"We Can Do It.": Chicago Oriental Studies before the Oriental Institute

Peter T. Daniels

It is July 1, 1895. This is the first cornerstone-laying ceremony at the University of Chicago. The other buildings, some of them in use for almost three years, were merely built; but this one is special. This is Haskell Oriental Museum. The principal speaker is the Reverend John Henry Barrows, the man who suggested the inscriptions for the cornerstone. Next to the lectern sits President William Rainey Harper, his mortarboard perched at a peculiar angle the way he wore all his hats. He had the knack of falling asleep for exactly as long as he wanted and waking up without seeming to miss anything. While he claimed that he never did that when he was on a podium waiting for someone else to finish speaking, our photograph certainly suggests otherwise in this case. The speech he may have missed was essentially the same as the letter in which Dr. Barrows discussed his choices, with some oratory added. The cornerstone reads "Light from the East" ("Lux ex Oriente" in Latin), "He was the true light which coming into the world enlighteneth every man" (in Greek), and "The entrance of thy words giveth light" (in Hebrew). The letter explains:*

> My Dear Dr. Harper:
>
> I enclose suggestions—as requested, for inscriptions on the cornerstone of the *Haskell Oriental Museum.*
>
> The first, in the language of universal scholarship—tells the story of Religion. It has come from the *East,* all the great religions have. It also describes the *Oriental* character of the studies in the Haskell Oriental Museum.

*The photographs and original documents used in this article appear courtesy of the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Libraries. I especially want to thank Mr. Albert M. Tannler, the Archivist, for guiding me through his domain. The principal printed sources are *William Rainey Harper* by Thomas W. Goodspeed and the serial publications of the University including the *Quarterly Calendar* and the *Record.*

The Founder and the president at the University's Decennial Celebration, 1902.

The second—in the language that will be largely studied in this building, tells the truth about Christ which is really the basis of the *Christian* science of Comparative Religion.

The third—in the language of the greatest of races—a language which, with its cognate languages—will be unceasingly linked with studies in the Museum—tells a universal truth—in regard to *all divine revelations.*

All the inscriptions are about Light. The East is the realm of Light. Christ is Light. Divine words give Light.

This is all the light I can throw on this question.

Faithfully yours,
John Henry Barrows

Ours is a *Christian* University—and it is appropriate to place on *this* foundation-stone—the three languages used in the inscription on the Cross of Him who is *our* Foundation-stone.

The Rev. John Henry Barrows speaking at the cornerstone ceremony of the world's first building devoted exclusively to Oriental studies

The Christianity of the University was not a matter of denomination, though in the early days newspapers frequently called it the Baptist university; rather it was Christian in that Christianity stands for freedom and brotherhood of all. This attitude, unusual for the time, reflects the character of William Rainey Harper.

WRH was born into a devout New Concord, Ohio, family on July 24, 1856. Will was a fairly normal boy, though he preferred reading books to playing with his friends. Able to read at age three, he was admitted to the Muskingum College preparatory school at eight and became a freshman in the college proper two years later. He was about ten years younger than his six classmates. Three of them were preparing for the ministry and wanted to study Hebrew. The whole class liked the idea and they took up the language. At graduation it was customary to have orations in English, Latin, and Greek, by the star pupils; but the class of 1870 had studied Hebrew as well, and were doomed to giving one in that tongue too. WRH was chosen by lot to do it, and that happy accident seems to have pointed him in the direction of his career. What would those Ohioans have thought if they had realized they were in effect attending the thirteen-year-old's *bar mitzvah?*

For the next three years WRH clerked in his father's store, continued to study Hebrew, fell in love with the daughter of the college president, gave organ lessons, and conducted the village band. In the year 1872/73 he was asked to teach Hebrew at his alma mater, and began to develop the "inductive method" that later brought him fame. It became obvious that WRH should continue his studies. His family could not afford to send him to Europe, so he went to Yale College, which was then just beginning to achieve its present eminence. There he studied under William Dwight Whitney, America's first great linguist, and in 1875 was awarded the degree of Ph.D. for his dissertation, "A Comparative Study of the Prepositions in Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Gothic."

Hebrew teachers were not in great demand in those days, so WRH secured the principalship of Masonic College in Macon, Tennessee. He married his childhood sweetheart and moved south. Instructing in math and Latin at least, there he discovered that he was a great

teacher. After one year at Macon a friend from Yale lured him to the preparatory department of Denison University, back in Granville, Ohio. He still did not get to teach Hebrew, but was so successful at Latin and Greek that he was made principal of the school. While living in Granville Harper felt a religious calling and became committed to a Christianity that thenceforth guided his studies and aims.

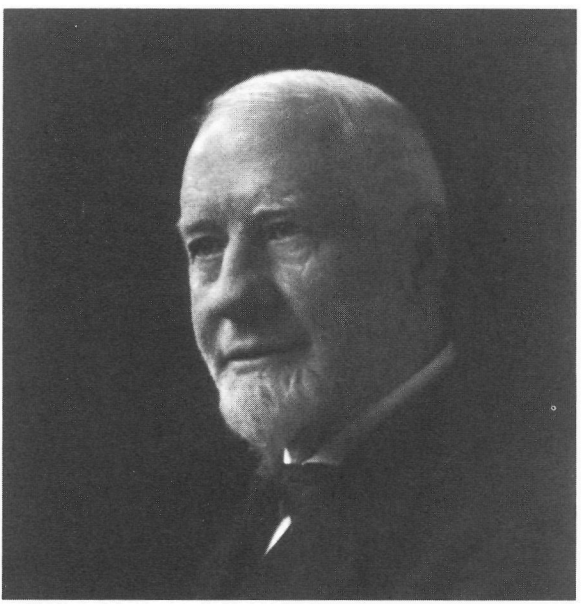
Harper's big break came after two and a half years at Denison. Though loath to let him go, the president of

Mrs. Caroline Haskell

that institution recommended him to the Baptist Union Theological Seminary in Morgan Park, Illinois, just outside Chicago. Thomas Wakefield Goodspeed was the Secretary, and John D. Rockefeller was its principal patron. The Seminary had been looking for an instructor in Hebrew, and WRH took that position. This involved a decrease in pay, but, as Goodspeed writes, it was what WRH had always wanted—"the teaching of Hebrew to men instead of Latin and Greek to boys." The Seminary was looking for an instructor. It did not expect to get a man who in his first year (1879/80) in addition to teach-

ing his classes managed to attend so many that he earned his own B.D. degree. He was made full professor and chairman of his department after that.

WRH induced a student from Denison, Ira Maurice Price, to follow him to Morgan Park, and for this part of Harper's career we have a fascinating memoir of his, possibly written in the late 1920's as source material for Goodspeed's biography. A rough draft of this manuscript survives in the University Archives. Price writes that in 1880 he constituted the entire Hebrew class—he



Thomas Wakefield Goodspeed

learned a year's work in seven weeks by the inductive method. ("The professor himself said that that class of one student was the beginning of the Hebrew summer schools.") The explanation of the inductive method given by Harper in several of his books is clear enough:

> The order of work which it advocates is, *first,* to gain an accurate and thorough knowledge of some of the "facts" of the language; *secondly,* to learn from these facts the principles which they illustrate, and by which they are regulated; *thirdly,* to apply these principles in the further progress of the work.

This is substantially the way linguistic science today advocates that languages be taught.

During the year 1880/81 WRH was occupied in preparing the first of his textbooks, *Elements of Hebrew,* a grammar which is still in print and remains useful to this day. Price claims that the professor "became so engrossed in Hebrew that at the end of the Seminary year when he signed his name to the diplomas of the graduates, he wrote 'William R. Hebrew.' " Also during that year six men, including Ira Price, spent their Christmas vacation with Harper reading the Hebrew Bible eight hours a day for ten days. Year after year the Morgan Park authorities noted an extraordinary enthusiasm for Hebrew on the part of the student body—an enthusiasm that apparently did not spill over into their other subjects.

For the summer of 1881 WRH decided that the Seminary buildings should not be allowed to stand empty over four months. He organized a Summer School of Hebrew. It started with twenty-three of those enthusiastic students, but grew quickly in the following years and became famous. In 1883 a second school was established at Chautauqua, New York, in connection with the great education factory based there. (Nor was that the extent of WRH's relation with Chautauqua: he was soon made principal of the College of Liberal Arts.) By 1886 there were five Summer Schools of Hebrew scattered across the country, each of them requiring WRH's personal attendance. Meanwhile, there were many people who for one reason or another could not attend a School in person, so Harper made up lessons to be worked by mail. (Price has a different version. He says, "Some time during the summer of 1881, the *Journal & Messenger,* a Baptist weekly paper of Cincinnati, carried an advertisement of a Jewish Rabbi who proposed to teach Hebrew by correspondence. Dr. Harper, in view of that ad, said to me, 'If a Jewish Rabbi can teach Hebrew by correspondence, we can do it.' ") At any rate, whatever the genesis of the course, it developed into the *Introductory Hebrew Method and Manual,* the lesson-book companion to the *Elements.*

Also at this time WRH needed a journal to unite his students and colleagues, and founded two: *The Hebrew*

Student (which became *The Biblical World*) for laymen—it survives as *Journal of Religion*—and *Hebraica,* now grown into *Journal of Near Eastern Studies,* which was to contain articles of scholarly interest. WRH continued to edit both periodicals until his death in 1906. (It is curious that his own articles, no matter how technical, appeared almost always in *The Biblical World* and seldom in *Hebraica.*) Harper's summary of the fivefold purpose of *Hebraica* characterizes his concerns at this time:

> To furnish a medium for the discussion of Semitic topics by Semitic scholars, to encourage and aid those who are in the ministry to engage in Semitic study, to advance, if possible, the interests, and to increase the efficiency of the Old Testament department in our various seminaries, to advocate the introduction of Semitic studies into our Universities and Colleges, and to form a bond of connection between the widely scattered members of the Hebrew Correspondence School, *Hebraica* is sent forth.

A man with such ambitious plans could not go unnoticed by the scholarly world. In April of 1886 Rockefeller informed Goodspeed that Yale University wanted its illustrious alumnus to join its faculty. They tried to keep him in Chicago by making him president of the nearly defunct Old University of Chicago (which subsequently expired), but he moved to New Haven that summer, taking with him editorial offices, a complete Hebrew printing shop, and a passel of assistants. There he was made Professor of Semitic Languages in Yale University, instructor in Hebrew in Yale Divinity School, and Woolsey Professor of Biblical Literature in Yale College. Simultaneously he was associated with Chautauqua, in charge of his own enterprises (publications, journals, schools), giving four lecture series outside Yale, and committed to returning to Morgan Park for the month of January to run a Hebrew school. Meanwhile he wrote textbooks on the inductive method for Greek, Latin, and English. His Yale years also (somehow!) saw the production of the first of his major scholarly contributions, a long series of articles on the "modernist" side of the Pentateuchal Question. WRH argued in favor of the Sources theory of the authorship of the first five books of the Bible, as opposed to the traditional, Single Author view. This position earned

him considerable criticism from the more conservative clergy.

About this time Rockefeller was becoming interested in establishing a center of learning to be the climax of his philanthropies. He was pressured to site it in New York, but perhaps through the influence of Goodspeed decided that it should be in Chicago. He arranged a "coincidental" meeting with WRH in October, 1888 that lasted fourteen hours, and the University of Chicago was born. Yale put great pressure on Harper to remain there, but in vain; he took up his duties as President on July 1, 1891. Armed with pledges from Rockefeller and Chicago's leading citizens, WRH almost singlehandedly built the buildings and assembled the faculty. The University opened its doors to students on October 1, 1892.

Harper had made himself Head Professor of the Department of Semitic Languages. He had also seen to it that his department would not be under the control of the conservatives who had given him trouble a few years earlier. The new University included a Divinity School—the old Baptist Union Theological Seminary of Morgan Park—but WRH placed his department, and the New Testament Greek department, in the University proper, not in that Divinity School. Because of this arrangement the Semitic department was from the beginning one of the largest in terms of the number of courses offered and number of students registered for them, since Hebrew was required of divinity students then. However, we learn that by 1914 the department had had only thirty-six students of its very own. The faculty of Harper's department numbered seven. Several of them had followed him from Yale, including his Assyriologist brother, Robert Francis Harper, and a young Egyptologist who just barely squeaked in as a Non-Resident Fellow, James Henry Breasted. Also included were WRH's old student Ira M. Price, who came with the Divinity School, and Emil Hirsch, Rabbi of the Sinai Congregation of Hyde Park. Rabbi Hirsch, grandfather of the former president of the University, Edward Hirsch Levi, gave courses in rabbinic literature and languages for many years.

The courses taught in that first quarter included Elementary Hebrew (WRH or IMP), three more ad-

vanced Hebrew courses, elementary Arabic (WRH), and elementary Assyrian (RFH). There were also classes in archeology and ancient history. By the second quarter the announcements included very much what they do today. For the first four years of the University the department was housed in a few rooms on the fourth floor of Cobb Hall, the first classroom building. (The President's office was on the first floor, containing a large roll-top desk; after WRH's death, this desk was moved to the office of the Dean of the Divinity School, and it is now catalogued as a document in the University Archives.)

One of the duties of a university president is raising money. Harper was very good at this. He had no difficulty in securing various scientific laboratories and dormitories, but no one seemed to want to aid his scheme for what he called laboratories for the humanities. WRH envisioned a series of buildings to be devoted to the study of literature and culture, one each for the Orient, Greek, Latin, and modern languages. He acquired the building for Oriental languages almost by accident. During 1893 a series of matching grants was offered, culminating in a half-million dollar subscription from Rockefeller that had to be equalled by July 1, 1894. In the beginning of June the Trustees were beginning to despair, and Harper and Goodspeed went out canvassing. As they were about to give up for the day and return home, they recalled that Mrs. Caroline Haskell was in town. She had already given $10,000 for a lecture series on Comparative Religion (stimulated by a committee of the World's Columbian Exposition, which had been situated just across the street from the University), but WRH went to see her anyway. He explained his position and asked for money. She wanted to provide a memorial for her recently deceased husband, Frederick, and offered a building. He asked for an Oriental Museum. She pledged $100,000. That sum was exactly enough for the construction of Haskell Museum.

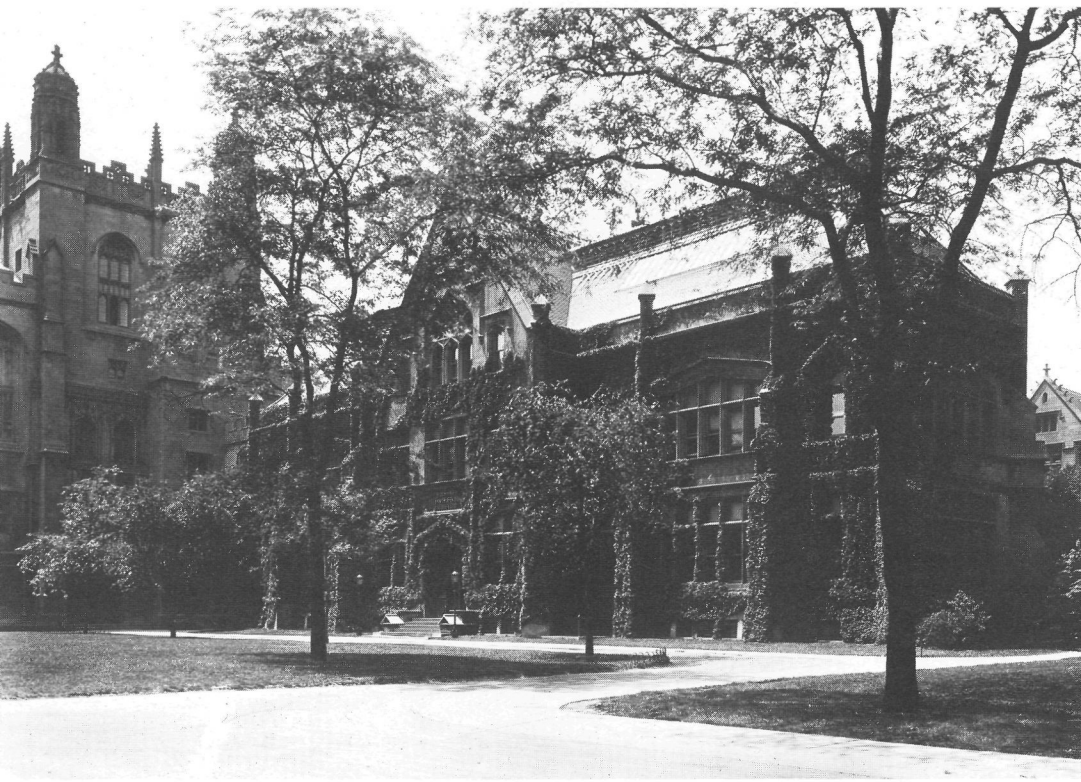
The cornerstone was laid one year later; the building was dedicated just a year after that. The 1896 ceremonies included the first visit of The Founder, as John D. was known around here for many years, to the University; but there is no evidence that Mrs. Haskell ever saw her building. The building was supposed to house

an Egyptian museum and an Assyrian museum on its first floor; a Palestinian museum, lecture rooms, and offices on the second floor; and a Comparative Religion museum, a library, lecture rooms, and offices on the third floor. In order to fill up one of these museums, the Chicago Society of Egyptian Research was organized in 1897. It supported the work of Flinders Petrie in Egypt and the bringing to Chicago of "a just share of the antiquities thus discovered," and intended to inform its members concerning the civilizations being investigated. For only five dollars a year they were to receive a "large annual volume richly illustrated" and might attend the annual meeting at which the year's work was discussed. In those days one could excavate the entire temple at Coptos for $1500, or "clear up thoroughly" a site at Thebes among the royal mortuary temples for $3000.

Unfortunately Haskell Oriental Museum could not be used according to its design. The Divinity School had no home of its own and was temporarily housed in Haskell. For thirty years. It occupied the first floor, with its library on the third; the Oriental Museum had one room on the second floor. Despite this difficulty, the department continued to grow. In the four quarters of 1900/01 the Department of Semitic Languages and Literature offered 127 courses; by 1906/07 the total was up to about 260. A curious setback occurred about the turn of the century, though. Recognizing that times were changing, WRH decided to make the study of Hebrew optional for the men in the Divinity School. He expected some decline in enrollment at that, but was not prepared for the sudden decimation that ensued. He offered to give the elementary course himself, but even that greatest of teachers could not lure more than a handful of students, and Harper's literary secretary and subsequent editor, J. M. Powis Smith, took over.

WRH continued to give his time to Chautauqua until 1897; he had his eye on every detail of the University's administration; he regularly taught courses—at 7:30 A.M. (in Autumn, 1894, twenty-six students were registered, one of whom lived at 2426 West Ohio, a distance of twelve and a half miles as the streets run!); he was a model editor of his journals, contributing articles to nearly every issue, and to other periodicals as well; in

1897 he took over the Sunday School of his church, the Hyde Park Baptist, and produced a new curriculum for it; and about the same time he began his principal scholarly work, an edition of and commentary on the books



Haskell Oriental Museum in an early view (the cornerstone is barely visible to the right of the door). The building later housed the Graduate School of Business, and is now being renovated for the Anthropology Department.

of the prophets Amos and Hosea. These are only the highlights of his work in Semitics.

But much of Harper's creative work can be ignored in an article on his Semitic scholarship. It is irrelevant that he was the first president of America's first great university, that he was the first man to hire women or Jews as professors, that he assembled the finest faculty in the world in all fields on the strength of a vision. I do not need to mention that he invented the academic quarter

system, the idea of a major field of interest for students, the university press, and university extension courses. Suffice it to say that probably the greatest loss ever suffered by American education was the death (from intestinal cancer) on January 10, 1906—before his fiftieth birthday—of William Rainey Harper.

No adequate biography of WRH has yet been written. But not even the shortest sketch can be complete without the appreciation written by John Huston Finley, president of the City College of New York, in a memorial article in 1906:

> (His) was the achievement of three men, and of three extraordinary men. It was as if these three men of the same basic character, having all much in common and having each a sympathy with the others, yet differing in their possessing interests and their intellectual gifts, were joined together in a loyal and enduring union. The great bounding heart was common to all. And they all worked together always. Only they divided their time among the interests of these three great men. Now it was teaching to which he gave himself with the strength of three men; another hour or another day it was to study, to the seeking of a scholar; and then the next hour or the next day it was the complex and tangled task of the executive to which this man of three men's brains set his hand. By this cooperation he accomplished what three men working independently, though of great ability each, could not have done.

The period after Harper's death was one of retrenchment for the University. He was succeeded as President by Harry Pratt Judson, who was determined to end the profligacy that WRH's charisma had made possible and to balance the budget. He succeeded, but at some cost in imaginativeness and scope to the University's programs. One result was that Breasted was unable to return to Egypt for a third season of epigraphic survey work (the funds for which had been transferred from the expedition at Adab, in Mesopotamia, which WRH had himself traveled to Constantinople to arrange in 1903, when its leader was accused of less than honorable conduct). Instead, he stayed in Chicago and composed the textbook *Ancient Times,* a sensational best-seller, which was directly responsible for the founding of the Oriental Institute in 1919.

Another Harper who died young was WRH's brother

RFH (1864–1914). One of three faculty members of the University who had graduated from the Old University of Chicago, in 1883, his technical training was at Berlin, and he was the epigrapher on the very first American dig in Mesopotamia, the University of Pennsylvania's Nippur Expedition of 1888/89. A reputable scholar—his editions of the Code of Hammurabi and Assyrian and Babylonian letters (fourteen volumes) are still consulted—and a fine teacher—forty percent of the Ph.D. degrees awarded in the Oriental Studies department during his time were to his students—RFH suffered from both the shadow of his prodigious brother and the antipathy of JHB; he deserves a biographical study in his own right.

These are the principal forerunners of the present ancient Near Eastern scholars of today's Oriental Institute. Members of today's faculty can trace their educational lineage directly to these giants, as can many scholars throughout the world. Our understanding of ancient times and of the history of western civilization would be very different, and probably rather smaller, without the achievements of William Rainey Harper and his company.

On the following two pages: Luxor colonnade as seen from the north, with stone fragments visible at the right and left.