

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on October 6, 2009, the following Minute was placed upon the records.

DONALD HARNISH FLEMING

Born: August 7, 1923

Died: June 16, 2008

Donald Harnish Fleming, *Jonathan Trumbull Professor of American History, Emeritus*, died in June 2008 after 41 years of service to Harvard University. A scholar of intellectual history and the history of science and medicine, he was the latest in a long line of Harvard's charismatic lecturers on history who informed and delighted generations of students with brilliant, compelling lectures—witty and epigrammatic, yet packed with details of the ideas, assumptions, and beliefs of philosophers, social and physical scientists, and literary figures and their critics.

Following his undergraduate years at Johns Hopkins University, Fleming completed his doctorate at Harvard in 1947, and three years later published his first, prize-winning book, both biographic and thematic, "John William Draper and the Religion of Science." The research for that work drew him into the detailed history of medicine, which he explored in his second book, again both biographic and thematic, "William H. Welch and the Rise of Modern Medicine" (1954). By then Professor of History at Brown University, he had become prominent as a leading intellectual historian. After a year at Yale (1958-1959), he accepted an appointment at Harvard, where he remained for the rest of his career. He served as chairman of the history department from 1963 to 1965 and as director of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History from 1973 to 1980.

Well before his move to Harvard, his scholarship had come to center on the view that there were key concepts, central foundational ideas embedded in certain words that radiated out through the humanities and the social and physical sciences, and that could be traced in their various ramifications. "What is required," he wrote in his fullest programmatic statement of his research and writing, is "a record of the principal mutations that key words have undergone, the overlapping of territory among closely related words, the struggle for survival and predominance...in short, the application of the principle of natural selection to words." He planned at one point to write a multi-volume history of science in America in precisely these terms, and indeed he drafted the first volume of a projected trilogy. But the complexities were enormous, and he chose instead to explore them in seminal essays, epitomes of the larger work as he envisioned it. One such paper was on the concept of Attitude in its elaborate radiation through the humanities and social and physical sciences; another mapped the ramifications of the concept of Conservation. Both were published in the journal he co-edited, "Perspectives in American History."

Editing that publication—an annual volume of monographic essays—became a central part of his work from 1967 to 1986. He scrutinized the contributions, edited them rigorously to maintain the standards he valued, and he rejected, without fear or favor, those he deemed insufficient or only plausible. He edited with a perfectionist zeal which, when directed to the contributions of his own immediate colleagues, earned him no friends. He was equally rigorous and demanding in his contributions to the main work of the history department: devising the curriculum and recommending scholars for appointment. In both, he insisted on maintaining the most rigorous standards. But the chief target of his perfectionism was

himself. He strove to meet his own extraordinary standards, which were increasingly devoted to teaching rather than publishing. His classroom lectures, rewritten every year and delivered from notes that fill 200 meticulously typed pages, were major intellectual performances, into which he poured his learning and his passion for the life of the mind, at the same time seeking to convey to students at various levels his unique theory of the evolutionary history of ideas, together with the information required for their education. That effort and his careful supervision of an increasing number of graduate students, consumed much of his energy. For them, he embodied and enforced his own stringent standards, expecting them to read widely in multiple languages and to write precisely with a self-critical eye; yet he extended to sometimes trembling students a tolerance for imperfection he never permitted himself.

But all of this—his pursuit of knowledge and his efforts to convey its essence to his students—was only one facet of his life. As rigorous, demanding, and unrelenting as he was in his professional life, so indulgent, generous, welcoming, and charming he was in his social life. A bachelor, he was a connoisseur of art, a gourmet who became legendary in the best restaurants of Boston and Cambridge, a book collector of enormous capacity (his Widener study was famous for its solid, ceiling-high barricades of books), and an enlivening companion on all sorts of social occasions. He could turn the smallest encounter, with the most obscure acquaintance, into a memorable event. His colleagues' children, as well as their parents, relished his company. So did others outside the university. In his frequent rounds through a leading local bookstore, its manager recalled in a note to his staff and affiliates, Fleming would “cajole, joke, and literally test our wits, tossing out bon mots that it would be impolite not to answer. You hoped your answer would make him laugh. He was formal and correct—a small man in a bow tie, camel hair coat, and a fedora, with patrician diction, and [yet he was]...thoroughly unpretentious.”

Fleming did not live to complete his projected history of science, but he left behind substantial and original works of historical scholarship, a number of brilliant essays, and the image of a wonderfully learned scholar who creatively engaged with his students and the company around him. One of his admiring graduate students, considering the complexity of Fleming's persona—his intimidating erudition and casual charm, his intellectual rigor and welcoming amiability—described him as “gloriously improbable.” So he was, to the great benefit of his students, colleagues, and friends.

Respectfully submitted,

Oscar Handlin
Ernest R. May †
James Turner (University of Notre Dame)
Bernard Bailyn, Chair