

Preface

ON SATURDAY EVENING, August 3, 1985, after having had dinner with his old friend Martin Duberman, John William Ward, known to everyone as Bill, went back to the Harvard Club of New York, where he was staying. The Club is an imposing Neo-Georgian building, altered since, but originally the work of the famous architectural firm McKim, Mead, and White. At the heart of it, through a small lobby and a grill room beyond, directly before you, more imposing still, is Harvard Hall, its ceiling forty feet—more than three stories—high, “the finest clubroom in the Western Hemisphere, if not the world,” the Club’s website claims. Around the walls are large portraits of distinguished alumni who were members of the Club: presidents of the Club, presidents of Harvard, presidents of the United States. We can imagine Ward looking at them before taking the elevator up to his room on the top floor of the building.

He was himself a distinguished alumnus of Harvard. He had aspired to distinction all his life and he had achieved it—as he would never forget—by overcoming odds that few if any of the men whose portraits he was looking at had had to face: he was Irish, not Irish like John F. Kennedy (whose portrait hangs in an adjacent room). “All four of my grandparents were illiterate immigrants in the latter nineteenth century. I am proud of them,” he once wrote a student who had changed his name in honor of his African ancestry. “I am proud of that Irish heritage, and no less an American for that pride. Just as you are, and should be, proud of being a black whose people were forced into bondage from Africa, people whose sweat and blood make your life today possible. May both of us hope that generations from now men and women may look back at us with pride.” Bearing down on another occasion, he said his grandparents were “illiterate peasants who came to this nation and with muscle and sweat gave their grandchildren a start, and their children’s children an advantage beyond even their own wild dreams.” They had dreamt the American Dream and it had been fulfilled. He himself was proof that that was so.

Having graduated from the Boston Latin School (where he was captain of the football team), he entered Harvard in the fall of 1941. Intending to become a doctor like his father, he began majoring in Biochemistry, but the following fall he left to join the Marines. When he returned four years later he majored in History and Literature and graduated, with honors, in 1947. In 1949 he married Barbara Carnes, with whom he would have three sons.

After Harvard he went on to the University of Minnesota, where in 1953 he earned his Ph.D. in the field of American Studies, the field in which he first distinguished himself. Indeed, he was a textbook example of what he taught and wrote about as a professor of American Studies—an individual, a self-made man, a citizen who believed in every man's chance to succeed and at the same time every man's responsibility to work for the common good—all, in the aggregate, distinctly American. His dissertation, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol of an Age*, was published in 1955; in the next several years it was widely read in college classrooms; the paperback alone sold over a quarter of a million copies. Beginning in 1952, he taught at Princeton as a member of the English and then of the History departments and chaired the university's Special Program in American Civilization. In 1964 he went to Amherst College as a professor in the History and American Studies departments. The list of honors he received along the way includes two Fulbright Lectureships in England, two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, and a Phi Beta Kappa Distinguished Lectureship. Admired as a teacher, scholar, and citizen at Amherst, in 1970 he was elected by his colleagues as one of four members who would serve on the committee that was formed to search for a new president of the college—and he emerged the winning candidate. He was president of Amherst College from 1971 to 1979.

He was president when America was going through radical changes. The nationwide protests against the war in Vietnam and the demands for racial and gender justice that became the civil rights and women's liberation movements shook the foundations on which America had been established. The confrontations and the conflicts that resulted were clearly and dramatically evident on college and university campuses. It was there that the generations were most obviously pitted against each other. "Never

trust a man over thirty” was a rallying cry that was taken seriously. The young wanted an America that would not draft them to fight in a senseless war halfway around the globe; they wanted a social and political order that was more truly democratic than the one they seemed destined to inherit. They wanted the education they were offered, or that was required of them, reformed with their ideals in mind, and wanted, moreover, a voice in the determination of how that should be done and a voice in the selection of the teachers who would do the offering and the requiring. One college president summed up the students’ goal precisely and memorably: “They want not to be prepared to play a role in society,” he said. “They want to change society so they may play a role in it.” That man was Ward.

Like all his peers, he wanted to see to it that the institution over which he presided continued to run smoothly no matter how rough the passage through which the country was going; and at the same time, inasmuch as it was an educational institution, he encouraged the expression, and discussion, of views no matter how radically divergent they were. He saw himself as an educator, a seminar leader, he sometimes said, even after he stopped teaching—not just an administrator. What was more, though, what set him apart from other college and university presidents, was how much he understood and shared many of the views of those who wanted American society to change, especially the views of the younger generation, the students. He wanted American society to be more inclusive, egalitarian—in a word, more democratic; he wanted an Amherst education to inspire students to work toward that goal and insofar as it was possible, to have Amherst itself be such a place.

In the spring of 1978, a summary description of him in an article in the *Amherst Bulletin* provided the obvious title for his story up through this stage of its completion: “President Ward’s biography is an American success story.” The occasion was his appointment by Governor Michael Dukakis to chair a seven-member special commission to investigate allegations of corruption in the awarding of state and county building contracts in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, or, as it was officially called, the Special Commission Concerning State and County Buildings, or, better still, unofficially, the Ward Commission. The story became more impressive, his success more evident during the more than two and a half years of the Commission’s existence. You could see the results: the Commission’s

findings saved taxpayers billions of dollars; politics in Massachusetts became more democratic, less corrupt; laws were passed that made representatives serve the people who had elected them. Upon leaving Amherst, Ward said repeatedly that his years as president were the most rewarding and exciting of his life; after one year chairing the Commission he said *it* was “the single most intense and interesting experience.” And it was. It was “the most intense and interesting,” and for reasons we will come to appreciate, the most fulfilling experience of his life.

His work with the Commission was pro bono. After it was completed, he wanted to continue to serve the people of Massachusetts, as president of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, for example, but neither that nor any other job materialized. Needing work, he became a social science consultant for the American Express Company in New York, and then, in 1982, the president of the American Council of Learned Societies, a confederation of forty-three societies that was, by his own description, “the premier organization in the world of scholarship and learning.”

The *Bulletin's* summation went on to say, “with idealistic overtones”: “President Ward’s biography is an American success story with idealistic overtones.” The addition got him right. As a teacher, especially in seminars, as a college president, as a crime-fighter and a consultant (essentially leading seminars), and as an apologist for liberal arts education and defender of the humanities not only in America but behind the Iron Curtain and in China, he was nothing if not idealistic. He gave expression to his idealism in convocation and college assembly and commencement addresses, in the essays that he wrote, essays on his favorite subjects and on figures he admired, and in countless speeches. He wanted the best for everyone, wanted everyone to be their best, as individuals and citizens, the two, he would always argue, being ideally one. He was an idealist, but not alone, not just *an* individual, a single, stirring voice. He was a man who was emblematic of his time. He embodied, in word and deed, the hope that was so strong between the mid-’60s and the mid-’70s that America could be a truly democratic society. Considering what has happened to those hopes since—the enormous gap between rich and poor, the polarization of the citizenry and its political leaders that seems to wipe out the possibility of a commonwealth or a common good—we must admire him the more.

His story, though, is not one of a steady rise to the top. Quite the contrary. His success at every level was followed by failure. But idealist that he was, every time he fell back, every time the stone rolled back, he righted himself and tried to push it not just back up but to new heights. After his academic reputation slipped when he failed to complete the book on individualism that he hoped would take off from where his Jackson book ended, he quite openly aspired to be president of Amherst. The success (and notoriety) of his early years as president was followed by relatively uninspired and uninspiring administrative work, and finally an ugly battle with his faculty that led to his resignation. He then went on to play the rougher game of politics on Beacon Hill, one in which the stakes were considerably higher than at Amherst, and he won.

But after the setback that followed upon the extraordinary achievements of the Commission associated with his name—after he failed to find a job *because* the Commission had been so successful—there was no ascent, not even a recovery. Having, as he said, “to hustle to pay the family bills,” he took the shuttle down from Boston fairly regularly to do consulting for the American Express Company and eventually moved to New York with his wife. To others his subsequently becoming the president of the American Council of Learned Societies might have appeared to be another rise to another more distinguished position, but it was not to him. He had known what it was to bring about significant change for the good more immediately and more directly than was possible in the academy. Now he was not even an educator—just an administrator and an apologist for education. In the summer of 1985 he told a man whom he had known since his days at Princeton that his life was now “useless.” He felt that way about himself because the job did not meet his expectations, but also because his personal life had become seemingly empty too: in June he and Barbara had filed for a divorce in the Bridgeport, Connecticut, Superior Court.

If we continue to follow Ward as he walked through Harvard Hall and looked at those portraits, we may go further and imagine not just his looking up at them but his thinking that their subjects were looking down on him. He had always been subject to depression, to what some called his “black, Irish moods.” William Styron is more specific and thus more helpful when, in *Darkness Visible*, his fine memoir about *his* depression, he says, “Of the many dreadful manifestations of the disease, both physical and

psychological, a sense of self-hatred—or, put less categorically, a failure of self-esteem—is one of the most universally experienced symptoms.” It is one we know Ward suffered from.

But Martin Duberman, with whom he had just had dinner, did not see what was coming, nor did a former Amherst student who had met with him that afternoon at the Council, nor did the two old friends, Richard Schlatter and Arthur Trottenberg, with whom he had lunch that day, even though they had invited Ward to have lunch with them because Schlatter’s daughter Heidi had warned her father about what she had recently perceived to be Ward’s fragile state of mind. “There was nothing to indicate the depth of despair,” Trottenberg later said.

After leaving Harvard Hall, Ward went up his room, which in those days would have been more like a dorm room, reminding alumni who stayed overnight of their undergraduate days, than a hotel room. He had always been something of a drinker; he had been drinking more and more since the move to New York. He drank heavily that night. Sometime in the small hours of the morning he called his wife and asked for a reconciliation. She said no. And he killed himself.

Suicide is not easy. According to Thomas Joiner, author of *Myths About Suicide*, “the accepted rate [is] one death for every twenty attempts.” But Ward was determined; he knew what he was doing. He did not slit his wrists, no tendons were in the way. As the medical records have it, he died from “incised wounds of major vessels.” His body was not discovered until early in the afternoon of the following day. Schlatter came and identified it. According to the *Boston Globe*, his wife declined to comment on the note that he left her.

John William Ward: An American Idealist is his story.