Fixing the Turnips

Reflections by Bernard Bailyn on Harvard's presidential transition.

One of the problems of being a historian is that one tends to develop double vision even when it is not very useful. Harvard's current presidential search is the 26th in its history. I wasn't here for all of them, though sometimes I feel as if I had been.

I wasn't here at the first great transition. It took place in 1707, when the Corporation rejected the heir designate, Cotton Mather, son of President Increase Mather (who some years earlier had quit when the Corporation insisted he live in Cambridge and do a little teaching). Cotton Mather was certainly one of the most learned and possibly the most boring man on two continents, and he believed the job was destined to be his. But instead of the scholarly Puritan preacher, the Corporation chose John Leverett, a lawyer, a liberal, a politician, a former Speaker of the House, and a judge. I would love to have been there, if only to have seen Mather's reaction.

I'm just as glad I was not here in 1770. After a series of refusals, the Corporation landed on one Samuel Locke, an unknown preacher from the town of Sherborn. Three years later Locke disappeared without a trace—not only from Cambridge, but apparently from the face of the earth—when it was discovered that the parlor maid in the president's house was pregnant.

I would have wanted to be here in 1810, though, when John Kirkland was chosen—a charming, humane, tolerant, and witty man. I would like to have been close enough to the scene to understand, better than I do, why his administration ended in chaos and why he was hounded out of office by one or more members of the Corporation.

I missed nothing in not being here in 1846, when Edward Everett was chosen. He was probably the vainest man ever to walk in Harvard Yard, which is saying something. An ex-governor and ex-ambassador to Britain, he always thought the presidency was beneath him (he had another presidency in mind) and never let anyone forget that. He lasted three very long years and went on to infamy in his two-hour harangue before Lincoln's address at Gettysburg.

I do wish I had been here in 1869, when Charles William Eliot delivered his hardheaded but visionary inaugural address. I think I would have recognized immediately that the Governing Boards had picked someone who would transform American higher education.

But I *was* here for the elevation of Nathan Pusey and Derek Bok, and I'm glad I was witness to those events.

If I could choose to go back to one of the 23 elections I missed, I think I would go back to Leverett's, because his appointment set in motion a process of transformation that ended by distinguishing American higher education from the British collegiate model and that shapes to this day everything we do, and the way we think about what we do.

The issue at the time was clear. Cotton Mather knew what Harvard was supposed to be and, above all, how it was expected to be run. It was to be a School of the Puritan Prophets, faithful to its learned heritage and to learning itself, as Mather and his Puritan colleagues understood true learning. This heritage he traced back to England's Cambridge, back to medieval Paris, back to Athens, back to the schools of the Old Testament prophets, ultimately back to Paradise before Adam's fall. And to guarantee that providential transfer of learning from the Garden of Eden to Cambridge, Massachusetts, the traditional mode of governance would have to continue. That is, Harvard, like Emmanuel College, Christ's College, Trinity, St. John's, King's, and all the rest at Cambridge and Oxford, would have a body of resident fellows, most of them teachers, with a head, the president or master; and these fellows, these teachers, would be the governors and the owners of the property and the managers of the College. So it had been in the colleges of the ancient English universities, and so it is today. I have the good fortune of being an honorary fellow of a Cambridge college, and I have sat in the fellows' meetings as these scholars and scientists discuss, just as we do, the honors to be awarded undergraduates, the curriculum, and the tutorials; but then they listen to the report of their finance committee and consider the management of millions of pounds of

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PORTRAIT COLLECTION

In the early nineteenth century, President John Thornton Kirkland failed ultimately to manage the severely conflicting demands of social service and higher learning. The portrait is a copy after Gilbert Stuart.

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After the Harvard Corporation quashed the candidacy of Cotton Mather (above) in 1707, the presidency of John Leverett began a transformation that set the pattern of governance for all American universities.

investments for which, in the end, they are responsible.

Why should Harvard have been different? Why should the teachers not have formed the Corporation, directed the place, and owned it? Things were moving in that direction, in a confused way, until Leverett's time. But he set in motion a process that stretched over a century of bitter lawsuits, savage political battles, and bloody intramural struggles until, by the late eighteenth century, it was clear that at Harvard the Governing Boards would not be the

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professors and other teachers, but would be laymen, external to the teaching process though ultimately—if only ultimately—responsible for it.

Everything in our history flows from this, and not only our history. What happened here happened in the other early colleges—William and Mary, Yale, and indeed all the hundreds of later universities, public and private, from Princeton to Brandeis.

Why? The details, especially in Harvard's case, are complicated, but the principle of what happened is not. Unlike the ancient colleges, American colleges and universities, starting with Harvard, did not develop as groups of teachers and students studying together, financed by secure income-bearing endowments, seeking protection from the world in collegiate and university charters. They were from the start deliberate and artificial creations, not of scholars or grand patrons of scholars, but of communities of ordinary people who felt they needed such institutions, created them, and then kept control over them. The teachers were not merely hired hands; they too had a piece of the governance, but not in the end the full legal responsibility. That belonged to the representatives of the creating body, the founding community, in Harvard's case first the Overseers, as representatives of the legislature, then the Corporation, and finally now the two in collaboration as joint representatives of the vast alumni body, over 200,000 men and women whose lives are involved in American society in uncountable ways.

As a result, Harvard has never been an ivory tower, a closed universe of scholars talking to scholars and students. It has always been, has had to be, open to the world, responsible to its founding and governing community—hence, in the service of society—and yet at the same time devoted to the demands of learning for its own sake. That balance between learning and service is the heart of the institution, and it has shifted in emphasis from time to time.

In this connection, Kirkland's administration is one of the most interesting, because it was the most severely divided between, on the one hand, social service (which meant service to upper-class New England society), and on the other, the growing demands of higher learning pressed on Kirkland by a group of sophisticated, well-traveled faculty scholars. For years successful, Kirkland, responding to the ambitions of scholars trained in the European universities, was unsure of his direction, and during a period of turmoil floundered in the conflicting pressures.

Under Eliot—a more determined, efficient, and clear-sighted, if less genial and tolerant, leader—the University shifted radically toward the interior development of scholarship and science at the highest level, precisely what Kirkland had failed to achieve. And since then, especially in recent years, with the full development of our powerful professional schools—medicine, law, business, design, public health, education, divinity, and, above all, now, the Kennedy School of Government—the University has swung in emphasis more directly than ever before to the service of the society around us.

That tension—between learning and service—did not (until very recently) exist in the ancient colleges from which Harvard descends, but it lies at the heart of this University.

It is sometimes hard for us to see this pressure within Harvard's life because it is so familiar to us; we take it for granted. But outsiders—especially from the universities from whose model we have departed—see it vividly and react to it.

In this century, two of England's most famous intellectuals, both philosophers, both marvelously articulate, have taught at Harvard, and both recorded their impressions: Bertrand Russell in 1914 and Isaiah Berlin in 1949.

Russell,* who came from Cambridge University to deliver the Lowell Lectures and to teach in the philosophy de-

*The quotations that follow are taken from Kirk Willis, " 'This Place is Hell': Bertrand Russell at Harvard, 1914," *New England Quarterly*, 62 (March 1989), and from Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America*, I (London, 1973).

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PORTRAIT COLLECTION

During the presidency of Charles William Eliot (1869-1909), Harvard shifted radically toward the interior development of scholarship and science at the highest level. The portrait is by William Page.

partment, liked the students and was impressed by them. "My pupils," he wrote, "are very well prepared, much better (for my work) than at Cambridge; and several of them strike one as really able." They were, to be sure, a "motley crew—Greek, Indian, German, Jewish"—a diverse group, far different from what he was familiar with in England. He singled out a few in his letters home. One was a certain Mr. Wu, "who wrote to say he wished to know the meaning of Being, Reality and Existence by return of post. . . . I considered such mysteries should not be entrusted to the post, and asked him to come and see me, which he did; and I answered him!" Another was the young Raphael Demos, later one of the pillars of the Harvard philosophy department, whom Russell liked and whom he later found "so full of courage and of passion for philosophy that he really brightened the world for me" but whom at first acquaintance he described as "an unshaven Greek . . . who earns his money for his fees by being a waiter." And a third was T. S. Eliot, "the only one who is civilized, and he is ultra-civilized—knows his classics very well, is familiar with all French literature from Villon to Vildrac, and is altogether impeccable in his taste, but has no vigor or life or enthusiasm. He is going to Oxford, where I expect he will be very happy."

But if Russell liked, even admired, the students, he had little good to say about the faculty, which persisted in trying to recruit him. "Dull," "tiresome," "complacent" people, forced to spend themselves in endless teaching and to produce "quick results," they were deprived of the "patient solitary meditation . . . that go[es] to producing anything of value." They lacked, he said, "the atmosphere of meditation and absent-mindedness that one associates with thought—they all seem more alert and businesslike and punctual than one expects very good people to be." Above all, it was the "blind instinctive devotion to ideals dimly seen" that Russell missed, "regardless of whether they are useful or appreciated by others."

Some of the faculty were better than others. Josiah Royce, though a "garrulous old bore," was "loveable," which could not be said for the mathematicians who, Russell wrote, were "full of stuck-pig prejudices." And as for the history and literature people, they were "all barbarians, but some, who had been to Oxford, accentuated their barbarism by a Common Room veneer. Ugh!" In sum, this "soul-destroying atmosphere" created "a type of bore more virulent," Russell wrote, "than the bore of any other [place]." Among them was not a single person "from the first rank." And the worst of them all, he wrote, was the president, A. Lawrence Lowell, of whom Russell, to his regret, saw a great deal:

> President Lowell, the head of Harvard, is an intolerable person—a deadly bore, hard, efficient, a good man of business, fundamentally contemptuous of learned people because they are not businesslike.

Lowell was determined, Russell wrote, "to get his money's worth out of [the faculty] and throw them on the scrap heap when they are used up." Under Lowell's administration, he wrote, "this place is Hell." The only remedy for Lowell's "hard slave-driving efficiency," his "loathsome" regime, Russell believed, was a reversal of precisely those developments of the early eighteenth century that had come to distinguish Harvard and other American colleges and universities from the pattern of the ancient colleges he knew so well. There would have to be, he wrote, a change in structure—away from "the institution of the president and the Board of Overseers" toward faculty self-government. Only with that change would Harvard develop properly.

But if Russell found Harvard generally disappointing (except for its very bright students) and its faculty and governance particularly deficient, the other colleges and universities he visited were worse. Princeton? It struck him as "full of new Gothic . . . and as like Oxford as monkeys can make it." Yale was "a one-horse place" whose compulsory chapel was justified as a way of getting the boys out of bed in the morning. Then there was a ladies' college he visited in western Massachusetts, of which he could only say that it rejoiced "in the name of Smith." But it was at the University of Wisconsin that he saw the fullest implications of the inner tendencies of American colleges and universities. There, he was astonished to discover, "when any farmer's turnips go wrong, they send a professor to investigate the failure scientifically." He found it very odd that taxpayers, with such expectations of their university, "should pay to hear me on principles of mathematics."

Isaiah Berlin, the Oxford philosopher, taught at Harvard a generation later.* He too liked the students. They were, he said, "more intellectually curious, more responsive to every influence, more deeply and immediately charmed by everything new . . . and above all, endowed with a quality of moral vitality unlike any I had found anywhere else." "Intellectually less parochial and provincial" than the English undergraduates, "lacking in irony or malice, naively earnest," they were "quite astonishingly open-minded." But on the other hand, "many of these excellent young people could not, as a general rule, either read or write, as these activities are understood in our best universities. That is to say, their thoughts came higgledy-piggledy out of the big, buzzing, booming confusion of their minds, too many pouring out chaotically in the same instant." The problem went back to their earlier education, where there must have been "a failure to order, to connect, and discriminate." And so, "they read rapidly, desperately and far too much. And because they tended to believe that all

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*Berlin's account of his Harvard experiences appeared in a three-part article, "Notes on the Way," in *Time and Tide*, November 12, 19, and 26, 1949.

facts (and only facts) were important and, what is more, equally important, the result was often a fearful intellectual congestion from which many of them will probably suffer for the rest of their lives."

But Berlin, like Russell, found a deeper, more important problem at Harvard. It was, he said, a world of academic people "made painfully aware of the social and economic miseries of their society":

> A student or professor in this condition wonders whether it can be right for him to continue to absorb himself in the study of, let us say, the early Greek epic at Harvard, while the poor of south Boston go hungry and unshod, and negroes are denied fundamental rights . . . With society in a state of misery or injustice [the scholar, the aspiring student, feels] his occupation is a luxury which it should not be able to afford; and from this flows the feeling that if only he can devote some—perhaps the greater part—of his time to some activity more obviously useful to society, work for a Government department, or journalism, or administration and organization of some kind, etc., he might still with this pay for the right to pursue his proper subject (now rapidly, in his own eyes, acquiring the status of a private hobby).

Berlin had discussed this problem with his more socially conscious Harvard students, but when he had suggested that intellectual curiosity was not necessarily a form of sin or even frivolity, and that a possible valid reason for pursuing this or that branch of knowledge was merely that they were interested in it,

> . . . I could see that I was thought . . . to be expounding what is vaguely thought of as the "European" point of view—at best something exotic and over-refined, at worst cynical and slightly sinister.

He had pondered the consequences and concluded that "this naive, sincere and touching morality, according to which . . . the primary duty of everyone is to help others . . . with no indication of what it is that everyone is to help others to be or do" was leading to a view of the world as "an enormous hospital of which all men are inmates, with the obligation of acting as nurses and physicians to one another." How, in such a world, he asked, could disinterested study flourish and the potentialities of mind and sensibility unfold?

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From the European perspective of visiting scholars Bertrand Russell (above) and Isaiah Berlin (below), the businesslike style and social commitment of twentieth-century Harvard seemed out of place at a university.

JERRY BAUER

For both Russell and Berlin the surprising thing they found at Harvard was the hustling, businesslike atmosphere and the degree of social commitment. Not that they did not see that learning went on here, but they expected that to happen and found it unremarkable. What they did not expect, and found remarkable, was the exterior pressures, the service orientation. *That*, and its deep implications, struck them as strange in a great university.

But service to the public, responding to the outside world—fixing the turnips when they go wrong—has been with us from the start, not as an aberration, but as part of a tense balance between two profound commitments.

Is this at all relevant to what lies ahead? I think it is. In recent years we have had a rich and beneficial turn to public service, mainly in the professional schools. We are positioned as never before, in our powerful professional faculties, to fix the turnips when they go wrong, indeed to see to it that they grow properly in the first place.

But as we begin a new transition, I hope we can conceive of the balance shifting back toward the University's primary faculty—toward the magnet of learning, toward disinterested study, toward intellectual pursuits not for extrinsic purposes but for their own sakes. We are in no danger of forgetting the turnips. The danger is that the University will become a mere holding company for highly publicized, semi-independent service institutes, its original core faculty still respectable but old-fashioned, diminished, and by-passed in importance. I hope in the years ahead we will above all honor our first commitment, which an earlier Harvard president, Josiah Quincy, defined simply as "giving a true account of the gift of reason."

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