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Narrative #5 -- King's College's Two Presidents

The Old Nutmegger and the Young Establishmentarian

No less than their successors, even the most actively involved governors of King's College were occupationally engaged elsewhere and left the day-to-day responsibility for the College's well-being to its president. King's College had two. Samuel Johnson, named as first president in the 1754 College charter, served just over nine years before resigning in April, 1763; Myles Cooper, elected by the Board of Governors in May, 1763, served 12 years before departing New York in May 1775. If not to be compared with the subsequent Columbia presidential sequoias, Frederick A. P. Barnard (25 years) and Nicholas Murray Butler (43 years), Johnson and Cooper served relatively lengthy terms. During their combined tenure, for example, Princeton went through five presidents.

Theirs were also tenures relatively free from internal discord. Johnson had been sought out by the Lottery Commissioners as early as 1751 and his eventual acceptance in the spring of 1754 conferred upon the undertaking his personal prestige as a churchman, scholar and intercolonial personage. His reputation and *gravitas* seemed likely to keep all but the most rambunctious scholars in line. Still, he took up his presidential duties at an "old" fifty-eight, and was not invigorated by them. As his son William Samuel had warned when trying to talk him then young and relatively unknown Boston painter, John Singleton Copley, as a true likeness. Cooper brought to New York a reputation as a minor poet but poor public speaker, which led to his not being offered Johnson's place in the Trinity lineup of homilists. (He did, however, insist upon the position's stipend.)

King's bachelor president proved to be much more social than his early-to-bed predecessor, both entertaining in his College rooms and dining out regularly. His wine cellar was acknowledged to be the best in the colonies. Friends who applauded his conviviality were quick to deny any inferences that he was "in the least bit dissipated." Auchmuty wrote of him in 1771, "as for public transactions in this great city, I must refer you to our friend Cooper, who knows everybody, and everything, that passes here."

For all his "knowing everybody," Cooper, like Johnson before him, never took to New York. He frequently absented himself with "rambles" into the southern colonies, where, in 1768 and again in 1774, he considered resettling. During a year-long visit to England in 1770-71, he looked closely into available and upcoming livings nearer to home. Another idea he floated among his ecclesiastical sponsors was that he might become the Anglican bishop of the southern colonies, should two be established. Following his hasty departure in the spring of 1775, Cooper seems to have given King's nor New York any further thought, other than to press claims for a continuation of his salary through the official closing of the College in 1776. He died in 1787 unmarried in Edinburgh, where he had a comfortable and undemanding living, at age 50. Buried at his request in a graveyard reserved for Anglican clerics, Cooper had prepared beforehand his own epitaph:

Here lies a priest of English blood
Who living liked whate'er was good
Good company, good wine, good name,
Yet never hunted after fame
But as the first he still preferred,
So here he chose to be interred
And, unobserved, from crowds withdrew
To rest among the chosen few
In humble hopes, that divine love
Will raise him to the bles't above.

Robert A. McCaughey
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Sources: Carol and Herbert Schneider, eds., Samuel Johnson: His Career and Writings, 4 Vols. (1929); Joseph Ellis, The Colonial Mind in Transition: Samuel Johnson of Connecticut, 1696-1772 (1973); Clarence Hayden Vance, "Myles Cooper," Columbia University Quarterly (1930), pp. 260-273.

out of taking the job in the first place, "providence has not called us alone to found a university in New York, nor to urge the slow cold councils of that city." Johnson quickly handed over most of his initial teaching responsibilities to others. In his third year as president he began scouting about for an appropriate successor.

With the College underway, it engaged Johnson's attention less than did his lifelong involvement in trans-Atlantic church politics and placehunting. He seems to have been not so much interested in the King's College presidency per se, but rather as a way station or stepping stone to something else, say, an American bishopric. Its handsome salary, £450, the same as that of the Trinity rector, had also been an inducement. On the other hand, it might have been a position that he, as the senior American-born Anglican in the field, felt he could not decline.

In any event, this third-generation son of Connecticut never fully unpacked, much less made an effort to become a New Yorker. The loss of his younger son Willy to smallpox while seeking ordination in England in 1756, the death of his first wife in 1759 and that of his step-son Benjamin Nicoll in 1760 all cast a domestic pall over much of his presidency. His remarriage in 1761 – to his son's mother-in-law – brought a measure of happiness back into his life but likely only increased his desire to return to his native Connecticut and the lighter responsibilities of ministering to a settled church in a familiar town.

President Johnson's prolonged absences from the College and New York City, undertaken to reduce the risk of his contracting small pox, prompted Auchmuty and some governors in 1761 to look to England for someone who might succeed him. They did so even as Johnson was publicly touting the American-born and Cambridge residing East Apthorpe as his successor, and privately trying to interest his son William Samuel in the job. He may well have felt that he was being handed his hat when Cooper appeared on the scene in the fall of 1762, ready to assume the presidency before the incumbent was ready to give it up. The following spring Johnson was out and Cooper in, likely attended by some hurt feelings but no public recriminations. Samuel Johnson gave good service to King's College in seeing it on its way . He died in Stratford in 1769, at age 73.

Myles Cooper was something else. Twenty-seven at his induction, Oxford-trained and recently employed as chaplain of his own Queens College, he had been ordained two years earlier and was already cultivating friends in high ecclesiastical places. Nobody in New York had ever set eyes upon him prior to his arrival in the fall of 1762. He was short, of rudy complexion and rolypoly shape, if one accepts his self-commissioned 1768 portrait by the