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BERKELEY AND EDUCATION IN AMERICA

BY GRAHAM P. CONROY

George Berkeley, unlike the other two philosophers associated with him in traditional histories of philosophy, John Locke and David Hume, has had no renown and scarce, if any, mention as a contributor to the educational thought and policies of the western world. Locke is well known for his series of letters published in 1693, Some Thoughts Concerning Education, and the posthumously published Conduct of the Understanding, a work no doubt designed as an adjunct to the celebrated Essay Concerning Human Understanding, which serves as a guide to the training, or education, of the rational faculty. Among his works of lesser importance about education were Some Thoughts Concerning Reading and Study for a Gentleman, Instructions for the Conduct of a Young Gentleman, and a short discussion, Of Study. The only real indication, however, that he was aware of the general need to educate the masses is found in a plan for Working Schools. Hume, the third member of the so-called triumvirate of British Empiricism, may be associated with the trend toward the education of the emotions and sentiments, as against the pedantry of reason; that trend was exemplified in his friend Rousseau. For Rousseau would agree with Hume that "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions."

By contrast exceedingly little is said of Berkeley's rôle as an educator. This is especially strange, because the Irish philosopher regarded himself as a moral educator rather than as a mere technical philosopher. Yet in searching through a number of present-day histories of education, I was able to find but one reference to him under the heading of "Graduate study in America" in the book Development of Modern Education by Eby and Arrowood. The authors state: "The first provision for graduate study in this country came from the generosity of Bishop Berkeley, the celebrated English [sic] philosopher, in a gift to Yale college." ¹ This short mention, however, is of great significance as it is in the setting up of this Fellowship in Latin and Greek and in its particular relationship to Yale University that Berkeley made his deepest imprint upon the educational scene of Colonial America. Unlike Locke and Hume, who remained essentially philosophers, Berkeley was a man of action bent upon promoting the common weal in all things, upon reestablishing public spirit, correcting the excesses of immoderation in society, and directing education toward workable public and private ends. His greatest philosophical contribution, the criticism of abstract general ideas as being empty

¹ Frederick Eby and C. F. Arrowood, The Development of Modern Education (New York, 1934), 746.
and nonsensical misusages of language, was itself meant to serve an educational purpose, for "in effect, the doctrine of abstraction has not a little contributed towards spoiling the most useful parts of knowledge." ²

While it would be interesting to discuss Berkeley's views and theories of education in general, for he wrote essays in Steele's Guardian concerning "Public Schools and Universities" and made important pronouncements on teaching and learning throughout the wide compass of his philosophical, literary and pastoral writings, it is primarily with his personal influence upon early American educators and colleges that this study is concerned.

Between the years 1716–21 he travelled in Italy as the companion and tutor of St. George Ashe, the only son of St. George Ashe (1658?–1718), Bishop of Clogher and Vice-Chancellor of Dublin University and a friend of Dean Swift. During this Italian tour Berkeley was appalled by what he considered the declining state of learning in Italy. In a letter to his friend the poet Alexander Pope, Berkeley complained from Naples, "Learning is in no very thriving state here, as indeed no where else in Italy; however, among many pretenders, some men of taste are to be met with." ³ And in a letter to Sir John Percival he declared:

> I made it my business to visit the colleges, libraries, booksellers' shops, both at Turin and here, but do not find that learning flourishes among them. Nothing curious in the sciences has of late been published in Italy. Their clergy for the most part are extremely ignorant; as an instance of it, they shewed me in the library of the Franciscans in this town a Hebrew book, taking it to be an English one.⁴

Upon his return to England Berkeley found that nation in great financial and moral travail due to the failure of the South Sea Company in its mammoth speculations connected with British trade in South America. The prevailing dimensions of national corruption brought writers such as John Brown, Sherlock, Swift, and Berkeley to write against these excesses. One of the results of this decline in British conservatism was Berkeley's Essay towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain in which he argued for moderation and a return to public spirit and religious consciousness. Berkeley concludes his Essay by saying:

> God grant the time be not near when men shall say: "This island was once inhabited by a religious, brave, sincere people, of plain uncorrupt man-

³ Letter no. 67 (1717) to Alexander Pope, in WGBBC, VIII, 107.
⁴ Letter no. 43 (1714) to Percival, WGBBC. VIII, 79.
ners, respecting inbred worth rather than titles and appearances, assertors of liberty, lovers of their country, jealous of their own rights, and unwilling to infringe the rights of others; improvers of learning and useful arts, enemies to luxury, tender of other men’s lives and prodigal of their own; inferior in nothing to the old Greeks or Romans, and superior to each of those people in the perfections of the other. Such were our ancestors during their rise and greatness; but they degenerated, grew servile flatterers in power, adopted Epicurean notions, became venal, corrupt, injurious, which drew upon them the hatred of God and man, and occasioned their final ruin.”

It was this disillusionment with the states of learning on the continent and in Great Britain coupled with an increase in his fortunes by way of his appointment to the Deanery of Derry (together with an unexpected inheritance from Swift’s Vanessa) that brought Berkeley to focus his eyes on North America and to propose the establishment of a College in the Summer Isles, or Bermuda. In the Americas Berkeley looked for a new renaissance of learning, one in which religious training and moral background would go hand in hand with practical and scientific education, for Berkeley felt that a true education must rest ultimately on a sound moral foundation.

In a letter to Lord Percival (1726) Berkeley includes a poem of his own composition whose prophetic quality haunts the mind. This poem, *America or the Muse’s Refuge*, subtitled by the philosopher himself, *A Prophecy*, ends with the following three remarkable stanzas:

There shall be sung another golden Age,
The rise of Empire and of Arts,
The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage
The wisest Heads and noblest Hearts.

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay,
Such as she bred when fresh and young
When heavenly Flame did animate her Clay,
By future Poets shall be sung.

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way,
The four first Acts already past.
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day,
The world’s great Effort is the last.

It was to serve two main purposes that Berkeley intended to set up his College in Bermuda: (1) to reform the manners of the English in the Western plantations, and (2) to propagate the Gospel among the American ‘savages.’ As he explained it to Percival:

*An Essay for Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain, WGBBC, VI, 85.*

*WGBBC, VII, 370. In the Miscellany (1752) the verses are headed “Verses by the Author, on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America.” The variant of the last line appears as “Time’s noblest offspring is the last.”*
The natural way of doing this is by founding a college or seminary in some convenient part of the West Indies where the English youth of our plantations may be educated in such sort as to supply the churches with pastors of good morals and good learning, a thing (God knows!) much wanted. In the same seminary a number of young American savages may be also educated till they have taken their degree of Master of Arts. And being by that time well instructed in Christian religion, practical mathematics, and other liberal arts and sciences, and early endued with public spirited principles and inclinations, they may become the fittest missionaries for spreading religion, morality and civil life, among their countrymen, who can entertain no suspicion or jealousy of men of their own blood and language, as they might do of English missionaries, who can never be so well qualified for that work.  

However, his vision of a great university in the Bermudas for which he sacrificed much of his energies and money failed to materialize because of apathy and subterfuge at Court. Though the Bermuda scheme had the backing of many of the influential men of his day, it failed, even after funds, patents, and a charter were obtained, due to the death of King George I and the subsequent left-handed methods of the then Prime Minister of England, Sir Robert Walpole.

Even though the Bermuda affair seemed to be failing, Berkeley set out in 1728 for Rhode Island with the founding of an American College still uppermost in his mind. He discovered Rhode Island quite to his liking, so much so that he wrote in a letter to Percival: "I should not demur one moment about situating our College here. But no step can be taken herein without consent of the Crown. . . ."  

It was about this time (1729) that he took steps to bring about the change in location of the proposed college by writing "to some friends in England to take the proper steps for procuring a translation of the College from Bermuda to Rhode Island." He purchased a farm near Newport out of his private funds to serve as a site for the new College, although he realized fully that this "purchase in case the College should not go on will be very much to my loss."  

While on his farm near Newport Berkeley wrote his *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, a book in seven dialogues. In it he polemicizes against the 'minute philosopher,' the upholders of license, fatalism, and irreligion who, according to Berkeley and Swift, take their education from the coffee-houses and gaming-rooms and who would have Englishmen be 'wicked upon principle.' It is this element in society, both in England and in Ireland, which Berkeley believed the main sources of opposition to his projected College, for in a letter to Percival before his return to Britain Berkeley declaims:

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7 Letter no. 85 (1722/23) to Percival, WGBBC, VIII, 127.
8 Letter no. 136 (1728/29) to Percival, WGBBC, VIII, 191.
9 Letter no. 144 (1729) to Newman, WGBBC, VIII, 200.
10 Letter no. 145 (1729) to Percival, WGBBC, VIII, 201.

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What they foolishly call free thinking seems to me the principal root or source not only of opposition to our College but of most other evils in this age, and as long as that frenzy subsists and spreads, it is vain to hope for any good either to the mother country or colonies, which always follow the fashions of Old England.\textsuperscript{11}

Even though Berkeley could not do as he wished, he did as he could. Though all hope of establishing an Anglican College with himself as President was no longer possible, his philanthropic drive brought him to bestow benefactions and endowments upon the Colonial Colleges then extant, namely, Harvard and Yale.

During his American sojourn he became a close friend of Samuel Johnson of Stratford, Connecticut, one of Yale’s more able tutors and a man of wide philosophic and scientific accomplishments. Johnson became Berkeley’s first and, in effect, only disciple of the immaterialistic philosophy. And even though it would seem that Johnson did not really understand what the Dean of Derry’s immaterialism was all about, nevertheless a good-sized correspondence and a deep affection continued between the two men. Although reared a Congregationalist, Johnson along with several other tutors had upon his own persuasion switched to the Episcopalian faith. This conversion helped lead Berkeley to bestow a benefaction of books upon the College at New Haven and to deed that school his Rhode Island farm, the revenues of which were to maintain graduate Fellows in Greek and Latin.

On September 7, 1731, the day before the annual Commencement, Dean Berkeley, who had been living for two and a half years near Newport, wrote to the Reverend Samuel Johnson announcing his return to England saying:

My endeavours shall not be wanting, some way or other, to be useful; and I shall be very glad to be so in particular to the College at New Haven, and the more so as you were once a member of it and still have an influence there. . . . I have left a box of books with Mr. Kay, to be given away by you. . . . The Greek and Latin books, I would have given to such lads as you think will make the best use of them in the College, or to the school at New Haven.\textsuperscript{12}

In the Annals of Yale College for the years 1731–32 we find it recorded that on the 26th of July 1732, Dean Berkeley signed and forwarded from London to the Reverend Samuel Johnson an instrument conveying to the College at New Haven his farm of ninety-six acres at Whitehall, near Newport, valued at about £3000, the income of it to be used to maintain two scholars between the time of their first and

\textsuperscript{11} Letter no. 151 (1730/31) to Percival, WGBBC, VIII, 212.

second degrees. The electors of these scholarships were to be the head of the College and the senior Episcopal missionary of the Colony. Mr. Johnson himself met this latter requirement at the time. The Fellowships were to be set up so that there could be no claim of unjust choice on behalf of the Episcopalian missionary.

Although he was accused of donating the books and farm to Yale upon the belief "that Yale would soon become Episcopal, and that they had received his immaterial philosophy," it appears that the Dean's gift was selflessly given to promote learning in that part of the world. This is further reinforced by his letter On the Roman Controversy to Sir John James, Bart., sent from Cloyne, Ireland, in 1741, in which he states:

As Plato thanked the Gods that he had been born an Athenian, so I think it a particular blessing to have been educated in the Church of England. My prayer nevertheless and trust in God is, not that I shall live and die in this church, but in the true church. For, after all, in respect of religion our attachment shou'd be only to the truth.14

In 1732 Elisha Williams, Rector of the College, in answer to Reverend Benjamin Colman of Boston, who had questioned Berkeley's motives concerning the donation, wrote: "The Gift is made to us in a Manner as bespeaks a true Catholic Spirit, as much (if I mistake not) as Mr. Hollis's to Harvard College." In fact, he continues, the Dean "prays it may serve, in the Promoting Charity, Learning and Piety in this part of the world."

The thanks which were sent to Berkeley led to another gift, for on May 30, 1733, he shipped from London about eight hundred and eighty (880) volumes for the College Library, making up the finest collection that had yet been brought to this country. In addition he signed on the 17th of August a revised deed for his farm embodying some changes asked for by the College authorities. One of the changes was for the redistribution of the income on the property among three Fellows instead of between two.

In 1733, also in recognition of the Berkeleian donation, there appeared in Boston an anonymous poem, "The Benefactors of Yale-College," which was in fact written by one Dr. John Hubbard of New Haven and which contained the following lines of gratitude:

Yalensis owes the power of knowing more
Than all her Sisters on the western shore
To Berkeley's liberal hand that gave a Prize
(To animate her sons to glorious fame.)

13 Ibid., excerpt from Stiles's Diary (1772), 125.
14 WGBBC, VII, 153.
16 This deed, as well as the catalog of books sent, is printed in the Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, I, 154-56.
The poem concludes:

My infant genius sinks beneath the song,
And only whispers Berkeley's name along
In broken sounds: beneath the task it dies,
To gratitude a willing sacrifice. 17

So much then for the reactions towards the gifts. Let us now turn to the actual Fellowships and the Berkeley Scholars who received them. One of the first Berkeley Scholars was Eleazar Wheelock, who shared the prize with his classmate Benjamin Pomeroy in 1733, the first year it was offered. Wheelock studied theology under Rector Williams. On the 13th of December 1769 he founded Dartmouth College, becoming its first President and in July 1770 fixing its permanent site at Hanover, New Hampshire. Pomeroy, who married Wheelock's sister Abigail, helped him found Dartmouth and become one of its original Trustees. He received the D.D. from Dartmouth in 1774.

Benjamin Nicoll (1734) was a step-son of Samuel Johnson. Prepared by Johnson, he entered Yale at thirteen and became a Berkeley Scholar upon graduation. He and Henry Barclay were concerned in founding King's College (Columbia University) and were among the Trustees named in the Act of Incorporation who invited Johnson to become the first President of that College. Nicoll was also one of the original Trustees of the New York Society Library, founded in 1754. Nicoll's co-holder of the award, William Wolcott, taught at the Hopkins Grammar School.

The Berkeley Scholars for 1735, Aaron Burr and James Lockwood, were both concerned in the activities of the College of New Jersey. Burr reorganized the College in 1748 and was named President. He was also one of the original Trustees. Burr died in 1757 four days before the first commencement was to be held at the new site in Princeton. Among his writings was the well-known Newark Latin Grammar. His co-winner Lockwood declined the Presidency of Princeton on Jonathan Edwards's death in 1758 and the Presidency of Yale on President Clap's retirement in 1766.

Gideon Mills and Noah Welles (1737, 1741) had charge of Hopkins Grammar School at various times and Thomas Arthur was one of the Trustees named in the act incorporating the College of New Jersey (Princeton).

Also among the recipients of the Fellowships were the four sons of Rector Elisha Williams, as well as Chauncey Wittelsey, who became a leading New England scientist. 18

— Dexter, op. cit., 473.
In concluding these brief biographical sketches of some of the early holders of the Berkeley Scholarships the name of William Samuel Johnson (1744), who was by far the most illustrious of them all, must not be omitted. A graduate of Yale at 17, he served as a member of the Continental Congress and headed the delegation from Connecticut to the Convention to form a Federal Constitution. He was a President of Columbia University and the first Senator from Connecticut to the U.S. Congress. He was the first graduate of Yale to receive an honorary degree in Laws as his father, the Reverend Samuel Johnson, had been the first to receive one in Divinity. William Johnson also became a good friend of Berkeley's son George.

Looking over the list of scholars, we find presidents and founders of Dartmouth College, Princeton College, and Columbia University, as well as trustees of these institutions, administrators of Hopkins Grammar School, authors, scientists, and statesmen.

Even if Berkeley's personality and example touched indirectly the fortunes of Dartmouth, Princeton, and less indirectly Yale and, as we shall subsequently see, Harvard, his influence upon King's College (Columbia) was much more direct and forceful. Johnson asked Berkeley for a plan to be used in setting up the academic structure of King's College. Berkeley's answer from Cloyne in 1749 stated that he was "glad to find a spirit toward learning prevail in those parts, particularly New York where you say a College is projected which has my best wishes" and put forward the following suggestions:

I believe it may suffice to begin with a President and two Fellows. If they can procure but three fit persons, I doubt not the College from the smallest beginnings would soon grow considerable. I should conceive good hopes were you the head of it.

Let them by all means supply themselves out of the seminaries in New England. For I am very apprehensive none can be got in Old England (who are willing to go) worth sending.

Let the Greek and Latin classics be well taught. Be this the first care as to learning. But the principal care must be good life and morals to which (as well as study) early hours and temperate meals will much conduce.

If the terms for the degrees are the same as in Oxford and Cambridge, this would give a credit to the College, and pave the way for admitting their graduates ad eundem in the English Universities.

Small premiums in books, or distinctions in habit may prove useful encouragements to the students.

I would advise that the building be regular, plain and cheap, and that each student have a small room (about ten feet square) to himself.

I recommend this nascent seminary to an English bishop to try what might be done there. But by his answer it seems the Colony is judged rich enough to educate its own youth.

Colleges from small beginnings grow great by subsequent bequests and benefactions. A small matter will suffice to set one agoing. And when this
is once well done, there is no doubt it will go on and thrive. The chief concern must be set out in good method, and introduce from the very first a good taste into the Society. For this end its principal expense should be in making a handsome provision for the President and Fellows.

I have thrown together these few crude thoughts for you to ruminate upon and digest in your own judgment, and propose from yourself, as you see convenient. 19

Like Berkeley, Johnson experienced his difficulties in raising funds and backing for the nascent College. In writing to his father, William Samuel Johnson is poignantly reminded of the Irish cleric's disappointments:

Words [he wrote from Stratford] are but wind, the epigram tells us. The assembly as yet holds the money! and there are corrupted Dutchmen as you mention, as well as Presbyterians. You very well remember the fortune of good Bishop Berkeley. It was perhaps only the opposition of two or three Presbyterians and two or three corrupted Parliament men, etc., that occasioned the withholding the moneys promised to him; and so caused the glorious design he had in view to fall to the ground. 20

President Johnson's task was in varying ways both easier and more difficult than that of Berkeley, for King's College was to be established as an interdenominational undertaking open to communicants of all Christian groups—a position which would certainly have been in conformity with the spirit of Berkeley's own 'latitudinarian' principles. Johnson's old school, Yale, was not as generous toward non-Congregationalist scholars. Upon his appointment as President of King's, Johnson took up the gauntlet for the Episcopal students of Yale. He wrote a long letter to President Clap of Yale thanking him for his congratulations upon his own election to King's, and at the same time urging that Yale College should be free to Episcopalians:

Your argument that it is inconsistent with the original design of the founders, which was only to provide ministers for your churches, is untenable. Among the founders must be included the principal benefactors. [He mentions "Mr. Yale" well known to have been a famous Church of England pillar, and Bishop Berkeley whose purpose he understood to be a "catholic" one in giving his great donation.] 21

Nevertheless, President Clap remained immovable, and it was not until a century later that Yale Episcopalians were allowed full liberty to attend their own services.

Evidence indicates that Johnson was a worthy President. He taught Latin and Greek as Berkeley had directed (not as a set of pe-

19 Letter no. 254 (1749) to Samuel Johnson, WGBBC, VIII, 301–302.
20 Herbert and Carol Schneider, Samuel Johnson, President of King's College, His Career and Writings (New York, 1929) IV, 14.
dantic exercises or for its own sake alone but for training in learning one's own language and for the moral lessons of the ancients). "My reason for which," said Johnson, "is that at the same time I am teaching Latin and Greek I may endeavour in these evil times to make them intelligent and serious Christians." And "the shortest course," he wrote, "that can be recommended for the attainment of any considerable accuracy in the knowledge even of our own language, is by tolerable acquaintance with the Latin and Greek tongues." 22

In his first years in the Presidency, Johnson used his own book, Elementa Philosophica, which he dedicated to Bishop Berkeley and which was also used briefly as a textbook at Philadelphia College (University of Pennsylvania). This volume, printed by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, bore on its flyleaf a quotation from Berkeley's Siris which was again requoted by Johnson in his "Exhortation to the Graduates" of 1762.

Berkeley's relations with Harvard were briefer and less intimate than those with either Yale or King's College. In letters to President Wadsworth and Mr. Bearcroft he gave descriptions of the benefactions of books which he was bestowing upon Harvard. These were comprised by "all the Latin Classick Authors in quarto," 23 "Ancient Greek Authors," 24 writings of Hooker, Chillingworth, Burnet, Tillotson, Barrow, Clarendon's History, as well as other important religious and historical works. 25 Some of these books were purchased by "two hundred pounds of the money contributed towards the College intended at Bermuda" 26 which Berkeley was unable to return to the donors, they being unknown to him. Berkeley, then Dean of Derry, also visited Harvard in 1731. An article in the Christian Examiner (vii, p. 91) proclaimed that "the great man, so renowned in the learned world and celebrated by his friend Pope as possessing 'every virtue under Heaven,' honored this College with a visit, September 17th, 1731, and received the attentions which were due his high character." 27

The Berkeley collection was, however, lost in the Great Fire which destroyed Harvard Hall and the College Library. The College President, reporting the loss in the Massachusetts Gazette for Thursday, February 2, 1764, noted that the Library "contained the Greek and Roman Classics, presented by the late and catholic-spirited Bishop Berkeley, most of them the best editions." 28

22 Schneider, op. cit., Letter to East Apthorp, Dec. 1, 1759.
23 Letter no. 161 (1733) to Wadsworth, WGBBC, VIII, 220.
24 Letters nos. 249 and 250 (1747) to Bearcroft, WGBBC, VIII, 297-98.
25 Letter no. 250 to Bearcroft.
26 Letter no. 249 to Bearcroft.
28 Ibid., 284.
In addition to the Colleges already mentioned Berkeley also visited William and Mary College upon his arrival in America and gave counsel to the authorities of the University of Pennsylvania in its early organization as he had done for King’s College. In particular the Berkeley Divinity School in New Haven bears him fond remembrance. The school, however, that enabled his name and influence in the realm of American education to span the continent from eastern to western seaboard was the University of California founded in the city given his name.

In his inaugural address as President of the University, Daniel Gilman delivered this eulogy to Berkeley on the 7th of November 1872:

I hail it as an omen of good, both for religion and learning, that the site of this University bears the name of Berkeley, the scholar and the divine. It is not yet a century and a half since that romantic voyage which brought to Newport in Rhode Island an English cleric who would found a college in the Bermudas—the Sandwich Islands of the Atlantic—for the good of the American aborigines. He failed in seeing his enthusiastic purpose accomplished. He could not do as he would; he therefore did as he could. He gave the Puritan College, in New Haven, a library and his farm, and endowed in it prizes and scholarships which still incite the learning of Latin. Therefore his memory is ‘ever kept green.’ His name is given to a School of Divinity, in the neighboring city of Middleton [now in New Haven]. It is honored in Dublin and Oxford, and in Edinburgh where his memoirs have just been written. His fame has crossed the continent, which then seemed hardly more than a seaboard of the Atlantic; and now, at the very ends of the earth, near the Golden Gate, the name of Berkeley is to be a household word. Let us emulate his example. In the catholic love of learning, if we can not do what we would, let us do what we can. Let us labor and pray that his well-known vision may be true:

‘Westward the course of empire takes its way;
The four first acts already past,
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;
Time’s noblest offspring is the last.’

It is most fitting that this final remembrance of Berkeley be made on the Pacific slopes of America in a university town named “in remembrance of one of the very best of the early friends of college education in America.”

In summary, it is clear that Berkeley has left his indelible stamp upon American education and that a significant number of our most well-known universities had felt his personal guidance and assistance.

University of California.

29 Quoted in Benjamin Rand, Berkeley’s American Sojourn (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), 77.