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The Shaping of Values in Nineteenth Century Massachusetts: The Case of Henry L. Dawes

Fred Nicklason

As a child in western Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century, Henry L. Dawes received traditionally strict New England training. His parents imbued him with their version of a stern but honest world. As an adult in the Gilded Age, however, Dawes spent fifty years in state and national politics, during a time when historians have charged politicians with using their public office for dishonest private gain. While Dawes received the childhood training that would seemingly bar his degeneracy to the stereotyped "politico," he was nevertheless tarred with that brush. A study of the values he received as a child, therefore, is a way of understanding the view of the world that a strict, rural New Englander brought to politics in the nation's capital. It involves, too, the change that occurred in values from one generation to another in the nineteenth century. While the discontinuity of values between Henry Dawes and his disreputable congressional colleagues is worthy of future study, the present effort focuses on the elusive and subtle break between the values of Dawes and his parents.

In essence the difference in values between parent and child in the Dawes family amounted to the difference between religious and moral values. The substance of their concerns did not change drastically. The emphasis, rather, centered on how each justified his values. Both his parents and Dawes, for instance, adhered to a form of stewardship. It was, however, the difference between a religious stewardship and a moral stewardship that defined the difference between the two generations, especially when applied to Dawes' mother, Mercy Dawes, and to a lesser extent his father, Mitchell Dawes.

When Henry Dawes entered Congress four years before the Civil War, Mercy charged him with the public duty of advancing freedom and alleviating oppression throughout the nation: "Rejoice my dear son that you are engaged in the cause of freedom. I hope you will labor in it until there is no more oppression North nor South, East nor West, until our whole Nation can in truth be called free. Your Father that is gone abhorred it, your Mother lives to abhor it, the God of the Bible abhors it." Were Henry on the side of oppression, Mercy continued, it would carry her "quickly to the grave." Recognizing that he would meet with unpleasanties in Congress, Mercy admonished her son not to sacrifice private principle for wealth or public acclaim. "I trust you will not," she added. "I have confidence in you to believe that you would lose your right hand before you would do it."¹

Mercy's charge to her forty-year-old son was not casually proclaimed. She imposed the even-handed yet oppressive threat of an Old Testament punishment. With the piety of an earlier New England, Mercy advocated her religion without fear of worldly retribution. In her devotion to God she sought no earthly sanctions. The heavier the duties of this world the more she conceived of them as preparation for the next. This was the way of salvation.²

The daughter of a country doctor, Mercy lacked skilled talents, formal training, or an association with fashionable society. Quiet, lean of mind, and capable of an uncomplaining dedication to the work of a farmer's wife, she could not afford any distracting frills of society. What natural abilities she possessed were inherited from her family. What mores she acquired were conditioned by a daily draught upon her spiritual resources. The conditions of her secular existence demanded no less. The New England environment imposed its stamp upon parent and child alike.

Early in the nineteenth century, Mercy's religious conscience roughly reflected the coercive geographic and economic facts of life in western Massachusetts. Springfield in south-central Massachusetts enjoyed a prosperous growth because of its location in the Connecticut Valley. Pittsfield and Adams on the western border of the state grew in size because of woolen mills in the Hoosac Valley and tourists in the summer season. The isolated hill towns between Springfield and New York State, however, enjoyed no such advantages of location. Hilly land and rocky soil denied their inhabitants any ease of labor and demanded of them an economic self-sufficiency familiar to an earlier century in Massachusetts. Their isolation restricted the market for even their meager products and imposed an economic niggardliness upon their citizens. Heavily wooded hills, scanty crops, and the economic as well as the social isolation all gave to the region the commonly known and descriptive name, the "bush." The isolation of these western Massachusetts towns showed as well in their lack of an orderly settlement. Small, huddled communities lay indiscriminately scattered throughout the tangled forests as though their only purpose was the political advantage of a town name. Their inhabitants, the residue and backwash of the westward-moving frontiersmen, were intolerant of the time required to clear land and till unyielding soil. With the nation expanding, these towns incorporated late, grew slowly, and in time actually declined in population. When finally their farmers despaired of reward from the unproductive soil, only the old, infirm, and tenacious remained behind. The young, impatient, and ambitious among them struck for the greater West or became mechanics in growing eastern cities.³

Henry's father, Mitchell Dawes, remained in the hills of Berkshire because of poor health. Shortly before the American Revolution his father, Samuel Dawes, had moved his farming family from the sandy soil of eastern Massachusetts to Cummington in the center of the "bush." There, two of Mitchell's brothers cleared the land and settled their own farms, but Mitchell, considered too frail for an independent struggle, stayed on the family homestead until his father's death in 1794. After working several years as a

cabinet maker, Mitchell discovered that wood dust taxed his lungs and he finally gave up the effort. He saw no alternative open to him but to return to the occupation of his father. At the age of thirty-three it was to a plain but commodious farmhouse that he brought his bride, Mercy Burgess of Goshen.⁴

Though Mitchell and Mercy possessed but few worldly goods and accumulated no savings, they did not suffer from a sense of economic deprivation. Their neighbors fared no better. A victim of both poor health and of his location, Mitchell willingly accommodated himself to the unalterable physical conditions of Cummington. He sought no advantage over other men, expected no improvement in his own life, and planned no future for his children beyond a continuation of the farm in their hands. A religious man, gifted with common sense, his ambition extended to living a Christian life and to teaching his children to be honorable members of society. With perseverance he managed a livelihood on the farm. With frugality he reared a family of seven children—four girls, followed by three sons. On the occasion of the birth of his first son on October 30, 1816, and with a sentimental attachment to the idea of primogeniture, he slaughtered a fatted calf. Mercy named her fifth child after the South Carolina Revolutionary statesman, Henry Laurens.⁵

If in raising their children Mercy Dawes stressed an absolute sense of religion, Mitchell Dawes, by his actions, emphasized the discipline of work. Henry therefore early learned the chores of the farm. In the spring he helped plough and plant; in the summer he would weed, hay, and harvest. The patient work of picking stones from the fields continued until snow fell. And during the long winters in the Berkshire hills, harsh even for New England, many duties of repair and of preparation for the next season required constant attention. Throughout each day in the fields with his father the lad silently received an indoctrination in the values of duty and pertinacity.

In the evenings Henry usually read aloud newspapers, novels, or the Bible while his four older sisters and younger brothers continued their household chores. In the frequent discussions arising during these evenings, the parents continued to encourage the formation of religious and moral values in their children. Christian standards equated with moral standards and Mitchell and Mercy imposed them without reluctance on all issues, public as well as private. Certainty about religion and morality was comparable to certainty about work. Neither could be evaded.

Until he reached the age of sixteen, Henry's training on the farm rather than a formal education at the Cummington common school prepared him for his evident future as a farmer. In his early teens he disliked the district school. It usually engaged for teachers the young women of the neighborhood or college students who had not completed their own training. And the red schoolhouse itself, cold in the winter and filled with rude benches, added little invitation to formal learning. And Mitchell, too often needing Henry's help on the farm, usually yielded to his pleas to stay home from classes. The lad's attitude was normal enough for a farm boy. He lacked ambition for anything more than his father could teach him and when looking about him nothing more than his

father's training seemed necessary. Thomas Rawson, principal at Cummington academy and a ministry student, however, had that special ability to inspire boys with his interest in learning. Though Rawson did not teach Henry in class, he courted his oldest sister, Louisa, eventually married her, and in the process won Henry over if not to religion then to the secular doctrine of education.

Henry now embraced his studies with the fervor of a convert. The new books he so avidly read opened a window to a world far different from the austere life of either his father or mother and, with studies once begun, he gained an entirely new sense of his future. Indeed, at the age of sixteen his desire for an education threatened to cause a neglect of work on the farm. Upon learning of his son's plans to become a college graduate, Mitchell naturally could see nothing but folly and uselessness in the undertaking. Yet Mitchell's need of his oldest son on the farm, his lack of money to pay for an extensive education, and Henry's faulty common schooling all failed to dissuade the youth from his goal.⁶ As with Mitchell's untiring struggle on the land and as with Mercy's love of religion, Henry's craving for an education proved too persevering to be subdued by obstacles or arguments.

Henry also disappointed his parents in his religious life. While his desire for a formal education angered his father, his resistance to a religious conversion disappointed and embarrassed his mother. In Cummington the Congregationalist evening prayer meetings and Sunday services fulfilled both spiritual and social needs of the Dawes family, and in that environment Mercy expected her son to follow naturally in her religious footsteps. That meant receiving the grace of God through salvation. She at first overlooked a young boy's reluctance to sit attentively through long sermons, but as Henry grew into his late teens his rationalistic arguments against religious conversion increasingly distressed her. Without salvation he simply did not consider himself a Christian. He knew the catechism. The local parson always had a prideful student in his Saturday morning recitations of theological doctrines. But, Henry reminded his mother, knowledge of doctrine did not insure conversion.

While Thomas Rawson gave him moral hope and pleaded with him to study the Bible daily, Henry in turn sought religious advice from other sources. The doctrine of election seemed particularly formidable. For an answer to that ever-present dilemma, he turned to a preseminary student at Amherst College. In a statement of his own interpretation Henry took the merely logical position that "if you are elected to be saved you will be, if not, you will not be, therefore there is no utility in giving oneself any trouble about it." In reply to such a dubious convert the Amherst student of religion wrote that while God determines all of Man's actions, man is free to act as he pleases; man therefore need only make the choice to become a Christian.⁷ Henry found little clarity in this explanation. Technically he remained "unregenerate," a religious condition Mercy Dawes found incomprehensible in a child of hers.

Meanwhile, except for one term at Cummington Academy and the occasional assistance of a sympathetic college student, Henry spent three grueling years in preparing himself for college at home. His sister Louisa helped, her husband Thomas Rawson continued his encouragement, and Henry made an

extra effort to earn money by teaching school in Windsor and working on a neighboring farm. In time Mitchell reluctantly submitted to the personal sacrifice of losing the labor of his oldest son and promised him clothes and a home while he pursued his studies.⁸ In three years the lad was ready, determined, and tense.

At nineteen years of age Henry stood more than six feet tall. Frail, thin, and slightly stooped as his father before him, he reflected the determination required to sustain his studies under difficult circumstances. The effort it had required showed in his temperament. In private often melancholy, in social gatherings pridefully uneasy, he lacked any gracious small talk or pleasing manners. Without self-confidence or an easy social intercourse, he often interrupted conversations with quick and subtle humor, or sarcasm, and revealed an uncertainty not of purpose, but of untried ability.⁹ He was self-disciplined and proud. He possessed, a friend said, a "certain nobility."¹⁰

If Henry were indeed noble, his was not a nobility derived from a tradition of personal security of social position. Rather it sprang from a tension between two frequently conflicting sets of values and goals. Mercy's piety and religious certainty protected her from the harshness of an immoral world and prepared her for the next. Mitchell's integrity and capacity for work insured him against moral backsliding or economic disaster on the farm. But both parents were involved in a holding action, both were limited by their view of their secular future and neither encountered any difficulty in conforming to the rocky, stingy, and above all isolated land of western Massachusetts. The sensed no hopelessness in their lives because the limited goals they set for themselves happily relieved them of frustrated ambitions. Not so with their son. In rejecting Mercy's goal of a heavenly world and Mitchell's ideal of a well-kept farm on reluctant soil, Henry set for himself the distant goal of a college degree and a prominent place in society. Cummington had not only been overlooked by the frontier moving westward; it had remained isolated from the social values of the nineteenth century. The impact of Henry's wide reading broke through that intellectual isolation, goaded him on to something more than his parents planned for him, and established a tension in his personality that no future contact with society would seriously alter.

Yet the discarding of some parental goals did not mean an entire casting out of the habits of mind their achievement required. Too much a child of both parents to completely reject their values, he clung to their general teachings and combined them with his recently-acquired ambitions. From Mercy's religious values he derived an absolute sense of morality. From Mitchell he benefited from a sense of secular endurance, pertinacity of purpose and commitment to duty. In the transfer of these characteristics from parent to child, however, the youth transformed them, shaped them in the process and, more important, directed them toward the possibility of success in a society beyond the negative sanctions of Cummington. His "nobility" therefore derived from the tension of breaking the crust of tradition. It helped him move intellectually from the society of his parents and their set of beliefs to a different society of still largely unknown manners and ways of living. If this move required aggressiveness, he possessed it. "Work will do it," Henry told a friend. "If a fellow makes up his mind to dig, dig, dig, no matter how poor he is, no matter if he is as poor as I am, he can do most anything."¹¹

More than a desire for economic acquisition, Henry strove for intellectual

freedom; more than the riches of industrial venture, he sought independence of mind. If he did not define his goal of "success" any more specifically than getting a college degree, it did not matter—with the stamp of his parents in Cummington and the mark of an education at college, the world would open to him without reserve. Accordingly, late in the summer of 1835, after a day's rest from the scythe, the youth walked for three days and over one hundred miles to Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut. After passing the first academic trials, Henry strove for a high class standing in the junior and senior years. True laurels began when he won an oration at Junior Exhibition. Fittingly enough, his oration title, "The Ultimate Triumph of Moral and Political Truth," characterized his translation of Mercy Dawes' religious values into moral absolutes. The "ultimate triumph" came in his senior year when Henry made Phi Beta Kappa and tied for third place in the graduating class.¹² In his Commencement Address, "Prophets of Evil," he stood before Yale alumni and ninety-four graduates in Center Church on that August afternoon of 1839 and reminded them of Patrick Henry's aversion to concentrated power, Fisher Ames's caution about French principles, and an unidentified lawyer's abhorrence of universal suffrage. He called for patriotism and statesmanship.¹³ It was truly a Yale student's effort—elevated in tone, Whiggish in politics, and confident that the moral universe lacked ambiguity.

After graduation Dawes taught school in New York state, studied law, spent some "down in the mouth" time at home in Cummington, became active in local and national Whig campaigns, and taught school in nearby Ashfield. There he met his future wife, Electa Sanderson, who rekindled his ambition to succeed, this time in law offices in Greenfield. Late in the summer of 1842 Dawes passed the bar examination and opened an office of his own in North Adams in the growing county of Berkshire in northwestern Massachusetts. When Electa inquired about his religious future, Henry continued to defer to Providence for his conversion. The young man was not irreligious. He believed in the existence of God, led a spotless life, attended church regularly, joined the "Young Men's Society," and lectured on temperance in secular as well as religious settings. While for his clergyman brother-in-law, Thomas Rawson, these good works were not sufficient for redemption, Electa accepted his religious position, conversion or no conversion.¹⁴

Religion remained for him a mystery, "fathomless and incomprehensible." He considered himself a "sceptic." Too often depressed as it was, he disliked the idea of concentrating on man's depravity and he told Electa as much when she nudged him in that direction. Man, he thought, was not created to "clothe himself in sack cloth and ashes to repine his sinful nature"; it was better to contemplate the "never-ending process of the human soul."¹⁵ Nevertheless, when Electa experienced a conversion in the Methodist Church, he envied her happiness as a convert and actively sought religious advice from local ministers. In one meeting four clergymen told him he had "experienced religion" and insisted that he testify to that fact in church. "Shocked, pained and disgusted," he left the meeting "wounded rather than healed," and concluded that however facile religion may be for others, a conversion involved an important event which he knew he had not experienced.¹⁶

After three years of courtship at a distance, Henry and Electa married in 1844 and set up housekeeping in North Adams. In his search for income Dawes as a silent partner helped establish the North Adams *Transcript*, wrote articles for several years, and through several ownership changes continued as its largest proprietor. He became a member of the Berkshire county Whig Committee, often drafting resolutions at Berkshire Whig conventions. Finally, in 1848, at the age of thirty-two, Dawes entered the Massachusetts state legislature and began his fifty years in political office, thirty-six of them as a Massachusetts congressman from 1857 through 1893.

Dawes' preparation for public office was grounded in the unambiguous values of his time. Those values translated into a steward's control of public affairs. In an important sense his custodianship of constituent needs compared to an earlier religious idea in Massachusetts, that is, the Puritan idea of stewardship among the elected few who by God's grace were chosen for regeneration.¹⁷ As an elected public official, Dawes conceived of his stewardship not so much in religious as in moral terms. Despite his pessimism of the actual course of events, he held an optimistic conviction that he understood the ultimate and self evident truths that enabled him to judge and condemn all legislation, all issues of policy, on moral grounds. Acting on this conviction in office Dawes occasionally disagreed with his constituents, but he did so without seriously questioning the conclusions to which he adhered and to which he was sure his constituents would agree if they were properly informed. Seldom did he not know his duty. If disagreement from constituents arose, his Puritan forebears would have said that the power of reason of unregenerates without God's grace is helpless.¹⁸ Dawes, on the other hand, relied on his moral certainty and sense of stewardship. Conscience rather than an occasionally misguided public opinion would be his guide.

In many ways Electa Dawes represented both the old and the new, the religious and the moral cast of mind. Electa expressed her interpretation of the proper attitude when Dawes entered the state legislature in 1848: "Be faithful," she wrote, "in the discharge of whatever duties devolve upon you, resolving to do right regardless of party or place—or of what the world may say, feeling that the approval of God and your own conscience is of more value to you than ought else."¹⁹ Translated into her husband's standards this charge became the faithfulness to duty, the willingness to work, to dig, and the moral stewardship that characterized his many years in public office.

Once in public office Dawes' self-conscious stewardship made him frequently independent, usually moderate but always faithful to Republican principles. As a House of Representatives member of the Committee of Five during the secession crisis of 1861, he received secret information that led to the investigation of President Buchanan's cabinet, and participated in the inconclusive but significant investigation that southerners plotted to capture the capital before the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. As floor leader of the War Contracts Committee in the first year of the Civil War, Dawes so dramatically revealed the committee's damaging findings that he simultaneously alienated radical Republicans and received President Lincoln's wrath for undermining public

support of the administration. As chairman of the Committee on Elections (1861-1869) he contributed to a moderate congressional reconstruction policy, continued during the post-war years to determine reconstruction measures, and successfully introduced a loyalty oath for southern representatives returning to the House.

In 1869 Dawes became chairman of the Committee on Appropriations, "Father of the House," and Republican leader of the House of Representatives. Using his enlarged influence and close knowledge of parliamentary skills, he shaped numerous policy decisions and pressed for the administrative reforms so desperately needed to counteract shoddy procedures and to accommodate increased government functions. For instance, he stopped deficiency bills and the use of unexpended balances in government bureaus, and he led the fight to discontinue making easily broken treaties with Indian tribes.

At the same time, in an impressive range of stewardship functions, Dawes defended mail service to sparsely populated areas, sponsored bills establishing the weather bulletin (later the Weather Bureau), the Fish Commission, and Yellowstone National Park, and he enlarged, for example, the appropriations for geological surveys of the West, and Children's Hospital and the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Washington, D.C. More dramatically, when the Grant administration dishonored its campaign promise of economic retrenchment, Dawes in 1870 forced a reduction in expenditures and struck the keynote for the Liberal Republican campaign of 1872. Finally, in the early 1870s in his last years in the House of Representatives as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee Dawes condensed and shepherded through Congress the tariff bills that advanced the Republican idea of commonality among diverse economic groups. In short, Representative Dawes, in holding the Republican party to its best purpose, fulfilled his best definition of stewardship.

It was as United States Senator for eighteen years, however, that Dawes most effectively fulfilled his stewardship role. American Indian policy became his specialty. Beginning in 1880, as Senate chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs—and with "Indians on the brain"—Dawes began the patient work that resulted in the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, the capstone of Indian policy in the late nineteenth century. In conjunction with the Boston Indian Committee, the Indian Rights Association, and the Lake Mohonk Conference of the Friends of the Indian, Dawes acted as the crucial "legislative medium" to bring justice to the Indian and "atone" for this country's sins against him. Seen from the negative side, Dawes intended to de-Indianize the Indian, destroy his culture, and separate him from his previous identity. Put positively, however, Dawes wanted to provide the Indian with a practically defensible economic base as an individual and an education that would most expediently assimilate him into the American culture. When later implementation of the Dawes Act violated its spirit, Dawes rejected the land greed it represented. Until the end of his life in 1903 he persisted as a moral and cultural steward of American values, convinced of their virtue and unambiguous in their adherence.

Notes

1. Mercy B. Dawes to Henry L. Dawes, Jan.17, 19; Feb 1, 1857, Henry L. Dawes Papers, Library of Congress. Hereafter Henry L. Dawes will be cited as HLD, and Henry L. Dawes Papers, Library of Congress, as DP.
2. HLD, "Autobiography," Mss., 9-11, DP. Dawes wrote this partial (up to 1857), fifty-nine page autobiography over a period of years—1866, 1870, 1875, and 1883, at the ages of 50, 54, 59, and 67. It contains several mistakes of fact, but is used here for his recollection of his early life which no other source can provide. Mercy Dawes most closely fits Philip Greven's Protestant strain of "evangelical," best understood in her case as "Self-Suppressed." Her son would fall into the "moderate" strain, best described as "Self-Controlled." Greven, *The Protestant Temperament Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New, York, 1977), *passim*.
3. George Rogers Taylor, "The National Economy Before and After the Civil War," in David T. Gilchrist and W. David Lewis, eds., *Economic Change in the Civil War Era* (Greenville, Del., 1965), 3-6.
4. HLD, "Autobiography," 2, 8-10.
5. *Ibid.*, 8-9; Anna L. Dawes, "Biography of Henry L. Dawes," Mss., ch.I,6-8, DP. The only daughter to live beyond childhood, Anna Dawes began this biography of her father shortly after his death, worked on it sporadically over the years and, while it is more complete than her father's autobiography, it contains more errors of fact. It is written often in outline form, uses her father's letters almost exclusively, and in the years when it might have been the most valuable—when she worked for her father as his maiden lady secretary—it becomes too sparse to be of any value to the historian.
6. HLD, "Autobiography," 13-17; Anna L. Dawes, "Biography of Henry L. Dawes," ch. I, 14-16, 19-22.
7. Anna L. Dawes, "Biography of Henry L. Dawes," ch. I, 15-16, 19; A. G.Dunning to HLD, Apr. 14, 1835, DP.
8. HLD, "Autobiography," 15-17; Anna L. Dawes, "Biography of Henry L.Dawes," ch. I, 28.
9. Anna L. Dawes, "Biography of Henry L. Dawes," ch. I, 26-27.
10. A reporter's interview with "Colonel Richards" unidentified newspaper clipping, undated folder, DP 57.
11. *Ibid.*

12. *Yale University Faculty Book of Averages, 1813-1839, Classes of 1817-1841; Book of Averages [1837-1868]*, Yale University Library.
13. HLD, "Autobiography," 25-26; HLD, "Prophets of Evil," Mss., DP.
14. Fred Nicklason, "The Early Career of Henry L. Dawes, 1816-1871," (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1967), 28.
15. HLD to Electa Sanderson, Dec. 17, 1842; Mar. 6, 1843, DP.
16. *Ibid.*, Mar. 28; May 14, 1843.
17. Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago, 1955), 24.
18. *Ibid.*, 27.
19. ED to HLD, Jan. 9, 1848, DP.