

THE PROTEST OF A “MEDIAEVALIST”

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Oxford, the Oxford of the past, has many faults; and she has paid heavily for them in defeat, in isolation, in want of hold upon the modern world. Yet we in Oxford, brought up amidst the beauty and sweetness of that beautiful place, have not failed to seize one truth:—the truth that beauty and sweetness are essential characters of a complete human perfection. When I insist on this, I am all in the faith and tradition of Oxford. I say boldly that this our sentiment for beauty and sweetness, our sentiment against hideousness and rawness, has been at the bottom of our attachment to so many beaten causes, of our opposition to so many triumphant movements. And the sentiment is true, and has never been wholly defeated, and has shown its power even in defeat. We have not won our political battles, we have not carried our main points, we have not stopped our adversaries' advance, we have not marched victoriously with the modern world; but we have told silently upon the mind of the country, we have prepared currents of feeling which sap our adversaries' position when it seems gained, we have kept open our own communications with the future. . . . It is in this manner that the sentiment of Oxford for beauty and sweetness conquers, and in this manner long may it continue to conquer. (MATTHEW ARNOLD).

ON what does the success of a university depend? Some will tell us that the essential thing is a good staff of tutors and lecturers. Others will lay stress on a “definite religious atmosphere,” or on the *esprit de corps* of the undergraduates, or on a mutual regard between the teaching body and the taught. No doubt each of these opinions contains a modicum of truth. But when we have summed them all up, we observe that we have been dealing with effects rather than with causes. It will be necessary to delve deeper, that we may find what is the root and stem of which these are but the branches. Nor must we overlook the frankly utilitarian school which holds that a university should be judged by the practical work of its alumni in after life. Its criterion is “Have the graduates made good materially?” not “Have they added to the culture of the world?” Thus the university is to be appraised in terms of earning power, not as a source of light and leading. The view that a university's task is to turn out technically equipped men rather than dreamers and visionaries—though the dreams and visions be ever so high and noble—has its root in Modernism.

And ambitious though the aspirations of the modernist may be, he builds upon a foundation of quicksand. If an institution is to endure amid the recurrent storms of time, it must be firmly planted in the bed-rock of the past, rich in traditions that have stood the wear and tear of ages.

The past half century has probably seen the rise and fall of more fads and theories than any corresponding period in the world's history. Each has had its flock of prophets and followers, all eager to declare that the promised millennium was at hand; but almost before the ninth day of this wonder discovery had dawned, its fallacy was exposed, and it left no more trace behind than a bubble idly blown by a child. Hardly had the excitement over one epoch-making discovery died down until some other pseudo-scientist had erected another portentous castle in the air; and even while we were being bidden to bow down in wonder at its exquisite workmanship, it faded from our vision as suddenly as Aladdin's palace. Yet in spite of previous experiences such as these, we have amongst us those who would have us pin our faith to modernistic experiments.

As the architects and builders of the past designed their erections not for an age but for all time, so did the founders of our ancient colleges and universities plan a curriculum and lay down faculties that were destined to last for ever. So let us frankly avow that if we are to gather the fruits of the tree of knowledge and culture we must see to it that the roots are deeply planted in the so-called "mediaevalism." The upholders of such a view may, nay probably will, be accused of being retrograde and reactionary. They will be called "obscurantist." But they will not turn a hair nor bat an eyelid, for they are too strongly entrenched in their positions to be enfiladed by even the most modernist of weapons. As in the World War steel helmets were found to afford protection from up-to-date projectiles, so will the earthworks of traditional mediaevalism be found a more than efficient defence against the modernist Howitzers, be they never so powerful and charged with the latest high explosive arguments and invective that our opponents can bring to bear.

It would be a justifiable query to put—where can such a university be found? And if one exists, could it be active in this twentieth century? The answer is not far to seek. Turn your eyes towards Europe, and especially towards England, and there you will find two mediaeval institutions showing every sign of healthy, vigorous life—namely, the two ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Perhaps it will be well to focus our attention more particularly on the former; for if we except its one lapse from age-long traditions, viz., the granting of degrees to women, it—more than any other existing corporate body—has clung to and cultivated the characteristics, methods and habits of our ancestors.

The very atmosphere of the place is redolent of antiquity, and a *living* antiquity. Neither Oxford nor Cambridge is a museum of curious relics of the past; each is an arena where the struggles and conflicts of a bygone time are again reconstructed and fought out to their bitter end. Compare say Oxford, where one breathes university at every inspiration, where the very stones are clamorous for recognition, with any town either in England or on this continent which possesses what for lack of a better term we will call a modern university. You leave Oxford imbued with the recollection of colleges, churches, examination schools; the rest of the city acts only as a blurred, misty and indistinct background for the things that really matter. On the other hand Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Montreal, Toronto, all possess universities, but they are not the heart and soul of these places; they do not supply the vital energy of these cities; they are merely adjuncts, mushroom growths, *fungi*, so to speak of last night's growth. These towns are not instinct with the spirit and vitality that has its root in a tradition-nurtured university. We depart from these spots overwhelmed perhaps by the vast potentialities of modern science and the giant strides of modern commercialism; but we are left untouched by the gentle, beneficent balm of time-honoured culture. There is an obvious lack of "Sweetness and Light." What are masses of warehouses, headquarters of transcontinental railroads, stupendous skyscrapers, monumental dockyards, utilitarian though they be, in comparison with the cloistered triumphs of an architecture bequeathed to us from the shadowy past? The spirit of man is the dominating influence on the one hand; the power of the machine on the other. It surely requires no great exercise of discrimination to decide which is of the greater value.

Oxford, again, is redolent of past greatness. The ghosts of great names haunt the place. St. John's College, for instance, is an everlasting memorial to that unyielding Caroline churchman—William Laud. His spirit impregnates the spot. Pembroke College, on the other hand, still maintains the traditional policy of Jewel, the most Protestant of the Elizabethan reformers. The influence of George Whitefield too still hovers over it. Oriel, with its dedication to Our Lady, could hardly have escaped being the home of that earnest band of Anglo-Catholics who inaugurated

the Tractarian Movement of 1833. Christ Church and Merton were and are strongholds of the Royalist party. All these links with the past transfuse themselves into the blood of the present. Hence Oxford affords us a strange complex, an institution thoroughly abreast of the times, yet reminiscent of what has gone before; in the forefront of modern intellectualism, but sternly refusing to break with the Middle Ages. Urged onward by these diverse impulses, the Oxford undergraduate presents us with a strange paradox—he is at once a member of a corporate body and yet an individualist, using the word individualist not as opposed to a collectivist, but in the Oscar Wildean sense as one who has recognized his own individual soul. It is somewhat erroneous to speak of the “typical” Oxford man, for the type exists only in so far as among blood relatives one can recognize a family likeness while each has his own individuality.

Esprit de corps is an outstanding characteristic of the Oxford man, and its action is twofold, engendered by the system of collegiate life. Walter de Merton must indeed have been inspired when he founded the college bearing his name. It was designed on monastic lines, but without monastic vows; indeed the original charter forbade any of its undergraduates to be connected with any of the monastic orders. De Merton's foundation served as model for all other Oxford colleges, and the alumnus of each of them thus perceives not a divided but a double duty, to his university and to his college. His university is, of course, *ne plus ultra*, whilst his college is naturally the brightest and most cherished spot in that university. As far as his course of studies or sports is concerned, each undergraduate is his own master; there is an absence of standardization, and every incentive to individuality is afforded him.

When the student matriculates, he has no label attached to him; he is not of the class '24, '25 or '26. He presents himself for examination when he feels he can do himself and his college justice, usually on the advice of his tutor. Thus of the matriculants of October, 1924, some will be graduating in June of 1927, others in 1928, and so on. Twelve terms (three years) residence is obligatory, and the minimum time in which a man can take a degree, in this instance usually a pass, while an honour man will occupy as a general rule at least sixteen terms (four years). By this method the deplorable system of “obtaining results” is entirely obviated, and we escape from the deadly uniformity of most modern educational institutions.

Glib phrases are apt to run readily off the tongue, and through frequent use gain a currency and weight to which they have no

claim. As an instance, we are sure to be told that Oxford is the home of lost causes and dying loyalties. The very fact that Oxford has stuck to these causes and loyalties has been a strong force to prevent their being lost or dead. The enthusiasm of the Wesleys and the Methodist Club in the eighteenth century, and the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth, infused new life into religious England which at those two periods was stagnating under the deadening, pernicious, Hannoverian influence. The fact that the Church in England to-day is pulsating with an activity and a sentient life she had not known for centuries is due to the religious instinct that Oxford got from her mediaeval tradition. When in 1649 the star of monarchy appeared to have set for ever, Oxford remained loyal to the cause, and perhaps monarchy has never been so popular with the masses or so firmly rooted in the hearts and love of the people as at the present moment in the Old Country. The Oxford leaven has done its work quietly, but none the less surely. Can we truthfully say that the causes and loyalties for which she stood are either lost or dead?

An important point at issue between the mediaevalist and the modernist appears to be as to the aim and object of education: is it a means or an end? Our modernist will maintain that the university curriculum is only a means, that the courses given should be of practical value,—for instance, dentistry, pharmacy, salesmanship, journalism. Instruction in all these lines is very necessary, but the object is frankly commercial. The acquired information is only practical, not cultural. Our mediaevalist will take his stand on the ground that all education is an end in itself, a thing to be desired for itself alone. He still clings to the theory of the Renaissance. The very name of the examination for Greats in Honours at Oxford is *Literae Humaniores*. Were not the adherents of the New Learning known as the Humanists? And this examination is so framed as to test the thoroughness of the candidate's knowledge, whilst giving him at the same time free scope to display any originality or individuality that is in him. In fact all Oxford examinations tend to cultivate liberal education and sound culture, and to discourage the narrowness of intense specialization. To appraise rightly the values of the two systems of education it is necessary to be thoroughly acquainted with both. A striking testimony to the superior excellence of Oxford may be found in a recently published book, *Oxford of To-day*, edited by Messrs. L. A. Crosby and Frank Aydelotte, both former American Rhodes scholars. Had the various contributors to this volume been indigenous to the Valley of the Isis, their love and veneration for

the university of their adoption could not have been more pronounced.

The modern university may be said to have had its birth in the industrial revolution, whilst the older is to be traced back to the days of feudalism. And the spirit that exists between the tutorial staff and the undergraduates is animated by feudalism. Discipline and authority are there, but only nominally; the students are restrained by silken cords, and the ordinary routine is carried on through a feeling of *noblesse oblige*, on either side, not by a table of laws decreeing pains and penalties for any breach of university enactments.

To an ordinary observer it might appear that much time is wasted at Oxford, for the "hundred-per-cent efficient" standard is not worshipped as a fetish. Two or three hours attendance at lectures in the morning and a few hours reading, sometimes in the afternoon, generally in the evening, with an occasional visit to a tutor, may appear to be entirely inadequate, while the rest of the time is devoted to the river, cricket or tennis. But herein lies the whole kernel of the matter. The undergraduate learns to play "cricket" not only in the playing-field but in his whole life. A horror of deception of any kind, of taking a mean or undue advantage, a sane and wholesome outlook on the world, in other words the building of character and the making of a gentleman are the outstanding features of the result of a three or four years course at Oxford. And the lessons are thoroughly learned. It is no outward veneer that is acquired. The true Oxford characteristics are dyed in the wool. Mr. F. D. How concludes a little brochure on Oxford with the following words:

So this is Oxford, this is the chief of all our seats of learning; and no word of wise professors and of lecture halls? Just so. It is not at the lectures men learn most. It is the spirit of the place, the friends they make, the living in an atmosphere so fair and sweet that counts for almost all. It must be that wherever they may walk in after years their share in what has been wrought so beautiful, and hallowed by the life and work of noble men, will tend to guide their footsteps in the higher path.

Here we have the matter beautifully summed up; such an influence, pure and ennobling, is almost—one is indeed tempted to say, altogether—impossible in the modernist environment of hurry and bustle, where the outstanding motto is "Every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost."

Let us for a moment pause and consider whither this modernist monster is driving us. It is said with truth that the onlooker sees

most of the game; so for a moment let us borrow a pair of Japanese spectacles and obtain an oriental point of view from which to regard our situation. Prof. Anesaki states that the East is deteriorating by contact with the West on account of absorbing its industrial commercialism; that it is growing increasingly harder to get men to embark in the liberal professions and in that of arms. Not because patriotism is dying in Japan, but because Mammon is now their God, and the acquisition of wealth is the end of all their ambitions. This is a terrible accusation, the more terrible on account of its truth, to lay to the charge of the Occident. If these times should ever have a cliché, they will be known as the Machine Age. The very mind of man is mechanical, and the mechanical mind must injuriously affect the aesthetic side of human nature. Science, in short, is studied at Oxford as a quest for the truth, whereas our modernist looks upon it as merely useful in the propagation of industry.

George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells are products of our present civilization, the former an iconoclast tilting at institutions and conventions merely because they are hallowed by antiquity, utterly regardless of the fact that they have weathered the storms of centuries and by their very age and stability have proved their truth. He proceeds to spring-clean, and to remove what he fondly imagines to be stubble, and finally discovers that in scrapping other inutilities he has removed the corner stone so that he brings the whole edifice, raised by loving hands, the work of ages, toppling about his ears, and like other reformers he can neither replace what he has so ruthlessly destroyed nor supply an adequate substitute. Again, one has but to read Wells's *Salvaging of Civilization* to see what he would give us in place of mediaeval culture—a study of history, modern languages and commercial arithmetic, dispensing with the foundations that made these subjects possible. His cheap sneers at the classics fall flat from one who would enjoy the fruits but destroy the roots from which these fruits sprang. The foundation of all art, drama, literature, philosophy, science, law—nay, even of our very much belauded modern languages—is to be found in the heritage handed down to us by Greece and Rome.

Take another phase of Oxford life, unconnected with classical traditions—the weekly meetings and debates at the Union. Here a hidebound, diehard young Tory fresh from some country vicarage will try a fall with an unrepentant Radical Socialist. Before their course is run at the university each will have lost some of his asperities, will recognize that both have grounds for their opinions, and both can go down purged of their crude extremism. Neither of

the two will have lost his individuality, but each will have rubbed off his sharp angles and absorbed a certain amount of his opponent's views. They will have learned to respect each other's beliefs, divergent though they may be, and have agreed to differ on irreconcilable points. So it is in the whole social side of collegiate life. Should a man feel a wave of asceticism sweeping over him, he has but to "sport his oak" and his solitude is inviolable; but when this bar to sociability is removed, what better opportunity exists of getting to know a man as he really is? You drop in upon him unexpectedly; he is off his guard; you can probe into his inmost soul. It is not when a man is engaged in some stupendous task which taxes all his energy that you can truly judge him, nor when he has his society mask on, but at the times when occupied with the trivial round, the daily task, or when discussing some problem that is of interest to the college community as a corporate whole: and life at Oxford must be weighed as a corporate existence. We lose the true perspective if we pick a few particular instances and hope therefrom to deduce a general conclusion. It is both a logical and a social impossibility.

Whence have so many statesmen sprung as from the older, mediaevally governed universities? The word "statesmen" is deliberately chosen in contradistinction to the party politician, the opportunist, the delegate whose freedom of will and clarity of judgment are too often hampered by fear of his constituents, and in some rarer cases by the fact that he is bound hand and foot by the referendum and the recall. William Ewart Gladstone, John Morley, the late Lord Salisbury, Lord Curzon, Earl Balfour, H. H. Asquith, were all men who had received a university training; and although the strictly party man may not always see eye to eye with any one of them, none can deny their honesty and tenacity of purpose. No mere party advantage, no hope of graft would turn any of these men from what he considered the path of duty. Every one of them at some stage of his career paid the penalty of not bowing to the popular cry, and did so deliberately rather than renounce his ideals. Oxford and—in the case of one of the above statesmen—Cambridge, were proud of their sons and of the stand that they took. They made the great renunciation without regret, without a murmur. Truly are the old universities makers of men. It is the inherent conservatism (not used in a party political sense) dominating Oxford and Cambridge that prevents the ship of State from ever turning turtle. None except a few unreasoning alarmists ever expected the Labour Government to be revolutionary: not only was it well ballasted by men whose early training had been

obtained in the older universities, but the very atmosphere of St. Stephen's and Downing Street was impregnated by an age-long tradition from which it is impossible to break away. Thus do we see that the old influences of feudalism and the mediaeval spirit are not confined to the geographical boundaries of the university town, but have outstretched their arms and gathered the whole of the United Kingdom into their kindly embrace. Their beneficent, life-giving influence permeates even the remotest corner of the realm.

We have seen how the daily contact of man with man in the peaceful college quad, in the lecture-room, at the cosy breakfast in each other's rooms, tends to break down the social barrier and to unbare the heart to one's comrade. This participation in each other's joys and sorrows, this communal aspiration for the general honour and welfare of the college, tends to foster life-long friendships and to open up phases of life not before encountered, perhaps not even dreamed of, and give glimpses into the character of our associates that otherwise might have been missed. As to know all is to forgive all, so this intimate knowledge of our neighbour helps to dissipate the mist of misunderstanding, and by enabling us to put ourselves in another's place to understand his point of view. If such understandings were more general, we should have less constant dread of wars.

The general trend of the Oxford spirit is well summed up in Dr. Johnson's dictum: "There is here, Sir, such a spirit of progressive emulation: the students are anxious to appear well to their tutors; the tutors are anxious to have their students appear well in the college, and the colleges are anxious to have their students appear well in the university." Such a spirit of co-ordination and correlation must and does influence an Oxford man in after life.

The average Oxford man might haply cut but a poor figure in the marts of commerce; but is he any whit the worse for that? If he cannot drive a hard bargain or outwit his trade competitor, he has at least left the world culturally better than he found it. Our modern civilization and education set before mankind as the goal of their ambition commercial enterprise and trade expansion. It has often been said that trade follows the flag—but what travels in its wake? Trade rivalries, the crushing of unwelcome competition, a mad rush for new markets with its inevitable result of rapine, savagery and war.

The mediaevalism exhibited at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge is not a *dolce far niente*, a sitting down, waiting for the clouds to roll by, not a life of contemplation, but one of incessant

activities. For be it understood that the Middle Ages were times of action, ages of discovery, geographical and scientific; but the mediaevalists were wise, they knew that science was ever progressive, they did not postulate that their last discovery was final. No, they but used it as a lever for further discoveries. Times that produced such scientists as Roger Bacon and Galileo cannot be looked upon as retrograde or unenterprising. It is to this life, fuller than the one we now lead, that our Oxford traditions would guide us, if only we would discard our petty vanities, our pitiful ambitions, our assumptions of omniscience, and as humble scholars submit to her benign tuition.

WORDS

GEORGIA DAVIES

Scarlet plumes against the black-green jungle,
Leven bolts that cleave a midnight sky,
Singing Lorelei wooing to destruction,
Eagle pinions wafting us on high.

Flashing swords that gleam and cut asunder,
Thunder rolling solemn as a drum,
Serpent-wise and full of subtle poison,
Hissing asps that strike the spirit numb.

Lily-chalices abrim with healing,
Rosemary and frankincense and balm,
Wine of life to fainting broken pilgrims—
Bringing consolation, courage, calm.