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## JOHN FISHER

Four colleges unite to-day to pay homage to the memory of John Fisher. In the noble list of founders and benefactors which our University and our colleges preserve, few names stand out with the eminence of his.

He was Master of Michaelhouse and President of Queens' College; and, with the Lady Margaret, a founder of Christ's College and St John's. In the University he held the offices of Senior Proctor, Lady Margaret Professor, Vice-Chancellor and Chancellor—that of Chancellor for thirty-one years.

In the early sixteenth century, when kings still went on pilgrimage, Henry VII set out for the shrine of St Mary at Walsingham. On his way he visited Cambridge. The University received him with all its ancient ceremony. The four orders of friars, the other religious orders and all the graduates according to their degrees awaited him. At the University Cross the King alighted and there Doctor Fisher,

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then Chancellor of the University (it was the year 1506), accompanied by other doctors, made 'a little proposition' and welcomed him.<sup>1</sup>

The 'little proposition' was a lengthy oration in Latin.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat fanciful in its account of the past glories of Cambridge, it yet contains a passage that illuminates for us the last years of the medieval University. We were in the depths of misfortune, said the Chancellor, when Your Majesty first came to our aid; continual strife with the townsmen, the long abiding of the plague and the want of benefactors had brought almost all of us to a weariness of learning. Many were planning to depart at the first opportunity. With your coming the sun has risen upon us.

The picture was a little overcharged with gloom, for Fisher had himself contributed to appease the strife with the town, and the records of the University show no decline in its activities in these years.<sup>3</sup> But new benefactions were bitterly needed, and the orator

<sup>1</sup> Cooper, C. H., *Annals of Cambridge*, I, 281.

<sup>2</sup> Printed in Lewis, J., *Life of Dr John Fisher*, II, 263-72.

<sup>3</sup> Grace Book B, Part I, p. xxvi.

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was leading up to his final theme—the unfinished college of Henry VI—‘a work for thee divinely destined’ to complete. Did Fisher, when he spoke thus, know of the king’s intentions? We cannot say. But before King Henry died he made provision for the perfect finishing of the chapel, which Fisher lived to see.

The procession moved on to the lodge of Queens’ College, where royal visitors were accustomed to stay, and of which Fisher had become President in the preceding year.

At the time of this royal visit Fisher was midway in his career, about thirty-seven years of age, of which some twenty-three had been spent in Cambridge. His earliest biographer describes him as tall and comely, six feet in height, upright and well-framed, ‘somewhat wide-mouthed and big-jawed, as one ordained to utter speech much’, and grave in countenance.<sup>1</sup> He had that asset of authority, a powerful voice, and when moved his manner could be vehement. Erasmus said of him that when he warmed to the contest he could not

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Fisher* (MS. Harleian 6382), Early English Text Society, pp. 129–30.

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easily desist<sup>1</sup>—a judgment Fisher's life was to illustrate. Already he had become the leading spirit in the University.

Born at Beverley in Yorkshire in 1469,<sup>2</sup> the eldest child of a prosperous merchant, he had been educated at the school attached to the Collegiate Church and had come up to Michaelhouse, a boy of fourteen. We have but glimpses of his student days—a grateful tribute to the exact teaching in geometry, given by his old tutor, William de Melton,<sup>3</sup> and a wish, expressed long after, that the text books in logic and rhetoric had been more attractive.<sup>4</sup> 'We were scholars together in Cambridge', wrote the Carthusian, John Bouge, 'and for a little pastime I might speak to him out of my chamber window into his chamber window.'<sup>5</sup> Seven years of study were required to make a

<sup>1</sup> *Erasmi Epistolae*, ed. Allen, P. S., IV, 73.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd, A. H., *Early History of Christ's College*, p. 391. Dr Lloyd kindly sent me a transcript of the dispensation to Fisher in 1491 which he has discovered in the Papal Archives. (*Reg. Later.* 908, f. 70). In this Fisher's age is given as twenty-two.

<sup>3</sup> Bridgett, T. E., *Life of Blessed John Fisher*, p. 12. See *Jo. Fischerii Opera* (1597), col. 1128. <sup>4</sup> *Erasmi Epist.* II, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Campbell, W. E., II[1].

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master. Fisher became questionist in 1488, was soon after elected a Fellow of Michaelhouse, and proceeded to the Master's degree in 1491. He had evidently made some mark, for three years later he was appointed Senior Proctor in the University,<sup>1</sup> an office next in importance to that of Vice-Chancellor. The proctors were generally young men; they were the maids-of-all-work of the University, and their multifarious duties demanded energy and competence. When Melton resigned the Mastership of Michaelhouse in 1497, Fisher succeeded him.

The appointment as Senior Proctor was a turning-point in his life. In 1495 University business took him to the Court at Greenwich. 'I dined', wrote Fisher, 'with the Lady mother of the King.'<sup>2</sup> Thus began an acquaintance of memorable consequence to both. Seven years later the Lady Margaret made him her Chaplain and Confessor. 'She chose me', he wrote, 'as her director...to guide her life, yet I gladly confess that I learnt more from her virtue than ever I could teach her.'<sup>3</sup> Fisher

<sup>1</sup> Grace Book B, Part 1, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Opera*, p. 747.

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had thus the opportunity to direct her bounty towards those needs of the University on which his mind was fixed. Meanwhile he had pursued the arduous course for the doctorate in Theology and had become Vice-Chancellor.<sup>1</sup>

Cambridge had by this time risen from the obscurity of a local reputation to take her place by the side of her older sister as a national University. Numbers had grown rapidly during the latter half of the fifteenth century and towards its close nearly equalled the diminished numbers of Oxford.<sup>2</sup> Schools of Divinity, Arts and Civil Law had arisen, the University Library had been founded and a new University Church was building. By this time, too, the College system was firmly established. From its earliest expression in the famous rule of Merton, the idea of the college had been progressively expanded and was reaching its modern form—the community of scholars, living under discipline, in a house that rivalled in splendour the great monastic houses, taught within the college

<sup>1</sup> Grace Book B, Part I, pp. 143, 162.

<sup>2</sup> Rashdall, H., *Universities of Europe*, II, 553.

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walls and including in their number students not on the foundation. Colleges stretched in an almost continuous line from Peterhouse to King's Hall. The college had learned much from the monastery, but its purpose was different. The monastery formed a body of recluses; the college sent forth a trained clergy for service in Church and State. Hence its appeal to Fisher.

The scholar in a college was under supervision and restraint, but he had a home of reasonable comfort. He was no longer tempted to enter one of the religious houses, so prominent in medieval Cambridge, or left at the mercy of 'practised extortioners'. But only a privileged minority of the students were in colleges. Others lived a less disciplined life in the hostels, whose brawlings so frequently disturbed the peace.

While these material changes were strengthening the University, on the intellectual side it was hardly touched by the stir of a new age. When Fisher graduated a printed book was still almost a curiosity.<sup>1</sup> Greek learning was unknown. The scholastic discipline was firmly

<sup>1</sup> Grace Book A, p. xliv.

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entrenched and Church and University stood together in its defence. The art of reasoning had been cultivated to perfection, and talented young men won their degrees by prolonged and subtle disputations in Latin, supporting their arguments from the Bible, the Fathers, the medieval commentators and the Canon Law. Fisher was bred in this system. He was not a Humanist and the spirit of Humanism is sought in vain in his writings. But he saw in the improvement of education the way of advance to a more spiritual religion. Thus would the Church be reformed and the evils of the time banished. A man of deep piety, he found little comfort either at home or abroad. Abroad the rise of a Moslem power oppressed his mind. 'Our religion of Christian faith is greatly diminished', he said in a sermon in 1507, 'we be very few.'<sup>1</sup> At home he condemned the worldliness of the clergy. 'In that time', he says, speaking of the early Church, 'were no chalices of gold, but then was many golden priests, now be many chalices of gold and almost no golden priests.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *English Works of John Fisher*, ed. Mayor, J. E. B., p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 181.



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An educated, preaching priesthood was one of the needs of England which the University might satisfy. But without new foundations learning would remain in the old channels.

Medieval piety turned instinctively to the endowment of religious houses, whence perpetual prayers might rise for the good of the donor's soul. Fisher essayed to show the Lady Margaret how by serving learning she could serve religion too. A scholar herself, her sympathies could be won for the Universities. The schools of learning, he told her, were meanly endowed, the provisions for scholars were very few and small, and colleges were yet wanting for their maintenance. What more meritorious than to educate a multitude of young men in learning and virtue, who should carry the gospel through all the bounds of Britain.<sup>1</sup>

The great benefactions of the Lady Margaret to the University began with a perpetual public lectureship in Divinity, since called the Lady Margaret Professorship. Established

<sup>1</sup> Baker, T., *History of the College of St John the Evangelist*, p. 59; Hymers, J., *Funeral Sermon of Margaret Countess of Richmond*, Appendix No. 10, Letter to the University, pp. 220-1.

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in 1501, it was the beginning for Cambridge of the professorial system. In the medieval University the regent masters and doctors gathered students round them and were paid by their fees. That system was slowly replaced by lecturers endowed from University funds and college resources. Fisher, appointed in 1502, was the first holder of the new office. The reader was required to lecture daily in the Divinity Schools without fee, except during Lent, when he and his class might devote themselves to preaching.

During the latter Middle Ages the sermon had fallen into disfavour in the Church, but Fisher saw in the revival of preaching a weapon of reform, and in 1504 the Lady Margaret Preachership followed the Lady Margaret Professorship. Something had thus been done to provide gratuitous instruction in theology in the University and preaching in the vernacular. Fisher himself was a leader in the reform of the pulpit. A high authority attributes to him 'the most finished pulpit eloquence' of that day,<sup>1</sup> and two of his ser-

<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock, E. V. and Chambers, R. W., *Harpfield's Life of Sir Thomas More*, E.E.T.S., p. cliv.