

A Natural History of the Princeton Tiger

by Frederic Fox '39

The American Eagle is a noble bird or a big buzzard, depending on your point of view. It is the National Emblem, representing our land and heritage. It is also kin to many other sea eagles (*haliaeetus*) which can be found all over the world, usually eating other people's fish.

Eagles are scavengers; they are birds of prey. They appear in many shapes and sizes, all of which molt and defecate, as well as soar majestically in the sky. In short, they are normal.

Normal too are the Russian Bear, the British Lion, and even the Princeton Tiger. These emblems are meant to represent the highest ideals of the community, but... the Bear makes a pig of himself on honey; the Lion gets ticks in his fur; and sometimes the Tiger runs away from a mutt in New Haven.

For many years the emblem of the University has been the Tiger. It has represented our highest ideals. On the playing fields we wear its stripes. We put our enemies to sleep with the deceptive lullaby:

Way down in old New Jersey
In that far-off jungle land,
There lives a Princeton Tiger
Who will eat right off your hand.

Strange to say, the Tiger did not come to Princeton easily. It was brought here—officially—by the Class of 1879, the classmates of Woodrow Wilson. Yet they actually preferred the Lion. At their tenth reunion, they gave the University a pair of lions, not tigers. They had chosen these because the Lion was the emblem of the royal house of Orange-Nassau, the source of many of our traditions. We were obviously meant for

each other—Princeton and the King of Beasts.

The class of 1879 decided to fix this union in metal forever. They raised money for two leonine castings and hired America's best-known sculptor, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi. He was the man who had just designed a fine Statue of Liberty in New York's harbor; surely he could create a pair of lions for Princeton. He did. In June of 1889, at the tenth reunion of the Class, they were bolted and blessed on the steps of Nassau Hall.

Why did the Class of 1879 prefer the Lion to the Tiger?



In their student days, '79 knew the Tiger had strong campus support. Our Bengal colors were adopted soon after the Civil War and our students had already adopted a "Tiger Cheer" from one of the regiments that marched through town. But the Tiger had received a cruel jolt in 1871 when Thomas Nast made it the figure of Tammany Hall and the symbol of New York graft. His ghastly cartoon of the Tiger roaring on top of the prostrate figure of Miss Liberty probably destroyed the power of Boss Tweed and ruined

the emblem for Princeton—at least temporarily—like the Nazi swastika nearly ruined the Navajo good luck sign.

For several years, in newspaper cartoons across the land, the Tiger represented the most unscrupulous side of American politics. How could such a creature represent Princeton! The Class of 1879 was sickened by the thought.

So they voted for the Lion. And for nearly a quarter century, from 1889 to 1911, the two Bartholdi lions sat on the steps of Nassau Hall while the Tiger licked his wounds and repaired his image. He knew the students still wanted him.

When they invented a funny magazine, they called it *The Tiger*. As their football team began to eat up the opposition, the New York and Philadelphia sportswriters happily headlined

PRINCETON TIGERS
DEVOUR HARVARD

The Glee Club had its picture taken for the *Bric-a-brac* in black tuxedos and orange tiger heads.

In 1896, as we celebrated our 150th birthday and adopted a new seal, we also confirmed the Tiger Rocket Cheer:

Tiger Tiger Tiger
ssss ssss ssss
boom boom boom
ahhhhh
Princeton! Princeton! Princeton!

This cheer was illustrated with a fierce tiger astride a rocket roaring up into the sky: "ssss ssss ssss," then exploding

above ("boom") while the people below murmured "ahhhhh," followed by an exultant three-fold amen: "Princeton! Princeton! Princeton!"

Later, in the Railroad Age, the cheer became a locomotive, increasing in tempo like a steam engine. In the Space Age it has returned to its original rocket form. It was most fitting for astronaut Pete Conrad '53 to take Princeton's flag to the moon aboard Apollo XII.

Although the University finally realized the facts of life and made the Tiger our Official Emblem, the Alumni, essentially more conservative than students, waited until 1911 before they adopted the Tiger. They didn't want the Lions moved from Nassau Hall. Perhaps Woodrow Wilson made them see the necessity of the Tiger as our emblem and persuaded his classmates of 1879 to hire another sculptor, Alexander Phimister Proctor, to design the present attendants at the door of Nassau Hall. Put in place June of that year, they were immediately embraced by everyone and dedicated to that Ideal Princetonian who combines "the massive strength, the alertness, the brawn of the Athlete, with the gentleness, dignity, poise, and repose of the Scholar."

The old lions slunk off the steps. They went down to the intersection of Washington Road and Prospect to paw forlornly at the entrance of '79 Hall. A few years ago, battered and abused, they were lugged off to the basement of MacMillan Hall

where they remain. Someday, we might give them to Columbia.

I don't claim to be Princeton's expert in iconography, but I have been intimately associated with the Tiger most of my life. I know him inside and out. Some people say I was the first person to put on his skin for football games in Palmer Stadium. I doubt that. I'm sure there must have been crazier students here before me.

Nonetheless, it is a wonderful way to watch a football game—through the jaws of the Tiger. When I did, the officials allowed me to follow the players up and down the field. It was a roving 50-yard seat, and I didn't pay a nickle for it. Actually that was the reason I was wearing the skin in the first place.

My father hesitated to send me money for football tickets or for anything else during the Great Depression. To save expenses he worked out a deal with a furrier in New York to lend me a real, honest-to-goodness tiger skin from Bengal. On Saturdays, when I got inside the skin, I could walk right through the gates at the stadium without being charged or challenged. I was the Princeton Tiger!

Since then, I have been partial to tigers in any form; especially sympathetic to those who run about in his skin. It can be quite hot inside—and sometimes dangerous. For example, after a close game with Yale, the frustrated bulldogs can tear you to bits. To confuse them

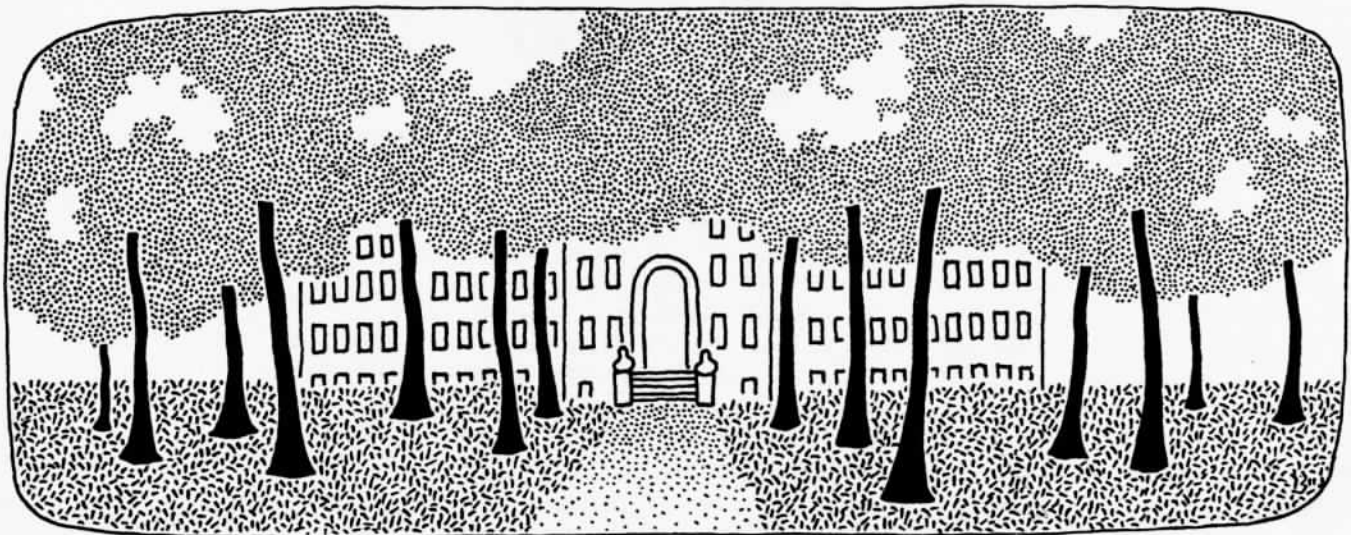
further I used to slip out of my skin behind a screen of friendly band members, and hide it in the bass drum.

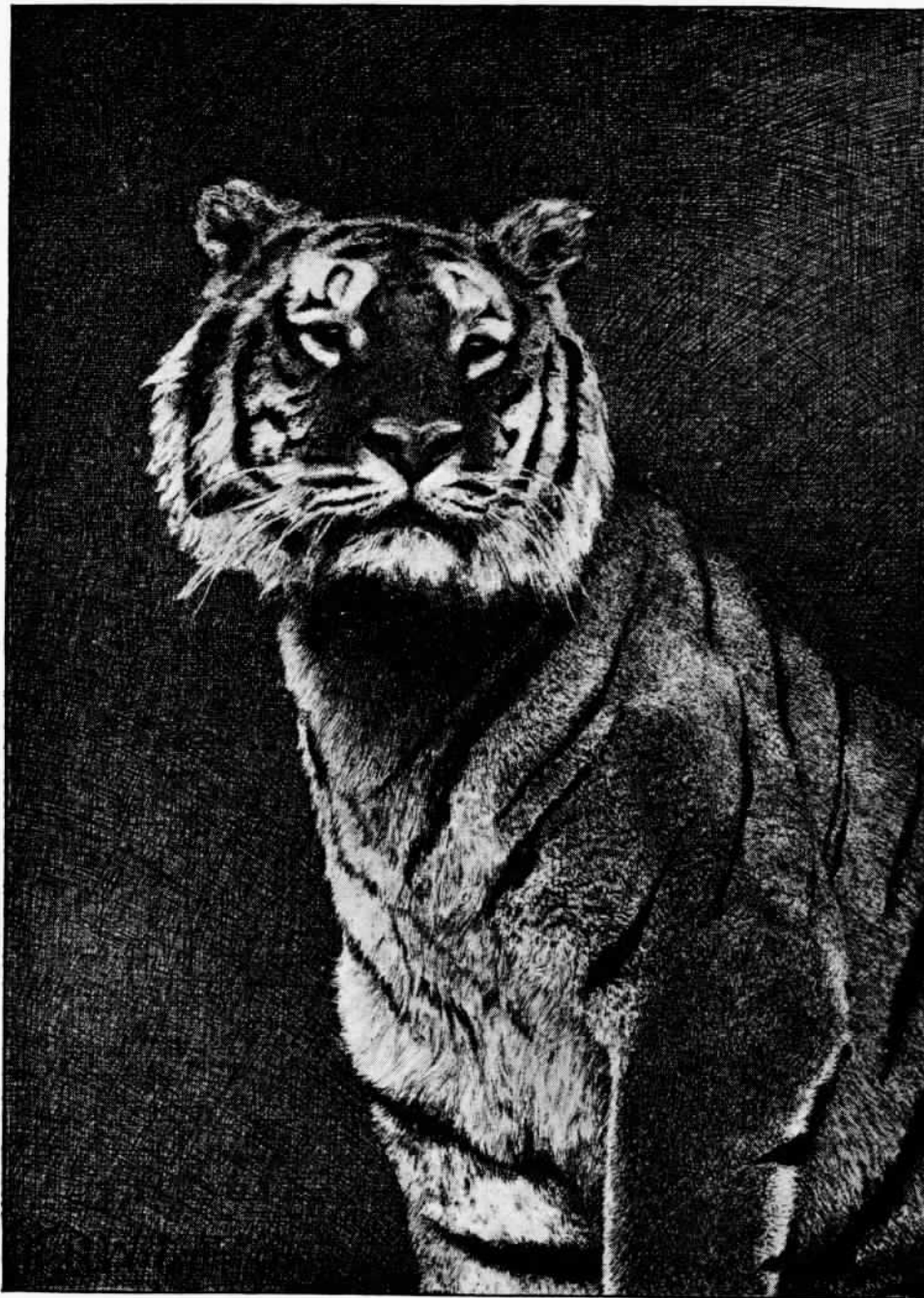
Of course there are even greater risks for the Tigress and I am much impressed by her nerve and spirit. She certainly upholds Princeton's most heroic tradition.

Soon after we became coeducational, a young woman came to see me about having *two* tigers in Palmer Stadium. She wondered whether this would upset the alumni. I assured her that they would understand. After all, our alumni know there are two tigers on the steps of Nassau Hall and two between Whig and Clio, two on the gates to the old baseball field, and two on Noah's Ark. "Male and Female, created He them." If we expect the tiger line to continue at Princeton, we must have two.

So I called an alumna who loved the Tiger and had been opposed to coeducation. I asked him whether he'd like to buy a skin for the Tigress. He snarled for a while, but being a generous and realistic gentleman, he said, "Sure." Two days later, he sent me a \$1200 check to buy two skins and an orange bow for the tail of the Tigress.

Others have sent me tigers galore: tigers in needlepoint, tigers on silk, tiger claws from India, tiger coloring books from Russia, tiger bibs, tiger Christmas cards, tiger get-well cards, Tiger Balm (Eng Aun Tong) from Singapore (which cures almost anything), Tiger Beer from Malay-





an Breweries Ltd. (which is even better), a tiger water pistol to shoot bulldogs, and much more. There is no end in sight. My Tiger collection (*Felis Tigris Princetoniensis*) keeps growing every day.

I am proud of it. As long as the University is a grand and glorious place filled with youthful promise and ancient wisdom, the Tiger is a splendid emblem. Although the Class of 1879 admitted that "no naturalistic representation will fully satisfy the deep spiritualistic phi-

losophy which makes up the full content of things Princetonian," I agree with them that the Tiger is most appropriate. In all its graceful power and courage, it comes closest to representing our particular "richness and luxuriance of life intellectual . . . strength and virility of life moral . . . depth and intensity of life spiritual," as the Class Orator said on the steps of Nassau Hall sixty-five years ago.

But I do not want to make it into a graven image and bow down before it. As I said at the beginning, the Princeton

Tiger is normal. It stands for our highest ideals. If we ever let these fall, however, our noble emblem would be no better than an alley cat.

—Fox



Fred Fox is the Recording Secretary of the University. During the Eisenhower years he was a presidential speechwriter.