



The Henry Dunster Society

Bringing together overseas alumni/ae to support the Bury Grammar Schools

RESEARCH MEMORANDUM 1

August 2009

Draft

CHOOSING THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF HARVARD: HENRY DUNSTER AND THE FALLOWS THESIS

Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith

Introduction

In 2007, while working on the formation of the Henry Dunster Society and planning for its first meeting, which took place at Harvard in the fall of 2008, I drafted an essay on “Digging Up Dunster: The Vital Link Between Bury Grammar School, Harvard University, and Higher Education in America.” Henry Dunster was the third Headmaster of the School and the first President of Harvard.

The greatest unsolved puzzle at the heart of the essay, and the one that probably has more intrigued and perplexed Dunster scholars than any other, is this: How did Dunster get the Harvard job?

I cannot solve that puzzle, here. The available evidence does not allow anyone to answer the question for sure. And it is extremely unlikely at this point in time that enough fresh seventeenth century evidence will be found to make the crafting of a good modern answer a possibility in the foreseeable future. It is possible, however, to speculate that, far from stumbling into an unexpected opportunity, Dunster was head hunted.

The Case for Speculation

Speculation involves some informed reasoning and some sensible imagining about how it might have happened that a young man from Bury, Lancashire, could be offered this job at Harvard in August 1640. The invitation came just three weeks after Dunster stepped off a boat in Boston, Massachusetts, one among the newest Puritan refugees from the religious strife that was increasingly poisoning the affairs of the established church and English politics more broadly. His appointment cries out for explanation, but none is at hand. Speculating about what happened— a fancier name for it would be hypothesizing — is possible, but it is also a risky business, especially when evidence is so scant. It is generally, therefore, an approach to understanding the past to which prudent historians are averse. In this particular case, however, speculating is warranted for two reasons.

Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith
The Henry Dunster Society
1115 Auburn Drive, Davis, California 95616, U.S.A.
(530) 756-4402

The first is that, while Dunster was not an entirely improbable choice to take over at Harvard, his qualifications and experience by themselves did not make him an outstanding candidate. Dunster went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, from Bury Grammar School in 1627 and returned to Bury soon after graduating. He became curate at Bury Parish Church, where the incumbent rector was a pluralist client of the Earl of Derby, as well as incumbent at Halsall, near Ormskirk, not far from where the earl lived. Dunster also served as master of the Bury school – we would now say as Headmaster of Bury Grammar School -- but only for a few years before leaving for America. In the interim, he completed his M.A. at Cambridge, but not with astonishing distinction. Even by the standards of the day, this was a limited resumé. The choice of Dunster, then, is hard to explain in conventional qualification and experience terms.

The other reason for speculating about why Dunster was appointed stems from his legacy. He saved Harvard. He turned it into a viable and respected institution of higher learning. And in so doing, and particularly through his drafting of the corporate charter for Harvard in 1650, he set a pattern for the governance of colleges and universities in America that has endured to this day. Dunster, then, is an enormously important figure, not just in the history of Harvard but also in the history of American higher education. And absent some exploration of the circumstances of his appointment it is difficult to understand both the magnitude of Dunster's accomplishments and the prestige Harvard has enjoyed ever since.

Previous Speculation and Speculators

Given all this, it is no surprise that other Dunster scholars have tried to answer the question: How did he get the job? But let me be clear – the study of Dunster's life and work is an acquired and specialized and limited taste. The issues addressed, here, are not the subject of a large published literature. Indeed, there are only three works in which, to one degree or another, the appointment of Dunster and his work at Harvard are assessed.

Setting aside family hagiographies, the earliest and surely the most magisterial work is the history of the founding of Harvard College published by Samuel Eliot Morison in 1935. The second is the equally prodigiously researched history of the founding and re-founding of the Bury Grammar Schools published by Ian Fallows in 2001. And the third is a book about Harvard as a corporation published by Jim Melnick in 2008. In all three of these works, however, the circumstances of the appointment of Dunster are incidental concerns and not addressed in detail, even speculatively.

Beyond this, there are some unpublished notes by members of Dunster's extended family and pieces of correspondence that can be brought to bear. After the distribution of my 2007 essay on Dunster, for example, I came across unpublished notes that date from 1996 by Charles Allen, who claims some distant relation to Dunster, about the Harvard appointment. And in recent and continuing correspondence prompted by my essay both Ian Fallows and Jim Melnick have shared ideas that go far beyond material they have included in their published work.

How, then, to proceed?

Elaborating the Fallows Thesis

On balance, it seems to me that the most thoughtful, detailed and plausible attempt to elaborate a head hunter thesis – to put the bare facts of Dunster’s arrival in Boston in August 1640 and his invitation three weeks later to accept the presidency of Harvard together with other contextual evidence and, thus, to advance a plausible explanation for what happened – is the one made by Ian Fallows, soon after reading my essay on “Digging Up Dunster.” I refer to it, therefore, as the Fallows thesis.

In what follows I rehearse the major points of the argument advanced by Fallows in a letter he sent to me in March 2008, annotated with such additional thoughts and comments by me and by others as seem helpful and merited.

Dunster Was a Known Quantity

The notion that the people in Massachusetts entrusted with the survival and welfare of Harvard, known at the time as overseers, could have initiated and concluded an assessment of the goodness of fit between Dunster and the leadership position they were trying to fill in the three weeks after Dunster arrived in Boston is implausible. By the same token, Dunster could not in this same short time frame have done very much himself to establish a reputation the overseers would find impressive. The person first chosen to lead Harvard, Nathaniel Eaton, proved to be such a disaster that the college for all intents and purposes closed after Eaton was dismissed. The bad experience with Eaton, sometimes styled professor or master but never president, counselled that the overseers proceed with caution.

The natural interpretation, then, of the overseers making an offer to Dunster in such a short span is that they already knew something about him. Their course would have been to wait until his ship arrived, give him some time to settle in, and take a brief look at him, all to reassure themselves that he was exactly the man they were expecting. After calling a prompt meeting, they could issue the invitation.

For this plan to work, however, the overseers must have known enough about Dunster to be reasonably sure that he was on paper at least the equal of Eaton but also had qualities Eaton lacked. They needed to find a man of piety and good character, someone with strong Puritan credentials. They wanted a man who could not only retrieve the appalling situation Eaton left behind but also someone with the skills, patience, integrity, and vision to build the reputation of their new college foundation. They wanted a good teacher and good pastoral care for students. They almost certainly wanted a Cambridge man, because so many of the early leading Puritans were Cambridge men and because the strength of Puritan leadership at Cambridge was well known, both in England and in Massachusetts, to which latter place a good many had already removed.

Dunster Had Influential Connections

Given that these are the sorts of requirements the overseers had in mind, they would very likely have asked each other, as well as others in Massachusetts at the time, where a person

might be found who could fit the bill. Although there is no record of the conversations and other exchanges the overseers initiated, three excellent advisers were on hand.

One was John Cotton. Born in Derby in 1584 and already in 1598 a precocious young scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, Cotton seemed destined for a Trinity fellowship. In 1606, however, in what seems to have been a fit of inadvertence, Trinity lost Cotton to Emmanuel College, where his learning and evangelism helped him to become the vicar of St. Botolph's in Boston, Lincolnshire, and complete a degree in divinity in 1613.

Cotton became increasingly nonconformist, a fine preacher, and a person to whom others at Cambridge would send their students as if to a theological finishing school. One of these was John Preston, whose life was changed, he said, by a sermon he heard Cotton preach at Emmanuel in 1611. Preston considered Cotton his friend, visited with him at Boston with his students, and was Master of Emmanuel from 1622 until he died in 1628.

For a time, Cotton was protected from the consequences of his dissent and nonconformity by the Bishop of Lincoln, John Williams, also a Cambridge man, from St. John's College, and a man whose sympathies for the Puritans twice led him to be imprisoned. An impending break with the church and with England was signalled in 1630, however, when Cotton preached the farewell sermon to John Winthrop's fleet of eleven ships and seven hundred souls before they left England to join the existing Puritan settlement at Salem and form the nucleus of the Massachusetts Bay colony, where Winthrop became Governor.

Three years later, Cotton himself emigrated to Massachusetts on the *Griffin*, along with two other Emmanuel men who would become prominent figures in the history of New England, Thomas Hooker and Samuel Stone. (John Harvard, also an Emmanuel man, a Dunster contemporary at Cambridge, and the person after whom Harvard College is named in recognition of the gift of his library, arrived in New England later, in 1637, and settled in Charlestown).

Cotton became teacher at the First Church of Boston and along with Hooker had "an important part in defining the ecclesiastical constitution of New England." More directly relevant to consideration of Dunster for the job at Harvard is that from 1637 until his death in 1652 Cotton served as an overseer of Harvard College. There is no evidence that Dunster was one of the many young men from Cambridge, from Emmanuel but also from other colleges, who went to Cotton's theological finishing school in Lincolnshire. But Dunster was inspired by the preaching of Cotton's friend Preston. Dunster tells us so himself. Circumstantially, then, Cotton was well placed to be in effect a friend at court.

A second person able to advise the overseers about Dunster was Richard Mather. Mather was from Lowton, Lancashire, and went up from Winwick Grammar School to Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1618. At first glance, this cuts against the Cambridge influence. This is more than offset, however, by other factors. Much the most significant of these is the marriage of Richard Mather in 1625 to Katherine Holt of Bury, a direct relative of the Reverend Henry Bury whose endowment founded the Bury school where Dunster was a pupil and, later, headmaster (what we now call Bury Grammar School). Both Henry Bury

and Katherine Holt knew Dunster well and Henry left him a legacy in his will. Katherine Holt was, moreover, a woman of remarkable strength and character, probably the first woman to emigrate from Bury to New England, a voyage she made not only with Richard Mather but also with four small sons (all of whom would later be Harvard graduates and one of them, Increase Mather, the sixth President of Harvard).

Richard Mather was also a good adviser to the overseers because he had strong nonconformist credentials, so strong that they almost caused his marriage to Katherine Holt to founder on her father's disapproval of Mather. In 1633, nonconformity in matters of ceremony caused Mather to be suspended from his ministry in Toxteth, near Liverpool. A panel of visitors appointed by the Archbishop of York refused to reinstate him in 1634, partly on the grounds that in fifteen years of ministry Mather had never worn a surplice. The following year, 1635, he and his family moved to Massachusetts, where Mather was selected teacher of the church at Dorchester in 1636.

The Mathers, then, arrived in Massachusetts five years before Dunster and during that time no-one would have been better placed to speak from first-hand knowledge about Dunster. Katherine Holt would have had letters from home, as Dunster himself did, and although none of Katherine's letters seem to have survived they can reasonably be supposed to have carried news of Bury Parish Church, with which the Holt family had strong links and where Dunster served as curate. Very possibly, the letters may have hinted of his intentions, certainly of his availability. Bury in the 1630s was a small place and the leading families, including the Holts and the Dunsters, among others, were close knit, lived near each other, and had the parish church as a focal point.

So, it is very tempting to say that the Bury woman who produced a future President of Harvard, Increase Mather, also had a hand in the appointment of the first President, Henry Dunster. Katherine Holt may, of course, have exercised her influence through her husband, rather than directly. But this does not diminish the argument that the Mather connection was probably vital for Dunster. Richard Mather had quickly made himself a prominent and powerful figure in New England church circles. He was the principal author of the platform of church discipline and served, after Dunster was appointed, as a Harvard overseer from 1642 until his death in 1669. (After the death of his first wife, Katherine Holt, Richard Mather in 1656 married the widow of John Cotton).

The third person in an excellent position to advise the overseers about the desirability of appointing Dunster was Thomas Shepard, another Emmanuel man. Shepard went up to Cambridge in 1619 and was ordained in 1627. He was a friend of Hooker and Stone, who travelled to Massachusetts on the *Griffin* with Cotton in 1633, and so it is no surprise that the work of Shepard as a minister in England was reprimanded by William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury between 1633 and 1645 and a staunch opponent of Puritanism. Shepard was suspended and decided to leave. After his arrival in New England in 1635, the same year as Mather, the people of Newtown, Massachusetts, chose Shepard as pastor of their church. The town was later renamed Cambridge, Massachusetts, partly in deference to Shepard's wishes.

Shepard earned a reputation as the most noted evangelist in New England and as a leading theologian. Again unsurprisingly, therefore, Shepard was selected as a Harvard overseer in 1637 and served until his death in 1649. Because of his Cambridge connections and his standing in the Puritan community, as well as his seat on the board, Shepard was well placed to help the overseers evaluate Dunster, and we can well imagine that he did so.

Dunster and the Lack of Evidence

So, if a plausible argument can be made that Dunster was a known quantity and that several prominent persons living in Massachusetts at the time were in a position to help the overseers make an advance assessment of his suitability for the Harvard job, why is there no evidence that this is what happened – that Dunster was a favoured candidate before he arrived in Boston?

For one thing, the business of head hunting to fill a vacancy usually involves private and confidential communications and in the mid seventeenth century trans-Atlantic voyages were hazardous. Communications back and forth to England took time and letters could get lost or fall into the wrong hands. The overseers must also have been inclined to be cautious, because they had been very badly let down by Eaton and would avoid a second mistake if they could.

In thinking about why information committed to paper is lacking, it is also relevant that in the years before 1640, probably starting when the intellectual ferment at Cambridge had an impact on him and lasting through his curacy and headship in Bury, Dunster went through a period of personal torment. Although Eaton was not dismissed from Harvard until September 1639, his troubles began before then and news of this and the inkling of a future opening in New England may have helped Dunster to a private resolution of his feelings about Puritanism and a decision to leave England in the summer of 1640.

A closer look at the three week period between arrival and invitation is also helpful. Assuming the overseers would not have had too much trouble satisfying themselves about the academic background of Dunster, his training at Cambridge and his work as a minister and teacher in Bury, the point on which they most needed assurance was the strength of Dunster's Puritan beliefs. By all accounts, this is something that shone out for all to see. So, while three weeks is a short time to start and finish a full assessment of Dunster it is not too short a time for the strength of his beliefs to be clear.

Keep in mind, too, that the lack of evidence about Dunster's candidacy and how it was dealt with is matched by a lack of evidence about other candidates. Indeed, as far as we know, there were no other candidates who were seen and rejected. In a situation where there is a single candidate, a single interview, and an immediate appointment, the sensible inference is that that candidate had been sent for and was already well known. And even if someone had hinted to Dunster before he sailed that there was an interesting post waiting for him, the sensible thing for Dunster was to keep quiet about it and tell no-one save, perhaps, members of his immediate family. Facing the dangers of trans-Atlantic crossing, it would have been imprudent to commit any hopes he might have had to paper.

The lack of documentary evidence is also not, in and of itself, a reason to reject the notion that Dunster had an inside track on the Harvard job. It was as true in the seventeenth century as it is now that the strongest testimonials for job candidates are personal recommendations from people who are known, trusted, and respected. The overseers could turn to people in Massachusetts for such recommendations. They would still want to see Dunster before making a final decision, and they did so, but they would not have been relying on the documentation of a detailed personnel file.

This last observation also serves as a caution not to treat the appointment of Dunster to the presidency of Harvard in modernistic terms. The essential argument, here, is that Dunster was head-hunted by men who knew precisely what they wanted and where and how to find it. But this needs to be put in historical context.

In the seventeenth century, the devout and pious men who had helped nurture Dunster at Cambridge and who would be his working partners in Massachusetts had an acute sense that their affairs were guided by the will of God. It would have been presumptuous of them to pre-empt what they believed to be the guiding hand of God in all human affairs by sending a direct request for Dunster to appear and take the job. The will of an all-seeing and all-powerful God had to be done and had to be seen to be done through the revelation to the overseers, once Dunster was in their sight, that he was the attractive and honourable leader they had hoped to find. Then, indeed, if God's will were done, there would be no need for lengthy deliberation. In this context, it was also wise for Dunster, if he had any private hopes, to keep them to himself and simply appear, thus bearing witness that he was a person willing and able to accept whatever great challenge God, and the Harvard overseers, offered him.