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Introduction

On 27 February 1908, the editors of the *Cambridge Review* announced that they had 'received from Messrs Bowes and Bowes one of the most amusing little pieces of Cambridge satire published in the last decade. For the modest sum of one shilling net, the young academic politician may obtain a *Microcosmographia Academica*, in which the various parties in University politics are hit off more nearly to the truth than they will like.'[1] Indeed, the picture painted in *Microcosmographia Academica* of the political life of an exceptionally intelligent and well-informed community, dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the quest for truth, was far from flattering. In University politics, so it appeared, matters were not settled by genuine discussion, with participants ready to modify their opinions in the light of the argument of others, or as a result of new information becoming available during the course of a debate. Instead, the scholar was characterised as being deeply conservative, sceptical and mocking in his attitude towards reform, and, in all his political actions, conditioned by greed and fear. So charmingly, however, was this unpalatable message conveyed, that *Microcosmographia Academica* has acquired a lasting fame, at least in the limited social world of Oxford and Cambridge high tables; and occasionally learned references are made to it in the columns of the broadsheets and the literary reviews. Its crisp formulations of the Principle of the Wedge, the Principle of the Dangerous Precedent or the Principle of Unripe Time (which are, in effect, not real arguments but rhetorical devices designed to make dialogue impossible) are glibly bandied about by many who lack a true understanding of either the original text or its purpose.[2] The author of the anonymous pamphlet was Francis MacDonald Cornford, then a young Fellow of Trinity College,

[1] *The Cambridge Review: A Journal of University Life and Thought* (hereafter, *CR*), 27 February 1908, 262.
[2] *Microcosmographia Academica* is now usually quoted without irony by ultra-conservatives in support of reaction. See, for example, the remarks made by A. Williams in the Discussion in the Senate on 13 July 1993, *Cambridge University Reporter* (hereafter *Reporter*) 1992–3, 1022.

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a former editor of the *Cambridge Review*, and later to be the first Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy in the University.[3]

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Francis Cornford was born on 27 February 1874 at Eastbourne, the second son of the Revd James Cornford and his wife Mary Emma MacDonald. He was educated at St Paul's School and went from there to Trinity College, Cambridge, where, among a distinguished group of students taught by a formidable group of dons, he became a favourite pupil of Henry Jackson. Cornford distinguished himself by being in the first division of the first class in parts I and II of the Classical Tripos in 1895 and 1897, and was bracketed equal with A. E. Bernays, his contemporary at Trinity, for the Chancellor's Classical Medal. Two years after graduating he became a Fellow of Trinity and was appointed to the teaching staff in 1902. In 1909 he married Frances Darwin, the poet and daughter of Sir Francis Darwin, whom he had met as a pupil of Jane Harrison at Newnham. Apart from service during the war of 1914–18, first as a sergeant-major and musketry instructor at Grantham (he had been an excellent shot at Bisley), and then in the Ministry of Munitions, his whole life was dedicated to the pursuit of classical scholarship at Trinity and Cambridge.

As a classicist, Cornford became impatient with what he held to be a dry and exhausted scholarly tradition. At first he was much guided by his Trinity mentors Henry Jackson and A. W. Verrall. The latter in particular was imparting in his lectures a way of interpreting the great classics of ancient literature as one would a work of modern poetry or prose: 'not reading back our own ideas into the ancient mind – far from it – but boldly applying common sense and universal critical canons to the content of a work, and daring to teach that the thought of an author was more important than his syntax'.[4] But soon after his election to a Fellowship, Cornford came much under the influence of Gilbert Murray, whose translations of Euripides were appearing at that time, and of Jane Harrison, whose *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* was published in 1903. Jane Harrison was a brilliant teacher. Cornford recalled that for her and for her audience a lecture was a dramatic event: 'Once she enlisted two friends to swing bull-roarers at the back of the darkened lecture-room in order that the audience might learn from the "awe-inspiring and truly religious" sound what Aeschylus meant by "bull-voices roaring from somewhere out of the

[3] Biographical information about Cornford from: *Times*, 5 January 1943, 6; D. S. Robertson, 'Francis MacDonald Cornford', *CR*, 30 January 1943, 164–5; Gilbert Murray, 'Francis MacDonald Cornford 1874–1943', *Proceedings of the British Academy 1943*, 421–32; Reginald Hackforth, 'Cornford, Francis MacDonald', The *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*) *1941–1950*, 177–9; W. K. C. Guthrie, 'Memoir', in F. M. Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy and other Essays*, ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge, 1950), vii–xix.

[4] Guthrie, 'Memoir', xii–xiii.

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1 Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928), Fellow of Newnham College and classical scholar. This portrait was painted by Augustus John in the summer of 1909 and given to Newnham College by Miss Harrison's friends.

unseen''.'[5] Murray, while being a little critical of Miss Harrison's 'lack of early training in the drudgery of exact scholarship' and her 'natural impulsiveness', recognised her 'width of learning, a force of historical imagination, and an infectious interest in her subject which amounted to genius'.[6] Her great contribution was to point to the importance to any understanding of Greek religion of a study of actual ceremonies and

[5] F. M. Cornford, 'Harrison, Jane Ellen (1850–1928)', *DNB 1922–1930*, 408. Among Miss Harrison's student friends at Newnham were Mary Paley (who married Alfred Marshall), Margaret Merrifield (who became Mrs A. W. Verrall) and Ellen Crofts (who married Francis Darwin), *ibid*.

[6] Murray, 'Cornford', 421.

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rites rather than just a concern with the fictional and largely artificial figures of the Olympian gods. Cornford was encouraged to approach ancient texts afresh by trying to devise ways of uncovering the often unstated inherited concepts and beliefs and methods of thinking which lay behind them. His first book, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, published in 1907, sought to explain how a highly scientific and logical mind, like that of Thucydides, expressed itself in a language which did not yet possess a scientific or logical vocabulary. Leonard Woolf, reading it in his exile in the Colonial Service in Ceylon, wrote to Lytton Strachey that he thought it to be 'rather good, except that as a book it has the almost universal fault of not ending.'[7] Others found it stimulating but flawed; though none could deny that Cornford's 'idea was a fruitful one, and the singular beauty of the writing made the book memorable'.[8]

In his later years, Professor Guthrie tells us, Cornford 'said that it sometimes seemed to him as if he had been all his life writing one and the same book'.[9] A dominant concern runs through all his work. In his inaugural lecture in 1931, he expressed it thus: 'If we look beneath the surface of philosophical discussion, we find that its course is largely governed by assumptions that are seldom, or never, mentioned. I mean that groundwork of current conceptions shared by all the men of any given culture and never mentioned because it is taken for granted as obvious.'[10] Cornford was attempting the exposition of what he perceived as a basic truth about the nature of human thought, and then applying that truth in particular to the Greeks. His key studies *From Religion to Philosophy* (1912) and *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914) broke new ground in this way in the understanding of ancient religion and philosophy. In Murray's words, Cornford

> with his 'sound scholarship' and his calm philosophic insight . . . obtained a constant and vivid awareness of the world of assumptions and ways of thought which lies under the surface of ancient philosophy and poetry, and indeed of ancient language itself; but he used that awareness of the undercurrents as an instrument for the fuller understanding of the upper streams. To understand Heraclitus or Anaximander, to understand even Plato and Aristotle, it was necessary to realize the atmosphere of thought and feeling in which they lived, and the habits of thought which they had accepted by inheritance and without criticism from primitive ages.[11]

The classical scholar had also to remind himself that many words had no straightforward English equivalent, and also that those that did carried with them different meanings and implications in different times: *words move . . . only in time; words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still.*

[7] Woolf to Strachey, 15 September 1907, in Frederic Spotts (ed.), *Letters of Leonard Woolf* (London, 1989), 132.
[8] Murray, 'Cornford', 423.
[9] Guthrie, 'Memoir', viii. [10] Quoted *ibid.*, viii. [11] Murray, 'Cornford', 425.

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Cornford's mature work dealt with Plato's most difficult thought and came to fruition with a series beginning in 1935 with *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. 'These later books', wrote Donald Robertson, one of Cornford's own pupils at Trinity, 'show a deep maturity of power and judgment, without losing the arresting quality of his earlier writing'.[12] But in wrestling with Plato, Cornford seems to have shied away from applying fully to a study of the ancient Greek texts the insights of contemporary philosophy. As Geoffrey Lloyd has written, it is somewhat intriguing that Cornford's works are

> far less influenced by the philosophy being done at Cambridge at the period when they were written than one might have expected. It is not that they are philosophically naive: they exhibit a far subtler reading of Plato than that judgement would suggest and though they now show their years they are still read, and still worth reading, which is more than can be said for most Plato scholarship of the 30s. But it's surprising how little FMC seems to have got out of contemporary philosophy – and that despite the fact that many of the most exciting developments were the work of FMC's own colleagues at Trinity.[13]

Along the way, Cornford had also devoted much time to work with the dying Philip Wicksteed on a translation, with introduction and commentary, of Aristotle's *Physics*, which was published in the Loeb Library in 1929 and 1934. And after the series of books on Plato, he returned, in 'Principium Sapientiae', which was published after his death in the collection of essays edited by Guthrie, to one of his central original interests: the relationship between philosophy and its pre-philosophical background. Although it appears that Cornford was a little defensive about some of his own early work, it is clear that he continued to be very interested in the problems of the relation between religion and philosophy, and Hocart, Hooke and others provided him with his opening to try a new approach.[14] Guthrie characterised the qualities he found in all Cornford's writing: 'the living (not mechanical) symmetry of form, the grace and delicacy of the details, the humour, irony and occasional fantasy enlivening a fundamentally serious theme'.[15]

Besides his own writing, Cornford was the original moving force behind 'Cambridge Classical Studies' which did, and does, so much to promote the publication of new classical scholarship. Although a quiet man – he could be 'embarrassingly silent', and Virginia Woolf was quite intimidated by him[16] – Cornford had a reputation as an eloquent and exciting lecturer. He was deeply committed to bringing his scholarship to a wider public, and a course of four lectures for the University's extra-mural

[12] Robertson, 'Cornford', 165. [13] G. E. R. Lloyd to G. Johnson, 10 May 1993. [14] *Ibid.*
[15] Guthrie, 'Memoir', xix.
[16] Robertson, 'Cornford', 165; And 'he looks like something carved in green marble on a tomb. This has the effect of making him very silent.' Virginia Woolf to Ottoline Morrell, 16 August 1911. Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1888–1912* (London, 1975), 474–5. Also, 'Too much elderly brilliance for my taste.' Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 12 August 1908, *ibid.*, 351.

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programme resulted in the publication in 1932 of *Before and After Socrates*. 'A student in any branch of knowledge', he wrote in the preface to the book,

> who is invited to set before a popular audience, within the space of four hours, the gist and upshot of his studies, may do well to submit himself to the discipline implied. He knows that the expert will frown upon some of his statements as questionable in content and dogmatic in tone, and will mark the omission of many things for which no room could be found. But it will do him good to sit back in his chair and look for the main outline, so often obscured by detail.[17]

Along with G. M. Trevelyan he was a great friend of the Working Men's College in London, and he took infinite trouble, with his pupils, to entertain visitors from the College when they came to Cambridge. Shortly before his death, he completed a translation of Plato's *Republic* – 'a masterpiece of vivid rendering, which reads like a new book.'[18]

Cornford died in Cambridge on 3 January 1943. Those who mourned him pointed to his love of music, taking up the viola in his fifties in the hope that eventually he might rustle up a full family orchestra, and of poetry, especially that of Milton and the seventeenth century. They also wrote of his personal charm and of

> the essential beauty of his character, the gentleness, the unselfishness, the utter remoteness from all that is worldly or violent . . . His relations with a series of brilliant children, whose opinions were at times vehemently opposed to his own, and whom he encouraged to 'sail away like ships' in pursuit of their own ideals, were a model to those parents who believe in the supreme power of affection and the value of freedom.[19]

Robertson testified to the deep impression Cornford had made on him as a shy freshman at Trinity forty years earlier. 'That charm never faded, and his death is a personal loss of which it is impossible to write.'[20]

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Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica*, which he included in its proper chronological place in his list of publications in *Who's Who*, is an elegant satire on University affairs at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, exhibiting some of the qualities to be found in his academic work: light in tone, and deftly written, there is a fundamental seriousness about it and its argument is profound. It belongs to a tradition of humorous literature, much then in vogue, and one which, in the University, found an outlet in the *Cambridge Review*. This journal, founded in 1879, was published

[17] F. M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge, 1932; reprinted 1960), ix.
[18] Robertson, 'Cornford', 165.
[19] Murray, 'Cornford', 432. [20] Robertson, 'Cornford', 165.

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weekly during Term, designed neither to amuse nor to edify the University but to be 'a part of it'. As one of its originators wrote later:

> It did not require much wit to see that a society of the importance of the University of Cambridge needed a journal in which its life and thought should be reflected; and the experience of a generation has now shewn that there is room for such a journal so long as it defines the University in the broadest sense, and does not affect to despise either the research of the learned or the athleticism of the muscular.[21]

By design its editorial team consisted of an undergraduate, a BA and a senior member of the University. Around the turn of the century, besides acting as a weekly news-sheet, the *Review* carried vigorous and opinionated pieces of prose and light verse on University affairs. Many were frivolous or satirical in tone. Cornford himself contributed a number of poems over his initials, and some of the unsigned paragraphs appearing from 1900 bear an uncanny resemblance to the argument and style of *Microcosmographia Academica*. Late Victorian and early Edwardian Cambridge was a fruitful subject for such satire because it seemed that only reluctantly and with obvious difficulty were the University and the Colleges transforming themselves into places of learning and research appropriate for the times. Feeling at once radical and conservative, religious and secular, reforming and reactionary, poor and rich, independent and oppressed, the dons might be forgiven for not seeming to know where they were going, and for appearing to make such a foolish display of managing their affairs.

What distinguishes *Microcosmographia Academica* from other early twentieth-century light literature, however, is that Cornford's tract contains a remarkably clear-eyed general analysis of political organisation and the use of power. Beneath the elegant and witty prose lies a profound (if somewhat pessimistic) argument about human political behaviour: reason plays but small a part in politics, for people are driven more usually by prejudice and fear.[22] Those who wish to get things done must understand how human nature is and how it might be worked upon. They must be cynical and ruthless in their methods, and recognise the unattractiveness of the world in which they tread. Cornford may not have been a skilled political practitioner, and, while recognising how necessity drives the political world, he must surely have regarded politics with distaste; for like Machiavelli's advice to his Prince, Cornford's essay bears the marks of a guileless and open-hearted man recollecting in a mood of resignation how that which

[21] *CR*, 21 February 1907, 261. The *Review* became a financial success, however, reaching a regular circulation of around 1,600, because its proprietors decided to carry in full the text of the weekly University sermon – essential reading in parsonages throughout the country; and later they published as a supplement a termly list of members of the University in residence.

[22] In April 1972, Dr G. S. R. Kitson Clark, a Fellow of Trinity, inscribed a copy of *Microcosmographia Academica* which he gave to Dr Kenneth Easton. At that time Dr Easton was battling with officials and committees in the National Health Service over the establishment of a sensible scheme of emergency care for patients after accidents. Dr Kitson Clark wrote: 'nowadays it is necessary to remember that people can be bolted in two directions. The dominant motive is still fear, but men can not only be frightened from doing right they can be frightened into doing what is judicious.'

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needs and should be done is checked, thwarted and threatened, by fear, by the inadequacies of others, and by the play of the political system. The disciplined exercise of pure reason transformed frustration with the petty politics of College and University into as perfect a piece of satire as may be imagined. Although the direct experience upon which Cornford drew was that of Cambridge in the early 1900s, it reflected an ancient and universal human condition. Venturing forth from Trinity at the outbreak of the Great War, Cornford found that when it came to politicians 'the academic species is only one member of a genus wider than I had supposed'. Others vouched for the general applicability of Cornford's analysis, noting that 'Civil servants and businessmen alike have claimed to recognise in their own walks of life the types which it portrays.'[23] Cornford's beautifully written, ironic and funny but so true a commentary on human political activity thus outlives its occasion and its generation.

Cornford published a second edition in 1922, revealing his authorship and dedicating the work to his friend Edward Granville Browne, the great scholar of Persian literature and Sir Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic, who, in the face of establishment hostility and indifference, sought to explain to the West the new spirit of nationalism which was sweeping Persia, and to impress upon his colleagues in Cambridge the importance of studying and teaching the living languages of the Middle East.[24] *Microcosmographia Academica* was reprinted in 1933, and then, after Cornford's death, Professor Guthrie wrote a new preface to an edition published in 1949, and it has been reprinted several times since then. Cornford himself resisted the temptation to revise or expand his text, recognising the difficulty of recapturing 'the mood of the fortnight in which this book was written'. But after nearly ninety years he may have sympathised with the desire of one from another age to probe below the surface of his text to find what lies beneath it. Cambridge at the turn of the century was a different world; but it is a familiar one also. Some account of the situation in which *Microcosmographia Academica* was written not only allows us to understand detail which the passage of time has rendered obscure, but it helps a fuller understanding of the essential and universal truth of the text itself. And, as Cornford was heard to say after a lecture attempting a similar exercise on the Pre-Socratics, I have found him and his times '*inexhaustibly* interesting'.[25]

[23] Cornford, preface to the second edition of *Microcosmographia Academica*; Guthrie, 'Memoir', 425.
[24] E. D. Ross, 'Browne, Edward Granville (1862–1926)', *DNB 1922–1930*, 123–5; Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer has also helped me on this point.
[25] Quoted by Murray, 'Cornford', 425.

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Cornford's Cambridge

Between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Great War, Cambridge was transformed from a rather indifferent academy into a great University. In part this was the result of demands from outside the University, but to a large degree it was also a consequence of enthusiasm for change from within. The politicians who clamoured for Royal Commissions and Parliamentary visitations to break down the social and religious exclusiveness of the ancient Universities, who wanted them to teach useful subjects, and to promote research in science and technology, found a willing response from within the academic community. But during these years, scholars whose vocation was contemplative, reclusive and quiet were being asked to do more, and to change more quickly, than many of them had ever imagined had happened to dons before. The change was neither easy nor comfortable, nor was it a foregone conclusion that Cambridge (and the other long-established seats of learning) would meet the challenge posed by the rapidly changing society and economy of nineteenth-century Britain. Many of those who saw a need to compete, adapt and push forward were often concerned that reform would be thwarted and opportunities would be lost. As E.V. Arnold, a founder of the *Cambridge Review*, observed in February 1907, 'no criticism of the University is harder for its devoted *alumni* to answer than that which maintains that here, more than anywhere else in the world, a decorous self-repression is reckoned a higher quality than either activity or enterprise'.[1] But move Cambridge did; and we should not be surprised if, in coming to terms with a new order of things, the University did not sometimes appear as ridiculous as it was brave.

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[1] *CR*, 21 February 1907, 261.

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2 His Grace the Duke of Devonshire, Chancellor, 1892–1908, leads the honorary degree procession round the Senate-House Yard, 11 June 1892, following luncheon in the large gallery at the Fitzwilliam Museum. Among the fifteen honorary graduands were HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, the Viscount Cranbrook, the Earl of Northbrook, Joseph Chamberlain, John Morley, Professor Seeley and Leslie Stephen. A Guard of Honour of 100 rank and file from the 4th (Cambridge University Volunteers) Battalion, Suffolk Regiment, was drawn up on the lawn and received the procession with a royal salute.

It has always been difficult to describe the University of Cambridge and how it works, for it is one of those peculiar forms of social organisation which have evolved for the express purpose of creating, discovering, preserving and transmitting knowledge. In order to function effectively, a University requires that dedicated scholars, teachers and students come together in one place where they are able to enjoy the use of

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