On Campus

College Intrigues

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|
Winter 2010-11



Columbia University Archives

Ah, for those pre-Internet days, when students mocked their professors in crude four-panel cartoons. From the moment Robert Harpur arrived at King's College in 1761 as a professor of math and natural philosophy, he became an object of student scorn, and, inevitably, the subject of a piece of mischief drawn in color and hung for public consumption in College Hall. This naughty satire, made in 1766, is one of dozens of items to be showcased in a yearlong exhibition called *Columbia University:*

100 Years of Collecting, beginning February in Butler Library to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the University Archives.

The cartoon's title, "College Intrigues, or the Amors of Patrick Pagan," reflects the disparagement found in the picture: bigotry (references to Harpur's Irish birth), sexual corruption (Harpur furnishes a certain Miss Myng with spruce beer — "You need not fear, Mistress, the Juce is verry weak and simple" — and gets her into bed), high scandal (a pregnancy, credited to the beer), and crowning disgrace, as Harpur arranges for an abortion, and the stricken Miss Myng,
in bed, cries to the doctor, "That pale face man has ruined me."

Yikes.

According to David C. Humphrey in his book *From King's College to Columbia*, 1746-–1800, the College governors identified the main culprit as a senior named John Vardill. The governors demanded that Vardill and his collaborators produce evidence to support their claims against the professor. They couldn't, and were duly punished. But Harpur, the lone Presbyterian on an Anglican faculty, and a stern disciplinarian, continued to suffer verbal abuse from students. Nine months after the cartoon incident, he resigned his professorship.

The exhibition will be presented in three installments inside the Chang Octagon in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library in Butler. The first, on display from February 1 to May 27, will highlight the growth of King's College to Columbia University, says university archivist Susan Hamson. Alongside the rendering of Harpur's alleged extracurricular activities will be such artifacts as a matriculation book bearing the names of Alexander Hamilton (a student of Harpur's), John Jay, and Gouverneur Morris, and the *Book of Misdemeanours in King's College, 1771–1775*, a compendium of student infractions, such as stealing teacups, absenting oneself from prayers, and spitting on the cook. (There is no equivalent register for wayward professors.)

The University Archives was officially established in 1991, when the University Secretary's office merged its records with the historical collection known as Columbiana, which was housed in Low Library. In 2007, the archives were moved to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library in Butler.

It might surprise Harpur that his brush with John Vardill should be remembered 250 years later, but his reputation survived the travesty. After leaving the classroom in

1767, Harpur stayed on at the College as a private tutor, and later became a regent and trustee. He was also the College's first librarian.

Vardill, a devout Anglican and staunch Loyalist, joined the faculty of King's College in 1773 — while spying for the British.

Now that's college intrigue.

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