

RED BRICK UNIVERSITY

by

BRUCE TRUSCOT

FABER AND FABER LTD

24 Russell Square

London

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INTRODUCTION

On the banks of two picturesque but undistinguished streams, the Isis and the Cam, stand the two universities of Old England.

While in so diminutive a country as ours no single town or village can be said to know the meaning of isolation, Oxford and Cambridge, even geographically, enjoy a measure of genteel aloofness. Their situation, in fact, by contrast with the situations of such other places of learning as (in Dickens' phrase) 'there may happen to be', is an ideal one. Like all really well-bred institutions, they are within easy reach of London, yet they lie just far enough from the main railway lines running west and north from the capital to enjoy a certain degree of inaccessibility. A still more fortunate circumstance is that, although as the plane flies they are little more than sixty miles apart, the rail journey from the one to the other normally involves a slow train to the junction of Bletchley, a change, a wait, and another train which seems even slower—a matter of from three to four hours in all. This providential disposition has not merely made it more difficult for the one university to meddle in the affairs of the other but has contributed to that sense of detachment, both from its ancient English rival and from all the remaining universities in the world, which each would recognize as an important element in its tradition.

Neither university, presumably, would choose to be located where it is if without loss of amenities and prestige it could miraculously transport itself elsewhere. The country around Cambridge is flat and bare and all but the very young find the east winds which sweep through it anything but pleasant. The surroundings of Oxford are more attractive—in places they might even be called beautiful—but the city itself is low-lying, damp, relaxing and unhealthy. It is the medieval courts and quadrangles, the storied windows, the congenial, cultured society that attract, at the one extreme, the untravelled schoolboy about to be transformed into an undergraduate, and, at the other, the venerable scholar from without the pale seeking a sheltered haven for his retirement. And, apart from these, there is something, it appears, in the academic atmosphere of an ancient university which makes up for any defects in climate. Or so we should gather from the pages of *Oxford*, the organ of a society of alumni founded in 1932 to effect, in somewhat American fashion, a realization of potential assets the existence of which was for long politely ignored.

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There is no 'Cambridge Society'—no doubt Cambridge wishes there were, but unfortunately Oxford thought of the idea first and to create one now would be to copy Oxford! And that reflection brings us within measurable distance of comparing the two. The temptation to do this in any detail must be firmly thrust aside. Just as, when discussing Oxford politics at the High Table of an Oxford college hall, one has a feeling that Cambridge exists only in legend, which persists until, ensconced in the arm-chair of a Cambridge don, one realizes that only now has the escape been made from myth to reality, so, in the more bracing if dust-laden air of the modern university, both Oxford and Cambridge seem to belong to a medieval past. Let it suffice to inform any foreigners who may read these lines that Oxford, dating from the late twelfth century, must always be mentioned before Cambridge, which resignedly accepts an origin in the early thirteenth, and that each of the two has not only its distinctive architectural glories and academic treasures but also its highly individual conceptions, traditions and methods of education. These last an outsider may find it hard to detect and impossible to define; and it is true that, of recent years, with increased and still increasing intermigration, with the invasion of State influence by way of the Treasury Grant and with the introduction of new subjects of instruction, they have been growing much more blurred. Nevertheless, to Oxford and Cambridge men they are still very real, and the use in this book, to indicate either or both of the two universities in respects in which they are similar, of the barbarous but convenient term 'Oxbridge' must not be taken as an attempt to minimize their importance. The author himself, educated at one of the two and a frequent visitor to the other, has, during a somewhat long professional life at a number of other universities, consciously aimed at inculcating certain of the main ideals of education formed in his youth and to this day would strenuously maintain that those of 'the other place' (referred to in public more courteously as 'the sister university') are notably inferior to them.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, Oxford and Cambridge were the only two universities in England, and university education was a prerogative of the more or less well-to-do and a discreetly respected preserve of the Church of England. It was a decade or so after the Battle of Waterloo had been won on the playing-fields of Eton that the principle of the Modern University materialized in the most natural and appropriate place—the capital city of the British Empire. The foundation, in 1828-9, first of University College and then of King's College, led to the creation, in 1836, of the

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University of London, in which were subsequently incorporated over sixty more colleges, institutes, hospitals and schools. So unique has the University of London become, and so essentially its own are the problems which it has to solve, that in this book very little specific mention will be made of it. These problems are due partly to the numbers of its internal students, which considerably exceed those of Oxford and Cambridge combined; partly to its location in a city of seven millions, to the nature of its constituent institutions, to the difficulty of communication between them and to the character of their relations with the central body; and partly—perhaps principally—to the admission, long ago, into the University of the ‘external’ system, which has brought a university degree within the reach of thousands to whom it would otherwise have been inaccessible but has also involved the University in periodical opprobrium.

‘I confess myself’, remarks that benevolent though astringent American critic of our universities, Professor Abraham Flexner, ‘unable to understand in what sense the University of London is a university at all.’¹ The confession, which one gathers did not necessitate any great searching of heart, is quite understandable. On the one hand, while his book was in the making, he had resided as an honoured guest in Oxford, and had thus been ‘enabled to feel something of Oxford’s charm’²—as well, no doubt, as of her prejudices; on the other, he was a native of a country in which, through over-inclusiveness, university education has to a great extent become degraded. So, while granting that it ‘avoids the excesses and absurdities of Columbia and Chicago’,³ which elsewhere in his book he castigates with enormous gusto, he sees, in the incorporation in it of such an institution as the King’s College of Household and Social Science, something remarkably like the thin end of a wedge. ‘Could anything’, he inquires, ‘be more absurd? . . . What does such a school gain by being a School of the University? And what does “University” mean when such a school is included?’⁴

Reasonable Englishmen, unacquainted with the puerilities of American university ‘home study’ courses, might find no difficulty in answering this question and feel complete confidence that the soundness of the English educational tradition would save its universities from over-inclusiveness, or at least from the worst excesses of that vice. There is a greater disposition in this country to criticize London’s practice of granting external degrees, which have won a popularity that can never originally have been contemplated, and which is the more surprising when we remember that there are now not four universities in England and Wales as there were when the

¹ Flexner, p. 231. ² Op. cit., p. vii. ³ Op. cit., p. 231. ⁴ Op. cit., p. 232 n.

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external system was introduced, but twelve. To those who believe that the letters 'B.A.' ought invariably to denote something more than the passing of examinations, and indeed something wider and deeper than purely academic proficiency at all, there is no more that can usefully be said. To others, however, who hold as firmly as they that residence or close association with fellow-students is a valuable part of university education but who also feel that a person should not be refused the other part because through no fault of his own he is debarred from attaining the whole, the question is a more open one. They think it suitable, desirable and even symbolic, that a practical expression of the belief that education is the right of all who can profit by it should come, not from some commercial institution constituting itself an examining body, but from the great university of the capital of the British Empire. They recognize the excellence of the work done by that University's external system in enabling 'internal' graduates of other universities to continue their studies though compelled to earn their living under conditions in which no other form of university study is open to them. They appreciate that the creation, as it were, of little cells of learning all over the country may become as conducive to the growth of educational ideals as the concentration of learning in a few large centres. They realize that the conferring of external research degrees, an important feature of London University's extra-mural activities, promotes original investigation as well as the acquisition of knowledge. And all this is only the beginning of an argument the full presentation of which would demand a separate volume.

Though little will be said, then, of the University of London, it should be understood that the author is among the most ardent of its apologists and would be proud if he could claim it for his Alma Mater. 'Mother of orphans', 'mother of them that have no "advantages"', it has 'provided a way of escape for thousands of imprisoned souls'¹—what finer testimony, from one of such souls, could any university desire?

In 1832, three years after the foundation of the first London colleges, the North of England gave birth to the first of its Universities, Durham. The connection of that University with the Church of England has given it, in the popular mind, a place apart, such as King's College, London, also an Anglican foundation, might have had but for its incorporation in a larger and an undenominational body. Its adoption, in a modern form, of the collegiate system (Durham has eight colleges) and the association of two of its Chairs

¹ L. P. Jacks, *The Confession of an Octogenarian*, London, 1942, p. 64.

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with canonries in Durham Cathedral enhance its prestige still further. Among cultured people in general, then, the University of Durham is vaguely felt to be more respectable than any other English university save Oxford and Cambridge, and its seniority of about half a century over the 'modern universities' has given it a prestige in no way diminished by its later incorporation of the College of Medicine and Armstrong College (since renamed King's College), Newcastle-on-Tyne. At the same time, it is not Oxford, and it is not Cambridge, though it enrolls numerous undergraduates who, even in the old exclusive days, might quite well have gone to either. Only its Newcastle college, perhaps, can properly find a place in this survey.

Once North and South had their universities, the existence of neither of which sensibly diminished the completeness of the monopoly held by Oxford and Cambridge, the craze for further centres of higher education seemed for a time to have subsided. The next step forward was the foundation of colleges for women: Bedford College, London (1849)¹; Girton (1869) and Newnham (1871) at Cambridge; and finally, at Oxford (which has made generous reparation for a tardy start by admitting women to full membership, while Cambridge still keeps them as far outside the fold as it dare), Lady Margaret Hall (1879), Somerville (1879), Saint Hugh's (1886), and Saint Hilda's (1893). Only with the widespread development of secondary education and the rapid growth of the great cities, particularly in the North of England, did university expansion enter upon a new chapter, and this must be considered as having begun in the 'seventies and 'eighties, when almost every one of the colleges which developed into the universities to be dealt with in these pages had its modest rise.

The oldest of the group was Owens College, Manchester, founded in 1851. Then, with a rush, after more than twenty years, came Yorkshire College, Leeds (1874), University College, Bristol (1876), Mason College, Birmingham (1880), University College, Liverpool (1881), University College, Reading (1892) and University College, Sheffield (1897). The seniority of Manchester was recognized in 1880 by the incorporation of Owens College in the Victoria University, to which were affiliated first the Liverpool college and then the college at Leeds. In 1903-4 these three were separated and became respectively the Universities of Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds. Meanwhile, in 1900, Mason College had been transformed into the University of Birmingham; Sheffield obtained its Royal Charter in 1905; and Bristol in 1909. The University of Reading was founded much later,

¹ The University of London, however, did not allow women to take its degrees on the same footing as men until 1878.

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in 1926. Parallel developments had been taking place in Wales, where the three colleges of Aberystwyth, Cardiff and Bangor, established in that order, were merged, in 1893, into the federal University of Wales, to which was added University College, Swansea, in 1920. Finally there are five English University Colleges, which provide teaching to degree standard but grant no degrees, presenting their students for the very convenient external examinations of the University of London: these are situated at Southampton, Exeter, Nottingham, Hull and Leicester.

It is primarily with seven of the eleven English universities that this book is concerned: Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Reading and Sheffield. With the exception of Reading, a small university, very largely residential (a direction in which the University College of the South-west, at Exeter, is also moving), they are all very much of the same type—a type which, if it can be modified in ways shortly to be suggested, will probably dominate English university education in centuries to come. Their foundation is due to local effort; their endowments come largely from local pockets; they are aided by grants from local municipal authorities; and their students, though to a slowly decreasing extent, are drawn from local areas. It is impossible to speak too warmly of the men chiefly instrumental in their foundation—members, for the most part, of wealthy and influential families, engaged in business, and often themselves graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, who could so easily have satisfied any zeal they might have felt for education by endowing scholarships to one of those universities to be competed for solely by students of their own city or area. Had they been content to do this, not only would students in perpetuity have benefited from their generosity, but the names of the donors would have been assured of a perpetual place on the roll of benefactors of their college or university. But their generosity and (a more significant thing) their insight, initiative and faith went far beyond this. They foresaw that, as the tide of prosperity in the country continued to rise, educational ideals and standards would rise with it and the four universities already in existence would soon be no longer sufficient for the national needs. They believed that a university established with noble, worthy and disinterested aims in the twentieth century would in time do as much for education as one that dated from the twelfth. They foresaw, again, that such a foundation could from the very first exercise a powerful moral and cultural influence upon the life of a large and rapidly growing community which was necessarily to a great extent preoccupied with material values. And foreseeing and believing these things, they were prepared to throw into the task of making a new founda-