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H. C. Porter

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PART I

HUMANISTS, REFORMERS AND EXILES

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CHAPTER I

THE CAMBRIDGE OF JOHN FISHER

CARDINAL JOHN FISHER, emaciated and ‘a very image of death’,¹ was beheaded on Tower Hill in June 1535, the first of five Tudor Chancellors of the University of Cambridge to meet death on the scaffold.² For over forty years he had been a man of high authority in Cambridge: perhaps at no other time has the university owed so much, for so long, to one man. Indeed, of all the formative periods in the development of Cambridge—the bursts of acceleration, as it were, or the changes of gear—those years have claim to be considered the most important; they were, without doubt, the most dramatic and the least dull; they were also—and this especially fits them for the historian’s pen—the most ironic. The Cambridge of Fisher was the seed-time of a strange harvest: the corn would have been alien to him. Fate, as Tudor poets were fond of pointing out, has a way of altering design. For instance, the two colleges which Fisher founded, with the Lady Margaret, as homes of orthodox religion and true learning, were to be notorious strongholds of factious Calvinist Puritanism. ‘He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.’

Fisher had first made the long journey to Cambridge from his home in Yorkshire when he was fourteen.³ That was in 1483, the year of Edward IV’s death. The college chosen for the boy was Michaelhouse, founded in 1324 by Edward II’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, and situated where today stand the south-west corner of Trinity Great Court and the Bishop’s Hostel. This choice was

¹ Philip Hughes (ed.), *St John Fisher: the Earliest English Life*, 184.

² The other four were Thomas Cromwell (executed 1540), Somerset (executed 1552), Northumberland (executed 1553), and Essex (executed 1601).

³ Fisher was born in 1469; A. H. Lloyd, *The Early History of Christ’s College*, 391.

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probably dictated by the fact that John there came under the tutoring eye of another Yorkshireman, William Melton, then in his middle twenties—Melton was later to be Master of the college, Chancellor of York, and a preacher of some renown. For nearly eight years Fisher studied the arts course under Melton, the seven liberal arts and the three philosophies.¹ To achieve the status of bachelor he worked at the *trivium*—Latin grammar (Priscian), rhetoric (Boethius, Cicero and Aristotle), and logic (Aristotle again, with the *Parva Logicalia*, a portion of the *Summulae Logicales* written in the late thirteenth century by Petrus Hispanus, a native of Lisbon who taught in Paris, and who became Pope John XXI). In his second year—1485, the time of Bosworth Field—he became sophister, able to take part in (and not merely to attend) certain disputations in the Schools. In his third and fourth years he came to grips with natural, moral and metaphysical philosophy, as expounded (yet again) in the works of Aristotle, with the commentaries of Duns Scotus or Alexander Hales as guide. From ‘questionist’, involving a nominal examination by the praelector, Fisher commenced bachelor in the Lent of 1488, four and half years after entering the university, when he was nineteen. This involved standing in the Schools with his fellow determinists on the afternoon of each week-day for a month, arguing his ‘questions’ with those who cared to test him. A successful ‘determination’ meant admission as bachelor of arts. There were now a further three years of study until the inception as master of arts: a hard core of the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy), much more Aristotle, some disputing and a little lecturing. Then, after the grant of an approving testimonial by twelve masters of arts and of a licence to incept, he took part in the solemn public disputations of the Commencement in the July of 1491, and, being successful, was himself admitted master. So

¹ The course of studies in medieval Cambridge is described in J. B. Mullinger, *The University of Cambridge*, I, 342–58; S. M. Leathes, Introduction to *Grace Book A*, xxi–xxvii; and S. E. Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College*, 26–35.

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from 1491 Fisher assumed for a few years the mantle of the regent, or teaching, master: lecturing, disputing, attending congregations of the regents—the ‘upper house’ of the Senate. In 1491 he was also elected Fellow of his college, and ordained priest—after obtaining a dispensation from Pope Innocent VIII, for he was only twenty-two, below the canonical age.¹ Eventually, by lecturing on the Bible and on the standard text-book of sound theological teaching (the *Libri Sententiarum* drawn up in the middle of the twelfth century by Peter Lombard), after preaching to the university, and passing through the detailed series of oppositions, responsions and replications, Fisher became qualified to receive, in 1501, the degree of doctor of divinity. By that time he had been for ten years a busy administrator: proctor in the year 1494/5, and Master of Michaelhouse (in succession to Melton) in 1497.² As proctor, concerned with the raising of funds for the rebuilding of Great St Mary’s, he had met the Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of the King, at Greenwich in 1495.³ In 1501 she appointed Dr Fisher her chaplain-confessor. In the following year he was named, in the deed of foundation, the first Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge. He was obviously, from all points of view, the appropriate choice.

So Fisher’s Cambridge career—extending now over twenty years—had been brilliantly successful. The stars were dancing for him, this tall, direct and grave young doctor, slender and sad, but with a ruddy countenance and a witty turn of phrase which nicely balanced the more highly serious of his virtues. In 1504, in swift succession, he was appointed Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of the university. He was to hold both offices until his death thirty-one years later. (For three of these years—from 1505 to 1508—he was also President of Queens’.) Like Matthew

¹ A. H. Lloyd, *op. cit.* 391.

² There is no direct evidence that either Melton or Fisher was Master; A. E. Stamp, *Michaelhouse*, 50.

³ Mary Bateson, Introduction to *Grace Book B, Part I*, xv. For Margaret Beaufort, see Mrs Sorley’s *Kings’ Daughters*.

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Parker, Fisher may be regarded, so far as his Cambridge career is concerned, as a born don who drifted naturally into administration. Certainly he had the qualities which were considered necessary for a successful university administrator and reformer—caution, prudence, soundness.¹ As Chancellor he ‘looked very straitly to the orders and rules of the university’,² and the value of his work as patron and benefactor can scarcely be overestimated:

calling every man to his duty, as well in the schools for profit of their learning, as in their churches and colleges for due keeping and observing the service of God, endeavouring himself by all the means he could to reduce the university to their ancient rules and statutes, which began even then to grow out of frame.³

As Bishop, ‘his palace for continence seemed a very monastery, and for learning an university’.⁴ As Chancellor, Master, President and Professor, ‘many times, for the encouragement of the younger sort, himself would be present at their disputations and readings and in disputing among them would bestow sometimes many hours together’.⁵ The ‘very mirror’, then, and ‘lantern of light’.⁶ And though in 1506, when the King came to Cambridge, with the Lady Margaret and Prince Henry, and perhaps Erasmus too, the Chancellor could oratorically declare that in his young days ‘there had stolen over well nigh all of us a weariness of learning and study, so that not a few did take counsel in their own minds how they might effect their departure’,⁷ of the three reasons he gave for this, one was conspicuously no longer applicable. The strife with the town continued, and the plague; but no one could say that in 1506 ‘there were few or no helpers and patrons of letters’. Weariness—if weariness there had been—had given way to a new spirit of assurance and achievement. The chancellorship

¹ H. O. Evennett, ‘John Fisher and Cambridge’, *Clergy Review*, ix, 378.

² Hughes (ed.), *St John Fisher*, 40.

³ *Ibid.* 40–1.

⁴ *Ibid.* 38.

⁵ *Ibid.* 41.

⁶ *Ibid.* 192.

⁷ Oration translated and quoted in Mullinger, *op. cit.* 427.

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of Fisher marked the spring of Renaissance Cambridge, no less surely than it witnessed the Indian summer of the medieval university.

For the Cambridge of Fisher was, in sharp degree, a combination of the medieval and the new; and much of the religious history of Tudor England is reflected or implied in the uses to which the new men were putting the ancient institutions—the hostels, for example, or the religious houses.

There were, in the early sixteenth century, about twenty hostels. During the whole period from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth there had been, all told, over one hundred and thirty.¹ The students and teachers of medieval Cambridge and Oxford did not necessarily house themselves in a college. In fact only a minority did so.² The thirteen colleges which existed in 1500 have been described as ‘essentially charitable and moral institutions for poorer men who could not afford to live in lodgings or the hostels’.³ Thomas Lever made a statement to the same effect when he spoke of the hostels serving those ‘having rich friends or being beneficed men’.⁴ The collegiate ideal (which received its earliest English expression in the rule of Merton) was confined at first to Fellows and scholars, and though during the fifteenth century there began to be provision for pensioners within the colleges, or some of them, not every young man would relish the prospect of a strict communal discipline. But just as the fifteenth century was a great period of Cambridge growth—until by the early 1500’s the numbers were almost as great as those at Oxford—the Cambridge of Fisher marked the most important stage in the rise of the colleges to power and importance. The statutes of God’s House drawn up in 1496 provided, for the first time, college lectures and college teaching, as distinct from the

¹ See H. P. Stokes, *The Mediaeval Hostels of Cambridge* (Camb. Antiq. Soc. Pubn., XLIX).

² E. F. Jacob, ‘English university clerks in the later Middle Ages’, *Essays in the Conciliar Epoch*, 215.

³ Evennett, *loc. cit.*

⁴ Thomas Lever, *Sermons*, 121.

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university lectures of the masters of arts such as those Fisher had given in the early 'nineties.

Thus, although several hostels were marked on Richard Lyne's map of Cambridge in 1574, there was not a single reference to the use of hostels for teaching and residence in the University Grace Book containing records for the years 1542–89.¹ Trinity Hostel, east of Holy Trinity Church, was, according to Thomas Fuller, 'the longest liver, surviving all the rest':² but there do not appear to have been students there after 1540.

Some of the hostels had been 'absolute corporations, entire within themselves'.³ Others were attached to the colleges. Borden Hostel, near the modern site of Deighton Bell's shop, was jointly owned by Peterhouse and Clare; it was sold in 1536 to a wealthy alderman, who made an inn of it.⁴ St Mary's Hostel, where the Senate House now stands, was once the Hall of the Guild of St Mary (attached to the Church of St Mary the Great). This guild combined with that of Corpus Christi (attached to St Bene't's), and the amalgamated guild founded, by 1352, the College of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Virgin Mary, to which college the old hall now belonged. Matthew Parker spent some of his student days there in the 1520's. Later, Parker bought it from his college, to use as a private house, and his son, Sir John Parker, died there in poverty in 1619.⁵ Physwick Hostel, with its twenty or thirty students, was an annexe of Gonville Hall; in 1533 a newly elected Fellow called John Caius was appointed Principal. Physwick Hostel, with Michaelhouse and King's Hall, went to the making of Trinity in 1546. The Hostel of St Nicholas, south of the Barnwell Gate, was distinguished for its brawls. Indeed, inter-hostel feuds were as striking a contemporary nuisance as 'town and gown' riots. In 1507, for instance, the men of this hostel carried on a boisterous battle with the students of Christ's

¹ J. Venn, Introduction to *Grace Book* Δ, vi.

² Thomas Fuller, *History of the University of Cambridge*, 62.

³ *Ibid.* 66.

⁴ Stokes, *Mediaeval Hostels*, 25.

⁵ Stokes, *Corpus Christi College*, 50.

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for two nights running!¹ When most of its latter-day inmates had long since heard the chimes at midnight for the last time, the hostel became the home of the puritan Laurence Chaderton, Fellow of Christ's and first Master of the godly house of Emmanuel.

The religious houses are more significant for the story. There may indeed have been an intimate connection between the monastic orders and the start of Cambridge studies, though the group of monks from the Lincolnshire house of Crowland who arrived in Cambridge early in the twelfth century² must regretfully be relegated, as theoretical founders of the university, to the crowded limbo of picturesque persons for whom the same honour has been claimed, in company, that is, with such worthies as the Spanish Prince Cantaber, King Arthur, and the Saxon King Sigebert. Be that as it may, to speak of the medieval university is to speak of monks and canons and friars; the disappearance of the religious habit from the streets and courts of Cambridge in the late 1530's must be numbered among the real breaks in academic history. Monastic houses had the obligation to send some of their number to study at the university, to take a degree in theology or canon law.³ The obligation was often ignored, in the fourteenth century as in the early sixteenth.⁴ After all, a leave of absence of at least seven years from the monastery, for a religious in early manhood, with the prospect of ample opportunity for all sorts and conditions of dissipation, would not necessarily be warmly encouraged by every abbot. Many monks, however, were sent. These 'university monks' may have gone to their own houses of study. The Benedictines had three such houses at Oxford, but none at Cambridge until 1428. In that

¹ Mary Bateson, *Introduction to Grace Book B*, xvii.

² H. Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, III, 276.

³ For monks at the university, David Knowles, *Religious Orders in England*, II, chapter 2, 'Monks and canons at the university, 1300-1450'; and J. Venn, *Early Collegiate Life*, chapter 6, 'Monks in Cambridge'.

⁴ Some sixteenth-century complaints are quoted in Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, I, 60-1.

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year 'the hostel called monks' place' was founded, a small community, drawn mainly from Crowland. From the 1480's the house was referred to as Buckingham College—a name assumed to derive from Henry, second Duke of Buckingham.¹ The first record of the name Buckingham College is dated 1483. Thus at Cambridge, and even at Oxford, the monks often lived in the ordinary colleges or hostels. The house of Augustinian canons at Butley in Suffolk had an *honesta camera* reserved for their men at Gonville Hall, Cambridge; and of the sixteen pensioners resident in that college in 1513, three were Austin canons from Westacre, in Norfolk, and there were monks also from Norwich and Lewes.² Conversation in the Gonville Hall of the 1520's was lively enough, when the young monks found as their collegiate seniors such Lutheran reformers as Edward Crome, Nicholas Shaxton and Sygar Nicholson. And by 1523 the prior of the house of Augustinian canons at Barnwell was himself in sympathy with the reformers: he was Thomas Rawlyn.

Thus many others besides Hugh Latimer of Clare may have remembered with affection, in later days, a 'merry monk' of their college.³ And the minor revolution of their disappearance seems perhaps the more shocking when it is remembered that the royal injunctions of 1535 had once more attempted to enforce the obligation of houses to send monks to the university.

The site and buildings of Buckingham College were granted by the King to Lord Chancellor Audley, and so Magdalene was founded. Such transformations were not a new thing. Over forty years before, in 1496, the Cambridge house of Benedictine nuns had been refounded as Jesus College by Bishop Alcock of Ely (like Fisher, a Beverley man), who had found at his last visitation only two rather fallen sisters. And at four o'clock on

¹ D. M. B. Ellis and L. F. Salzman, 'Religious Houses', *Victoria History of the County of Cambridge*, II, 312.

² Venn, *Early Collegiate Life*, 77; 68–9.

³ Latimer, *Sermons*, I, 153.