

Howard Miller. *The Revolutionary College: American Presbyterian Higher Education 1707 - 1837*. New York: New York University Press, 1976. Pp. 381. \$20.00.

Denominational history, susceptible as it is to strenuous exercises in self-congratulation, at best impedes relaxed authorship. Impediments multiply as denominational history and educational history intersect. What is more, at least three generations of educational historians lurk in the wings, crooks at the ready, prepared to hook off stage the sorry writer whose notion of education doesn't quite match their fantasy. Not so with Howard Miller. Thanks to meticulous research, imaginative organization, bold explication, and attractive style, he and his recent achievement *The Revolutionary College* are likely to enjoy centre stage for some time to come.

Considering the scope of the book, with its century sweep, geographic comprehensiveness, and cast of scores, issues and context remain remarkably clear. *The Revolutionary College* is not about this or that Presbyterian institution — Princeton, Hampden-Sydney, Washington, Jefferson, Transylvania, or the rest. Rather, its characters play before the backdrop of the first Great Awakening, the American Revolution, and the denominational complexities of the young republic. And their concerns embrace the nature of social union, higher education's social function, and the subtle relationships between a college's inner workings — pedagogy, curriculum, discipline and so forth — and what Miller designates as "broader developments in American Presbyterianism."

Stated briefly, Miller's analysis runs something like this. Presbyterian ecclesiology, a tightly-related configuration of session, presbytery, and synod, augured well for church, hence American social order. Presbyterian theology, however, emphasized "the individual's role in the process of salvation." The resulting tension between institutional authority and individual introspection thus characterized every move in the development of Presbyterian colleges. Old Side and New Side strove, the one to professionalize, the other to vitalize the ministry. Political independence and an initial exuberant republicanism subsequently prompted both sides of the Presbyterian schism to deploy higher education as an instrument of "republican regeneration." But a monolithic republicanism was never to be. Indeed, the strain of individualism upon authority that marked the theological debates of the Great Awakening found political intensification in a young republic whose frontier life style served as a constant menace to centralized political stability. "Gradually," according to Miller, "the Presbyterians evolved a view of society that allowed them to accept as inevitable the social conflict and competition that appeared to be endemic in America. But at the same time, they made of their denomination the organic community they had failed to find in commonwealth or republic." By 1800, Presbyterian colleges had become fortresses on a religious landscape, echoing the clash of inter-denominational conflict.

Now, given the wide though intriguing generality of this explanation, you might fear for sufficiency and thoroughness of example and logical articulation through ten chapters. Don't worry. For one thing, Miller is himself a persuasive teacher, economical, lucid, and master of the literature. Since his argument depends in part upon several concepts in religious studies which some of us last saw on an exam paper, he takes the trouble of refreshing to a nicety our understanding of salvation, subscription, Old and New Sides, revival, visible and invisible saints, election, redemption, faith, good works, the light within, and establishment. In so doing, moreover, he enlightens the layman without insulting the specialist, thereby immeasurably augmenting the book's potential readerships. For another thing, Miller excels in the deft touch, particularly the character-sketch-for-a-purpose. Hence, John Witherspoon's views on discipline, Jonathan Dickinson's on authority, Gilbert Tennant's on an unconverted ministry, or Benjamin Rush's on ethnic assimilation advance the general thesis with an impetus disproportionate to the actual word-count afforded them. Then, too, despite his sorties into topics as widely varied as the Dartmouth College case, college dormitories, and the millennium, Miller is rarely far, or for long, from his central contention that Presbyterian colleges, conceived as implements of social integration, ended up as mechanisms for denominational fragmentation. He demonstrates, in short, that rare ability of making each stroke count as he works out striking historical designs.

So seamless, in fact, appears Miller's historical fabric that thesis, context, and illustration at times blend imperceptibly. Quite apart from its pleasing stylistic outcome, the work as a result furnishes several serendipitous insights about the Revolution itself. One of them is that after 1783, Presbyterians "turned for support for their colleges not to the American republicans but to the citizens of corrupt Europe." One of Witherspoon's unlucky fund-raising trips to England, netting L5.14.00, was gently assessed by Princeton's Board as "upon the whole, . . . very unsuccessful." Naivete? Perhaps; but testimony to the continuity America's sense of international Christian community despite the severing of transatlantic constitutional bonds. In another instructive observation, Miller highlights the Pen-

sylvania constitutional debates of the 1770s, in which the conservative argument against a unicameral legislature, employed by such spokesmen as Benjamin Rush, told of "natural distinctions of rank in Pennsylvania, as certain and general as the artificial distinctions of men in Europe," an unrepublican apology, to be sure!

Such generalities notwithstanding, Miller's title *The Revolutionary College* proves neither misleading nor disappointing. Central is Princeton, a New Side venture in colonial reformation whose graduates were later to establish Presbyterian colleges committed to teaching public and private virtue consistent with a Christian (though disestablished) republic, and, ultimately, forced "to coexist with the expansiveness inherent in the republican ideology of the Revolution." Patent to a glimpse at their workings are accounts of financing, curriculum, location, living conditions, discipline, methodology, control, and influence. Selected topics come in for amplification, especially Witherspoon's introduction of Scottish realism and the eventual triumph of the classics despite the marked growth of mathematics and natural philosophy between 1787 and 1800. Meanwhile, vignettes of denominational colleges such as Transylvania, Danville, and Cumberland serve to probe such issues as Board politics, church-state relations, ministerial dependability, state intervention, and social control, rounding out the picture. Focus, then, is frequently and effectively on the revolutionary college as institution. Educational critics in the wings will take note, though, that Miller's notion of higher education transcends mere institutional examination. The crucial importance of the sermon as vehicle of both theology and ecclesiology, the ebb and flow of books and pamphlets as aids to philosophical statement, examination, support, or refutation, and, above all, the phenomenal emotional impact of the frontier camp revival, "a ceremonial, sacramental occasion elevated to a high drama," likewise take their place in Miller's enquiry as powerful intellectual as well as affective approaches to the higher understanding — of God, of mankind, of society.

At a time when shelves sag with lightly-edited collections of this and that educational composition, Howard Miller's *The Revolutionary College* arrives as a reminder of the intellectual endurance demanded of the full scholarly statement. The author stands convinced, he admits, that we educational historians are a singularly timid lot and that what he needed to do was to indulge in some historiographic gambling. It is probably wise to greet such brave introductory comments with restraint. Upon occasion they prove only fashionable, textually unfulfilled prophesies. But my reading of *The Revolutionary College* assures me that Miller amply anticipates such skepticism. He delivers. And what flaws appear are as the rug-maker's or the acrobat's — dramatic reminders of the essential difficulty of the attempt. A case in point proves disarming enough. Himself, I suspect, a latter-day enthusiast, Miller presents his Old Side cast as a crusty lot. They consult "in huffy petulance," prove "reluctant to compromise," "refuse to be judged," see the frontier as a "threat to ordered society," consider Philadelphia's immigrant settlers as "easy prey to ranting evangelists." New Side players come off rather better. New Siders "innovate;" modify; assert the claim of people to "judge their minister's success," even suggest "that people had the right to use the promptings of their own hearts to judge the worthiness of their rulers." Altogether, a more likeable genre, present North American democracy considered. But this is an understandable peccadillo, forgivable in one so deeply involved in his *dramatis personae*.

What is more to the point, *The Revolutionary College* enhances a growing body of literature intended to help North Americans understand the colleges they have created and the social purposes they might be expected to serve now and in the future. Every half-decade or so you find a winner. Such a contribution was Douglas Sloan's *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* which in 1971 invited us to add to English and German antecedents the pervasive influence of Scottish-trained educators and their students upon higher education, hence, society. What Miller does is further sophisticate that enquiry by demonstrating the effect of schism upon education's direct social impulse. Of course, his conclusion that the Presbyterian Schools become "bastions of orthodoxy" seems pessimistic compared with Sloan's finding that colleges generally attempted "to reconceive the social uses of the higher learning." But given its research design and supporting data, Miller's appraisal stands as legitimate, provocative, and I would predict, durable. We have him to thank for writing it and New York University Press for awarding it the confidence it deserves.

John Calam,  
University of British Columbia