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THE SCHENLEY EXPERIMENT: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF PITTSBURGH'S FIRST PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

Laura Gabrion

Jake Oresick, *The Schenley Experiment: A Social History of Pittsburgh's First Public High School*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. 222 pp. ISBN 978-0-271-07833-5. \$19.95 (paperback).

In November 1916, John Dewey's address to the National Education Association (NEA), entitled "Nationalizing Education," appeared in the *Journal of Education*. Dewey's fervent plea called upon educators to support American public education and one of its primary goals, that "every pupil recognizes all of the factors which have gone into our [national] being."¹ He cautioned against the alternative, stating: "In short, unless our education is nationalized in a way that recognizes the peculiarity of our nationalism in its internationalism, we shall breed enmity and division in our frantic efforts to secure unity."² Perhaps coincidentally, the doors of Schenley High School, located in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, officially opened in 1916. In *The Schenley Experiment*, Jake Oresick ardently chronicles the story of a school that, despite many odds, exemplified Dewey's view of nationalized education.

Oresick begins by providing readers with a historical perspective. Schenley High School was built to replace the aging Central High School facility and continue its role as an elite educational institution, where entrants needed to pass an exam to gain admission. The school would also acquire Central's lauded faculty, a group of prestigious educators who influenced students bound for Ivy League educations and other large-scale achievements. While stymied by several years of disagreements over property, Schenley High School was finally built in the Oakland neighborhood, opening to students and faculty a year before the United States entered World War I. Oresick illustrates the breathtaking result: a triangular-shaped landmark that boasted impressive conveniences and inspired long-held public opinion in favor of this architectural gem.

Oresick explains that, in converting to the new facility, a main goal was to make the curricula "comprehensive" (14) in compliance with the NEA's early twentieth-century models of educational reform. Locational upheaval did not disrupt

Schenley's support of Central's three distinct educational tracks—"Academic, Commercial, and Normal" (9)—each meeting the needs of its diverse student population. Like Central, Schenley's three schools within one were joined in elements of communal spirit: sports, school colors, and all-school publications. In other words, Schenley sought a most obvious way of uniting students seeking a variety of educational outcomes by putting them all in one building. The benefits would stretch beyond a cost-effective solution. Students would inevitably grow in worldly knowledge by interacting with others who did not necessarily share their educational foci or cultural backgrounds, and this approach persisted as Schenley continued to offer often separate and unique educational programs, but united students in common activities, such as athletics and clubs. In addition, throughout its nearly one hundred-year history, Schenley continued to stretch educational limits by offering cutting-edge courses that used innovative educational tools, acknowledging Dewey's belief in a pragmatic approach to education. A commitment to excellence bolstered by fierce school pride, though meeting various obstacles over time, is the hallmark of Schenley's history.

Aided by geography, the Hill District that initially fed most of Schenley's student population was diverse in itself, a veritable "melting pot" of race, class, and ethnicity. While this promoted intense cultural integration, Oresick is clear that Schenley was not a utopia free from prejudice; for example, the faculty continued to be predominantly white despite drastically changing demographics in the student population. Black students particularly felt this impact, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, when racial tensions in America rose, and "white flight" imposed an unplanned segregation on Schenley. However, the school's first principal, James Noble Rule, was intent upon setting a tone and leading by example whereby decades of students celebrated the "shared successes" (29) of their classmates, which included academic, athletic, and artistic achievements. (Oresick devotes Appendix B to famous alumni such as Derrick Bell, Darnell Dinkins, and Andy Warhol.) Thus, while twentieth-century American history was fraught with turmoil, Schenley's countercultural practices mainly provided an oasis for its faculty and students. Schenley staff continued to work in a familial atmosphere supported by the administrators, and students sought opportunities that were not available in their neighborhood schools. Their allegiance to one another and the school created an environment that contrasted with that of the outside world, one facing wars, economic strife, racial and gender-based discrimination, and an increasing influx of drugs and violence, among other issues.

Oresick's audience targets not only graduates of Schenley High, but also current educators and administrators focused on equity in education. His chronological account is seasoned with photographs, maps, and sometimes humorous modern-day references, such as the subtitle "Came in Like a Wrecking Ball," a nod to Miley Cyrus's hit song. Yet, as he recreates the progression of Schenley from inception

to demise, his sincere tone implores readers to consider the far-reaching impacts of integrated, inclusive, and intellectually rigorous education. He reminds readers that life is often unfair, but education should not be, and in this message he invites his audience to consider the most important elements of educational equity: opportunity, faculty expertise, administrative commitment, respect, loyalty, and a unified spirit. Promoting these ideals outside of school is emphasized as well; the book's jacket announces the school's motto: "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve," and this mantra amplifies Oresick's secondary theme: education is not restricted to the growth of one's intellect, but instead has the ability to influence one's role in society—"for life in democracy" (25).

Schenley High School's last class graduated in 2011 amid the palpable frustration of its many previous graduates and mixed messages from a divided school board. Despite its diversity, Schenley had continued to be a neighborhood high school that supported generations of students from the same families, making residents of Pittsburgh, young and old, proud stakeholders in its success. The school's storied history included scores of accomplished teachers and graduates; cultural, educational, and political events for the community; and dynamic concerts, plays, and orations. In closing, Oresick alludes to present-day conflicts based on race and class, such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, indicating the critical role schools like Schenley play in education. Integrated schools promote an appreciation for diversity that extends beyond school walls, and Oresick ends on the note that ninety-five years of multiplicity is not wasted. It lives on in the graduates who continue the school's legacy in their families, occupations, and actions, echoing Dewey's hope that each will be able "to serve the community by his own best powers in his own best way."³

NOTES

1. John Dewey, "Nationalizing Education," *Journal of Education* 84, no. 16 (1916): 426, accessed December 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42807817>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 428.

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