

# Oakland University Chronicles

*Interview with*

## Thomas Fitzsimmons

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: March 14, 1998

Interviewer: Paul Tomboulian



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# Oakland University Chronicles

## THOMAS FITZSIMMONS

Date of birth: October 21, 1926

### EDUCATION

Certificat	Sorbonne and Institut de Science Politique	1949
B.A.	Stanford University	1951
M.A.	Columbia University	1952

### PRIOR TO OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Director of Research for Publication  
HRAF (Human Relations Area Files) at  
Yale University

Assistant Professor  
American University

### OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1959	Assistant Professor Other positions held: Associate Professor Professor
1989	Resigned

### SINCE LEAVING OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Continued editing and publishing book series for  
University of Hawaii Press/Katydid Books:  
*Asian Poetry in Translation: Japan; and Reflections*

Editor and publisher, Katydid Books

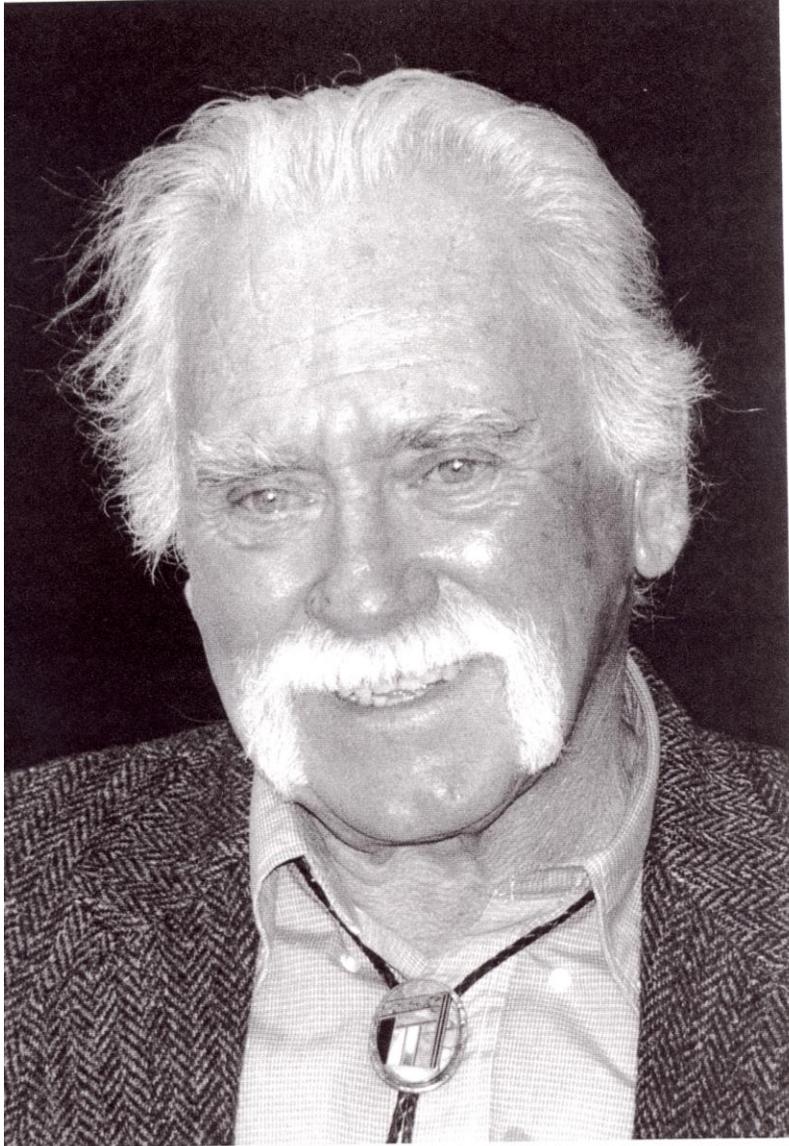
Fulbright Professor: Sophia University; Tokyo, Japan

NEA - Belles Lettres

### CURRENT OCCUPATION

Writer, editor, publisher

*Current as of March 8, 1998*



**Photograph of Thomas Fitzsimmons**

March 14, 1998

Photographer: Alice Tomboulian



Thomas Fitzsimmons\*  
*Associate Professor of English*  
*(on leave 1962-1964 as*  
*Fulbright Professor at the*  
*University of Tokyo)*

**Photograph of Thomas Fitzsimmons**

MSUO Yearbook 1963

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with THOMAS FITZSIMMONS**  
**March 14, 1998**

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews in the Oakland University Chronicles project, supported in this second year by a special university allocation. Today is March 14, 1998 and we are speaking from the studios of KCHF-TV11 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University, the time prior to the first graduating class which was in 1963. Our focus is on the first years and the pioneers who started the new university.

My name is Paul Tomboulian and I have been a professor of chemistry at Oakland University since 1959. My guest today is Thomas Fitzsimmons, who was a member of the charter faculty of what was then MSUO. Professor Fitzsimmons taught English, literature, and creative writing at Oakland University for 29 years. For the past seven years, Tom has been living in Santa Fe where he is a poet and editor of two series of books. Tom, welcome to the Oakland University Chronicles project.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Thank you.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tom, could you start by perhaps telling about what you were doing before you came to Oakland University?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I was working for Yale University for a department called Human Relations Area Files [HRAF] which had been given a contract by several government departments to produce full cultural studies of a number of countries. The project is still going on, as a matter of fact—I think they're up to 60 nations now. I had been with the *New Republic* prior to that, and this project of Yale's got into a bind because they were doing a great deal of research but they weren't producing any books.

So I came on essentially as a person who knew how to get a book done, and deadlines met, and stuff like that. Gradually I took over one team, at that time the RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republics] team. We did a book first on the RSFSR and then on the whole USSR. In the process of getting

that book written, we put together a manual to guide other teams in the doing of the research, a very new area. It was the meeting of experts in different fields about a country, around a table, exchanging thoughts and information, and gradually coming up with a synthesis so that what the geographer said didn't completely contradict what the economist said, and things like that. That was a very difficult thing to do.

In the process of doing it we put together a manual. Ned [Edward T.] Hall who was a cultural anthropologist and lives in Santa Fe now, and George Trager who was a cultural linguist and worked with Taos Indians often—under their guidance we put together a 35- to 40-page series of questions that could be asked of any culture, and should be asked if you were trying to make a book that could be compared to others. For that reason, I was invited to come to MSUO and help put together the area studies program, not to teach in it but to help design it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That was a little later. How did you first hear about MSUO?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I had a telephone call one day from Bob [Robert] Hoopes, who I believe was with the American Council of Learned Societies in New York at that time. He had been appointed as dean of the faculty, or some such position, and was recruiting [some of] the first faculty. He called me and asked if I would come and be effectively the poet in residence, the teacher of creative writing, teach English, and also participate in these designing seminars for curriculum. He told me about the basis of this university, that it was supposedly going to be able to investigate and explore the possibilities of making somewhat more flexible the standard higher education system. There was talk of St. Johns [College] at Annapolis, and various things were to be examined, so there would be greater flexibility and more focus on individual achievement and development than on meeting certain rigid criteria for moving ahead.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But you didn't know Bob personally before that?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I didn't know Bob. No, I'd never even heard of this [MSUO] project.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And he didn't know you, but he came to know of you through what connection?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: My memory is a little vague but it seems to me Bob said that his director (whose name I don't remember) was a friend of the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the East coast periodical world being what it is, we all knew one another. Everybody was on an important magazine—important in its effect on public opinion—and was known to everybody else, so that was not surprising and it was reassuring (but I don't remember his name either). I had a lot of respect for the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* at that time; he was an outstanding man.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tom, what was your connection with the East coast periodical group?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I was working on the *New Republic* magazine in Washington, DC. They had recently moved their operation—the principal editorial offices—from New York to DC, when the magazine was restructured when the vice president, Wallace, left. We had a very small staff, and I had a great many things that I had to do covering the political scene. I was also the principal editor for foreign affairs, and there was news coming in from people abroad who corresponded with us. I was fairly well known in journalists' circles.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But you had no specific academic experience?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: No, I had never taught at a university. I had been to a bunch of them, both in Europe and in the States. I was a little surprised at the invitation, but it was also quite a pleasing, exciting idea. At the beginning we just agreed that I'd come out and be looked at, and look at, and talk. We did that for several days.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You came out and met Woody Varner. Tell us about that.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I met Woody Varner, but it's kind of vague. I think the first building had been constructed and was being finished on the inside.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It wasn't what you were used to, though, coming from the East coast.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Well, that was all right. I was getting pretty tired of the East coast, actually. I had some hesitations about going to the Midwest because, in that small society on the East coast, that is the equivalent of ending up in Siberia or something. No more really fancy parties, no more of the important people of the world to deal with, just regular folks. Of course the American myth of the Midwest is that it's repressive and stodgy, and totally the opposite of DC, New York, and Boston. But I'd grown up in Massachusetts, and I knew the East coast pretty well.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So you perhaps saw this new opportunity as a chance to do something that you wanted to do?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Well, I was sure it would leave me more time to write—I was wrong about this for the first several years—and that was important. All of my writing had come to be either about politics on the magazine, or at HRAF constructing these books. I wrote myself, physically, from materials given to me by the teams, the first half dozen of books that came out of HRAF, because I discovered that the academic styles not only were not terribly exciting, but they were so different from one another that if you wanted a book, you needed to reconcile the way the political scientist wrote with the way the military specialist wrote. This of course produced a great many ego problems, but it had to be done. That's why the books weren't coming out—nobody wanted to change a word.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You've had enough experience with higher education; tell us some of your experiences.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Well, I went into the war at fifteen and a half as a merchant seaman. I left high school.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: About what year was that?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: It was '42 or early '43. When did the war start?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: 1941 was Pearl Harbor, but Europe was at war earlier.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: It was '42. It was a difficult war for me—a lot of hard things happened. I got very angry at always being helpless on a merchant ship, being shot at and sunk several times. So in a moment of madness between ships, I signed up for the Army Air Force Reserve. As soon as I was 16, I was able to do that. Then I would be called up at 18, which is what happened.

At 18, I was off the beaches of France in the Channel. So I couldn't report on time, and my career in the Air Force began with this horrible problem of having reported late, and being an embarrassment because I'd been in action when they were training, and all this nonsense. But I got out of the Air Force with the GI Bill.

I did other things for a couple of years after the war, and made a little bit of money—my mother was dependent on me at that time—and put some aside. Then I decided to try to go to college. I took that Princeton exam that veterans could take, and I did pretty well except in math. I decided if I was going to go to college that I would go to California, because I'd never been to California. This is a theme in my life: if I haven't been somewhere, I'm very interested in it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I see that new things don't bother you.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: So I finally was accepted at Fresno State College—which is now, I guess, Fresno University—on probation. After I was there a year, there were more embarrassments because I was by then a published short story writer. I'd been writing during the war, so I was in their most advanced writing course, but I flunked “bone-head English” because I didn't know how to talk about English—I only knew how to use it. So when I was asked, “What is a subject? What is a predicate?”—I didn't know. There I was in their lowest English class and their highest English class—we had to sort that out. But at some point in there I decided I was wasting my GI Bill because I could do this California thing just by being a resident, which I was by then.

So I heard about an opportunity to study in Paris as a guest of the French government, because I'd fought in the Second World War in that region, in that theater. So I went to the Sorbonne and to the Institut de Science Politique, the "Science Po," which were extremely different from American teaching. You just attended vast lectures, had some meetings with professorial assistants, and then took these sort of "drop dead" exams. At the end of a year's work, you would come into a room, the professor would be there, you'd have a bunch of pieces of paper in a hat or box. You would all sit and you'd go up and get a piece of paper, and sit down. You had 10 minutes to write an essay in your head, that you would then go up and speak eloquently to the teacher. While you were doing that, the kid behind you had his little piece of paper, and he was writing an essay in his head. It just had to be done in French. Fortunately I had grown up speaking a version of French that comes down from Quebec. So it was another totally different way of coming at these things.

The political science courses were marvelous, because a lot of the teachers were people who'd been involved in the French colonial empire and knew a great deal about colonial problems, which were not talked about much back then. So then I got a fellowship to Stanford for creative writing and I was told, "You cannot have a degree at Stanford in one year—we do not permit it." But I got a degree in one year, and they didn't seem to mind too much.

Then I went to Columbia, where we had a more English system—it was very much like going to Oxford. You decided what you were going to do, you submitted a proposal to write a certain kind of book and take a comprehensive exam, and then you started picking the minds of the professors who would be most useful to you, or whom you found most interesting.

So I had those three very different versions of higher education: rather low key, wonderful Fresno State College—chummy, not too challenging— which was perfect for me, because I wasn't accustomed to doing studies and exams; and then more and more difficult and demanding [work at the Sorbonne, Stanford, and Columbia].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tom, it sounds like you had a great deal of non-traditional academic experience—nothing that the normal college person would typically see as a career pathway into a university like MSUO. What was your feeling about coming to MSUO at that time? You weren't cut out of the same

fabric as most of the other faculty members that you subsequently met—how did you come to have a feeling that you could do this?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: The project was described to me in terms of enormous flexibility, and that nobody really knew how this was going to turn out [at MSUO], that we would find out—that was our job—to see what could be done, and what couldn't, with the implication that a great deal could be done. There was a “charter” that had been written by some very distinguished scholars and public persons who had met at Meadow Brook, and there was a clear indication that this was a very important document.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The Meadow Brook Seminars?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, it was called the “charter” of the college, and always referred to in my experience as the charter. Things were justified or rejected at the very outset largely in terms of whether they furthered the goals set forth in the charter. The charter seemed to be informed by a desire to recognize that higher education in America was fine, but that it had become rigidified to some extent, so that people were jumping through hoops a lot of the time, instead of actually finding an environment in which they could discover, first, and then develop whatever particular talents and gifts they had. This was very idealistic, of course, but it was a fine ideal, I felt, at the time—because my experience, certainly on the magazine, was that so much of what was abhorrent in American politics was a result of the citizenry simply refusing to change their minds about things as change occurred.

So it was the idea of an educational institution that would make people more comfortable with newness, surprise, variations on a theme, all of these things; that would also turn out students who were at least familiar with the different ways in which human beings approach life—scientifically, intuitively, religiously, and philosophically—that knowing about that makes a difference. I was encouraged to believe that was the purpose of this university.

You often hear these kinds of descriptions of glowing utopian things, but the people they told me they had asked to come, like Loren Pope from the *New York Times*, I knew to be hard-headed, deeply experienced in the realities of American life, in the power centers. That suggested to me—well, that it isn't

just a pipe dream, there is something solid here. Then there was the economic structure, which sounded sound: a large gift had been given the State on the condition that a new dimension of MSU be established, and left free to explore the possibilities of refining what we've just said. So I said, "OK, I'll come and talk, it sounds wonderful."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So you had not only special qualifications in writing, but you also had a background in some other areas related to curricular directions—the non-Western [cultures], or what we called it subsequently, area studies.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You'd been writing for the *New Republic* and editing there. You probably had a published record which was well beyond most beginning faculty at that point.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, it wasn't of course scholarly work, but it was poetry and political analysis, essentially.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Where is the line [between these]?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I thought that the fact that they invited people like me and Loren indicated that they really did want a more unusual spread of resources for the students.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You were always one of the folks who didn't have one of the official credentials.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, I don't have it officially. I am to this day without a doctorate, thank God. It wouldn't fit in my mind, it would cripple me.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Okay, that is apparent. You had an interview, you came. What was your early work, starting in the fall of '59?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: We had freshmen, that's all we had. We had an entering class, and a [number] of them were from the East coast, so they were living around [the area]. There were no dorms to begin with; we had one building. Somewhere in there we received a whole lot of books from MSU and that was a very exciting day. I would teach freshman English. We had agreed among us—Bob Hoopes and I, and I think Gertrude [White] was there—that we would use a particular book, I've forgotten it but it was a lovely book. In its title was the word "rhetoric," which later made it [clear to us] that we could not use such a book with such a name.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Because?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Because it sounded too difficult. But it was a very well-done book, and at the beginning I simply followed the book, what it was doing, and added to it. I realized early on that part of teaching successfully is, to some degree, entertaining your students and making what you're doing interesting, so I had a lot of stories to tell from all the stuff I had done, and that went over well. So I was pleased with the teaching. The teaching was rewarding.

Then we had lots of [Senate] meetings, sometimes marathon meetings, trying to sort out what slowly emerged as very legitimate conflicts of interest. I was thinking about this—something happened which I had sort of forgotten about. There was a tendency to camouflage conflicts of interest. I found myself often saying, "Listen, if there's a conflict of interest, the best thing to do with it is to get it out, have the conflict, and resolve it openly, because if I don't know that you want something, I can't help you get it or defend myself against how you might feel." You know, it was funny stuff like that and it took up a lot of time. Everybody was unsure. There were a lot of very young guys and there was a lot of reticence, which made the meetings sometimes go on forever. Then of course there were people like me, who blurted out everything as soon as they thought of it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: (I doubt that.) So there were a lot of committee meetings. Especially, you mentioned to me that you had been involved in the preparation of materials for what we then called area studies.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I was involved in talking about how such a program could be put together so that it would actually deliver usable information to students, without dragging them through a lot of highly specialized information that wasn't being patterned in a way that gave insight. I'd brought along my handbook of questions that we had put together at HRAF. At that time, I didn't realize that a lot of what we'd been doing was going to be completely changed on the basis of who was hired to do what jobs. Once you had an actual area studies department, and a chairman and some faculty, they were going to decide how those programs were put together, and quite rightly. But at the time it really seemed like we were laying the groundwork and it would last a little while at least.

Also we were having meetings, some kind of curriculum design committee, chaired by Woody [Varner] with Bob Hoopes as [dean], and several of the original staff or group. That was about how to set up priorities and design: who to hire, what kinds of people to look for, and how much time to dedicate to different things—because part of the attraction was that this was not going to be “come and get your degree in a certain number of years, you have to take a major and a minor,” and stuff like that; there was going to be some exploration of other ways of structuring. That was very time-consuming.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That was curriculum planning after classes began in the fall of '59. And it wasn't part of the university Senate?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: No. I'm not sure we had a Senate, but I guess we must have had one.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We did. How would you characterize it, from your political background? Describe your perspective of what was going on in the Senate meetings.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Oh, you could almost write an equation: the more emotion and passion was shown, the more trivial was the issue. You know people were, to a large degree, establishing where they were on a power line, feeling for a niche that they could sustain, getting knocked down or getting further up. So a lot of the content of the discussions was relatively immaterial.

It was grist for the mill, and that's normal when you form a new group. People have to figure out where they are in it, and how far up and down, and stuff like that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you remember some of the questions that particularly stuck in your mind?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: In the very first year?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Issues that you thought were probably [either] unimportant, or very important but weren't discussed. You'd mentioned that people had these power interests—what were the kinds of conflicts that perhaps were not properly expressed?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Every profession has its strange superstitions. At that time, this is one that comes back to me: there were still the last strands of this notion that studying foreign languages trains the mind in some impeccable fashion, like math. That no matter what else you did, you should study more than one [language], which is not a bad idea. But there was a kind of strange belief system brought to this.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Dogma.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, that's right—and everybody believed it. The more administrative they were and less involved in actual hands-on dealing with students, the more they subscribed to this. This was like a "hallmark of excellence" in education. Well, of course it grabbed a big hunk of time. I think probably everybody would benefit from studying a foreign language within the context of a full area studies program, but there was no way to modify this—this was the rock that sat in the middle of the road at all times.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But wasn't that part of the "charter" that you mentioned? Or don't you remember?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I don't think they went into detail of that kind. They didn't try to micro-manage.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: These were the rocks that were on the "charter road."

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, and simultaneously we discovered that our students didn't know their own language very well, so it was hard to negotiate with some of these things.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You mentioned that you'd become interested in some non-traditional areas of understanding about area studies and cultures, because of cultural misunderstandings, because of your childhood experiences. Maybe you could go back and reflect on what brought you to the point of needing to build better communications in our society. What was it about your childhood experience that put you in that direction?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: To sum it up, it taught me that there was no such thing as a "melting pot" in the United States, at least below the middle class. I grew up in Lowell, Massachusetts, which everybody knows is Jack Kerouac's town. It was a town that had been founded to support weaving mills. Agents were sent into Europe to the poor countries to enlist people who were out of work, often in famine situations—as in Ireland—to come back and work at these mills. At the beginning—I'm not really sure—but I think they brought over only single people; they had them living separately in dorms, men and women. By the time I was born in '26 the depression was grinding its way along.

What everybody in Lowell was doing, instead of melting into an American citizen, was determinedly hanging on to whatever identity they had within a culture that they had left. So no one was permitted to speak English at home, whether they were Greek, Armenian, Italian, French, Irish, or whatever—nor in the schools. We all went to parochial schools run by the Greek church, or the French Canadian church, or the Irish church, or whatever. They were excellent schools in my case, but the divisions were completely preserved; not only preserved—they were insisted upon, magnified. They were seen as: if you lost your language and your culture and your religion, you simply were lost—you started floating around like of piece of meat in the great

kettle. So that was very strengthening at the beginning—not so much for me because I had a dual identity as a Frenchman and an Irishman, which meant that I didn't belong in either camp.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Why didn't you?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: My mother was French and my father was Irish. They had come out of families that had been brought over and they met as people do. Even Lowell couldn't prevent families from occurring.

The poverty in Lowell was really crushing. It was very, very hard to live in. Then as the mills began moving south because of the union problems, there was often no work at all in Lowell. Then after the weaving mills left, now and then a shoe company would take over one of the old mills because of the space, and then another kind of company, and people would compete with one another for jobs. There again your ethnic background had a lot to do with whether or not you got the job. If the foreman was Irish and you were Irish, you were much more likely to be hired. People were taking care of each other. All the politicians were Irish and most of the cops were Irish, which made the Irish hated by other people, just kind of in general.

There was an enormous amount of hatred, and it was mostly based on the strengthening of the cultural identity which produced a mis-comprehension of other people who had different cultural identities. This would come to a head especially when boys and girls would reach puberty. It was always the girls from the other tribe who were most attractive. Irishmen loved Italian girls, Italian girls loved French blonde kids, and that caused a lot of real mayhem and endless fights. Every dance would end in a fight.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now, this is Lowell High School you're getting to?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, we all emerged from these parochial schools into one high school, and we weren't even speaking the same language most of the time. We all spoke a kind of street patois, that was a mix of English and whatever language we also had, and we all were by then worshipping some of the same icons, like Frank Sinatra and Glenn Miller. That brought people

together; but once together, these differences would shoot up, and it was quite nasty.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But you responded to this by making this into a challenge; you got interested in trying to understand these things, rather than to go off in a single direction.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I had to, because I was both Irish and French and I ran with a French gang mostly, but I had increasingly Irish friends. As you get older, fighting gets serious—you actually can get hurt and hurt people. It isn't like two little kids flailing around and rolling on the ground, hoping that somebody is going to pull them apart. So you learn that that's really bad news, so you try to figure out ways to deflect these things.

Finally when World War II broke out, and I realized from the news reports that the Merchant Marine was taking such very heavy losses, it dawned on me that they weren't going to be too careful about who they signed up, as long as I avoided the Merchant Marine Academy approach. So I went and got a job in a boat in Boston harbor, and just kept getting letters, and taking Coast Guard exams, and finally getting on a real ship. So I ran away, in a sense, from the whole thing into a much bigger brawl.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You didn't actually graduate from high school?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Never. I got a diploma years after the war, because when I decided I wanted to go to college, I went back to the high school and said I had to have a college diploma, and showed them my service record. I'd left the Merchant Marine as a ship's engineer, Third Assistant Engineer, which gave me immediately a whole bunch of credits. I had studied on the ships, I had taken a correspondence course from some outfit in Chicago that mailed you book lists and exams. [There was] a lot of time on ship between rough patches, and I was in the engine room at first because it was the job I could get. I began by shoveling coal into old boilers on small boats, and I wanted to get out of the engine room because it's a terrible place to be when the ship is sunk. I kept trying to study navigation and all the skills that deck personnel need, but there never was enough time to bring that off.

I was advancing in rank in the engine department, so they gave me enough points for a [high school] diploma, but they were all what they call non-recommended points, so no college would touch me to begin with. I mean I got one acceptance, and that was from Fresno State College. Well, Harvard was interested but I didn't really want to be around Lowell and Boston anymore. I did go to [visit] Harvard and they had something going about veterans, and I think I made a big mistake, in a sense. I said that I'd be delighted, I'd love to come to Harvard, but I didn't want to work for a degree; I just wanted to come and take classes.

I had no interest in getting a college degree; this was very true at that time. I guess that comes back later in my feeling about education. I just thought I could get an education without having to do this thing, which didn't seem of any value to me at that time. I already had made my mark; I knew I was a person, I didn't need a degree. But that fell through because [Harvard] didn't want to do that, and I fundamentally didn't want to be that close to that same old scene. So I decided to go to California, and I was only able to get in at that one place, and barely. But I did have a little academic experience. I became the assistant to the head of the French department, I remember now, at Fresno before I left, and that was interesting.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tom, how would you characterize your approach to teaching? Your background was not very traditional, and it seems to me that you bring to the educational world a different approach and a different philosophy. What are some of your thoughts about your classroom and educational approaches?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I think a lot of what I did as a writer in the *New Republic* carried over, in that I learned that you can talk to people, or write to people, but you can't make them read or listen. You can teach, but you can't make them learn. So principally my idea was to ignite some kind of curiosity in the students I had.

I found at the beginning—and I wasn't surprised by this—that where literature was concerned, there was a kind of convention among American students, especially with boys, that this was something that really had to do with interior decorating, and what kind of suits you wore, and accoutrements, rather

than something practical and useful. So I began from the beginning trying to point out curious aspects of what we were reading, things that they might not have noticed going on—that you could use language this way, or that the kinds of experiences being written about were not those that were ordinary to them and shouldn't just be dismissed because they were not ordinary, but were at least as interesting as throwing the football again.

Anyway, I would try with a lot of anecdotes, parallel stories from things I had seen, to make the works reveal themselves as not so threatening as they seemed to be at the beginning. Over the years, as I was teaching more and more complex and difficult works, this became quite a complicated technique, which I boiled down over time into a format in my mind: that it's always useful—whatever the phenomenon, but talking about reading art books, books that are designed as works of art—[to know] that you're up against a mix of the familiar and the strange. First, the book has to be written in a language that's familiar to you, or you can't get anywhere at all with it. But even that language in the hands of a Joyce, for example, can become extraordinarily strange.

Your personal capacity to handle the movement of that balance from 90% familiarity, which is entertainment, to 90% puzzle and challenge depends largely on where you have your taste. I would present this schema to advanced students and invite them to start pushing the pointer, and to reflect that most of the best sellers came out of an area that mixed the familiar and the strange in fairly balanced proportions that were satisfying to both needs: to be surprised, to be delighted; and to be reassured, to feel at home and in control. But also that works at the other ends of the spectrum had their own interests.

Why, for example, can someone write the same story 100 times changing only the details, and always sell 100,000 mystery novels? Or what happens when you really get off? A classic example is *Finnegan's Wake*, where you really have to spend an enormous amount of time purely studying to make the language work, to make it communicate to oneself. Is it worth it? To whom is it worth it? What is the point of it? Does a little bit of it make a difference in your life?

So I presented poetry especially as a practice, like going and learning how to shoot a bow or to repair an engine. The more often you deal with these contrivances that challenge you to accept, along with a little familiarity, a good deal of strangeness, then the more balanced you're likely to be inwardly; and when a real surprise comes along, you may react in a more balanced and effective way.

I had a canned lecture I used to give for the State Department in other countries called "Poetry as a Survival Technique." I still believe that. I think that's a very important aspect of what we were talking about, of helping students discover previously unused or unrewarded dimensions in themselves.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Were there some particular interactions with students that brought out some of this understanding, or examples of how they responded in a positive fashion to this approach?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: When things went well they tended not to be all that memorable. I mean this was classroom work, after all, and people did well or they didn't do well.

The "Lee Elbinger thing," which I think you're referring to obliquely, was a result of this attitude, I'm sure, though I never foresaw it, for some reason. I encouraged my students to really try to find significant symbolic ways of communicating what they were thinking and feeling about the work we were doing. Many of them had become professionals in their high school years at writing "the paper that pleases the teacher." Some of them were really quite adept, and some were not, but that's a different story. Those that were, I would simply tell them, "That's fine, you know how to do that, so do something else: put together a play; do a sculpture; paint a painting and bring it in for people to look at and see if it works, or if you're just indulging yourself."

So we would frequently have these final exhibitions which many of the faculty would come to. A lot of very nice things were done, along with a lot of triviality, but it was nice. Lee was a guy who had some very profound need to provoke and to shock and surprise, which I didn't much realize. Lee was always obviously troubled. So one sort of tried to make his trouble less troubling while making him study.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You obviously knew your students very well.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: In the earlier days, even quite a long time into the game, we were able to spend quite a lot of time with our students. I was fortunate in living in houses that were spacious and old, and people could come over.

I was able to rent a house once with a swimming pool, for several years, and students would come over and swim. It sort of loosened everything up.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Were there other faculty events that you went to, or were you a participant in parties or social events?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, sure, at the beginning, less and less so after time. I got fairly ill, and I got so I couldn't drink, I couldn't eat very much; I had to eat odd things at odd hours.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That was about when, in the second year?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: That happened in the second year.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We missed you. But you were always able to maintain this contact with the students in some fashion?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Well, some. I've moved around so much in my life, and when I have time to write I tend to write a poem instead of writing a letter, which is a fault. I'm beginning to catch up with it now as time goes by. I'm a bad correspondent and I've let a lot of people drift away, but I'm still in touch with several students in a significant way, and a few faculty people. And now also with you.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So in the early days when you would have meetings with students and invite them over informally, or things like that, there was a sort of a sense about the institution.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Oh, yes, it was all part of that excitement that we were going to redefine things a little bit. We weren't going to just simply move into the old matrix, punch all the buttons, and fill all the slots, and the students felt that.

We had some remarkably gifted students from the East coast, all of whom were behavior problems like Lee, and I came to not associate those two. Because someone had a behavior problem or acted up was no reason to close the door on

them. I don't think I became a pseudo-psychiatrist but there was a leniency [on my part], and a tendency on the part of the students to realize: one, that I wouldn't be provoked in the standard ways, and two, that I really didn't mind a lot of things they did.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think this surprised other faculty. They had a much more disciplinary approach to it.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, I think so.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I guess your leniency or tolerance—

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: —began to be viewed as a fifth column activity or something, generally reducing the degree of discipline—but by then the university had gotten to a size where these questions were no longer important. Every professor had a small group that I think they took particular pains with.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We didn't finish the Lee Elbinger story. You had this presentation?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Lee was going to do a dramatic reading of a Yeats poem that had to do with moral honesty and integrity, and ended up with a preference of going naked rather than wearing all the various costumes and motley that help you get along. Well, he read the poem and then he stripped. Nobody thought he was going to strip all the way, but what the hell difference did it make ultimately? Everybody laughed. What was one to do? Go charging at him and wrap him up in a blanket? There were no blankets.

This was a very tiny incident but we had invited people to come, and one of the visiting students from another class had brought a French boy who was visiting them, who took some pictures of Lee and tried to sell them to the local newspaper. This is what broke the story. I just remembered this: I had this amazing phone call early the next morning asking me if I was the professor who had stripped in class, giving a nude lecture in class. It was such an astonishing thing to hear that I never even connected it with what Lee had done. I just said, "Of course not," and hung up the phone.

This became a cause célèbre—it apparently must have fed into some ongoing confrontation. I know there were some people in the state Senate who were very upset by Oakland, and its small departure from the usual ways of doing things, and unfortunately Lee played into that. But again, the kid was not all together. He was trying to star, and this was what occurred to him to do. What he got was laughed at by everybody—except the powers that be, who first tried to deprive him of his degree, so he brought an action about that within the university. I remember being amazed, because it was a committee of faculty that was spending most of its time defending Lee’s rights, and another committee trying to take away his degree. In the meantime Lee floated away from the university. So that was that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In the long view of that incident, that was a minor excursion in a continuum of activities.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, there was no way to protect against these aberrant or random effects. You do have to take responsibility for the consequences of what you do, but if you try to be so careful and reductive that you eliminate almost all possibility of something embarrassing or strange or provoking happening, then you end up with a dead situation. So it’s like the best way not to have a car accident is not to drive a car. So that was my attitude.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: [Not to] stay with the low-risk familiar situation.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The practicalities about Oakland over time forced changes in lots of things. Looking back on that period between the first year and the subsequent three to five years, what did you see changing, and how did you and some others respond to that?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: From this perspective, of course, it seems that it was inevitable that the power of the vision in the charter, or the spirit of the charter, should come up against the actualities of political life in Michigan. This was going to be a state university subject to the state legislature, which meant many

things had to be talked of in very practical terms. I can remember when they first introduced the business of “credit units delivered” or something: some of us were “manufacturing credit units” and “delivering” them.

That’s the kind of talk that they liked over at the legislature, and Woody Varner, who was Chancellor, was a very experienced go-between for MSU; he [had been] the [MSU vice president] for legislative affairs, or something. So he brought all of that to the [MSUO] situation, and from his point of view, he had to keep this group of idealists from running amuck. He found allies among them who were also somewhat dumbfounded by some of the “other” ideas that some of us had.

We spent a lot of time at the beginning in this particular [curriculum design] group that Woody chaired, trying to resolve the spirit of the thing, which is terribly hard to do because it’s hard to even talk about what you really think this place should be like. Somebody would have to say in all honesty, “A place where I can get ahead.” Someone else would have to say, “Well, it’s got to be all for the students.” Things kept changing slowly, and there was always a very good reason, and it was always very frustrating to me and to a couple of other people, who resigned and went away over a period of some years.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You didn’t [really] leave.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I left in the sense that I found a relief from it by going to teach abroad, and then coming back. The changes that had occurred while I was gone were of such a magnitude that I had to adjust. So I began to have that kind of relationship to the organizational development. But I was always very grateful for the total lack of interference with one’s teaching in one’s own classroom. When you had the confidence of your colleagues that you were going to do a good job, people didn’t mess with you anymore. That began to happen much later when they had all these reviews. They made that hugely cumbersome machinery for moving people through the grades, they had to have reviews at this level, this level, and this level.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The faculty reviews, you mean?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes, and then they started interfering, perhaps inevitably.

But I relished that freedom, and the ability to reinvigorate my interest in the classroom by trying out new ways of getting stuff across and getting stuff back in an exciting fashion, and turning kids on. That was always very important to me, and something I often didn't have abroad.

Abroad, I'd have the new challenge of dealing with really strange backgrounds and in a strange context, but often—like when I taught in communist Rumania—the context was enormously rigid, just enormously rigid: spies in the classroom, tape recorders in the walls of the apartment—and all very visible. The Rumanians were geniuses at getting you to police yourself. They'd follow you openly. They'd plant some 45-year-old man in a class full of 27-year-olds. They'd take your picture as you were entering the faculty. You'd get a letter in Bucharest, there would be a postmark from where it was sent and there would be a receipted postmark when it reached Bucharest—that would be half under the flap, indicating that the letter had been opened. So you began to do it for them, restricting [your behavior]. It was a wonderful lesson on how that works, turning you into your own policeman.

So often it was less free elsewhere. Japan, for example, was a fascinating place to adapt to, because if you can walk certain balances, you can do anything you want, but you have to do these things which reassure everybody that you really know how to play the game, you're not a freak, you're not a wild cannon. All that stuff is fascinating.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Even though things drifted from where you perhaps saw the original "charter" going, you continued to have a fondness for Oakland University.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Yes. Teaching turned out to be an amazingly rich educational experience, and just from the mere diversity of the people one deals with, not only the students but the faculty. The faculty drifted apart; there was very little interaction after a while between one department and another; and that was one of the things we were determined would not happen.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you think that it was inevitable, as you get to a larger institution, that that would happen? Is it impossible for a large institution to retain that closeness between faculty?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: It seems so. That was one of the first deceptions, to discover that the guarantees made that the ceiling on students at Oakland would be 700—I remember that number very clearly... Then they started a campaign denouncing that as elitist and “blah, blah, blah.” Of course the whole idea was elitist. We were going to choose students who could handle the challenge and give them these unusual challenges—and that’s elitist. But that was suddenly—we didn’t have “political correctness” then—but it was some of the seeds of political correctness.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You mentioned the size issue.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: The size was determining, yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There seemed to be a plan in the back room that [the size] had been predetermined?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: It gradually dawned on me—I did have a lot of political savvy, after all, from my years in Washington—that some of the people who had been brought [to MSUO] to do especially administrative jobs, would never have come unless they could see themselves building more buildings, building more roads, developing more classrooms, bringing more students. That’s natural career development for administrators—having more assistants and all the rest of it—which doesn’t make them bad guys, but it was clearly in the cards.

I saw plans for another ten buildings; we had two at that time. I saw them by accident; I wish I hadn’t seen them. I’d have kept my spirits up a couple years longer. I went through a period of funk. That’s one of the reasons I went away to Japan. There was a conflict between the savvy that said, “Why did you expect anything else?” and part of me that said, “But, gee whiz, I really did expect something else.”

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But in spite of expecting something else, you adapted. You didn't follow that path of checking out.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: No, some of these things I was sure would be the same anywhere if I stayed in academia. It was just part of the game. It's the real world and people have to get along in it, and get ahead and so forth. So there was no sense in seeking out another brand-new place, and all the old ones were already firmly established in these patterns. By going away, being reinvigorated and coming back to old acquaintances and familiar surroundings —there was always good hiking around Oakland's campus, and it was nice—it turned into a rather pleasant and nourishing rhythm. Then I met Karen. She's a Michigan girl, and that was just an absolutely major thing. Her family was here so that was another tie to Michigan.

It all worked out fine. I mean, I feel good about Oakland. It was a worthy experiment. I think everybody was honorable, to the degree that they saw their responsibilities and of course worked out their desires. No one ever did anything unfairly to me that I can remember. I don't remember ever having a single mean thing [said about me]. I heard a lot of talk about mean things being done to people, but nothing like that ever happened to me.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you think they were real or was it just paranoia?

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Oh, I'm sure some things did happen. There are always opportunities for people to do things.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You came from a very pleasant department.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Oh, yes, they were great. I can't think of anyone in the English department that I didn't personally like—not [always] gobs, but some affection for; and some people a great deal of affection. The more you worked with them the better it became. Someone like Gertrude White, the longer you're working with Gertrude, the better it gets. Bob Hoopes went away, that was a surprise and a disappointment. I think he'd been let down a little too, by what he'd been led to expect. Other people developed in different ways. Pete was a dear friend and he died.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Pete Evarts.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: Pete Evarts, yes. That was a shock. It was a good department and that whole floor was good. Philosophy department people would come over and have lunch, and we had a pretty good little community going there.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It sounds like you really enjoyed your time there.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I did. It made me what I am today, Paul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Sounds like a success. Tom, I want to thank you for coming and spending your time with us.

THOMAS FITZSIMMONS: I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to remember all this stuff.

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**THOMAS FITZSIMMONS**  
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