In Memoriam

Abbott “Tom” Gleason (1938–2015)

Abbott “Tom” Gleason was born on July 21, 1938 in Cambridge, Massachusetts; he died of complications from Parkinson’s disease on Christmas Day 2015 in Providence, Rhode Island. He was 77. He is survived by his wife Sarah, his grown children Nicholas and Margaret, and four grandchildren. The son of S. Everett Gleason, a former professor at Amherst College, and later an intelligence officer at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and Mary Eleanor Abbott Gleason, an artist, Tom attended St. Albans School in Washington, D.C. There in addition to his studies he played soccer and studied art under the school’s beloved art teacher, Dean Stambaugh. He graduated from Harvard College with a bachelor’s degree in history in 1961 and a doctorate in Russian history in 1969.

Tom received numerous awards and grants. They included fellowships bestowed by the Howard Foundation, the Russian Research Center at Harvard University, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation. He received grants from the University of Heidelberg, Brown University, and The American Philosophical Society. He published four books, including his memoirs, edited five more books as well as publishing scores of book chapters, articles, book reviews, and encyclopedia entries.


Appointed an assistant professor of history at Brown University in 1968, Tom served as department chair from 1989 to 1992; he retired in 2005 as Barnaby Conrad and Mary Critchfield Keeney Professor of History emeritus. Among his other administrative leadership posts, Tom served as Secretary (Director) of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC from 1980 to 1982. He was
appointed Director, Brown Institute for International Studies, 1985–1988; he was elected President, American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, 1995–1996; and he served as Director, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 1999–2000. Tom remained active in various capacities at the Watson Institute, which he helped to establish, as a Senior Fellow until the end of his life.

With a fresh Ph.D. in hand in 1969, Tom’s aspirations were as vast as his curiosity about the world around him. His wide range of interests and his versatility led him to declare that he wanted to teach in Louisiana, “dividing my professional life into thirds: one third devoted to Dostoevsky and the Slavophiles, another third to Stalin and Soviet tyranny, and a final third to Preservation Hall and the Eureka Brass.” Yet, it seemed that he was constrained to pursue his various interests in New England for most of his life. Tom described his early attempts in the classroom as “my primitive lecturing technique, in which I lurched inexpertly between literature and pedantry, stand-up comedy and hysteria.” His courses at Brown, however, attracted many students to whom he dedicated much time and attention within and outside the classroom with his advice, encouragement, and hospitality. Tom was a particularly devoted advisor to his graduate students. They all became his friends and appreciated his close mentoring, editorial guidance, and lifelong attachment. He was never too busy to open his office door, hearth, or heart to them.

In some respects Tom was very much like a member of the Russian intelligentsia that he studied: his home was a virtual salon, seldom empty of colleagues, graduate students, neighbors, undergraduates, or local illuminati passionately engaged in heated discussions late into the night, amidst swirls of smoke until the use of tobacco dwindled. A whiff of bourbon, not vodka, circulated in the living room air. Toward the end of his life, the air might have become fresher, but the stream of visitors never abated. He loved to talk but he was also an intent listener. Those in his company profited from both talents.

His wit and humor were well-known, but he could be self-deprecating, too. In 1999, when Sergei N. Khrushchev, son of Nikita, the former Premier of the Soviet Union, became a United States citizen, Tom was interviewed on television concerning his feelings of having such a colleague at Brown University. “Well,” Tom opined, “it was like an ichthyologist being able to talk to a fish. I was the ichthyologist and Sergei, the fish.” Jon Stewart on his TV comedy show excerpted a shot of that pronouncement, muttered the cost of tuition at Brown

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2 Ibid. p. 267.