Norman Scott Brien Gras, 1884-1956

Professor Gras himself often wrestled with the practical problem of providing suitable inclusive dates for phases of historical development. He accepted the necessity for the chronological markers raised by historians, but he mistrusted those markers and often challenged their location. He would probably have been skeptical of an assertion that the span of his career at the Harvard Business School served to delimit an era in business history.

And yet, the temptation to draw some such conclusion is overwhelming. The deep sense of personal loss that the news of Professor Gras' death on October 9 brought to his friends was linked with a strong realization, shared by many, that an era had ended. Perhaps, as Professor Gras himself seemed to believe, it had been ending for some time, and a new phase was already well launched.

It is too soon, perhaps, to attempt precise measures of what N. S. B. Gras did, or to appraise what he wrote. Neither is it appropriate, since most of the essential facts are known and already have been recorded, to present here in fine detail the story of his career in business history. Those who worked closely with him, however, realize that some things should be said, not in a eulogistic way but to further the understanding of a man whose professional influence ranged far beyond the circle of associates who were familiar with the pressures that shaped his thought and scholastic life.

When, in 1927, Professor Gras was appointed to the Faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration to teach business history, that subject existed only as a course name in the curriculum. Dean Wallace B. Donham had come to believe that men being trained for work in business should be given some historical perspective on their profession as business administrators, and he prevailed upon Macy's Straus brothers to endow a chair in business history. But neither the Dean nor anyone else had any specific thoughts on what a course in that subject should contain.

Professor Gras was chosen for the post because he had demonstrated considerable interest in the history of business in his work at

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Minnesota, where he was teaching in the Department of Economics and Business. This interest was partly owing to personal and local circumstance, but it had a strong intellectual base in the work of certain economic historians — notably Unwin, Ehrenberg, and Sombart.

While Dean Donham had given to business history a name, an idea, and strong institutional support, it was Professor Gras who charted the new field and marked it as something different from economic history. The emphasis of the Harvard Business School was on administration, and the new course in business history had to be set forth in terms that had meaning for the business administrator. Moreover, teaching at the School was by the case system, in which materials for discussion were drawn from actual business situations. While Professor Gras could supply background materials from his wide knowledge of economic history, he was under compelling necessity to seek new material from business — from the actual records of individual firms and executives. Thus the case system, the emphasis of the School on administration, and the opportunity the School afforded for observing the constant interplay of dynamic conditions in society all were important elements in the development of the new subject.

From the beginning, the subject was broadly conceived. While actively engaged in the collection of case evidence, Gras sought constantly to formulate a theoretical framework that would embrace observed realities. He was keenly interested in all kinds of business, ancient as well as modern, and he looked unceasingly in the accumulating data for evidence of patterns. The group discussions he organized at his office in Baker Library were devoted to broad contemplation and were attended by scholars from other fields of interest. The launching, in 1928, of the *Journal of Economic and Business History* and the type of articles there published evidenced a quest for greater knowledge of individual business units, an interest in the relation of the firm to its environment, and an appreciation of the essential interdependence of economic history and business history. At the same time, his active promotion of the Business Historical Society helped enlist the interest of businessmen in his work and relate that work to vital business issues of the day.

Having formulated from scattered available evidence a set of concepts about stages of capitalism and patterns of secular trend, Gras sought additional information to support or refute those concepts. To this extent his approach was clearly deductive. Very early, however, he came to feel that the scholar's knowledge of

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business was so meager that there was real doubt whether the most important questions were being asked. Attempting, on the one hand, to answer questions already posed, Gras by inductive methods simultaneously sought, on the other hand, to unearth new questions. This bilateral approach to business history was a unique and exacting challenge. The broadly conceived basis of business history tended to be obscured by the fact that the immediate common requirement of both deductive and inductive approaches was greater knowledge of the behavior of business units. As a practical matter, a great deal of Professor Gras' time came to be spent in getting to know business. Beyond this was the even more prosaic necessity for learning how to gain access to and employ business records.

Thus, the years from 1927 to 1939 were full of searching – for new answers to old questions; for evidence that would suggest new questions; for answers to new questions. Culmination of the formative period in business history took the shape of *Business and Capitalism*. The volume was experimental. It was written with full realization that supporting evidence was fragmentary. It was written with courage, out of conviction that the time had come for a statement of thinking to date. It reflected the pressures of perhaps the most turbulent decade the American businessman had yet experienced. It stimulated rather than calmed the intellectual controversies in which business history was enmeshed, but it served, and serves, as a beacon.

Out of the dozen years emerged some major contributions. Professor Gras, not alone but certainly among the foremost, breeched the barrier of misunderstanding and suspicion between the businessman and the historian. He established a pattern of objectivity and formulated the stringent groundrules for achieving that objectivity. He, with others, literally saved the records of American business from the fire. At a time when money was scarce and social science research was not a fashionable philanthropy, he was responsible for the channeling of thousands of dollars into historical investigations. Meanwhile, he taught.

Paradoxically enough, it was as a teacher that Professor Gras received the lesser notice from his academic associates. This may have been because his students went, with few exceptions, into business rather than academic life – an inevitable consequence of the predetermined School environment and of the then almost nonexistent opportunities for a rewarding career in business history. Yet Gras was a gifted teacher, and it was in the classroom where his true beliefs most clearly were revealed. Here the narrow was

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lucidly drawn upon to support the broad. The individual firm receded and patterns emerged. Stunning generalizations shocked students to challenge, and to think. Barbs of wit and, sometimes, satire impaled important concepts upon student minds. The excitement of ideas then new often charged the air. No theory, institution, or individual was too sacred to escape piercing scrutiny, but some of Professor Gras' most monumental skepticisms were tempered by a twinkling eye or a scholarly admission of counter arguments. Student viewpoints were not merely tolerated but solicited with respect, and Gras learned much while he taught. The ultimate impression carried away by his students was not of particular facts or theories but of the long-term interplay of massive forces that was business. They left, stimulated and curious, vividly aware of vital questions still to be answered. They also left with profound admiration, certainly for Gras' classic breadth of scholarship but also for his knowledge of business and his penetrating comprehension of the motivations of the businessman.

In the years following 1940 work pressures outside the classroom mounted steadily. Business history spread, prospered, matured. New studies multiplied; data piled up faster than it could be assimilated. The exploratory, experimental phase of work that commenced in 1927 was drawing to a close and the time for synthesis, revision, and reorientation, toward which Gras had conciously been pointing his efforts since the start, was at hand. Amidst growing demands upon his time, Gras clung tenaciously to a work pattern evolved in an earlier, less trying environment. Forsaking the office at noon each day, he trudged, briefcase in hand, across Larz Anderson Bridge to disappear into the Craigie Street study. But it was new research opportunities to which he gave most of his energies, laying aside for a time that never came the final recording of observations accumulated in a lifetime of study.

Regret for what may have been lost is diminished because so much was achieved, and among the achievements business history itself must be numbered, together with the respect of a generation of scholars and the affection of those who were privileged to know the man.

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