

Chapter I

ORIGINS

I

It might be a question how far back a Retrospect should extend; and one or two answers might be given. For instance, perhaps the first reference to Cambridge in extant literature is in the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (iv, 19). Stone is sought to make a coffin for Queen Aethelthryth or Etheldreda, who had died an abbess at Ely. The district of Ely, says Bede, is on every side encompassed with water and marshes and has no large stones; but the brothers sent on this errand came to 'a small deserted city' (*civitatula*) 'which in the language of the English is called Grantacaestir', and near its walls they found a white marble coffin, beautifully wrought, with a lid of the same stone. Grantchester, say the annotators; probably not, say the antiquaries, suggesting that it is more likely to have been Chesterton.¹ But, whichever it was, the archaeologists would carry our retrospect much further back. Mr Cyril Fox, in his *Archaeology of the Cambridge Region*, dates the bronze age in this area about 2000 B.C. He assembles an extraordinary mass of material of successive periods and races, to which the reader is referred with confidence. The retrospect of an ordinary member of the University may not improperly be limited at times to the academic story.

Accordingly, we note in the year 1209 a large body of men on Madingley Hill looking in our direction—men footsore and weary, we can well believe, for they have tramped from Oxford, a distance of eighty miles. At whatever rate the 'well-girt man' of Herodotus could have got over the ground, it may not be a bad guess that this body of straggling students, launched into the

¹ See A. Gray, *The Town of Cambridge*, pp. 1-2.

sudden expedition, took a week before they looked down on the little medieval town they sought. Needless to say, it had not then the architectural features that we pick out to-day from the hill. But they had reached their intended goal, and the next thing was to find quarters for the night, and to make plans for food and shelter and some kind of lecture-rooms for the months and years that lay before them. It is interesting to note how the commonplace and the humdrum treads on the heels of adventure. In old days people would talk (and perhaps feel) sentimentally about the emigrant sailing from Liverpool. He at least had a dream of a new land, a new freedom and fresh prosperity; but when the Ocean was crossed and he had sailed up the St Lawrence, he would disembark at Levis, opposite Quebec, in an immigrant shed among inspectors, to be herded with others into a train which should take him in several days to the North-West and the prairie. We need not follow him so far; Levis is dismal enough and the French inspectors no sentimentalists where the British immigrant is concerned. Some hundred of students to be fitted into a new town—old, no doubt it thought itself, old and shabby many of its houses, but new to them; and the problems that faced them were both old and new—the age-long problem of food and how to pay for it, and the perennial problem of what we call College life—what to do with your students, when they are not in the lecture-room listening to a lecturer or wishing he would stop. What will they do, when they get outside? And there we touch discipline, and in a moment learn why they had come. When Alice (through the Looking Glass) is in talk with the White Queen, she notices that the royal lady keeps murmuring to herself, and makes out that the words are ‘Bread and butter’—rather surprising words on a Queen’s lips, one might say; but she was a human soul, and she touches there one of the fundamental problems of University life. When we reach the married don some centuries later, we shall find again the bearing of this problem on College life. Learning, idealism, the development of character in a natural married life—so forth; and the married man’s problem of the cost of a family—

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food, roof, clothing, they are the medieval requisites; and the problem of the College is whether it can get, or keep, a real teacher for a hack's wage. This is lowly matter, but royal commissions have been needed to solve the questions. Thus one thread at least runs through the fabric of University life from the beginning till to-day.

But let us see why these men came here.

II

'Town and gown rows' hardly suggest glory to-day, but it is a curious thing that from conflicts so essentially inglorious have come some of the greatest extensions of learning. Legend says otherwise; for, as Professor Maitland wittily put it, 'the oldest of all inter-university sports was a lying match. Oxford was founded by Mempricius in the days of Samuel the prophet, and Cambridge by the Spanish Cantaber in the days of Gurguntius Brabtruc.'¹ But in 1209 a scholar of Oxford killed a woman of Oxford—it was of course accidental, as, it is commonly told us, such episodes are apt to be; but the Mayor and burgesses resented it after the manner of 'townees'. They made a raid on the hall or lodgings of the unlucky student, and seized a number of 'clerks'; some of whom, two or three, they put to death, with the consent of King John, who was at the time quarrelling with Pope and Bishops. And once again, as so often in University history, it was affirmed that innocent men suffered; they are easier to arrest and perjury is not a difficult art. A great migration of Masters and scholars followed—3000 of them, Matthew Paris says, 'and', wrote Rashdall, 'there is no reason to suspect that estimate of more than the usual medieval exaggeration'. What with the migration and the Papal Interdict, the existence of the University of Oxford was practically suspended, till peace was made in 1214, and the citizens of Oxford properly humbled in penance and finance. The de-

¹ Maitland, *Township and Borough*, p. 51. Spenser speaks of Cambridge as the 'elder sister'.

parting students went to Reading, to Paris and to Cambridge, and that is the first historical record of our University.

'What attracted them to that distant marsh town, we know not', wrote the Oxford historian in his youth. A modern founder, if he were confined to the neighbourhood, would surely prefer Royston Heath or Newmarket.

Coleridge, as an undergraduate in February 1792, writes of 'the quiet ugliness of Cambridge'. "'Tis a dismally flat country, Sir,' said Robert Hall, the great preacher,¹ 'dismally flat.... Before I came to Cambridge, I had read in the prize poems, and in some other works of fancy, of "the banks of the Cam", of "the sweetly flowing stream", and so on; but when I arrived here, I was sadly disappointed. When I first saw the river, as I passed over King's College bridge, I could not help exclaiming, Why, the river is standing still to see people drown themselves! and that, I am sorry to say, is a permanent feeling with me.... Shocking place for the spirits, Sir.... Were you ever at Bristol, Sir? There is scenery, scenery worth looking upon and worth thinking of.' He had, no doubt, the Avon Gorge in mind. And on his last visit, he said much the same, but magnanimously added: 'I always say of my Cambridge friends, when I witness their contentedness in such a country, "Herein is the faith and patience of the saints".'²

A similar impression was made on the American, Mr Everett, who was a student at Cambridge from 1839 to 1864 and wrote one of the outstanding books upon it.³ 'Cambridge is of all provincial boroughs the most insignificant, the dullest and the ugliest. It is at once the last town on the chalk, and the first on the fen,—a combination admirable for raising wheat, but wholly at variance with beauty of all kinds. An endless expanse of marsh, cut up by long-drawn reaches of sluggish brooks, bordered with pollard

1 *Works of Robert Hall*, vi, p. 42.

2 Defoe in 1722 pitied the people who live in the fogs of Cambridgeshire, but remarked that they live unconcerned and as healthy as other people, except for ague.

3 Everett, *On the Cam*, p. 9. Very similar is the description of Mr Bristed, *Five Years in an English University*, p. 13.

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willows and unhappy poplars, form the prospect of the lowlands.' The Gogmagogs he dismisses as a slope or a molework; 'and through the melancholy of these marshes creeps what seems a forgotten canal, nowhere over seventy feet wide, with a few locks and half a hundred black barges;¹ and this you are informed is the river Cam'. Cambridge 'seems to have stagnated for three hundred years... Its streets are too crooked to be convenient or imposing, and not crooked enough to be picturesque. The buildings are mostly of bricks baked of the local clay, which is of a dirty white, relieved by occasional touches of dingy red'—made worse, he adds, by the combination of smoke with the condensations of the marsh fog.

Dismal as these men, thinking of the Don and the Hudson and Devonshire, found the flat scene, and the uncomfortable climate with its damps and cramps—to say nothing for the moment of harsh judgments of the natives, to which we shall have to return, it is to be borne in mind that to others Cambridgeshire has made a very different appeal. Charles Kingsley wrote glowing vindications of the fens, and the bird-lover of to-day will not hear a word against them. And the town, too—of course, it has changed in seven centuries—has found people to love it and to say so with something of a lyric note. Amy Levy, authoress of that remarkable Jewish novel *Reuben Sachs* (which after half a century will bear re-reading), wrote:

Oh, fairest of all fair places,
 Oh, sweetest of all old towns,
 With the birds, and the greenness and greyness,
 And the men in caps and gowns.²

And here are other verses by Kitty Coates:

From north and south the counties
 With hills and splendour call;
 But Cambridgeshire of fenlands
 Is gentlest of them all!

¹ On the barges, see Mr Clark; Atkinson and Clark, *Cambridge Described and Illustrated*, p. xxv; 'laden with coal, or heaped high with turf and sedge'.

² Quoted from memory, as the printed source is beyond me.

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Sweetness of cool gray beanfields,
 May in the snow-white hedge,
 And amber trail of sunsets
 Against the ploughed land's edge.

Open, and green, and golden
 It spreads before the eyes,
 With roads that call to follow,
 White under quiet skies.

And under dreaming willows
 The river winds and gleams,
 Nor speaks above a whisper
 For fear to break their dreams.

III

But Mr Everett's description touches one or two points which explain the history of the town and the choice of it for the home of a University. Cambridge is, as he says, close upon the fens; and the Cam was, he says, a river with half a hundred black barges. In the middle ages, when the choice of the site was made, Lincoln, Peterborough, and Cambridge had as good a right to be reckoned seaside towns as has Lynn to-day.¹ In its earlier days Cambridge was a military headquarters of the Danish invaders, who came up the river from the Wash, though the Castle Hill was perhaps made as a defence against them.² The fens were very navigable, though the water was not salt nor its flow continuous. Northward of Cambridge they stretched to Lincoln. Southward or to the South-East, not very far away, lies a range of hills, between 250 and 500 feet high, that form a little watershed for the small rivers of East Anglia. Between hill and fen is a belt of level country, more or less dry—at least out of the water—and the river. Out of the water—for St*John's, we used to be told, is twenty feet

¹ Bp Creighton, *Historical Essays*, p. 266. Cf. A. Gray, *Cambridge and its story*, p. 29.

² Atkinson and Clark, p. 5.

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above the sea. Old Roman and Saxon roads cross a little above the town—the Icknield Way and Ermine Street. We learn, too, that in the middle ages East Anglia was one of the most densely populated parts of England¹—if ‘densely’ may be given a comparative rather than a positive sense. Here then we have the elements for a town of consequence—population—plenty of food and fuel from the fens, which swarmed with wild life, beast, bird, and fish of species not all to be found to-day—oversea goods from Lynn—a junction of great roads—a river, a bridge,² and a sea-front of a sort. Ships were smaller and of far less draught than to-day, and the Wash and the Cam gave one of the best inlets and outlets for trade with Europe. The great roads connected the place easily with the North, and rather less directly with London; and it became a ‘natural emporium’, the seat of four of the annual fairs at which much of the trade of the middle ages was carried on, while one of the most famous, Stourbridge Fair, was held just outside the town.³ Here Oxford bought her salted eels for Lent; and wool and woollens changed hands.⁴ A place of commerce where men gathered naturally,⁵ a place easy of access, and well supplied with food, it was not so bad a spot for a University, perhaps; at all events a very similar combination of advantages has in our own day made great University centres in the New World, and more recently in the English provinces. Centuries after the great migration from Oxford, we find George Herbert the poet, as Public Orator of the University, thanking King James I for stopping the drainage of the fens by certain bold speculators; for town and gown both held that the reclamation would leave Cambridge ‘high and dry’ as we say, stripped of its chief means of communi-

1 A. Gray, p. 19.

2 The name Cam does not appear till about 1600, and comes from the corruption of the town’s name Grantabrigge to Cantabrigge and Cambridge.

3 It has been suggested that Bunyan modelled Vanity Fair on Stourbridge.

4 Forbes and Ashford, *Our Waterways*, p. 45.

5 Further evidence of its commercial significance has been found in the existence of a Jewry in Cambridge, Conybeare, *History of Cambridgeshire*, p. 117.

cation with the sea and the world; and in that case 'the beautiful dwellings of the Muses' would become 'like worn-out widows or sapless withered logs'. So perhaps the choice of the marsh town was not so very out-of-the-way after all.

Cambridge, then, like Oxford and Paris and Bologna, owes its foundation to no external authority, neither to Church or State, nor Pope or King. It is the creation of a race of students, turbulent and disorderly no doubt, but bent on learning.¹ The early history of the new University is not unlike that of the others. In 1229 there was another of those fierce town and gown rows—'savage, sanguinary, devastating conflicts'²—at Paris this time; and Cambridge reaped the benefit once more. Ten years later there was another at Oxford, but this time the students went off to Northampton, which for a quarter of a century could boast, more or less, a University of its own. In 1260 another fight with townspeople sent a lot of Cambridge scholars to Northampton, and more followed for the same reason in 1263 from Oxford. In 1264 Henry III besieged Northampton; the scholars played a vigorous part in the defence, and narrowly escaped hanging when the town fell, betrayed by the monks. A short while after, a writ in the King's name decreed the 'entire cessation of the University of Northampton'.

IV

So that danger to Cambridge was averted, but the townspeople remained. At the time of the Peasants' Rising, in April 1381, the townsmen broke into the University Church and burnt charters and muniments; and so well pleased with themselves were they, that they did it again in June—one old woman, Margaret Starre, being conspicuous in the Market as she flung the ashes from the fire into the air, crying: 'Away with the learning of the clerks! away with it!'³ Turbulence, then, we are told, was one of the

1 A. J. Carlyle in *Progress and History*, p. 86.

2 Bp Lightfoot's description.

3 Powell, *Peasant Rising*, p. 50.

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characteristics of the medieval student; and it is interesting to learn that in 1413 Parliament expelled the Irish on this ground from the English Universities, unless they could prove that they were subjects of the English King.

Two great movements mark the medieval history of the University—the struggle for independence and the rise of Colleges. Neither ‘University’ nor ‘College’ is originally a word with any suggestion of learning or teaching; they both mean ‘corporation’ or ‘society’. It is only the success with which teachers and students have grouped themselves into societies and maintained themselves in growing independence and self-government, that has at last given ‘University’ and ‘College’ their exclusive suggestion of places of learning. The teaching and training institutions of to-day, created and controlled perhaps by Town Councils, are in the strict and original sense of the words neither ‘Colleges’ nor ‘Universities’. One of the early endeavours of the University—and we may some day see it again in the new foundations—was for independence of the town and then for some control of it. Many an undergraduate to-day has an uneasy feeling, perhaps instilled at home, that the town shopkeepers will cheat him if they can;¹ *hospes* and *hostis*, certain old Latinists told us, looked too much alike. Chaucer, in the Reve’s scandalous tale, shows us the Miller of Trumpington over-reaching the two young clerks with Northern accents, and then more than paid back by them. It was in the interests of the town to have students; but, as we see in modern labour disputes, identity of interest means also divergence of interest. This appeared in Cambridge; and when the town passed a certain point in systematically over-charging the scholars for their lodging and their food, two things followed, reminders of which we see to this day in the College buildings of Cambridge

¹ The late Mr Schiller-Szinessy, Reader in Rabbinic at Cambridge, is responsible for the statement that Pumbaditha was one of the great Universities of the ancient East; ‘so that through all the East it was a proverb that there were no such thieves as the greengrocers of Pumbaditha’. The oriental student was perhaps more vegetarian than ours.

and in the old habit of selling butter by the yard.¹ The University organized itself and did so for self-defence against various enemies—the tradesmen and lodging-house-keepers to begin with; and, once organized, it was able to fix the prices of food for the scholars and to deal with the question of lodgings. The secession to Northampton helped that matter forward. By 1278 the town complained to King Edward I that the University on its own authority is actually requiring the town bailiffs to make corporal oath of submission to the Chancellor and Masters.² The years 1314 and 1383 mark big stages of the extension of the Chancellor's jurisdiction in cases where scholars were concerned.³ Reference to the Crown would appear to have been a strong line with the University. Oxford has a similar tale to tell, and its historian⁴ sums it up by saying that 'by the middle of the fifteenth century the Town had been crushed and was almost entirely subjugated to the authority of the University. The burghers lived henceforth in their own town almost as helots or subjects of a conquering people.' Cambridge, we read, was slower in achieving its freedom; but then, we are told, Cambridge is apt to be a little behind Oxford, as (and here the historians grew lyrical) befits a younger sister.⁵ Now and then, it is true, as at the Reformation and in the modern study of Natural Sciences, Cambridge has for a little taken the lead, but the common belief seems to be that its role is to follow. The public press is more generally manned by Oxford.

Side by side with the battle for freedom from town rule went on another for liberty from ecclesiastical control. There were friars to deal with, who wanted degrees on their own terms—great monastic houses at Barnwell and elsewhere—and a Bishop

1 It is perhaps of interest that the yard measure for butter is still handed over to each new Senior Proctor on entering upon his office. We always had so many inches of butter when I was young; 'the dear old lubricant of my youth', said Heitland, 'butter by inches'.

2 A. Gray, p. 27.

3 Rashdall, *Universities of Europe*, ii, p. 548.

4 So Rashdall, and J. R. Green, *Oxford Studies*, p. 4.

5 See the reference to Spenser on p. 3 note.