

Free Spirit: A Biography of Mason Welch Gross**Thomas W. Gross****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021****342 pages****ISBN: 9781978808331****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.295>**

Thomas W. Gross's biography of his father, Mason Welch Gross, deserves a wide audience, especially for anyone interested in the history of New Jersey. It tells the story of a remarkable scholar, teacher, and university president who played a pivotal role in shepherding Rutgers from two small liberal arts colleges with a land-grant agriculture school into New Jersey's state university. Mason taught two generations of Rutgers students: fellow veterans of World War II and the first wave of baby boomers. Mason's rise to leadership at Rutgers was meteoric. He arrived as an assistant professor and assistant to the dean in 1946; three years later President Robert Clothier named Mason provost. Initially passed over for the presidency in 1951, before the decade ended Mason took the helm serving as chief executive until his retirement in 1971.

The portrait that emerges from this biography of Mason Gross is a man who was an emblematic member of the privileged White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) elite in education, dress, dietary habits, and daily routine. Born into a prominent Hartford, Connecticut, family with strong ties to Yale University, Mason decided not to follow his father's wishes to attend the family's alma mater or enter the legal profession. Instead, in the midst of the Great Depression, he attended Cambridge University for his undergraduate degree, where he studied Greek and Roman classics, and then earned his doctorate in philosophy from Harvard University. Although declaring himself a "free spirit" intellectually, in terms of dress he favored conservative Brooks Brothers suits and seldom could be seen without a tie even at home. In terms of diet he favored red meats. Like many of his generation, Mason drank prodigious amounts of alcohol and smoked cigarettes

his entire adult life. For Mason, home was a refuge while serving as Rutgers president and he often listened to music to unwind, seldom engaging with his children.

When Mason arrived at Rutgers, the student body stood at a few thousand students; by the time of his retirement after 25 years, enrollment had risen to 30,000. Buildings mushroomed and the faculty grew exponentially. Thomas is careful in not turning this biography into a litany of what his father built or created, but he does examine some of the most significant achievements, among them the founding of the medical school in New Brunswick, establishing Livingston College, and creating an anthropology department. Mason strengthened the arts at Rutgers, although securing funds for the construction of a first-class performing arts center eluded him. There existed a democratic touch to Mason: he embraced the role of the “professor” on the television game show *Two for the Money* for five years. Despite Rutgers becoming a state university, Mason supported the continuation of nondenominational Sunday services at Kirkpatrick Chapel and regularly attended them during his presidency.

Thomas, a physician and former military officer, has sought to reach a broad audience and does provide the general reader important context for the major events central to Mason’s life, including World War II, McCarthyism, New Jersey politics, civil rights, and Vietnam. The author’s citations are lean and will disappoint the specialist, and the author did not consult archives outside those found at Rutgers. For instance, I wonder if Thomas could have gleaned more about Mason’s relationship with several New Jersey governors by consulting the papers of Alfred E. Driscoll, Robert Meyner, Richard Hughes, and William T. Cahill. Despite these minor quibbles, this is a book that historians of higher education will find invaluable, especially for the insights it offers to Mason’s character and temperament.

Researching and writing this book was clearly an effort by the author to better understand his father, and one comes away reading this book with a great admiration for Mason. Few university leaders today can be found teaching in the classroom or keeping such an open door to students. Mason's devotion to free speech and justice even when pressured by political leaders to abridge them is commendable. At great peril to their careers, Mason and New Jersey Governor Richard Hughes supported the right of Professor Eugene Genovese in 1965 to speak his mind in regard to the Vietnam War despite the public outcry. In the late 1960s, Mason recognized the need for Rutgers to provide more equitable admissions policies and programs to overcome systemic racism experienced by African Americans. In response to protests against the Vietnam War, Mason safeguarded the right of dissent and nurtured his students. When students took over the main administration building on campus, Old Queens, in early May 1971, Mason forbade the police from using force to remove them and instead allowed students to stay for the night. He sent sandwiches and coffee for them so they would not go without dinner.

There are some gaps. The author does not explore questions of gender and Mason's attitude toward the women's movement of the early late 1960s and 1970s. What was Mason's relationship with Douglass College and why did Rutgers College remain all male during his tenure? One of the major struggles on campuses in the 1960s centered around *in loco parentis* and police efforts to suppress the use of illicit drugs. How did Mason relate to the emerging counterculture in the 1960s, especially the changing mores regarding dress? When Mason arrived at Rutgers, students still often wore ties to class; by the end of the late 1960s, students dressed far more casually.

Thomas's insider-outside perspective is one of its strengths. Lacking an introspective diary or memoir from Mason, Thomas relied heavily on speeches and correspondence that survived from his father, along with his recollections of certain events as well as those of other family members,

friends, and colleagues. It is clear that, despite a prodigious amount of research, certain aspects of Mason's life remain difficult to decipher. Like many World War II veterans, he had been reticent to talk or write about his military service. The war clearly made him initially uneasy to return to the academy, and he had misgivings about a life as an untenured philosophy professor at Columbia University.

Why do individuals do what they do? Thomas Gross freely admits that parts of his father remain an enigma to him. He recalls a man who seldom engaged with him and his siblings. For instance, when Mason counseled his eldest daughter about college, the session took less than a minute before abruptly ending, but he spent an hour with a neighbor's daughter who was asking for similar advice. Thomas recalls learning of his father's first bout of cancer from a neighbor on a return visit home from college. But Thomas does recall some happy times and glimpses of the Mason who many of his students, colleagues, and wider public knew—a gregarious and brilliant man. Thomas recalls fondly when his father played the piano at the family's annual Christmas party while Rutgers president, and the kindness he showed him as a young boy when he flew on an airplane the first time. And Mason did not delegate purchasing holiday presents for his children to his wife or a secretary, but personally picked them out.

Avoiding hagiography, Thomas W. Gross has offered a compelling portrait of a remarkable individual who led Rutgers through a turbulent time. When I conducted interviews with Rutgers alumni as founding director of the Rutgers Oral History Archives (1994–1998), many spoke highly of Mason, especially World War II veterans. *Free Spirit* provides convincing evidence that this admiration of Mason Gross was well deserved.

G. Kurt Piehler
Florida State University