David Durell: Brief biography

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David Durell (1728–1775) was Principal of Hertford College, Oxford from 1757 to 1775, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford from 1765 to 1768, and a noted Old Testament scholar of his day.

Origins and schooldays

David Durell, son of Thomas Durell, was born of a prosperous family in Jersey in 1728. He went to Cowbridge Grammar School in the Vale of Glamorgan. At first sight this was an odd choice for a Channel Islander, as the school, though worthy, was small and a long way from his home; but his uncle, Daniel Durell, was the Master there from 1721 to 1763, and, in line with contemporary custom, attracted some pupils from his own native place: there were seven of these in all, at least four of whom (including David and his elder brother Thomas) were either the Master's relations or sons of friends.

Daniel Durell's full correspondence and other papers give vivid cameos of young David among other pupils.

There were plenty of pupils at Cowbridge into the twentieth century whose first language was not English; but the mother tongue was practically always Welsh. Uncle Daniel found himself having to teach English to many pupils before they could proceed to the usual Classical grammar-school curriculum. He complained how difficult it was to prepare "young lads for ye University, who when they come to me, can hardly speak or write English". From 1733 he added to the usual Welsh speakers a small number of his fellow Francophones. But by the same token English tuition with them should have been easier for all concerned: Daniel Durell could draw on his own experience of learning English in his youth and use French in the class if necessary.

In 1741/2 young David left some of his first steps of English in his uncle's letter-books. He was sometimes given Daniel's letters to copy for practice, but had to struggle both with an unfamiliar language and the horrible writing of the originals. The result was sometimes attractively-transcribed gibberish: David's own handwriting was boyishly clear and round.

A year or so later, however, David had improved sufficiently to be allowed to copy some of the Latin epigrams he himself had composed into his uncle's "Golden Book" reserved for his pupils' best work. In the spring of 1743/4, the 14½-year-old David was in the second class. He was the youngest member, so it was an early promotion, a sure sign of an exceptional pupil. At the end of 1744 his uncle Daniel described the 16-year-old as "a good Boy": well, so far, so good.

A prolonged phase of delinquency, however, quickly ensued. In January 1745 David gambled away 18 shillings (about £360 in today's money) of a guinea that he had been given for Christmas among a gang of some of his schoolfellows and "town" ne'er-do-wells. He tried to cover up by claiming that the money had been stolen. A maidservant, under suspicion for the "theft" (which could have brought down draconian punishment on her), told David's uncle the whole story. Daniel was naturally shocked at his nephew's behaviour, especially as the blame seemed to be falling on to a vulnerable inferior, but "hushed it over and never beat him for it". Next came the theft of a sundial from the neighbouring village of Llysworney in June. Gout-ridden Uncle Daniel showed his temper over this and on 21 June David ran away, taking half a guinea (around £210 today) sent to him by his mother, nine shirts (not as extravagant as it seems: linen was difficult to wash in those days), and some letters. The next day he had got as far as Newport in Monmouthshire, about 25 miles east of Cowbridge (no mean feat then); and there, exhausted and penitent, he gave himself up, writing a letter to his uncle asking pardon for his "sad and heinous crimes".

David was rescued, and once back treated leniently, even compassionately; in fact, his uncle continued to spoil him. This did not work: David immediately plotted with older boys (but they could not have been that much older, as David himself was nearly 17) to con the Bishop of Llandaff, no less, into granting the school some extra holidays. A more senior boy wrote complimentary verses to the Bishop which David transcribed in his own beautiful handwriting and passed off as his own. This worked, as the Bishop liked the flattery and admired the precocious erudition. He may well have assumed that, as the verses were purportedly by the Master's nephew, Daniel Durell himself approved of the request. Thus in contrast to his earlier delinquencies, David (with his collaborators) was directly making a fool of his uncle the Master and dragging him in — compromising him as an accessory in conning the Bishop. This could have had damaging consequences for the elder Durell: the Bishop ranked as the equivalent of a secular peer (or even above, given his sacred office), and thus was numbered among the ten

most important persons — in a rigidly hierarchical society — in the whole of South Wales. Furthermore, he was the direct superior of Daniel Durell not only as a schoolmaster, but also as a clergyman (indeed Daniel was Rector of Coy Church).

Daniel Durell's fury can be inferred from the fact David ran away again the next month on Sunday 28 July: this time to be found no further than twelve miles away, in Cardiff, with only 7*d.* (about £12 today) in his pocket. Then, partly through the intervention of another uncle, Henry Durell (the acknowledged head of the family and settled in London as a merchant) who sent two exhortatory letters, Daniel became a reformed character. By the end of August 1745, he was obediently beginning to read Horace in Latin, and there is no evidence of further sensational misconduct. He went up to Oxford in March 1747, eventually (1765) to become the University's Vice-Chancellor.

Iolo Davies in his book on Cowbridge School understandably remarks that this is hardly the schooldays' behaviour one would expect in the future holder of such a portentous office. No one could have seen this exceptional career in 1745, but such aberrations are surprising in any case. In today's categories, David counts as a bright, academically-engaged sixth-former of 16½. Such studious and senior pupils are the last one would expect to commit outrages which culminate in running away twice. This is immature behaviour of a 13-year-old who has not yet settled down; or, regardless of age, of the type who does not take to book-learning and will either come to little good or perhaps follow a non academic, "practical" career: in the Army or the East India Company, or on the High Seas in eighteenth-century terms. But, within eight years of his delinquencies, David was an Oxford don thoroughly immersing himself in Hebrew, having used his Latin and Greek as springboard.

His bad patch could be interpreted as an immature attempt at self-assertion prompted, paradoxically, by the approach of adulthood. David at 16½ was isolated on several levels, which might have occluded whatever passed for "natural" or at least multivalent, development. By his time at school (1741–7) all his fellow pupils were either day-boys living at home or boarding with families in the town, which usually afforded quite enough "freedom". David alone lodged with his widowed uncle and much younger female cousin in the school house. He could well have found this stifling. Uncle Daniel was kindly but given to bursts of bad temper exacerbated by gout; indeed he was neurotic and oversensitive, as his quarrels over the decade reveal. Worse, other members of the family (as Davies impressively remarks), "had case

histories of obsessional depressive psychosis", notably Daniel's father (and David's grandfather), and his brother Thomas (David's own father, who suffered a nervous breakdown in 1733). It is likely with these genes that David was also neurotic and highly-strung, as academic people can be. Thus there were two people of similar volatile temperament rubbing up against each other for years in the same house. Daniel was very probably over-concerned with the academic progress and general welfare of a pupil who was also his lodger and his nephew. Complementarily for David, Daniel embodied the authority of substitute father, schoolmaster, and clergyman all rolled into one: an oppressive concentration of which the most famous example is Thomas and Matthew Arnold at Rugby in the 1830s. There were no home breaks in the holidays, as Jersey was too far away: David was in the school house for the duration.

Additionally, David could well have suffered among his schoolmates from the teacher's (indeed head teacher's) child phenomenon. This is still with us today; but could have more acutely felt in the narrow confines of a school and "town" that were tiny by our standards. The incidents show him as associating closely with some of his schoolfellows, which indicates integration; but the delinquencies indicate that he is straining to show himself as one of the boys to offset being the Master's nephew, rather than simply reaching out to what peer-group society there was. He was equally prepared to associate with "rascals of ye town" who helped fleece him of his Christmas guinea; and he was an alien to boot. To the natives, he must have appeared doubly exotic: not even an English visitor (a type with whom the inhabitants of Cowbridge were tolerably familiar), but a Frenchman, unique in the mid-1740s. It would have been natural for many of his school-fellows to relax into their native Welsh after a hard day's work of translating among three laboriously acquired tongues (English, Latin, and Greek) under Daniel Durell's exacting direction; and David's own Welsh was probably limited or non-existent, as Uncle Daniel was unlikely to have encouraged him to learn it. David was unable *en revanche* to lapse into his own mother-tongue of French with any contemporaries, as in the 1740s he was the sole French speaker left (the other six French speakers, including his brother Thomas, having left by 1741). By the summer of 1745 David was well in sight of seventeen, an age when many bright boys went to university; indeed some went earlier: David's own most famous student at Hertford College, Charles James Fox, arrived there aged fifteen. Daniel Durell, however, had for years cautiously recommended against his pupils going up to Oxford too young, which could be sound advice. David, however, academically gifted and keen to get

away from his cramped confines, could not be expected to see it the same way. He eventually got to Oxford when he was well over eighteen.

From undergraduate to tutor, 1747–57

In March 1747 David Durell entered Pembroke College, Oxford, although the boys of Cowbridge School usually went to Jesus College; indeed Daniel Durell was annoyed if they wished go elsewhere. Daniel, however, had attended Pembroke himself and there was good reason for David to follow him: the college had the Morley Scholarships for Channel Islanders. His senior at Cowbridge, a fellow Jerseyman and distant relation, John Alexander, held such a scholarship from 1740 to 1748, and David succeeded him in 1749, holding it until at least 1753. It probably also helped that the current Master of Pembroke, John Ratcliff, had been a pupil of Daniel Durell during his brief pre-Cowbridge spell as Usher at Abingdon School. Nearly 30 years later they were still corresponding and on generally friendly terms.

David graduated B.A. in 1750 and M.A. in 1753, becoming a Fellow of the new Hertford College that year, and became a B.D. and D.D. in the 1760s. Founded in 1740 out of Hart Hall (an institution which had existed since medieval times), Hertford College predictably enjoyed very little endowment, and its revised statutes of 1747 were in part unworkable.

David quickly gained a high reputation as a tutor, and on 12 November 1757 he was appointed Principal of Hertford.

Principal of Hertford College, 1757–75

Durell became Principal at a young age (29). This might be in part attributed to the generally shorter life-span of the eighteenth century (as Durell's own was sadly to prove), which meant that people had to attain positions earlier today, or not at all — and to the then universal patronage. Even so, as his schoolmaster uncle proudly stressed when writing to congratulate him, "To be a Head of a College is an Honour which very few in the Kingdom have obtained at your years — and which none of our two Islands [Jersey and Guernsey] ever had." Durell's appointment also breached the very recent Founder's Statutes which laid down that the Head of House must be chosen from among the dons of Christ Church. Cogent considerations were probably some mix of the following: either flattering to Durell, or neutral. Hertford was not a great prize; indeed more like the wooden spoon: it was by far the smallest, youngest, and poorest of the colleges. Durell's predecessor, William Sharp, the second Principal, had resigned

after four years and returned to Christ Church because the endowment was so miserable. What was technically a self-demotion proved a better career move: Christ Church was rich, and in 1763 Sharp was appointed Regius Professor of Greek, a Chair he held until his death in 1782. This implies that there was little or no competition for the principalship of Hertford among older and more established dons or former Oxford Fellows now married and with comfortable church livings elsewhere.

Conversely and by the same the token, Hertford would give an able and energetic young man the chance to make his name and build the college up virtually from scratch. Thanks to Durell and one or two colleagues, it already had a good academic reputation. This, and the likelihood of his already having shown administrative and organizational ability, probably weighed in his favour; so might Durell's relative youth: he could have had between thirty and forty years in post to fundraise and develop Hertford academically. A Head of House, in contrast to an ordinary Fellow, did not have to resign on marriage and so often stayed put for life. In the event, Durell never married and only lived another eighteen years. In addition, Durell was a Whig (unusually for Oxford), and Hertford was a Whig college.

Under Durell, the academic reputation of the college was maintained and expanded. Its most famous undergraduate was Charles James Fox, who came up in 1764 aged fifteen. Such a modest college might seem an odd choice for the son of an elite family; but there were advantages on both sides. Recently-founded Hertford was anxious to prove itself and its very smallness could provide intimacy and a level of pastoral and academic care which large grand institutions such as Magdalen and Christ Church, with their numerous aristocratic undergraduates, did not bother to do. At Hertford, young Fox was if anything an over-studious youth, very different from the debauchee he was to become as an adult politician. In later life such devoted and wealthy alumni might furnish Hertford with much-needed endowments and more generally exert their considerable influence in the college's favour. At the time, such wealthy undergraduates could pay their own way; with poorer ones, it could be the other way round: they would need scholarships like the Morley at Pembroke which Hertford could not provide. Hence such recruitment policy was prudent on Durell's part.

A few fresh endowments did come to the college. More generally, Durell bypassed the Founder's more obstructive statutes for the college's good. One such bypass, however, might seem more in his own than in the college's interest, as he held concurrently with his

principalship a Vicarage in Sussex and (from 13 January 1767) a canonry in Canterbury Cathedral. The Founder of Hertford had prohibited its Principal from such pluralism so that he could devote himself to the college. The income, however, of the Principal was inadequate without such supplements — hence Sharp's complaint and resignation — and this would have occasioned money worries — a more insidious and gnawing distraction from the job. Such pluralism among college heads and indeed dons in general was in any case normal until the dawn of the twentieth century.

It was generally held after his death that Durell was the best person who could have firmly established the struggling new college if he had had another twenty years or so. This concept of the lost leader who dies, if not romantically young, at least prematurely, is an attractive one, particularly as under his successor Hodgson the college gradually declined and collapsed altogether at *his* death in 1805, to be refounded in its present form in the 1870s (an age of far greater wealth and, therefore, endowments).

Whether Durell would have averted this fate had he lasted until 1805 is unprovable; but, if from 1775 there was a thirty-year decline from the peak reached by Durell, it was a very modest peak to start with. His reputation for financial astuteness may have been deserved, but he had only modest sums to manipulate. Both points are illustrated by his lending money to help build Oxford Covered Market (on the committee for the erection of which he was one of the university representatives) in the 1770s. Generously he arranged that the £20 annual interest be divided, half going to the Principal of Hertford and the other half to be divided between the two Senior Fellows in the perennial effort to provide them all with decent incomes. This sum in present-day values would amount to c.£4,000 a year for the Principal and £2,000 apiece for the two Fellows: worth having, but far from transformative. Durell, despite his early death, had after all eighteen years as Principal: if he had not raised large funds in that time, why should he have done so if he had had another eighteen years? He may have handled what money there was shrewdly, but there was not enough money to handle.

Vice-Chancellor, 1765–8

On Tuesday 8 October 1675 Durell was invested as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford, also at an age (37) considered markedly young for such an office even then. This was not because the young Principal of Hertford was considered, after eight years in post, to have proved himself an outstanding administrator, but via the usual eighteenth-century practice of

patronage and *quid pro quo*. It was a belated reciprocation from the Chancellor of the University, George Lee, 3rd Earl of Lichfield, for the support of the Whig colleges for his own election in 1762. Lichfield nominated, under pressure, Durell because he was the *least* influential of the Whig heads; in other words *because* of the junior status of himself and his college, not *despite* it. The Whig Chancellor wanted to break ground by appointing a Whig Vice-Chancellor and so encourage the party within the University, but not one powerful enough to ruffle feathers within predominantly Tory Oxford, and after Durell's three years, the experiment of a Whig was dropped. Nevertheless he could have been dropped after one year, but was annually reappointed twice. He certainly seems to have been competent as Vice-Chancellor; it was probably impossible to have been anything more than that because of the way that the University envisaged the role. He was certainly better than his immediate predecessor, Joseph Browne, Provost of The Queen's College, who held the dignity for five years, despite being "old and infirm", because he was a Tory.

Durell's tenure is memorable for the expulsion of six students from St Edmund Hall for holding unauthorized prayer meetings, a case he is credited with handling resolutely. He certainly found himself in the midst of a national controversy expressed in a pamphlet war: one side protested at the injustice: that the trouble with contemporary Oxford was that it had too little religion for a purportedly ecclesiastical institution, but these unfortunates were expelled for having too much. They were "Methodists", or labelled as such; but Methodists at least claimed to be loyal to the Church of England. If they had been Dissenters, they would not have been at Anglican Oxford in the first place. Durell was *ex officio* the leader of the opposed grouping who doubted the sextet's Anglican orthodoxy. He was acting in a twofold capacity: firstly as Visitor *ex officio* of the University Halls he expelled the undergraduates from St Edmund Hall; and secondly under the special powers of *imperium marum (blanket powers/prerogative)* he also expelled them from the University. He need not, therefore, have taken such a hard line, but he suspected the undergraduates of being tainted with Calvinism, which he was firmly against. As his eminent supporter, the High Churchman Dr Samuel Johnson no less, retorted when it was put to him that the expelled undergraduates were worthy and useful people, "A cow is a useful animal in a field, but we turn her out of a garden."

The Scholar

Durell was also a practitioner of the core purpose of a university: he was an industrious scholar — of the Old Testament. In the 1760s and 1770s he variously and extensively commented on,

translated, and edited parts of the Scriptures which treated of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and the Books of Job, Proverbs, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes, and the Canticles. But his edition of the prophecies of Jacob and Moses was, after his death, "severely handled by the critics". He was also an ardent advocate of a new translation of the Bible to improve on the Authorized Version.

It is sometimes mistakenly written that Durell was appointed Regius Professor of Greek at the same time as Vice-Chancellor. This was recorded by Gorton, for example, in 1835, when Durell was still — just — in living memory, and repeated by Iolo Davies in 1967. But this must be a simple confusion with his predecessor at Hertford, William Sharp, who held that Chair from 1763 until his death in 1782, leaving no interval for Durell, who died in 1775. In any case, even in the patronage-ridden eighteenth century, it would have been perverse to have appointed a Hebrew scholar to this prestigious Greek chair when there were so many undeviating Classicists to choose from.

Conclusion

Durell was patently an able man. His early death robbed him of the chance to realize his full potential as a scholar, a college head, and general university *eminence grise*. His unequivocal achievement was in his twenties, as a tutor.

References

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Alumni Oxonienses, entry for David Durell

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