

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on March 15, 2005, the following tribute to the life and service of the late William E. Gienapp was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

WILLIAM E. GIENAPP

BORN: February 27, 1944

DIED: October 29, 2003

William Gienapp died of a prolonged illness at the age of 59, on October 29, 2003. His loss has been keenly felt by Harvard students, his colleagues, and the historical profession.

Gienapp was born in Denton, Texas on February 27, 1944. His father was a public school principal and teacher, and his mother taught as well. Most of his boyhood was spent in rural Iowa, about 30 miles outside of Des Moines, but in his early teens the family moved on to Southern California. He began his undergraduate work at the University of California at Berkeley as a physics major, but was seduced into the study of history by his first college course on the subject, given by Kenneth Stampf, Berkeley's distinguished historian of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. After Berkeley, Gienapp went on to do graduate work at Yale, but was dismayed to find that the eminent scholar with whom he hoped to write a dissertation had recently concluded that little new could be learned about the coming of the Civil War and was therefore steering all of his graduate students into work on the Reconstruction period. Even at his comparatively tender age, Gienapp was sure that the Civil War was the central event in American history, and he was determined to conduct research that might enrich our understanding of how and why it had come about. If it could not be done at Yale, he would return to Berkeley and work under Stampf's direction.

Gienapp completed his dissertation in 1980 and took a teaching position at the University of Wyoming. After years of additional research, his monumental study, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856*, appeared in 1987. Published by Oxford University Press, it won the Organization of American Historians' Avery Craven Award for the best book on the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Based on deep immersion in an abundance of primary sources, his volume also provided a sophisticated and innovative statistical analysis of voting behavior in the era, and will remain a work of fundamental importance to students of the era. It did much to revitalize the study of nineteenth century American political history, and certainly it demonstrated that his temporary mentor at Yale had erred in his judgment about which areas of research were most likely to yield fruitful new insights.

Among his other scholarly writings, his biography, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America* (2002), and a companion volume of Lincoln's speeches and writings, *This Fiery Trail*, stand out. The biography, written in what one reviewer termed a “laconic, understated, almost Lincolnesque” style, is perhaps the best short life of Lincoln now available. Regrettably, Gienapp was not given the time to complete the follow-up volume to *The Origins of the Republican Party*, upon which he was working at the time of his premature death.

In 1989, Gienapp arrived at Harvard as Professor of History. Exceptional as a teacher as well as a scholar, he taught a wide range of undergraduate courses in American history from the Jacksonian era through Reconstruction. He gave a Core course on the American Civil War that attracted many students, and a novel and highly popular course on “Baseball and American Society, 1840-Present.” He enlivened the lectures in this course by wearing a different historic baseball cap each day—one for the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings, for example—drawn from his personal collection. He was a shy man, and struck some at first as being austere and even stiff. And yet he made a deep emotional connection with his students, communicating his genuine passion for the great issues he grappled with in his historical work.

His popularity was not purchased by giving gut courses. Far from it. One of his teaching assistants has remarked that he has “never known a professor who was able to get students to work so hard and, more important, to take such pride in their work.” His distinguished contribution to undergraduate education was recognized by the university in 2000, when he was named Harvard College Professor, a new designation intended to honor excellence in undergraduate teaching.

His deep attachment to his graduate students was legendary. They have spoken of his “single-minded devotion” to them, of his “warm, father-like presence.” One of them noted that in describing Abraham Lincoln's character traits—patience, humility, intense loyalty, deep emotional resources, and an almost angelic wisdom—Gienapp was describing himself. Another thought of Gienapp as a Civil War general—undoubtedly Ulysses S. Grant—with his graduate students as his officer corps. He was no distant commander, but wanted to be part of the lives of his field captains and lieutenants. When it came to the writing of seminar papers and dissertation chapters, though, he certainly did not expect his students to march along lines he had mapped for them. To the contrary. Some professors, he told them, “want you to think like they think” and some “just want you to think.” He placed himself firmly in the latter category.

The colleagues who knew Gienapp best found that there were no limits to his warm, lucid and truly disinterested collegiality. He rarely took leave from his teaching duties. Once he was asked to teach a demanding departmental service course to which he had vaguely and theoretically committed himself several years earlier. Gienapp responded that he would have to postpone his scheduled leave in order to do so, but promised to think about it. Two weeks later, he said that he would do the course and circulated a highly original and imaginative syllabus for it. His leave could wait, he concluded, if the department really needed his services.

During his time at Harvard, Gienapp lived in Lincoln, Massachusetts with his wife Erica and their two sons, William ('01) and Jonathan ('06). He was an avid gardener, particularly adept at the care and feeding of orchids, and an even more avid supporter of the Red Sox.

Respectfully submitted,

Akira Iriye
James Kloppenberg
Michael McCormick
Stephan Thernstrom, Chair