TIMOTHY DWIGHT

In a biography of Timothy Dwight published in 1942, Charles Cunningham wrote that Dwight “delivered his inaugural address, an ‘elegant Latin Oration’ apparently no longer extant, and, after the students had sung an anthem called ‘The Heavenly Vision,’ closed ‘the solemnity with a Blessing.’” A search through Sterling Memorial Library and Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library revealed no hidden document containing Dwight’s address. Therefore, a translation of his “elegant Oration” is missing from this volume. Although his initial vision for the College is alas unknown, the achievements of Yale’s erudite President deserve brief mention here.

Timothy Dwight was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, the son of a graduate of Yale, Major Timothy Dwight. His mother, the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, was a woman of brilliance who undertook much of her son’s early education. By the age of four Dwight could read the Bible, and legend has it that he mastered the alphabet in one lesson. He was sent to Middletown at the age of twelve to study Latin and Greek with the Reverend Enoch Huntington, a Yale graduate of 1759, and entered Yale at the age of thirteen. Dwight and a classmate, Nathan Strong, tied for first place in their class when they graduated from Yale in 1769, and Dwight remained in New Haven for two years of further study. He supported himself by teaching at Hopkins Grammar School. Appointed a tutor at Yale in 1771, Dwight became much beloved by his students. He earned a master’s degree at Yale, and although he first thought of studying law, instead turned to the ministry. When Naphtali Daggett resigned in 1777, the students petitioned to have Timothy Dwight appointed President, but he was only twenty-five at the time and deemed too young. Ezra Stiles was selected instead.

While he was a tutor, Dwight broke the long established tradition that tutors remain single by marrying Mary Woolsey. He resigned his tutorship in 1777, during the Revolutionary War, to enlist as a chaplain in the Connecticut Continental Brigade. He served for a little over a year and had to resign when his father died. Returning to Northampton with his wife and young son to assist his mother and twelve brothers and sisters, Dwight—the oldest son in the family—spent the next five years taking care of his father’s estate, establishing an innovative coeducational school, and preaching in several churches in the neighborhood. He also served as a member of the Massachusetts Legislature for two years. He resisted many offers of positions elsewhere, including a professorship at Harvard, but in 1783 accepted the pastorate of Greenfield Hills Church in Fairfield, Connecticut where he was ordained on November fifth. Dwight held the well-paid position for twelve years, becoming one of the best-known ministers in New England. He also published several volumes of poetry and founded a new school, Greenfield Hills Academy.
which, in addition to being coeducational, accepted pupils from all over the country and some from as far away as the West Indies and France. Dwight held many views unusual for the time. In particular he believed strongly in the education of women, for he remembered the strong influence of his mother on his own early education and development. Further, he did not believe in corporal punishment, advocating instead persuasion and reason.

When Ezra Stiles died in 1795, the Corporation met and quickly agreed to offer the presidency to Timothy Dwight, who incidentally had just declined the presidency of Union College. His parishioners in Greenfield Hills were very upset at his departure. Nonetheless, Dwight was inaugurated on September 8, 1795, and began a presidency characterized by thoughtful change and enormous popularity with students and the faculty who, for the first time, were given responsibilities in the governance of the College. He added several new professorships in law, languages, ecclesiastical history, and chemistry, choosing as Professor of Chemistry Benjamin Silliman, who had planned a career in law but was sent by Dwight to Philadelphia and then to England to study chemistry. Dwight believed “that the man was more important than the subject” and his choice proved totally correct, as Silliman eventually became the best-known scientist in the United States.

In 1805, while President, Dwight became Professor of Divinity and instructed seniors in rhetoric, ethics, logic, metaphysics, and the history of civil society. Under his presidency, the library doubled its holdings, increasing to 7,000 volumes, and the first musical group, the Beethoven Society, was formed. And the predecessor of the School of Medicine—the Medical Institution—was chartered in 1810, with three students earning the M.D. degree in 1814. After serving for twenty-two years as President, Dwight died of cancer on January 11, 1817. Though a minister and Professor of Divinity, Dwight greatly liberalized and secularized the curriculum. It is often said that the modern university began under Dwight and that to take classes with him was in itself a fine liberal education.
Timothy Dwight
by John Trumbull (American, 1756–1843)
Yale University Art Gallery
Gift of T. Dwight Partridge