

The Evolution of an Institution?

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On Saturday, December 8th, 1923 the “largest audience in which ever listened to a speaker in Webster Hall” gathered to listen to none other than the controversial William Jennings Bryan.¹ The infamous anti-evolutionist traveled to Hanover, New Hampshire to attack one of the College’s mandatory freshmen Orientation courses, an Evolution course designed and taught by Dartmouth Professor William Patten. Yet this so-called ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate had less to do with Bryan and more to do with the desires of two prominent Dartmouth community members: Professor William Patten and President Ernest M. Hopkins. The debate provides insight into the College’s goals on education in the 1920s as Hopkins and Patten, while seeking to expose their students to a variety of perspectives, also hoped to prove that evolution taught Dartmouth men how to be better citizens. What has been called the ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate at Dartmouth College in the 1920s teaches us more about the institution bolstering its image as a progressive institution that strove to promote the practicality of education than the merits of science and evolution.

William Jennings Bryan’s visit to Dartmouth perhaps reflected an effort to expose students to different sides of the argument and teach them the lifelong value of open-mindedness. Bryan had difficulty understanding the “belief in a theory which makes man not the son of God but a beast,” a statement contradictory to what Dartmouth students were learning in Professor Patten’s mandatory Evolution courses.² Patten himself firmly believed “in the generalist tradition of Social Darwinism” and so no doubt influenced his students with his one-sided views on this

¹ “William Jennings Bryan Opposes Evolutionists,” *The Dartmouth* no. 68 (December 10 1923): 1, Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

² *ibid*, 4.

version of evolutionary theory.³ In fact, Patten was so passionate about what he was teaching at Dartmouth that just days before his death at the age of 71, he was in the Baltic Island of Oesel Esthonia looking at primitive fossil fishes to be shipped back to Dartmouth College.⁴ He understood his courses as aligned with Hopkins' vision of Dartmouth as an institution that "allow[s] men access to different points of view...to secure their adherence to conclusions on the basis of their own thinking."⁵ Although President Hopkins fully supported Patten's classes, he delivered on his commitment to teach his students about tolerance and open-mindedness by inviting William Jennings Bryan. In staging this debate, Dartmouth, guided by Hopkins' goals for education, hoped to teach its students that critical thinking outside the classroom first involved hearing and contemplating opposing perspectives.

Bryan also integrated into his speech a number of controversial viewpoints on issues separate from the 'Science vs. Evolution' debate. For example, he criticized all institutions of higher learning by claiming that God "use[s] those who lack the training of the higher institutions of learning if the spiritual power of some of our college graduates is paralyzed by the materialistic influence of the brute hypothesis."⁶ In emphasizing that Christ performed the most amazing miracles out of the "unlettered men,"⁷ Bryan mocks the supposed "superiority" of educated men, the Dartmouth men gathered to hear him speak. Thus, although President Hopkins must have been aware what the outspoken Bryan was capable of saying about Dartmouth, he was

³ Susan Gordon, "Patten, Evolution, and Dartmouth's Great Experiment" (History 57, Dartmouth College, 2004), 4, Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

⁴ John H. Gerould. "Obituary: William Patten." *American Association for the Advancement of Science* 76, no. 1978 (November 25, 1932): 481-82.

⁵ Ernest. M. Hopkins. "Problems in Education at Dartmouth College." *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 12, no. 4 (1926): 249.

⁶ "William Jennings Bryan Opposes Evolutionists," 4.

⁷ *ibid.*

a firm advocate that “without freedom of speech, education is impossible.”⁸ In Hopkins’ eyes, free speech and dialogue were cornerstones of his goal towards making education at Dartmouth more practical.

While the ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate itself may have failed to convince anyone in the audience to change his or her opinion, it succeeded in showcasing the advantages of having a strong oratory skillset. In an article published shortly after, on Monday December 10th, *The Dartmouth*, the student newspaper, concluded that, “at a late hour Saturday night neither Mr. Bryan’s position nor the positions of the undergraduate body and the faculty appeared altered in the slightest degree.”⁹ Yet despite many disagreeing with Bryan’s viewpoint and arguments, Dartmouth students and faculty alike were so impressed by his performance as “an adroit and witty controversialist” that they did not hesitate to laugh and applaud him throughout the debate.¹⁰ Even the student editorial section, also published in *The Dartmouth*’s December 10th issue, concedes that, “one couldn’t hold back a swelling admiration for [Bryan’s] compelling powers.”¹¹ Bryan’s proficiency in charming his audience certainly did not go unnoticed among Dartmouth men, a testament to the students’ recognition of the worldly value in being a gifted speaker.

Although William Jennings Bryan amused and entertained his spectators, *The Dartmouth* observed that lacking substantial evidence and facts, his speech was “nothing but oratory.”¹² Thus, while Dartmouth men recognized the power of strong oratory skills, they realized that independent thinking trumps oratory flattery. Professor Patten hoped that this type of

⁸ “Problems in Education at Dartmouth College,” 254.

⁹ “William Jennings Bryan Opposes Evolutionists,” 4.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ “A Crusader Flares,” *The Dartmouth* no 68 (December 10, 1923): 2. Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

¹² “William Jennings Bryan Opposes Evolutionists,” 4.

independent thinking would encourage Dartmouth students to contribute new, fresh ideas to society. He writes that “one of the primary purposes of a college is not to increase a man’s income—although that may be an incidental result—but to preserve and increase the heritages of social life by making a college man a more useful member of society.”¹³ He believed that the ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate succeeded because Dartmouth men, in viewing evolution as an important enough issue to merit such controversy and media attention, could, one day, “minimize the antagonism between religiously minded and scientifically minded people.”¹⁴ This was especially the case since Patten believed that “the world war was largely due to a misunderstanding of the real meaning of evolution.”¹⁵ We can see his beliefs put into practice through the curriculum; Evolution fit into a two-course sequence for all freshmen in which its counterpart was Citizenship.¹⁶ Because the school year organized into two semesters, each semester, Patten would teach half of the freshmen class in his Evolution course. As opposed to Citizenship, targeted towards students hoping to major in any of the natural sciences, Evolution was designed for students planning to major in the field of the social sciences or humanities. Both courses aimed to craft Dartmouth men into better citizens who might help prevent future conflict and strife. The two, attempting to “initiate all young men into the secrets of manhood,”¹⁷ supplied Dartmouth men with the toolkit to apply classroom lectures to what became the chaos following the 1920s with the breakout of World War II.

¹³ William Patten, “First Summary and Review” (1922), William Patten Papers, 1, Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

¹⁴ William Patten, “Why I Teach Evolution: (Hanover: The Dartmouth Press, 1924), 14. Box 1, Evolution 1923-1924 folder, William Patten Papers, Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover New Hampshire.

¹⁵ “First Summary and Review” (1922), 3.

¹⁶ “My Memory Book” (1927), 2, Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire.

¹⁷ “First Summary and Review” (1922) 1.

Reverend Frank L. Janeway returned to Dartmouth in 1922 after a decade-long reprieve from Hanover and found that “the new students were not only doing far more thinking than their World War predecessors, but more independent, frank, and critical thinking,”¹⁸ manifesting the positive changes in student behavior that the Evolution courses hoped to engender. The independent and critical thinking Reverend Janeway refers to aligned with President Hopkins’ goal to make Dartmouth men intellectually superior to their uneducated counterparts through their “knowledge of widely discussed arguments and social theories on which thousands of [uneducated] boys and young men had whetted their minds for years.”¹⁹ President Hopkins hoped that Dartmouth students would become enlightened on issues that affected everybody in society and use their education at Dartmouth to help address them.

President Hopkins’ dedication to the mandatory Evolution courses not only fit into his goals of education but also demonstrated his loyalty to William Patten, which in and of itself is a crucial quality to possess. In making Patten’s courses required for all freshmen, Hopkins displayed the fierce sense of loyalty prevalent among Dartmouth community members. As noted by Susan Gordon ’06 in her essay “Patten, Evolution, and Dartmouth’s Great Experiment,” President Hopkins took an unusually “active and fatherly interest in the course, monitoring, encouraging, and protecting it throughout its existence.”²⁰ Perhaps Hopkins’ loyalty to Patten was a form of “thank-you” to his former Dartmouth professor, whom he called “one of the most distinguished biologists in the world, a man of international reputation, and an author whose works are alike recognized as authoritative at home and abroad”²¹ and who had made such a

¹⁸ Ralph Nading Hill. *The College on the Hill: The Students*. Dartmouth Publications, 1965: 245.

¹⁹ “Problems in Education at Dartmouth College,” 254.

²⁰ Susan Gordon, “Patten, Evolution, and Dartmouth’s Great Experiment” (History 57, Dartmouth College, 2004), 4.

²¹ William Patten, “Evolution 1921-22,” Hopkins Manuscript Collection DP-11, Rauner Special Collections Library of Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire, 49-12.

“profound impact” on him while he was a student from 1897-1901.²² The support that Hopkins showed for Patten throughout the 1920s illustrated the interconnectedness within the Dartmouth community that depicted its members as willing to accommodate and support the desires of others at such a progressive institution.

Ernest M. Hopkins '01 remained loyal to his school and to his much-admired professor, staying steadfast to his belief that “one of the most desirable features of higher education in America is its freedom from standardization.”²³ Hopkins even declined the invitation to become president of the University of Chicago in 1922²⁴ so that he could “continue development of his ideas of what an undergraduate liberal arts education should encompass” in Hanover, New Hampshire.²⁵ His presence thus ensured that as long as Patten taught at Dartmouth, the Evolution courses would continue. In fact, Evolution courses ceased just a few years after Patten’s death due to the lack of “feeling of enthusiasm” without Patten’s leadership.²⁶ The responses of President Hopkins and of the faculty towards the ongoing Evolution controversy revealed their dedication to Dartmouth when it was put to the test because they realized that together, they could make greater educational strides at the institution.

The ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate paints a picture of the ideal Dartmouth student under President Hopkins in the 1920s. Yet, at the same time, we must consider the fact that Dartmouth benefitted from the controversy surrounding such a hot topic. Hopkins’ urge to Patten “to do everything possible to make this course of maximum advantage, and the more so because it is

²² Warren D. Allmon, “Why Study Evolution?” *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* (March 1985): 40.

²³ “Dr. Ernest Martin Hopkins Dies,” *New York Times* (1964). Web.

²⁴ John W. Boyer, “A Hell of a Job Getting it Around” (report, Annual Report to the Faculty of the College of the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, October 30, 2012).

²⁵ “Problems in Education at Dartmouth College,” 249.

²⁶ James P. Poole, personal note, November 28, 1983.

attracting so much attention outside”²⁷ suggests that one of the goals of the ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate was to center conversations in the media on Dartmouth. The publicity first garnered from the ‘Science vs. Evolution’ debate and Patten’s mandatory Evolution courses boosted the College’s image as a progressive institution with leaders like Hopkins and Patten at the helm. Also, the inclusion of the mandatory Evolution courses at Dartmouth further justified construction of its brand new natural science building in the 1920s, which made headlines in being the “first college edifice to use this method of heat regulation.”²⁸ As a result of all this media attention, we are forced to wonder the extent to which Dartmouth genuinely supported Patten’s vision or rather viewed it as a means to an end for publicity purposes. Similarly, in 2015, we wonder whether President Hanlon’s “Moving Dartmouth Forward” was motivated by his desire to appease the media or if he truly believes that his proposed measures will promote learning and growth outside the classroom “to prepare graduates with the wisdom, confidence, and capacity to lead.”²⁹ President Hopkins faced innumerable controversies during his tenure at Dartmouth, but stood firm in his vision even when more desirable options came along, including the University of Chicago job opening. Will Hanlon, too, be committed to stick to his “vision” or will he be tempted to take the easy way out when something better comes along? Time solidified Hopkins’ legacy; let’s see what time will do for Hanlon and the evolution of Dartmouth College and its students from 2015 onward.

²⁷ “The Evolutionary Debate at Dartmouth,” *Dartmouth Undergraduate Journal of Science* (May 22, 2009). Web.

²⁸ “Dartmouth’s Beautiful New Natural Science Building to Open After Easter,” *The Boston Globe* (1920s).

²⁹ Philip Hanlon, “Moving Dartmouth Forward” (speech, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, January 29, 2015).