

Athens wasn't built in a day

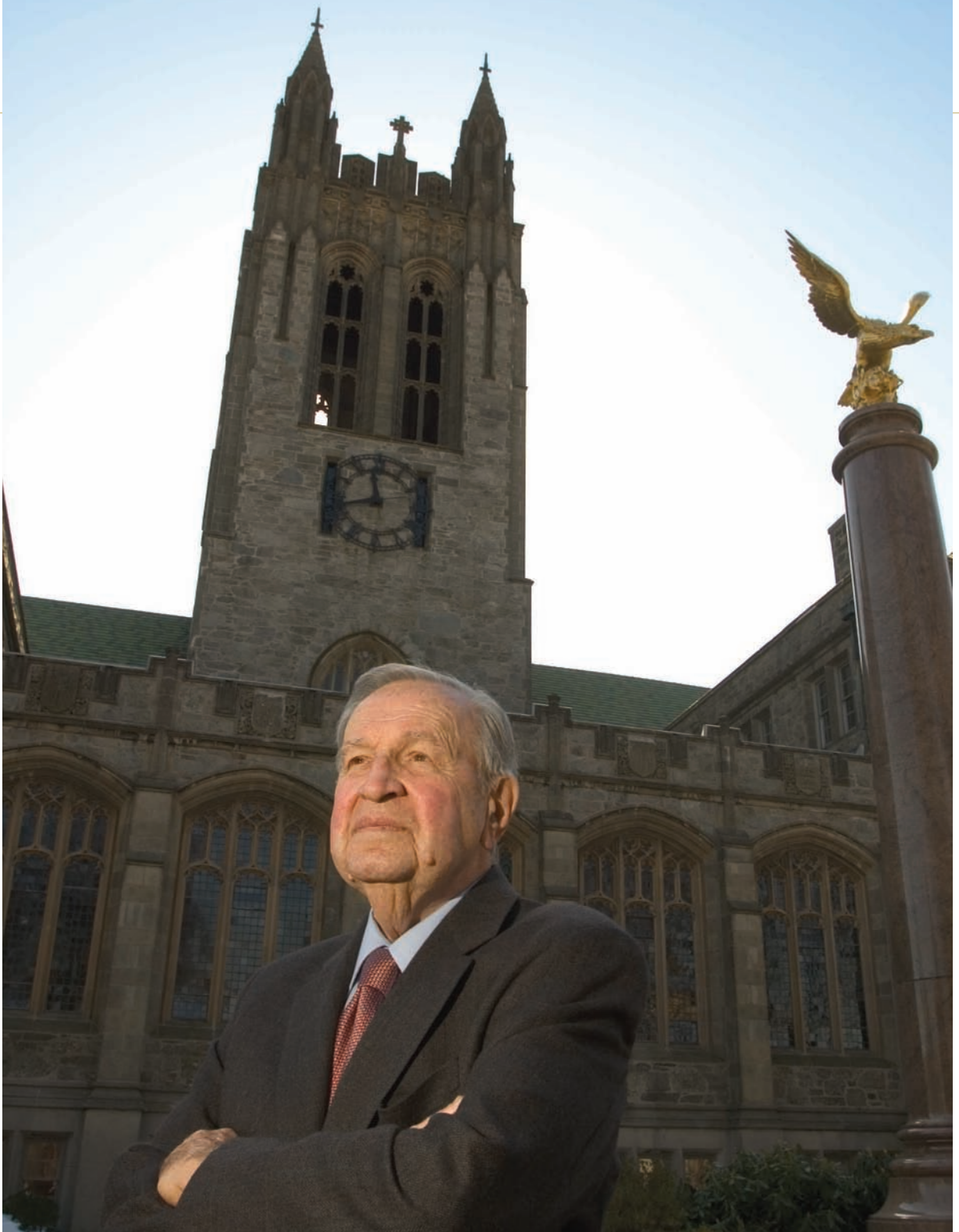
Historian Thomas O'Connor says the Hub's first plan for urban renewal—physical, intellectual, and spiritual—was the product of an enterprising, civic-minded elite. Which leaves him wondering: *Who would make Boston the 'Athens of America' today?*

Thomas O'Connor has been telling Boston's story for more than three decades. His 1976 book, *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses*, based on a series of lectures delivered at the Boston Public Library the year before, established the South Boston native as the dean of Boston historians, an informal title no one has challenged since.

O'Connor began teaching American history at Boston College—his alma mater for bachelor's and master's degrees; he got his Ph.D. a trolley car ride away, at Boston University—in 1950 and never left. He became professor emeritus in 1993, but he has been no less productive in “retirement,” constantly exploring new angles on Boston's past. In what remained of the last decade of the 20th century he published *The Boston Irish: A Political History* (1995), *Civil War Boston: Home Front and Battlefield* (1997), and *Boston Catholics: The Church and Its People* (1998). In 1999, O'Connor was named University Historian at Boston College.

A revised edition of *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses* published in 1984 brought O'Connor's survey of Boston history up to the inauguration of Raymond Flynn as mayor. But when he set out on the eve of a new millennium to update Boston's story once again, he found his 1970s alliteration to be dated.

“I suddenly discovered that the title wouldn't work anymore,” says



O'Connor, in his office across the street from Gasson Hall, the "tower building" erected on BC's Chestnut Hill campus in 1913. "It was an appropriate title back in 1976. Twenty-five years later it was not, because of the many changes in Boston—the demographic changes, the economic changes. *That was no longer Boston.*"

So O'Connor decided to appropriate Oliver Wendell Holmes's term for the city, and *The Hub: Boston, Past and Present* was published in 2001. But "hub of the solar system"

is not the only immodest title Bostonians have bestowed upon their city, and as he thought about a next project for his inquiring historical mind, O'Connor gravitated toward another, one slightly less well known today than "hub" or Winthrop's "city on a hill."

The result is *The Athens of America: Boston 1825-1845*. It was William Tudor—whom O'Connor calls an "enterprising merchant" and a member of the circle who launched a magazine, the *Monthly Anthology*, in 1803—who first

CONVERSATION

referred to Boston as a new Athens, but the term reflected the classical ideal Boston's elite had adopted for their city, and then set about trying to realize. In this post-Revolution, pre-Civil War era, Boston's civic leaders embarked on a program of physical reconstruction, institutional reform, and intellectual awakening that, to a surprising degree, made Boston what it is today.

As he delved into Boston's Athens of America period, O'Connor found his research resonating with current events. He spelled it out in *Athens's* introduction: "At the turn of the twenty-first century, what seemed like an inordinate number of Boston-owned and Boston-based financial and literary enterprises were taken over by corporations based in other parts of the United States or, with the rapid growth of globalization, located in other parts of the world." The litany he lays out is familiar: Gillette, Fleet, John Hancock, *The Boston Globe*, Jordan Marsh and Filene's, *The Atlantic Monthly*.

"The leaders and directors of these prominent financial and literary institutions were men who lived in Boston, whose enterprises were located in Boston, and who had always assumed a serious personal responsibility for the social, cultural, and intellectual life of the community," O'Connor writes. "As I read about all the companies and institutions leaving Boston, with their directors residing in New York, London, Singapore, and Tokyo, I must say I wonder who now will serve as the 'treasurers of God's bounty' and represent the community as trustees of corporations, editors of journals, directors of hospitals, board members of museums, subscribers to the symphony, monitors of the charitable and welfare centers of the Commonwealth? Who will serve as the new leadership elite in shaping the future of the city?"

It's a question being asked by others ("Corporate Citizens," *CW*, Spring '05), but not many with the knowledge and appreciation O'Connor has for a time when, as he writes, "a leadership elite, composed of men of family background, liberal education, and managerial experience in a variety of enterprises, used their personal talents and substantial financial resources to promote the cultural, intellectual, and humanitarian interests of Boston to the point where it would be the envy of the nation."

"There is a vacuum," says O'Connor. "At the present time there is a vacuum where, if I had to put my finger on any one particular group and say, well, that is who is influential in the city, I can't. I'm sure there are some. I'm not saying that there are not any. But I don't think they're as definable and cohesive as they were earlier."

What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation about what today's civic leaders—state and local, public and private, known and unknown—could learn from a time when Boston strived to be the Athens of America.

— ROBERT KEOUGH



COMMONWEALTH: So how was it that, in the early 1800s, such a cohesive group seemed to be directing things in Boston?

O'CONNOR: One advantage, perhaps, that some of these earlier people had was that they knew each other. They intermarried, for one thing. Old money married new money during that period of time, when the Lowells married the Lawrences and so forth. There was that incestuous type of relationship there. They lived close to each other, most of them up on Beacon Hill. They sent their children to the same schools. I'd say there were roughly 40 families in the [so-called] Boston Associates [old mercantile families and new mill owners who diversified their investments in real estate, banking, and other enterprises]. You had a kind of social commerce, social collaboration, among these people. They went to dinner together. They had lunch together down at the Parker House every Saturday and so forth.

CW: Not only was it a cohesive group, but one that made quite a concerted effort to bring about this new identity for Boston as the Athens of America. This was not a natural evolution, you say. It didn't happen by accident.

O'CONNOR: Right. It didn't just happen. We tend to look back on history and say, wasn't that wonderful, what happened? Well, it took a lot of planning and work. In teaching the survey of American history, I was always fascinated to come to this period of American literary history. Can you imagine all of these great figures—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, and those were

only the biggies—all on the same stage at the same time? Most of them went to Harvard together. They'd meet each other at the Old Corner Bookstore. Right here on our stage, you had a dozen of the major figures of American literary history, and by this time internationally known. [Boston's elites] put them to work, by organizing the lyceum system [clubs that held public lectures all over the city], by giving the money, for example, to the Lowell Institute [founded in 1839 from the estate of the son of textile magnate Francis Cabot Lowell to sponsor free lectures "for the promotion of the moral and intellectual and physical instruction" of Boston residents]. What [the civic elites] did was to give

'There were good, practical reasons' for humanitarianism.

these people a podium, a public podium, so that they wouldn't be over at Harvard teaching all day long and not seeing anybody else. Think of some of the names of the organizations—the Mechanics Association, the Mercantile Association—that were organizing lectures for their workers. It was not only realizing that these [intellectual] resources were there, but putting them to work, and putting them to

work so that the less fortunate classes would benefit. It was this idea of ancient Greece. You not only have a great city, but you have a great populace who could understand history.

So there was a certain humanitarianism there. I'd also have to say that these were practical men, and there were good, practical reasons for what they were doing. They wanted to benefit the poor, but they were helping themselves out, too. What they were doing, in many ways, was justifying their political position. They were ousted from national politics [definitively in 1828, when President John Quincy Adams was unseated by Andrew Jackson], but they had, for all practical purposes, taken over the city. It was their city, by God, and they weren't going to let any of these Toms, Dicks, and Harrys run the government. When you look at the lists of mayors when they made it a city, they were all upper-class people. John Phillips and Josiah Quincy and Harrison Gray Otis—these were the mayors. As practical people, they had to face the question: Why should these unfortunates vote for us? Why are they going to vote for rich people for mayor? Basically, what they had to say was, I can do more for you than anybody else. *We can do more.*

The built environment shapes the world
the world shapes our ideas
our ideas shape the built environment

ab
ArchitectureBoston

An ideas magazine published by
the Boston Society of Architects/AIA

For a free subscription, write to
freeab@architects.org

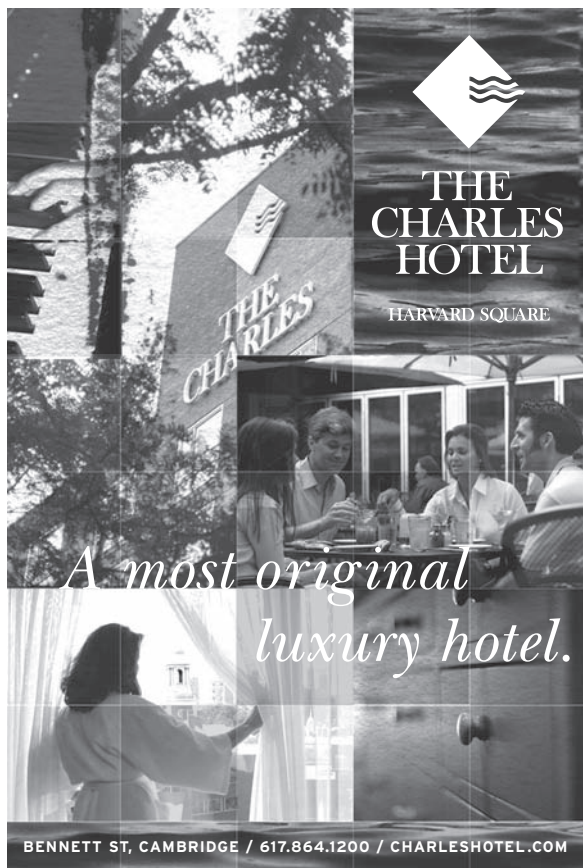


CHRIS & JEAN EGAN FAMILY
FOUNDATION

"The greatest good we can do for others is not just to share our riches with them, but to reveal theirs to themselves." —Anonymous

Providing educational opportunities for families in need, to break free from generations of poverty and realize the dream of self-sustainability and prosperity.

501(c)3 Non-Profit Corporation
116 Flanders Road, Ste. 2000, Westborough, MA 01581
TEL (508) 898-3800 FAX (508) 898-3005



**BUILDING THE
AMERICAN DREAM**

~ One Home at a Time ~

**Home Builders Association
of Massachusetts**

2 Liberty Street, Suite 4
Foxborough, Massachusetts 02035

508-543-6119 | www.hbama.com

CONVERSATION

Take Josiah Quincy, in his first inaugural address, saying he had to fix up the city. And he made the point that people like himself and his friends could go off to Nahant for the summer, but the poor people had to stay in the city and endure what he called the “noxious effluvia” of a long hot summer. The place stunk. It wouldn’t bother him, but these people had to stay and bear a stinking city, and that was not right.

Part of it was moral, if you like. These were Christian people. I’m sure they were feeling, “This is the right thing to do.” For example, cleaning up the jails—I’m sure they were doing it for humanitarian reasons, moral reasons, that it’s not Christian to see these people without blankets and so forth. But I think there were other reasons, some of them practical. There was this idea of being proud of your city. Many, if not most, of these people were the sons of the revolutionary Founding Fathers. This was a new generation after the Constitution and so forth. Their forebears had done all of these great things—fought the war, won independence, wrote the Declaration of Independence, wrote the Constitution. What do you do for an encore? We talk about noblesse oblige, but there was also a built-in sense of responsibility that this is “the city on the hill.” What are you going to do with it? How do you put it up there, as John Winthrop said, so that the eyes of the world will be upon it? That’s a question of family pride, if you like. I think they had to do good for their forebears, make them proud of them.

CW: This, you say, was a period of institution building, social reform, and intellectual leadership. Boston and Bostonians had been eclipsed politically on the national stage, but tried to set an example for the country in a variety of ways. What were some of the institutions built and the great causes taken up at that time?

O’CONNOR: One of them was physical—that is, when Josiah Quincy rebuilt the city. Boston was 200 years old at this time. Now, maybe that doesn’t sound old—if you’re in Europe, you think 200 years old is a new city—but not much had been done to it. It suffered greatly during the Revolutionary War. And, as Quincy said himself, it stunk. So he set up, almost single-handedly, a program of what we would call today urban renewal, and it actually renewed the city—and built the market [now named for him]. Then there was the development of the Massachusetts General Hospital a little bit earlier, in 1810. They were developing a medical school at Harvard, and this young doctor, John Collins Warren, looks around and sees there’s no hospital. So he goes around to these financiers, these Boston Associates, and he taps them for money. He said, “You are the treasurers of God’s bounty.” They came up with the big bucks, not only for the Mass General but also eventually for the McLean Hospital. And the word “general” was very interesting, because that’s what it was intended to be, a general hospital—not just for

the elite, but for everyone. And these prominent people not only gave the money but also became trustees of Mass. General Hospital. Actually, you could trace whole families for generations, starting with the Warrens, all of the family names continuing on the boards of trustees of this hospital, making a personal commitment to the institution.

So they were interested in making Boston a healthy city. This was something Josiah Quincy praised himself for, that he had made Boston the healthiest city in America by cleaning up the garbage and the sewers. This insistence on cleaning up Boston, making its citizens healthy, [then led] into the temperance movement. Josiah Quincy and Dr. Warren, and members of the Harvard Medical School, took that up. Then of course the religions got involved in it, which gave it a much broader base, with the idea that intemperance was a moral sin and obviously had serious moral effects. I think that people like Quincy and the doctors were interested in the health effects of intemperate drinking. It's bad individually for the health, but it was also bad socially because it affected families and children.

Then there was the involvement of many of these peo-

'Their forebears had done all of these great things. What do you do for an encore?'

ple in what were called prison discipline societies. They would visit the jails and make sure that the inmates had something to eat. They were appalled by the conditions that they saw and began to get behind the movements that were going on during this period, creating what they called penitentiaries. The Quakers in Pennsylvania were coming up with some new ideas, and so were people in New York. Boston incorporated some of these ideas in the new state prison in Charlestown, and particularly in the Leverett Street [Charles Street] Jail. The designs were intended to give better conditions to inmates, like windows, and to provide them with better meals and with inspiring literature. And a significant movement at this time was taking out the juvenile offenders. They put them in a special building that was called the House of Reformation.

The term reformation obviously has a religious connotation, but it was also the idea of rehabilitation. This was new, in a sense. Strictly speaking, in the Congregational ethos, you couldn't really rehabilitate anybody. But in the new Unitarian spirit, there was the idea of salvation. People could be saved. And that was the idea of putting these young men into a situation where, you try to inspire them, but at the same time they were given training in some kind of work, whether it was leather work or metal work, whatever, so that they would have some kind of job when they got out.

At least that was the hope.

CW: All this institution building and social reform was very inward directed, all about improving Boston, even if the purpose was, in part, to set an example for America. But at a certain point the reform impulse turned outward, and national, and changed in tone, on the subject of slavery.

O'CONNOR: I think there were "reformers" who looked at all of these nice things that were being done, in libraries and hospitals and school systems and so forth, and said, that's all well and good, but you're not getting at the real problems. You're dealing with intemperance, but you're not doing anything about the labor problems that drive people to getting drunk when they can't get work. You're talking about the goodness of man and the possibility of salvation, but you're not saying anything about slavery. So I think that, philosophically, there was a difference here. See, these people [of the elite], generally speaking, were collaborationists. They were very, very conservative people. They wanted to make progress. But they wanted to move at a measured pace

and they wanted to do it on their terms, without creating social divisions, without angering churches, without upsetting Southerners. Most of these elites personally didn't like slavery. I think they found it dirty. And I think it was something that they thought and hoped would gradually

decline. I think most of them, if they thought about it at all, felt it would die on the vine.

A number of them joined what were called anti-slavery societies. Now, I use two terms—anti-slavery society and abolition society. I see them as two separate things. In the early 1800s, there were anti-slavery societies, and a lot of Southerners belonged to them. One of these, I'm sure you know, was the American Colonization Society. President Monroe was not only president of it for a period of time, but they named Monrovia after him, in Liberia. [The Colonization Society's approach was,] we'll form these societies, we'll raise money, and every year we'll purchase the freedom of some of these slaves. Then we buy this place in Africa, Liberia, and every year we send them back to Africa—send them back where they come from.

I know [that] members of the Lawrence family joined the American Colonization Society. So, if somebody asked, they'd say, we're working on it. We want to reduce slavery. But we want to go about it in a gentlemanly way.

CW: But the abolitionists took a more strident tack.

O'CONNOR: Yes, and William Lloyd Garrison said that. He said, "I am told that many object to the severity of my language, but is there not cause for severity in a case like the

present?” The style of the earlier groups was one of gradualism, moderation, and a gentlemanly spirit. The approach of the new reformers was immediacy, no holds barred, immediate, and unconditional. Garrison, of course, infuriated people. But the question of conscience became introduced into the reform movement.

CW: I was struck by one sentence from your introduction that describes the arc of this period: “Boston started out trying to be the Intellect of America, ended up trying to be its Conscience—only to find that at least half the nation wanted neither its intellect nor its conscience.” Has America ever been more resistant to leadership from Boston and from Massachusetts than today? We keep offering leaders, but America rejects them—Mike Dukakis, John Kerry, now we will have to see what happens to Gov. Romney as he offers himself up to a national audience. And I think of gay marriage. This is an example set in Massachusetts that most other states are trying to inoculate themselves against.

O’CONNOR: That doesn’t surprise me. It’s true. But is that a bad thing? You know, Boston prides itself on being a thinking person’s city. If it loses that, won’t it be losing something that is really what makes Boston unique among all the cities in America?

CW: One of the things I noticed in *Athens* and in your previous book, *The Hub*, was the role of universities in civic life. It was striking, in the early 19th-century reform period, how closely intertwined the intellectual elite and the financial elite were, how much they were working in tandem in this greater cause of raising the public dialogue. But also in the early New Boston period, in the 1950s, both business and the academy played very active roles in city life.

O’CONNOR: Yes. And that was unique for Boston because that had stopped for a long time. What John Hynes did was quite remarkable, in terms of reaching out. He had a remarkable vision for the city, but he didn’t have the horses, the kind of people who were sophisticated enough to do it. So he reached out to Harvard University and he reached out to MIT. He made use of Boston College, which launched a series of citizen seminars. In the same way, he reached out to ask for help from businessmen. Before that, in the Curley years, politicians and businesspeople hated each other. And now they get a call from the mayor’s office: Would you sit on this commission? They say, nobody ever asked us before. So that was unique.

And again, I think it indicates something about a new base for some kind of elite, a thinking group, for today and for the future. I mean, people could say, you’re talking about

a bunch of big rich fat cats. But you don’t have to be rich fat cats to form this kind of elite. Maybe you don’t like the word “elite” even. But some kind of steering group that would meet on a regular basis—not the one big meeting a year down at one of the big hotels where you have a panel, but I’m talking about the things these people did, meeting for dinner and then sitting around and discussing some particular topic, whatever it happens to be. What are we going to do about it? Not merely the health institutions and the social institutions, but what are we going to do about opera, for example, in Boston? Or plays. Should Boston simply continue to be a tryout town? Or shouldn’t Boston be a great center for art? What about this art community that’s growing up in South Boston? Everybody’s doing their own thing. And that’s fine, that’s going to happen anyway.

‘[We need] some kind of elite, a thinking group, for today and for the future.’

But I think it would be nice if the mayor, for example, could sit down with a group like this occasionally and say, what are your ideas?

CW: Every time you write a book like *The Hub*, in the last chapter you get to come into contemporary history and identify the most important moments and trends of the most recent period. You finished *The Hub* around the year 2000. If you were writing it today, what would you identify as the key events or developments of the last 10 years?

O’CONNOR: One is the changing demography. Since 1970, let’s say, to pick a date, one remarkable thing has been the influx of persons of color, starting with African-Americans—who already had become a force in the city, where before 1950 they were not. They had no political clout until Kevin White was mayor. But there are the African-Americans, and then increasingly the Latino-Americans and the Asian-Americans, who have now come into the city. And they constitute—well, already they’ve gone over the 50 percent mark. But the numbers are much more impressive when you look at the school figures. This is the dynamic that’s developed over the last 25 years, and it raises the kinds of questions that were raised earlier in Boston history, about not only immigrants but also new Bostonians. I haven’t heard many people talking about, how will they become happily integrated into this city in such a way that they become not only active participants in the city but [also] feel themselves a *part* of the city? So that they can feel, “This is my city.”

If I go back to 1850, I can get statements, which I do bring into class, about what Bostonians were saying about the

Irish. It was worse than anything that anyone's saying about newcomers today. "These Irish, they're no good, they're drunks, they fight. And they'll never become Americans." And yet, 100 years later, they're the ones that saved the city from default. I mean, look at the mayors: Johnny Hynes, John Collins, Kevin White, Ray Flynn. You look at all the names involved in urban renewal, for example, and not all of them are Irish, obviously, but they made an impact.

CW: And they certainly made this their city.

O'CONNOR: Yes. But there must be, you know, creative people who could think of things to do [that would make the integration of newcomers to Boston into] a two-way street. We're not only saying to these people, "Welcome to Boston and now you're going to have to become Bostonians just like us," but also, "Welcome to Boston, and what can you give us? How can you participate in this?" To have some dialogue.

In terms of the changes, one is the new Bostonians, and along with that, because it's part and parcel of it, is the school system. Mayor Menino always talks about that. Housing—again, if Boston is to keep these people and keep new people coming in, they have to have a place to live. I know Boston College has that as a problem. They find somebody at the University of Illinois that they like and say, this guy would be great here, and you make him an offer and he says, sorry, I can't afford to live there. My daughter just moved back here two years ago. She was living in Houston, Texas, and she had a lovely home, with a swimming pool and everything. But she got a good offer in Boston, and she took it. We're delighted she's here, and she did buy a nice house, but it cost her three times what it would've cost in Phoenix or in Kansas. Now, whether this will produce a brain drain, I don't know.

But see, these are the relationships between issues in the city that have to get addressed. If everyone is doing work in his or her own bailiwick, that's one thing. But you have to get to a situation where you're talking about housing as compared with other things. Like the schools. I mean, if the guy [you're recruiting] comes in and says, I can afford the house but your schools stink, I don't want my kids to go there, that becomes a factor. But they're factors that have to be seen in light of one another. That's where this idea of reintroducing an enterprising elite, if you want to call it that, comes in. Elite is not a fashionable word, and I'm sure somebody could come up with a better one. But a leadership group of some kind based on the concerted efforts and ideas and talents of people in these various areas.

CW: Needed for the next attempt to be the Athens of America?

O'CONNOR: Right. Well, it could be again. Yes, why not? **CW**

Boston University

Making a Difference
in the Community

BU annually awards approximately 50 full-tuition scholarships to Boston high school graduates, totaling nearly \$110 million for the past 17 years.

For the past 17 years, BU has managed the Chelsea Public Schools in a unique reform-based partnership.

BU is the fifth largest employer in Boston and is responsible for more than \$3.6 billion in direct and indirect annual spending in Massachusetts.

www.bu.edu/community

Interested in advertising in *CommonWealth*?

Take **ADVANTAGE** of this unique **OPPORTUNITY** to reach over 11,000 opinion leaders each quarter!

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CALL 617.742.6800 x101
OR GO TO www.massinc.org.