



L. Pearce Williams

September 8, 1927 – February 8, 2015

L. Pearce Williams, '49, PhD '52, the John Stambaugh Professor of History of Science Emeritus, died on February 8, 2015, at the age of 87. Pearce was one-of-a-kind. Tall, bombastic in both voice and attitude, politically conservative, a distinguished scholar, fiercely devoted to his students, and dedicated to teaching writing of the highest quality, he was a well-known figure on campus from 1960 until his retirement in 1994. He was a committed Cornellian.

Born Leslie Greenberg in 1927, Williams grew up in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, the son of George and Addie Adelia (Williams) Greenberg. He entered Cornell in 1944, intending to study chemical engineering. He left for a year in the U.S. Navy at the end of World War II. On his return, to fulfill a requirement, he took Henry Guerlac's history of science course. He was smitten. For the rest of his life, he argued that one could not understand Western Civilization without understanding the history of science. After graduating in 1949 (and that year marrying Sylvia Alessandrini '49), he stayed on at Cornell to earn his Ph.D. under Guerlac, writing a thesis on "Scientific education in France during the revolutionary and imperial periods, 1789-1815."

In 1948, Pearce and his brother Charlie '44 (who later became the long-time business manager of the *Cornell Alumni News*) tried to volunteer for the army of the newly-created State of Israel. But, Pearce recalled, because they were only half-Jewish (and, by Jewish religious law, not Jewish at all), their service was declined. A few years later, finding that anti-Semitism was keeping Sylvia from finding a job, he and his brother legally changed their name, taking their mother's family name.

On graduation, he taught at Yale, spent a year as historian at the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, and then taught at the University of Delaware. He claimed that one night, while teaching at Delaware, the bridge to his home had washed out and he had to ford a rushing creek, holding student papers high over his head to keep them dry. Pearce returned to Cornell in

1960, and never left. He became Professor in 1965, and took up the John Stambaugh chair in 1971.

Pearce began his scholarly work by looking at the social context of French scientific education. But he was ahead of his time, and “externalist” history of science was not yet in vogue. From the late 1950s, he focused more on the “internal” history of science, looking at the development of scientific ideas, with particular attention to the intersection of philosophy, religion, and science. He was best known for his 1965 biography of Michael Faraday (entitled, not surprisingly, *Michael Faraday: A Biography*), which won the History of Science Society’s Pfizer Award for best book in the history of science published that year. In the book, he argued that Faraday was the true father of electromagnetic field theory, providing the foundation on which James Clerk Maxwell would later build. Pearce published several other books in the area, and compiled a two-volume set of Faraday’s correspondence. Pearce also edited a number of readers placing the history of science fully into the Western Civ syllabus. In the final years of his career, Pearce worked on a biography (alas, never finished) of André-Marie Ampère, the great French physicist. Pearce was proud that, at age 60, he taught himself Latin so that he could read Kant in the version to which Ampère has access. Pearce also edited the Cornell University Press series in the field and served on the Board of Editors for the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*.

His teaching was legendary, both for the quality of his lectures and for the detailed comments he provided on student essays. Born to a vaudeville family, he was a natural performer. For many years, he presented to entering freshman “The Notorious Note-Taking Lecture (hint: it’s not about taking notes).” Among the topics was the founding of the university. Sample line: “One day, Ezra said to Andrew Dickson White, ‘I’ve got it! Our motto will be ‘An institution where any student can find instruction in any study.’ ‘Ezra, you can’t do that!’” White replied. ‘We’ll be overrun with students.’” Pearce waited a beat to give Ezra’s reply. “‘Not where I’m going to put it!’” After Pearce’s death, one student commented on Facebook that the Notorious Note-Taking Lecture “was the moment I knew I was at the right school.”

A key element of Pearce’s scholarship and teaching was his commitment to rational thought. In 1989, the *Cornell Daily Sun* wrote that “L. Pearce Williams found his religion of rationalism 40 years ago and has been preaching the search for truth ever since.... Like most fanatics, he is eager to teach by preaching the Word whenever and however possible – dynamic lectures to classes of 250 students, sarcastic letters to the editor, scathing critiques of colleagues’ work, stormy public debates and quiet one-on-one discussions with a student. These activities have earned the ... history of science professor the respect of some (including a 1971 award for distinguished teaching), the resentment of others and the attention of all. On one thing everyone can agree: L. Pearce Williams cannot be ignored....” The story captured Pearce’s distinctive voice: “He acknowledges that his freely shared views are filled with strongly held value judgments, but he wonders what’s wrong with that. ‘This will come across as, “You pompous ass,”’ he said, ‘but I am a moral human being. I have standards of behavior.’”

Students are desperate for this, by the way, for someone who will fight for values.”

Students did respond to him. In the Facebook comments after his death, one student wrote that he “chose History as a major because of [Pearce’s] masterful storytelling.” Tamar Terzian, herself

the daughter of an extremely popular Cornell professor, wrote that Pearce was “my best professor at Cornell. I took four of his classes and used to trudge up Libe Slope on Friday mornings to be in his 8 am section.” Pat Munday, one of his last Ph.D. students, called Pearce “a great mentor.” Pearce also helped recruit funding from Philip Merrill ’55 to provide TA support for the Western Civ courses.

The upheavals of the 1960s tested Pearce’s politics, and he became adamantly conservative. He wrote frequently to the *Cornell Daily Sun* and the *Ithaca Journal*, gaining (according to his obituary) “a certain local notoriety, or fame, depending on one’s point of view.” Years later he told another story, recalling a time when radical students were threatening to march on the homes of professors they opposed. One African-American graduate student, Pearce said, had been a TA for him and dissuaded his colleagues from heading to Pearce’s home. “‘He’s got guns,’ the student said, ‘and he’ll *use* them!’” Whether the stories were true or not, Pearce loved the role he played. When he retired, the *Cornell Alumni Magazine* described him as “either a pompous blowhard or a tough-minded teacher who bludgeoned his students into becoming better writers; an erudite lecturer on the history of science, or, as the Cornell Daily Sun dubbed him, ‘Cornell’s Biggest Loudmouth.’ ... ‘I don’t think it’s an exaggeration for me to say that throughout about 28 of my years at Cornell, mine was the only voice speaking up for Burkean conservatism. I’m not a Republican. I am, in fact, a Roosevelt Democrat who has stood still for the last 40 or 50 years while everyone else has moved.’”

Pearce also served the institution in a variety of ways, including as Chair of the History Department (1969-1974). Then, in 1984, Pearce joined with astronomer Martin Harwit to lead a group on campus creating a graduate Field in History and Philosophy of Science and Technology (HPST). With seed money he raised from the National Endowment for the Humanities, he helped bring a cadre of young historians and philosophers to campus, placing them in departments across the university. A few years later, the HPST graduate field combined with the two-decade-old Program on Science, Technology, and Society to form in 1991 a new department of Science and Technology Studies. I am not sharing any secrets – and holding back wouldn’t have been Pearce’s way anyhow – to say that not being the founding chair of S&TS was deeply disappointing to him. But according to records in the S&TS files, the department faculty at the time quite explicitly had hoped that he could somehow be formally acknowledged as a department founder.

Pearce retired in 1994, continuing to hunt with his Weimeraners and swim in the pool at his home on West Hill. Unfortunately, dementia arrived in the mid 2000s, robbing him of his beloved rationality, and Pearce spent his final years in a nursing home in Ithaca. He was survived by his wife of 65 years, Sylvia; by his children David, Alison, Adam, and Sarah; and by nine grandchildren.

Bruce V. Lewenstein