the books as objects, of course; I probably never read more than the famous introduction to Taine’s methodology—and certainly not until years later. Unfortunately the books had a small defect: the



Photograph by Daniel Fink (Author's Collection)

*Walter W. Wright (right) and the “cheeky young curator”*

## INTRODUCTION

headband on one volume was loose. In search of a solution to this damage, I carefully wrapped the Taine in soft flannel cloth and carried it to the school librarian in the hope she could suggest a means of repair. Handing it over for examination, I watched as she held the volume firmly in her left hand and, clutching the spine tightly with her right hand, ripped it away—as if peeling an orange. “As you can see,” she said, “the leather’s dried out. Nothing can be done.” I was flabbergasted by the savagery of what I had observed. With a shrug, she handed the pieces back to me with terse comment: “Could be rebound in buckram, I suppose.”

It would be many years before I read Randolph G. Adams’s brilliant essay “Librarians as the Enemies of Books,” but I had just observed a dramatic and painful demonstration.<sup>10</sup> In the future I would realize the school librarian had been technically correct—as well as totally insensitive to a nascent bookman. After becoming a library director responsible for thousands of rare and fragile books, as well as chairman of the board of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia, I always made sure the Athenæum’s annual budget included an allowance for book conservation and, at the Conservation Center, there would be funds to award survey grants to regional institutions to encourage best practices for book and document care.

As I stood before Walter Wright’s desk that spring day in 1962, he explained how Ohio University, founded in 1804, had absorbed several early private and institutional collections, including a fair number of rare and valuable books. These had never been segregated from the general collection. Now, in preparation for the upcoming move to a new library building, where there would be a “special collections” reading room, he had funds for someone to survey the collection and to designate the most obvious candidates to be classified as “rare” books. The library budget would cover my graduate school tuition and a modest salary for twenty-four months. In addition, the position carried the exalted title “Morgan Collection Curator,” which ultimately would result in my first publications.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity and enjoyed myself immensely for two years. The only downside to the position was the hostility of the library’s elderly technical services staff who resented the cheeky young graduate student curator who had *carte blanche* from the university librarian to request hundreds of location changes in the card catalogue, a laborious process before the age of computer-based systems.

Walter Woodman Wright (who always signed his memos W<sup>3</sup>) was the eldest son of Charles Henry Conrad Wright (1869-1957), longtime professor of French at Harvard, and his wife, Elizabeth (Woodman) Wright (1885-1961), who were married in 1914. Walter attended Harvard (A.B. 1937) and Columbia University School of Library Science (1937-38). He subsequently advanced in rank as a librarian at Harvard, the New York Public Library, and the University of Pennsylvania, becoming the University Librarian at Ohio in 1957, a position he left in 1968 in favor of Dartmouth College. In 1941 he had married Aagot Horn, a Norwegian-born student he met at Columbia; they would have two children.<sup>12</sup> From his childhood, Wright had summered at a family house called Windy Ledge, near South Paris, Maine, that his father had purchased in 1903. In that idyllic rural setting from which the White Mountains can be seen rising to the west, Walter developed his lifelong passion for collecting every sort of publication relating to the region—tourist brochures, hiking guides, geological reports, and railroad timetables. His *White Mountains: An Annotated Bibliography, 1918-1947*, was published in 1948. The position at Dartmouth with its White Mountain Collection would be the perfect fit.

Walter Wright's offer of employment had the added benefit of allowing me to pursue a master's degree with Roy Fairfield.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the promised income from the library position would not begin until September. Once again, Fairfield came to the rescue. That summer he was directing the Peace Corps team preparing the first group of volunteers headed for Cameroon.<sup>14</sup> I was hired as a general dogsbody with responsibilities ranging from compiling reading lists to escorting Cameroonian diplomats, the latter an eye-opening experience in itself. Modest as this position was, I was approached by a representative of the newly established U.S. Agency for International Development who was recruiting teachers from the Peace Corps staff to establish schools in what he described as a "beautiful French-colonial city" in Vietnam named Hué. The position included total immersion French language study in Tunisia, a fully staffed house in Hué, and a handsome tax-free income. I was tempted by this exotic offer, but I declined. Later I learned that the USAID program was a cover for Central Intelligence Agency operations and the junior faculty member who accepted the position remained in Vietnam until the Tet Offensive in 1968 when he and his family were airlifted by helicopter

## INTRODUCTION

as much of the city and all of his schools were destroyed.

By late 1963, as work at the library and my thesis progressed, I began to consider a doctorate in history. My minor field for the master's degree was eighteenth-century English literature, directed by an assistant professor named William E. Morris, a native of Delaware. After reading one of my papers including references to architecture and decorative arts, Morris asked if I had ever considered the Program in Early American Culture jointly sponsored by the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum and the University of Delaware. I admitted I'd never heard of Winterthur or been in the state of Delaware, but I would look into the program. I had already applied to Vanderbilt University to study early American history with Douglas E. Leach (1920-2003), a former Bates College colleague of Fairfield's on whose recommendation had offered me a waiver of tuition and a teaching fellowship to pursue a Ph.D. under his direction. I was about to accept the Vanderbilt appointment when a telegram arrived from the department of history at the University of Delaware offering similar financial arrangements, in addition to access to the early American material culture courses at Winterthur Museum as my minor field. Here was a dilemma: which path offered the most promising opportunity? A Vanderbilt Ph.D. would probably lead to a teaching appointment in a small college in the Midwest or upper South; a Ph.D. from Delaware would probably lead to an East Coast teaching position. The added experience of study at Winterthur Museum might open several additional opportunities—as proved to be the case.

---

### Notes

- 1 Letter from Roy P. Fairfield to Roger W. Moss, August 12, 2012, including a brief unpublished biographical essay, "Turning Points," January 21, 2012.
- 2 Roy P. Fairfield, "Plumbing Our Cultural Heritage," *Journal of Higher Education* 28 (February 1957), pp. 75-82. The Cultural Heritage Program archive is part of the Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library at Bates College.
- 3 Letter from Roy P. Fairfield to Roger W. Moss, August 12, 2012.
- 4 Roy P. Fairfield, "An Individualist Manifesto," *Phi Delta Kappan* 45: 5 (February 1964), pp. 230-235.
- 5 Roy P. Fairfield, *Person-Centered Graduate Education* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1977).

## ATHENÆUM PROFILES

- 6 Throughout his career Roy P. Fairfield has been a prolific author of history, criticism, fiction, and poetry. See his extensive bibliography in WorldCat.org.
- 7 Roy P. Fairfield, ed., *The Federalist Papers: A Collection of Essays Written in Support of the Constitution of the United States* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961, 2nd edition 1966). Fairfield greatly inflated my role as a research assistant when he acknowledged my “translation assistance and critical reading of various portions of the text,” pp. 277-278.
- 8 Dates of Walter W. Wright’s employment at Ohio University supplied by Sara Harrington, Head, Arts and Archives, Ohio University Libraries, Athens, Ohio. I am also grateful for the assistance of Professor Ivan Tribe who, as University Archivist, shared an office with me at Ohio University Library, 1962-64.
- 9 Today a good first edition of *Oceana* might realize \$10,000-15,000 at auction.
- 10 Randolph G. Adams, “Librarians as the Enemy of Books,” *Library Quarterly* 7 (1937), pp. 317-331.
- 11 In 1959, Dr. John Whalen Morgan, a retired professor of chemistry at Wittenberg College, gave his rare book collection of 1,200 titles in the history of chemistry to Ohio University for which a handsome room had been provided in Chubb Library. Roger W. Moss, “The Morgan Collection in the History of Chemistry at Ohio University,” *Ohioana* (Winter 1964), pp. 136-137. Roger W. Moss, *The Morgan Collection in the History of Chemistry: A Checklist* (Athens: Ohio University, 1965).
- 12 Genealogical information drawn from the guide to the Wright Family Papers, 1826-2003, deposited at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, by Walter W. Wright and his siblings, widow, and children. The Dartmouth College Library holds Walter W. Wright’s collection on the White Mountains, 1934-1994.
- 13 Not surprisingly, given my work on his edition of the *Federalist Papers*, I chose as a thesis topic the then little-studied Anti-Federalist arguments published during the debate over the U.S. Constitution. Roger W. Moss, “The Federalist-Anti-Federalist Debate,” M.A. thesis, Ohio University, 1964.
- 14 Ohio University was selected by the Peace Corps because the School of Education had a long history of operating branch campuses in Africa. Julius Amin, *Peace Corps in Cameroon* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1992). Roy P. Fairfield directed the “Cameroon 1” program staff composed largely of Ohio University faculty; the first Peace Corps team arrived in country on September 13, 1962.