

Oxford and the Future

“THE PRIMACY OF OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE AMONG THE ENGLISH national universities is, in my judgment, doomed”: so writes the late Master of University College. “The educational authority of Oxford will relatively decline. In another fifty years, or less, the most famous and influential of English universities will be London. This metropolitan drift is world-wide.” If this prophecy comes true, it will be Oxford’s own fault. Against the wealth and convenience of London, Oxford can match its splendid reputation and inheritance. It would be tragic if education also should yield to the vicious centripetal forces which are weakening the whole structure of England.

Already Oxford has surrendered much of its independence. The legislative interferences of the last century were accepted under protest; but after the war the university yielded to the lure of money what it had refused to the claims of “reform.” A Treasury grant was the bait; and having swallowed it, the university has never since been truly its own master. It is now kept by Parliament to the tune of £110,000 a year.

While handing over its own autonomy to the State, the university has exacted from the colleges the surrender of their autonomy in turn. Though this development was well advanced before the war, it has now reached a point at which the colleges are mere vestigia; and they will soon be reduced to the decorative impotence of city companies. This policy also originates in the university’s insatiable demand for money. The colleges are now subjected to forced levies of some £75,000 a year for “university purposes.”

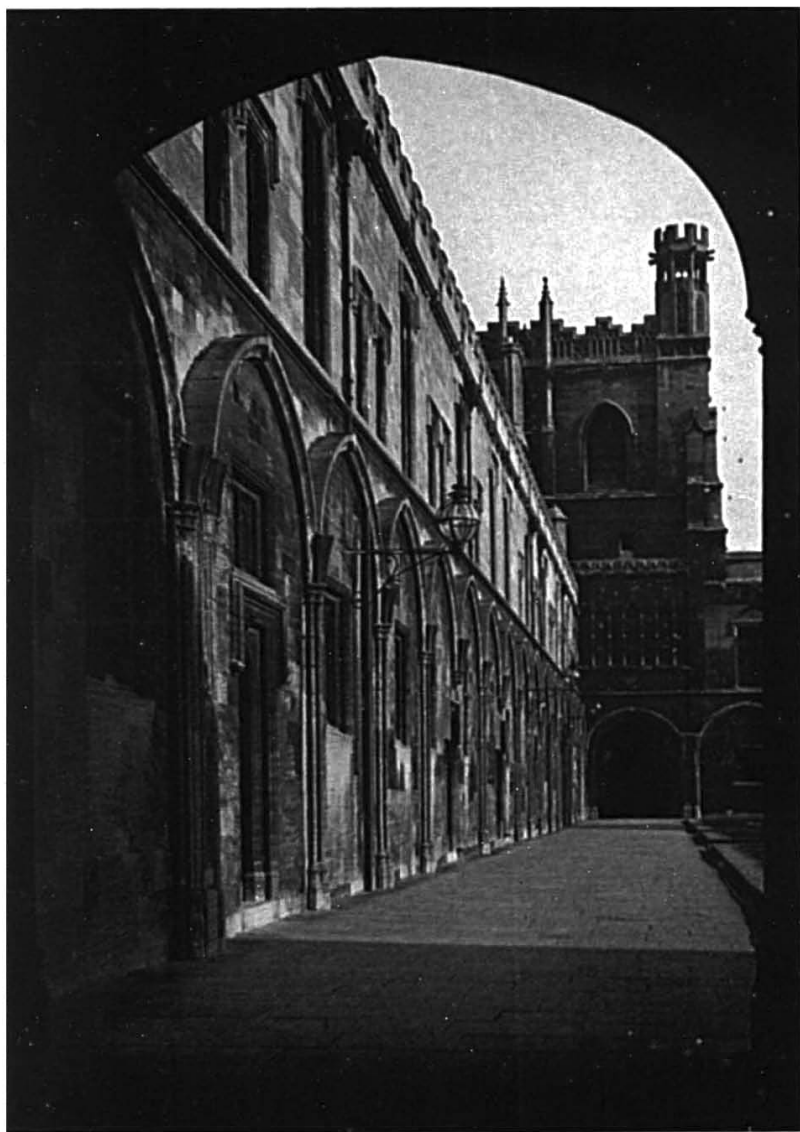
Sustained by these two main sources of income, the university balances an annual budget of a little over £200,000. This vast sum of money, earned by such regrettable expedients, is laid out in grants to all those institutions which have least relation to the immemorial purposes of the university. The Ashmolean Museum has only to ask for an odd £20,000 and it is granted. A guarantee of £7,000 yearly, representing a capital sum of some £250,000, is allotted without hesitation towards the upkeep of the new



136 New College Hall



137 The Broad Walk in Christ Church Meadow



138 A Glimpse of Tom Quad

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Bodleian, although the effect of it is to wipe out the entire surplus of the university's revenue. To maintain and enlarge these huge collections, which exist only for the specialist, in competition with governments, municipalities, and millionaires all over the world, the university lays its hands on ancient endowments set aside for the education of the young in separate colleges.

Greedy as it has recently been, the university has become rapacious in its demands since the advent of Lord Nuffield. William Morris, as he was born, was the son of a college scout. His first venture was a bicycle shop in Long Wall Street; and a certain fellow of New College recalls how his punctures used to be mended by Morris's own hands. He is now a Viscount, and one of the richest men in the world. The suburb of Cowley, where his works are situated, now outclasses Oxford itself. His tens of thousands of well-paid workers throng the shopping streets of the city.

Lord Nuffield has no heir. He has given millions away to his own workers, millions to the distressed areas. But he regards Oxford with a special fondness, not unmingled with a sense of power. He has given great endowments to Pembroke and Worcester among the poorer colleges, and to St. Peter's Hall. From the Trustees of Dr. Radcliffe he bought the Observatory and practically took over the Infirmary, in order to transform the whole site into a medical institute of the first rank. In 1936, he gave the sum of £1,250,000 for the express purpose of medical research. An immense school of medicine was to be originated, including four chairs for new professors. The university gasped at this magnificence. At a ceremonial meeting, held in order to invest Lord Nuffield with an honorary degree, he casually added an odd £750,000 to his original donation. Later he sent £200,000 for the provision of new medical buildings, and another £300,000 for the improvement of hospital facilities.

These astonishing benefactions brought great publicity both upon Oxford and upon Lord Nuffield. The reaction of the university was characteristically inept. Its appetite whetted by these unexpected millions, it promptly issued an appeal to the public to subscribe yet another million pounds: the first £250,000 of this sum was to be earmarked for the purpose of carrying the guarantee so improvidently given to the Bodleian; the remainder (if there should be any) was to be spent on furthering the study of the Social Sciences, on the provision of modern science buildings, and on a variety of lesser objects, among which the extension of the Ashmolean figured once again. This appeal met with a very limited success. The general public proved unresponsive; but Lord Nuffield again behaved magnificently. He gave £100,000 to the appeal fund, and as much again towards a Physical Chemistry laboratory.

It will be seen that already in a few months the aims and purposes of the university had undergone a startling extension. Oxford was to become a medical centre comparable to Edinburgh, in spite of the limited facilities provided by a county town for the study of disease. In competition with Cambridge, it was to aim at the most up-to-date facilities for scientific research. And lastly, an altogether new ambition had arisen in the "study of the Social Sciences."

In the year 1985, the Rockefeller Trust made a small grant to the university for the vague and mysterious "Social Sciences." An Institute of Statistics was set up, various "research lecturers" were appointed, and the usual committees and subcommittees set to work in the usual way. It was apparently taken for granted that the scheme was to be for the exclusive benefit of the senior members of the university. "It has been suggested," wrote one of them, "that the grant might be used to help to form a bridge, both between theory and practice in each science, and between the different sciences; to encourage the kind of research which is closely related to observable facts and can illumine the practical problems of administration and the current phenomena of our social and economic life; to give a preference to co-ordinated and co-operative work, both between different specialists in one science and those in several which are brought into contact in specific practical problems. . . ." One can talk like this for ever without venturing upon a fact, or even a thought. One could read such a passage through and again, without ascertaining whether the sciences were to be learnt or taught, what they were, and why Oxford should be interested in them. Only one thing emerges—that among all this co-ordination, illumination, and bridge-formation, among all these problems, phenomena, and theories, the existence of the mere undergraduate has been overlooked.

If the university were honest with itself, it would call a halt to all this nonsense. It would remember the simple and pious objects of its ancient founders. It would reflect that never more than at the present time did England need a supply of young men fit to serve God in Church and State.

That Lord Nuffield should fall for the vogue of the Social Sciences was only to be expected. A man of simple tastes and upright views, he derives the wealth of Cræsus from an invention which is a curse to mankind. Between himself and those who take his wages is fixed a gulf which he would gladly bridge. He may well feel as keenly aware as any man in England of the ill-adjustment of present-day society. And it is natural that he should suppose that money, which can banish so much of disease, should be able to solve these problems also.

Lord Nuffield has given a million pounds for the foundation of

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a new college, to bear his name, and to be devoted to "post-graduate studies, especially but not exclusively in the field of social studies." The primary object is to establish a link between "the theoretical students of contemporary civilisation and the men responsible for carrying it on." In other words, a clique of brainy fellows is to be hired to think and think on behalf of those who act and make progress—sometimes too rapidly for their own peace of mind.

The university has been given this money to spend. In All Souls it already has one post-graduate college, packed with ability, unhampered by restrictions. One such college is enough. If the problems of contemporary civilisation were capable of solution on academic lines, All Souls would have solved them. It produces flowery words enough, and woolly abstractions in abundance. Nuffield College will produce more. Committees are conferring; Mr. Harold Butler, a Civil Servant, has been appointed Warden; the buildings are in the charge of Mr. Austen Harrison, the excellent architect formerly retained by the Palestine Government; The million will get spent all right; but not a single undergraduate will be benefited by it.¹

"Nicholas Wadham, founder of Wadham Coll., Oxon., was wont often to say to one Mr. Orang a neighbour of his (who was accounted a wise discreet man in that country) that 'he had a good estate and had no children to leave it to, and his kindred to whom he thought to leave his estate did not care for him.' 'Why' (said Mr. Orang) 'do as Sir Thomas Bodley hath lately done. As he hath built a library, so you build a college and you shall be remembered every day. It will last from generation to generation.' So Mr. Wadham proceeded and did all according to his counsel." That was a balanced age: after the library, the college. To-day the counsel would be different. Why, do as Mr. Rockefeller hath lately done. As he hath endowed an institute for social studies, so you endow another institute for social studies. In this way are the springs of youth and vitality dried up; money is lavished upon researches and collections, while St. Edmund Hall still begs in vain for an endowment little greater than a professorial salary.

It is clear enough that, if this process is to continue, "the educational authority of Oxford will decline." Every year fresh thousands of young men are clamouring for truth and knowledge. When Oxford has spent all its energies on the establishment of institutes for vague research, and all its funds upon libraries and galleries and museums, the young will turn elsewhere for what they seek. Middle-aged parasites will oust the true teachers. Words and theories will take the place of knowledge.

¹ Nuffield College, incidentally, is to extend equal hospitality to graduates of both sexes. It will thus set Oxford yet another precedent, being co-institutional if not co-educational.

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That day is not yet. In spite of modernistic jerry-building, the old foundations are sound, and the old walls will stand for many generations. For nearly a thousand years now, Oxford has by its quiet example taught dignity and the love of truth to the youth of England. There is still no place on earth where a young man will sooner acquire these virtues, or more lastingly embrace them.