

The Alleged Migration of the University of Oxford to Northampton in 1264

By F. M. POWICKE

IN January, 1264, King Louis IX of France made his award at Amiens on the dispute between King Henry III of England and some of his barons about the Provisions of Oxford. So far from uniting England, the award stiffened the opposition. When King Henry and his son Edward returned to the country they found that war was threatened in the Marches of Wales. Edward rushed westwards, spending a night at the king's hall outside the north gate at Oxford on his way. The king summoned his feudal host to meet at Oxford and made his own headquarters there, in Blackfriars, also outside the walls. From there he wrote a letter on 12 March to the chancellor and scholars of the university, ordering them to disperse. Oxford would be no fit place for studious clerks. The place would be full of soldiers, some of whom would be too savage to restrain. The king promised to maintain all the rights, privileges, lands and rents of the university and to allow the scholars to return as soon as peace was restored. He would then enforce the terms of his recent letters from Rochester relating to a dispute outstanding between the scholars and burgesses.¹ To this dispute I shall return. After their victory at Lewes some weeks later Simon de Montfort and his colleagues authorized the scholars, in the king's name, to return to Oxford. The royal letters are dated 30 May, 1264.² According to the rhyming chronicler, Robert of Gloucester, the scholars did not reassemble until after Michaelmas, that is, for the next academic year.³

This brief interruption of academic life has been given a somewhat fantastic political importance.⁴ The Oxford scholars are described as hot partisans of Earl Simon, ejected for this reason by the king. They are said

¹ Rymer, *Foedera* (edition of 1816), i, i, 435.

² The original letters patent survive and are printed in *Mediaeval Archives of the University of Oxford*, edit. H. E. Salter, 1 (O.H.S., LXXXI (1917)), 24-5.

³ *The metrical chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, edit. W. A. Wright (Rolls Series, 1887), II, 743.

⁴ H. C. Maxwell-Lyte, *A history of the University of Oxford from the earliest times to the year 1530* (1886), pp. 63-6; C. E. Mallet, *A history of the University of Oxford*, 1 (1924), 52-3. Dean Rashdall is more cautious, but says, 'the motive for this order seems to have been the sympathy shown by the scholars of Oxford for the King's enemies'; see H. Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the middle ages* (2nd ed., 1936), III, 87.

to have migrated in a body to Northampton, where they took a leading part in the defence of that town against the royalists. In the end this reading of the situation appears to rest upon two authorities, the chronicle generally described as *De bellis* and the later Walter of Hemingburgh. The former ascribes the king's action to the suspicion that, if the barons should arrive on the scene, the scholars would commit some fraud upon the king's army. It goes on to say that more than fifteen thousand names were entered upon the university's lists (*in matriculis rectorum*), a number about ten times greater than the generous estimate usually allowed by modern scholars.¹ Walter of Hemingburgh tells a story that the university migrated to Northampton by command of the barons, and that, during the siege, the clerks, fighting under their own banner, with slings, bows and crossbows, inflicted more damage than the rest of the baronial forces was able to inflict upon the royalists. King Henry, after his victorious entry into the town, swore that he would hang them all, whereupon many shaved their heads and fled as hard as they could. The clerks were saved by the expostulations of the king's advisers, who pointed out that distinguished kinsmen of some of them might be alienated.²

Contemporary evidence does not support this story.

While there is no reason to reject the reason given by King Henry for the dispersion of the Oxford masters and scholars, it is possible that his anxiety for their peace and tranquillity was mingled with irony. He may have been influenced by recent events. Robert of Gloucester, who knew Oxford intimately, thought that the royal command was the result of a riot which had disturbed the town two or three weeks earlier. The circumstances were these. In February, during his hurried march to the west, Edward, as has been said, had stayed for a night at the king's hall outside the walls.³ The authorities in the town had closed the gates when they heard of his arrival, probably because he had armed men, mercenaries, with him. After he left the gates were opened with the exception, for some unknown reason, of Smith Gate, at the end of Cat Street. The younger scholars, who used this gate when they went out to the open ground called Beaumont for their diversions, were angry. They broke the gate down and carried it, as though it were a corpse, on to Beaumont. Then the trouble began. Some of the

¹ *The Chronicle of William de Rishanger of the Barons' Wars*, edit. J. G. Halliwell (Camden Society, 1840), p. 22; Rashdall, III, 327, 328.

² *Chronicon domini Walteri de Hemingburgh*, edit. H. C. Hamilton, I (1848), 311.

³ The king's hall occupied the site of the present Gloucester Green and Beaumont Street. It was never described in the middle ages as the royal palace of Beaumont; that was a later invention. Beaumont was an academic name given to the open ground to the north of the city, including the unenclosed part of Holywell Manor. From Edward II's time the Carmelite Friars occupied the king's hall. See H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, O.H.S., vol. c (1936), 75.

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scholars were arrested and the burgesses refused to surrender them to the chancellor. A riot, which is described in detail and with relish by Robert of Gloucester, ensued, following the destructive course usual on such occasions. The king heard the news from two Oxford Dominicans at Rochester, and took action. In his letters of 28 February—the letters to which he refers in his injunction of 12 March—he expressed his concern and ordered the chancellor and university to submit to him the terms of the award, when it should be ready, of the arbitrators upon whom the university and town had agreed. He expressed the wish that the scholars should assemble in Oxford and 'stay there in security as they used to do, provided that they made oath to their chancellor that with the burgesses they would give their counsel and aid for the safe and peaceful keeping of the town'.¹ This suggests that expulsion or a migration had been considered, and lends some colour to Robert of Gloucester's opinion that Henry's action, after his arrival at Oxford, was influenced by the recent disturbances. On the other hand the Winchester annalist expressly denies this. He mentions the riot, says that peace was restored and adds, 'the university was dispersed by the king's order, not because of this quarrel, but because the king proposed to hold a parliament (*parliamentare*) in Oxford'.² Other chroniclers merely refer to a temporary dispersion. No contemporary evidence suggests that a migration, on any large scale, had been or was made to Northampton, nor is there any suggestion of political hostility between Henry and the university either in the story of the riot or in Henry's letters.

Some of the scholars may well have gone to Northampton and taken a part in the defence of the place, for since 1261 Northampton had been an embryonic university centre. A number of masters and scholars had gone there, not from Oxford, but from Cambridge. In February, 1261, the king had encouraged them to persist in their *scholastica disciplina*,³ but, four years later, on 1 February, 1265, the baronial council, after consultation with the bishops, decided that the 'new university' should be removed, on the ground that it might seriously affect the interests of the borough of Oxford, now generally approved as a home of learning.⁴ The decision certainly implies that Northampton was attracting men who would otherwise have gone to Oxford. Perhaps the Oxford scholars were returning to their old home too slowly; but there was no migration on a large scale from Oxford to

¹ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1258-66*, p. 383.

² *Annales monastici*, edit. H. E. Luard (Rolls Series), II, 101. The King did hold a parliament after his followers arrived in Oxford.

³ *Foedera*, I, i, 403.

⁴ *Close Rolls, 1264-68*, pp. 92-3.

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Northampton. The solicitude of the king's advisers for the interests of the town, rather than for its academic tradition as such, is interesting. Even as late as 1265 a 'university of scholars' had no abiding city; the interests of householders and shopkeepers counted more than academic prestige.

The disturbances in 1264 show that the supposed 'baronial' sympathies of the scholars and town of Oxford do not arise. No doubt Earl Simon had sympathizers both among the clerks and in the town, but we hear of no general movement in contemporary records. A recent chancellor of the university had been Master Thomas de Cantilupe, one of the baronial proctors at Amiens. He would have a following. A prominent burgess, Guido the tailor (*scissor*), who had houses in Oxford, was a follower of the earl.¹ Again, there was an element in the town strongly opposed to the ruling class in its government,² but this element, if it was still strong in 1264, aroused no baronial sympathies. While the king's court was at Canterbury in September of this year 1264 the mayor and bailiffs were directed to suppress illicit gatherings and confederacies by men of the town, joined with others from outside the town, also congregations of Jews who were flocking into Oxford.³ This was a baronial command. The baronial council tried to check disorder in Oxford just as it did in another disorderly town, Bury St. Edmunds, and this particular trouble was due to the general disturbance and to the attacks on Jews. Its political significance is not apparent. All the same, baronial partisanship was more evident in the town than it was in the university. After the battle of Evesham the burgesses agreed to pay 500 marks to Edward for the remission of 'the rancour of mind which he had conceived against them because in the disturbance of the realm they were said to have adhered to the enemies of the king and himself'.⁴ This agreement with Edward does not appear to have been the outcome of definite charges or judicial proceedings. It was rather an act of insurance, a bid for favour and peace by men who had been in a very trying situation, as other important towns had been, if they were the natural meeting places for armies and councils. For all we know, the Feteplace family, which had suffered from Simon de Montfort the younger when he passed through Oxford shortly before the battle of Evesham, may have been behind the allegations.⁵ The king exacted fines

¹ See the inquiry into the case of Adam Feteplace printed in *Snappe's Formulary*, edit. H. E. Salter, O.H.S., LXXX (1923), 284-5. Adam was a rich burgess who had been mayor many times. The younger Simon de Montfort, early in July, 1265, imprisoned him until, for his release, his son paid over some rents to Guido 'cissorem et fautorem domini comitis nostri inimici' (sc. regis). On 31 October, 1265, the sheriff was ordered to investigate the case by means of a jury.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 272-80.

³ *Close Rolls, 1261-64*, pp. 363-4.

⁴ This is known from letters acquitting the burgesses on payment of the reduced sum of 200 marks; *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1258-66*, p. 576.

⁵ See note 1 above.

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from Hereford, Bristol, Northampton, Leicester, Norwich, Bury St. Edmunds, but it would be quite wrong to assume that the citizens or burgesses of all these places had, as bodies of responsible men, taken a clear stand. Even the Londoners, who had to pay 20,000 pounds, had been divided. However this may be, it is hard to believe that the scholars and burgesses of Oxford acted together. The more baronial the burgesses were in their sympathies, the less the scholars are likely to have been.