

The Reamer Kline Years: An Appreciation

Reamer Kline became President of Bard College in 1960. A distinguished Episcopal priest, this striking, broad-shouldered, six-foot-two-inch, imposing but gentle fifty-year-old man assumed the leadership of the College at a decisive if somewhat desperate moment in the College's history. The closing years of the 1950s were marked by dissension and decline. President Case had encountered growing opposition within the faculty. Despite Bard's sustained reputation for boldness in style and adventuresomeness in its academic program, the College's financial fortunes had declined and its prospects were bleak. President Case had been an eloquent orator and an erudite spokesman for the College. Despite these virtues and the fact that Case recruited many of Bard's most distinguished faculty and initiated curricular reforms like the "Common Course," somehow Bard failed to share in the momentum of the post-World War II years in terms of both enrollment and philanthropic support. The Board of Trustees was as divided as the faculty at the end of the ten-year tenure of President Case. More important, however, was the fact that the Board itself was disintegrating gradually. It failed to grapple with the economic needs of the College and it left Bard, at the start of its 100th year, financially drained and physically run down. With Case's departure, Bard was entirely leaderless. Whatever strength resided in the faculty, certainly the College's strongest asset, seemed not enough. In 1960 the College's Business Manager, William Asip, drafted a memorandum addressed to the Trustees in which he outlined in a painstaking and somewhat bittersweet manner what would be required to liquidate the College.

Who was this individual, Reamer Kline, who had the courage in those dark times to assume the difficult task of leading Bard (a challenge under any circumstances) and, in fact, rebuilding it? Kline had been neither a college teacher nor an administrator within the academic world. He had been the rector of a large, important and vital Episcopal parish in New Britain, Connecticut and had risen to prominence in the diocese of Connecticut, in part through his efforts with young people and in education, both Christian and secular. He was beloved by his parishioners and remained for sixteen years in New Britain where he and Mrs. Kline raised three daughters. Through his work in the Church he became friendly with Clinton Jones, a Canon in the Cathedral at Hartford, a Trustee, and a loyal alumnus of Bard from the Class of 1938. Unlike many of the alumni who entered the ministry in the Episcopal church, especially those from the St. Stephen's years, Clint Jones appreciated the new Bard. He served on the Board and was sympathetic to both the ecclesiastical tradition and the modernist pedagogy which were the two hallmarks of the College's heritage. Significantly, he, and later Reamer Kline, saw the reconciliation and perhaps the synthesis of these two vital aspects of the history of Bard as one major objective of their leadership in the College. When, predictably, the Trustees could not agree at first on any successor to Case, Clint somehow managed to intrigue Reamer Kline with the possibility of becoming the new President. Reamer's status, tested skills and his particularly broad interests within education and the Episcopal Church made him an attractive and strong candidate.

Reamer's father had been a distinguished college teacher of history at Middlebury College in Vermont. During Reamer's college years there he met his wife Louise who was to play an active and decisively helpful role throughout Reamer's career and especially during his years at Bard. Louise Kline would be the only spouse of a President ever to receive the Bard Medal (presented to her in 1973) for her service to the College. After graduating from college, Reamer studied English literature, worked for a time as a journalist, and then chose a career in the ministry. The reserved and serious young Kline became involved in a wonderful and humorous incident during his student days at the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Reamer was a co-conspirator in a graduate-student prank which involved the creation and defense of a spurious "original" manuscript source to the Gospels. The hoax was initially a remarkable success among scholars in Cambridge and might have even earned a place in the long and noble history of forgeries of ancient and medieval ecclesiastical documents. But the perpetrators, Reamer among them, readily confessed and exposed the pretense. The episode

became a legend, was written up later several times, and was commemorated permanently in the detail of a beautiful stained glass window which now graces the chapel of the Seminary.

What motivated Reamer Kline to accept the presidency of Bard was his love of young people, his sense of the possibilities, his confidence, and his willingness to seize a significant if troubled opportunity despite visible drawbacks. Last but not least, Reamer's interest in the educational side of his pastoral vocation had grown over the years. In retrospect, the early 1960s were the beginning years of rapid and radical change for American higher education. They will be remembered as the last significant period of expansion for education in the twentieth century. A host of new institutions were founded, many of which have not survived or may not survive the year 2000. Many of these institutions were experimental and heralded a decade of innovation and reform in the theory and practice of American higher education. New College in Florida, Hampshire College in Massachusetts, Franconia College in New Hampshire, Roger Williams College in Rhode Island, not to speak of the plethora of state university campuses are but a small sample of institutions which were conceived and founded in the 1960s. From the vantage point of 1960, starting a new institution could easily have appeared more attractive than rescuing a venerable but starved and confused one.

After much reflection, Reamer accepted the job. When he arrived on campus in July of 1960 he faced three immediate challenges. First, he had to overcome the initial suspicion of both students and faculty. Despite President Case's relative unpopularity, especially among faculty, Case's reputation as an individual was that of a liberal and secular man. The appearance of an Episcopal priest wearing a clerical collar evoked fears of a reactionary return to the values and practices which preceded Dean Tewksbury's arrival at Bard in the 1930s. President Case's reputation for challenging McCarthyism at Washington and Jefferson and at Bard and his support for the progressive image of the College contributed to a sudden nostalgic romanticizing of Case's tenure upon Reamer's arrival. Kline's pragmatically sound and historically justified initial effort to make visible contact with the older alumni and rebuild the connections with the Episcopal Church (which had never been completely severed) were all subject to facile and incorrect public interpretation.

Resistance had to be overcome among the faculty who were wary not only of Reamer Kline's profession but also of his lack of academic experience. Even though he held an honorary degree from Middlebury College earned for his service in the church and to the college, many faculty (as is often the

case with new presidents) took a hard wait-and-see attitude. Students, being younger and more quick to make either-or judgments, were even less tolerant. It would be with a sense of both good-natured irony and personal triumph that Reamer Kline and the College would remember, in the midst of the turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies, the coldness and provocative hostility which Kline encountered among some students in 1960. By 1970, few college presidents in the United States could boast of as trusting, warm and loyal a relationship with students and faculty. Even the most socially, culturally and politically radical elements of the student body and faculty, appreciated Reamer Kline. His gentle dignity and his ability to succeed as President on behalf of the College were not generally perceived or predicted on campus in 1960. Few, if any, would have believed that the tall, Episcopal priest who was then the incoming President would later be found assisting and defending students who had been arrested for reasons social and political during the turmoil of the late sixties.

The second set of immediate challenges facing Reamer Kline were the quality of the lay leadership of the College and the depth of its philanthropic support. Kline had to build a Board of Trustees and an alumni organization. Most importantly, he had to teach the habit of giving which had all but lapsed in the 1950s. There were alumni like Flint Kellogg, John Steinway, and Edgar Hatfield who had stayed with the College through its worst years. But even among the loyal alumni and friends, memories of the ups and downs in the College's history and a gradual acceptance of uncertainty and elegant shabbiness as part of Bard's unique character — as a way of life — had led to a rejection of Bard as the proper object of serious and sustained giving. For anyone coming into the Hudson Valley for the first time in 1960, the contrast between the relative histories of Bard and Vassar was staggering. Vassar, although one year younger than Bard, boasted a magnificent physical plant, an acknowledged national reputation, and a huge endowment of over fifty million dollars. Bard, for positive as well as negative reasons eloquently put forth in the chapters of Reamer Kline's history of the college, failed to develop a comparable constituency and base of financial support. Reamer realized that an overriding and immediate task was to reverse this failure and compensate for its consequences.

Third, Bard's physical plant and resources had become intolerably run down. John Hill, whose daughter graduated from Bard and who later became an influential Trustee, remembered a visit to Bard while he was Chief Executive Officer of the Aetna Life Insurance Company in Hartford. He was struck with how shabby the College looked. There had not been a

single new facility (apart from the federally-funded Tewksbury dormitory) constructed on the Bard campus since the 1930s. The gift of the Zabriskie Estate in 1951 was the only substantial addition to the physical plant of Bard since the days of Bernard Iddings Bell.

Reamer recognized these three pressing needs and went to work immediately. He developed new networks with the Church to assist in the recruitment of students. He became the College's primary ambassador to all secondary schools. He systematically went about rebuilding confidence in Bard with those who might influence the opinions of potential students. Reamer recognized that one major indicator of the success of his efforts would be the quality and size of Bard's enrollment. He realized that growth in enrollment could boost morale and generate the means for financial recovery.

Reamer Kline urged changes in the academic program, expanded the range of the teaching staff, and developed the first professionally-produced and elegant explanatory material on the unique academic opportunities at the College. To deal with faculty morale, Kline made the increase in faculty salaries a high priority. This goal remained a major one for Kline throughout his fourteen years at Bard. The gains in morale and faculty quality are one of his many legacies to the College.

Reamer spent considerable time in his first few years developing a viable student government and assuaging student suspicion, providing in his house a central meeting place and collective home (so to speak) for both students and faculty. Reamer and Louise Kline presided over the faculty, their families, and their spouses as warm friends. The wives of faculty members became organized and volunteered on behalf of Bard. There were parties for children and a regular series of social events which made the faculty feel part of a collegial and friendly campus environment. Reamer and Louise became prominent and beloved by a wide spectrum of groups and individuals throughout the Hudson Valley. The Klins took a personal interest in students. Many of the alumni look back with fondness to those years in the early sixties when they became friends of the President and his wife; when they were encouraged to assume leadership and were brought into the effort to rebuild the morale of the College.

Reamer began to strengthen the Board of Trustees. He drew into the leadership active alumni like David Schwab and William Rueger. He placed on the Board generous and active individuals who had no prior association with the College. Russell Brown became a substantial contributor. Paul Williams, the distinguished lawyer and public servant, became the Chairman

of the Board. Furthermore, Fairleigh Dickinson joined the Board, and would later give the first major gift to the College. Reamer worked closely with Flint Kellogg whose leadership and generosity were to be so important to the fortunes of the College. He made contact with Bishop Donegan and other prominent clergy in New York. He developed a strong relationship with the Procter family which resulted in the creation of the Procter Art Center. He established a mechanism by which parents and friends could give to the College on a regular basis. He put in place the first entirely professional fundraising and development operation in the College's administration and organized the first sustained series of regular publications to the constituency. This was work which Reamer often did with his own hands. He did the writing, the calling, the organizing. He worked with a minimum of bureaucracy and extended himself late into the evening, day after day, week after week, to try to develop a stable, lasting, common-sense institutional structure for the College.

Reamer perceived early three major trends which were to dominate the character of higher education in the sixties: the growth in enrollment, the increase of state support (with a concomitant growth in the number of state institutions), and the radical social and intellectual challenges to the traditions of higher education and campus life.

In anticipation of the enrollment growth, Reamer arranged for the refinancing of the College and the acquisition of the buildings and ninety acres of the Ward Manor property. Originally built as a private residence and later converted and expanded into a retirement home, this property was contiguous to the College. It now provides the major housing complex for students on the Bard College campus. Reamer became active in statewide associations and in the policy-making discussions which characterized the beginning years of the optimistic expansion of higher education in New York State in the 1960s under Governor Nelson Rockefeller's leadership. Bard was accepted as member of the Empire State Foundation. Reamer Kline helped found an organization of which he was later to become the Chairman of the Board — The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities — and brought Bard once again into prominence in the vanguard of educational reform. Likewise, Reamer was instrumental in re-creating a fraternity of Episcopal institutions, the Association of Episcopal Colleges, which continues today and includes Hobart, Kenyon, University of the South, St. Augustine's, Voorhees, Cuttington in Liberia, St. Paul's, and Trinity of Quezon City in the Philippines. Without Kline there would have been no such organization. Typical of Kline's work, the creation of this Episcopal

organization was not exclusively or even primarily a matter of Bard's self-interest. Despite Bard's austere financial condition, Reamer recognized the obligation of older, academically-established, predominantly white institutions to assist the weaker and more fledgling Black colleges of the South, especially those which shared the older, Northern institutions' common Christian heritage.

Kline would reorganize the College's governance and charter in a way which made it eligible for the new influx of state aid, especially Bundy Aid. In short, in the first five years of Kline's tenure at the College, Bard was transformed as an institution. It became professionally managed, visible within the nation and the state, and increasingly in the forefront of social and educational change.

On the physical side, Reamer's accomplishments were dramatic and swift. He brought Richard Griffiths from Hamilton College whose energy, dedication, and ingenuity as Director of the Physical Plant of the College were to become indispensable. Reamer began to refurbish the dormitories. He modernized the plumbing and heating systems. He renovated the Hoffman Library and added a floor in it. He constructed buildings for the Music Department and dormitories in the Cruger Village area. He tore down the dilapidated quonset-hut facilities where the parking lot now is. Reamer built the Procter Art Center; the first lecture facility of the College, Sottery Hall; award-winning modular dormitories, the Ravine Houses; tennis courts; and in the early 1970s a magnificent new addition to the Library, the Kellogg Library. Finally, he built the central facility of the College, given by Fairleigh Dickinson, the dining hall and meeting rooms of the College which the Trustees appropriately named in his and Louise's honor: Kline Commons. Apart from the creation of these new facilities, Reamer took care of the existing plant. John Hill would have occasion to remark in the last year of Kline's tenure that the College was, in essence, unrecognizable from its original condition of more than a decade before.

It could be said that during his tenure Reamer Kline rendered the College modern. But the extent of his accomplishments during his fourteen years as the President of Bard was not merely remedial or restorative. Three qualities were consistent and notable attributes of Bard College throughout the century which preceded Reamer Kline: academic distinction; daring and inventiveness in the educational strategy undertaken by the College; and the unusual, open atmosphere of the campus life engendered by students and faculty. In the area of academic excellence, Reamer Kline brought two influential deans to Bard during his tenure: Harold Hodgkinson, who later

went on to have a distinguished career in research and the management of higher education; and Carl Selinger, a lawyer who went on after six years at Bard to become a Dean at two growing and innovative law schools, one in Hawaii and one in Detroit. Under Hodgkinson's and Kline's leadership, the emphasis on individual instruction and the pedagogical strategy most frequently associated with Dewey and his followers were strengthened. Under Carl Selinger's and Reamer Kline's leadership, the social sciences in general, especially the relationship of theory to practice in the study of society on the undergraduate level, were measurably enhanced. In the last years of Selinger's and Kline's work, the Higher Education Opportunity Program was established to assist educationally and economically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, the extension of the College's program to adults who had been out of school was undertaken in the form of the Independent Studies Program. Finally, the inspiration to use the immediate region surrounding the College as an object of study led to the creation of the Community Regional and Environmental Studies Program. The study of ecology was started as a new discipline in the Natural Sciences Division. A field station on the Hudson River designed for research and the teaching of the environment was planned, constructed, and placed into operation.

The Kline era brought some of the finest teachers in Bard's history into the faculty. In the Languages and Literature Division Robert Kelly, Clark Rodewald, Peter Sourian, Agnes Langdon, Benjamin LaFarge, Frederic Grab, William Wilson, Terence Dewsnap and Mark Lambert were all recruited and tenured. In the Natural Science and Mathematics Division Michael Rosenthal, Burton Brody, Peter Skiff, William Maple, and Hilton Weiss joined the faculty. In the Social Studies Division Richard Wiles, Bernard Tieger, Stuart Levine, Richard Gordon, John Fout, Mark Lytle, Mario Bick, David Pierce, and William Griffith began their service to the College. But it is in the Arts Division that the Kline era was most decisive. Reamer Kline anticipated with prescient accuracy the significance of the arts to the future life of Bard. When Reamer arrived, the staff and range of the arts program were strong but limited. Under his leadership and that of William Driver, the number of teachers in drama and dance grew to include a rich and varied stable of directorial talent and an entirely autonomous dance program staffed by such distinguished teachers and dancers as Aileen Passloff from New York City. Reamer brought painter Matt Phillips to Bard and together they assembled a faculty in painting, sculpture, and art history (which included Jean French, Jacob Grossberg, Murray Reich, Jim Sullivan, Bernard Greenwald and Tom Wolf) that has remained one of the finest in any liberal arts college. Under

Reamer's leadership and by his insistence, a program in Film, headed by Adolfo Mekas, was inaugurated. The Music Department expanded to include Benjamin Boretz, Joan Tower, Elie Yarden, and Luis Garcia Renart.

In expanding the arts, Reamer built upon one of the basic innovations in Dean Tewksbury's program for the College. Since the 1930s, Bard considered the active doing of the Arts — rather than the study of the arts for appreciation — an obligation of the educated individual equal to the study of science, mathematics, foreign language, the humanities, and the social sciences. While this was a notion accepted in the 1930s by progressive colleges like Bennington and Sarah Lawrence which had only women students, it was a concept which ran against the prejudices that informed the commonly-held notion of what an acceptable curriculum for men might be. Although the arts program at Bard was started in the thirties and survived intact throughout the forties and fifties, the significant role of the visual and performing arts grew at Bard under Reamer Kline's leadership. Both in the teaching of literature and in the teaching of the arts, the mixing together of writers, painters, directors, and actors with scholars and critics on an equal basis was a goal attained in the Kline years.

For most of the years in which Reamer was President, the Dean of Students was Mary Sugatt whose tenure extended beyond President Kline to 1981. She and Reamer Kline presided over some of the most difficult and yet humorous periods in Bard's history. The College grew in size enormously from an enrollment of under 300 in 1960 to an enrollment in the 700s in the early 1970s. This expansion was not only one of size. Reamer was the first President of Bard to aggressively recruit minority students into the student body. Reamer reestablished a link to the history of Bard by encouraging scholarships in programs which would attract, as they did, each year a small group of individuals who undertook their pre-ministerial education at Bard. Kline consciously developed a policy in admissions which reflected what the Chaplain of the College, Frederick Q. Shafer, the Bernard Iddings Bell Professor of Religion and a 1937 alumnus of the College, characterized in 1975 as the nature of Bard: "an Episcopal Yeshiva with a Zen Buddhist Chaplain." The 1960s were, among students, a period of courage and inventiveness. For example, members of the Steely Dan rock group, Blythe Danner, Chevy Chase, and a host of our most distinguished alumni writers and journalists all date from the classes of the mid-sixties. Reamer survived police raids, student demonstrations, severe intergenerational strife, radical educational experiments like the "Inner College," (a separate, autonomous unit within the academic program which had a brief but controversial life) with a

wise, Solomonian patience. His even-handedness, his warmth and yet his calm in conflict and under fire made him an exception to the ubiquitous phenomenon of the firing and resigning of college presidents in the late sixties and early seventies. Louise and Reamer sustained their dignified and tasteful lifestyle in the midst of the most speculative and, to some, outrageous shifts in tastes in politics and mores among both students and faculty. Their consistency and integrity and their refusal to become self-righteous or to moralize won them support from the most unlikely sources — often the most unconventional constituents within the Bard College community. Reamer Kline, by the early seventies, became like Emperor Franz Josef of Austria: a symbol of continuity, stability, and evenhandedness in an often-divided, warring, and factious community whose behavior corresponded to that which was then endemic to college campuses around the country.

When, in 1974, Reamer Kline decided to retire from Bard because of ill health and advancing age, the entire Bard community was saddened and taken aback. The community in and around Bard, all his friends and neighbors, the lay leadership of the institution, the Board, and alumni somehow hoped that Reamer's retirement would be yet a few years off. During the first stage of the presidential search process, the College, as all institutions in search of new leadership, assessed the state of the College. The progress of Bard College from 1960 to 1974 was unmistakable. A distinguished but disorganized institution had become confident, organized, and stable. Bard had not only retained and augmented its distinction but had become strong and well-run.

Looking back at the Kline years from the vantage point of almost a decade since their close, it is clear that without Reamer Kline Bard could not be what it has become. He entered the institution at its most critical moment. Of all the shifts in the fortunes of the College, the crisis of 1960 was, without question, Bard's severest test and most dangerous period. Reamer Kline brought unusual skills of perception, vigor, personal integrity and judgment to the College. He drew from the College insight and understanding as to the nature of a superior undergraduate environment. He strengthened Bard's twin inheritances: a progressive curriculum centered on the individual; and the classical tradition which stressed, in part through the Episcopal heritage, the continuity and dominance of the intellectual and aesthetic values of the past. Reamer and Louise Kline came to understand and to love Bard. They not only served it; they made it their home. Apart from making an almost insolvent institution more solvent, a faltering institution steady, Reamer's era was one of synthesis and unity. During his tenure, the gaps between the St.

Stephen's years, the Columbia years, and the autonomous Bard years from 1944 on were closed. Reamer Kline found a way to integrate the fragmented constituencies of the Bard College family. Devoid of egotism, arrogance, or self-righteousness, Reamer Kline undertook the obligations of this office with dedication. He left for his successor an imaginative and vital Bard whose constituents reflected the economic and intellectual gains he brought. Most of all, Reamer Kline passed to all his successors the model and the foundation for the future leadership of Bard.

— Leon Botstein