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Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

MUCH has been written about the university of Cambridge in the eighteenth century, and it would be idle to attempt to do again what already has been done so well. The stormy years of Bentley's Mastership of Trinity are admirably and fully described in Monk's biography of that turbulent scholar<sup>1</sup>, and Henry Gunning, in his *Reminiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge*, has given a vivid and entertaining account of university ways and manners at the close of the century. But Bentley died in 1742 and Gunning did not begin his undergraduate career until 1784; and between these two dates lies an unexplored tract of university history. It cannot be pretended that this middle period claims attention as being peculiarly rich in great scholars and striking characters; but the history of an university, like the history of a nation, is not exclusively a record of the achievements of great men. Mediocrities play their part in building up the whole; and it may at least be said of Cambridge during the middle years of the eighteenth century that, though not prolific of great scholars, it was peculiarly rich in university politicians. From 1748 until 1768 it had as its Chancellor that very typical eighteenth century politician, Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle; and any society over which Newcastle presided was not likely to lack opportunities of exercising its talents in the direction of intrigue and wire-pulling. It is now the

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Richard Bentley*, by James Henry Monk, Bishop of Gloucester (1830).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

## INTRODUCTION

fashion to deride those who spend their time and energy upon the ephemeral controversies which rage in an university, and possibly they might often be more profitably employed; but, while the moralist and scholar condemn, the student of human nature has cause to be grateful. It is neither uninteresting nor uninteresting to see men imitating on a small stage the warfare of the great world and striving to attain their petty ambitions with as much fury and as little scruple as if contending for empires; and the Cambridge combatants in the eighteenth century, though frequently contending for nothing greater than the satisfaction of their own ambitions, certainly carried on their struggles with an ingenuity and resource deserving of a better cause. But the period of university history under consideration does not present an unrelieved picture of sordid struggles for ignoble spoils. The lamp of learning was not burning with startling brightness but it was still burning; jobbery was rampant but honest merit came sometimes to its own; scandals were unpleasantly frequent but probably not as frequent as is popularly supposed. We indeed have often occasion to blush for our predecessors; but we possibly have been readier to blush than to enquire.

And enquiry is the more necessary as we are separated by a wide gulf from eighteenth century Cambridge. Much has changed in the university during the last two centuries; but in no respect has the change been greater than in the habits and outlook of its senior members. A present-day Fellow of a college is not very different in type from the ordinary professional man. His university career is a part and a very important part of his life, but it is not the whole. His interests are many and by no means exclusively academic. Almost as much at home in London as he is in Cambridge, he has friends and acquaintances in many paths

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

of life, does not garnish his conversation with Greek and Latin quotations, and plays his part without conscious effort in general society. He takes a pride in his freedom from eccentricities and improves upon the Pharisee by thanking God that he is as other men. His eighteenth century predecessor had a far more limited outlook upon life and bore more visibly the marks of his calling. Generally in orders and often of comparatively lowly origin, he was a stranger to the exclusive social world of his time. When he visited the metropolis his manners and behaviour stamped him as a provincial, and he commonly had no higher ambition than to become a tutor to the son of an influential nobleman through whose assistance he might secure advancement in the church. If he was singularly fortunate he might obtain a bishopric which would place him on terms of equality with the great, but such good fortune was reserved for the few, and the average university 'don' only saw the polite world from the point of view of the humble dependent. His social experience was in consequence extremely limited. Removed from refining influences, and with few opportunities of measuring his conduct by any other standard than that prevailing in the university, he retained many of the characteristics of the class from which he had sprung. Servile towards his superiors and overbearing towards those he considered beneath him, he was frequently gross and boorish with his friends and equals; but it must in fairness be remembered that the seclusion, which kept him a boor, was productive of certain virtues. It is likely that he had a far deeper and more enduring love of his college and university than is at all common at the present day. To his education he was mainly indebted for whatever success he had achieved in life, and his college, if not his first, was at least his greatest patron. It was moreover his home in a way which it

Cambridge University Press

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Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4

## INTRODUCTION

has nowadays ceased to be except for the few, and he therefore gave it the affection which men reserve for their homes. He may often have quarrelled with his colleagues and neglected his pupils; but he was seldom found wanting in loyalty to the society to which he belonged.

His virtues, however, have perished with him and he has come down in history with a sorry and tarnished reputation. It is popularly believed that he was lazy and self-indulgent; but there is good reason to think that his failings have been exaggerated. Though Cambridge in the eighteenth century was sadly lacking in eminent mathematicians<sup>1</sup>, it was not wanting in great classical scholars; and a century of university history which can boast of Bentley, Porson, Dawes and Markland may be accounted to have paid its debt and more than its debt to classical scholarship. It can of course be contended that scholars of such merit were rare, that they were the exception rather than the rule, and that to derive from them the standard of industry prevailing in the university is to argue from the particular to the general; but, inasmuch as it is the inevitable consequence of the progress of learning that the greater part of the work of one generation is superseded by the next, and that only a comparatively few students are remembered for all time, it is particularly necessary to be cautious of assuming that idleness must have been almost universal because the proofs of industry are not very obvious. It is true that research was not quite so much the order of the day as it is at present; but the claims of learning and scholarship were certainly not completely disregarded. No one now troubles to investigate the high dusty shelves of college libraries on which repose the volumes on philosophy, divinity,

<sup>1</sup> As Sir Isaac Newton died in 1727 he can hardly be claimed as an eighteenth century mathematician.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00226-4 - The University of Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century

Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

mathematics and the classics, which, though now completely out of date, were greeted in their day as valuable contributions to learning. Dr Smith, Master of Trinity, is now chiefly remembered as the founder of the mathematical prizes named after him; but in his own day he was famous as a mathematician and his treatise on optics was translated into French and German. The *Essay on the Roman Senate*, written by Dr Chapman, Master of Magdalene, has fallen into still deeper oblivion; but yet the treatise, when published, was thought sufficiently important to be translated into French. Few moreover have ever heard of Dr Law, Master of Peterhouse, who, when a Fellow of Christ's, assisted to edit *Roberti Stephani Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*; and probably fewer still have heard of Professor Rutherford, Fellow and Tutor of St John's, who was accounted one of the best scholars in the university and published in quick succession volumes upon the natural sciences, theology and international law.

This list of forgotten scholars could be indefinitely extended, and, as it takes some trouble to produce even a bad book, industry was presumably not an unknown virtue in the university. It must be admitted however that if scholarship was not so neglected as is often supposed, there is a great deal of truth in the traditional belief that the instruction given in the university was very far from satisfactory. It was by no means unknown for a newly appointed Professor to be unacquainted with the very rudiments of the subject he was supposed to teach, and for a college Tutor systematically to neglect the instruction of his pupils. Dr Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, was in many ways a very favourable specimen of an eighteenth century Professor, and appears conscientiously to have discharged his duties as a teacher; but nothing is more astonishing than the courage with which he shouldered responsibilities for

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00226-4 - The University of Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century

Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6

## INTRODUCTION

which he was most inadequately prepared. He has left on record that, when he was appointed Professor of Chemistry in 1764, 'he knew nothing at all of chemistry, had never read a syllable on the subject, nor seen a single experiment in it,' and that it was only by as much hard work as his 'other avocations would permit,' he was able, fifteen months after his election, to deliver a course of lectures. Seven years later he was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity, and again he frankly admits that he only knew as much divinity 'as could reasonably be expected from a man whose course of studies had been directed to, and whose time had been fully occupied in, other pursuits,' and that it was not until his election to the Regius Professorship that he embarked upon the study of theology<sup>1</sup>. There were probably many Professors who initially were as badly equipped as Dr Watson and never troubled to overcome their deficiencies, and others who possessed the requisite knowledge but preferred not to impart it by way of lectures. Edward Waring, who was Lucasian Professor of Mathematics from 1760 to 1798, did not lecture as his 'profound researches...were not adapted to any form of communication by lectures,' and Waring's case is only singular in the excuse given for the non-performance of his duties.

The average college Tutor does not appear to have been any more conscientious than the average Professor, and Richard Cumberland, who came up to Trinity as an undergraduate in 1747, has left a very unfavourable account of the instruction he received.

'When the time came for me to commence my residence in college' he wrote 'my father accompanied me and put me under the care of the Rev. Dr Morgan, an old friend of our family and a Senior Fellow of that society. My rooms were closely adjoining to his, belonging to that staircase which leads

<sup>1</sup> *Anecdotes of the life of Dr Richard Watson*, pp. 28, 29, 34.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00226-4 - The University of Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century

Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

7

to the chapel bell; he was kind to me when we met, but as Tutor I had few communications with him, for the gout afforded him not many intervals of ease, and with the exception of a few trifling readings in Tully's Offices, by which I was little edified and to which I paid little or no attention, he left me and one other pupil...to choose and pursue our studies as we saw fit<sup>1</sup>.

There were however Tutors who conscientiously fulfilled their duties towards their pupils. The Rev. James Backhouse of Trinity is now only remembered as the victim of some scurrilous verses by Porson<sup>2</sup>; but he appears to have been an admirable Tutor, for we are told that he 'gave regular lectures and fulfilled the duties of his charge ably and conscientiously<sup>3</sup>.' Another Tutor of Trinity, Thomas Jones, is still remembered in the college for which he laboured, and deserves to be remembered.

'During many years' it is recorded in his biography 'he continued to take an active part in the Senate House examinations; but latterly he confined himself to the duties of college Tutor. These indeed were sufficiently numerous to engage his whole attention; and he displayed in them an ability, which was rarely equalled, with an integrity which never was surpassed<sup>4</sup>.'

Jones was too busy as a Tutor to win fame as a writer, and his only published writings are a sermon on duelling and an address to the volunteers of Montgomeryshire; but his biographer, while regretting that much of his learning died with him, finds consolation in the knowledge that

his lectures on philosophy will not be buried in oblivion: all his writings on those subjects have been delivered to his successor in the tuition, and, though less amply than by publication, will continue to benefit mankind<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland*, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Gunning's *Reminiscences*, II, 113-114.

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland*, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Marsh's *Memoir of the Rev. Thomas Jones*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Memoir of the Rev. Thomas Jones*, p. 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00226-4 - The University of Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century

Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8

## INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt however that we have improved upon our predecessors in regard to the education given in the university; and, though there are some who think that the improvement has gone too far, a return to the eighteenth century standard of efficiency has never been contemplated<sup>1</sup>. There has also been an improvement in the refinements and decencies of life. The eighteenth century was a time of heavy eating and copious drinking, and Cambridge, faithfully reflecting the characteristics of the age, was the home of rude plenty. Students of Gunning's *Reminiscences* are familiar with Dr Ogden's pathetic complaint that the goose was a silly bird, being too much for one person and not enough for two<sup>2</sup>, and it is possible that some of Ogden's contemporaries were of the same opinion but lacked the ability to give it such epigrammatic expression. Excesses in eating and drinking were certainly not uncommon phenomena. Dr Chapman, Master of Magdalene, who died in 1760, probably shortened his life by gluttony, for we are told that, about a week before his death, 'he eat five large mackerel, full of roe, to his own share, but what gave the finishing stroke was a turbot on Trinity Sunday, of which he left but very little for the company<sup>3</sup>.' Dr Ridlington, Fellow of Trinity Hall and Professor of Civil Law, was more

<sup>1</sup> 'It is interesting to note that whereas the earlier Royal Commissions were concerned with providing against the indifference and want of conscientiousness of some of the Fellows, the charge now made in some quarters is that the Fellows overwork themselves at teaching and administration.' *Report of the Royal Commission on Oxford and Cambridge Universities* (1922), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Ogden was a Fellow of St John's and Professor of Geology. For twenty years he was vicar of St Sepulchre's Church in Cambridge. He published volumes of sermons and was warmly commended for his merits as a preacher by Dr Johnson who remarked: 'I should like to read all that Ogden has written.'

<sup>3</sup> Gray's *Letters* (edited by D. C. Tovey), II, 160.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00226-4 - The University of Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century

Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

9

fortunate though not more temperate; for, when supposed to be dying of the dropsy, he 'prescribed himself a boiled chicken entire and five quarts of small beer<sup>1</sup>,' and by aid of this unorthodox remedy recovered. Such Gargantuan feats must have been rare, but self-indulgence was only too common and sometimes had disastrous results. In the year 1779 the Rev. George Mounsey, Fellow and Tutor of Jesus College, accompanied some friends on a pleasure party on the river, and, having drunk too much,

got out of the boat at Ditton Plough, a public house on the waterside, and, kneeling down before a number of people who happened to be there, denied his faith, blasphemously reviled the Holy Ghost, and...cursed the King, the Queen and all the Royal Family<sup>2</sup>.

In consequence of this escapade Mounsey was deprived of his Tutorship, but he continued to hold his Fellowship, and in 1780 officiated as Moderator in the Schools when, much to the indignation of the antiquarian, Cole, 'he seemed as unconcerned as if nothing had happened.'

There is however no reason to think that, even in the eighteenth century, college Tutors habitually imitated Ben-hadad, King of Syria<sup>3</sup>; but the general standard of conduct left much to be desired and the outlook on life was very often frankly materialistic. When the Rev. Dr Walker, Vice-Master of Trinity, lay dying in 1764, he heard one of his nurses say 'Ah, poor gentleman, he is going,' and his comment, though it would have been creditable to a philosopher, was disgraceful in a divine: 'Going, going,' he ejaculated, 'where am I going? I'm sure I know no more than the man in the moon<sup>4</sup>.' The

<sup>1</sup> Gray's *Letters*, III, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Add. MS. 5852, f. 119.

<sup>3</sup> 'And they went out at noon. But Ben-hadad was drinking himself drunk in the pavilions, he and the kings, the thirty and two kings that helped him.' 1 Kings, ch. xx. 16

<sup>4</sup> Gray's *Letters*, III, 61.

Cambridge University Press

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Denys Arthur Winstanley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

doubts of the Vice-Master were probably shared by many, and it was perhaps because they felt so uncertain of the future that they sought to make the most of the present. For whatever be charged against the senior members of the university, they cannot be accused of neglecting their worldly interests, and Cambridge was not behindhand in that shameless hunt for places and preferments which is associated with the eighteenth century. As long as the Duke of Newcastle remained in the service of the king and dispensed the crown's ecclesiastical patronage, he was constantly being reminded by his academic supporters of their claims to recognition. When the Deanery of Ely fell vacant, both Dr Prescott, the Master of St Catharine's, and Dr Law, the Master of Peterhouse, applied to the Duke for the preferment, Dr Prescott urging that he had 'always retained and shewn some affection to the royal family<sup>1</sup>,' and Dr Law imploring the Duke, whose displeasure he had incurred,

to give credit to this, my solemn and sincere profession, that as I never entertained the least thought of seeking any patronage beside that of your Grace, so neither was any application made either by me, or, to my knowledge, for me, to any person whatsoever, but in perfect concurrence with and proper subordination to your Grace's pleasure<sup>2</sup>.

In 1759 another Head of a House, Dr Sumner, Provost of King's, requested Newcastle to advance him in the church; and, as he was already holding a canonry and two livings, he naïvely suggested

a method, perhaps the readiest, of carrying into execution in the most effectual manner your Grace's favourable intentions towards me; and that is, my Lord, to divest me at once of both my canonry and my livings by placing me upon the Bench<sup>3</sup>.

Most of the applicants stated their wishes in plain

<sup>1</sup> Add. MS. 32877, f. 170.

<sup>2</sup> Add. MS. 32876, f. 508.

<sup>3</sup> Add. MS. 32896, f. 168.