OLD CAMBRIDGE

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Chapter 1: Old Cambridge

“Old Cambridge,” as it was formerly called, to distinguish it from the later settlements called East Cambridge and Cambridgeport, is one of the few American towns that may be said to have owed their very name and existence to the pursuits of letters. Laid out originally by Governor John Winthrop as a fortified town,--furnished soon after with a “pallysadoe,” of which the large willows on Holmes's Field are the last lingering memorial,--it might nevertheless have gone the way of many abortive early settlements, had it not been for the establishment of Harvard College there. We Cambridge boys early learned, however, that this event was due mainly to the renown attained, as a preacher and author, by the Rev. Thomas Shepard, known in his day as “the holy, heavenly, sweet-affecting, and soul-ravishing Mr. Shepard,” a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, England, who came to America in 1635. A voluminous author, some of whose works are yet reprinted in England, he was the ruling spirit of the Cambridge synod, which was held in 1637 to pronounce against “antinomian and familistic opinions.” He was described by his contemporaries as a “poor, weak, pale-complectioned man,” yet such was his power that the synod condemned under his guidance “about eighty opinions, some blasphemous, other erroneous, all unsound,” as even the tolerant Winthrop declared. By this and his other good deeds he so won the confidence of the leaders of the colony that when a college was to be founded, Cotton Mather tells us, “Cambridge rather than any other place was fixed upon to be the seat of that happy seminary.” On the wrecks of eighty unsound or blasphemous opinions there was thus erected one happy seminary. And the college also brought with it the name of the English university city, so that the

settlement first called “Newetowne” became in May, 1638, Cambridge, and has thus ever since remained. And so essentially was the college the centre of the whole colony, as well as of the town, that there exists among the manuscripts of the Massachusetts Historical Society a memorandum, dated September 30, 1783, to the effect that in the early days the persons appointed to lay out roads into the interior did it only so far as “the bank by Mrs. Biglow's house in Weston,” and that this they considered to be quite as far as would ever be necessary, it being “about seven miles from the college in Cambridge.”

Fifty years ago, Cambridge boys knew all this tradition very well; and they knew also that the soul-ravishing Mr. Shepard, after publishing a dozen or so of his books in England, printed the last two upon the press which came to Cambridge in the very year when the town assumed its name. We all knew the romance of the early arrival of this press; that the Rev. Joseph Glover, a dissenting minister, had embarked for the colony in 1638 with his wife, his press, his types, and his printer, Stephen Daye; that Mr. Glover died on the passage, but the press arrived safely and was at length put in the house of President Dunster, of Harvard College; that this good man took into his charge not merely the printing apparatus, but the Widow Glover, whom he finally made his wife. For forty years all the printing done in the British Colonies in America was done on this press, Stephen Daye being followed by his son Matthew, and he by Samuel Green. We know that the first work printed here was “The Freeman's oath,” in 1639; and that about a hundred books were thus printed before 1700, this including Eliot's English Bible. It was not till 1674, nearly forty years later, that a press was set up in Boston; and Thomas in his “History of printing” says that “the press of Harvard College was, for a time, as celebrated as the press of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in England.”

And not merely were the foundations of the town and of the college thus laid in literature, but the early presidents of Harvard were usually selected, not merely for soundness of doctrine,which was not always their strong point,--but for their scholarship and even supposed literary taste. President Dunster, for instance, was an eminent Oriental scholar and performed also the somewhat dubious service of preparing the “New England psalm book.” As originally compiled it had dissatisfied Cotton Mather, who had hoped “that a little more of art was to be employed in it,” and good Mr. Shepard thus ventured to criticise its original compilers, the Rev. Richard Mather of Dorchester and the Rev. Messrs. Eliot and Welde of Roxbury:--

You Roxb'ry poets, keep clear of the crime Of missing to give us very good rhyme, And you of Dorchester, your verses lengthen But with the text's own words you will them strengthen.

Presidents Charles Chauncey and Urian Oakes published a few sermons — the latter offering one with the jubilant title, “The Unconquerable, All Conquering and More than Conquering Soldier,” which was appropriately produced on what was then called Artillery Election in 1674. President Increase Mather was one of the most voluminous authors of the Puritan period, and from his time (1701) down to the present day there have been few presidents of Harvard University who were not authors.

All these men we Cambridge children knew, not by their writings, from which we happily escaped, but from their long-winded Latin inscriptions on the flat stones in the.Cambridge cemetery. These we studied and transcribed and, with a good deal of insecurity, translated; indeed, one boy whom I knew well, son of the college librarian, made a book of them all, which is still known to collectors.

Thus we learned of President Charles Chauncey, who died in 1672, that his tomb was the grave of “praesidis vigilantissini, viri plane ntegerrimi, concionatoris eximii,

pietate pariter ac liberali eruditione ornatissimi.” It seemed to us far more impressive than the tenderer tribute to his wife, who died four years before him :

Here lies enterr'd wthin this Shrine
A spirit meeke, a Soule divine,
Endow'd wth. grace, & piety
Excelling in humility:
Preferring Gods commands above
All fine delights & this World's love.

We used to read also of the Rev. Edward Wigglesworth, S. T. D. (1765), whose virtues took thirty-three lines to inscribe them, and of whom it is recorded that he made his Hebrew lectures not only profitable for teaching, but delightful to all cultivated minds (“Ad docendum mire accomodatas, literatis item omnibus probatissimas reddiderunt”). He was also, “Conjux peramans, parens benevolentissimus ;” and it is expressly stated that while he was candid in controversy he was also exceedingly vigorous -“Simul et acer, nervosus, praepotens extitit.” If so, it is not strange that Dr. Chauncey in his sketch of him praises his “catholic spirit and conduct, in spite of great temptations to the contrary.”

From these we turned to the humbler tomb of Thomas Longhorn, the town drummer, who died in 1685, “aged about 68 years,” or of Thomas Fox, whose death was in 1693, and who had a quarter of a century before been ordered by the selectmen to “look to the youth in time of public worship, & to inform against such as he find disorderly” ; or, perhaps with vague curiosity to that of “Jane, a negro servant to Andrew Boardman,” who died in 1741, when Massachusetts still held slaves.

These larger tombs, by reason of their horizontal position, afforded excellent seats for schoolboys, intent perhaps on exploring the results of their walnutting or chestnutting; or possibly a defiant nap might be there indulged. I have often wished that I had learned from

Lowell on which of them he sat during that Hallowe'en night when he watched there vainly for ghosts.

Only one of these longer epitaphs was in English; and the frequent “Eheu,” or “O spes inanis,” in the others, made us feel that emotion as well as accuracy might exist in Latin. Modern cemeteries never seem to me very aweinspiring; but the old New England graveyards, especially in college towns, impressed on the boyish mind not only the dignity of virtue, but of knowledge; of this world's honors and grandeurs perhaps, but never of its financial treasures. I can find only one epitaph in the Cambridge churchyard which mentions that the person commemorated was a man of wealth; and that is on the grave of a non-collegiate man, whose inscription is in English. But we noticed that at the end of the tombstone of the Rev. Samuel Appleton, after all the sonorous Latin the climax came in those superb words from the English Vulgate: “They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament. And they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.”

I have dwelt upon this churchyard because it is perfectly certain that every Cambridge boy in 1830 drew from it as distinct a sense of an historic past and of the dignity of letters as any English boy receives when he glances downward, while waiting for the Temple Church in London to open its doors, and sees beneath his feet the name of Oliver Goldsmith. Through its influence we naturally thought of the academical virtues — dignity, learning, the power of leadership — as being the great achievement of life, while all else was secondary. On the other hand, the empty diamond-shaped cavities on many of the tombs represented the places where leaden escutcheons had been converted into bullets for the army of the American Revolution. Holmes and Longfellow both described the place in their poems; and it is certain that the Cambridge muses would not have been just what they were without the old churchyard.

Cambridge children also discovered that during the eighteenth century the Harvard professors, if not literary men, were at least scholars, according to the standard of their time. Samuel Sewall, grand-nephew of the celebrated judge of that name, first taught the grammar school in Cambridge, and then (1762) became college librarian and instructor in Hebrew. He published a Hebrew grammar, a Latin version of the first book of Young's “Night thoughts,” and various poems and orations in Greek and Latin; and he left behind him a manuscript Chaldee and English dictionary, which still reposes unpublished in the College Library. His kinsman, Jonathan Sewell (not Sewall), born in Cambridge (1766), became an eminent lawyer and legal writer in Canada, was one of the first to propose Canadian federation, in a pamphlet (815), and left a work on “The Judicial History of France, so far as it relates to the Law of the Province of Lower Canada.” The eighteenth century also brought the physical sciences on their conquering course, to Harvard College, displacing the established curriculum of theology and philology; but Professor Goodale has shown that they really came in as a branch of theology, or of what is called “pastoral care,” since the clergy of that day were also largely the medical advisers of their people and had to be instructed for that function. The first Professor of Mathematics and Philosophy, Isaac Greenwood, was not appointed until 1727; he was followed (738) by John Winthrop, who was greatly in advance of the science of the day, and whose two lectures on comets, delivered in the College Chapel in 1759, are still good reading. The year 1783 saw the founding of the Harvard Medical School; and although this was situated in Boston, the Botanic Garden was in Cambridge and under the supervision (1825-1834) of a highly educated English observer, Thomas Nuttall, whose works on botany and ornithology were pioneers in New England. These books we read, on the very ground which had produced them; and

Nuttall's charming accounts of birds, especially, were as if written in our own garden and orchard.

We further discovered that in passing from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century Old Cambridge passed from the domain of a somewhat elementary science to a more than elementary literature. The appointment of John Quincy Adams (1806) as Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, had a distinct influence on the literary tendencies of Cambridge, and his two volumes of lectures still surprise the reader by their good sense and judgment. Levi Hedge, about the same time (18 10), became Professor of Logic and Metaphysics, and he furnished what was for many years the standard American textbook on the former subject. A few years more brought to Cambridge (between 1811 and 1822) a group of men at that time unequalled in this country as regarded general cultivation and the literary spirit,--Andrews Norton, Edward Everett, Joseph Green Cogswell, George Ticknor, Washington Allston, Jared Sparks, Edward T. Channing, Richard H. Dana, and George Bancroft. Most of them were connected with the University, the rest were resident in Cambridge, but all had their distinct influence on the atmosphere in which the Cambridge authors grew. Professor Edward T. Channing especially-grand-uncle of the present Professor of similar name — probably trained as many conspicuous authors as all other American instructors put together.

It has also an important bearing on the present volume when we observe that the effect of all this influence was to create not merely individual writers, but literary families. The Rev. Abiel Holmes, D. D., author of “The Annals of America,” came to Cambridge as pastor of the First Church in 1809; and both his sons, Oliver Wendell and John, became authors -the one being known to all English readers, while the other, with perhaps greater original powers, was known only to a few neighbors. The Ware family, coming in 1825, was a race of writers, including the