

College Muniments : A Preliminary Note

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IT is hoped that future numbers of *Oxoniensia* will contain a series of articles describing the muniments of the various colleges. It is hardly possible to over-rate the importance of these muniments, and of the colleges themselves, for the social, intellectual, and economic historian. With the exception of some of the greater monasteries, there are perhaps no institutions, no bodies of men, about whose life and affairs we can collect such complete and minute information, continuously over so long a period of time. A college therefore deserves at least some of that exhaustive and sympathetic study which we have learnt to give to a medieval monastery or a Roman villa. In the past, college histories have generally tended to deal rather disjointedly with certain aspects, such as the biographies of college worthies, or architectural description. Yet no one making a study of a Benedictine or Cistercian monastery would fail to bring the architecture into relation with the daily life of the inmates, their religious observances, their economic and intellectual development, and these in turn with the biographies of the abbots and great men ; and so a complete picture of monastic life is given. It is precisely on these lines that a college needs to be studied, on the basis of its muniments. It is important, however, not to regard the muniments as mere quarries from which to extract quaint and curious antiquarian tit-bits. Just as it is impossible to make intelligent use of a plea roll or a pipe roll without fully understanding the governmental machinery that produced it, so in order to use college muniments to the full, one must try to understand exactly how and why they were made. Further, while the medieval muniments, such as bursars' accounts, where they survive, will naturally attract most interest, those of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries deserve careful study, not only because they describe an interesting phase of society, which is becoming every day more and more remote from us, but also because they throw much light, backwards, upon the middle ages, by reason of their astonishing conservatism. Thus, right down to the last century, Fellows received payments for attendance at Obits, which of course had ceased to be performed since the Reformation ; and such a phrase as 'Item

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pro duobus ferreis ly barrs in fenestris magistri Lomax,' which might have come out of any medieval account, occurs in the year 1648-9.

What are the chief types of college muniments that one may expect to find? The following rough classification may be suggested:

A. *Registers.*

(1) Registers recording the corporate acts of the college, especially deliberations and decrees of college meetings; such as (to quote printed examples) the fragments of Merton 'scrutinies' (1338-9), the Merton *Registrum Annalium* (1483-1521), the Dean's Register of Oriel; many other colleges have such registers, at least from the sixteenth century, e.g., Balliol, Exeter, St. John's, and Magdalen (the Vice-president's Register, mainly disciplinary). Such Registers may sometimes tend to become formal and stereotyped, but they all probably contain a great deal of information about college policy, discipline, 'ancient customs,' academic curriculum, and even buildings. They invite comparison with the similar records of other institutions, such as the printed chapter acts of Lincoln Cathedral and Ripon, and again, with the modern minutes of college meetings.

(2) Registers of letters and deeds, issued by the college, or to which the college is a party; these are fairly frequent; they tend to become formal records of leases, presentations, and compositions, but some, especially the earlier ones, may be in part genuine letter-books, like the fifteenth century portion of the Dean's Register of Oriel. They invite comparison with episcopal and monastic registers, and with the letter-books of the University. There are also to be found unofficial note-books and drafts of letters, from the seventeenth century onwards.

(3) Registers of admissions, of elections of Fellows (with notaries' attestations), catalogues of Fellows, and caution books. These are almost universal, and already much used; but there is, still, a lack of printed lists of medieval Fellows, even for such important colleges as New College and All Souls.

(4) Cartularies and Registers of Muniments: such as the *Liber Ruber* of Merton, and the Oriel *Registrum munimentorum* (now Lansdowne MS. 386).

(5) Kalendars and Obituaries, and, later, catalogues of benefactors, which may give useful lists of plate or books given.

B. *Accounts by college officers, of money received and spent, similar to the monastic obedientiary rolls.*

(1) Bursars' or Treasurers' accounts;¹ dealing more or less with the complete finances of the college; at first in the form of rolls, later in books.

¹ At Exeter, these accounts were kept by the Rector.

(2) Special accounts, such as Buttery books, Battel books, accounts of the Seneschal of Hall, Building accounts, Chapel and Library accounts.

Most colleges have examples of (1), at least from the sixteenth century, and some from a much earlier date, as Exeter (from 1324), New College, University, Oriel (from 1409); above all, Merton has the finest collection, both for its range of time, and for the variety of accounts kept by different officers. College accounts are perhaps the most informative of all the muniments, and need to be exploited, as the monastic obedientiary rolls have been.¹ As regards the problem of ultimate publication, to print all the accounts is probably out of the question, but much might be done, (i) by printing a good many representative specimens *in extenso*; (ii) by a study of the organization and finances of the college;² (iii) by a series of studies on particular aspects, illustrated from the accounts, such as a full description of the personnel, Fellows, servants, 'sojourners,' and even undergraduates, showing exactly how they lived and worked, *e.g.*, the disposition and furnishing of chambers and studies; the development of the fabric and of the various parts of the college, such as the chapel and the library; the management of estates and of appropriated churches and hospitals; college business and activities, such as lawsuits, journeys, funerals.

C. Inventories of plate, of books, and of the contents of chambers and studies.

The importance of these is obvious; there are still some medieval examples unprinted, and many more of the sixteenth and succeeding centuries.

D. Charters, title-deeds, leases; and rentals, bailiffs' rolls and court rolls.

A large proportion of the records of this class deal with matters outside Oxford, and throw light on the college estates rather than on the colleges themselves. Dr. Salter has shown what good use can be made of the Oxford deeds, for topographical purposes. The later leases sometimes have useful plans of house-property, which might be listed, and used to reconstruct the older, domestic Oxford which is so rapidly being destroyed.

E. College statutes, and Visitors' injunctions.

Even where these have been printed, the texts need revision.

This classification is necessarily very imperfect and tentative, being based for the most part on the early reports of the Historical Manuscripts Commission. Obviously, the different classes of records may be found combined and fused in various ways, *e.g.*, a register may include letters, resolutions, elections,

¹ *E.g.* in E. H. Pearce's *Monks of Westminster*; E. R. Chapman's *Sacrist's Rolls of Ely*.

² *Cf.* H. F. Howard, *Finances of St. John's College, Cambridge, 1511-1926*.

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inventories, all together ; and there are volumes of miscellaneous memoranda which defy classification.

What we hope for, then, is in the first place, a series of surveys of college muniments in *Oxoniensia*. It is not necessary that each survey should be very long or elaborate. What is important is to have a description of the various classes of documents, even the humblest and most recent, and some explanation of the structure and purpose and historical utility of each class, especially the more important ones, such as college accounts ; so that if we were faced with such a document, we would recognize what it was, and know where to look for any information that we sought. Then finally, it is to be hoped that this survey of the materials will prove a useful guide and encouragement to the publication, beyond the pages of *Oxoniensia*, of substantial monographs on the various colleges.