

12-30-2011

Beyond Progressive Education: Why John Andrew Rice Really Opened Black Mountain College

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Recommended Citation

Ritter, Jennifer M. (2011) "Beyond Progressive Education: Why John Andrew Rice Really Opened Black Mountain College," *Rollins Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholarship.rollins.edu/rurj/vol5/iss2/2>

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Changes made to manuscript following the request for minor revisions:

As per the suggestions, I have eliminated the use of “to be” verbs in the introductory paragraph by re-working all the sentences that used to contain them. I have removed instances of the word “But” beginning sentences (except in quoted passages) by either shortening the sentence, changing the transition word or working “however” into the interior of the sentences in question. I must admit to some confusion as to “but” being a contraction, as it is not a shortened word, so I did not change any other “contractions” that may begin sentences in the paper on account of the ambiguity of this recommendation. The thesis has been modified in that the previous concluding sentence, “Rice’s personality, dedication to progressive education, dismissal from numerous colleges and fixation on attaining greatness combined to turn him into the type of man he sought to avoid becoming” has been deleted. The new final sentence of the introductory paragraph is a revision which has now been altered to phrase it so that Rice opened Black Mountain in order to prove that he was a great man, which is what he sought. This helps it conform to the title but retains the aspect of the original thesis that led to the extensive personal analysis of Rice that is treated by many of the footnoted materials and sources. As a side note, if the reader wishes to explore more about Black Mountain College’s history I encourage them to visit Olin Library and read over the appropriate supplementary titles referenced in this paper. The history of Black Mountain College is worth a whole separate study on its own. The word “entered” in the paragraph on holistic learning has been amended to read “entertained.” The opening sentence in the paragraph that begins with “To complicate matters” has been re-written so that it is less awkward. It now addresses Rice’s lack of attention rather than an inability to observe details correctly, which was a vague turn of phrase at best. Later in the same paragraph the words “tendency towards” now appear before “oversight.” The short references to Hamilton Holt remain throughout the paper however, the paragraphs that formerly compared Sawney Webb to Hamilton Holt and John Rice to Hamilton Holt have been relocated to follow the paragraph that begins “In contrast,” in the order they are respectively listed. Further, the paragraph formerly about Webb and Holt has been retooled so that it is primarily about Holt as an important international figure, it relates one likeness to Webb at the end of the paragraph where it is remarked that both used unilateral decision making power which was mentioned in the preceding paragraph in regards to Holt. The latter paragraph still compares Holt and Rice but the introductory paragraph has been re-written so it relates how the similarities between Holt and Rice complicated their interpersonal conflict. The paragraph which begins “Not surprisingly” has been edited so that the conflict it references is one between Holt and Rice, rather than a trait of Rice’s that led him into conflict with Holt. The sentence contrasting Holt’s ability to be “grim” despite his greatness to Sawney’s desire for it has been moved to the paragraph about Sawney Webb near the end of the paper.

The 1930s emerged as one of the most turbulent periods in American history. Members of the middle and lower classes faced rampant economic depression and unemployment. Despite the hardships, higher education in the United States underwent a transformation. Progressive new ideas about teaching and learning took shape as a handful of colleges throughout the nation reorganized to embody the upcoming principles. Rollins College represented one of the foremost among these forward looking schools. Newly elected President Hamilton Holt set about restructuring the school day as well as altering the format of classes to discourage lectures and promote the relationship between students and faculty. As part of his reform campaign, he hired progressive Rhodes Scholar John Andrew Rice to teach Greek and Latin. Rice proved too radical for Holt's vision of Rollins and lost his job as a result. Upon his release from teaching at Rollins, Rice and a small group of fellow faculty members and a handful of students defected to South Carolina and opened Black Mountain College in 1933. Rice risked opening a new college in the middle of the Great Depression on account of his intense desire to prove himself as a great man.

First, and foremost, Rice's personal characteristics were a powerful force in his life and the lives of those he came in contact with. Outspoken and unorthodox, he acted as a center of controversy on more than one occasion. He was strongly opposed to traditional entrenched institutions, such as the Greek system and organized religion. In 1932, he served as chairman of the Rollins committee assigned to investigate whether fraternities aligned with the College's experimental direction.¹ The committee's findings, despite the predominance of former pledges, were resolutely 'no.'² While Rice was in the majority on this issue, it would prove to be an exception to his general rule.

More often than not, Rice styled himself as an iconoclast.³ His question during a panel session at Rollins entitled 'The Place of the Church in the Modern World' provided a better window into his line of thinking; "if I should come along Interlaken Avenue tomorrow, Sunday, morning, and, instead of the churches, I should find green grass growing, what difference would it make, and to whom?"⁴ In his autobiography, Rice expressed his opinion that Holt had ample opportunity to uncover his religious persuasion, meaning lack of it, before hiring him as Rollins' "liberal on my [Holt's] faculty."⁵ Holt failed to take the possibility of religious discord into account.

Rice's teaching style also raised questions. Although Rice did not suffer from an inability to transition off the lecture system as some of the long term faculty at Rollins did, his use of the Socratic method to engage students was handled in such a way that it became questionable.⁶ One

¹ Jack C. Lane, *Rollins College: A Centennial History* (Rollins College: Rollins College, 2009), 142.

² Lane, *Rollins College*, 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴ John Andrew Rice, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1942), 301.

⁵ Rice, *I Came Out*, 299.

⁶ Lane, *Rollins College*, 148.

example was his decision to post a pinup of a pair of insufficiently clad women to the wall without any explanation.⁷ The move proved to be a catalyst for a discussion on the definition of art but such unconventional methods were not readily welcomed by the Rollins faculty at large, especially since he had been hired to teach the classical languages, which were a graduation requirement.⁸ This interdisciplinary approach to learning was in keeping with the Progressive spirit of the College but its application was executed carelessly and many of his students left “virtually as ignorant of the two languages as when they entered.”⁹ His methodology could also be unmercifully harsh upon the student body because it “hurt people’s feelings, hurt their vanity, hurt their pride, which was often unfortunate but sometimes productive.”¹⁰

However, his behavior was not the only attribute that made him stand out; Rice’s appearance also tended to attract attention. A number of the affidavits later filed against him attacked the scandalously short bathing suit he wore “at the college beachhouse in New Smyrna...he was later accused of parading around in nothing more than a jockstrap.”¹¹ He was even reported to have conversations with passersby from the yard of his campus housing while attired in nothing more than his underwear.¹² Rice’s “carelessness in dress” combined with his “perennial pipe, from which he scatters ashes around him” and argumentative personality made the stocky, rotund man difficult to ignore.¹³

Given this information, it seems counter intuitive that he was offered a number of prestigious opportunities. Yet, there was a great deal more to John Rice than was sometimes readily visible to his detractors. Even Hamilton Holt admitted that “Rice had a good side. In not a few respects.”¹⁴ He was a brilliant Rhodes Scholar, “recognized authority on the writings of Dean Swift” and a Guggenheim fellowship recipient.¹⁵ Another opinion also recognized his dual nature as, “an amiable, provocative Socrates, and a diabolic rebel and critic.”¹⁶ Students that he took a liking to remembered him in glowing terms and more often recalled his positive side. Black Mountain College student Sue Riley said in retrospect that:

John Rice genuinely believed in the value of the student...His Socratic dialogue method of teaching, and his warm almost grandfatherly way of conducting writing seminars were both stimulating to me, stretching my mind and deepening my level of understanding. And beyond that he was a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid; Rice, *I Came Out*, 299.

⁹ Lane, *Rollins College*, 149.

¹⁰ Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 2002), 8.

¹¹ Rice, *I Came Out*, 311. ; Lane, *Rollins College*, 152.

¹² Lane, *Rollins College*, 152.

¹³ Harris, *The Arts*, 8.

¹⁴ Rice, *I Came Out* (annotated by Hamilton Holt), 295.

¹⁵ Garcia, “John Rice.”

¹⁶ Harris, *The Arts*, 8.

friendly counselor whose study door was always open, even late at night, when I needed to talk.¹⁷

He also believed in a holistic approach to learning, “the education of the whole man: by a whole man” but he also had the wisdom to know that, “None of us were whole, man or woman.”¹⁸ In addition, he sought to overcome the inherent racist views that were part of his Southern upbringing.¹⁹ Strangely, the most moving piece in Rice’s defense came from Hamilton Holt’s written margin notes in his copy of Rice’s autobiography, which ironically opened by accusing Rice of telling “lies, [and] half truths worse than lies.”²⁰ In the same book, Holt’s frank notes indicate that he wanted to keep Rice at Rollins. What is interesting to note is that Holt left behind two annotated copies of Rice’s biography and in regard to this note their content is nearly identical; one reads “tried again and again to save him,” while the other says, “to the last I tried in every way to save him.”²¹ This came from the man who not only fired Rice but also felt free to rip apart the particulars of his chapter about Rollins in the autobiography. If he was willing to contradict almost every point Rice made and still entertained this notation, he was likely being sincere to some degree.

In contrast to Rice, Hamilton Holt was a different kind of man in many respects. His first exposure to Progressive thinking came during his years as the editor and owner of *The Independent*, a weekly religious magazine that his grandfather had helped develop and which Holt largely secularized.²² He was well known across the nation for his support of the League of Nations and his ardent pacifism.²³ These views clashed with Rice’s earlier career positions including his work in the War Department, Military Intelligence Division, and the Department of Codes and Ciphers.²⁴ Similarly, Holt’s personal convictions were more in line with conservative thinking when compared to Rice. Holt stood by the Greek system and actually recognized a new sorority on campus in the midst of the committee investigation.²⁵ He gladly welcomed the donation for Knowles Memorial Chapel whereas Rice publically denounced its Christmas service as “obscene” because the strong Catholic influence on the service was at odds with its

¹⁷ Sue Spayth Riley, “Some Pieces of the College,” in *Black Mountain College Sprouted Seeds An Anthology of Accounts*, ed. Mervin Lane (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 80.

¹⁸ Harris, *The Arts*, 53; Rice, *I Came Out*, 322.

¹⁹ Harris, *The Arts*, 8.

²⁰ Rice, *I Came Out* (annotated by Hamilton Holt), 295.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

²² Julian Chambliss, “Hamilton Holt (1872-1951): Eighth President of Rollins College,” *Golden Personalities* (Rollins Archives Web Site, 2009)

²³ Chambliss, “Hamilton Holt.”

²⁴ Angelica Garcia, “John Andrew Rice (1888-1968): Controversial Professor, Founder of Black Mountain College,” *Golden Personalities* (Rollins Archives Web Site, 2009)

²⁵ Lane, *Rollins College*, 144.

Protestant orientation.²⁶ Holt's administrative methods were conventional despite his aspiration to change the nature of higher education and eliminate the traditional lecture course. His innovative conference plan was accused of "putting Socrates on the eight-hour day" rather than truly revolutionizing the curriculum.²⁷ President Holt was generally true to his mission of making Rollins a more democratic institution by allowing students and faculty to voice their opinions, but if solid disagreement surfaced over his more cherished policies he stood fast and leaned toward the use of authoritarian control.²⁸

As such, Holt was accustomed to forging his own path. In addition to his Presidency at Rollins, Holt had owned and edited *The Independent*, helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, attended the Hague and Paris Peace Conferences, received more than six international commendations from international governments, brought John Dewey to Rollins to host the Rollins Educational Conference and initiated the Animated Magazine program at Rollins that attracted famous personalities including Edward Murrow and Greer Garson.²⁹ Rice's appraisal of Holt was mixed, much as Holt's opinion of Rice seems to have been ambivalent. Rollins' President was "driven in unpredictable turn by ambition, sentimentality, charity, Yankee shrewdness, pride, humility, and childlike wonder" and yet was also, "a very lovable man."³⁰ Like the founder of the Webb School, where Rice had taught previously, Holt was accused of unilateral decision making in regard to issues regarding Rollins.³¹

Interestingly, Rice and Holt shared several positive attributes, which may have exacerbated the conflict between them and pushed Rice to prove himself by defending the ideas he was fired for by opening Black Mountain College. These men were progressive by the standards of the day and sought to institute new changes in education. Likewise they valued student and faculty interaction as a key innovation in their learning process. It was their disagreement over the scope and nature of necessary alterations that set them at odds. Each of them was also a firm believer in his own ideas which, unfortunately, decreased their ability to compromise or even discuss the issues at hand. Holt and Rice were each charismatic and assertive, traits that lead both of them to become leaders at various points in their careers. By seeing many of his own personal strengths and failings reflected in the Holt, who was an international figure, Rice was plagued by a feeling of inferiority and needed to defend the ideas that got him fired from Rollins.

Not surprisingly, this conflict led to a direct confrontation between Professor Rice and President Holt. A committee had been created to assess Holt's treasured "eight-hour day" format for the courses and it voted that the plan be abolished.³² Again, Rice was a member of the faction

²⁶ Rice, *I Came Out*, 301; 311.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁸ Lane, *Rollins College*, 142.

²⁹ Lane, *Rollins College*, 155; Chambliss, "Hamilton Holt"; Ward, Harold A. III. Interview with Wenxian Zhang, Allia Alli and Jennifer Ritter. [Rollins Oral History Archive](#). 26 May 2010. 9.

³⁰ Rice, *I Came Out*, 302.

³¹ Garcia, "John Rice."

³² Sam Hodges, "Educational Camelot Had Rollins Ties Professor's Firing Opened Door For The Black Mountain Dream," *Orlando Sentinel* (December 6, 1987): 1.

opposed to Holt's idea, as he had been in the conflict over the fraternities.³³ In Holt's mind, the faculty was given the privilege of having a say in the altered curriculum as a token of generosity on behalf of the president.³⁴ He declared that if the Rollins plan was dropped "either he would resign or a certain group of faculty would have to go."³⁵ Although the resolution to do away with the Rollins plan was not passed, Holt called for John Rice to resign four days after the recommendation was made; Rice refused and was summarily fired in March of 1933.³⁶ In spite of his notation that Rice's version of the event was "not accurately related" Holt did not deny that he "called thirteen recalcitrant members of the faculty into his office and handed them slips of paper to sign, pledges that the administration would be supported whatever it did."³⁷ Rice suggested that Holt's ultimate decision to fire him resulted from outside pressure, a claim Holt denied.³⁸

Motivation aside, the event triggered a chain reaction. A ten-day investigation by the American Association of University Professors ensued in which Rollins' tenure policy was declared to be insufficient and President Holt was cautioned that he was in the wrong for abruptly dismissing Rice, who had tenure and was cleared by the investigation later on in 1933.³⁹ By the conclusion of the academic year, eight faculty members who either agreed with Rice or simply objected to the "violation of his academic freedom" had quit or been released from the College along with a number of students who refused to return to Rollins in protest of the dismissals.⁴⁰

At this point, Rice had no choice but to pursue a new career. He had resolved "not to try teaching anymore. I had learned my lesson...There was no place for me...in any established school or college."⁴¹ Rice was considering writing or playwriting as his new direction in life.⁴² According to his account however, Bob Wunsch and Frederick Georgia, both of whom had also been released from Rollins, were serious about opening a new institution that would employ the principles they had been trying to enact at Rollins.⁴³ Despite Rice's statement that "I hung back," evidence suggests that this may have been exaggerated modesty.⁴⁴ Records show that he and Wunsch travelled to Pennsylvania in order to discuss the proposition of opening a new college with President Frank Aydelotte of Swarthmore College who also happened to be Rice's brother-

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lane, *Rollins College*, 145.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hodges, "Educational Camelot," 2.

³⁷ John Andrew Rice, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century* (annotated by Hamilton Holt) (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1942), 307.; Rice, *I Came Out*, 307.

³⁸ Rice, *I Came Out* (annotated by Hamilton Holt), 308.

³⁹ Harris, *The Arts*, 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Rice, *I Came Out*, 316.

⁴² Ibid., 317.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

in-law.⁴⁵ Rice and Georgia then drove to Blue Ridge in South Carolina on Wunsch's advice to take a look at the seasonally disused YMCA complex that ultimately became the campus of Black Mountain College.⁴⁶ In addition, a reflection from Black Mountain's treasurer, Theodore Dreier, states that he was also present at the meeting with Aydelotte and had to talk Rice out of announcing the opening of the college before they could even be sure of one year's financial viability.⁴⁷ The same document recorded that an alternate rector, Black Mountain's term for its executive head rather than 'president,' was chosen in Rice's stead because "it was thought better not to have Rice, even though he was obviously our real leader."⁴⁸

Also of interest was Rice's reaction to the attempt to get media recognition for the opening of Black Mountain College. After sending an article to the associated press, Rice and Dreier "felt they had to go ahead with the venture" despite a follow up letter reversing the decision to publish it.⁴⁹ Thinking that there would be no publicity for the opening at all, Rice changed his mind and wanted to abandon the project; he was willing to forsake it until Dreier read him an article that had been written in the *Herald Tribune* announcing the opening.⁵⁰ In his earnest, Rice plunged into the prospect of creating his ideal college. If no established institution would accept him he was just going to have to establish one on his own. Faced with the possibility of ruin however, Rice felt it necessary to renounce the project if it would preserve his reputation. The small group did proceed with the plan however, and Black Mountain College opened in September of 1933 with twelve faculty members and twenty-two students.⁵¹

Explicitly, Black Mountain was founded on three cornerstones: "complete democratic self-rule, extensive work in the creative arts, and interdisciplinary study."⁵² The aspect that Black Mountain is remembered for today was its commitment to art in its many forms. This was the component that inspired Rice more than any of the others:

But between the vincible, who had surrendered to the public world, and the invincible, who would not, there were those who began to ask why they had given up, unable to take their submission as final and yet not knowing how, or whether indeed, they might become artists once again. It would not mean creation, they sadly knew, but was it just barely possible that there could be such a thing as having another try, this time at re-creation?

⁴⁵ Harris, *The Arts*, 2.

⁴⁶ Rice, *I Came Out*, 317.

⁴⁷ Theodore Dreier, "Early Close Calls," in *Black Mountain College Sprouted Seeds An Anthology of Accounts*, ed. Mervin Lane (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 24-25.

⁴⁸ Dreier, "Early Close Calls," 25.

⁴⁹ Harris, *The Arts*, 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² William C. Rice, introduction to "Black Mountain College Memoirs," by John Andrew Rice, *The Southern Review* 23:5 (1989): 569.

It was for these that Black Mountain was founded.⁵³

That was the reason Rice gave to the world. And although the nation was facing the worst economic crisis in its history, it was actually a suitable time to focus on the arts.

As Hitler rose to power in Germany and closed the Bauhaus, an influx of European intellectuals, many of them Jewish, began heading to the United States.⁵⁴ For Black Mountain that meant an opportunity to attract distinguished faculty members in need of teaching positions, such as noted artist Josef Albers.⁵⁵ Albert Einstein was also recruited to join the College's Advisory Council which, although legally powerless, boosted the institution's credibility by featuring other distinguished members, such as John Dewey and Carl Jung.⁵⁶

Additionally, the New Deal helped to promote the arts. The Work Progress Administration's Federal Art Project started at roughly the same time Black Mountain College opened.⁵⁷ These programs used government money to employ artists and enhance public culture by supporting projects such as murals and the "creation of local orchestras, drama groups, galleries, and museums" and thereby helped nurture a growth of American based art independent of the European tradition.⁵⁸ The result was a relatively tolerant atmosphere in which to open a modest liberal arts school, one which combined both standard academic subjects with the arts, rather than focusing exclusively on one or the other.

Naturally, raising funds to open such an institution was not an easy matter. After reviewing the College's immediate needs for its first year, it became apparent that a minimum of \$14,500 in underwriting would be needed to make the college a reality, excluding tuition.⁵⁹ By modern standards that amount may seem modest for the founding sum of an educational institution. After accounting for inflation though, that figure reaches \$239,027.52 in relation to the value of the dollar in 2010.⁶⁰ Treasurer Dreier recalled that tuition made up the remainder of the estimated operating costs for the first year at a rate of \$1,000 per student.⁶¹ In terms of 2010's dollar value, that was \$16,484.66 for a single year's worth of tuition.⁶² In summation, it cost nearly half of a well-off family's yearly budget, assuming they made \$40 a week during 1933, to be able to afford sending their child to Black Mountain College.⁶³ Combined with the College's

⁵³ John Andrew Rice, "Black Mountain College Memoirs," *The Southern Review* 23:5 (1989): 574.

⁵⁴ Harris, *The Arts*, xxi.

⁵⁵ Rice, "Black Mountain," 576.

⁵⁶ Harris, *The Arts*, 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xxi, xx.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ "Inflation Calculator The Changing Value of a Dollar," HBrothers, accessed November 16, 2010.

⁶¹ Dreier, "Early Close Calls," 25.

⁶² "Inflation Calculator."

⁶³ Mirra Komarovsky, "The Plight of the Unemployed in the 1930s," in *Major Problems in American History 1920-1945*, ed. Colin Gordon (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 278.

lack of accreditation, the high price tag made attracting students a difficult task.⁶⁴ Throughout the College's history, it seldom had more than one hundred students at any one time.⁶⁵ Clearly, Black Mountain College was not opened as a money making venture.

At the same time, Rice was still an ardent supporter of democracy within educational institutions. And it would seem that the use of free choice to enhance the learning experience paid off. Visiting lecturer May Sarton remarked in a letter to a friend that, "I attended the best, most disciplined English class I have seen at Black Mountain. Everyone had his say, and yet the class had a focus and an end and got there."⁶⁶ She went on to describe how one of the girls spent an interlude- "which means that people can work for a week and not go to classes. The best work gets done then"- studying Yeats independently as a result of her lecture⁶⁷. Black Mountain students did not have to take a set of required courses and they lived communally on the campus with the faculty members and their families.⁶⁸ By the same token, the administration was not subject to any form of external legal control.⁶⁹ Partially to prove to the students that Black Mountain would indeed be democratic and partially because they had not planned anything for the first day, "At the first meeting of the college that was to start the revolution in American education the first speaker called was the permanent caretaker, who would explain fire precautions."⁷⁰ Its short twenty-seven year history⁷¹ did not diminish the significance of its accomplishments.⁷¹

Yet, Rice resigned from Black Mountain College in the spring of 1940.⁷² In his autobiography he avoided giving any particulars as to the circumstances and settled with summarizing his career at Black Mountain College in one sentence, "It began in doubt, rose to high hope, and ended in despair."⁷³ However, he noted earlier on that, "two charges [from Rollins]...transmuted into atheism and nudism" continued to haunt him through his career at Black Mountain.⁷⁴ Details about his alleged nudism are difficult to track down but the assumption that he was an atheist can be traced to a "lecture he gave for the PTA in Charlotte, North Carolina."⁷⁵ He is recorded as having said that humans were not "special darlings of God

⁶⁴ William Rice, "Black Mountain," 570.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ May Sarton, "Excerpt from Unpublished Letter to Rosalind Greene, November 1940," in *Black Mountain College Sprouted Seeds An Anthology of Accounts*, ed. Mervin Lane (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 81.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Harris, *The Arts*, 7.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Rice, *I Came Out*, 321.

⁷¹ Garcia, "John Rice."

⁷² Harris, *The Arts*, 56.

⁷³ Rice, *I Came Out*, 323.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 311.

⁷⁵ Harris, *The Arts*, 54.

that created them...but only one point in a long line of evolution.”⁷⁶ Another controversy that followed him from Rollins was the rumors that he had affairs with students.⁷⁷ Some of the best insight into the atmosphere at the College leading up to Rice’s resignation was expressed by a student:

The point is some of the faculty are trying to get rid of Rice and threaten to break up the College if he doesn’t leave. Ostensibly their reason is that they can’t get money and students as long as he continues to insult people away from here, as he has done all his life... the reason goes back to what happened last year, because I think his disciples (and that’s what many of the faculty were) feel somehow that he betrayed them then, and they no longer have security in him, so they are looking for a new kind, which is success...it is enormously complicated by personal rivalries and jealousies, and by certain solid criticisms on their side. I don’t know what will happen. I hope he will leave peacefully, because there is no possibility of reviving his prestige here.⁷⁸

In truth, the fear that Black Mountain College would close as a result of such a schism was well justified, and the threat was not idle. Rice was not one of the three legal incorporators of the College and as such could not have controlled the outcome of such a situation if he had chosen to stay.⁷⁹ Rice also sunk to the point of having public arguments with his wife, Nell, who was one of Black Mountain’s incorporators, and attacking faculty members using a double standard where he excused his own behaviors.⁸⁰ “What happened last year” is unclear and cannot be analyzed further with any confidence.⁸¹ It would seem that despite the fresh start afforded to him by helping found his dream college, Rice’s personality continued to set him at odds with others.

Because of this, his dismissals from Rollins and Black Mountain College were not particularly surprising. Nor were they the only ones he faced during his academic career. After eight years on the faculty at the University of Nebraska starting in 1919, Rice quickly took an offer for a new position at New Jersey College for Women of Rutgers University in the wake of a “conspiracy...to raise faculty salaries to somewhere near the living level.”⁸² He was not formally dismissed but he was aware of the possibility that he might be, especially since the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lane, *Rollins College*, 152; Harris, *The Arts*, 57.

⁷⁸ Marian (Nacke) Tetter, “Letter, 24 April 1939,” in *Black Mountain College Sprouted Seeds An Anthology of Accounts*, ed. Mervin Lane (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 68.

⁷⁹ Harris, *The Arts*, 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁸¹ Tetter, “Letter, 24 April,” 68.

⁸² Rice, *I Came Out*, 273, 271, 294, 292; Garcia, “John Rice.”.

“ringleader...was gone from the university, forced out by a trick.”⁸³ In 1930, he left Rutgers after three years due to an event described only as “a faculty controversy.”⁸⁴ His tenure at other institutions was consistently brief as well, even when he left in good standing. Rice only taught at the Webb School for two years, served as a fellow or fellow-elect for the University of Chicago for two years and spent one year in Washington D.C. working for the military.⁸⁵ While Rice may have been a restless man, it also stands to reason that he was unable to find a place where he was accepted and could get along with his coworkers.

To complicate matters, Rice did not always put an appropriate amount of attention into the tasks he undertook. This would have contributed to his inability to gain social acceptance if it translated into a disinterest in others. An objective example of such a mistake occurs in Rice’s autobiography; his description of Holt remarks that Holt’s eyes were blue when in fact Holt supplied that, “mine are brown.”⁸⁶ Rice also exhibited this tendency toward oversight of correct details regarding his publication “Grandmother Smith’s Plantation” which was published in *Harpers Magazine*.⁸⁷ A relation of one of the story’s characters criticized the piece for its factual mistakes.⁸⁸ Despite his intellectual brilliance, John Rice often lacked the common touch that could have made him more approachable and less caustic.

Perhaps more than anything else, John Rice was motivated by an acute fear of failure. This theme appears again and again in his autobiography. He recounts a quote attributed to Holt, which Holt marked as a “double twisted quotation,” that says, “Everything I have ever done... has been a failure. I was a failure at Yale and at Columbia; *The Independent* was a failure... then I campaigned for the League of Nations, and that was a failure; now it is Rollins.”⁸⁹ Ralph Lounsbury, who was released from Rollins as an objector to Rice’s dismissal despite his strong conservatism, was also a close friend and classmate of Hamilton Holt.⁹⁰ Lounsbury joined the Black Mountain group but suffered from a stroke shortly after the college opened.⁹¹ Rice’s memory of their final conversation concluded with Lounsbury saying, “What will people say, John? I’m a failure.”⁹² On this occasion Rice commented that the word failure was also “Yale’s word, the word of millions of Americans.”⁹³ Rice finally applied it to himself in reference to his departure from Black Mountain College.⁹⁴ The same student who wrote about Rice’s clash with the faculty of Black Mountain College also put his failure into revealing terms, “It is fascinating to watch such a decline from magnificence... But sometimes it is terribly sad. But still magnificent- still on a heroic scale.”⁹⁵

⁸³ Rice, *I Came Out*, 292.

⁸⁴ Garcia, “John Rice.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Rice, *I Came Out* (annotated by Hamilton Holt), 297.

⁸⁷ Garcia, “John Rice.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Rice, *I Came Out*, 303; Rice, *I Came Out* (annotated by Hamilton Holt), 303.

⁹⁰ Rice, *I Came Out*, 306.

⁹¹ Ibid., 322.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 320.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 323-324.

⁹⁵ Tetter, “Letter, 24 April,” 69.

Along with his fixation on failure, which he admitted to some degree, Rice was also motivated by an underlying desire for acknowledgement. John Rice quoted Doctor Johnson in saying, “He would have been a great man if he but knew how to go about it.”⁹⁶ This line seems to have defined Rice’s life. He often lingered on the careers and personality traits of those whom were considered great, regardless of whether his own feelings toward them were positive or negative. His take on greatness was as follows, “No one knows when, but some day there will be a writer more profound than Shakespeare, painters who will be masters of all who have lived before, a Beethoven who knows how to reach the heights and depths of human feeling, a greater man than Socrates will live.”⁹⁷ Rice was often surrounded by men he deemed to be great and it had a profound influence on him.

One of those who “might have been...great” was Rice’s uncle, ‘Cotton Ed,’ who was better known as Senator Ellison Durant Smith of South Carolina.⁹⁸ His uncle failed on several counts by Rice’s standards. Ed never escaped the “stamp of Southern Puritanism” by which Rice seems to have meant adherence to old Southern ethics in a time when they were becoming obsolete.⁹⁹ He also recorded his uncle’s knack for telling exaggerated stories, talent for “touch[ing] a weakness,” and his inability to make decisions.¹⁰⁰ Cotton Ed did not usually commit to any one side of an issue but Rice was exceedingly fond of him and enjoyed his “un-centered nature.”¹⁰¹

Sawney Webb, one of the founders of the Webb School where Rice attended as a student and later returned as a teacher, was another of these aspiring giants.¹⁰² Rice associated “‘success’ and ‘failure’” with Sawney Webb, as he did with Hamilton Holt, whom he compared to Webb.¹⁰³ Webb had a domineering personality and denounced anything less than fame as failure.¹⁰⁴ When he was called upon to finish a deceased senator’s term, Sawney was hailed as “only a great teacher; and he had wanted so much to be a great man.”¹⁰⁵ Unlike Sawney Webb, Holt at least was occasionally, “grim while he was being called a great man.”¹⁰⁶ Sawney’s preoccupation with comprehensive greatness overshadowed his relationship with his brother and ultimately created a divide between them.¹⁰⁷ His authoritarianism led him to claim the ownership of the Webb School for himself following his brother’s death in the grounds that, “if there was a partnership, it did not go beyond the life of either [of them].”¹⁰⁸

⁹⁶ Doctor Johnson as quoted in Rice, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1942), 303.

⁹⁷ Rice, *I Came Out*, 216.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16; Harris, *The Arts*, 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 219-220; Garcia, “John Rice.”

¹⁰³ Rice, *I Came Out*, 220; Rice, *I Came Out* (annotated by Hamilton Holt), 297.

¹⁰⁴ Rice, *I Came Out*, 220.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

On the other hand, the Webb School's second founder, Sawney's brother John, "never wanted to be anything great."¹⁰⁹ Of the two of them, it was John who captivated Rice's admiration. John Webb's temperament was mild and his observations were equally subtle, such as Rice's later discovery that John Webb had known practically everything about his students but had discretely kept the information to himself.¹¹⁰ The descriptions of John Webb are laced with musical terminology from, "we heard his voice again, as a musician will read a score and recall its perfect playing," to "language and thought were to him as scores to a musician."¹¹¹ As a lover of the arts, Rice would have used such diction in reference to a man he held in high esteem. To Rice, John Webb was a great man but, "it was only when he lay in his coffin that we could speak without fear of reproof [he disliked being termed 'great']."¹¹²

At the same time, Rice had to come to terms with the less desirable similarities he shared with these great men. His inability to overcome this challenge is what perpetuated his lack of social adaptation and enhanced his sense of self-importance. Despite his admiration for John Webb, Rice was never able to cultivate the calm demeanor or sensitivity to others that characterized him.

Rather, his behavior had more in common with Ellison Durant Smith, Sawney Webb and Hamilton Holt. In the case of his uncle, Rice recognized the family resemblance, "getting a dim foreknowledge of my own struggle to find a center."¹¹³ Not only did he pick up his uncle's paradoxical nature, Rice also seemed to inherit the habit of infuriating others. Rice's similarity to Sawney Webb was exhibited in his dissatisfaction with the renown that was bestowed on him. Despite his status as "Holt's brightest golden personality," John Rice was not content.¹¹⁴ He "wanted... to know that I [John Rice] was right."¹¹⁵ Louis Adamic's *Harper's* article on Black Mountain College, entitled "Education on a Mountain," was a tribute to Rice and served to further enlarge his ego.¹¹⁶ His one-man style of leadership was something that both Sawney Webb and Hamilton Holt also exhibited. The most compelling evidence for this self-centeredness actually stems from Rice himself and from one of his students from Black Mountain College. In his autobiography, John Rice wrote that "Holt was Rollins," the irony is fitting in that Marian Teeter wrote almost exactly the same thing in relation to Rice, "Rice was the College [Black Mountain College]."¹¹⁷

To conclude, John Andrew Rice founded Black Mountain College as the culmination of his career. The new institution combined his progressive ideals about teaching methods and a comprehensive approach to education through an emphasis on the arts. His long history of dismissals from varying institutions reflected the grating aspects of his personality which often set him at odds with his colleagues and with students. Given the opportunity to open a new

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 221.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 217, 221.

¹¹² Ibid., 221.

¹¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁴ Lane, *Rollins College*, 148.

¹¹⁵ Harris, *The Arts*, 8.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 52, 56.

¹¹⁷ Rice, *I Came Out*, 302; Teeter, "Letter, 24 April," 69.

college formed in his own image, Rice succeeded in making Black Mountain College a reality despite economic challenges but was unable to rise to the occasion or conquer his own personal shortcomings. His dismissal from the college he pioneered was his ultimate failure that dashed his hope of attaining a lasting place in society. His lasting legacy is that of a great instigator.

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