William Smith and the College of Philadelphia

Among the men of the Scottish Enlightenment who left their mark on the colonial College, none had a greater influence than its provost, William Smith, whose tenure as the first academic executive lasted, with interruptions, for more than a quarter of a century. Smith had originally come to the attention of Benjamin Franklin as a result of a utopian plan for a college which he published in 1753. Ultimately, the differences in the two men’s views on education as well as their divergent political opinions contributed to Franklin’s disaffection with the College in its later developments. In 1754, however, after three years in the colonies as a private tutor, William Smith was called to Philadelphia as a direct result of the efforts of Benjamin Franklin, to teach “Logick, Rhetoric, Ethics and Natural Philosophy.”

Born in Aberdeenshire in 1727, the year Franklin settled permanently in Philadelphia, Smith was the son of a landholder. He had been educated at King’s College, Aberdeen, and, after a year or two in London, had accompanied the family of Colonel Josiah Martin to New York. At that time there was a great deal of discussion on the subject of establishing a college in the province. Smith contributed to this debate with a pamphlet in which he stated that an institution of higher learning was needed and set forth his opinions as to how and where it should be founded, as well as describing methods for raising the necessary funds. With this tract, entitled Some Thoughts on Education, Smith entered the lists as an influential spokesman for educational change. In 1753, before returning to London for ordination to the Anglican priesthood, he composed A General Idea of the College of Mirania and saw fit to send a copy to Franklin in Philadelphia. Franklin replied, agreeing to forward his comments on the work “per next Post” and adding that he would be “extreamly glad to see and converse with you. . . . For an Acquaintance and Communication with Men of Learning, Virtue and Publick Spirit, is one of my greatest Enjoyments.”

In addition to his other writings, Smith also composed verses in the Augustan vein. A visit to the Academy, two months after Franklin’s invitation, was the occasion for a poem dedicated to its trustees. In lofty
metaphor, he exhorts those concerned with the college in New York to emulate their “noble sister,” Philadelphia:

Rise, nobly rise! Dispute the Prize with Those;
As Athens, rivaling Lacedaemon rose!
This nobler Strife, ye nobler Sisters feed
Be yours the contest in each worthy Deed;
Hence with your Names shall Fame perfume her Wing;
To her eternal Tromp your Glories sing.

Franklin had the poem printed on his press and, from this time on, supported Smith’s admission to the faculty of the Academy.

In Mirania, Smith describes a province of the New World in the utopian tradition of Plato and Sir Thomas More. It is inhabited by “a mighty and flourishing [sic] people, in possession of an extensive country, capable of producing all the necessaries and many of the superfluities of life.” Reflecting on the importance of securing their present and future well-being, the inhabitants decide to set about educating their youth in the distinction between the true and the false, “by directing their studies to such things as come more immediately home to their business and bosoms.” He then sets forth a specific program of study in an institution erected for the purpose. At first, all students are to receive identical instruction in a “common school.” After two or three years, the curriculum diverges: those bound for the learned professions receive five years of education at a Latin school, followed by a further four years of undergraduate study, while those who are to follow a trade spend six years at a mechanic’s school. This provision for formal technical education was unusual for the time. As Smith informs the reader: “Public seminaries are almost universally calculated for the first class; while a collegiate class for the instruction of the latter is rarely to be met with. This class of people, by far the most numerous, . . . are overlooked.” Aspects of his scheme echo Franklin’s practical proposals for an “English School” to which Smith does not fail to allude. He also draws upon his own college experiences in Aberdeen and his familiarity with recent educational reforms in Scotland. In essence, however, Mirania is based on an informed appraisal of the needs of the colonies. Although the title suggests a utopian plan, Smith translated some of his suggestions into actual practice, and certain of his arguments also foreshadow ideas on educational diversity of much later date.

It was at the Academy, soon to be the College of Philadelphia, and not in New York, that Smith’s “general ideas” were put into effect. In an edition of his Discourses in 1762, he notes that his proposals are “a pretty exact reproduction of what the author is now endeavoring to realize in the seminary over which he has the honor to preside in another city.”
impression of the curriculum at the College of Philadelphia may be obtained from the schema which Smith published in the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1756. In keeping with the reforms of Scottish realism, the students are seen to progress in the course of their undergraduate program from a study of the concrete and the particular to more abstract areas of consideration. In the first year, the student proceeds from Latin and English exercises and arithmetic to logic, Euclidian geometry, and logarithms. There are also extensive readings from prescribed classical authors. In what constituted a new departure in the education of the time, a list of modern writers, including Isaac Watts, John Locke, and the authors of contemporary treatises on mathematics, as well as a perusal of the Spectator, is recommended for the occupation of “Private Hours.”

In addition to continued readings with emphasis on the theory of poetry and rhetoric in writings ancient and modern, second-year students begin moral philosophy and pursue their studies of logic and geometry, together with navigation, trigonometry, and “natural philosophy” (physics), “conic sections” (analytical geometry), and “fluxions” (differential calculus). During both years, a place is reserved for the oral arts of “declamation” and “disputation.” In their final year at the College, students apply themselves to moral philosophy, natural law, and aspects of government and commerce which bear a relation to the modern disciplines of political science and economics. Scientific studies are continued in the third year with courses in physics and astronomy as well as in “natural history of animals” (biology), “natural history of vegetables” (botany), and chemistry. The third-year readings, prescribed as well as private, continue to reflect the subjects designated for study in the principal courses. During the entire period, the French language is offered as an optional extra, and the daily reading of the Holy Bible is compulsory.

The College’s three-year curriculum was widely imitated by other colleges during the half century which followed. With its emphasis on science, the curriculum of the College of Philadelphia differed substantially from that of other colonial colleges of the time which continued to teach the classics almost to the exclusion of other disciplines. The nonsectarian character of the institution in Philadelphia is frequently taken as its distinctive mark, particularly in comparison with King’s College—later Columbia University—which was founded in the same period by Anglicans. Yet, Smith was no less an Anglican clergyman than Samuel Johnson of King’s College. If the colonial College of Philadelphia stood apart from the others, it was, according to Laurence A. Cremin, mostly on account of “the vision of its leadership and the urban context in which that vision was realized.”

The fortunes of King’s College, New York, and the College of Philadelphia are intertwined at a number of points in their early colonial history. If Smith had initially been interested in heading the New York
Plan of Education in the College of Philadelphia
From the Pennsylvania Gazette, August 12, 1756
Outline for the detailed scheme of studies prepared by William Smith and published in Franklin's Gazette in 1756. The three-year program in the "Philosophy Schools," leading to the Bachelor of Arts degree, was the first arrangement in the colonies of a nonsectarian collegiate program freed from medieval tradition. Mathematics and science made up one-third of the course by which the student in the College of Philadelphia was "to be led through a scale of easy ascent till finally rendered capable of Thinking, Writing and Acting well, which is the grand aim of a liberal education." The curriculum of 1756 was retained by the College and University until well into the nineteenth century.
college, Johnson, who actually assumed the position, was eager for Smith to join him there. Franklin, in the meantime, was arranging for Smith to start teaching at the Academy. Some years later when Smith was in England soliciting contributions for the College of Philadelphia of which he was now provost, he was less than overjoyed to receive a call from Sir James Jay of King's College, whose business in London was manifestly the same as his own. Smith seemed to recollect having mentioned his fund-raising venture which had been approved by the Philadelphia trustees in 1761 on a visit to his associates in New York. Whatever had decided the trustees of King’s College to follow suit, there was nothing for the representatives of the two colleges to do but to coordinate their efforts. Between them, they proceeded to raise an unprecedented sum of money: even after division had been made of the funds collected, Smith returned to Philadelphia with more than £7,000 sterling.  

On this occasion, Smith remained in England in the service of his college for a period of over two years before returning home. On an earlier visit, however, there had been personal reasons for his prolonged absence. Within a year of becoming provost, Smith had found himself under attack for his overt political sympathy with the proprietary party of the Penns, by then in a minority in the local Assembly. Opposition had come to a head in 1758 when he was suspected of having had a hand in publishing an attack on the Assembly in an article which had found its way into an influential German-language newspaper. Smith was cited for contempt along with the initiator of the derogatory remarks, Judge William Moore of Chester county, later to become Smith’s father-in-law. The judge was now imprisoned for his penmanship.

When Smith declined to admit any complicity or to make an apology, he too was taken into custody. The “inconvenience from thence arising to the College” was satisfactorily remedied, according to the minute book of the trustees: “Mr. Smith having expressed a Desire to continue his Lectures to the Classes which had formerly attended them, the Students also inclining rather to proceed in their Studies under his care, They ordered that Said classes should attend him for that Purpose at the usual Hours in the Place of his present confinement.” That place was none other than the new Market Street “gaol” from which he was released after three months, only to be imprisoned once more and threatened, on regaining his liberty, with being locked up again when the Assembly met in the fall. The trustees hurriedly granted him a leave of absence and Smith departed for London to appeal to the Crown against the Assembly’s action.

Not only was Smith vindicated as a result of his appeal: he received a further mark of the esteem in which he was held in the home country. In the Rare Book Collection of the University of Pennsylvania is a printed recommendation, signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and five other
Anglican bishops, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Divinity from the University of Oxford. Such honors may have secured Smith's position but they did little to improve his popularity in Philadelphia. In fact, even the successful fund-raising mission of a few years later was viewed with suspicion in some quarters because of Smith's favorable standing with the Proprietors, the King himself, and, in particular, the princes of the Anglican church.

Although the College's finances improved as a result of the provost's fund-raising in England, its political position worsened. The College came under attack for its connections with the proprietary party. As Revolutionary sentiment increased, Smith himself was viewed by many republicans with mounting distrust. Although in his correspondence he inveighs against the Stamp Act for impeaching the loyalty of the colonists, his British birth as well as his ties with men of high station in England brought him under suspicion as a royalist and sympathizer. Nonetheless, there was sufficient rapport between the College and the new authorities for the provost and trustees to invite the members of the first Continental Congress to take part in the commencement exercises of 1775. On this occasion, George Washington and the other delegates proceeded in a body from the State House to the College on Fourth Street.

All the considerations which rendered Smith suspect of royalist sympathies further exacerbated the difference of opinion between himself and Franklin. As early as 1763, Franklin had written bitterly of his former protégé: "I made that Man my Enemy by doing him too much Kindness. 'Tis the honestest Way of acquiring an Enemy. And since 'tis convenient to have at least one Enemy, who by his Readiness to revile one on all Occasions, may make one careful of one's Conduct, I shall keep him an Enemy for that purpose." Nonetheless, as president of the State Constitutional Convention in 1776, Franklin was able to introduce an article protecting charter rights which Smith had proposed "for religious and scientific corporations," and this was adopted as a clause in the newly framed constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Their foresight was rewarded later on, although their proposal had little effect on the immediate fate of the College after the Revolution.

In September 1778, after the last redcoats had departed from the city, the College, which had been used as a military hospital by the army of occupation, prepared once more to open its doors. A very large number of trustees, faculty, and alumni of the College and the Academy served their country with distinction during the Revolution. In the army, Major General Thomas Mifflin (A.B., A.M., and trustee) and Major General John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg (graduate of the Academy and trustee) were but two of the military leaders who had attended the institution, while the first three professors of the department of medicine—John Morgan, William Shippen, and Benjamin Rush—held high administrative posts in the army
Francis Hopkinson (1737–1791)
by Robert Edge Pine
Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Member of the first class of the College of Philadelphia to graduate (1757), Hopkinson received an A.M. (1760) and an L.L.D. (1790). He became a lawyer and was a delegate to the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Devoted to the arts, he wrote Seven Songs, probably the first book of music published by an American composer (1788). At the time of the Revolution, he composed many political satires. He played the organ, invented a quill for plucking the harpsichord, and designed the first American flag (1777), the Great Seal of New Jersey and the original Orrery Seal of the University of Pennsylvania (1782).

as medical director and chief physician. The chaplain to the Continental Congress was the future Right Reverend Bishop William White (graduate of the Academy, A.B., A.M., D.D., and trustee), and, of some fifty graduates and trustees who were sometime members of the Continental Congress, twenty had very close bonds with the institution and no fewer than nine of these signed the Declaration of Independence.10

Hostility to the College had nonetheless grown in the legislature which suspected it of loyalism on account of certain Tory trustees and its Anglican provost. A committee was therefore appointed to look into the affairs of the College and to investigate accusations that the trustees had mismanaged its finances and infringed the religious freedom intended by its founders. On the pretext that they were not abiding by the conditions of the College’s original charter, the board of trustees was accordingly dissolved and a new one appointed in its place.11 The College in 1779 was renamed the “University of the State of Pennsylvania,” a clear indication that, in future, it would find itself under domestic rather than foreign influence. It thus became the first institution in the English-speaking world outside Great Britain to receive the title of university.

Among the new trustees, officials of the state appeared in an ex officio capacity; an attempt was made at an equitable distribution of seats among the various Christian sects in the city. The perennial Benjamin Franklin was made a trustee of the new University, but he did not accept the honor. Instead, after returning from France in 1785, he set about reassembling the former board at his house. Meanwhile, the members of the faculty of the colonial College were relieved of their duties and, with them, Provost Smith, who had spent the years of tumult at his home at the Falls of Schuylkill. In other respects, the act of the legislature ratified all the existing charters and made provisions for the University to receive additional funds collected from estates which had been confiscated in the Revolution.

It was to be expected that this action would be bitterly opposed by the former trustees and particularly by William Smith who was well known for making his opinions heard. For almost a year, he refused to vacate the provost’s house or to turn over the keys and seals of the College to his successor, the Reverend John Ewing. When he finally complied, it was only because he had been served with a writ for his eviction. Smith promptly moved to Chestertown in Maryland where he became rector of the parish church and took a few private pupils. It was not long before his life’s work of improving education in the colonies was resumed, this time when he expanded a local school and obtained a charter for it from the legislature of Maryland. This institution was given the name of Washington College in honor of the nation’s hero. Speculation in western land also occupied his time.

Acknowledging defeat in Philadelphia was, however, out of the
George Washington, who attended the 1775 commencement of the College of Philadelphia along with other members of the Continental Congress, was the recipient of an honorary LL.D. eight years later. The diploma of the University, “ambitious of enrolling your justly celebrated name in the catalogue of her sons” and bearing the pendant paper orrery seal, is a hand-lettered parchment now in the Library of Congress.

question: for the next ten years, Smith continued to assail the legislature of the Commonwealth with complaints and objections concerning their arbitrary treatment of the colonial College. As time passed, the Revolutionary zeal of the men who had drawn up the most radical constitution of any of the thirteen colonies gave way to a more conservative element in the government. Smith’s vehement protests against the “robbery,” by which he did not hesitate to imply that the earlier trustees had owned the College, were at first ignored; but gradually, as changes took place in the composition of the legislature, there was greater willingness to give him a hearing. Chiefly as a result of Smith’s persistent petitions, a committee was formed in 1788 to open up the whole question once more. Smith immediately published a new tract entitled, with no pretense at moderation, An Address to the General Assembly of Pennsylvania in the Case of the Violated Charter, of the College, Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia. The next year, it was finally decided that, in the light of clauses in the state constitution of 1776 which Franklin and Smith had been instrumental in putting on the books, the statute of 1779 contravened the law protecting the property rights and privileges of existing corporations.
As a result of a new act passed by the Assembly, the former trustees and faculty were reinstated in the original College buildings. There were now two institutions of higher learning in Philadelphia with faculties which overlapped at some points, for, in the absence of judicial action at this or any other time, nothing prevented the University from continuing to exist side by side with the resurrected College. Forced to seek alternative accommodation, the University took up quarters in the building being constructed for the American Philosophical Society at Fifth and Chestnut Streets. Anomalous though it may seem, this situation continued for the next three years, by which time both the College and the University came to recognize the wisdom of joining forces instead of competing with one another.

Among the problems which had to be resolved at the time of union, none was more sensitive than the fate of William Smith. The new board of trustees represented a merger of the two previous bodies, with each responsible for electing twelve members. Despite his versatility as a teacher and his long experience since the inauguration of the College, there was considerable opposition to Smith among these men. When the board made its appointments to the faculty of arts, Smith was left out altogether. Amazed, he inquired of a member of the board whether "not voting in is the same as actually voting out, and is to operate as a Discharge," and he requested some indication that there was nothing dishonorable in his omission. The trustees then proceeded to reinstate Ewing as provost. Smith responded by making a statement of his financial claims against the University while still expressing eagerness to serve the institution in any capacity. A financial settlement was forthcoming, but Smith discovered the truth of his incredulous fear that "after all my Services, for near forty Years, in the Cause of Learning in Pennsylvania, I am now absolv'd from all future Duties and connexion with the seminary." By a strange irony, William Smith, who had been associated with the College of Philadelphia since 1754, was destined not to hold a position when faculty were elected at the newly constituted University of Pennsylvania in 1792.