
Review by Ellen Schrecker, Yeshiva University

There was nothing unique about New York University (N.Y.U.)’s dismissal of Edwin Berry Burgum in the spring of 1953. Dozens of other institutions were doing or were about to do the same thing. Burgum, a tenured Associate Professor of English, had invoked the Fifth Amendment in response to questions about his supposed Communist connections posed by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (S.I.S.S.) the previous fall and N.Y.U., after a lengthy internal hearing, decided that he had to go. In his detailed – and depressing – exploration of the Burgum case, Phillip Deery offers us “an anatomy of an inquisition” that shows exactly how and why a supposedly liberal institution of higher learning capitulated so readily to the forces of repression that characterized the American polity during the early years of the Cold War (469).

As Deery notes, few other scholars have fleshed out the academic inquisition by producing this kind of case study. Some of the problem may have been logistical. Not every school is eager to collaborate in the washing of its dirty linen by opening its archives, and the delays involved in obtaining F.B.I. and other official records can be daunting, especially for younger scholars. Deery’s judicious examination of N.Y.U.’s archives, as well as of Burgum’s F.B.I. files and a trove of student publications, has produced an exemplary study that, as he promises, offers insight into the “bureaucracy of repression” (470). Moreover, given the current resuscitation of a somewhat measured rationalization for McCarthyism that has emerged in the aftermath of the post-Cold War revelations about Soviet espionage, it is useful to be reminded of the serious damage the anticommunist crusade inflicted on its innocent victims.

1 For an overall view of the academic freedom cases of the McCarthy era, see Ellen Schrecker, No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
I use the word “innocent” purposely, for it is likely that Edwin Berry Burgum was or had once been a member of the Communist party (CP). A prolific literary critic, he was one of the founders of Science & Society, a scholarly Marxist journal most of whose editors operated within the penumbra of the party. He also belonged to or supported dozens of so-called “front groups” and causes associated with the Communist movement. Since the CP was a secret organization, the standard way to identify its members was to trace the pattern of their activities and associations on the not unreasonable assumption that if someone looked like a duck, quacked like a duck, and waddled like a duck, the red hunters could be safe in assuming they had found their prey. Congressional committees were like bird dogs; their public hearings flushed out the supposed Communists and exposed them to a wide array of legal and, especially, economic sanctions. Those sanctions were largely undeserved; most of the men and women who, like Edwin Berry Burgum, were singled out during the McCarthy period were punished for participating in perfectly legal, though unpopular, political activities. And no invocation of Stalin’s crimes (which admittedly were much, much worse than anything that occurred during the McCarthy era) can erase the fact that most of the American Communists and ex-Communists who suffered during the early Cold War were victims of serious injustice.

By 1952, when Burgum appeared before the Senate subcommittee, it was common for the men and women who did not want to name names or cooperate with the inquisition to employ the Fifth Amendment when asked about their politics. What was less common, however, was his later refusal to answer what were essentially the same questions put to him by N.Y.U.’s own investigating committee. Only a handful of academics did that – some because they believed their schools had no right to question their political beliefs and affiliations and others like Burgum, because they and their attorneys feared that answering their institution’s questions might expose them to charges of contempt or perjury if they were again called before a committee. All, of course, lost their jobs; but so, too, did many of the other academics who did cooperate with the investigations by their universities.

What was at issue in all of these cases was the contention that membership in the Communist party disqualified someone from teaching. N.Y.U.’s resident philosopher, Sidney Hook, was as responsible as anyone else for elaborating the rationale behind that formulation, one that, Deery shows, the school’s administrators eagerly embraced. Although they had no evidence that Burgum had ever abused his classroom, the university’s leaders operated on the then-common assumption that because Communists might try to subvert their students, they were unfit to teach. As a result, the N.Y.U. authorities believed, once Burgum’s appearance before the S.I.S.S. raised the issue, that they were obligated to investigate his political affiliations. His refusal to answer the university’s questions about those affiliations was a “failure to tell the truth frankly” and thus constituted “conduct unbecoming a teacher” (479, 483).

Deery’s most important contribution to this story is to show not only how the N.Y.U. authorities constructed their case against Burgum, but also how closely they collaborated with the nation’s key anticommunist activists and organizations in doing so. Thus, for example, in 1951 (a year and a half before Burgum’s congressional hearing), the university’s acting president asked the F.B.I. to supply him with the information he would
need to “clean up the campus” by eliminating “any professors who might be of a suspicious or subversive category” (474). Whether such cooperation took place, we do not know. The F.B.I. was fastidious about covering its traces. And, in any event, it is hard to imagine that the N.Y.U. authorities were unaware of Burgum’s politics. Though Deery implies that this incident shows that the initiative for Burgum’s subpoena could have come from the school, that seems unlikely. Even though most institutions of higher learning scrambled to rid their faculties of the men and women who refused to cooperate with congressional committees, they certainly did not welcome the adverse publicity those individuals attracted.

What is not at issue is that once Burgum appeared before the SISS, N.Y.U. pulled out all the stops to obtain evidence of the Communist connections it believed his invocation of the Fifth had been trying to hide. The administration requested and received material from the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). It also hired J.B. Matthews, one of the nation’s most prominent “experts” on Communism, as a consultant and even imported two professional witnesses to testify before the faculty committee that was handling the case. With Matthews’ help, the university compiled a massive collection of clippings, letterheads, petitions, articles, and other ephemera documenting Burgum’s political trajectory from the early 1930s on. The hearing before a faculty committee lasted from 18 February to 6 March, 1953 and produced a 984-page transcript. While it decided that N.Y.U. could not punish Burgum for using the Fifth Amendment, the committee nonetheless voted 9-3 that Burgum had been guilty of an “abuse of his University position under the cover of academic freedom”2 His dismissal was a foregone conclusion.

Deery’s painstaking reconstruction of the case leaves little doubt about the serious miscarriage of justice that the N.Y.U. administration participated in. Several years later, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) investigated the dismissal. Though it did not recommend censure and waffled about the obligation of faculty members to answer their institutions’ questions, it did criticize the university’s procedures and it noted that since the chancellor had stated that party membership disqualified someone from the faculty, Burgum had a good reason not to tell N.Y.U. about his relationship to the C.P.3 Perhaps Deery’s most dispiriting finding – and one that my own research reinforces – is how little support Burgum received from his colleagues.4 The chair of the English Department, who had promised to testify about Burgum’s teaching ability, backed out and no other faculty members protested the firing. Such timidity was widespread. The inability of Burgum and dozens of other politically tainted professors to find faculty positions in the United States until many years later (if at all ) testifies to how readily the entire academic community accommodated itself to the political climate of the day. It was not academia’s finest hour, as Phillip Deery has so eloquently shown us.

---


3 Ibid., 49-50.

4 Schrecker, No Ivory Tower, 299-300.

Copyright © 2011 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.