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“For the Children of the Infidels”?: American Indian Education in the Colonial Colleges

BOBBY WRIGHT

Wild and savage people, . . . they have no Arts nor Science, yet they live under superior command such as it is, they are generally very loving and gentle, and doe entertaine and relieve our people with great kinnesse: they are easy to be brought to good, and would fayne embrace a better condition.

—Robert Johnson, *Nova Britannia*, 1609

We must let you know . . . the Indians are not inclined to give their Children Learning. We allow it to be good, and we thank you for your Invitation; but our customs differing from yours, you will be so good as to excuse us.

—Canassatego (Iroquois), 1744

Schemes to deliver higher education to American Indians arose sporadically throughout the colonial period. Within a decade of the first permanent European settlement at Jamestown, plans were already underway for an Indian college, and similar designs

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continued periodically throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indians in fact offered the impetus for establishing and maintaining among the nation's most enduring and prestigious halls of higher learning—such elite institutions as Harvard College, the College of William and Mary, and Dartmouth College.

The lofty aspirations to provide higher education arose amidst conflicting interests among the stay-at-home English, the colonists, and the native people for whom the colleges were intended. The English, mindful of the Crown's desire to spread the gospel among the "heathens" of America, generously endowed the educational missions in a true spirit of piety. The colonists, eager to maintain British sanction of their struggling settlements and institutions, capitalized on the religious fervor of the English, but for the most part neglected to fulfill their professed pious mission. Meanwhile, the Indians, tenacious in their cultural persistence, were rigidly resistant to the white man's interest in their spiritual welfare. Only when war and disease had disintegrated tribal integrity and left Indian communities vulnerable to English domination did Indians embrace Christianity and European culture.

Despite the prevailing literature glorifying these efforts to convert and "civilize" American natives, close examination of the several schemes to establish colonial Indian colleges reveals a drama of deception and fraud, in which the major players betrayed motives that were less than honorable. Most historians of the colonial era would have us believe that piety was the moving force behind the early colleges. After all, in Virginia as in New England, the officially proclaimed purpose of English colonization of America was the conversion of native "heathens" to Christianity. King James I, in the 1609 charter of the Virginia Company of London, reaffirmed his mandate that "the principal Effect, which we can desire or expect of this Action, is the Conversion and Reduction of the People in those Parts unto the true Worship of God and Christian Religion."¹ Similarly, the 1629 Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company proclaimed its purpose to "wynn and incite the natives . . . to the knowledge and obedience of the onlie true God and Saviour of mankinde."²

In assuming their missionary charge, colonists viewed education as a primary means not only to Christianize Indians, but also

to civilize and remake them in the image of the European. As early as 1609, Robert Gray advocated this means since "it is not the nature of men, but the education of men, which makes them barbarous and uncivill, and therefore chaunge the education of men, and you shall see that their nature will be greatly rectified and corrected."³ Yet, despite this avowed pious calling, the colonists either ignored their mandate or failed miserably in their meager attempts to fulfill it. The most enterprising among them, however—those who promoted the Indian colleges—were able to capitalize handsomely on this mission.

In settling Jamestown in 1607, the Virginia Company had more than devotion to religious duty in mind. It was, after all, a profit-making venture, financed by the most daring entrepreneurs. Yet in *A True and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and Ends of the Plantation* (1609), the Company declared that its principal aim was "to preach and baptize into the Christian Religion, and by propagation of the Gospell, to recover out of the armes of the Divell, a number of poore and miserable soules, wrapt up unto death, in almost invincible ignorance."⁴ However, a dissenting faction within the Virginia Company later declared that, despite assurances to the contrary, "conversion of those Infidels did not happen in those first 12 years during wch time the English were allmost allso in continuall Hostilitie wth ye Infidells."⁵ Indeed, the Jamestown colonists spent much more energy in seizing Indian lands than in spreading the gospel.

Indian conversion nevertheless proved fertile ground for reaping other benefits. Duly impressed with a carefully contrived visit from Pocahantas, the first and only Jamestown Indian convert, King James ordered in 1617 a special collection in churches throughout the realm. The proceeds were to be delivered to the Virginia Company for "the erecting of some Churches and Schooles, for the education of the children of those Barbarians."⁶ Accordingly, the Virginia Company in 1618 ordered "that a convenient place be chosen and set out for the planting of a University . . . in time to come and that in the mean time preparation be there made for the building of the said College for the Children of the Infidels." The company then endowed the college with 1,000 acres of land seized from the natives at Henrico, some 50 miles upriver from Jamestown.⁷

Against this backdrop entered one of this drama's most crafty

and enterprising players, Sir Edwin Sandys, treasurer of the Virginia Company. Sandys reported in 1619 that the bishops' collections had already netted 1,500 pounds. However, only about half of that sum was available in cash, since the Company had borrowed the remainder for its own financial needs. By May, 1620, augmented by considerable private donations to the college, the collections grew to 2,043 pounds.⁸ Despite this substantial and growing benefaction, Sandys advised a postponement in building the college. He justified the delay by proposing to invest the funds to create an endowment for the college. Evidence suggests, however, that he planned to employ the capital to further the Virginia Company's ambitious economic plan.

To save the Company, which continually wavered on the brink of bankruptcy, Sandys's new economic policy aimed to rapidly increase the population settled on the public lands and to stimulate the production of new commodities. Accordingly, he announced his intention to use the Indian college funds to ship indentured tenants for the college lands. Sandys incidentally noted that this use of the charity "may save the Joint stock the sending out a [supply] Shipp this year."⁹ Instead of reaping income for the college at Henrico, half of the tenants who arrived in 1619 were assigned to private plantations. When the scattered tenants were finally resettled on the college lands, they served another aim of the Company—the production of new staples, silk and wine. With the remaining college funds, Sandys invested not in education but in yet another economic scheme, an ironworks on a plantation owned by himself and another investor. Two years later, one significant benefactor complained about the use of his donation by private investors, "contrary to my minde."¹⁰

By 1620, although nearly three-fourths of the money raised in England to educate Indians had been disbursed, Treasurer Sandys had diverted the charity and thwarted all intentions to construct the college. Not a penny went toward the conversion and education of would-be native scholars. Meanwhile, a native uprising in 1622 put an end to the grandiose plan for the Indian college at Henrico. Considering this scheme, an eighteenth-century historian concluded that "we do not find that the money was employed as those Religious Persons would have had it"—an understatement indeed and a better than warranted reflection on the dubious character of Sir Edwin Sandys.¹¹

The New England colonists, settling their new world with the

same godly mission, learned from the Virginia experience. They learned, foremost, to manipulate and capitalize on the charitable impulses of the pious English. Their enterprising machinations resulted in the construction of the Harvard Indian College, which advantaged English scholars more than it did the natives for whom it was ostensibly intended. Also like their Virginia predecessors, the New England colonists—neglectful of their chartered mission—spent more effort in seeking funds for Indian conversion than in actually spreading the gospel. Publishing several pieces of promotional literature, which greatly exaggerated their success in converting Indians and even more their desire to do so, New England leaders embarked on a plan to link the needs of the fledgling Harvard College with the proven solicitations for Indian conversion. In fact, the first promotional tract, published in 1643, recommended that contributions for the Indian work be sent to the College president.

Under pressure from New England lobbyists, in 1648 the House of Commons began to debate a bill to charter a new philanthropic corporation for Indian missions in the Puritan colonies. One debate focused on an opportunistic amendment to alter fundamentally the character of the bill, placing Indian conversion in a position of importance secondary to that of Harvard College. In this amendment, the New England colonists advocated allocating the charity “for the maintaining of the universities of Cambridge in New-England, and other schools and nurseries of learning there, and for the preaching and propagating of the Gospel among the natives.” However, this attempt to include assistance for the College was thwarted, as Parliament approved the final bill designating funds solely for “the preaching and propagating of the Gospel of Jesus Christ amongst the natives, and also for maintaining of schools and nurseries of learning, for the better educating of the children of the natives.”¹² Thus, in 1649 Parliament created the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England, commonly called the New England Company, charging the London-based Society to raise and administer funds for Indian conversion.

Against this backdrop, a behind-the-scenes player, Harvard President Henry Dunster, entered center stage. Although he had provided much of the information for the 1643 tract designed to create a climate of favorable support in England, Dunster made an even more strategic move by engineering Harvard’s charter

in 1650. The charter provided for the "education of the English and Indian Youth of this country in knowledge: and Godlines."¹³ (It is instructive that, although Harvard College was established in 1636, it had not yet professed a commitment to Indian education.) In 1651, this maneuver accomplished, he inquired of the Commissioners of the United Colonies, overseer of the New England Company's disbursements in the colonies, whether the charitable funds might in some measure benefit the College. The Commissioners responded with a letter to their London agent suggesting that "an eye may bee had in the destrebutions to the enlargement of the Colledge at Cambridge wherof there is great need and furtherance of learning not soe Imediately Respecting the Indian Designe." The interests and intentions of Dunster as well as those of the colonial commissioners were clear; foremost among them was the struggling and financially strapped Harvard College.

Whatever their motives, the solicitations were fruitful. In 1653 the trustees of the missionary fund ordered "the building of one Intyre Rome att the College for the Conveniencye of six hopfull Indians youths . . . which Rome may bee two storyes high and built plaine but strong and durable." The Indian college was accordingly completed in 1656.¹⁴

In this use of charitable funds, several factors arouse suspicion regarding the Commissioners' intentions for the Indian college. First, the building did not cost one hundred pounds as initially proposed. Twice enlarged beyond the original design—this, to accommodate English, not additional Indian students—the total cost was some four hundred pounds. Such a sum would have supported ten missionaries for four years at the prevailing twenty-pound annual rate paid through 1656.¹⁵ Second, there were no Indian students identified to occupy the Indian college, a situation surely known to Harvard's president and to the Commissioners. Three years after construction of the Indian college building, the New England Company wanted to know

what number of Indians there are att the university and what progresse and profisiency they make in their learning; and to what degree and measure therin they have attained; and we hope wilbee such as will give good satisfaction unto divers well affected heerunto.

Although the Commissioners encouragingly reported that "there are five Indian youthes att Cambridge in the lattin [preparatory]

Schoole," they made no mention of any at the Indian college.¹⁶ Not until 1660 did an Indian student enter Harvard for the bachelor's degree, and never did more than two occupy the Indian College at any given time. Indeed, during the nearly four decades of its existence, the college housed only four Indian scholars.

Nevertheless, the building did not stand vacant. As soon as it was completed, Harvard's next President, Charles Chauncy, proposed that its rooms be used to accommodate English students. Later, a contemporary observer described the Indian College as "large enough to receive and accommodate about twenty scholars with convenient lodgings and studies; but not hitherto hath been much improved for the ends intended. . . . It hath hitherto been principally improved for to accommodate English scholars."¹⁷

Despite receiving encouraging reports and testimony from the colonial Commissioners, the New England Company questioned the progress relative to expenditures, reporting that "it is wondered by some heer that in all this time there are noe more in regard it appeers by the account sent; . . . we desire therefore that . . . you would please to bee more particular in youer next accounts." They also warned that "we shalbee slow to take many more English or Indian youthes upon our charge for education till wee have some experience of those on whom soe much hath bine bestowed."¹⁸

If the Society was suspicious of the Puritan effort by 1660, certainly the negligible progress through the remainder of the college's life to 1693 afforded no evidence to allay their misgivings. Indeed, by 1675 there was but one Indian student at the College, and the last Indian attended in 1685. The professed interest in educating Indians at Harvard merely concealed the intention to use the Indian cause to exact English funds for the survival of the colonists' college. This was a lesson learned from the earlier Virginia enterprise at Henrico, and it was once again destined to be employed in that same colony. Ironically, when the Indian College at Harvard was demolished in 1693, the College of William and Mary in Virginia received its royal charter—once again, purportedly for the education of Indian youth.

As was the case in other missionary enterprises, the promise of funds incited greater concern for the education of Indians—again under the initiative of a cunning, enterprising individual; in this case, the Commissary of Virginia, James Blair. While

soliciting contributions from the merchants of London for the founding of a college in Virginia, Blair proposed in 1690 the possibility of "perhaps" creating "a foundation for ye Conversion of our neighbouring Heathen to ye Christian Faith."¹⁹ Since there is no evidence that the proposed college was intended for Indians, it is likely that the mention of conversion was a bid to enlist the merchants' pious impulses.

A twist of fate then forced Blair to play his hand openly. In January 1691, while Blair was in London seeking a royal charter for the College of William and Mary, the Governor of the New England Company, Robert Boyle, died, leaving 5,400 pounds for unspecified "Charitable and other pious and good uses." Boyle's will recommended "the Laying out of the greatest part of the same for the Advance or propagation of the Christian religion amongst Infidells."²⁰ Prevailing upon the executor of Boyle's estate to direct the fund toward the support of an Indian school at the prospective college in Virginia, Blair reported from London that "Mr. Boyle died about the beginning of last month, & left a considerable Legacy for pious uses, which, when I understood, I made my interest with his executors by means of the Bishop of Salisbury, and I am promised 200.1. [pounds] of it for our college."²¹

Ultimately, Blair's solicitations proved even more successful. From the proceeds of an investment of the Boyle bequest, the executors specified an annuity to

keep att the said Colledge soe many Indian Children in Sicknesse and health in Meat drink Washing Lodging Cloathes Medicines bookes and Educacon from the first beginning of Letters till they are ready to receive Orders and be thought Sufficent to be sent abroad to preach and Convert the Indians.²²

Thus, when Blair obtained in 1693 a royal charter for the establishment of the College of William and Mary, he duly contrived that, among other ends, the College would exist so that "the Christian faith may be propagated amongst the Western Indians."²³ Despite the semblance of a pious mission, no evidence survives of Indian enrollment at William and Mary prior to 1705. Clearly, during his fifty years as the college president, Blair made no serious attempt to fulfill the intent of the Boyle legacy. Instead, he devised other than the intended uses for the charity.

By 1716 Indian students were so few that their college master requested "the liberty of teaching such English Children as shall be put to him" and that a partition be erected to separate English students from Indians.²⁴ By 1721 William and Mary College had no native students, and the "Indian Master" rendered his services exclusively to English scholars.²⁵ There is no evidence that Indians attended the college in the later 1720s.

In the face of an untapped and rapidly accumulating Boyle fund, President Blair began to contrive further uses for the account which might revitalize the struggling and financially strapped William and Mary College. In 1723, reviving the appearance of commitment to Indian education, Blair constructed a building for an Indian school which did not in fact exist. Built at a cost of 500 pounds, the structure, called the Brafferton, was a handsome two-and-a-half story brick house. This accomplished, Blair devised yet another tactic to capitalize on the Boyle bequest to aid the College. Using the fund to build its severely deficient library, in 1732 he authorized a London agent to spend up to 300 pounds on books for the general use of William and Mary scholars. Blair rationalized this diversion by sarcastically noting that "as we do not live in an age of miracles, it is not to be doubted that Indian scholars will want the help of many books to qualifie them to become good Pastours and Teachers."²⁶ Little did it matter that there would be no Indian scholars at William and Mary for over a decade.

Efforts to engage Indian students were negligible throughout the remainder of President Blair's administration. On Blair's death in 1743, William Dawson became the new president. That same year, the College enrolled perhaps half a dozen Indian students.²⁷ From the 1750s until the Revolution, when funds from England halted and the Brafferton "Indian College" simultaneously ceased to exist, William and Mary maintained a small but steady enrollment of between three and five Indian students. But, throughout the course of James Blair's presidency, the Indian School at the College of William and Mary was, in the words of College historian J. E. Morpurgo, "an entry in the ledgers through which charitable funds could be funneled to extraneous activities."²⁸

The final and most lucrative scheme for the advanced training of Indians during the colonial period resulted from the machinations of Eleazar Wheelock, called—perhaps mistakenly—the

founder of Dartmouth College. A Congregational minister in Lebanon, Connecticut, Wheelock in 1754 established Moor's Charity School for Indian students, unquestionably a successful venture which operated for nearly a century. In 1763, seeking a land grant of thirty to thirty-five square miles, Wheelock sent to England "A Proposal for Introducing Religion, Learning, Agriculture, and Manufacture among the Pagans in America," suggesting "a large farm of several thousand acres of and within said grant be given to this Indian school [and] that the school be an academy for all parts of useful learning: part of it a College for the Education of Missionaries, Schoolmasters, Interpreters, etc., and part of it a School for reading and writing, etc."²⁹ This proposal reflected Wheelock's growing passion for establishing a college as well as his then waning interest in educating Indians.

The efforts of Wheelock's most successful Indian protégé provided the money needed to finance his scheme. Samson Occum, Wheelock's "black son," embarked on a fundraising mission to England and Scotland from 1765 to 1768. He thus raised over 12,000 pounds in the mistaken belief that the funds were to be employed "towards building and endowing an Indian academy for cloathing, boarding, maintaining, and educating such Indians as are designed for missionaries and schoolmasters, and for maintaining those who are, or hereafter shall be employed on this glorious errand."³⁰ These funds represented the largest amount that any college up to that time had been able to raise by direct solicitation abroad.

Yet Wheelock had become disillusioned with his Indian students because of what he called their "Sloth," "want of Fortitude [and] Stability," and "doleful Apostasy."³¹ He set into motion his plans to relocate to New Hampshire, where he had secured a substantial land grant for his college. With an ample treasury at his disposal, his next task was to obtain a royal charter for the so-called "Indian achademy." On December 13, 1769, Wheelock secured the charter for Dartmouth College. In writing the charter, Wheelock had to deal with several potentially volatile matters. One centered on defining the purpose of the school. On the one hand, he had to assure the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, trustees of Samson Occum's collections, that their funds would be employed solely for the education of Indians. On the other hand, he had to deal with the expectation among the people of New Hampshire that the school

would supply local ministers. Wheelock had already decided that Dartmouth would emphasize the education of English scholars, but in writing the charter, he disguised his intentions well. The first charter draft defined the school's purpose as providing "for the education & instruction of Youths of the English and also of the Indian Tribes." After carefully considering that numerous English benefactors had contributed thousands of pounds to a school for Indians—not white colonists—he revised the reference to English youth as if to indicate their subordinate position in his scheme. Accordingly, the final draft of the charter read that the college would exist

for the education & instruction of Youth of the Indian Tribes in this Land in reading wrighting and all parts of Learning which shall appear necessary and expedient for civilizing and christianizing Children of Pagans as well as in all liberal Arts and Sciences; and also of English Youth & any others.³²

The business of the charter settled, Wheelock completed his move to New Hampshire in 1770. During that year the number of Indian students in Wheelock's Connecticut school had conveniently diminished to three, while the number of English scholars had grown to sixteen.³³ The school continued to admit Indians after the move to New Hampshire, although with an increasing influx of white students. During the entire decade of the 1770s, the reverend was responsible for educating some forty Indians, while during the same period he had more than 120 white students at Dartmouth College and many more at the charity school. By 1774 Wheelock had exhausted all of Occum's collections for Indian education.

While Wheelock's sophistry led to the fulfillment of his dream to establish a college, it shattered the vision of his Indian protégé. Samson Occum maintained that the English funds were raised solely for his brethren, as "we told them that we were Beging for poor Miserable Indians." Occum further complained that he had been duped, having previously been warned in England that "You have been a fine Tool to get Money for them, and when you get home, they won't Regard you the'll set you a Drift,—I am ready to believe it Now," he wrote.³⁴ A nineteenth-century critic was even more harsh in his condemnation. The charitable collection for Indian education, he wrote,

is all expended; and excepting in new lands, Dartmouth College is without funds. It was intended that only the interest should be annually spent, but the fund itself is consumed. Though this was primarily designed for Indians, yet the only Indian that has graduated there was obliged to beg elsewhere towards supporting him the last year of his college residence. . . . Such a mixture of apparent piety and eminent holiness, together with the love of riches, dominion, and family aggrandizement, is seldom seen.³⁵

When the sincerity of the professed commitment to Indian education in the colonial colleges is measured by comparing announced intentions against actual effort and money expended, there is reason to seriously doubt the genuineness of pious motivation. While the presence of some measure of concern for the Indians' spiritual welfare is unquestionable, other factors clearly motivated the major figures responsible for the advancement of Indian education and conversion. Certainly the colonists played cunningly on the religious impulses of stay-at-home Englishmen, capitalizing successfully on the image of "lost heathen" souls. In doing so, they were able to further their own political, economic and educational agendas, which included Indian education as an ancillary aim at best, while all the time professing their own piety as if this were their singular motivation. The Virginia Company leaders were thus able to invest charitable funds in their new economic program, intended more to revitalize the colonial enterprises than to establish the Henrico Indian college. College presidents Henry Dunster of Harvard and William and Mary's James Blair capitalized on Christian philanthropy to enhance the growth of their floundering and financially strapped colleges. So, too, was Reverend Wheelock able to profiteer and thus fulfill his desire to found Dartmouth College. Consequently, the colonial experiments in Indian higher education were not simple expressions of unblemished piety. Rather, they characterize a drama of self-righteousness, deception and neglect enacted on a stage of failure in Indian education.

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