

Cambridge University Press

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Sydney Castle Roberts

Excerpt

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JOHN SIBERCH

EXCURSIONS into the realm of legend have long served as the traditional method of approach of the academic historian to his subject. True, the story of the foundation of the university of Cambridge by “one Cantaber, a Spaniard, about 370 years before Christ,” or, as Fisher described him in 1506, “Cantaber, a king of the East Saxons, who had been educated at Athens,” is now definitely rejected as unhistorical; but it was only in 1914 that the name of Sigebert, King of the East Angles, was removed from the list of royal benefactors¹.

University printing, like the university itself, has its Apocrypha. Edmund Carter, writing in 1753, includes a short section on *University Printers*:

Printing had not been long used in *England* before it was brought hither, but by whom it is difficult to ascertain, tho' it may be supposed that *Caxton*, (who is said to be the first that brought this curious art into *England*, and was a *Cambridgeshire* Man, born at *Caxton* in that County, from which he takes his Name) might Erect a Press at *Cambridge*, as well as at *Westminster*, under the care of one of his Servants; (for it is Conjectured, he brought several from *Germany* with him). The first Book we find an Account of, that was Printed here, is a Piece of *Rhetoric*, by one *Gull. de Saona*, a Minorite; Printed at *Cambridge* 1478; given by Archbp. Parker to *Bennet* College Library. It is in Folio, the Pages not Numbered, and without ketch Word, or Signatures.

¹ *Cambridge Historical Register*, pp. 1, 168.

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Alas for Carter's pious suppositions! Caxton, according to his own testimony, was born in Kent and Cambridge can claim only to be the place of compilation of the *Rhetorica*; the phrase at the end of the book, *Compilata in Universitate Cantabrigiae*, no doubt led to the entry being made in the catalogue in the form *Rhetorica nova, impressa Cantab, fo. 1478*, and the mistake persisted for two centuries.

Nor is Oxford without a controversial prologue to the story of its printing. In the first Oxford book the date appears in the colophon as MCCCCLXVIII and for long it was sought to establish the claim that Oxford printing preceded Caxton. But though it has been contended that the ground for the claim "has not yet entirely slipped away," it is now generally accepted by bibliographers that the printer omitted an x from the date, which should in fact be MCCCCLXXVIII.

"The oldest of all inter-university sports," said Maitland, "was a lying match."

To return to Cambridge, we are on firmer, though not very spacious, ground, when we come to the name of John Siberch, the first Cambridge printer. "True it is," says Thomas Fuller, "it was a great while before Cambridge could find out the right knack of printing, and therefore they preferred to employ Londoners therein . . . but one Sibert, University Printer, improved that mystery to good perfection."

Of the life of Siberch, either at Cambridge or elsewhere, we know little. He was the friend of

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several great humanists of the period, including Erasmus; he was in Louvain, evidently, in 1518. "I was surprised," writes Erasmus to John Caesarius on 5 April of that year, "that John Siberch came here without your letter."

The earliest appearance of his name on a title-page is in 1520, when Richard Croke's *Introductiones in rudimenta Graeca* was printed at Cologne "expensis providi viri domini Ioannis Laer de Siborch."¹ His full name, then (of which there are many forms), is John Lair and his place of origin Siegburg, a small town south-west of Cologne.

A discovery made by Mr Gordon Duff in the Westminster Abbey Library in 1889 makes it almost certain that Siberch was already in England when Croke's book was printed; for in a copy of a book bound by Siberch there was found, besides two printed fragments and a letter from Petrus Kaetz², a portion of the manuscript of the *Rudimenta Graeca*. It seems clear, therefore, that Siberch was in England when proofs and 'copy' of the work were sent to him.

Richard Croke (afterwards the first Public Orator) was at this time the enthusiastic leader of Greek studies in Cambridge. He had earned fame as a teacher at Cologne, Louvain, Leipzig, and Dresden and, in succession to his friend Erasmus, was appointed Reader in Greek to the university in 1519. His text-book could not be printed in England, because there was as yet no Greek fount

¹ The binding of a copy of this book in Lincoln Cathedral is almost certainly the work of Siberch. ² See below, p. 14.

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owned by an English printer; and it is quite probable, as Mr Duff suggests, that John Siberch, himself settled in Cambridge, had undertaken to have Croke's work printed by a friend, possibly by his old master, in Cologne. Possibly, too, Croke may have previously met Siberch in Germany and, with Erasmus, have been responsible for his coming to Cambridge. This, of course, is conjectural, but of the friendship between Erasmus and Siberch there is no doubt, since, in a letter from Erasmus to Dr Robert Aldrich, written on Christmas Day 1525, there is a message sent to "veteres sodales Phaunum, Omfridum, Vachanum, Gerardum, et Joannem Siburgum, bibliopolas."

From this it would naturally be inferred that Siberch was still in Cambridge in 1525, but his name does not appear in the Subsidy Roll of 1523-24 and it is probable, therefore, that, unknown to Erasmus, he left in the early part of 1523¹.

Siberch, then, probably lived in Cambridge from 1520 to 1523, a period during which the labours of the first Cambridge humanists were beginning to bear fruit. In 1497, the Lady Margaret, mother of Henry VII, had appointed as her confessor John Fisher, Master of Michaelhouse; and "to the wealth and liberality of the one," in Mullinger's words, "and the enlightened zeal and liberality of the other the university is chiefly indebted for that new life and prosperity which soon after began to be perceptible in its history."

To the Lady Margaret were due the foundation

¹ See G. J. Gray, *John Siberch* (1921).

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of St John's and Christ's Colleges and the Professorship and Preachership which bear her name; Fisher, afterwards Bishop of Rochester and President of Queens' College, was the first holder of the Divinity chair and it was at his invitation that Erasmus, who had taken a degree in divinity in Cambridge in 1506, came to live, in 1509 or 1510, in the turret-chamber of Queens'. Though it is, perhaps, as the first teacher of Greek (himself for the most part self-taught and not, as Gibbon says, the importer of Greek from Oxford) that Erasmus is most famous, the result of his first lectures was disappointing:

So far I have lectured on the grammar of Chrysoloras, but to few hearers; perhaps I shall have a larger audience when I begin the grammar of Theodorus, perhaps I shall take up a theological lectureship.

This last hope was fulfilled in 1511, when Erasmus was elected to the Lady Margaret's professorship of divinity. His letters are full of petulant complaints which may be taken as seriously as those of Gray in later years. He sees no hope of lecture-fees since his conscience will not let him rob 'naked men,' and only by touting does it appear possible to get pupils. The college beer is bad and the townsmen boorish. So he retires to his garret in Queens' and applies himself to his work on the New Testament (*Novum Instrumentum*) and his edition of St Jerome, both of which were to play an important part in preparing the way for the Reformation in England.

When weary of study, "for lacke of better exercise he would take his horse and ryde about the

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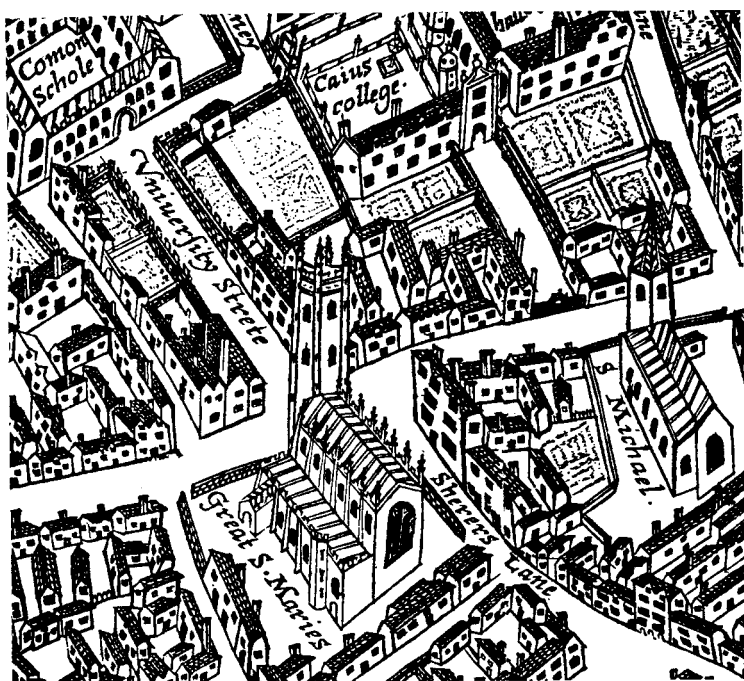
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Market Hill.” But he has words of praise for the Cambridge school of theology:

In the University of Cambridge instead of sophistical arguments, their theologians debate in a sober, sensible manner and depart wiser and better men.



PART OF HAMOND'S PLAN OF CAMBRIDGE, 1592
(showing Siberch's house)

It was to this Cambridge and, probably, to this patron in Cambridge that John Siberch came. The single reference to his place of residence and to his position in the university occurs in the *Annals* of Dr Caius:

The space (he writes) between the gate of humility and the gate of Virtue was formerly occupied by a

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tenement called the King's Arms. This was once the residence of John Sibert, alias Siberch, the University Printer, who printed some books of John Lydgate and others, and of Erasmus when he was residing at Cambridge.

The "tenement called the King's Arms" explains the use by Siberch of the royal arms as a printer's device; but although *cum gratia et privilegio* appears on the title-page of several books printed by him, there is no official confirmation of his having held the office of university printer¹.

There are entries, however, in *Grace Books* and in the *Audit Book* of the university which show that in 1520 or 1521 the university advanced to him the sum of twenty pounds:

Obligatur doctor Manfeld loco et vice magistri Norres pro summa pecunie quam recepit Johannes bibliopola ab universitate².

Probably, Mr Duff suggests, this sum of money—a larger amount than a university stationer's fee—may have been advanced with a view to helping Siberch in the establishment of a press.

The debt is entered in the proctors' accounts until the year 1524-25 and in *Grace Book B* it is recorded under the date 1538-9 that John Law, an alien priest, with Drs Ridley, Bulloke, Wakefield, and Maundefelde owed £20 sterling to the university, for which they had given a bond with their signature and seals; reference is made to

¹ John Tabor, Registry from 1600 to 1645, wrote in 1620: "John Seberch a printer of the University of Cambridge was the first that printed in England in greeke letter" (Registry MS 33. 2. 17).

² *Grace Book G*, p. 196.

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this bond in the *Audit Book* under the dates 1546, 1549, and 1553. From the description of Siberch as “presbiter alienigena” Mr Duff infers that Siberch eventually forsook printing for the Church.

Such are the fragmentary references that have survived concerning the career of the first Cambridge printer.

Fortunately, however, eight complete specimens of his book-printing have been preserved:

1 The first Cambridge book (of which a page is shown in facsimile) reflects the atmosphere of the time. It is the *Oratio* delivered by Henry Bullock, D.D., Fellow of Queens’ College and afterwards Vice-Chancellor, in honour of the visit of Cardinal Wolsey to the university in the autumn of 1520. The ‘frequentissimus cetus’ before whom the oration was given included the imperial ambassadors and several bishops.

The cardinal was lodged at Queens’ College and both town and university delighted to honour him, as may be seen from the following items from the proctors’ accounts:

To the Vicechancellor for expences in going round the town with the mayor, to cleanse the streets against the coming of the Cardinal, 2s 2d.

Gifts to the Cardinal: for wine £3 6s 8d; for carrying the same to Queens coll. 12d; for 2 oxen, £3 7s 8d; for 6 swans, 28s 8d; for 6 great pikes, 33s 4d; for 6 shell fish, 4s 4d; for a river fish called a breme, 6s 8d.

For repairing the streets on the Cardinal’s coming, 13d.

To 2 scholars who carried an altar on the coming of the Cardinal, 4d.

DOCTISSIMI VIRI HENRICI
 Bulloci theologiæ doctoris oratio, habita Cantabri-
 giæ, in frequentissimo cetu, præsentibus Cæsaris ora-
 toribus, & nonnullis alijs episcopis, ad reuerendis,
 D. Thomam Cardinalem titulo sanctæ Ce-
 cilie, Legatū a latere, Archiepiscopū
 Eboracensem, & Angliæ su-
 premum Cancellarium.

NON expectabis multo omnium fælicissi-
 me Cardinalis, quod hac breui oratione-
 cula, immensam illam laudum tuarum are-
 am uelimus ingredi, uel tantulo uerborum numero
 uir utum tuarum omnium summam perstringere,
 quando eas uix ingenti uolumine, tantum abest, ut
 sermone non dico diurno, sed ne semestri quidem
 aut annuo uel connumerare quispiã possit. Nos uer-
 ba facturi sumus de hisce duntaxat rebus perpaucis
 illis quidem, sed quæ ob earundē magnitudinem es-
 sent omnibus, nedū adstantibus, cognita (quod hos
 meos spiritus non mediocriter recreat) uiderent for-
 tassis incredibilia, nec cura assentationis notam referri
 posse, cæterū tantū aberit hic noster sermo ab assen-
 tatione, quā tum abest a necessitate. Quippe huiusce
 modi sunt proceres humanissimi, huius amplissimi
 Præsulis

A PAGE FROM *HENRICI BULLOCI ORATIO*, THE FIRST
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The style of the oration is even more lavish than the ceremonial preparations. “Scarcely from the obsequious senates of Tiberius and Domitian did the incense of flattery rise in denser volume or in coarser fumes.”¹

Bradshaw pointed out that the type used for the printing of the *Oratio* appears to be quite new. Many of the lines are wavy and irregular and there are no woodcut initials or ornaments of any kind. The second imprint, at the end of the book, runs: *Impressa est haec oratiūcula Cantabrigiae, per me Ioannem Siberch, post natum saluatorem, Millesimo quingentesimo uicesimoprimo. Mense Februario.* A second impression was printed a few months later and issued with Siberch’s third book.

Four libraries possess copies: the British Museum; the Bodleian Library; Lambeth Palace; and Archbishop Marsh’s Library, St Patrick’s, Dublin. Cambridge unfortunately has no copy.

11 The second Cambridge book is the rarest of all those printed by Siberch, only one copy (John Selden’s, bequeathed to the Bodleian Library in 1659) having been preserved.

It contains a letter addressed by a ‘certain faithful Christian’ to ‘all Christians’ and a sermon of Augustine *De miseria ac breuitate vitae*, of which the full title may be read in the facsimile. In addition to its uniqueness, the book has a further interest in that the Greek motto on the title-page was printed from the first genuine moveable Greek type used in England. Woodcuts depicting scenes from the

¹ Mullinger, 1, 546.