A funeral elegy for Thomas Danforth, treasurer of Harvard

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father of the science of chemistry, Hobbes disagreed concerning the interpretation of the famous experiments which Boyle made with his new vacuum pump, or 'pneumatic engine.' The issue of that controversy was the existence of the vacuum, the subject, in part, of Hobbes' letter to Mersenne. Because Boyle was attacked by Hobbes, and also by an English Jesuit named Linus, he made further experiments in the course of which he discovered the law named after him, which states that the volume of an enclosed gas at constant temperature is inversely proportional to the pressure at which it exists.

The brevity of the letter is interesting in itself, as Brown has pointed out, because it indicates that Hobbes and Mersenne were living in the same town and consequently not dependent on letters for their contacts. Hence this one lacks the news of general interest with which others are marked.

I. BERNARD COHEN

A Funeral Elegy for Thomas Danforth, Treasurer of Harvard

ONE of the steadiest plodders on the nearer slopes of the Puritan Parnassus was the pastor of Dorchester, John Danforth (1660-1730). A modest man, he probably had no illusions about his poetic stature. His most notable literary characteristic was the faithfulness and simplicity (too great at times) with which throughout his life he prepared a suitable 'copy of verses' whenever the occasion called for it. In almost every piece he rises to at least one brief passage of real though minor poetry; at least once in his life he achieved a poem of intensely personal though stark and thorny expression; once too, in his New Year's poem for 1720, he came close to perfection in simple naive charm.

Nearly all of his works were written for special occasions, most of them upon the deaths of friends, relatives, and parishioners. Their value is not so much literary as historical and biographical, for conscientious workman that he was, he rarely turned out the vague generalities prevalent in many an elegy of the day, but rather gave a solid factual account of the life of the deceased and a careful delineation of his character — this often the best part of the elegy literally. Thus in his verses the spirit of the second era of Puritan New England lives in its activities, principles, and aspirations, and from his lines the historian can attain an insight into the temper and attitudes of the period often lacking in the more material sources. To give just one example: in the elegy before us (Plate I) and in the one on Hannah Sewall (when speaking of her father John Hull) Danforth's terse, graphic depiction of the New England Puritan attitude toward great wealth epitomizes a whole course of development.

The elegies generally appeared as printed broadsides, occasionally as appendices to books or pamphlets, occa-
sionally in the early newspapers. But
the mills of time have ground most of
them to pulp. Of the seven broadsides
which can at present be located, only
one has survived in as many as two
copies; five others, still known to scholar-
s in the nineteenth century, have sub-
sequently disappeared. Since publica-
tion of The First Century of New
England Verse, I have found two fur-
ther poems of John Danforth’s and
notice of another, and it is rather prob-
able that more of his verse will turn
up in the course of time. While still
working on the Danforth bibliography,
however, my attention was
called to the broadside before us,
which subsequently came to the Har-
vard College Library through the gift of
Carleton R. Richmond, ’09. It had
apparently been resting in the bottom
recesses of a bookcase in a private
home for about a century or so and
seems never previously to have been
so much as mentioned. It is the earliest
of Danforth’s broadsides now pre-
served (though the elegies on John and
Anne Eliot appeared two years earlier,
appended to a sermon).

This elegy, on the death of his uncle
Thomas Danforth, typifies all the vir-
tues and shortcomings of the poet’s
verse to a notable degree. As fre-
quently, John Danforth here puts his
worst feet forward in the singularly
awkward first lines, but then he warms
to his theme in the eulogy of Old Eng-
land and of her sterling son, Nicholas
Danforth, who refused the expensive
honor of knighthood and brought his
children Thomas and Samuel with him
to New England, after having distin-
guished himself as a patron and pro-
tector of noted Puritan divines at his
Suffolk home in Framlingham.

The son Thomas carried on this
honorable tradition of piety and public
service in New England; and at this
point we come to the finest portion of
the elegy. With all its mixed meta-
phor, there emerges from it the clear
image of a man deeply pious in speech
and conduct, strong and positive in
character, born to rule yet with no de-
sire to rule, imbued with a strong
sense of responsibility toward carrying
on the founding ideals of New Eng-
land, with a deep humanity, with a
notable tolerance, courage, and inde-
pendence of mind which caused him to
stand out against the two popular
hysterias of early New England, the
witchcraft trials and the persecution
of the Christian Indians during King
Philip’s War, as well as against the en-
croachments of political tyranny. The
poet finds his best lines toward the end
of the second column when he de-
scribes his uncle’s steadying influence
on government and order, his judicial
moderation, the kindly, homely wit
with which he often settled the cases
brought before him, his intuitive talent
for detecting trouble before it came
into the open, his reasonableness and
complete lack of judicial vanity.

The passage on his long and gener-
ous services to Harvard lapses from
literary grace, but is packed with in-
formation and bears out Morison’s ver-
dict on Thomas Danforth that no
other person had so long, intimate, and
important a connection with Harvard
in the seventeenth century. Better
again are the lines on his broad and
deep learning (he was not college
trained) and on his family life with the
traditional New England intellectual
influences to which Benjamin Franklin
later paid such striking tribute. The
A FUNERAL ELEGY
Humbly Dedicated to the Memory of the HONORABLE,
Thomas Danforth Esq.

Of Cambridge, An Academy in the University of the King of England, and President of the College of New England, and One of the Judges of the Superior Court of Judicature of New England.

In Memory of His Excellency, a Noble and Eminent Character, He was the first President of the Province of New England and one of the Judges of the Superior Court of Judicature of New England.

PLATE I

JOHN DANFORTH'S FUNERAL ELEGY ON HIS UNCLE, THOMAS DANFORTH

BOSTON, 1699
poem concludes with religious reflections, a bit of heraldic and Japardy lore, and blessings on Thomas’ descendants.

With such a well-known public character, we cannot expect to find here many new facts contributing to his biography. From the superscription it is clear that the date of his birth was then set at 1622 rather than 1623, as more recent accounts will have it. One nice new tidbit adds to our lore about that ever-ready anagrammatist, the first John Wilson, who greeted young Thomas Danforth when he first assumed high office with the perfect anagram: ‘Handsome for that.’

On the whole, this elegy is one of Danforth’s best; it is of some literary merit, a good example of the later Puritan elegiac tradition, and a precious document of the New England way of life.

Harold S. Jantz

Notes

Wordsworth’s Thanksgiving Ode: An Unpublished Postscript

ENGLISHMEN celebrated 18 January 1816 as a day of general rejoicing for the final defeat of Napoleon, and Wordsworth commemorated the occasion in his Thanksgiving Ode, published some three months later. Unfortunately, the Ode is a somewhat labored occasional piece. There is in it more of what its author called ‘rational patriotism’ and ‘sound philosophy’ than of true poetic fire. It does not seem to have enjoyed a wide contemporary popularity, and it has not worn well.

Wordsworth cast his poem in the form of an irregular ode. As he explained his choice to Southey,

It is a dramatised ejaculation; and this,

if anything can, must excuse the irregular frame of the metre. In respect to a stanza for a grand subject designed to be treated comprehensively, there are great objections. If the stanza be short, it will scarcely allow of fervour and imperosity; unless so short that the sense is run perpetually from one stanza to another, as in Horace’s alexandrines; and if it be long, it will be as apt to generate diffuseness as to check it.

In its first edition, the stanzas or movements of the Ode were indicated simply by spacing and indentation. This practice led to a printer’s error which was a source of some vexation to Wordsworth, and of which he complained in the hitherto-unpublished postscript of a letter to John Scott:

* The Ode was sent to the printer about 18 March 1816, the date of its profestory advertisement, for in a letter of April 9 to R. P. Gillies, Wordsworth speaks of having sent it ‘three weeks ago’, see The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (1937), II, 749. The published correspondence also indicates that the book finally appeared between May 3 (De Selincourt, II, 749) and May 26 (De Selincourt, II, 745). The Harvard copy of the Thanksgiving Ode contains a four-page publishers’ advertisement dated April, 1816, possibly indicative of a publication date early in May.

* De Selincourt, op. cit., II, 717.
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