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Martha McMackin Garland

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

AN ACADEMIC ANCIEN REGIME

In 1800 the University of Cambridge was to some extent a center of teaching and of learning, an institution dedicated both to the education of the young and to the advancement of thought. But any analysis of Cambridge is bound to be misleading unless it emphasizes another aspect of the University's character: it was a branch of the Church of England. Nearly all Anglican clerics studied at Cambridge or at Oxford. Degrees were granted only to members of the Established Church. University regulations included compulsory chapel and required courses in theology. And the colleges controlled vast networks of ecclesiastical patronage with which to help young graduates launch their clerical careers. Thus when a man went up to Cambridge he was doing much more (and in some ways much less) than enrolling himself in an educational program. He was joining a religious society – a college – in which he could have life-long membership and from which, if he chose to exert himself, he could expect permanent financial and emotional support.

Such an institution was a remarkably pleasant, tranquil place in which to live. For the permanent members of the colleges, the fellows, life could be very attractive indeed. Fellowships for life were awarded not on the basis of a candidate's academic promise but as a reward for his achievements as an undergraduate; in consequence, while fellows generally were bright, at least insofar as intelligence could be measured by a rigorous mathematical examination, there was no guarantee or even expectation that they would lead a life of real scholarship while serving as Cambridge dons. Furthermore, since teaching obligations were minimal and residence in many cases not even required, a college fellowship could become – often in combination with one or more other ecclesiastical livings – a nearly perfect sinecure. If a fellow chose to remain in residence, he was provided with comfortable rooms and elegant meals; his responsibility

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to a handful of students was little more than formal; and he was free to indulge his taste for fine port, whist, gardening, or reading, as he liked. A single restriction marred this otherwise ideal situation: dons were required to remain celibate. Only a comparatively small number chose therefore to make of their college positions a lifetime career. Most held their fellowships only until a living became available to them, and then they married. Those who remained at Cambridge satisfied their ambitions (and augmented their incomes) by assuming college offices or university professorships. But it is clear that a life lived entirely in college could become a rather lonely affair, often ending in marked eccentricity.¹

For the junior members of the colleges, the students, Cambridge life was also generally pleasant. They, of course, did not experience the financial security guaranteed the fellows; but their families usually provided them with lavish amounts of spending money, and, except for the few students who aspired to honours and fellowships, the academic demands were slight. Young and energetic, with plenty of free time, in comfortable surroundings and freed for the first time from parental controls, students designed for themselves a convivial life of wine-parties, breakfasts, late night discussions, gambling, boating, and occasional study. Although in principle the collegiate relationship was supposed to provide a warm and friendly substitute for family life, in practice the junior and senior members of a college saw very little of each other, usually formally. However, isolation of the students from the fellows was not generally regarded as a weakness. Indeed, it was often explicitly assumed that the primary benefit to be derived from the collegiate experience lay not in the influence of the senior members but in the close and long-lasting friendships formed between a student and his peers.² As a German observer wrote:

Our universities produce learned men in the several sciences, or men for practical life . . . The English Universities on the contrary, content themselves with producing the first and most distinctive flower of the national life, *a well educated 'Gentleman'* . . . We scarcely need add that even during the University residence the studies are by no means the only thing that brings about this result. A complicated machinery of reciprocal influences lies in the manners, habits and other relations peculiar to the English College life, bearing upon the education of the youth and the development of their feelings and characters . . . a glance at the University Calendars may convince us that in all the world one cannot be in

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better company than ‘on the books’ of the larger Oxford or Cambridge colleges.³

Many Englishmen of the eighteenth century would have agreed with this positive assessment.⁴ But the various reform currents of the early nineteenth century would sweep through the old universities as well as through other British institutions, and shortly after 1800 Cambridge was to find itself criticized both by outsiders and from within. Almost all aspects of the University – collegiate government, the connection with the Church, teaching methods, entrance and graduation standards – were suddenly subjected to searching, sometimes hostile reevaluations. Central to such re-assessment was concern about the university curriculum. Interestingly Cambridge had long been quite proud of its course of studies, and indeed, in comparison with Oxford (the only comparison frequently made), it had every right to be. The study of classical literature had long been at the core of the academic programs of both of the older universities, and at Oxford classics (together with a smattering of theological reading) continued to be the main object of undergraduate attention. At Cambridge, however, the program had been broadened by the addition of a mathematical course, required since the seventeenth century when Newton had been a member of Trinity College. The ‘pass’ standard in neither classics nor mathematics was very high, but Cambridge had at least made a gesture at including both the sciences and the arts, at cultivating ‘the Reason as well as the Literary Taste’⁵ of the student. Furthermore, about mid-way through the eighteenth century the examination system had been reformed so that although pass or ‘poll’ (from *hoi polloi*) men could get by with ‘two books of Euclid’s Geometry, Simple and Quadratic Equations, the early parts of Paley’s Moral Philosophy’⁶ and some simple translation from Latin, better students could follow a more elevated route to graduation in the form of the ‘tripos’ or honours degree. Separated from the ‘passmen’ by an early oral examination (‘disputatione’), honours candidates sat for a five-day series of rigorous written mathematical examinations, at the end of which they were individually ranked on the basis of comparative merit. The position in the honours list – the first twelve students were called wranglers, and the ‘senior wrangler’ was widely regarded as semi-divine – was very important, for it was the basis for the awarding of college fellowships. Because

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of the difficulty of the honours or tripos examination, as well as the scrupulous fairness with which it was administered and the supposed objectivity of the methods of ranking, most late-eighteenth-century Cantabrigians had been blinded to the obvious weaknesses of their system. In the first place, because the study of the classics was not encouraged within the context of the tripos examination system but rather by a series of prizes and medals for which only honours students were privileged to compete, literature was studied seriously only by a very few. A dedicated classicist had first to show himself to be an accomplished mathematician, a requirement which undoubtedly forced many potential scholars to be satisfied with a poll degree. The other traditional component of the curriculum – theology – had been similarly pushed into the background: in the face of eighteenth-century rationalism, strictly religious education had given way to a vague kind of ‘moral philosophy’, drawn almost entirely from the works of John Locke and William Paley. Neither author was studied with much intensity; the part of the exam in which they were covered was generally regarded by the undergraduates as an ‘easy day’.⁷ And Paley’s work seemed to some to be inherently unsuitable, being mainly a popularization of utilitarian political thought. Furthermore, even the much respected mathematical examination itself was very narrow in scope, taking no cognizance of new ‘continental’ methods of analysis, nor indeed ranging much beyond the limits of traditional Newtonian geometry. Critics of the Cambridge curriculum, therefore, would in the first part of the nineteenth century stress the need for a broader, more modern, mathematical course, a renewed emphasis on classical excellence, and a more sophisticated approach to theology and philosophy. There would be an increasingly strident outcry about the disgracefully low standard demanded from the majority of students. And some critics would go so far as to assert that even the best imaginable combination of classics, mathematics, and religion was too narrow a basis for a university curriculum, especially in an age in which literary criticism, political and economic thought, and the biological and physical sciences were making enormous strides.

Criticisms of Cambridge’s curricular shortcomings thus focused attention on a related weakness of the University: its failure to provide systematic support for scientific research or encouragement for advanced scholarship. England at the turn of the century was not without her great thinkers; but it is easy to demonstrate the

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comparative isolation of scientists like John Dalton, Thomas Young, and Michael Faraday,⁸ and to show that having the support of a community of scholars would probably have been beneficial to their work. The French had the lavishly endowed Academy of Science, while in Germany and Scotland the universities served as organized centers of research. English scientists, in contrast, depended on a series of privately (and therefore inadequately) funded societies and institutes, most of which were to become important only during the course of the nineteenth century. The Royal Society predated the Paris Academy of Sciences but without the support of public funds had not flourished in a way comparable to its French rival. The Royal Institution was established by Count Rumford only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the British Association was not founded until 1830.

Furthermore, the situation was even worse in the humanistic fields. The universities had a monopoly on English literary or philosophical studies, but they were organized mainly to help undergraduates pass examinations: Oxford and Cambridge continued to use the most conservative texts and methods, apparently ignorant of the new 'scientific' philological and linguistic techniques being developed in Germany. In 1809 and 1810, the *Edinburgh Review* published a series of scathing articles contrasting English classical scholarship with that of the continent and even of the Scottish universities;⁹ and the defense mounted by the old universities did little to dispel the doubts raised by these criticisms.¹⁰ This failure of the universities to become involved in research was a double liability: on the one hand, English scholars had to struggle with their work in isolation and without support; on the other, the new knowledge which modern scholarship was revealing was kept from the young thinkers at the universities, so that Cambridge mathematicians knew nothing of LaPlace's *Mécanique Céleste* and classicists read Greek and Latin totally without benefit of the discoveries of comparative philology.

It was possible to argue that not learning but the diffusion of learning was the University's main role and that the endowments of the various colleges had been given to support undergraduate teaching, not to advance research. In some cases this was patently true – various prizes in classics, for example, were supported precisely to encourage undergraduate excellence, while many of the grants to the colleges had been earmarked for instructional purposes.

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This was not a wholly adequate answer, however. In the first place, whatever the intentions of the original founders, the value of Cambridge endowments had increased so dramatically that the colleges were hard pressed to find enough educational projects on which to spend them.¹¹ In practice most of the funds were distributed as prizes – in the case of fellowships, lavish, life-long prizes – for undergraduate accomplishments. The colleges were usually too small to justify investment in equipment for specialized subjects like science; collegiate instruction was mostly conducted on a tutorial basis and only in the core subjects of classics and mathematics. The central University, in contrast, was comparatively poor; and while it should logically have provided lecture rooms, laboratories, and museums for general use of all the students, funds for such purposes were not available. Nor would the individual colleges agree to pool their resources; jealous of their independence they clung to the letter, while grossly perverting the spirit, of their benefactors' wills.

The central University did have some resources in the form of various professorial endowments, and in principle these funds should have been used to support a more generalized curriculum as well as advanced research. The purpose of a professor's endowment was to provide a salary to a mature scholar so that he might have the leisure to pursue his researches; he would then lecture on his findings to Cambridge students, thus both advancing his discipline and enriching the intellectual quality of university life. In practice the endowments were usually too small to provide an adequate salary unless the holder had an additional source of income. A professorship could be effectively combined with a fellowship; but since the holders were frequently older men who had left college and married, the more usual combination was a professorial chair with an ecclesiastical living, with the living often some distance from Cambridge. In such circumstances residence was not usually required, and in the early part of the century it was not unusual for a professor to fail to deliver any lectures whatsoever.¹² Even those scholars who remained in Cambridge and faithfully lectured to undergraduates, however, found that they were fighting an uphill battle. Honours students could not waste time with professorial lectures, since their content would not be tested at the tripos; and pollmen – sometimes required to show a certificate of attendance from at least one professor – often filled the lecture rooms only to read their newspapers or to sleep. Thus since

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the University systematically failed to support the professoriate either through the examination system or with adequate financial resources, it is hardly surprising that Cambridge at the turn of the century was something less than a thriving center of research.

By 1800 another aspect of Cambridge's undergraduate program had also begun to come under public scrutiny: it was increasingly argued that the University was failing at its main task, the training of members of the Anglican clergy. Perhaps not surprisingly many potential clerics were less than enthusiastic mathematicians; it was thus usual for future ecclesiastics to 'go out in the poll', bearing with them comparatively little education. Furthermore the occasional cleric who graduated with honours was almost inevitably offered a college fellowship and thereby kept out of contact with any parishioners. Letters testimonial for graduates going out to clerical livings were granted automatically with the degree; a critic in 1809 suggested, among other things, that dons should 'be more circumspect in granting testimonials for orders . . . and that the University should try to increase the necessity of religious study among the undergraduates, by granting no degrees to those who are void of ecclesiastical information'.¹³ There were three theology professors at Cambridge, and some reformers argued that attendance at their lectures should be required and that their subject matter should be tested in the examinations. Others argued that theology and practical ecclesiastical subjects could be better taught after the baccalaureate and away from the hurly burly of Cambridge. Several reforms would include proposals for honours examinations in theology, for a more serious theological program before the M.A. and even for separate theological colleges designed to complete the work which undergraduate training left undone. The nineteenth century would be much concerned with improving the University's approach to clerical education.

By 1800 several factors had combined to call into question the older views of the universities as tax-exempt religious centers established to educate clergymen for service in the national Church. The extraordinary wealth accumulated by the colleges – even in comparison with other ecclesiastical institutions – made Oxford and Cambridge seem like latter-day successors to the monasteries dissolved by Henry VIII. This was a new *mortmain* with its grasp tightened around an ever-increasing share of English capital. For example, even a small and comparatively poor college, St

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Catharine's, was able to support fourteen fellowships and thirty-one scholarships, as well as to provide four permanent ecclesiastical positions to the recipients of its patronage. And Trinity College, the wealthiest of the foundations, supported the master, sixty fellows, seventy-two scholars, sixteen sizars, and six minor scholars. In addition the College controlled three headmasterships, forty-eight vicarages, ten rectories, and nine perpetual curacies.¹⁴ While this system was developing the proportion of non-Anglicans in the English population had increased, particularly with the successes of the Methodists during the eighteenth century. The new dissenters, often drawn from the middle class, were more articulate and more determined to win equality than had been their Stuart and Georgian predecessors. It was becoming ever more difficult to argue that the Established Church was the genuine expression of the national religious will. Besides, the Church itself was increasingly under attack because of internal abuses. Its failure to serve the poor in the expanding cities, its inadequate missionary effort in the colonies, its tolerance of pluralism and absenteeism among the clergy – all roused the righteous indignation of serious dissenters and of 'evangelical' members of the Church itself.

As the nineteenth century wore on, not surprisingly, resentment towards the Established Church would spill over to its academic branches. Concern about the inadequacies in clerical training have been mentioned. Even more worrisome were the increasingly rancorous public protests against the inordinate wealth of the colleges, including several demands for parliamentary investigation and even threats of confiscation.¹⁵ The supposed low moral tone of the University, particularly with respect to undergraduate life, was contrasted with its avowed religious purposes. 'Anachronistic ritualisms', like the enforced celibacy of fellows, were sharply questioned. But the single issue which was undoubtedly the most intensely and hostilely debated was the question of the universities' religious exclusiveness, the refusal of Oxford or Cambridge to allow non-Anglicans to take degrees. If ecclesiastical education had remained the chief task of the universities or if the institutions had remained comparatively modestly endowed or if the Church of England had maintained a firm grasp on the affection of most articulate Englishmen, it is possible that the old universities could have remained Anglican preserves. But the various social changes of the nineteenth century made such an arrangement increasingly

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unsatisfactory; and ironically university reform itself, making Oxbridge degrees at once more highly respected and less traditionally theological, would contribute to the increasing demand for the admission of dissenters. The battle was a long and heated one, begun at the turn of the century and not really ended until 1871. In the process the nature of the relationship between the Church and the University would be transformed.

As critics both inside and outside the University considered the various curricular and ecclesiastical problems already mentioned, they began to perceive Cambridge as an institution in need of general, structural reorganization. Each suggested improvement seemed to raise a new series of problems; and time and again reformers found their efforts frustrated by the fundamental conservatism of the university constitution itself. By the 1830s some critics would come to believe that sweeping governmental reform would have to precede any genuine academic improvements, and to see the disproportionate power of the colleges as the fundamental problem facing Cambridge. It has already been noted that the finances of the University were controlled by the collegiate bodies; it was also true that, whether intentionally or not,¹⁶ the colleges had come to possess the lion's share of political power. The central university government itself was run by a group made up of Masters of some of the colleges, with the chief executive officer, the Vice-Chancellor, chosen from among their number. Only this central body – the 'Caput' or the 'Heads' – could initiate legislation, and any one of them had veto power in any matter. Subsequent approval by the Senate (the rest of the university fellows) was not automatic, but in practice the Senate usually followed the lead of the Caput. Such a government might have been a workable if somewhat top heavy form of representative democracy if the Heads had been subject to any kind of periodic electoral review. But Masters were selected for life; the highly hierocratic nature of Cambridge society usually prevented their being effectively criticized by those beneath them in the collegiate structure; and the fact that Masters could (and did) marry while fellows remained single, led to a sharp social demarcation between the closed circle of the Heads and all the other fellows at the University. The Caput thus tended to be an isolated, elderly, conservative body, one with the power to frustrate any democratically initiated efforts at change. The social unity of the Heads, and their isolation from the rest of the university community, unfor-

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unately did not mean that they were politically unified in efforts to support the central University. For despite their social ties with the other members of the Caput, Masters were foremost and fundamentally members of their own colleges. And there was a strong tendency for each Head to see as his primary responsibility the preservation of the wealth, the privileges, and the independence of his individual society. Thus socially cliquish yet fiercely jealous for their separate colleges, the Heads were a body preeminently unsuited to the task of centralized university reform.

To some extent these constitutional difficulties were not simply a consequence of the social and psychological backgrounds of the individual college leaders; part of the problem lay with the central legal foundation of the colleges and the University. Each society had a collection of statutes which its officers swore on oath to uphold; in many cases these primitive statutes and bequests severely limited the possibility of any change or reform. Frustrated by such legal problems as well as by the conservative attitude of the university government, some of even the most loyal Cambridge dons gradually began to conclude that an external body, probably Parliament, would need to take the initiative.

The pressure for external action would be intensified by growing and increasingly hostile attacks on Cambridge in the popular press. Liberal journals like the *Edinburgh Review* frequently lambasted the old English universities for faults ranging from the narrowness of their subject matter to failure to provide adequate religious leadership. But even more inflammatory of public opinion were the occasional pamphlets published by individuals and directed against the moral turpitude believed to be prevalent at Oxford and Cambridge. One such extremely popular work was *The Melancholy and Awful Death of Lawrence Dundas, Esq., with an Address to the Younger Members of the University, on the Evil Nature, Tendency, and Effects of Drunkenness and Fornication, followed by an Appeal to the University on the Laxity of its Discipline and Licentiousness*. It was written in 1818 by a country parson, F. H. Maberley. Mr Dundas had fallen drunk into a ditch on his way to Barnwell, Cambridge's red-light district, and had died of exposure. Maberley made this undoubtedly melancholy event the occasion for a general attack on the morals of undergraduates, extrapolating from an extreme case to present a general picture which was almost certainly exaggerated.¹⁷ Maberley's standards were themselves rather extreme – he advocated total