

Elhanan Winchester, Junior - Fire for the Gospel, Universalism

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When I set out upon my sabbatical to England, where I had never been before, though I had been to the continent long years ago, I thought to read up on England today. All I knew was historical, and we all know how elusive history can be. So I read *The Oxford Book of Oxford*, and concluded the Brits had been very, very naughty for a very, very long time, but wrote about it exceedingly well! Margaret Drabble said of contemporary England: “Not a bad country,” really, “just a mean, cold ugly, divided, tired, clapped-out post-imperial, post industrial slag-heap covered in polystyrene hamburger cartons.” Sounded just like America to me. I thought I should feel right at home. Alice Walker recommended, for living in England, “Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise.” Good advice, that, for a visit to any country. I turned to David Frost’s book on England in which he describes a famous British edifice, in words that could apply to England, “bewitching, absurd, elegant, barbarous, exotic, execrable, delicious, deplorable, romantic and ridiculous.” Sounded just like my beloved Boston to me. I found another traveller in the Emerald Isles who described the English character as follows:

The English don’t like change. They have a propensity for letting things alone. Whatever the trouble, they feel in the long run “we’ll jolly well muddle through.” Their talisman is stability. Victoria’s Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, who was gloomy about politics and opposed to innovation, once said that the best thing about the Order of the Garter is: “There’s no damned nonsense about merit in it.”

Then I discovered on arriving on British shores that the greatest institution in England which has never had any illusions or pretense of merit about it, the House of Lords, was about to be summarily trashed, or at least altered beyond recognition. What will England ever come to if democracy prevails. Our cabby said, on passing the House of Commons, that the “House of Con Men” would be in full charge, a consummation he obviously did not devoutly desire. I think it was David Frost who said that London was “the most engaging city I have ever known - endless in kindness, immeasurable in charm, lavish in the rewards it offers any who come here with an open mind and a receptive heart;” if you can avoid the bombs in a neighborhood you just walked through, and the open hostile altercations with words and weapons on the streets near Newington Green where my sabbatical flat was.

I had not expected that much of what I had researched in Brookline, Massachusetts would be of any particular use in rummaging in English Universalist and Unitarian history, but of course I was wrong. In struggling to comprehend the tiny church in Newington Green where I was based, most famously ministered to by Dr. Richard Price, I kept coming upon references to Elhanan Winchester (Junior) a name I immediately recognized from Brookline. Winchester had been a child of Brookline’s First Parish back in the days when his father was a leader in both church and town, head of one branch of a large and influential family. And Universalist historians have long detailed Junior’s religious odyssey through Separatist, Baptist to Universalist, and traced his physical peregrinations back and forth from New England and England, sometimes seeking or fleeing a spouse.

I must move on to my subject, early British Universalism and Unitarianism, and particularly the influence and agency of that Elhanan Winchester, Junior. Much of what is known of his life is from biographies and biographical sketches written mostly in the early and mid last century, the earliest by the Universalist Unitarian minister William Vidler in London in 1797. The most extensive biography was that of Joseph Sweeney, a University of Pennsylvania Doctoral thesis of some thirty years ago. All of Winchester's biographers believed beyond what they knew, and knew less than they thought, like most ministers I guess. It is difficult untangling the story, but I have one minor advantage. Elhanan Winchester, Junior, was born in my town, in my church in Brookline, Massachusetts, whose records are better than most, especially those records assembled by my distinguished predecessor Dr. John Pierce (Brookline 1797-1849).

Elhanan Winchester, Senior, was the great-great grandson of John Winchester who emigrated from England to Boston in 1635, on the same ship as Sir Henry Vane, soon to be fourth Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Elhanan Senior known in later life as Deacon Elhanan Winchester, deacon of the Church of Christ in Brookline, was raised in the early eighteenth century in this somewhat middling to liberal Calvinist congregation of the established church of the Colony, a member of a large family. There were many prominent Winchesters in town and it is said that Elhanan, Senior, became tithingman in the church, before his conversion to an evangelical separatist faith, at the hands of a minister in neighboring Newton, the Rev. Jonathan Hyde. The Winchesters were prominent in many offices in town and church. Elhanan, Senior, moved from Separatist to Baptist, to Shaker - Mother Ann Lee's community - late in life, out in Harvard, Massachusetts. Elhanan, Senior, was one of six young men of the Brookline congregation who, in 1743, in the midst of the Great Awakening under the prompting of their new evangelical convictions, sent a long letter of remonstrance to James Allin, the minister of the Church of Christ in Brookline, the parish church, suggesting that he was not responsive to their understanding of faith, not interested in speaking with them, and perhaps, no proper minister at all. The protest was a detailed list of charges against the minister based on his distance from the enthusiasms, convictions and evangelical practices of the leaders of the Great Awakening which had persuaded their way into these young mens' hearts as the true Gospel of Christ. Allin responded by urging church members to flee them and their disorder of faith, as from the devil himself.

Elhanan Winchester, Junior, was the eldest child of Sarah and Elhanan, born September 30th, 1751. He was essentially self taught, brilliant, inquisitive, and ultimately among the most learned Universalist ministers of his time. When he was 19 a new wave of the revival spirit spread through New England, with house meetings in many places including Brookline, led by often untrained enthusiasts without credentials the Standing Order would recognize. There was no town hall, that function being served by the old meeting house, which was solidly closed to irregular evangelists by its minister, then Joseph Jackson, a moderate, quite learned and thoughtful Calvinist. Elhanan Winchester, Junior, experienced a powerful and personal conversion, which remained with him life long, through many religious changes. He became a Separatist, then a Baptist as his father, and early began to preach. He was married to Alice Rogers of Rowley, Massachusetts in 1769 or 1770, desperately unhappily, though his wife accompanied him to Virginia where he became a very successful Calvinist Baptist preacher. They had four children.¹ Around 1772-3 he became convinced of the truth of the open communion

¹ In all eight children were born to him by his first, second and fourth wives, only one born alive, that one living only 18 months. Much useful family information, including this, is in "Elhanan Winchester, Preacher and Traveller, by John Emory Hoar, Publications of the Brookline Historical Society, Brookline, Massachusetts, Published by the Society, 1903, pp 7-12.

Baptists, closer to the General Baptists of Britain, and was baptised in Canturbury, Connecticut. Ezra Styles, President of Yale College and a friend said he “came forth a loquacious and flaming preacher,” and so he did and always remained. Shortly he organized a successful church in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, and was soon converted once more to the Particular Calvinist Baptists, following the line of theological reasoning of London theologian, Dr. John Gill. If this faith was correct, he judged, then it was both foolish and irreligious to invite sinners to Christ, since most were damned anyway, and the invitation would be to a party to which they weren’t invited and could never attend. Communion would be open only to those clearly among the saved! The Baptists, not wishing to be so purist, judgmental and absolutist about the matter, wouldn’t ordain him an evangelist. His faith was too absolute and consistent, but he went on preaching never the less. Though a Church Council judged his convictions correct the church was not so sure. He left for Bellingham, and from there Grafton, and thence to Hull, Massachusetts for two years. Being close to his ancestral home he dogged the religious footsteps of the moderate Calvinist preacher in the Brookline church mercilessly!

In late 1774 he was invited to be minister to the Particular Baptist Church in a town on the Pec Dec River in South Carolina, where his first wife died.² Continuing for a few lonely months he soon returned to Boston and married again, a young woman from Rehoboth, Sarah Peck in 1776. They returned to his church in South Carolina, where he insisted on inviting Blacks to the faith and church, a practice that was not popular in the slave culture of the American South. He was relentlessly, and Biblically opposed to slavery. His new wife died in 1778, but the next year he married wife three, Sarah Luke of South Carolina. She lived less than a year. This was, of course, the season of the American Revolution and Winchester enthusiastically joined in the cause of political and religious freedom, issuing on behalf of the Charleston Baptist Association a magnificent plea on religious liberty, which may have had some effect on Virginia’s declaration of religious liberty in 1779. In that year Winchester returned home to Boston, preaching briefly in First Baptist Church in the absence of Dr. Stillman, the minister, and Brookline, preaching widely. Issac Backus, the great Baptist evangelist and recorder, wrote (in 1781) to a Mr. Wallin in London that, “A very remarkable work is also begun in Newtown, and Brooklyne, by Winchester’s means, though among his kindred and acquaintances.”³ The Baptist Church in Philadelphia invited him to be its minister in 1780. His ministry there was brief, as he was gradually more and more persuaded of universal salvation, though he fought against that conviction hard and long, and his universalist faith terminated his ministry to First Baptist Church in Philadelphia the following year.

Winchester read Siegvolk and Stonehouse, the most learned and accessible works on universalism at that time, Siegvolk already having been republished in America years before and Stonehouse’ work well known, both widely circulated. Winchester was married a fourth time in 1781 to Mary Morgan, and on his expulsion from the Baptists, held services at the hall of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia until 1784, and then built the new meeting house on Lombard Street. In these years he met John Murray, the British Rellyan Universalist then settled in Gloucester, Massachusetts, but though personally friendly their theologies were substantially different, Winchester having finally departed from the last dregs of his recurrent Calvinism. He oversaw the building of that first Universalist meeting House for his new Society of Universal Baptists in Philadelphia, and attended the first convention of Universalists in Oxford, Massachusetts in 1785, where he summarily ordained Hosea Ballou, destined to be the great spokesman of American Universalism. Benjamin Rush, a universalist and signer of the American Declaration of Independence wrote to his friend Dr. Richard

² Ibid, p 10.

³ As quoted in: “A testimony of respect to the memory of Elhanan Winchester,” London, 1797, pp40-41.

Price at the non-subscribing chapel in Newington Green, of the changes that were occurring in theological conviction among Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Baptists, helped along by Winchester. “Mr. Winchester, an eloquent and popular Baptist preacher...has openly and avowedly preached the doctrine of final restoration,”⁴ he happily recorded. Winchester was popular, well spoken, and still a fiery and persuasive preacher, now of Universalism.

Winchester remained in Philadelphia until, he said, God called him to London, England. Somewhere along the way these years he lost wife four and found his latest and last wife, Mary Knowles (around 1784), the most unhappy alliance of all. He later told British Baptist Minister William Vidler that he had “for several years...a strong impression on his mind that he ought to come [to England], because he had a message to deliver.”⁵ He arrived in Liverpool in September of 1787, and proceeded to London where a British Universalist society had been organized a decade before. Winchester preached occasionally in Baptist churches in Blackfields and Moorfields, but those doors shut quickly in the face of his universalist heresy. There were not many General Baptist churches which might receive him kindly, desperately concerned with the public perception that they were already dangerous radicals as it was without the additional heresy of universalism. And most Baptists were Particular Calvinist Baptists, who were then aggressively organizing and spreading. Joshua Toulmin, later an outstanding Unitarian leader, was minister of a General Baptist Church in Taunton which was receptive to Winchester. Friends provided Winchester a chapel in Southwark on Worship Street; he preached not only there but wherever he could get a hearing. Some of his sermons and brief works, most particularly his “Outcasts Comforted,” already had gone through British editions, so there was a wide effect of his writings and his presence. His London congregation grew so large that they had to move to Parliament Court Chapel on Artillery Lane in Bishopsgate, where he regularly filled the 400 - 500 seats.

Winchester became acquainted with Joseph Priestley and Richard Price in his years in England, preaching at Price’s church in Newington Green. We should pause to properly introduce Dr. Richard Price⁶ whose reputation in England still survives but is relatively unknown in the United States. Price was urged to the ministry by his determined mother and assumed a brief part time ministry in London before his service in Newington Green and at Gravel Pit in Hackney. In Newington Green he served the old Dissenting Presbyterian chapel (soon Unitarian) and was connected to two of the great Dissenting Academies, most particularly Warrington which led to the foundation of Manchester New College at Oxford. Gravel Pit was, of course, Priestley’s church. He was not only a learned essayist on theology, but a definer of the actuarial sciences, and a defender of the freedom of the American Colonies. He corresponded regularly with several leaders of the American cause including both Adams and Franklin, who visited his church in England. Abigail Adams lamented:

? how much I shall regret the loss of the good Dr. Prices Sermons.
They were always a delightful entertainment to me. I revered the
Character and Loved the Man. Though far from being an orator,
His words came from the Heart and reached the Heart. So Humble,

⁴ Letter to Richard Price, July 29, 1787 as quoted in “Elhanan Winchester and the Universal Baptists, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1969, by Joseph Sweeney.

⁵ “A Testimony of Respect to the Memory of Elhanan Winchester, by William Vidler (1797), p 41-42.

⁶ The University of Aberdeen granted him a Doctor of Divinity in response to his many learned papers on matters of morality and theology.

So diffident, so liberal and Benevolent a Character does honor to that religion which he both professes and practices.⁷

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and a host of influential Divines were among Price's correspondents in the tangled days of the Revolutionary war era. Some of Price's parishoners also corresponded with leaders in the new world from that small but immensely influential congregation in Newington Green. So impressive was Price's intellectual work that the Continental Congress asked him to be an advisor to the new American government. The resolution, of 6 October, 1778, was glowing:

That the Honourable Benjamin Franklin, Arthur Lee and John Adams, Esqrs, Or any one of them, be directed forthwith to apply to Dr. Price, and inform Him that it is the Desire of Congress to consider him as a Citizen of the United States, and to receive his Assistance in regulating their Finances. That if he shall think it expedient to remove with his Family to America and Afford such Assistance a generous Provision shall be made for requiting his Services.⁸

The Continental Congress seemed particularly concerned with gaining his expertise in issues of basic finances, and actuarial questions concerning the government's budgeting, and response to the needy and aged. Price had suffered for his support of the American Revolution and was not in good health. His wife had just died and he declined on account of age and frailty of health. Yale granted him an LLD in 1783. He died in 1791.

It seems likely that Elhanan Winchester, Junior, met Priestley after the Birmingham riots had driven him to London, and soon the relative safety of Hackney, one of those precincts historically far enough out from London for safety for society's outcasts and non conformists to the Church of England's faith and practice. Winchester would later welcome him to his new meeting house in Philadelphia when almost all other doors were closed to him. Winchester's was not just a cheerful Gospel and outlook. He was vigorously opposed to the severity of the British Penal Code which could take one's life for stealing a farthing, and strongly condemned slavery as well. John Wesley was apparently a reader of his works, and occasionally noted agreement with Winchester. Even the Baptist president of Rhode Island College (Brown University today) Rev. Jonathan Maxcy paid tribute to non conformists like Winchester in powerful words to a graduating class in 1793:

Will the gates of Paradise be barred against these, because they did not possess the penetrating sagacity of an Edwards, or Hopkins? Or shall these great theological champions engross heaven, and shout hallelujahs from its walls, while a Priestley, a Price, and a Winchester, merely for difference of opinion, though pre-eminent in virtue, must sink into the regions of darkness and pain? I cannot induce myself to repose so small a share of confidence

⁷ Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA), III, 212 et seq, as quoted in D.O.Thomas, Richard Price and America (1723-91), Published by the author (Aberystwyth, 1975) p 27.

⁸ Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789, ed. W.C. Ford (Washington, 1904-37), XII, 984-5, as quoted in Thomas, p 2.

in the mercy of God, as to imagine, he will not pardon all the sincere errors of his creatures.⁹

Maxcy was to struggle with charges of heresy for the largeness of his sympathies, for years ahead.

It is important at this juncture to recognize what was so frightening about the Gospel as understood by the Universalists. Why did so many more orthodox bodies and believers go to such extremes to condemn Universalists, urge the boycott of universalist persons and businesses, to flee from their theology as from the devil? Orthodoxy, particularly in its narrower Calvinist forms, declared that those who did not believe in “an eternity of hell torments” for sinners had no reason to seek virtue and avoid evil. They had no motivation to act justly, honorably, honestly. They could not be trusted in any office or appointment. Since they had no motivation for rectitude they should be excluded from all public trust and public life. Indeed it was but a short step to seeing them as minions of the devil, Satan’s own troops, malignant, dissipate, capable of every form of viciousness and dishonesty. It was not easy to be a professed universalist. The American Universalist movement generally responded with great good humor - how else could they embody a Gospel of Eternal Love and not fall into bitterness? They loved to speak of the Calvinists’ “Glad Tidings of Endless Damnation.” Calvinism was the ultimate blasphemy against God to Universalists, with its God of double pre-destination and eternal vengeance. This was not Jesus’ Gospel, they declared, and it was not theirs!

William Vidler, a native son of Battle and minister of the Battle Baptist Church in Sussex from 1777 on, a “benighted place,” according to George Gilbert, “a place of darkness” according to Vidler, became acquainted with Winchester through his writings, and later in person. Vidler had been a successful Particular Baptist preacher at Battle Baptist since the congregation begged him, with no training or apprenticeship at all, to take up preaching, which he did against bitter opposition and boycott from more orthodox neighbors. Vidler was not unlettered; being well self educated, fluent in Greek and Latin, and much more. He, like Priestley, was sympathetic to the American and French Revolutions, and a mob threatened him as well. A mob one night burned an effigy of Tomas Paine at the stake, then turned to burn something better, stopping at Vidler’s house. They asked him if he was for Paine. “No my lads,” he quickly replied, “be assured I have no liking for PAIN; I am for ease.”¹⁰ They gave this man of such good humor three cheers and departed. But his faith was changing. He found, on reading Winchester, that his “heart, with its feelings of love, and [his] head, with its cold unfeeling creed, were at perpetual variance.”¹¹ Battle Baptist built a new building in 1789, though it took a couple of generations to pay for, and by 1792 Vidler was a Universal Baptist, like Winchester. Vidler described Winchester as of “amiable” character, his “conversation cheerful and instructing,” and a “watchfulness over his tongue such as [he] never witnessed before.”¹² Winchester exchanged pulpits at Christmastime in 1792, and shortly following the Battle Church voted itself into the new faith. Vidler often preached for Winchester at Parliament Court, and ultimately became his successor, an influential ministry that was to last twenty years and carry the congregation, as well as many other General Baptists, into Unitarian connections. Crowds flocked to hear him. All London, they say, talked of his sermons. He became founder and editor of The Universalist’s Miscellany which lasted under different names for nine years. He became associated with Richard Wright minister of the ancient General Baptist congregation at Wisbech, and through Wright Vidler became a Unitarian, creating a contentious controversy at

⁹ As quoted in Sweeney, op cit, p 161.

¹⁰ The History of the Battle Baptist Church (nd), p 39.

¹¹ Ibid, p 42.

¹² “A Testimony of Respect to the Memory of Elhanan Winchester,” by William Vidler (1797), p 38.

Parliament Court, but one Vidler and the congregation, also becoming Unitarian, weathered. They made quite a pair, Vidler a huge rotund man, “wellnigh elephantine,” said one contemporary, and Wright a man of very small stature and trim figure. Richard Wright was of a family all of whose money and status belonged to the Anglican side of the family, of which he was not a proper believing member. Well and self educated he supported himself as a “foot-boy,” a grocer, draper, candle-maker and blacksmith before entering ministry to Baptists in Norwich and Wisbech. Wright and Vidler exchanged pulpits and, to some degree, exchanged convictions as well, both becoming eventually Unitarian evangelists. Vidler preached around Cambridge and northward, through old General Baptist country, moving individuals and congregations toward unitarianism. It is probable that his unitarianism was an obstacle to many, but his “clearness” of mind, “retentiveness of memory, quickness of perception, patience in enquiry and coolness of judgment” stood him in good stead in his new religious affiliation and advocacy.¹³ He also championed the cause of ending cruelty to animals, a natural outcome of his universalist thought. It was Vidler that began the Unitarian Evangelical Society which in 1806 became the “Unitarian Fund for promoting Unitarianism by means of Popular Preaching” with Wright its “perpetual missionary.”¹⁴ beginning the labor that was to result in the organization of British Unitarians and Free Christians. Vidler and Wright became the only official and paid Unitarian evangelists ever to scour the country for the cause. Vidler died in 1816 and was buried in the graveyard of the Unitarian congregation at Old Gravel Pit in Hackney, where Priestly had served. The Parliament Court congregation chose William Johnson Fox as his successor, and in 1824 it moved to become the South Place Chapel in Finsbury, which had a long and interesting Unitarian history, before evolving into the South Place Ethical Society. Wright before his retirement, and death in 1836, “walked from Land’s End to John o’ Groats”¹⁵ from the southwestern tip of England to the northeastern tip of Scotland in his missionary efforts.

Returning to Winchester’s life, he abruptly left England arriving again in Boston on the 12th of July in 1794, saying by letter to his London congregation that his wife’s furious and violent rages were the cause. His London congregation sent his wife to him in Boston, perhaps hoping to frighten him back. It didn’t work in any event. Winchester preached in Brookline and around New England and New York. He wrote back to London:

I have the greatest door open that I ever saw, insomuch that I am surprised at the alteration since I was last here. I have preached in a great many meeting houses of different denominations, and to great numbers of people, as often as eight or nine times a week, with greater acceptance than I ever did¹⁶.

That fall he was moderator of the General Convention of Universalists meeting at Oxford, Massachusetts. Again he preached in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as well. There, of course, he welcomed Joseph Priestley and gave him a pulpit when all others seemed closed. A parishoner of Winchester’s was to record the friendship and welcome:

...the first winter the Doctor came down to Philadelphia to preach....Mr.

Winchester was never absent, and he consistently gave out the hymns when that excellent man, Dr. P. did not read them himself.

On the floor, directly in front of the pulpit, and close to it, was placed a long seat, with backs and arms, and a table before it: on this seat, which was generally occupied by elderly men, members of the Universalist Society, Mr. Winchester would take his place, unless he went into the pulpit

¹³ Ibid, p 51.

¹⁴ Rara Avis; a Memoir of Richard Wright, by John McLachlan, (Sheffield, 1998), p. 11.

¹⁵ Quote from Alexander Gordon, source unknown.

¹⁶ Hoar, p 11.

with the Doctor, it being large enough to hold several: this I need not say was a mark of friendly-heartedness and liberality, and, in fact, gave umbrage, together with his acting as the Doctor's clerk, to some of his own people.¹⁷

Winchester would then preach in the afternoon, with Priestley in attendance. Apparently Priestley was moved to affirm universal restoration there. Winchester moved on to New York, travelled widely up and down the Atlantic coast eventually settling on a farm in Connecticut, with his wife, where he died on the 18th of April 1797.

Winchester's last written work (excluding a sermon in Hartford, Connecticut April 1, 1797) was an answer to Paine's Age of Reason (1794). From the early printed sermons he published several more substantial works. John Emory Hoar lists:

New Book of Poems on Several Occasions, 1773

Hymns, 1776

The Universal Restoration: Exhibited in a Series of Dialogues, London, 1778

Course of Lectures on the Prophecies that remain to be Fulfilled, 4 vols, 1789

An Oration on the Discovery of America, 1792

The Three Woe Trumpets, 1793

Plain Political Catechism for Schools

Progress and Empire of Christ, 1793¹⁸

Winchester was as prolific and persuasive a writer as he was a preacher. He was, however, not in the mainstream of developing Universalism or Unitarianism. He was a forerunner who left the mark of his thought and deeds upon liberal religious people and institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. The story of the origins of British and Scottish Unitarianism really can't be properly told without him and his disciples.

There is implied in the life of Elhanan Winchester Junior a caution to historians on either side of the Atlantic who would write national denominational history without reference to the possible influences of other people in other nations. We see this with Winchester. We see this clearly also in the transatlantic issues of Anti-Slavery, and Women's Rights, and their interplay in our denominational histories.

¹⁷ As quoted from Joseph Priestley's "Memoirs" in Sweeney, p 202.

¹⁸ Hoar, p 12.