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Editor’s Notebook

Andrew C. Holman
Bridgewater State University, a2holman@bridgew.edu

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among the more popular concepts that scholars in the social sciences and humanities have bandied about recently is transnationalism: the study of how people, goods, and ideas flow and have flowed among nations and among the regions of the world. Today, at the height of globalization and our technological revolution, we are convinced that the world has never been more integrated—economically, socially, and, especially, culturally; that we have never been more transnational; and that this new reality is a really remarkable thing. The evidence is abundant and clear: Sushi bars in Topeka, McDonald’s in Beijing, Salsa week in Italy, Disneyland in France. A hookah bar in Plymouth! More than ever before, everything and everyone is everywhere. Or so it seems.

It is an annoying habit among historians (or maybe just this historian) to exercise an almost involuntary reflex whenever we encounter claims of novelty. The tool in historians’ professional toolboxes most often employed is a trump card, a wet blanket, a cocktail-party conversation killer; the one that begins, “Well, in fact, my friend, that phenomenon about which you speak is not really ‘new.’ You see…” and so it is with transnationalism. Historians and other scholars are discovering that for much of the past several centuries, the world has been a great deal more globalized than our presentist perspective today allows us to contemplate. National boundaries have always been weak containers for people, ideas and materials. The point dawned on me recently as I thumbed through some dusty, old nineteenth-century manuscript enrollment registers and photographs from the Bridgewater Normal School (BNS) housed in our Maxwell Library Archives.

Bridgewater State’s past will matter this year, perhaps more than in others. We celebrate 175 years of continuous operation as an educational institution, an uncommon mark matched by comparatively few other universities in the United States. There are a great many things about who we are and what we do that deserve our celebration. Among them is the relatively recent push to become a global campus. The activity in this regard over the past decade has been appreciably brisk: the expansion of our course offerings, the establishment of Area Studies programs and a Global Studies Major, the recruitment of foreign-exchange students and the concomitant growth of semester-abroad and travel courses, all under the guidance of dedicated, professional administrators in the Minnock Center for International Engagement. Add to this the more than 30 cooperative partnerships that BSU has signed with foreign institutions of higher education and the result is impressive. In the past decade or more, we have developed, truly, a global “footprint” and a commitment to connecting our students with the world. And that feels new.

Well, in fact…

Sitting in the Archives, it was hard not to draw some comparisons between who we are today, and what the BNS of the 1890s and 1900s must have felt like. One thing that surprised me was how global our old school was back in the day, both in terms of its students and its reputation.

The first wave of Bridgewater’s globalism began during the long and formative tenure of Albert Gardner Boyden as principal of the school (1860–1906). As early as 1876, only 36 years after the school’s founding, BNS had enrolled students from Burma, Canada and Japan, including the celebrated Shuji Isawa (1851–1917), the father of public education in Japan, whose impressive record my History Department colleagues Thomas Turner and Wing-kai To have documented so well. In the 1880s, the pattern broadened, reaching its apogee, perhaps, in the 1890s. On our campus, in these decades, could be found students from Mexico, England, Jamaica, “South America” and Armenia. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the catchment broadened further: Turkey, Peru, France, and Venezuela. A few of these students enrolled in typical 2- or 4-year programs, but most of them came to BNS as students in the college’s “Special Course” (later called “Advanced”), most of them older students who had already graduated from classical or normal colleges in other

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countries and had come to Bridgewater for polish, or to master the celebrated system of pedagogy that Boyden championed. “we are gathered from the old world and new, from Armenia to the land of the Incas,” the class entry for the “Specials” notes in the 1910 yearbook, the BnS Normal Offering. “The three Americas send forth their sons. We speak many languages… [I]n the pursuit of learning we are joined together.” What’s more, these foreign students were active members of the college community—athletes who represented the school on the playing field, politicians who deliberated in student government and actors who trod the boards in their class plays. In late May, 1910, in what can be read as a telling statement of globalism at BnS, the Specials’ class production was The Revenge of Shari-Hot Su, a 1880s play written by an American during the height of western infatuation with the Orient. Playing the lead role of Shari-Hot-Su Sama, “learned Japanese,” was a Canadian, Randolph Leonard Harlow, while, on the same stage, playing Kioto, “a young Japanese,” was Luis C. Infante, a Mexican-born graduate of the Peru Normal School in Lima. Transnationalism indeed.

These foreign students only ever constituted a small fraction of the student population (we can count them in the dozens before 1910, not the hundreds), but we should not underestimate the impact their presence would have had on a small, isolated, provincial campus whose students came largely from the rural towns and villages of eastern Massachusetts. These were the days before radio, newsreels, television and the internet began to bring the world to southeastern Massachusetts; and so, in a way, at BnS, these walking, talking globetrotters were the world. And BNS seems to have been peculiar in this aspect: a cursory look at the alumni records of other contemporary normal schools in New England and New York shows nothing like the numbers of foreign enrollments at BNS.

But Mr. Boyden’s School “went global” in these years in another way, too — in its growing reputation abroad. Specials and others who were educated at Bridgewater took their experiences home with them and broadcast the good news about BnS. They were Bridgewater evangels. “What have been the results of Mr. Boyden’s fifty years of teaching, forty of which have been as principal of the school?” correspondent F.H.K. asked in a Normal Offering editorial 1900. “The results in buildings and equipments stand here in Bridgewater; the beneficent work of the thousands of graduates who are to be found in all the States of this Union, in Canada, Cuba, Mexico, Chili, France, England, South Africa, India, Japan, in the Philippines, cannot be estimated” (17).

It is difficult to know why this first wave of globalization declined at BNS in the 1910s, but it seems likely that a confluence of factors contributed to it. In 1900, Massachusetts legislators passed a bill that introduced a $50 tuition fee for students from out of state and “other countries,” and demanded that all normal school applicants in the commonwealth declare it their intention after graduation to teach in Massachusetts public schools. Perhaps the end of A.G. Boyden’s principalship mattered. Certainly, the arrival of World War I blocked the ease with which foreign students could come to BNS, and the political culture of isolationism in 1920s America would have dampened local interest in hosting foreign students. Foreign-student enrollment dwindled to a trickle in the 1920s, and the Special Course disappeared. Finally, in the 1930s, the transformation of BNS into a comprehensive state college, a regional service institution, must have emphasized the school’s local mission and orientation and checked the reemergence of a transnational campus.

But, happily, not forever. One hundred years later, we can celebrate the revival of a second wave of transnational culture on campus that is grand, ambitious, robust and deliberate, even if it is not entirely new.