

A Conversation with Richard S. Dunn

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Friday the Thirteenth is usually thought of as the unluckiest of days. The one in December, 1996 started out that way as I drove from State College to Philadelphia in an unending rainstorm to interview Richard Dunn. But I was rewarded with a wonderful two-hour conversation at the headquarters of the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, which Richard founded in 1978. Although the ugly, square building and windowless offices constitute perhaps the least attractive physical setting for a nomadic Center that, at least to my knowledge, has been previously housed in two old Victorians and deep in the bowels of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the personal atmosphere could not be warmer. As always, several of the fellows were working away and occasionally chatting. The Center has always struck me as the most egalitarian and informal, as well as productive, of any academic environment I have been privileged to work in. The Director's Office, in which Richard and I spoke, is a small square cubicle like all the others, its most notable features being large maps of Montserrat and Barbados on the wall. I began by asking Richard about how he became interested in early American history.

RSD: I was born and raised in Minneapolis. My father was a professor of English at the University of Minnesota. I knew as an adolescent if not earlier that I wanted to be a professor and in an area close to his in interest. My father inspired me with a love of Shakespeare and the metaphysical poets, and when I went to Harvard, I took an equal number of courses in English and History focusing on seventeenth-century England. I really liked history better than literature but the way things were taught in the late 1940s was pretty distressing for the historian. We read nothing but textbooks. We never read any documents. Until my senior thesis, I had no clue about what historians did.

WP: You must have studied with Perry Miller or Samuel Eliot Morison?

RSD: Actually, I did no work whatsoever in American history or literature. I had no thought of ever becoming an early American historian, and I certainly never would have studied with Samuel Eliot Morison who was pilloried in the *Harvard Crimson* because he ordered students out of his classroom if they didn't wear a coat and tie. I always wore a coat and tie but I was damned if I would go to a class where it was required.

WP: It's funny that he's wearing an old seaman's slicker in the statue of him they put up on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston.

RSD: The *Crimson* published a photo of him when he was an admiral in the navy with his collar unbuttoned, too. But as for my work, I wrote my senior

thesis on Archbishop Laud because I wanted to study the beginnings of the Puritan Revolution. When I went to graduate school at Princeton I wanted to continue in that field. The rule was that all graduate students doing British or European history had to take one American history course and they tended to take [Wesley] Frank Craven's course as that was the beginning, the most useful, especially if you were studying early modern Britain. I liked the man tremendously. I wrote a seminar paper for him on how the trustees of Georgia managed to use their positions in the House of Commons to get a lot of money to keep the colony going for the first twenty years and Craven got it published in the *William and Mary Quarterly*. That made me like him even more. I went on to write my doctoral dissertation with him on another Anglo-American subject, the Winthrop family. I've always kept up an interest in trans-Atlantic history, and in my approach to early American history I've always stressed the importance of the English background. I revised my Winthrop dissertation and published it as *Puritans and Yankees* in 1962. I was enormously influenced by Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* when I wrote about the Winthrops, but now I wish that I'd been influenced by the new social history. Unfortunately for me, the new social history hadn't been invented yet in 1962.

WP: Here you are, forty years later, back with the Winthrops, although this time just the elder John, publishing Winthrop's *Journal*.

RSD: This project has been in the works for thirty years. Shortly after my *Puritans and Yankees* book came out in 1962, Bernard Bailyn invited me to do a new edition of Winthrop's *Journal* for the John Harvard Library, of which he was the editor. The journal had not been printed since 1908. I thought this would be a rather quick thing so I agreed. But that project took thirty years to complete because I kept changing my mind about how to do it.

WP: I don't understand. You simply had to publish the journal, no?

RSD: Well, no. There had been three previous editions, 1790, 1825, and 1908. All three had been modernized according to the sense of the time. And it was difficult to produce a more literal edition because the journal was written in three volumes and the second one burned up in 1825, along with many other things, when James Savage, the second editor, had a fire in his library. So we have to rely on Savage's modernized transcription for half the journal, the lost volume being twice as big as the two surviving ones. But Laetitia Yaendle, the curator of manuscripts at the Folger Library, and I decided, after much experimentation, that we wanted to reproduce as much of the original as remained. So we have a volume that has the original for parts one and three and Savage's edition for part two. Harvard Press didn't like that much, but accepted our plan when I agreed to do a modernized and abridged student version for them.

WP: You mentioned studying with Frank Craven. Could you tell us a little about him?

RSD: Frank Craven is not a household name, even among early American historians, partly because he published mostly on the seventeenth-century South before people really had a handle on how to interpret the early Chesapeake or Carolinas. But he was a fine historian and with his training from Wallace Notestein at Cornell, he had an interest in Atlantic history. Frank was a genial North Carolinian, a very attractive and engaging sort of person. His students were few in number but they were remarkable in their diversity. The best known is Gary Nash but there were also John Shy, the demographic historian Bob Wells, and Kenneth Lockridge and several others. And Frank would let us all write about whatever we wanted.

In retrospect, I was very fortunate in switching from British history to early American history, because seventeenth-century English history has taken a terrible licking over the last thirty years. English historians have become obsessed with the idea that there wasn't a revolution in the 1640s and 1650s. They've spent a lot of time arguing about how accidental the Civil War was and how inconsequential the radical new ideas were. I suppose there was a need to revise the rather simplistic notion, mostly presented by American historians of England, who wanted to find a relevant heritage in people like the Levellers, John Milton, and the radical tradition of the 1640s. But if I'd gone into English history, I would have been fighting a losing battle in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, whereas by accident I found myself in the most exciting field of American history, early American, which became the pilot field for tremendous change.

WP: Why do you think that was so?

RSD: When I began work in the 1950s, early American history was very lopsided. People were mainly just interested in political history and intellectual cum religious history. The greatest figure in the field, Perry Miller, was not interested in religion as such. Personally he was an agnostic who was only interested in the Puritans from what he considered a scientific viewpoint, as a laboratory experiment, to see how people functioned. But thanks to Miller, Morison, Edmund Morgan, and some others, New England history was totally dominant. Until you got close to the revolutionary era, no one had much interesting to say about the South or the Middle Colonies. So the field was very lopsided in two ways, focused on political and intellectual history and on New England.

At the same time there were young people of major talent in the field. Bernard Bailyn became the prime teacher at Harvard around 1960, succeeding Morison. Morgan produced first-rate people at Yale, and a little later, Jack Greene at Johns Hopkins and people like Gary Nash and John Murrin also have drawn excellent students. And when attention turned to the new social history, the logical place to start was at the beginning, to ask what it was like to live in early America, what relations with the Indians and the African slaves

were, and so forth. You get a number of very formative questions.

WP: You mentioned to me once that you knew Gary Nash at Princeton.

RSD: He was an undergraduate, a senior, my only year of full-time teaching there in 1954. I was an instructor in the history department, and handled precepts [small discussion sections] in Frank Craven's colonial America class. Gary Nash was in one of those precepts. He was in the Naval ROTC and a very straight-shooting lad at this point. He always wore his uniform since he had just come from drill to my class. He was always very natty whereas I was on the scruffy side, and he was the best student in my precept so I gave him an A. He didn't have a stellar undergraduate record, and I learned much later that he wrote his senior thesis on the Anglo-German naval pact of 1935. He says it was an unremarkable piece of work. He then went into the navy, came back, and started working in graduate admissions at Princeton. Next he was a part-time graduate student. Frank Craven was very dubious but he let him enroll and the rest is history.

WP: So after Princeton you came to Penn?

RSD: Actually, after getting my Ph.D. in 1955 I went off to Michigan for two years. I was hired as an English historian, for I was keeping up this notion that although I had been detoured into American colonial history for my degree I was really an English historian. I was teaching two courses in Tudor-Stuart England at Michigan, when Roy Nichols happened to be out in Ann Arbor, and called me in and asked if I would have any interest in coming to the University of Pennsylvania. It startled me as I didn't know anything about Penn. He told me they were looking to strengthen their program in early American history. This, I think, was because Penn was shell-shocked when Yale decided to publish the papers of Benjamin Franklin, following in the footsteps of Princeton doing Jefferson's papers and the Massachusetts Historical Society and Harvard doing the Adamses. Yale didn't have any Founding Fathers of sufficient stature and when they saw there was nothing going on here in Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society, which held most of Franklin's manuscripts, was perfectly willing to have them do this edition. It knocked the socks off the Penn historians because Franklin had founded the University of Pennsylvania and their man had been stolen from them. I was called in, certainly not to take Franklin back, but to help make sure disasters like this didn't happen again. And I agreed I would come to Penn if I could do Tudor-Stuart history. I continued to teach it through the 1960s, probably longer than I should have.

WP: So this explains your book on *The Age of Religious Wars*.

RSD: I wrote this book at the invitation of Felix Gilbert. He was a wonderful person and a very distinguished historian who taught at Bryn Mawr before moving on to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. He invited me when he was organizing the Norton series on European history which had six

volumes starting with the Renaissance. Felix asked me to do the second volume. I was so flattered I said yes, although I probably should have said no. After I wrote the book, I concluded that I made a mistake in stopping at 1689, so for the second edition I went to 1715 and added a chapter on all those damned wars — Peter the Great, Louis XIV, and so on.

WP: Now you do a different sort of history.

RSD: I've changed from a political historian to a social historian along with a lot of other people. Looking back, I was greatly affected by the black protest movement of the 1960s. One of the books that inspired me the most was Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*. That book opened up a whole new way of looking at race relations for me. No one had previously written about how whites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries thought about blacks. Of course the book now seems dated since it doesn't really deal with blacks, only with the image of them, so there was no agency for black people. Of course it was written out of white liberal guilt, which I shared. But it gave me a framework. A lot of people have criticized Jordan for going to extremes about color consciousness but I don't think he's too extreme; it's very much there.

Jordan's book, which came out in 1968, certainly influenced the way I wrote *Sugar and Slaves*. That was a book with a strange pedigree. Having written on the Winthrop family, I concluded that the end of that story was more interesting than the beginning. What was going on with the third generation of Winthrops and their adjustment to empire at the end of the seventeenth century was interesting to me, so I decided to write a book on the Glorious Revolution in America, focusing on the revolutions in Massachusetts, New York, and Maryland. Of course this was before David Lovejoy had written his book on the subject. I went to England in 1961-62 with the idea of collecting archival materials for this book which I never wrote, although I recently used them for a chapter in the forthcoming *Oxford History of the British Empire*. But the crucial decision I made right in the beginning was that I would also include the sugar islands. I thought there was something peculiar about the way in which early American historians ignored the West Indies, because back in the seventeenth century the sugar islands were considered the most important colonies by the people in England, for they brought in much more wealth than the North American colonies. I was probably influenced by Frank Craven here, because he had written on early Bermuda. I thought I should find out why there didn't seem to be a real revolution in 1689 in Barbados or Jamaica, so I set to work compiling information on the island as well as the mainland colonies. I collected a great deal of material, some on microfilm, and came home and started looking through it. Then I discovered that around 1680 the governor of Barbados had taken a magnificent census of his island, and I knew right away it was a much better census than for any mainland colony. It listed all of the property holders, the amount of land, the number

of slaves, which I could correlate with who held offices, militia posts, and so on. I could also locate each plantation since the census was done by parish and there is this wonderful map — a copy is here on the office wall — which has some six hundred plantations listed by the name of the owner. So I could find out where the biggest planters were located. I wrote what I think is probably my best article about the Barbados census of 1680; it appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1969. That got me thinking that what we really needed was a social history of the West Indies. I was greatly influenced by the “four horsemen” — Greven, Lockridge, Demos, and Zuckerman — whose books appeared in 1970, introducing a new approach to social history. I came to my subject very much as a New England historian, just as Morgan did when he wrote about Virginia a few years later in *American Slavery, American Freedom*. I was very censorious of these West Indians, getting drunk all the time and brutalizing their slaves. It was a very moralizing book.

WP: I think that is one reason why at the conference in your honor most people declared it their favorite of your books. The times we live in, where people will do anything to anybody to make money, are very similar. But then there is also the depth of research — in census and government records.

RSD: *Sugar and Slaves* is the best book I’ve written yet but if I live a little longer I hope to write a better one. I have been working on it fitfully for the last twenty years, and it’s about half written now. It compares a slave plantation in Virginia with one in Jamaica, and ought to open up some very interesting issues as to why slavery could be so very different in the Antebellum South and in the Caribbean, although instituted in both places by Englishmen.

WP: After New England and the West Indies, you finally turned to William Penn. How did this happen?

RSD: I realized as I was teaching at Penn that I didn’t know much about Pennsylvania history although all my early graduate students worked on Pennsylvania topics. One of the first, Joe Illick, wrote his dissertation on Penn and my wife Mary also wrote a book on Penn. I went along quite happily studying New England and the West Indies, then I chaired my department for five years in the mid-1970s. In 1977, when I stepped down, I wanted to try something new. This was when we created the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies. I was spurred on by Vartan Gregorian who was the provost at Penn then. He thought that the Mellon Foundation might help us if we had an attractive proposal, so I drew one up that tried to fit in with grants that Mellon had recently given to the Library Company, the Historical Society, and the American Philosophical Society. I conceived of a center that would bring scholars here to use these great archives. After receiving a very generous grant from Mellon and getting the Center going in 1978 I realized we’d better have a research component to it.

The obvious thing to do would be to produce an edition of the *Papers of*

William Penn, and two things facilitated this. One, I was involved in a microfilm edition of Penn's papers in the early 70s. When it had been completed it brought together over three thousand documents which were photocopied and transcribed. So a lot of the spadework had already been done. We had access to the research papers of Albert Cook Myers, who had set out to do an edition but had never produced much. Mary and I supposed that we could produce an edition of four volumes in three years, which was absurd. But actually we did produce four volumes in nine years which is a pretty quick rate of production.

WP: And you actually finished the project, an honor I think you share only with the Hamilton Papers, and Alexander helped by being shot in a duel at the age of forty-seven.

RSD: Well, they produced many more volumes than we did. But we have a lot of footnotes, whereas the Hamilton Papers are pretty thin. We published about a third of the three thousand surviving Penn documents, trying to choose the most interesting ones. We had a wonderful team of associate editors. Richard Ryerson is now editor-in-chief of the Adams Papers, Jean Soderlund is a fine historian at Lehigh University, Craig Horle is now running the biographical dictionary of Pennsylvania legislators, Joy Wiltenburg teaches at Rowan College, and Marianne Wokeck teaches at Indiana University at Indianapolis. We had a very good group and they worked well together. Without them we couldn't have done it. And editing is a very useful skill for the research scholar to acquire. Actually, between the *Penn Papers* and *Winthrop Journal*, I've done more editing than I've cared for. It's more fun to write interpretive books.

WP: I'm sure our readers would like to know how you and Mary met, and something about your work together.

RSD: Being married to Mary is the greatest blessing of my life. It's very special being married to a fellow early American historian. We see each other very much as partners, although Mary has pursued a quite different career from mine. She became a dean at Bryn Mawr after twenty years as a member of the history department and then served for ten years as the President of Smith College. She is now running the Schlesinger Library of Women's History at Radcliffe. She's an outstanding administrator, but she's always been a very active scholar, too. We have developed, in a way, along parallel lines. Mary gradually acquired an interest in the history of women, which was not a serious subject in the 1950s. Her dissertation director Caroline Robbins (who had made it in a male world and expected other women to do so too), had not the faintest interest in women's history. Mary started as I did in political and intellectual history, and by the 1970s she was extremely involved, as I was, in social history. And now she studies women, while I study slaves. Draw your own conclusions about that!

As for how we met, in my first year at Penn Mary was in England doing doctoral research for her Bryn Mawr degree. We met the next year in the fall of 1958 and we got married on September 3, 1960. I certainly remember the first time we met, at a dinner party given by Felix and Mary Gilbert. Mary Gilbert had been Mary Maples' closest friend in Bryn Mawr graduate school and she was in my graduate course at Penn the first year I taught there. So the Gilberts considered themselves to be matchmakers.

WP: You worked with Mary for several years on the *Penn Papers*. Not all husbands and wives could be around each other so much.

RSD: Actually, we weren't working day in and day out together. The first year I got the Center going, I spent much of my time planning the *Penn Papers* edition, while Mary was dean at Bryn Mawr, which was more than a full-time job. Then she got a year's leave, so she worked full-time at the papers in 1979 and 1980, when we really got going on the *Penn Papers*. Mary was down at the Historical Society daily. She whipped our first editors, Richard Ryerson, Jean Soderlund, and Scott Wilds into shape, or they whipped her. She's a very efficient person and started us off at a brisk pace. Volume One is definitely Mary's. I taught half-time at Penn all through the nine years of this project, and Mary became so absorbed at Bryn Mawr and Smith that she could only put in a month or so in the summer. I was in the office much more often, but the associate editors did most of the work.

WP: I'm sure you were teaching more than half time with all the graduate students you produced and directing the Center, making sure you had some reasonably intelligent comments on each paper if no one else had anything to say. Can you describe your approach to teaching either undergraduates or graduate students?

RSD: First of all, I've never considered myself a particularly charismatic lecturer. I can lecture to a big class if I have to, but I prefer a smallish class so that I can involve all the students in discussion of the reading. I prefer to have students do as much of the active work as possible. The kind of teaching I have always liked best was, first, working with graduate students, especially with people on dissertation projects, and, second, working with advanced undergraduates who were doing senior theses. I really came to love that because there you are dealing with amateur historians, almost all of whom will not go on to graduate school, but they're full of beans, they're interested in the subject, they're filled with contagious enthusiasm. At the same time they're doing lots of other things, taking three or four courses, and they can't possibly spend all their time on it like graduate students. They have to write fast and cut to the heart of the subject. One of the things I am proudest of was that I was able to persuade Randall Miller when he was editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* to publish five of the essays as a special issue of the magazine.

WP: That was amazing, because no one would have known if you hadn't said they were senior theses.

RSD: They were actually subject to blind reviewing. I think Van Beck Hall reviewed one of them supposing this was some young assistant professor.

WP: What do you do to get students to turn out this quality of work. Do you just let them do what they want?

RSD: A little guidance helps. We produce a lot of senior theses at Penn as at other places, so it is important to think up interesting topics. Mark Lloyd, the University Archivist, has gotten into this with great vigor and encourages students to do projects based on manuscript collections at the Archives: studies of a student protest movement, the construction of the basketball arena, or the history of a sports team. And some of my students did analyses of nineteenth-century diaries or collections of personal papers which are in the Archives.

WP: Do you take the same approach with graduate students?

RSD: There's a tradition I don't approve of, which is when the students tend to ape the master, to write an elaboration of the master's work. I think graduate students should definitely choose their own topics. What is most noticeable as you look over the list of the people I have supervised is the gradual change from political history to social history and also a widening out. At the beginning almost everyone was working on Pennsylvania. My most recent Ph.D.s in December, 1996 are highly variegated. Ann Little worked on seventeenth-century New Haven, Liam Riordan wrote on three towns in the Delaware Valley, and Rosanne Adderley wrote on Africans who were rescued from slave ships and sent to either Trinidad or the Bahamas. All three worked out these topics for themselves, with only minimal coaching by me.

Writing a doctoral dissertation is a difficult and often lonely occupation. I think it is very important for dissertation writers to keep in close touch with graduate students going through the same challenge, so as to support one another.

WP: This is where the Philadelphia Center is so wonderful. Graduate students didn't used to give many papers. Now they do. They can think of themselves as real historians, as part of a community.

RSD: This is one of the reasons people travel for some distance to get to our seminar, which is the biggest compliment that is paid to the Center. Everyone is welcome, especially graduate students from other institutions.

WP: I know one person who is very welcome is Robert McNeil, who through the Barra Foundation has contributed so generously to the Center. I know he is very interested in early American history. How did he get involved?

RSD: I first got to know Bob because of his sponsorship of the history of Philadelphia that came out at the tercentennial. The Barra Foundation had long been generous in supporting the publication of books on early America,

especially on art, because Bob is especially interested in American material culture from about 1775 to 1825. One of the things that solidified my admiration for the Barra Foundation was that when Mary and I were raising money for the *Penn Papers* — it cost a million dollars for the five volumes — we had great success in getting grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, but they always had to be matched. After having received an outright grant from the NEH we couldn't get the rest of the grant until we raised a matching amount of money. Our first challenge was to raise \$45,000, which struck me as a great deal. But the Barra Foundation gave \$15,000 toward this goal, which turned out to be their formula. They gave us a third for every NEH matching grant, which enabled us to go to other people and say "This is what the Barra Foundation has given, what can you give?"

But the really remarkable thing is that Bob McNeil has chosen to support an organization not started by him. Most generous benefactors want to create something new, like the DuPonts with their library and garden, but Bob sees what we have been doing for twenty years, and gives us money to keep the Philadelphia Center going.

WP: A lot of people talk about how good things were thirty or forty years ago — that there was more collegiality and not so much pressure to publish.

RSD: No, the absolute reverse is true. The historical profession is in a far stronger position now than it ever has been. Of course, there are terrible, perhaps insoluble, problems. A lot of people have to teach at two or three different places in order to make enough money to live on, and they have no benefits and no security. Also, if you do acquire a good job, getting tenure is far more difficult now. But almost everything about the way history is taught and written is a big improvement. More interesting questions are being asked and there's tremendous young talent in the field. I am impressed by the enormously talented young people who join us as fellows at the Philadelphia Center, and the people who don't get fellowships but come and join us are terrific, too. People say there's nothing left to do; that's not true. There's a whole new field, cultural history. We also need much more work on Native Americans and gender history. And then it will be time for interesting reappraisals of some of the old standbys such as the Great Awakening, the American Revolution, and the fight over the Constitution. We'll see all these events in a different light.

WP: It seems we're doing more social history, which is more egalitarian, and reflects what is happening in the profession and especially at the Philadelphia Center where young people don't mind speaking up. But in American society it seems we're going in the opposite direction. This energy, this desire for more equality, this effort to give voice to the poor and unfortunate seems to conflict with the rising tide of conservatism in our society.

RSD: I agree. I happen to be very consistent in my political views. I've always

been on the left. I grew up in a household that was very enthusiastic about FDR and the New Deal, I still feel that the welfare state has been enormously beneficial, and that it is vitally important for the federal government to step in actively to help those who need it. I was energized by the civil rights movement. I still feel that race relations are in jeopardy in this country. I've been pretty unhappy with most of the political developments in the last twenty-five years, voting many more times on the losing side than the winning side. I don't like the drift toward conservatism and toward hostility to government. I really tremble for the future of this society in which so many people have no hope of a fair shake. Maybe that's why I take refuge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.