

Hugh Hawkins

Hugh Hawkins, the Anson D. Morse Professor of History emeritus, died at his home in Plainfield, Massachusetts on May 6th after a brief illness. Hugh taught at Amherst for 43 of his 86 years and continued to contribute to the College following his retirement in 2000--reading the manuscripts of colleagues, interviewing for the Amherst oral history series, and giving the occasional talk, the last of which he presented in a student-run series just weeks before his death. Those who knew Hugh recall with fondness his sunny disposition, his capacity to enter sympathetically into the concerns of others, and his wide-ranging curiosity, often expressed with lifted eyebrows and a forceful "tell me more." Hugh took pleasure in the achievements of his coworkers and students and made little of his own, of which there were many.

Raised in Kansas and Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl years, Hugh was the youngest of the five children of James Hawkins, a dispatcher for the Rock Island Rail Road, and Rowena Eddy. The times were hard, but the family was prosperous. Rail passes took them across the country on summer vacations, and all five children went to college. In Hugh's case this meant attending Washburn College in Topeka for a semester and then transferring to what he considered "an eastern school," Indiana's De Pauw University. Hugh had considered going even further east until receiving a brochure from Harvard that included the photo of a young man dining alone at the Harvard Union. "I had a sickening feeling that this might be me," Hugh later recalled, "friendless among strangers in a distant place."

In 1950, a bit older and a good deal more confident, Hugh entered The Johns Hopkins University to study intellectual history. He had heard that Hopkins

stressed research and writing over teaching, and this fit Hugh's sense of himself; he had already drafted a novel and saw history as another outlet for his literary ambitions. Baltimore also enlarged Hugh's experience in unexpected ways. He roomed at a house owned by a professional wrestling referee whose wife managed "The Band Box," described on its matchbooks as Baltimore's "most intimate" lounge.

Hugh could not have spent much time at the lounge. He completed his Ph.D. in a speedy four years under the direction of Charles A. Barker, a founder of the American Studies Association. Graduation brought two offers, one from the American Studies Department at Amherst and a second, more insistent one, from the U.S. Army. Hugh didn't have a warm feeling for the Army, but served his time dutifully, including a year in Germany as a supply clerk for a helicopter unit near Mannheim. The stint had at least one silver lining; it gave Hugh a chance to consolidate his knowledge of the German language--a skill that he would draw upon both in his research and in two Fulbright Fellowships.

Amherst, of course, had not waited for Hugh, but other opportunities were plentiful, and upon leaving the Army Hugh took a job as instructor of history at North Carolina State University. But Amherst was soon calling again. In the spring of 1957 it renewed its offer of an instructorship in American Studies, and Hugh decided to cast his lot with Amherst despite the equivocal advice of Henry Steele Commager, who, as Hugh later recalled, told him: "You might be able to catch on at Amherst if you can design your own course and get it accepted."

Commager's remark unintentionally captures the strong sense of hierarchy that prevailed at Amherst during the era of the Kennedy or "New Curriculum,"

when the common core courses required many young teachers to bend themselves to a syllabus designed by their seniors. It was not uncommon for new instructors to teach several years before launching a course of their own. Some never did.

But Hugh had no difficulty catching on. While teaching in the Problems in American Civilization course that was mandatory for all sophomores, Hugh also developed a durable new course on the history of the South, a subject which he had studied at Hopkins under C. Vann Woodward, and a long-running seminar on the history of higher education. D.C. Heath published three of the readers that Hugh developed for these classes in their famous series, "Problems in American Civilization." His collections on the Abolitionists and on Booker T. Washington found wide use in courses on the history of race relations in America; some historians knew Hugh primarily in this context. But his principal scholarly achievements were in the history of higher education.

Here Hugh did much to bring professional standards to what had been the domain of apologists and fund-raisers. Appearing in 1960, his first major book, *Pioneer: A History of the Johns Hopkins University*, was and remains a model of how to compose the history of a university. Hugh dug deeply into topics that were critical to the novelty of Johns Hopkins: the selection of Daniel Coit Gilman as president and building of a faculty committed to research, the organization of a university press and foundation of journals, the creation of fellowships for graduate students, and the influence of Hopkins on the growth of graduate studies in America more broadly. The American Historical Association awarded *Pioneer* the first Moses Coit Taylor Prize for the best manuscript in intellectual history. Hugh appears to have broken the mold, however, since it was not only the first but also the last award of this prize.

Hugh's second book, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot*, considered the dynamic of the university movement from the viewpoint of Boston rather than Baltimore. Hugh, like R. G. Collingwood, believed in reconstructing the thought of his subjects in a sympathetic light before turning to criticism or judgment. This was a congenial task when dealing with the avuncular Gilman of Johns Hopkins, but Eliot could stretch anyone's powers of sympathy. Described by contemporaries as "the martinet who stalked across the Yard," the man "whose opinions were as strong as Prussia's boots," and "the spiritual father of the glacial era," Eliot was utterly unlike Hugh, who presented a cheerful demeanor no matter the circumstances. Even so, Hugh found common ground with his subject. He admired Eliot's "orderly mind," his respect for institutions, his tolerance of criticism, and especially Eliot's evolving commitments to research and to free choice in teaching and study. When Hugh was tapped to serve as a member of the select committee on the curriculum in 1976-77, he drew on Eliot's thought in helping to craft an argument for Amherst's open curriculum and the new Introduction to Liberal Studies program, of which he was one of the main architects.

Hugh's third major work on educational history, *Banding Together: The Rise of National Associations in American Higher Education, 1887-1950*, appeared in 1992--two decades after *Between Harvard and America*. Hugh frankly admitted that it had been a struggle to write about the alphabet stew of organizations that coalesced around groups of universities, university presidents, and faculty. The sources were scattered; he found the records of one organization in a janitor's closet. Too often the groups turned out to be as colorless as their acronyms (the AAC, AAU, ACE, ALGC, ALGCU...). But Hugh was also convinced that the

story had to be told because it was a capstone to the university movement and illustrative of the growth of large-scale organizations which characterized his period.

Hugh appreciated historians who use a spacious canvas, but he preferred to work at a level of finer resolution, where he could come to know actors and institutions through archival evidence. Hugh once wrote that he avoided generalization because he was “not much of a risk-taker and eager to avoid mistakes.” Perhaps. Or we might say that his caution reflected a scrupulous honesty and skepticism about ideology. He sought to explore the tangled complexities of authentic human beings rather than impose a simpler order.

Hugh certainly could not be described as timid. At Hopkins, he had been a member of Students for Academic Freedom, an organization formed to fight McCarthyism, and joined the campaign to defend Owen Lattimore, one of McCarthy’s first targets. After coming to Amherst, he participated in founding the Peace History Society and was a faculty advisor to Students for Racial Equality. In March 1965 Hugh, shocked by the atrocities of Bloody Sunday, flew to Selma with the College chaplain to join the march on Montgomery. The following summer he led a group of students southward to participate in the voter registration campaign of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Here at Amherst, he served as co-chair of an ad hoc committee that recommended stronger efforts to admit students of color and the creation of a Black Studies Department.

As these examples suggest, Hugh believed in the importance of institutions and invested his energies to understanding them better as a scholar and to improving them as a citizen. This respect for institutions may also be inferred

from his chastisement of John William Ward on the occasion of Ward's famous march on Westover Air Force Base in May, 1972. As told by Kim Townsend in his biography of Ward, Hugh rebuked the President at a tumultuous faculty meeting after the march, maintaining that Ward had confused his roles as a private citizen and as President of the College—and had thereby raised passions at a time when reasoned discussion was essential. Hugh's remarks, also expressed in the *Alumni News*, were hardly gauged to curry favor, but nonetheless earned private expressions of respect from others who shared Hugh's reservations but who maintained a discreet silence while feelings ran high.

Hugh's work on behalf of civil rights reflected a reverence for community and fairness that surely went back to his youth in the Middle West but which was also sharpened by other experiences. In an interview with the late Doug Wilson, Hugh spoke movingly about painful memories of concealing his identity as a gay man and about his loving partnership with Walter Richard, which began in the 1950s and ended with Walter's death in 2012. Here at Amherst, Hugh navigated through some years of frank hostility to homosexuality, a decade or more of "don't ask, don't tell" silences, and the gradual opening of minds and attitudes that came in the 1980s and 90s. It was a journey that he somehow managed without bitterness.

Toward the end of his teaching career, Hugh became engaged in a new first-year seminar on the theme of "Memory." His collaboration with others in that course refired his enthusiasm for teaching and set Hugh to thinking about the ways that memories renew the past and anticipate futures. Following his retirement in 2000, Hugh turned his hand to forms of writing that suited this growing interest. In

2006 he completed *Railwayman's Son*, a notable memoir about how family, church, and school had shaped his youth. Later, he also drew on memory in a collection of short stories, *The Escape of the Faculty Wife*, and in what he called “an autobiography in quotations,” *They Spoke, I Listened*.

Hugh did not wish a memorial service but could not prevent his neighbors in Plainfield from gathering to celebrate his life. It ought not be surprising that the warm feelings expressed at that gathering included appreciations of his wise advice, his determined modesty, and his role in maintaining local institutions, not least of which was a covered bridge that he repaired each summer. We like to think of Hugh patiently repainting that bridge as we recall the generous life he live among us.

Frank Couvares

Gordy Levin

John Servos (chair)

Pat Williamson

President Martin, I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the Faculty in a rising vote of silence, that it be entered in the permanent record of the Faculty, and that a copy be sent to Professor Hawkins' family.