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FREDERICK B. ROBINSON
THE RECORD
"LIBERAL" OF A
EDUCATOR

BY
HOWARD LIVES

(16)

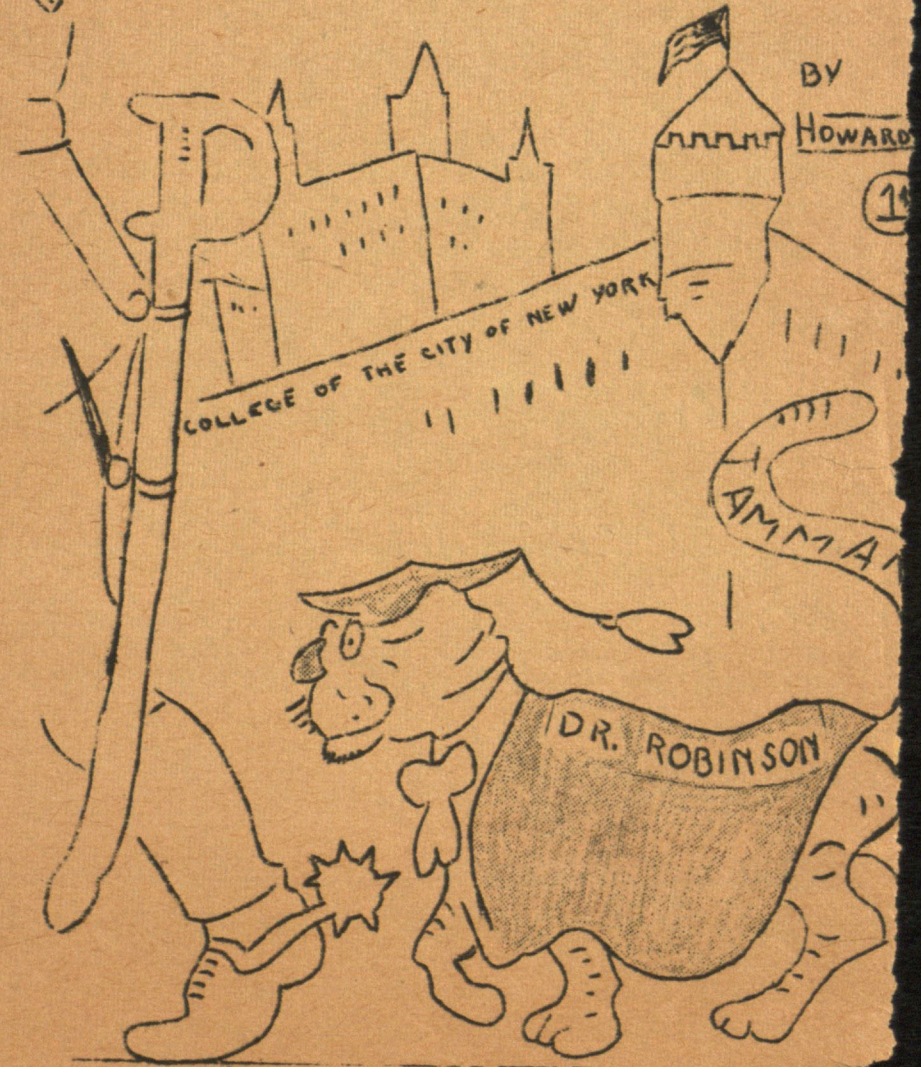


YOUNG PEOPLES SOCIALIST LEAGUE
4th INTERNATIONALISTS

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F. B. ROBINSON -

- A "LIBERAL EDUCATOR" -

"It shall be my policy to grant to the students the widest possible range of freedom in the field of student life...just as it would be improper for the students to invade the province of the faculty, I feel it would be improper to interfere with the students"

With these words Frederick R. Robinson assumed the presidency of City College in 1927. How true he has been to this creed it is our purpose to examine. But this pamphlet has a more immediate purpose. For Robinson is now coming up for reappointment. Now is the great opportunity to rid City College of him for all time.

The Young People's Socialist League (Fourth Internationalists) charges that Dr. Robinson is unfit to hold his present position. We charge:

- 1) That he has suppressed academic freedom.
- 2) He has victimized students of radical beliefs through innumerable suspensions & expulsions
- 3) He has hindered unionization of school employees
- 4) He has indulged in "literary" activities unfit for the president of a college
- 5) He has persecuted radical teachers because of their unorthodox views and has attempted to remove them
- 6) He is an extreme reactionary having, through words & deeds, given comfort to the Fascist cause
- 7) He has personally by temperament & training incompetent of holding his present position

These assertions we shall now proceed to prove

A GREAT CAREER BEGUN

Recent City College history must turn to the anti-military science campaign conducted in the fall of 1925 by the Campus, which was edited by Felix Cohn (son of Prof. M.R. Cohn). An editorial barrage, a student

A student mass meeting, & a student Council referendum demanding, by the overwhelming vote of 2092 to 345, the end of compulsory Mili. Sci. resulted in prohibiting the "Campus" from mentioning this topic. Dr. Sidney Mezes was then Pres. of the College, but Dr. Robinson as Dean of the School of Business and later as acting Pres., led the fight for compulsory ROTC.

It is related that in the faculty discussion at the time Prof. Brown of the Classical Dept. suggested that those students who had conscientious objections should be exempt from drill. To which Dr. Robinson replied "conscience is piffle"

TRY, TRY AGAIN

In 1926 a new editor, supposedly more docile than Cohen was appointed to the "Campus". But he fought vigorously for Student Rights. On Armistice Day, he ran a blank editorial column, printing only an excerpt from the ROTC Manual: "The inherent desire to fight and kill must be carefully watched for and encouraged by the instructor."

A new editor Heller, was deposed by the Campus Association because of his "bad taste". Heller charged that this was done after a telephone conversation between Robinson and the president of the association. When he was removed, most of the Campus staff resigned and formed the "Student", an unofficial paper later to be revived whenever the Campus didn't adequately fight for student demands.

It was at this time that Dr. Robinson said: "the most illiberal thing any one can do is to impose upon a student body his own views and theories. Here at the college we do not wish to be tyrannical"

AND NOW THE FUN BEGINS

After he had been officially inaugurated as president Dr. Robinson got down to business. In the fall term of '27, two pacifists individually protested against R.O.T.C ... and were expelled. On Armistice Day '27, Sy Gerson initiated another anti-militarist campaign, for which he was expelled.

BEFORE THE STORM...

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The next two years were quiet. Dr. Robinson was bringing the methods of Big Business into City College: re-organizing the curriculum, putting up new buildings etc. Then the storm, a small one in comparison with later events, burst out. A student was expelled because he had been arrested for distributing radical literature in the Bronx! Thus, not only did Dr. Robinson punish radicalism on the Campus; he even punished students for activity miles away from the school.

Then the editor of the "Campus" was suspended because he dared criticize the personage of Dean Edwards of the Business School.

Dr. Robinson's ego was slightly pierced that year when the Brooklyn College was formed. It had formerly part of City College. He then took the precaution of setting up an office in the 23rd building lest that too be taken from him.

LETS PLAY "SUSPENSIONS":

February 1931 brought a new outburst. The left-wing Social Problems Club published a magazine!! Such an unprecedented piece of revolutionary audacity could not go unpunished! On the basis of an absurd technicality, never applied to other clubs, the magazine was banned & the president of the club and ten other of its members were suspended. A storm of student protests brought the revocation of the suspension of all students but the president of the club. When another student wrote a letter to Dr. Robinson protesting the discrimination against the president of the club;;;guess what happened to him? You're right! He, too, was suspended (without a hearing).

And so the suspensions & expulsions continued at this merry pace. To Dr. Robinson it involved little more than a flick of the Royal Pen; but to the students it signified a tragic disruption of careers and studies, often resulting in permanent dislocation of life perspectives. But this was only the beginning--mass expulsions, wholesale suppression, police brutality were yet to come. City College was to be lost for education, for teachers and students. It was to be inherited by police squads awaiting the beck and call of our "liberal educator".

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L'ETAT...

In 1932, the Dramatic Society was preparing a play "Herry Go Round" which took a few gently pokes at Tammany Hall. Verboten! declared the administration.

In October of that year, the student Forum was prohibited from running a symposium on the presidential campaign, to which representatives from all parties had been invited.

It is interesting to contrast 2 statements of Dr. Robinson, the first made in September of '32, the second in October of the same year.

No.1

"College is not a rostrum for announcement of political views, but an institution for the development of the mind"

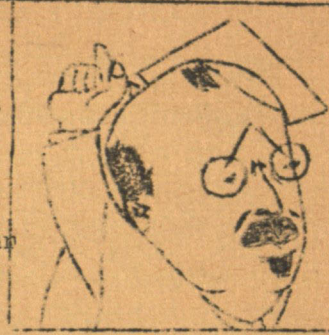
No.2

"If the student doesn't have the opportunity to discuss, in College, political theories, he will be greatly handicapped as to how to evaluate the governmental & social theories".

At this time, the "Campus Association" rejected all the candidates for the editorship because they were liberals or radicals; instead they appointed an obscure reactionary. The bulk of the staff then resigned and began once again to publish the "Student". President Robinson promptly forbade it; it came out anyway.

COPS OFF THE CAMPUS:

To top off the year, Oakley Johnson, an English instructor, was dismissed for reasons of "economy". (This case was similar to that of Mr. Schappes in 1935) The real reason for his dismissal was his outspoken radical sympathies. The Liberal Club, on October 21, '32, took the lead in organizing protest. Indignant at being deprived a room in the building, the students marched out to the college grounds, only to be met by the police. On Oct. 28 sixteen students were arrested in a pitched battle with the police on the campus and outside room 126. Some 11 hundred students filled the courtroom during their trial.



Suspensions followed; the students resultantly called a neck trail at which 1500 were present. They all un-animously found Dr. Robinson guilty. Here were punished, 19 suspended this time. Though the trial was held in an outside hall, far from the school grounds, Dr. Robinson could not be deterred from noting out his "Justice".

The suppressions at this period were truly unbelievable. Police were to be seen daily upon the campus. One student was expelled for the crime of pasting an unauthorized poster in the lunchroom!

It is indicative of Dr. Robinson's attitude that all he could say was: "Outside agitators have fastened themselves upon college property."

The students tried new tactics. On December 7, 1932 the Liberal Club invited him to speak. During the discussion, when Oakley Johnson got the floor, Dr. Robinson forgot about his dignity and stormed out of the Great Hall in a towering rage. This was the second such meeting from which he made a hasty exit. When, in June '32, Phi Beta Kappa passed a motion urging legalization of the "Student", left-wing paper, he unceremoniously barged out.

The climax of the affair was reached when on Feb. 24 1933, 1000 students struck for the readmission of the 19 expelled students. And they were readmitted!

THE WAR OF THE UMBRELLA

Every year, the anniversary of the College is celebrated with military exercises on May 30. This day is called Jingo Day. In 1933, Jingo Day was marked by one of the most amazing incidents in academic history.

The usual anti-war counter-demonstration was called. The students since they were not admitted to the stadium where the ceremonies were being held (despite a previous invitation by Dean Gottschall) were parading in the street along Convent Ave.

And now the curtain rises on an unparalleled comic opera. Dr. Robinson drives up in his limousine and gets out with his wife and female guests (Daughters of the American Revolution). Coincidentally, Colonel Lewis, partly head of the ROTC was at the same time walking to the stadium. The students hissed the colonel, who was to them the

the symbol of militarism in C.C.N.Y. The hissing continues. And then Dr. Robinson swings into action. He doesn't hesitate a moment. His duty is clear. As he afterwards expressed it, he must save the Daughters the horrid sight of students hissing the military. Dr. Robinson (B.A., M.A., Ph.D., LL.D.) dashes out, into the street and begins to lustily swing his umbrella at the students. Not being very accurate at the art of umbrella swinging he misses the students and loses control of his precious defense weapon. But he is not hurt. The students don't even attack him with their pencils. One of them, subsequently expelled, coarsely, with a smile on his face, returns the umbrella.

Not result: 21 students expelled, 6 suspended--and one umbrella undamaged.

It is significant that the 5th edition of the World-Telegram carried a report approximating the above. "They (the students) heckled Dr. Robinson (untrue--H.I.) as he entered the stadium with his wife and guests, & the President wielding a sturdy umbrella, pounded and routed the students." By the seventh edition the story was changed to read "A squad of policemen rushed to the rescue of Dr. Robinson this afternoon when he was set upon by a milling throng of pacifist students". This rather miraculous change was achieved only after repeated telephones by Dr. Robinson to the papers.

Jingo Day left a deep impression in the minds of the students. Bitterness was the dominant feeling. The campus was smoldering...and one year later in the celebrated visit of Italian students it burst into bright flame.

The best commentaries on Jingo Day are contained in 2 statements. The New Republic of June 21, '33 says "We don't care which of the parties is guilty...What is far more important is that any college president who descends to fistcuffs with his students has destroyed his usefulness as the perceptor of youth..."

Heywood Brown, in one of his better moments said: "Instead of the conventional Phi Beta Kappa key, Dr. Robinson seems to have attached a whistle to his watch chain. If Frederick B. Robinson has a suppressed desire to be a second lieutenant, he should visit a psychoanalyst".

ROBINSON AND THE FACULTY

The relations between Dr. Robinson and the faculty have never been too cordial. Only a few men dared oppose him. After the Italian fracas, however, a split occurred in faculty ranks: Dr. Gottschall and Profs. Cohen and Overstreet urging clemency. Dr. Robinson triumphed, of course.

He has consistently tried to "get" radical teachers. The case of Johnson is an example. The case of Mr. Schappes is similar in nature. Fired because of "economy" (read: independent political opinion), he was reinstated after a wave of student protest. Whatever our political differences with Mr. Schappes may be, we consider and still do, his reinstatement a victory for academic liberty and an example of the practicability of militant tactics.

Generally speaking, it is not difficult to observe a healthy disdain for Dr. Robinson among the teachers, particularly in the lower ranks.

UNIONS IN CUNY

Dr. Robinson has been consistently hostile to any attempt of school employees at unionization. To briefly cite two instances: last year the "Campus" charged discrimination against library employees. Just recently, we have seen the virtual terrorization of lunchroom employees who joined a union. Dr. Robinson has not lifted a finger to stop this.

ROBINSON--HER GROSS POLITIKER

We have charged that Dr. Robinson is a reactionary. We can safely ignore his vague and verbose pronouncements on "democracy." Much more revealing are several of his specific statements.

The New York Times of Sept. 23, 1932 quotes Dr. Robinson on his return from a summer trip to Italy: "he found no war-like spirit among the Fascisti (sic) and considered them all like a crowd of college boys 'whooping it up for the team' ". What a keen observer!

The Times of March 12, 1933 quotes him as saying: "Uttered vilification against the German Nationalists (Nazis-H.I.) will be of little avail and the support by American Jawry of opposition parties in Germany to defy openly Hitler and his followers would only serve to aggravate the situation.

and finally had not Dr. Robinson made his inane remark to the students when they hissed mention of Fascist Italy, "You're worse than guttersnipes", There would have been at least less trouble.

So that Dr. Robinson was guilty of provocation on four counts:

1. The original invitation,
2. Refusal to allow campus counter-demonstration,
3. Refusal to allow opposing speaker, and
4. His now classic remark.

"TO THE ENSLAVED, TRICKED ITALIAN STUDENTS"

One can therefore understand why the students were incensed to hissing; why Alexander, the President of the Student Council, said, "We greet the enslaved, tricked students laboring under Italian Fascism". In any case, at no time did the students act in such a rowdy fashion as the Italian Department and ROTC staff when they mobbed Alexander.

As Dr. Gottschall put it in his faculty report: "To them (the students) the menace of fascism in America looms very close...They cannot afford to wait until the Fascist movement has grown stronger, but must combat its every manifestation".

This report delivered when the faculty was considering what penalties to mete, is a document every student should read. Eloquenty he describes the intimate connection between the college and its social milieu, and even hints that the invitation to the Italians was provocative. He realizes that expulsions cannot stifle independent student thought. Yet he urged five suspensions on the paternalistic ground that "More forgiveness would be construed as vindication".

But this was not enough. The report of Dean Skene, instigated by Dr. Robinson which urged twenty-one expulsions, was adopted. Our Shylock had secured his pound of flesh.

Thus ends the major cycle of suspensions and expulsions. Its effect in wrecking lives cannot be estimated here. Certain questions concerning the social implications of this struggle must, however, be considered. But before we do so, let us briefly examine a few other phases of our subject.

failure. The other came back a complete success. He of course had never bothered with any social thought. He had always attended exclusively to his studies. The moral; all reds are failures.

ROBINSON - THE man

Dr. Robinsons personality need not detain us very long. At best, he is a pugnacious mediocrity. Much of the trouble in the school, despite its social roots, could have been avoided by a diplomatic, friendly personality. There are a few incidents worth recording.

Two years ago Dr. Robinson won a World-Telegram prize as the most unimportant personality of the year. In March 1933 students found a reprint of an article from the "American Business Journal" which praised Robinson extravagantly. A copy of each was in every student's locker. After investigation, it was found that this magazine was a "puff" sheet, that is a sheet which for a certain remuneration will print a laudatory article about anyone. It was never discovered who arranged for printing this article. At the same time the "Daily News" printed an article in which they referred Dr. Robinson's goatoo.

He found it necessary to answer with a "Letter to the Editor" pointing out it was a Van Dyke & not a goatoo. x The President has had a diversified list of hobbies. In an interview with the Woman's Home Companion (what a talent for getting in the best papers) he said "I turn to something new each year & they're equally bad". Among his hobby's are sculpture, etching colle, literature (particularly literature). Of him it may truly be said in Goldsmith's words...

And still they gazed and still the wonder grow
That one small head could carry all he know.

IN CONCLUSION

This is the record, in brief, of Frederick B. Robinson.

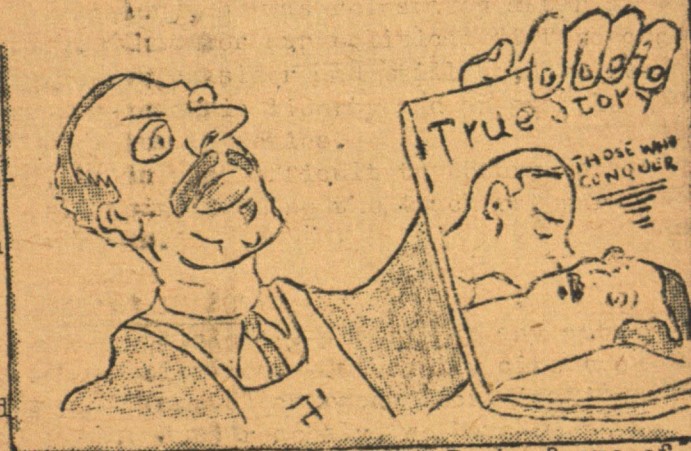
It would be a serious error to dismiss this case as the mere peculiar character of one individual. This is a record of an important, tense social conflict.

And one little gem delivered on January 5, 1935. Praising a hysterical Hearst attack on the USSR, he uttered the following brilliant remark: "Communism is nothing new. It is as one of the primitive forms of government (tribal), thousands of years ago. To revert to it would be to destroy the development of mankind for centuries."

In view of the above remarks would it really be unfair to expect Dr. Robinson to come out with a bold statement favoring the restoration of the Bourbons in France?

LITERARY STUFF!

DR. Robinson did not confine his wisdom to mere oral statements. He also participated in the literary life of the nation. For some peculiar reason, he had a predilection



for the Hearst press. Birds of feather... Part of one of his articles is worth quoting. It follows:

"My suggestion is that some legal provision should be defining subversive activities in schools as CRIMINAL & liable to expulsion. authorities should EXPEL and KEEP EXPELLED persons who are shown to persist in such activity. Colleges & universities of course should permit discussion of various types of activities, but they cannot tolerate a practical program of subversive activities..."

TRUTH IS STILL STRANGER THAN FICTION

The lead article of the November 1935 issue of "True Story Magazine" featured an article by Kate Pullman on "My Own Love Tragedy: America's Strangest Romance". There was also an article entitled "Those Who Conquer" written by one Frederick B. Robinson. This fanciful masterpiece of literature related how two of the Proxy's graduates returned to school: one, a campus radical, a complete

The history of the suspensions and expulsions at the college has not been a history of youthful exuberance pitted against aged administrative obstinence. Dr. Rob- has been merely an exaggerated, and aggravated person- ification of certain social forces: specifically, the putrescent influence of capitalism in education.

Students who participate in local struggles for, let us say, the ending of tuition fees, are likely to grasp the social implications of the conflict. Their horizons widen and from the specific local questions they begin to gather the necessity of struggling on the greater and crucial issues of the day. Especially is this true of a school like City College where the students come from working class homes and often are in school by the skin of his teeth.

In brief, the student sees the necessity of partici- pating in the great fight of the working class for Soc- ialism. He sees the necessity of making that struggle a revolutionary conflict. And he must, sooner or later, come to the conclusion that the Fourth International is the sole vital revolutionary force in the world today:

But here in City College we face an immediate task upon which all groups and trends of political thought can unite, at least if these trends be of the slightest progressive nature. Once again the militant student of banner must be unfolded: JUST ROBINSON!

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