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***DUNSTER HOUSE PRESENTATION, Senior Common Room Dinner.
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“Henry Dunster’s Life and Impact: 400 Years Later”

by

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First of all, I’d like to thank President Faust, the Masters of Dunster House - Roger and Ann Porter, and Ed Likovich for their gracious invitation and for organizing this event. Today we remember and honor the life and contributions of Henry Dunster, Harvard’s first President, in this, the 400th anniversary of his birth-month in 1609.

For most Harvard students as well as many faculty, I suppose, Henry Dunster’s name is probably mostly an historical footnote. Some may vaguely know that he was Harvard’s first President, that a key street near the heart of the University as well as this House are named for him. But beyond that, I suspect, there is little knowledge and perhaps minimal interest, unless one has taken the time to read Samuel Eliot Morison’s works on the history of Harvard or searched out other far-flung sources, brought closer in recent years only as a result of the Internet.

About a week and a half ago I returned from a trip to Jerusalem. In East Jerusalem one day I had lunch with a former recent Mather House resident, who is working there now with the UN. One of our other attendees at lunch happened to tell him about my work on Dunster. He was quite interested in learning more, but then he jokingly replied: “Increase Mather and Down with Dunster!” I certainly understand the intensity, if not the precise source, of all the rivalries thus expressed. I would be happy to be more fully informed on the matter so that my own loyalties may be properly configured!

The Dunster Biography

I have been at work on a modern-day biography of Dunster, off and on, for about a decade and a half. The whole thing was really first launched as a result of the difficulty I encountered in initially tracking down Dunster’s gravesite in the early 1990s and my strong urging of then President Rudenstine to do something to better mark the grave of Harvard’s first President. At that point, nothing had been done in more than a hundred

years to the gravesite, and the Latin epitaph on the slab over the grave was beginning to fade. After the whole process was completed, we did end up with a nice marker being placed on the gravesite clearly marking it as Dunster's (which had been my main goal), but then, to our chagrin, it was later discovered that we had a wrong date for his year of birth – 1612 instead of 1609! That was, in part, the catalyst for me to embark on a quest to do an up to date biography in order to set that and many other issues straight. So, I've been at it since probably about 1993. I had hoped to have it done for this year, the quatercentenary, but I also got side-tracked: the whole story of Harvard as America's first corporation and Dunster's role in that story took on added significance for me. I soon realized that that part of the story would probably be lost in a biography that perhaps few would read and was much deserving of a separate book of its own; thus, what emerged was, in essence, my own *Hobbit* spun off from a larger *Lord of the Rings*. Thus, I didn't reach my self-imposed deadline of 2009 for the biography, but I have received sufficient encouragement from a number of quarters that I really hope to have it completed and published by sometime next year or by early 2011. Dunster's role as the owner of the first printing press in America and one of the first publishers in this country is also probably worthy of a separate book, since I don't believe the full story has yet been told on that aspect of his life, either...

Magdalene College

I'd next like to acknowledge our profound tie and debt to a sister institution, Magdalene College, Cambridge University, Henry Dunster's *alma mater*. I recently received a gracious note from Dr Ronald Hyam, Magdalene College Archivist. They will be having a special ceremony in the College chapel there commemorating the life of Henry Dunster on November 26th – Thanksgiving Day – the anniversary of his baptism and the only sure date we have from the earliest period in his life – we don't know his exact day of birth nor exactly where he was born, other than it was somewhere in or near the town of Bury in present-day Lancashire, England. The Magdalene service, among other things, will include music from the *Bay Psalm Book* and a reading from Dunster's 'Confession of Faith'.¹ That's very appropriate. Dunster – along with a fellow named Richard Lyon, a graduate of Emmanuel College who lived with the Dunster family in the president's house and who also tutored Harvard student William Mildmay (great-grandson of Emmanuel College founder, Sir Walter Mildmay²), upgraded the translation of the *Bay Psalm Book* into a popular edition known as *New England Psalms* that was used in New England churches for more than a century after his death – and is said to have gone through some fifty editions. Professor Hyam also just published a special commemorative article about Dunster and Harvard in the *Magdalene College Magazine*, titled "Magdalene and America's First University." (Issue No. 53, 2008-2009, pp. 42-49)

¹ Dunster's 'Confession of Faith' prior to receiving membership in the First Church of Cambridge (where, over the years, he later served at times as an interim preacher and teacher) was recorded by its then pastor, Rev. Thomas Shepard and reprinted in George Selement and Bruce Wooley, Eds. *Thomas Shepard's Confessions* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1981). From the Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts series, Vol. LVIII.

² Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*, p. 349. See also George Parker Winship, *The Cambridge Press, 1638-1692* (1945), pp. 92-93.

So, in a spirit of fraternal trans-Atlantic solidarity, I will be sending a copy of my remarks here tonight to Magdalene College, so that they will be available to them prior to their own Dunster celebration in a couple of weeks. I will also be sending a copy to Mr. Adrian Frost, town development manager in Bury, Lancashire, who will be dedicating a new road in Henry Dunster's honor on that same day in Bury in honor of their native son.

The State of 'Dunsterian Studies.'

There are enough things going on now in the form of worldwide scholarly exchange that one can actually refer to this as a field of 'Dunsterian studies' – at least among a small group of interested persons. Two organizations have also recently been founded honoring the name of Henry Dunster – the Henry Dunster Association, founded by myself and two others, Mr. Charles Allen, a descendant of Dunster who lives here in the U.S., and Charles Walker of Bury, Lancashire, a member of local historical societies there, who has conducted extensive research into issues related to Dunster's birthplace. The second is the Henry Dunster Society, founded in September 2008 by Dr. Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California at Davis, primarily to bring together overseas alumni of the Bury Grammar School, where Dunster was once a student and where he also served as Third Headmaster prior to becoming Harvard's first President in 1640.³ Between all of us and others not mentioned, we have a lively exchange on many issues Dunster-related.

We are all also much encouraged by the Harvard Archives' recent digitization of the Henry Dunster Papers, making them available online just in time for the 400th anniversary.⁴ For any of you interested in keeping up to date on these or related developments, please consult my website **HenryDunster.org** for more information. It is, however, still a work-in-progress.

Dunster the Man

Now, in the few moments that we have left, a few thoughts about Henry Dunster the man and what he means to us today – some 400 years after his birth. I readily admit the bias of the biographer – at least in the sense of a biographer who deeply admires his subject. In terms of his faults, in Dunster's case, it is really difficult to find them. He was an average undergraduate student at Magdalene but later emerged as a much respected scholar in Hebrew, as well as having knowledge of Chaldean and Syriac and a deep interest in the indigenous languages of Native Americans. He was fascinated by how the sounds of various Indian languages compared with certain sounds in the classical and ancient languages with which he was very familiar. In his scholarly correspondence with

³ The primary source on the Bury Grammar School and Dunster's role in it is covered in the major work by I.B. Fallows, *Bury Grammar School: A History c. 1570 to 1976* (Altrincham, Chesire, UK: The Estate Governors of the Bury Grammar Schools, 2001).

⁴ The newly digitized Henry Dunster Papers at Harvard are now available at the following link, which goes to Harvard's OASIS system: nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:hua23004 The Harvard University Archives' Call Number for the Henry Dunster Papers is UAI 15.850. According to the Archives' website, the "digitization of Henry Dunster's papers was made possible in part by generous support from the Sidney Verba Fund."

Professor Christian Ravis, a famous linguistics professor in Europe of that day, Dunster said that he was seeking both “the promoting of Learning in the Colledge amongst the Students, and in the woods amongst the Indians in their Savage booths or wigwams.”⁵ According to historian Alden Vaughan, a leading scholar on Puritan-Indian relations, Dunster was “the prime mover” behind the creation of the Indian College, though he had to leave the presidency before he could see that dream fulfilled.⁶ One amazing quotation from the period says that it was Dunster’s desire “to make Harvard the Indian Oxford as well as the New-English Cambridge.”⁷

Beyond languages, though, he had deep interest and knowledge in a number of fields, and he also did virtually all of the teaching of the entire curriculum in those early years, besides raising a large family and serving as the College’s chief fundraiser and administrator.

When he designed Harvard’s corporate charter, he saw the institution as a place to impart both “knowledge *and* godliness” to both “the English and Indian youth of this country” – words that are enshrined in the very same charter that governs Harvard to this day. Against much opposition, he established the standard for four-year undergraduate education in America. Though the content has changed completely since Dunster’s day, the concept of needing four years for a proper foundation for higher education has been retained to this day as the basis for a bachelor’s degree.

Dunster was probably the key catalyst for what we now refer to as the concept of *translatio studii* - the transfer of the best of knowledge from the Old World to the New – a subject discussed by professors George Williams and Bernard Bailyn and also briefly in my first book.⁸

He also was a man of courage – a fact often lost on those with only a passing acquaintance with the period in question. Even the granting of the first degrees at Harvard was a bold step at the time - despite the Civil War in England, since Dunster did not have the permission of the British Crown, and only the sovereign or his designees had the right to confer degrees. Clearly, that decision would have been made jointly by Dunster, the Overseers and the General Court of Massachusetts Bay, but there seems little doubt that Dunster would have been the person held chiefly responsible if the Crown had later chosen to retaliate for such an incursion on the royal prerogative. As it was, there were those on the British side who remained generally upset even years after Dunster’s death. As I discuss in *America’s Oldest Corporation*, a group of Royal Commissioners from England visited Harvard in 1665 (some six years after Dunster’s death) and were being shown the then Indian College on campus – in whatever state it

⁵ Jeremiah Chaplin, *Life of Henry Dunster* (1872), Appendix V, p. 271.

⁶ Alden Vaughan, “Missionary Efforts: Years of Harvest, 1665-1675,” *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians: 1620-1675*, p. 281.

⁷ Vaughan, op. cit., p. 281. The quotation is taken from *Harvard College Records (Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Collections, XV-XVI [1925])*, I, p. 40, 181, as well as Samuel Eliot Morison’s *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts), Vol. I, pp. 6, 340.

⁸ See A. J. Melnick, *America’s Oldest Corporation and First CEO: Harvard and Henry Dunster*, Appendix F: The Trivium and the Quadrivium; The Concept of *Translatio Studii* and Henry Dunster,” p. 198.

was at the time. They then made this comment about Harvard in general: they said that the “colledge may afford as many schismatics to the Church, and the Corporation as many rebels to the King, *as formerly they have done*” [emphasis added], “if not timely prevented.”⁹ An ominous warning, to be sure, and one made 110 years before the events of 1775.

Dunster primarily saw himself as a pastor-teacher-mentor. When he set up the “Rules and Precepts of Harvard College,” the following took center stage as the mission statement of the College and indeed of learning itself:

*“Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternall life, and therefore to lay Christ at the bottome, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.”*¹⁰

Being “earnestly pressed to consider well” is not the same thing as being forced to believe. Dunster believed in conscience rather than compulsion as the means for changing minds; in this he differed from some of his fellow Puritans.

When it came to matters of conscience, though it is not usually well known nor appreciated for its significance – Dunster, who was at the time, without question, the very essence of the Harvard Establishment – gave it all up because of his convictions, thereby becoming Harvard’s first dissenter. As I wrote in *America’s Oldest Corporation*, Dunster “became the first model of dissent for conscience’s sake for all Harvard dissenters who would follow, whether they ever knew his name or not...”¹¹

Another Harvard Financial Crisis: Making Ends Meet

Dunster as a young college president, in a way similar to President Faust today, had to deal almost immediately after he began his presidency with an economic crisis that hit New England hard.¹² As Morison states:

*But for the energetic leadership of Dunster in this crisis, it is probable that Harvard College would have died before graduating a class...”*¹³

As far as his salary was concerned, another Harvard President, Josiah Quincy, would say this during the nineteenth century:

His scanty salary had been paid, not in cash, nor in

⁹ *America’s Oldest Corporation*, p. 8, footnote 29.

¹⁰ Chaplin, *Life of Henry Dunster* (1872), p. 65.

¹¹ *America’s Oldest Corporation*, p. 176.

¹² Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, p. 199.

¹³ Morison, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

*kind, but by transfers of town rates; thereby vesting him with the character of tax-gatherer, and exposing him to all the vexations, delays, complaints, losses and abatements incident to that office.*¹⁴

Dunster received an average annual salary of about £55 pounds, along with money from the Glover estate, as well as tuition fees.¹⁵ In 1654, his successor, Charles Chauncy, was offered an annual salary nearly double that figure - £100 pounds – to accept the presidency.¹⁶ According to Benjamin Peirce’s *A History of Harvard University* (1833), Dunster wrote a letter in 1643 to Governor Winthrop discussing “abatements he had suffered, from £60 [down]...to £30,” that dwindling figure being the rent he collected from the ferry.¹⁷ He told Winthrop that he “was and am willing, considering the poverty of the country, to descend to the lowest step, if there can be nothing comfortably allowed.”¹⁸ He was ready to “sit down appeased, desiring nor more than may supply me and mine with food and raiment....to the furtherance of our labors for the good of Church and Commonwealth.”¹⁹ Dunster was obviously prepared to sacrifice wherever he could in order to serve Harvard College as an institution – that is how much he believed in it. He also was respectful of the pressures on Winthrop as well, choosing to place his own needs in the context of the joint enterprise they both served – “to the furtherance of our labors for the good of Church and Commonwealth.”

The Cambridge Grammar School and Dunster’s Role

Though he had to sacrifice greatly during this time, not only did Dunster do everything he could to keep Harvard afloat and successful, he also did the same for grade-school education here in Cambridge. He was one of the guiding lights, if not the savior, of one of the first grammar schools in America, the Cambridge Grammar School. In fact, he was so involved that he personally funded the bulk of the costs of construction. For the longest time, the town of Cambridge was unable or unwilling to reimburse him for those costs, and he actually held the property title to the school, which was built on land originally belonging to his first wife. The whole issue was not settled until after his death, when the town of Cambridge, in what it referred to as a “voluntary act,” gave his widow, Elizabeth

¹⁴ President Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University* (1860), Volume I, p. 20.

¹⁵ Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*, pp. 343-344.

¹⁶ However, even with a near doubling of the salary that Dunster received on average, President Chauncy found it quite difficult to run the College and still make ends meet. Andrew Schlesinger, citing Mather’s *Magnalia*, relates a fascinating story years later about Chauncy after the latter’s financial appeals for urgent needs had twice been turned down by the General Court. Chauncy himself had gone into debt as a result. Friends reportedly urged him to give it up and walk away but he would not do so. His response was: “*Oportet Imperatorem Stantem mori*” (“An emperor ought to die standing.”) See George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers, Being the Lives of the Pilgrim Fathers & Their Families, with Their Friends & Foes* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), p. 364; Andrew Schlesinger, *Veritas: Harvard College and the American Experience* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), pp. 9-11. The reference in *Magnalia* is in Book III, Part 2, Chapter 23, pp. 474-476, 1853 Edition.

¹⁷ Benjamin Peirce, *A History of Harvard University, from its foundation in the year 1636, to the period of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Brown, Shattuck, and Company, 1833), p. 11.

¹⁸ Peirce, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁹ Cited in George P. Costigan, Jr., “Henry Dunster, Harvard’s First President,” *The Harvard Graduates Magazine*, Vol. XIV (March 1906), p. 397.

Dunster, £30 to obtain clear title to the school, but, as I say in my book, I think the Dunster family was much short-changed by the transaction; they desperately needed funds after his death, and so Elizabeth accepted what she could get.²⁰

A Believer in ‘Second Chances’: The James Ward Story

Henry Dunster very much believed in ‘second chances.’ As a Puritan believer, this very much grew out of his faith in redemption. One amazing story showing this is that of Harvard student James Ward, who, along with another student, was once caught burglarizing homes in Cambridge. According to Governor Winthrop, this category of crime itself was so new in Massachusetts that they “had yet no particular punishment for burglary.”²¹ Dunster decided to have Ward and his partner in crime, John Weld, publicly whipped, and he decided to do the punishment himself. Both young men were ministers’ sons, so what they had done struck especially hard at the very core of the religious establishment of the emerging Commonwealth.

Dunster believed that strong punishment needed to be meted out, but once the discipline was over, he also believed very much in rehabilitation. James Ward went on to graduate from Harvard in 1645, and, as I say in *America’s Oldest Corporation*, he became one of the most important degree holders in the history of American education.²² It was this same James Ward, in whom Dunster obviously saw great promise, who went back to England after graduation to seek to continue his studies at Oxford University. In an extraordinary vote of confidence in both Harvard and Ward, Oxford accepted his degree as fully equivalent to the Oxford B.A. itself, thereby becoming the first degree transfer, so to speak, to occur between the Old and New Worlds. This act of “incorporation,” as it was then called, sealed Harvard’s reputation, occurring just eight years into Dunster’s presidency. There could be no greater statement of credibility or confidence in the quality of a Harvard degree, and, at the most fundamental level, Harvard has never looked back.

Morison wrote that this privilege of “incorporating” the bachelor’s degree was extended “to ten or twelve Harvard men between 1648 and 1660, at Oxford and Cambridge, but never to any later American university.”²³ The whole story is an amazing testimony not only to the quality of Dunster’s work in preparing these young men, but also in how his belief in ‘second chances’ came back to impact Harvard itself.

Dunster’s “Jewel of Scholarship”

Henry Dunster’s lasting contribution to scholarship in America is not some famous work that bears his name. Rather, it is the jewel of scholarship *itself* that he established at Harvard: the commitment to excellence, the demand for quality, the high standards and

²⁰ See *America’s Oldest Corporation*, p. 140.

²¹ Cited in Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, p. 241.

²² *America’s Oldest Corporation*, p. 145. See, generally, the section titled: “Principle: Reforming and Redeeming Those in Whom You See Promise: Giving People a ‘Second Chance’,” pp. 141-145.

²³ Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*, pp. 212-213; see also *America’s Oldest Corporation*, footnote 453, p. 142.

the creation of a nurturing and challenging academic environment where countless scholars have produced untold tens of thousands of works enriching the world and the life of the mind through the centuries. But he was also committed to the life of the spirit and freedom of conscience. He extolled and exhibited humility, once saying that, if there were not humility in learning, then “desiring to be as gods, we become as devils.”²⁴ Making the quest for *Veritas* a noble one – that is what Henry Dunster helped give to all who came after him, and for that, and much, much more, we honor him here tonight.



Senior Common Room Dinner, November 12, 2009,
Dunster House, Harvard University, honoring the
400th anniversary of Henry Dunster’s birth.

²⁴ Cited in Ernest Axon, “Henry Dunster, First President of Harvard College,”
Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, Vol. XXVII, 1909, p. 91.