
Conrad Wright, Perry Miller, and Unitarian History

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I really got to know Conrad Wright in the spring of 1988, when I decided to sit in on the last divinity school class he ever taught, "Transcendentalism in New England." I did not actually enroll in the course, even as an auditor. A dissertating graduate student "in the Yard," I had no course requirements left to fulfill. But with Conrad's kind permission, I attended every class, did all the readings, took part in all the discussions, gave a final presentation, and took part in one of his famous historical walking tours. I did this work because I needed to learn what Conrad had to teach.

Until I started writing a doctoral dissertation on the Transcendentalist and abolitionist Theodore Parker, I confess I had no interest in the history of Unitarianism nor in religious history of any sort. I considered myself a historian of American intellectual and cultural life, which I conceived of largely in secular terms – as did all my professors in the history department where I was getting my degree. Although Parker was a minister and theologian, I intended to devote only a few pages of my dissertation to this aspect of his life and instead concentrate on his antislavery activism. When I began reading his writings systematically, however, I quickly figured out that his views on every subject, including slavery, were informed by the theological debates he was having with mainstream New England Unitarians. So in 1988 I came to Conrad, who knew the history of New England Unitarianism better than anyone else in the world.

Conrad gave me the tools to understand Parker, but beyond that, he convinced me that I could not make any sense of Transcendentalism without understanding Unitarianism. He therefore helped me achieve two major realizations. I realized that I could not understand the history of American intellectual and cultural life without understanding the

history of religions in America, and I could not understand the history of religions in America without understanding Unitarianism and Universalism. Owing to these realizations, I wrote a dissertation, and then a book, that focused primarily on Parker's theology; I became editor of the *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*; and I became a professor of Unitarian Universalist history at Meadville Lombard. But I have always studied Unitarian and Universalist history to illuminate American intellectual life and culture, and I have always sought to engage with other scholars in that field.

I offer this personal narrative not only to acknowledge my intellectual debt to Conrad. In preparing this essay, I did some research on his early career. What I found has led me to conclude that his intellectual path resembled mine more than I had at first supposed.

Like many others, I have thought of Conrad as a denominational historian, dedicated especially to deepening our understanding of the Unitarian aspect of the Unitarian Universalist heritage. In fact, I once asked him point blank if he saw his particular scholarly mission to have been the rehabilitation of the Unitarian "mainstream" from the aspersions cast upon it by evangelicals and religious radicals alike. To my surprise, he shook his head and quietly said, "No, no, that's not it."

I think now I know in part why he demurred. His starting point for the study of Unitarianism turns out to have been, like mine, the study of American history and culture. And I think this is an aspect of his legacy we would do well to remember.

My admittedly limited evidence for making such a claim rests primarily on records from Conrad's years as a Harvard student. He entered the college at age 16. In an era of the "gentleman's C," he graduated *magna cum laude* in 1937. That same year, the university established a new doctoral program in the History of American Civilization, and he was among the first students enrolled. By 1942, he had completed his doctoral dissertation, which became the basis for his seminal book, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*.¹ But the United States had just entered the Second World War, and before he could make his dissertation defense, he received a letter from the draft board. A conscientious objector, he went on to serve as a hospital administrator in Massachusetts, England, and California before returning to Harvard to get his Ph.D. in 1946.²

I have looked at Conrad's doctoral dissertation and at his undergraduate senior honors thesis. I have even looked at the handwritten notes he took for his classes. Three boxes of these are at the Harvard Archives, apparently representing every course he took from the beginning of his sophomore year in the college until 1941, near the end of his graduate study.³ I also intended to look at the large collection of personal papers he gave to the Massachusetts Historical Society, but discovered that these were closed to researchers until 2029. Nonetheless, based on what I have seen, I think I can make some relevant observations.

The first concerns the courses Conrad took.⁴ These do not portend a career in Unitarian denominational history. With one exception, which I will mention in a moment, Conrad seems never to have taken a class on the history or philosophy of religion, nor on church history, much less a class at the divinity school. He focused his studies, instead, on American history and literature, broadly conceived (including classes on the writers of the South and West). He did write his senior honors thesis on a Unitarian, the American novelist and man of letters William Dean Howells, but Conrad's topic was Howells' social thought.⁵ The word Unitarian appears nowhere in the text.

My second observation is that one faculty member above all had an influence on Conrad. This was Perry Miller. Then a junior professor, Miller today is remembered as the most influential of all historians of New England Puritanism and one of the founders of the academic field of American Studies.

Conrad took his first undergraduate survey class in American literature from Miller, and, as a graduate student, his only class on religious history from him (a survey of Protestant religious thought from Martin Luther to William James).⁶ Again, when Conrad was at the college, Miller served as his sophomore tutor and his junior tutor, meaning that the two of them met every week for two academic years to discuss readings in American history and literature. Conrad's notes seem to indicate that they met one on one.⁷ In graduate school, Miller supervised Conrad's dissertation, and Conrad self-consciously modeled his project on Miller's first book, published during Conrad's freshman year, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650*. The title of Conrad's doctoral dissertation was "Arminianism in Massachusetts, 1735-1780."⁸

That Conrad orbited Miller so closely on the one hand seems inevitable. By all accounts, Miller's force of personality and intellect exerted considerable gravitational pull. He is generally remembered as a big, rough-edged man who drank and swore and yet dazzled everyone with his brilliance. Many students who shopped his classes would hear him list such formidable course requirements that they would rush for the exits, but those who stayed in their seats included some of the brightest young minds at Harvard, exhilarated by the chance to pick up the gauntlet he had thrown down.⁹ Moreover, Miller was, when Conrad met him, a young scholar nearing the height of his powers. In 1939, at the age of 34, he published the massive, densely-written first volume of his greatest work, *The New England Mind*. This book, with its successor volume published in 1953, would shape Puritan studies for a generation and more.¹⁰ In short, Miller was the most exciting figure on the humanities faculty, despite formidable competition (Conrad's other professors included Samuel Eliot Morison, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., and F. O. Matthiessen). Of course Conrad wanted to study with Miller.

On the other hand, Conrad's choice seems puzzling in light of his later career, because Miller notoriously disdained Unitarianism. Reared an Episcopalian, Miller had become an atheist, attracted — like many other highbrow Modernists — to a tragic, strenuous, Hemingway-esque variety of existentialism. As a historian, he reconceived Puritan theology, long dismissed as a barren subject, in two ways that made it seem burningly relevant to his own time. First, he claimed it was the foundation of American intellectual life. I will say more on this point in a moment. Second, he claimed that Puritans shared his fundamental spiritual sensibility, which he identified as “the Augustinian Strain of Piety,” using the word “strain” in a double sense, as both “descent” and “violent effort.”¹¹ He celebrated those post-Puritan figures who, he believed, also shared this sensibility, notably Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

By contrast, he regarded the New England Arminians and their Unitarian descendants as Philistines.¹² Miller made no secret of this opinion to Conrad. Conrad himself liked to tell the story that when he submitted his dissertation on Arminianism, Miller remarked, “All right, and to hell with it.”¹³ Conrad's own scholarship challenged Miller, not only by insisting that Arminians and Unitarians be taken seriously as

religious thinkers, but by questioning, in the case of Emerson, whether Miller's reading of him was correct. In Conrad's later career, he began to examine Unitarianism in light of sociology and the history of institutions, subjects about which Miller had no interest.

Nonetheless, I think Conrad took from Miller a conceptual framework that made his own work possible. As we all know, Conrad came from a Unitarian family and grew up attending the First Parish congregation here in Cambridge. But I strongly doubt, before he encountered Miller, that he considered studying the history of Unitarianism. The leading historian of Unitarianism at the time was Earl Morse Wilbur, whose emphasis on anti-Trinitarianism and the Reformation held for Conrad little fascination.¹⁴ Again, the theological traditions of American Unitarianism were theistic, while Conrad was an atheist.

Yet in Miller he found a fellow atheist who not only studied theology, in his case Calvinist theology, but as I said before, made the subject seem burningly relevant. Miller's insistence that Puritans at bottom shared his modern, heroically existentialist sensibility would not have much interested Conrad, who always seems to have found spiritual meaning not in strenuous individualism, but in the quiet bonds of family and community. Miller's other claim about New England Puritanism, however, did appeal to Conrad. Miller portrayed Puritanism as a European intellectual system that was transformed on being transplanted to these shores, turning, to the discomfit of its adherents, from God-centered to human-centered. In Miller's view, this uneasy transformation laid the foundation for what he liked to call "the American mind." Because New England Unitarianism grew from New England Puritanism, Miller's schema gave Conrad a way to conceive of Unitarianism as a distinctly American religious movement. Through its history, in other words, Conrad saw that he could shed light on American history and literature, subjects that deeply interested him. Here, I believe, was his starting point.

I am not saying that Miller was right about Puritanism, nor that American Unitarianism was exclusively American. I believe neither proposition. Instead, I want to emphasize the memory of Conrad as a historian of America, because UUs tend to remember him as someone who looked inward to study his own religious tradition, not outward,

to find its place in the wider culture. But just as UUs today believe that on questions of social justice, they have been too much engaged in an internal dialogue rather than one with the world, so I believe UU historians have written too much just for UUs, rather than trying to understand what Unitarianism, Universalism, and UUism mean to American history and life. I think the engagement of UU historians with American historians should be encouraged, and Conrad, the UU and American historian, would agree.

Notes

¹ Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, Beacon Press: 1955). As a graduate student, Conrad also published two articles, "The Religion of Geology," *New England Quarterly* 14:2 (June 1941), 335-358, and "Edwards and the Arminians on the Freedom of the Will," *Harvard Theological Review* 35:4 (Oct. 1942), 241-261. The latter article was adapted from his Helen Choate Bell Prize Essay of 1942, with the same title; it became chapter 7 of his doctoral dissertation, "Arminianism in Massachusetts, 1735-1780," Ph.D. Dissertation (Harvard University, 1943), and would be adapted for chapter 4 of *Beginnings of Unitarianism*.

² *Decennial Report of the Harvard Class of 1937* (Cambridge, MA: Printed for the Class, 1947), 444; *Twenty-fifth Anniversary Report of the Harvard Class of 1937* (Cambridge, MA: Printed for the Class, 1962), 1186-1188. Conrad Edick Wright, in a eulogy for his father delivered at the First Parish in Cambridge (May 22, 2011), noted that his father had been a conscientious objector.

³ Course Material, 1934-1939 (two boxes catalogued as "Course Material, 1934-1940," HUC 8934.300); Accession #13956, Folder #1 (English 170d, Spring 1941), Conrad Wright Papers, Harvard University Archives.

⁴ I sent a request to the Harvard Registrar to examine Conrad's Harvard transcript, but never received a reply. I therefore have had to reconstruct his course of studies from his surviving notes in the Harvard University Archives.

⁵ Conrad Wright, "Progress to Alturia: The Social Thought of William Dean Howells," Undergraduate Honors Thesis (Harvard College, 1937).

⁶ Accession #13956, Folder #1, Wright Papers, Harvard University Archives. The survey in American literature was team taught by Perry Miller, together with the literary critic Kenneth Ballard Murdoch (who had been one of Miller's teachers), and the Melville scholar William Ellery Sedgwick.

⁷ Conrad Edick Wright informs me that his father would have had Perry Miller as his senior tutor (as Harvard refers to the senior thesis advisor), but Miller was on leave, so his advisor was F.O. Matthiessen.

⁸ Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650: A Genetic Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933); Wright, "Arminianism in Massachusetts." Conrad Wright himself once told me that Miller's book was his model, and his dissertation is

much more similar in structure to Miller's book than the book it became, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*.

⁹ See the tributes to Miller written by his former students, among them Edmund S. Morgan (who was Conrad Wright's exact contemporary at Harvard), Kenneth S. Lynn (who first encountered Miller in the late '40s), and Ann Douglas (who observed Miller at the end of his career): Morgan, "Perry Miller and the Historians," *Proceedings of American Antiquarian Society* 74 (April 1964), 11-18; Lynn, "Teaching: Perry Miller," *American Scholar* 52:2 (Spring 1983), 221-227; Douglas, "Hero of the Academy: The Mind of Perry Miller," *The New Republic* 186:5 (February 3, 1982), 26-30.

¹⁰ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 1982, first ed. 1939); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 1953).

¹¹ Miller, *New England Mind: Seventeenth Century*, 3-34.

¹² Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 8: The Transcendentalists' condemnation of "'the corpse cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street' ... is nothing less than the first of a succession of revolts by the youth of America against American Philistinism."

¹³ Anecdote related to me by Conrad Edick Wright.

¹⁴ The two volumes of Wilbur's *A History of Unitarianism* appeared in 1945 and 1952 respectively, after Conrad Wright completed work on his Ph.D., but Wilbur had already laid out the approach he would take in *Our Unitarian Heritage: An Introduction to the History of the Unitarian Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1925).