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A Ruffle at Columbia

A student at Columbia University working on his Ph.D. dissertation in American history stumbled on fragments of a three-way correspondence back in 1851 between Columbia's then-president, a senior professor, and the father of a college student. Greatly engaged by these fragments, he surreptitiously copied them out in longhand. As I was a historian friend of this doctoral student, and had tutored him when he was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, he confided the situation to me. Why, I asked him, hadn't he simply requested permission to make xerographic copies?

The letters, he said, were in a large box of files labelled "personnel" and were not even catalogued. His request, he knew, would lead to a long delay and very likely a denial, as even his initial handling of the letters left them in far worse physical condition than before. At best, months would pass while committees decided whether and how they should preserve them. Any decision on these matters by the university would be interpreted in the light of current academic controversies and might seem politically motivated by factions among the students and the administration.

He had sought biographical materials on the four principals—the president, the senior professor, the student's father, and a young instructor in Greek—in the university archives and at the New York Historical Society, he said. Now he had nearly enough material to conceive of a narrative. Whether he would dare to publish such a narrative soon he didn't know. Teaching

positions were scarce for new Ph.D.'s in history. His dissertation director at Columbia might resent his not confiding in him, or might think that his liberties in the archives were unethical. However, he had now typed out the text of the letters and would allow me to read them.

With the graduate student's agreement, and upon my promise of anonymity for him, I am sharing the texts of the letters with a few trusted historian friends, hoping that they can offer further details and suggestions.

PRESIDENT CHARLES KING TO RICHARD DANFORTH, A SENIOR MEMBER OF THE FACULTY, OCTOBER 12, 1851.

Dear Professor Danforth,

What can you tell me about the background of Thomas Trueblood, the tutor in Greek whom you engaged last year while I was in England?

PROFESSOR DANFORTH TO PRESIDENT KING, OCTOBER 14, 1851.

Yes, I know a bit about the young man. He is a graduate of Harvard College who studied Latin and Greek for several years under the tutelage of Professor James Dunbar. He says that he intends to enter the ministry, possibly as a Congregational clergyman. His family is unexceptionable. They are well-known to the Gansevoorts. One of the Gansevoort progeny, you

know, married the daughter of Lemuel Shaw, the chief justice of Massachusetts. Socially he should be eminently acceptable to us at Columbia.

PRESIDENT KING TO PROFESSOR DANFORTH, OCTOBER 15, 1854.

I am glad to hear details about Mr. Trueblood, and I think that there should be no problem with him socially. The reason I queried you was that I received a letter from the father of a student complaining about Trueblood's teaching. The student's name is Robert Beauchamp, and he is from Charleston, South Carolina. I am sending you an excerpt from that letter.

EXCERPT FROM LETTER FROM CLARENCE BEAUCHAMP TO PRESIDENT KING, OCTOBER 1, 1851.

Please do not think me presumptuous in writing to complain about Mr. Trueblood's teaching. My son, who is a student in his class, hopes to become an Episcopalian minister or a professor of classics, preferably in Virginia or South Carolina. Our family has invested much our ready money for his tuition and living expenses at Columbia College. He went to Columbia because of its excellent scholarly reputation and because it is affiliated with the Episcopalian Church. Thus the college seemed sound to me in two essential respects.

I did not expect my son to be taught Greek by someone as unprofessional as Mr. Trueblood. Let me cite Trueblood's manner of teaching Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Greek is a difficult language, and one can hardly devote too much time to preparing himself with its vocabulary, inflections, tenses, etc. Mr. Trueblood spends a quarter of his class's time on

digressions. Why, he asks the class, is it understandable for Odysseus to sport with Calypso for seven years while his wife, Penelope, is expected to remain at home cloistered and chaste?

This isn't the worst irritant to some of the students and, I trust, the community. Trueblood seems to have an obsession with females and slavery in Greece. Regarding Odysseus' hanging the insolent servants who cohabited with Penelope's suitors during his absence, Mr. Trueblood asks the class whether Homer leaves room for pity for these slaves? With what justice, he asks them, did these women become slaves in the first place? Mr. Trueblood is too prudent to say that he sympathizes with slave disobedience, rebellion, and flight in the United States, but what are the implications of his queries?

My point is that my son—and many of his classmates—feel that Mr. Trueblood is a poor teacher who wastes their time with digressions from the stated subject of the course: Greek language and literature. I am sure that Columbia College, a conservative Episcopalian institution, will not violate the expectations of these students and their parents.

LETTER FROM PRESIDENT KING TO MR. TRUEBLOOD, OCTOBER 17, 1951.

I am sorry to tell you that there have been complaints about your teaching. Their tenor is that you employ much class time in digressions pushing your political and social opinions upon your students. Your opinions, in my view, are those of small and disreputable minorities. Probably you would be happier preaching in a church of like-minded congregants than teaching at Columbia.

However, Columbia intends to honor its contract with you, although it has almost two years to run. As your social background and scholarly recommendations are strongly in your

favor, there could be a long-term place for you at the college if you chose to stay on and accommodate yourself to it. Please pay my respects to Judge Lemuel Shaw, whom I am honored to know, should you encounter him.

I want to help this graduate student follow up on the story, perhaps turn it into a second book after he publishes his dissertation. He needs to learn more about President King's background, and still more about Mr. Trueblood's subsequent life. Perhaps Harvard's archives in particular will be forthcoming on Trueblood. Finally what became of the Beauchamps, father and son? What were their thoughts and actions 1861 when South Carolina militants fired on Fort Sumner, in Charleston Harbor?

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