Thomas J. Shelley

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The history of colleges and universities is an unusual genre. Often commissioned to help mark significant anniversaries, institutional histories have to strike a balance between serious scholarly narrative and analysis on the one hand and, on the other, the inherently celebratory motives that have called them into being in the first place. Moreover, they are usually written by long-time members of the faculty at the school in question, and thus the arm's-length perspective that historians normally have on their subjects is shortened. A friend once described his assignment to prepare a history of the university where he had spent his entire career as akin to being asked to write a biography of his wife. These potential pitfalls notwithstanding, there is much to be learned from looking at the history of American colleges. Higher education has become such a large and significant feature of national life that the multiplication of case studies, each one useful in itself, also allows us to understand the larger phenomenon and how we got to where we are now. The forest emerges from the examination of particular trees.

Thomas Shelley, emeritus professor of church history at Fordham University, has skillfully navigated these tricky pathways with his new history of that institution, which accurately describes itself as “the Jesuit University of New York.” Especially for its earliest years, the school has a complicated history. Predecessor and related efforts come and go, and the name Fordham is not finally applied to the entire enterprise until 1931. The relationship of the university to the city has been similarly complex. Downtown programs appear and disappear, and the fortunes of the neighborhood surrounding the main campus at Rose Hill in the Bronx rise and fall, presenting particular challenges to the institution within the walls. In recent times, the Catholic and Jesuit identity of the university has been the subject of discussion and debate, as it has on most Jesuit campuses. In the past, that identity did not need active contemplation: it could be seen every day, simply walking around. Now, reduced numbers—there are twenty-nine Jesuits in the community as Shelley writes, he says, precisely the same number as there were in 1846, when members of the Society first arrived to take up the work—raise the question of what that identity will mean and how it will be expressed going forward.

Shelley accounts for these themes as he efficiently tells the long history of the school in animated and highly readable prose. Undergraduate liberal arts always formed the core of the academic program, but graduate and professional schools were added in the early twentieth century, responding to perceived

needs in the local Catholic community. Not all of these endured—a medical school and a pharmacy program did not last—but some of them did. There might even be internal tension based on their successes. By the 1960s, for example, the law school was one of the few component parts of the university that was running a surplus, and it resisted closer integration into the whole as a way of protecting its assets. At the same time, student unrest came to the otherwise conservative campus, as it did nearly everywhere, but these moments, intense though they were, proved to be blessedly short-lived. Throughout, leadership was generally competent, though for a long while the traditional Jesuit practice of combining in one man the presidency of the college and the term-limited rectorship of the community introduced a degree of instability at the top that would not be tolerated today. Ongoing institutional planning and professionalized fundraising have now become a normal part of university life.

Shelley considers all these themes, and he does so with a welcome frankness that is usually absent from institutional histories, too often written as though everything was already great but nevertheless always getting better. The university lost its accreditation in 1935, for instance, a potential death sentence, and the work of getting it back had to be managed deftly. The long resistance here and at other Jesuit colleges to the admission of women seems benighted from a contemporary perspective, and the objections of the Jesuit general in Rome to the appointment of a professional school dean on the grounds that he was Jewish are similarly invidious. Shelley rightly does not shy away from such episodes.

At the same time, he slights some other topics about which this reader, at least, wanted to know more. Greater focus on the content of the curriculum and how that evolved over a century and a half would have been useful to have. In the end, all schools are about teaching and learning, and understanding those processes is more important than knowing who built what buildings and how the books were balanced. Like most Jesuit schools, Fordham called itself a “college” from the beginning, but in its early incarnations it was really a kind of overgrown high school. Seeing how that changed with time would tell us more about the heart and soul of this, or any, university. In the same way, greater reliance on the methods of social history would help us get to know the thousands of students who passed through Fordham’s doors, hoping the school would prepare the way to better lives for themselves and their families. Thanks to ancestry.com and other sources, it is now possible to reconstruct perfectly ordinary immigrant and first-generation families, allowing us to test the common presumption (entirely correct, as far as I can tell) that Jesuit schools were engines of advancement

for working-class Catholics and others. Watching this process at work in a number of specific examples from different decades would strengthen the case.

Like any university, Fordham is a big, complicated thing, and Shelley is no doubt painfully aware of the many subjects and stories he has had to leave out of this history, lest the work become encyclopedic. What he has done, however, is provide an expertly researched and smoothly written account that will attract grateful readers, not just from among Fordham alumni and alumnae, but also from anyone with an interest in works of the Jesuit order and the importance of higher education in the United States.

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