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978-0-521-07900-6 - Cambridge Before Darwin: The Ideal of a Liberal Education, 1800-1860

Martha McMackin Garland

Frontmatter

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BEFORE DARWIN

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The Ohio State University

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PREFACE

During the first part of the nineteenth century Britain experienced sweeping changes in the very fabric of its society. Urbanization and industrialization greatly modified English economic and social life. Political changes followed, symbolized by the great reform bills, portents of a coming spirit of democracy. The intellectual climate also was transformed. Spurred by industry, the sciences made tremendous strides and their successful methods began to be used on new problems – the history of the earth, the authenticity of Scripture, man and his mind. There was a flourish of popular piety: the High Church Oxford Movement, Low Church Simeonite ‘enthusiasm’, a vigorous growth of nonconformity, and even – crudely – puritanical and prudish ‘Victorian morality’. Ironically, at the same time that virtue and religion seemed to be at their zenith, a new skepticism began to appear in intellectual circles. Faith and reason no longer could be expected to reveal One Truth, as geology, criticism, and psychology began pushing back and limiting the domain of revealed religion. It is in the context of this evolving and – some might say – disintegrating society that I have examined some of the ideas underlying changes at one of England’s most characteristic institutions, the University of Cambridge.

It was possible for university scholars to take a hard reactionary attitude toward the changes in nineteenth-century England, and there were a few members of the University who greeted every new suggestion with alarm and active opposition. And there were a small number of quite radical dons who were prepared to accept almost any innovation – intellectual, governmental, or religious. Far more typical, however, were scholars who saw some changes as inevitable and necessary, but who wanted reform to come cautiously and gradually. Such conservative reformers felt that the University must improve itself to prevent its being revolutionized from outside; they

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wanted better instruction and harder-working scholars, and they wanted to rid Cambridge of various inequities which they recognized. But they saw much that was good in the 'old ways', they were fearful of very rapid change, and they seemed to see – more clearly than more liberal reformers – that some of the new ideas carried to their natural conclusions would spell the collapse of their working synthesis between faith and reason and the disintegration of the prevailing intellectual world view.

The reforms these conservatives undertook were in a way 'typically English'. For their inspiration they turned to old ideas and long-standing traditions – for example, to the notion that classics and mathematics should form the basis of an undergraduate education. Then they reworked the traditional concepts into something quite new, in fact reinventing from the outworn curriculum of the eighteenth century the very idea of a Liberal Education. This reformed program mirrored the larger intellectual world in many ways – it implied a view of man's mind and of epistemology, it assumed an integration of the various scholarly disciplines, it reflected an intellectual climate in which science and religion each revealed part of a single, unified Truth.

Such a synthesis did not long survive its authors or the shock of Darwin's publication. After 1860 the more radical position triumphed: education was broken up into small compartments, intensive specialized scholarship replaced any idea of a general education, bars against dissenters were dropped and the colleges ceased to be (or to pretend to be) surrogate family units providing 'sound knowledge and religious education'. With the old methods went the old world-view – no longer at all certain that all understanding leads to God, scholars began moving away from the grand, eternal questions and to be satisfied with little specialized areas of knowledge which they tried to grasp fully without any hope of integrating them into a larger whole. While it had been in the ascendancy, however, the Cambridge ideal of a Liberal Education had provided an intellectual framework which was very attractive. And even after it ceased to exist in practice at Cambridge, it remained a theoretical goal – perhaps unattainable – towards which many educational institutions (especially small colleges in the United States) continued to strive. It is perhaps one of History's rejected ideas which nevertheless retains a lot of its appeal.

The research which has led to this book was begun in Cambridge

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in 1969. My family and I were living in Clare Hall; the hospitality shown me by the Hall – and especially by the President and Mrs Brian Pippard – was extremely generous and much appreciated. I am also grateful for having been allowed to use the resources of the University Library and later of the Library of Trinity College.

At Ohio State University I have profited from many discussions with Professors June Fullmer and Franklin Pegues. I am especially grateful to R. Clayton Roberts who helped me to improve the footnotes and to the Department of History for a travel grant which enabled me to return to England to complete my research. I am also much indebted to my parents and to my husband Jim.

Philip Poirier was my supervising professor at Ohio State. His fine mind, solid scholarship, dry wit, and gentle criticism made him for me an ideal mentor. His untimely death in March 1979 was a sad loss to his family, his colleagues, and his students. It is to his memory that I dedicate this book.

Martha McMackin Garland

1980