

This is the fourth volume of *A History of the University of Cambridge*: it explores the extraordinary growth in size and academic stature of the university between 1870 and 1990.

In 1870 the university was a provincial seminary enhanced by a traditional prestige, by expertise in a small range of disciplines, and by a few academic giants. Today it comprises disciplines almost past counting and high international fame in many of them. Yet it is also the home of tradition: a federation of colleges, one over 700 years old, one of the 1970s, the rest of almost every century between, preserving buildings and institutions with a very varied history. This book seeks to penetrate the nature of the colleges and of the federation; and to show the way in which, especially from the 1920s, university faculties and departments came to vie with the colleges for this predominant role. It unravels a fascinating institutional story which is also a piece of social history – of the society of the university and its place in the world. It explores in depth the themes of religion and learning, and of the entry of women into a once male environment. There are portraits of seminal and characteristic figures of the Cambridge scene, Henry Sidgwick, Emily Davies, F. W. Maitland, Gowland Hopkins, Ernest Rutherford, and many others; there is a sketch – inevitably selective but wide-ranging – of many disciplines, an extensive study in intellectual and academic history.

A HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY  
OF CAMBRIDGE

GENERAL EDITOR  
CHRISTOPHER N. L. BROOKE

## A HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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Fellow of Gonville and Caius College*

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# A HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

VOLUME IV  
1870–1990

CHRISTOPHER N. L. BROOKE



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## CONTENTS

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	xiii
	<i>Preface</i>	xv
	<i>Abbreviations</i>	xxiii
I	PROLOGUE	I
	Cambridge in 1870	I
	From clergyman to don: F. J. A. Hort – Henry Sidgwick	7
2	THE UNIVERSITY AND THE COLLEGES	20
	The university	20
	The colleges – Three samples: King’s, Jesus, Gonville and Caius – The smaller colleges: St Catharine’s, Magdalene, Corpus Christi, Sidney Sussex, Peterhouse, Downing, Queens’ – The middle ground: Emmanuel, Christ’s, Trinity Hall, Clare, Pembroke – The giants: St John’s, Trinity	32
	Epilogue: college finance	73
3	THE SECOND ROYAL COMMISSION AND UNIVERSITY REFORM, 1872–1914	82
	The Royal Commission and the Statutory Commission	82
	The Adullamites	90
	Cavendish College and Selwyn College	91
	The debates of 1907–14	95
4	RELIGION 1870–1914	99
	The abolition of religious tests	99

## *Contents*

	College chapels	106
	Compulsory chapel	111
	The agnostics	121
	CICCU and SCM	131
5	THEOLOGY	134
	Lightfoot	134
	Westcott	138
	The Divinity School and the theological colleges	141
	The early twentieth century	146
	Charles Raven	147
6	THE NATURAL SCIENCES	151
	Prologue: the Mathematical Tripos	151
	Museums and laboratories	153
	Geology and earth sciences	157
	Botany	160
	Physiology	164
	The School of Medicine	166
	The Cavendish – Foundation – The marks of the Cavendish – Its progress from Clerk Maxwell to J. J. Thomson – Ernest Rutherford – the new Cavendish	173
	Chemistry – Frederick Gowland Hopkins – Alexander Todd	194
	Archaeology and anthropology	201
7	CLASSICS, LAW AND HISTORY	210
	A. E. Housman and the classics	211
	Law: Frederic William Maitland	216
	Buckland, McNair and Winfield	224
	History	227
8	THE SOCIETY	240
	I The background of students and teachers	240
	II Wives	252
	III The masters	257
	IV The fellows and the coaches – Two kinds of teacher: Goulding Brown and Welbourne – The economics of the academic profession, 1918–39	267

*Contents*

	V Students – Reading men and rowing men – Sport – Triposes – Women, May Week and the Footlights	287
9	WOMEN 1869–1948	301
	Preparation	301
	Girton	306
	Newnham	311
	Girton and Newnham as colleges	316
	The admission of women	324
	Epilogue	328
10	THE GREAT WAR 1914–18	331
11	SIR HUGH ANDERSON, THE ASQUITH COMMISSION AND ITS SEQUEL	341
	The Commissioners	341
	Sir Hugh Anderson	343
	The Royal Commission	349
	The Commissioners at work	364
12	THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY	370
13	THE DONS' RELIGION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CAMBRIDGE	388
14	RELIGION AND LEARNING: C. H. DODD AND DAVID KNOWLES	407
	C. H. Dodd	409
	Dom David Knowles	418
15	A DIVERSITY OF DISCIPLINES	427
	Prologue: on philology and oriental studies	427
	From medieval and modern to modern and medieval languages	431
	Philosophy and English	436
	Art, architecture and music in Cambridge	455
	Education and extra-mural studies	463



### *Contents*

Economics and social sciences	467
Geography and HPS – history and philosophy of science	473
Engineering	475
Mathematics	482
Radio astronomy and cosmology	486
Computers and computer science	491
Some biological sciences – Prologue: zoology and veterinary science – Sir Ronald Fisher and genetics – Molecular biology – Sir Frederic Bartlett and psychology – Sir Vincent Wigglesworth	492
16 THE SECOND WORLD WAR	505
17 THE UNIVERSITY AND THE WORLD, 1945–1990: A COSMOPOLITAN SOCIETY	511
I Anthropology – Research – Religion, exams and sport – Cosmopolitan Cambridge – Student attitudes – ‘Trade union’ attitudes among the dons, and student action – The role of women – Bureaucracy	512
II Politics	538
18 THE NEW COLLEGES	567
Fitzwilliam and Churchill	567
New Hall and Lucy Cavendish	569
The Bridges Report	573
Hughes Hall, Homerton, St Edmund’s, Wolfson, Darwin and Clare Hall	575
Robinson College	582
19 EPILOGUE	585
Appendix 1 Fellows and undergraduates of the men’s colleges, 1869–1919	593
Appendix 2 Student numbers by college, 1990–1	596
Appendix 3 College incomes, <i>c.</i> 1926	598

*Contents*

Appendix 4 A note on schools	599
Appendix 5 Professions and status of Cambridge students	601
<i>Bibliographical references</i>	604
<i>Index</i>	625

## ILLUSTRATIONS

The map is by Reginald and Marjorie Piggot. Figures 2–5, 8–10, 15, 17, 21–2 are by Wim Swaan, with his kind leave; for figures 6, 18–20, we are indebted to the Curator of Aerial Photography, Mr David Wilson, and his staff; for figures 13–14 to the Syndics of the University Library and Dr Patrick Zutshi; for figures 1, 7 and 16 to the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum; for figure 11 to the Principal and Fellows of Newnham College, for figure 12 to the Mistress and Fellows of Girton College.

Modern Cambridge	xxiv–xxv
1 Portrait of A. C. Benson, by Sir William Nicholson, in the Fitzwilliam Museum	<i>page</i> 47
2 Pembroke College, library and chapel	65
3 Selwyn College, court and chapel	94
4 Sidney Sussex College, chapel	120
5 New Museums Site, Mond Laboratory, now Department of Aerial Photography: the crocodile by Eric Gill	192
6 The new Cavendish Laboratory in west Cambridge	194
7 Drawing of Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins by Edmund Kapp, in the Fitzwilliam Museum	197
8 Town and gown: Magdalene Bridge	253

*List of illustrations*

9	Girton College, Emily Davies Court	312
10	Newnham College, Sidgwick Hall and Clough dining-hall	315
11	Portrait of Miss Jane Harrison, by Augustus John, in Newnham College	321
12	Portrait of Dame Mary Cartwright, by Stanley Spencer, in Girton College	322
13	Sir Giles Scott's first design for the University Library: watercolour by Cyril A. Farley, 1924	380
14	The University Library: an artist's impression of 1931	384
15	Portrait of Joseph Needham, by James Wood, in Gonville and Caius College	401
16	Drawing of M. R. James, by William Strang, in the Fitzwilliam Museum	461
17	The Mullard Radio Astronomy Observatory, Lord's Bridge	489
18	The Backs from the air: the History Faculty, Harvey Court and Queens' new building from the west	548
19	The Backs from the air: the Queens' new building, Harvey Court and the History Faculty from the south-east	549
20	St John's College, new buildings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the Backs	552
21	Wolfson College, façade	578
22	Robinson College	584

## PREFACE

It might be said, with some exaggeration, that in 1870 the University of Cambridge was a provincial seminary; in 1990 it is a major academy of international repute. It would be a half truth, for the dominance of the clergy among the alumni was already in decline in 1870; there had been giants in the land, and in mathematics, botany, geology and theology Cambridge had a high reputation already in the 1860s. Nor could the university which had bred Newton in the seventeenth century, endured Bentley in the eighteenth, and trembled before Whewell in the nineteenth be thought wholly provincial. The reputation of Cambridge today, furthermore, owes much to its history: it learned the art of attracting talent from every corner of the globe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries partly because a prejudice was abroad – not often related to the facts – that Cambridge was a distinguished university. Nor is it in all respects a cosmopolitan university today. In many fields it is a part of the academic cosmos; it draws its students from far and wide; a proportion of its staff and a high proportion of its postgraduate students come from distant lands. But it is also profoundly inward-looking. A scholar can step in a moment from international discussion in his seminar or lab to the parochial atmosphere of his college's Senior Combination Room – or vice versa, from lofty discourse in the SCR to instant coffee in the lab.

None the less, there has been a remarkable transformation. In 1870 the university was a federation of colleges. There was a medical school of a kind and some museums; but as late as the 1850s John Venn could discern no provision for the specialist teaching of science except 'a small table, such as two people might take their tea at; a table not in constant use, but brought into the

## Preface

Arts School three times a week during the May term', so that Professor Stokes might expound physical optics.<sup>1</sup> By 1990 a vast array of faculties and departments has slid into place beside the colleges, competing with them for power and influence. They are not a federation, but the servants of a hierarchy of small committees – faculty boards, councils of Schools, General Board, Council of the Senate – representative in a sense but so small as to be oligarchical in practice. It is true that over the whole structure presides the governing body of the university, the Regent House, a democracy of all the teachers in the university – and of senior administrators too; and that the Regent House regularly debates and occasionally votes on reports and motions – 'graces' – laid before it. But in the university there is a large, and growing, element of managerial government, more than in the colleges. It could be said that two quite different systems of government are in conflict here – a strange warfare in which the same protagonists sit in both camps, for most of the academic teaching staff of faculties and departments are also fellows of colleges and members of their governing bodies.

It is a fascinating theme for a historian, but profoundly difficult. First of all, a history of the university should be securely based on scholarly histories of colleges and faculties alike; but few exist. I had the extraordinary good fortune, at an early stage, of a generous invitation by Brian Harrison to view his team at work on the *History of the University of Oxford*, VIII; and to many of them, and especially Mark Curthoys and John Prest, I owe invaluable help, advice and insights. I have greatly benefited from the general surveys by John Roach in *VCH Cambridgeshire*, III (1959), and in T. E. B. Howarth, *Cambridge between Two Wars* (1978). Nearly every college in Oxford and Cambridge had a place in the series of histories published by Robinson about 1900, and some are good. But the best stop about 1850, and give only perfunctory outlines of the events of the author's own time. A striking example is John Venn's history of Caius, for he was one of the great pioneers of college history, and had no doubts about its value.<sup>2</sup> But he could not view the events of his own lifetime as history nor see their importance to historians of the future; so

<sup>1</sup> Venn 1913, pp. 263–4. For the context, see Brooke 1985, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> Venn 1901; see Brooke 1985, pp. xiii–xiv.

## Preface

when I came to write *A History of Gonville and Caius College* a few years ago I was amazed to discover that of all the periods I had to cover the least studied, and in some respects the most obscure, was the age of John Venn himself, from the 1850s to 1923. A new era has dawned: we have modern histories of St John's, Girton, St Catharine's, Trinity Hall and Queens', and others are on the way.<sup>3</sup> But many more are needed; and the same is even truer of the faculties. There is a wealth of literature on the Cavendish and on its remarkable offshoot, the molecular biology lab – though this is funded by the MRC and is not, strictly speaking, a part of the university.<sup>4</sup> There are many articles on the history of science and individual disciplines. But there are enormous gaps. For chemistry we depend in some measure, significantly it may seem, on the reminiscences of Gowland Hopkins and Lord Todd.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is vital in such a book as this to give a genuine impression of the variety of the scene – the different characters of the colleges, so like and so unlike one another; the differing fortunes of the many disciplines. Such is the state of scholarship, such are the limits of my own knowledge, such are the restrictions of space, that my view of any one college, of any one discipline, must be selective and impressionistic. It is easy to make such a book a pile of facts, a heap of sawdust. That above all I have tried to avoid; and it may be that it is too personal, too idiosyncratic. But I have become increasingly aware as the work went forward of a paradox: it is easier to see the wood than the trees – that is to say, it is difficult to see the rich and varied elements in the University of Cambridge as living, fruitful organisms. I have dwelt at length on some seminal figures – Sidgwick, Lightfoot, Hort, Maitland, Housman, Gowland Hopkins, Rutherford and so forth – and on some crucial buildings and institutions which have moulded the character of Cambridge – the Cavendish and the University Library are examples. Perhaps their share is disproportionate; but if we are to understand anything of a very complex subject we need from

<sup>3</sup> Miller 1961; Bradbrook 1969; Rich 1973; Crawley 1976; Twigg 1987; the History of Caius is Brooke 1985. Mr D. J. V. Fisher is writing a new History of Jesus; Professor Patrick Collinson, Dr Sarah Bendall and I are writing a History of Emmanuel. For the younger colleges, see chap. 18.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 173–94, 497–9.

<sup>5</sup> Needham and Baldwin 1949; Todd 1983.

## *Preface*

time to time to go deeply into this or that person or institution; and I hope the effect will be to make the book more interesting and more challenging to our thoughts about how universities in general, and Cambridge in particular, have evolved.

I have deliberately made religion a central theme, for I think this essential to understanding the subtle shades of an era in which a constellation of religious institutions became secularised, without losing all their religious character. While I was engaged in my task the master and College Council of Trinity generously invited me to give the Birkbeck Lectures in ecclesiastical history for 1990–1; and I took this as an opportunity to give shape and colour to some chapters of the book. To them and to many in Trinity who helped me in the making of the lectures I am deeply indebted, and especially to Professor Patrick Collinson, Dr Robert Robson and Mr Alan Cuccia. The result is that religion may seem to some to have a disproportionate share; even so, there is still a great deal missing. On student religion, on the CICCU and the SCM, for instance, there is much less than there should be.<sup>6</sup>

If one contemplates the geography of Cambridge, then one might reasonably say that it was more affected by the growth of playing fields than of labs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the undergraduates in particular Cambridge was above all a great sporting centre. This is inadequately reflected in my pages. Undoubtedly it needs to be stressed; but sport played a small part in making Cambridge a great academy. By the same token my chapters on the social history of Cambridge may seem impressionistic and inadequate. For this I plead a more particular excuse. There has been some analysis of the origin and destiny of Cambridge alumni; but most of it is based on slender foundations, and all of it ultimately depends on matriculation registers and the like. For most colleges little work has been done on them; and I learned from my attempts to provide statistics for Caius, one of the best documented and best published of colleges, that the material is nothing like so lucid or accurate as one would wish. Even for the schools from which the alumni came, for which information is plentiful, there is a major

<sup>6</sup> This is partly because the current literature – such as Pollock 1953 on CICCU – provides little searching analysis of its role among students.



## *Preface*

difficulty: no serious study has been given to ways of comparing the very different pattern of schools of the 1880s with that of the 1960s or 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile I have given in the appendices such tables as I could collect.

I have tried in a measure to balance the themes which are essential to understanding the history of a university: science and scholarship; the institutions – the very peculiar institutions of Cambridge which have shaped its destiny in all sorts of unexpected ways; ideas, religious and academic, notions of the function of a university or a college; and the social setting and the inner anthropology. I have striven to do justice in particular to three areas of change: the transition to a major international centre of scholarly and scientific teaching and research; the transition from an Anglican academy to a secular university; the transition from a male society with two women's colleges attached in some measure to a mixed university in which women are equal partners in principle if not yet in practice. I have tried to analyse the nature and inwardness of these changes while not wholly neglecting their outward form and history.

A wholly intractable problem has been the arrangement of the book. Many themes must be treated analytically; and it would be tedious and tiresome – or take far too much space – to have two or three separate discussions of heads of houses or theology or physics or the role of the colleges in different parts of the book; there is indeed a strong advantage in treating some of these topics so that the contrast between their condition in 1870 and in 1970 is immediately apparent. Yet there must be some chronology, some sense of the movement from 1870 to 1990 which is the central purpose of the book. The result is a chronological frame, with caesuras at the two World Wars, yet with analytical chapters laid out within it. Most puzzling of all have been the chapters on the academic disciplines, now almost beyond counting. Those most central to the earlier decades have been grouped in chapters 5–7; the rest are gathered in chapter 15. The division is often a trifle arbitrary, but if they were all grouped together, they would be wholly indigestible.

I am a medievalist whose life has been spent in the central

<sup>7</sup> See pp. 245–9 and Brooke 1985, pp. 308–9.

## *Preface*

Middle Ages. As a trespasser in very modern times I have been particularly aware how like and unlike historical scholarship is in the contemporary world; how much I needed help – and the generosity and excellence of the help I have received.

The modern world is full of documents, beyond a medievalist's dreams. But they have been very unequally preserved. Venn and his generation treated the medieval records of university and colleges with loving care, but had little notion of preserving the more intimate records of their own work. In the twentieth century paper has grown to alarming proportions, and in the University Archives and in some colleges it has been deftly handled by professional archivists. Contrary to what is sometimes alleged, the attitude to archives in the Cambridge colleges has greatly improved in the last twenty years, and several have professional archivists. But much of this is very recent, and college memory is peculiarly vulnerable, since the custom in most is to record only the baldest of decisions from college governing body or council meetings. Thus the debates which preceded the admission of women in all the male colleges are only recorded (so far as I know) in a small number in which one or other fellow made a private archive. If we look a little further back, the Royal Commission and the Statutory Commissions of the 1920s have left little record; most of their archives have been lost. I have been alternately overwhelmed by the wealth of material and baffled by its absence. When documents survive in reasonable quantity, however, the techniques of research are much the same in the twelfth and the twentieth centuries, for human nature applied to drafting documents alters little over the centuries, and those of the twentieth century as often intend something quite different from their surface meaning as those of the twelfth. In particular, effective documentation (or more crudely, adequate footnotes) – not always provided by contemporary historians – are as important as ever. One type of source is wholly new to a medievalist, and that is oral evidence and human memory. I have made much use of both – and I recall as striking examples invaluable advice on the Statutory Commission of the 1920s from the late Tressilian Nicholas, its Assistant Secretary, from Richard Eden on the foundation of Clare Hall, and from Charles Brink, Lord Lewis and Martin Brett, on the foundation of Robinson College, in

### *Preface*

which they were deeply involved, and many of the kind on individual disciplines, for example David Phillipson on arch and anth, Nicholas Brooke on English, Brian Harland on geology, John Baker and Peter Stein on law, Elisabeth Stopp on modern languages, Dame Elizabeth Hill on Russian, Anthony Hewish on radio astronomy, and so forth. I am very much aware that I could have been more systematic and effective, had time and opportunity allowed. Meanwhile it has been fascinating to observe how often memory and archives are at variance – not always due to error and fallibility, but sometimes to a natural difference: archives tend to record formal decisions, the memory the informal processes which lay behind them.

The plot from which this volume emerged was originally laid by Michael Black and William Davies in the Cambridge University Press, and I am deeply indebted to their advice and enthusiasm. In its final preparation and production I am especially indebted to Margaret Sharman and Lyn Chatterton. Damian Leader started the series and the idea owes much to him; I have had many discussions with Victor Morgan and Peter Searby, authors of volumes II and III, and Peter Searby has generously commented on my drafts. Rosalind Brooke, as so often in the past, has revised my drafts and helped to shape the book – and steered the book and its author past many shoals. I have had invaluable advice and help from Denis Bartlett, Peter Bayley, Owen Chadwick, Donald Charlton, Barrie Dobson, Anthony Edwards, Ronald Hyam, Yao Liang, Christopher Morris, Valerie Pearl, Harry Porter, Graeme Rennie, Peter Robinson, Robert Robson, Frank Stubbings, Gillian Sutherland, Simon Szreter, David Thompson, John Twigg; and from Patrick Zutshi and Elisabeth Leedham-Green in the University Archives, and from many college archivists, including Catherine Hall and Anne Neary at Caius, Sarah Bendall at Emmanuel, Malcolm Underwood at St John's, Christopher Parish and Nicholas Rogers at Sidney, and Alan Cuccia at Trinity. To Elisabeth Leedham-Green I am also deeply indebted for reading the proofs. All have been generous in encouragement and must bear their share of credit for the enterprise; its failings are all my own.

For permission to quote reserved or copyright material, and the photographs included in this book, I am deeply indebted to

### *Preface*

Dorothy Atcheson, author of the life of Tressilian Nicholas (see p. 155), to Michael Brooke (see p. 283n), to Janet Whitcut (see p. 288n.), the University Registry (Appendix 2), the College Council of Trinity College and especially the Secretary to the Council, to Lord Bonham Carter, to the Curator of Aerial Photography, David Wilson, to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Library; and in particular to my friend and fellow-worker in another enterprise Wim Swaan for his photographs, and to Sir Trenchard Cox, to whom I owe the use of the delectable memoirs of his late wife Maisie Anderson, ‘Time to the sound of bells’, now, by his generosity, lodged in the Caius archives.

I owe much generous help to Gonville and Caius College and its staff, and especially to Mrs Edna Pilmer, the Fellows’ Research Secretary. The college has provided research grants and a computer, the college library books, Edna Pilmer has brought order out of the chaos of my drafts.

One kindly reviewer of my book on Caius observed that it might be better if a college history was never written by a member of the college. By the same token it might be well for university histories to be written from outside. I confess that my own position is equivocal. I was brought up under the shadow of Cambridge and served college and university for a spell in the 1950s; I returned to Cambridge in 1977. Thus far I write as a devoted alumnus and Regent master. But between 1956 and 1977 I was a professor in Liverpool and London – at Westfield College; and I have looked at Cambridge from the outside too, not always with a friendly eye. I hope that both points of view have contributed to the book. If history is to be interesting and meaningful the historian must be both critical and committed. I have been highly critical of some features of Cambridge – especially of the divorce between colleges and university – but at the end of the day it has been one of the supreme privileges of my life to serve it, and I doubt if any imaginative reader will fail to realise that I feel it to be so.

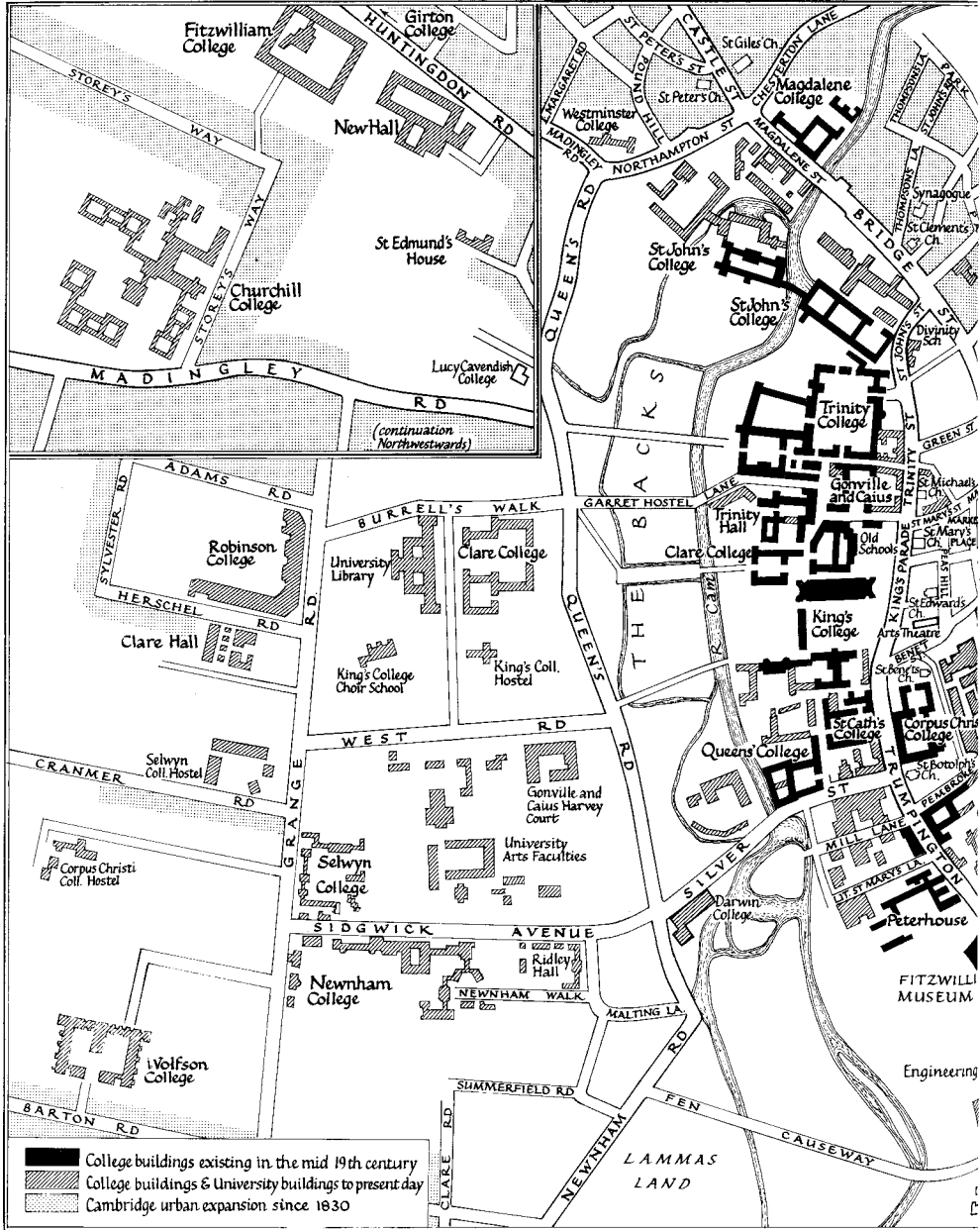
*Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge*

C.N.L.B.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BMFRS</i>	<i>Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society</i>
<i>CUA</i>	Cambridge University Archives (in <i>CUL</i> )
<i>CUC</i>	<i>Cambridge University Calendar</i>
<i>CUL</i>	Cambridge University Library
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>DSB</i>	<i>Dictionary of Scientific Biography</i> ed. C. C. Gillespie, 16 vols., New York, 1970–80
<i>PBA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<i>RCHM</i>	
<i>Cambridge</i>	<i>Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England, City of Cambridge</i> , 2 vols., London, 1959
<i>Reporter</i>	<i>Cambridge University Reporter</i>
<i>VCH</i>	<i>The Victoria History of the Counties of England</i>

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