

Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999. 350 pp. + notes, acknowledgments, index, ISBN: 0-374-29984-6, \$27.00 cloth.

Americans continually debate the meaning of equality of opportunity while losing little sleep over inequality of results. Education is presumed to accomplish the former and justify the latter, eliminating any need to redistribute wealth. In the mid-1800s, the crusade for 'common schools' embodied that struggle, followed by the establishment of public high schools later in the century. By the late Twentieth Century, colleges had become the focus of efforts to reconcile equality of opportunity and inequality of results. As a result, the validity of college admissions tests, although often an arcane academic concern, sometimes engender surprisingly public debate through issues such as 'affirmative action' or athletic eligibility.

Unlike European youth's ordeal by subject-based exams, the only common exams faced by American aspirants to higher education are primarily 'short-answer,' quantitatively-scored tests assessing verbal and mathematical 'aptitude.' Further distinguishing the process from that in most of Europe, the exams are administered by a private (albeit non-profit) corporation. In *The Big Test* Nicholas Lemann examines how that organization, the College Board, founded in 1901 and re-invigorated in 1948 by adding a psychometric off-shoot, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), became a gatekeeper of nearly mythical proportions. Through that investigation he raises larger questions about the tensions between higher education and equality of opportunity since the 1930s. A journalist, Lemann enlivens a potentially deadly subject with intriguing anecdotes.

For example, the words 'Affirmative Action,' which predictably raise American blood pressure, can be traced to Lyndon Johnson's Vice-presidential Inaugural Ball in January, 1961. As Hobart Taylor, Jr., a young Black lawyer from Houston, reached the end of the receiving line, LBJ whispered that he had to see him the next day. At issue was a draft Executive Order on Equal Employment. Given the opportunity to rewrite it, Taylor sought a memorable phrase that suggested serious purpose. At the last minute, for alliteration, Taylor chose 'Affirmative Action' over 'Positive Action.'

Or, for forty years the College Board had posed essay questions to candidates for selective colleges. The 'short-answer' Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was a late-coiner designed originally for students applying for scholarships. Over lunch on December 7, 1941 some of the Board's statisticians were discussing their unlikely hope of convincing the College Board's traditionalist leadership to scrap the essays for the more statistically reliable SAT. The meal was interrupted by the unwelcome news from Pearl Harbor. Within two weeks the essays were suspended as too unwieldy for wartime, never to be re-instated.

Then there is the story of Stanley Kaplan, creator of the famed SAT preparation books and courses, who was an outstanding Jewish student at City College, and whose desire to attend medical school was thwarted by a flurry of rejections, probably inspired by anti-Semitism. Unemployed in the midst of the depression, he returned to his high school job of tutoring students for the New York State Regents exams. In 1946 a client asked him to help her prepare for the SAT. He made a fortune by giving public high school students some of the advantages of private school education.

'The Moral Equivalent of Religion,' the first of Lemann's three cleverly crafted 'books,' begins in the 1930s with two Harvard administrators trying to figure out how to infuse their largely private school-educated, Protestant student body with natural talent while maintaining the commitment to public service formerly encouraged by Protestantism. At the dawn of mass higher education, their Jeffersonian vision was to be accomplished through testing, championed by President James Conant and implemented by Dean Henry Chauncey. Conant deputized Chauncey to find ways to identify worthy scholarship students for Harvard. After World War Two, Chauncey accepted the Presidency of the College Board, guiding its transition to reliance on the quantitative SAT (Aptitude Examination). Meanwhile from his position on Truman's Presidential Commission on Higher Education, Conant duelled with George Zook for the direction of postwar higher education. Conant had opposed the GI Bill (a sin he later repented) and remained concerned about lowering standards; Zook was comfortable with mass higher education. Both won. The Truman Commission recommended greatly expanding higher education enrollments, but Conant brokered a deal to make the College Board the gatekeeper for elite colleges.

Although Michael Young coined the term 'meritocracy' to describe an anti-utopia, Americans instinctively embraced the term. In 1958, the year *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was published in England, about 6,000 miles to the west Clark Kerr became President of the multi-campus University of California. Over the following four decades many of the most dramatic battles over meritocracy, education, and equality would be fought there. Book II ('The Master Plan') derives its name from Kerr's

design for the University of California which enabled Berkeley to challenge the elite universities of the East and Midwest while providing higher education for an unprecedented proportion of youth. Although Kerr's 'Master Plan' enabled Berkeley to challenge Conant's and Chauncey's Harvard, it adopted the SAT and other ETS tests to assess applicants.

Lemann describes the ironic results of creating a meritocracy selected by the testing system. His sympathetic treatment of Clark Kerr shows how, having raised the University of California to remarkable heights, he was brought down by the very students and faculty who benefited from it, thus playing into the hands of Ronald Reagan. At the same time, older East Coast colleges adopted more meritocratic admissions, using the SAT as a talent scout.

Meanwhile, Asian-Americans' growing presence in the most selective colleges, aided especially by their SAT mathematical aptitude scores, seemed to confirm ETS's claim to provide an objective measurement of merit for college admission. However, African-Americans' low scores brought intellectual and political attacks on the SAT. The twin objectives of providing both equality of opportunity through standardized tests and more success for large numbers of African-Americans were now in conflict. 'Affirmative Action' seemed to offer a way out. The straightforward moral and political victories over segregation now seemed naive in the context of this complex new game. For instance, Nixon accepted the 'Philadelphia Plan' for Affirmative Action in order to drive a wedge between trade unions, the civil rights movement and the Democratic Party by 'tying their tails together,' in John Ehrlichman's memorable phrase. The three female Harvard Law School graduates Lemann follows move into lucrative jobs feeling they are on a gender crusade, but one that reproduces the existing class system. The inherent contradiction between equal opportunity and affirmative action is played out to an inconclusive end in the Bakke Case.

To add to ETS's problems, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the New York and California state legislatures passed truth-in-testing legislation and Ralph Nader launched an investigation which produced a scathing report, *The Reign of ETS*. ETS had always been affronted by Sidney Kaplan's test preparation products, which implied that preparation for the test was possible, thus undercutting its claim to measure aptitude. Just as ETS was finally making peace with Kaplan, who had admired the exams, a new and very hostile test preparation company called Princeton Review entered the field. Book II ends with ETS on the defensive from coast to coast.

Affirmative Action surprisingly weathered the Reagan and Bush administrations, only to run into heavy going during the more liberal Clinton administration, especially in California. Book III follows 'The Guardians,' ambivalent beneficiaries of the very meritocrats who benefited from ETS examinations, who wind up leading the opposition to California's Proposition 209 designed to end Affirmative Action in California. This is an intriguing and complex tale of talented individuals, moral dilemmas, and political hardball. Thus Jerry Karabel, a Berkeley professor best known for scholarship accusing American higher education of channelling students to pre-ordained social positions (especially through community colleges), becomes the unlikely vehicle of a report ratcheting back Affirmative Action at Berkeley in the interests of maintaining a more meritocratic stance. Glynn Custred and Tom Wood,

two traditional liberals who had strongly backed the civil rights movement, author Proposition 209 to defend the ideal of a color blind society. Molly Munger, a corporate lawyer described in Book II, rethinks her life and winds up working for Bill Lee, the Chinese-American later named director of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, to defeat the measure.

As the battle over Proposition 209 heats up against the backdrop of the 1996 Clinton-Dole presidential campaign, the sides would seem predictable. But national and state politics take the idealists for a ride. The liberal authors became dependent on conservative funders with different agendas. Karabel tries to craft a rival Proposition in tune with Clinton's 'mend it, don't end it' mantra, but gets undercut by a Clinton campaign seeking to protect him from addressing the issue. Molly Munger successfully pries the opposition leadership away from the politically counter-productive 'Feminist Majority' only to find that the promised funding from the California Democratic Party doesn't materialize. On election day Clinton sails to victory, having barely mentioned Proposition 209. Although the Proposition's 54 per cent to 46 per cent margin of victory was less than predicted, the result sets off a national re-think that seems destined to operationalize the sunset clause in Affirmative Action.

If Lemann ended the book there, I would end by thanking him for employing his journalistic skills to elucidate complicated events in an engrossing and understandable narrative that, as an academic historian, I can admire but not replicate. Nicholas Lemann has accomplished what most academics can only dream of: to write a book that is reviewed in the Sunday newspapers and excerpted in *Atlantic Monthly*, and that puts you on TV talk shows. Unfortunately *The Big Test* ends with a poorly judged 'Afterword' that displays the potential weaknesses of journalistic approaches to complex topics. Sadly this section has received most of the public attention. His polemic assumes that testing, and especially the SAT, determines who gets into the right colleges, leads the country, and reaps the financial rewards. This parodies the multi-faceted admissions process of selective colleges; American 'continuous assessment' provides records of high school achievement that are more valued than the SAT and selective colleges seek to create 'well-rounded classes' based on various other criteria. More fundamentally, Lemann walks blindly into trap of assuming education shapes the class system and thus can change it. And strangely, neither class, a leit-motif of the book, nor its relation to education is analyzed.

Although Lemann presents his book as an attack upon the elite, the book seems mired in elitism. A Harvard graduate who has spent recent decades working for *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, he seems incapable of envisioning other worlds. Any student not attending an elite college falls off Lemann's radar screen, pitiful victim. A recent study showing that students who declined offers of admission from highly selective colleges to attend less prestigious institutions wound up with similar incomes as those who accepted the elite offer. In the world created by Lemann, such a result is unimaginable.

Lemann recommends establishing a national curriculum, mastery of which would be the basis of all testing; he disparages any attempt to continue measuring scholastic 'aptitude.' This suggestion jars with the idea that education for an 'information age' should value the ability to handle new information over mastery of a fixed body of

knowledge. And to this reviewer in London, where teachers constantly bemoan the recently imposed national curriculum, the suggestion has a hollow ring.

This engaging book elucidates many steps in the twirling relationship between equality of opportunity and higher education, but save the last dance for serious academic inquiry.

Bruce Leslie

State University of New York, Brocton