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INTRODUCTION AND LIFE

Bound by the invisible links of common interests, the social and educational points of contact between the old Universities only serve to bring into sharp relief their complementary contrasts. Rivals now-a-days less in the prowess of brains than of brawn, throughout the centuries there has never lacked in each a keen appreciation of the merits and defects of the other. However much a modern Thomas Caius may boast of the superiority of Oxford, with his great namesake John he feels in his heart that things are better managed here ; and it is well known in the combination rooms that when he speaks of Oxford the tongue of a

Cambridge man is very apt to belie his heart. Migrations from one place to the other have gone on for centuries; incorporations, less frequent now than formerly, have counteracted to some extent the ill effects of close breeding. Oxford men have adorned Cambridge chairs, and as Oxford Professors Cambridge men have solved the riddle of dual personality. And the Universities are linked in the possession of the blessed memory of a group of men whose benefactions make them honoured as much in the one as in the other. Among those in order the first, and in scholarship the most distinguished stands Thomas Linacre. A summary of his life and character is thus given in the epitaph placed by Caius on a stately monument in old St Pauls surmounted by a phoenix¹;

¹ Apropos of the phoenix Fuller could not resist one of his characteristic remarks, "Yea, I may call these doctors the two Phoenixes of their profession in our nation and justify the expression, seeing the latter in some sort sprang from the ashes of the former."

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“Thomas Lynacrus, Regis Henrici VIII medicus; vir Graece et Latine atque in re medica longe eruditissimus: Multos aetate sua languentes, et qui jam animam desponderant, vitae restituit; Multa Galeni opera in Latinam linguam, mira et singulari facundia vertit: Egregium opus de emendata structura Latini sermonis, amicorum rogatu, paulo ante mortem edidit. Medicinae studiosis Oxoniae publicas lectiones duas, Cantabrigiae unam, in perpetuum stabilivit. In hac urbe Collegium Medicorum fieri sua industria curavit, cujus et Praesidens proximus electus est. Fraudes dolosque mire perosus; fidus amicis; omnibus ordinibus juxta clarus; aliquot annos antequam obierat Presbyter factus; plenus annis, ex hac vita migravit, multum desideratus, Anno Domini 1524, die 20 Octobris. Vivit post Funera virtus.”

Nearly four centuries have now passed since the endowment of his lectureships at

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Oxford and Cambridge. Vacant, by the happy translation of Dr Donald MacAlister to the Principalship of Glasgow University, this College, as guardian of the trust, has decided to change the lectureship to an annual lecture to be called after the name of the founder. That you, Master and Fellows of St John's College, should have asked one from Linacre's University to give this first lecture manifests in the sons of the prophets the old courtesy of the fathers. In the choice of a subject you will all agree that on the occasion of such a radical change a review of the life and works of the Founder is most appropriate, and here duty and inclination meet, since it happens that for some years I have been interested in both.

What we know of the early years of Linacre may be told in the brief sentences of Freind, "Canterbury gave him his birth (1460) and

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Oxford his education; he was chosen in 1484 Fellow of All Souls¹." His college is not known, nor have we a single item of information about his studies or his mode of life. Whether or not he was a kinsman of the Founder of All Souls is disputed. At Canterbury he had come under the care of William de Selling, possibly a relative, a man already infected with the new learning, and while an undergraduate Grocyn and Latimer became his friends and the names remain as the Oxford triumvirate with whom true English scholarship begins. Studies scholastic, life monastic express in a sentence Oxford at the end of the 15th century. Wood describes the condition in a paragraph: "The schools were much frequented with quirks and sophistry. All things, whether taught or written, seemed to be trite and inane. No pleasant streams of humanity or mythology were gliding among us;

¹ *History of Physic*, Vol. II.

and the Greek language, from whence the greater part of knowledge is derived, was at a very low ebb or in a manner forgotten." That good son of the church and of the profession, Dr James J. Walsh, has recently published a charming book on *The Thirteenth, the greatest of the Centuries*, and he makes a very good case for what is sometimes called the first Renaissance. Had the times been ripe and could men have done it, such men as Roger Bacon and Robert of Lincoln and Richard de Bury would have made, for England at least, a new birth; but from an intellectual standpoint the 13th century was at best, not the true dawn brightening more and more unto the perfect day, but a glorious Aurora, which flickered down again into the arctic night of mediaevalism.

Not until Greece rose from the dead did light and liberty come to the human mind, and it is the special glory of Linacre that he became,

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as Fuller says, the “restorer of learning in this country.” But certain manuscript treasures in the Bodleian and in the libraries of Balliol, New and Lincoln Colleges, Oxford, tell of an intermediate though unsuccessful Oxford movement by a group of men remembered now only by a few who know their story. An English medical student, one John Free, a Balliol man, became not only the most learned Englishman of his age, but was the first who ever attempted the goal of universal learning Italy had created. A peripatetic professor of medicine in the North Italian Universities, he was the prototype of the English scholars, who for the next two hundred years were to flock across the Alps as “o’er a brook.” But Free, Grey, Flemming, Gunthrop and Tiptoft, all Oxonians and all, save Flemming, Balliol men, had no enduring influence on English scholarship, and the manuscript treasures collected in Italy and now

distributed in the Oxford libraries alone remain to tell of this abortive renaissance.

William de Selling, Linacre's teacher, had already been in Italy and had studied Greek and had brought back manuscripts to Canterbury, of the monastery of which he became Prior. It is stated that the first real facilities to learn in England were there to be found, and he translated from the Greek a work of St John Chrysostom. It is not improbable that Linacre went to Oxford knowing Greek, and already athirst for the new learning. In 1488 Selling was sent by Henry VII on an embassy to the Pope, and we can imagine how eagerly the young Oxford scholar grasped the opportunity to visit Italy with his teacher. According to Leland, Linacre was to have taken part in the embassy to Rome, but at Bologna, meeting his old teacher Poliziano and naturally thinking the advantages too great to be neglected,

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de Selling left Linacre with him¹. How long he stayed is uncertain. We hear of him next at Florence still under the tutorship of Poliziano at the Court of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Here he seems to have had the advantages of sharing in the instruction given to the young princes, Piero and Giovanni. Years afterwards to the younger brother, when Pope Leo X, Linacre dedicated one of his works. In addition to the instruction of Poliziano he came under the influence of the great Greek scholar, Demetrius Chalcondyles. What a contrast for the young All-Souls' Fellow to exchange the dreary semi-monastic life for the polished world at the Court of Lorenzo where he associated with the master spirits of the age. He may have sat at the same board with Michael Angelo, with Marsilio Ficino and with Pico

¹ Dr Sandys tells me that there is no ground for believing that Linacre met Politian at Bologna.

della Mirandola. We do not know what the austere young Oxonian thought of the frivolities and diversions of Lorenzo and his companions; possibly he joined in them, but however much he may have appreciated the learning of Poliziano he did not make that genial heathen his life model. After a stay of a year or more he went to Rome, where he came under the influence of another great scholar, Hermolaus Barbarus. Johnson quotes the following anecdote of their accidental meeting: "He was one day engaged in the Vatican, in an examination of the *Phaedon* of Plato, when Hermolaus Barbarus suddenly approached the press where he was seated, and expressed his conviction that the stranger had no claim, like himself, to the epithet *Barbarus*, from his choice of the book to which his attention was directed. Linacre recognised the speaker, notwithstanding the equivocation under which his name was