

Reviews

The Commonwealth of Lincoln College 1427-1977. By Vivian H.H. Green. Oxford University Press. 1979. £20.

The history of the University of Oxford has suffered from the poverty of much of the historiography of the colleges which made it up after its earlier years. Works which should have provided a solid institutional background have on the contrary only too often consisted of flimsy pieces of local *pietas*, and it is only comparatively recently that this weakness has begun to be corrected on at all a large scale. There are various reasons for this weakness, among them the mass of material faced by the historian — as early as the eighteenth century there were no fewer than twenty independent colleges which went to make up the University as a corporation. It is therefore most encouraging that Dr. V.H.H. Green, sub-Rector of Lincoln College, who has already done so much to emphasize its importance, has now produced an admirable history of it, stressing strongly its institutional factors, and relating them to the study of the University as a whole. It is necessary to bear in mind that the University of Oxford was not originally a collegiate body. Like most medieval Universities of Masters it consisted of students living in small private halls or independently. The colleges were a later and at first a humble addition. The College of the Blessed Virgin Mary and All Saints, Lincoln (known as Lincoln College) was founded in 1427 and was the eighth to come into existence, the others being University College, Balliol, Merton, Exeter, Oriel, Queen's and New College. They were the creation of private benefactors and it would be hard to subsume them under any one head. They ranged from the creations of magnates like the great William of Wykeham who housed his seventy scholars in a superb palace on the outskirts of the city, to tiny groups like Lincoln itself, a 'collegialum' (as its founder Richard Fleming, a Yorkshire Oxonian, called it) consisting of a Rector and seven fellows. It was housed in a little group of parochial halls in the centre of the old city, and its early benefactors were elderly Oxford friends of the founder or men lodged in one or other of the halls. The colleges shared certain characteristics — their students were (apart from New College) graduates, mostly working for a degree in one of the higher faculties (usually divinity) and they were intended to achieve some end dear to the individual benefactor. Those ends were generally related either to the production of a learned or at least a well-informed body of clergy, and/or (before the Reformation) to the creation of an organization to pray for the souls of the benefactor himself or his heirs ('founder's kin'). Richard Fleming in creating his modest institution had a specific purpose in mind. He wished to check the heresy of Lollardy which Oxford was alleged to have been encouraging as a sequel to the earlier Wycliffe movement. The suspicions were poorly based; had they been serious the measures taken by Fleming to combat them would have been far from adequate.

That a small and disparate group of colleges should come to dominate the University as a whole is an illustration of what we mean by the social changes of secularization and of the strength given to small bodies of men sharing common ends and sound organization. By the end of the sixteenth century the colleges were, as Dr. Green says, 'virtually supreme in the University, so much so that for the next three or four centuries they could be identified with it'. In less than a hundred years after Lincoln was founded it was playing its part, if not a very prominent one, in working for the 'established order in

Church and State', a college's function being to 'train men to serve and support it'. It may be noted that at no period before 1914 did so high a proportion of the nation's youth seek a university education as in the early seventeenth century. In 1639 the Lincoln caution books show seventy-two men in residence in the college, including four gentlemen-commoners, six servitors and sixty-two commoners. There was also the bible-clerk who in the early years of the college was its only undergraduate member.

Dr. Green devotes 746 pages to the main body of his text. It contains nineteen chapters, admirably annotated and elegantly written. To them he adds sixteen appendices of varying lengths and many of them stressing valuable sociological conclusions. Lincoln was on the whole a highly conservative institution, always a small one and not in the main noted for its intellectual distinction. It had, however, among its numbers some very remarkable individuals of whom John Wesley is perhaps the best known, and a surprising number of eccentrics, two of whom were Rectors: Edward Tatham and Mark Pattison, to whose comparability with George Eliot's Casaubon Dr. Green dedicates a very interesting Appendix. The volume is excellently illustrated and the Oxford University Press is to be congratulated on its production; that it costs £20 is not, under present circumstances, surprising.

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The Victoria History of the County of Oxford, Volume IV The City of Oxford. Published for the Institute of Historical Research by O.U.P. 1979. £50.

Many reviews that I have read of the different county volumes of the 'V.C.H.' published in recent years, began in roughly the same way, with some remarks about what a good thing the whole project was, but how outdated it looked. The iron hand of the editorial arrangements for each volume, with their sections on Markets and Fairs, Parliamentary Representation, Churches, Education and the rest, is often represented as a bad thing. To me, at least, it is a virtue. Any project trying to gather 'all useful known facts' about the history of any place or area — be it some rural wapentake, lathe or hundred, or a great city like Oxford — in one fell swoop, faces a massive task to be taken at a steady pace. A measure of uniformity in these arrangements, discreetly modified over the years, as they have been, is the only way to proceed. Any attempt to write scholarly local history by the device of a broad sweep across the past, the net picking up matters of interest here and anecdotal supportive facts there, would be inappropriate to this long-standing project. Marvellously thought-provoking though the style of Professor Braudel's two-volume canter through the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II, or recent attempts at writing the history of the world by Dr. Roberts or Professor Thomas may be, they simply would not do for the V.C.H.

So this long-awaited volume on the City of Oxford has a comfortingly familiar look to it. But it has been worth waiting for. Indeed, the delay has been a positively good thing. Had it been published in the 1930s after the project was received by Dr. Salter, or even in the 1950s when Mrs. Lobel took over the county editorship with characteristic vigour, much of critical general interest would have been obscured. The excavations of the City by Mr. T.G. Hassall and others in very recent years have revealed so much about the origins, early shape, and changing topography of Oxford. Equally penetrating searches of the archives have revolutionised our appreciation of the demographic and economic structure and changes of the medieval and pre-industrial City. We are now able to set medieval and early modern Oxford as much in its national context compared to other towns in the urban hierarchy, as we long have been able to do for the Victorian and

20th-century city. Above all, taken in conjunction with Volume III on the history of the University, it is now so much easier to assess the role and relations of University and City.

Just as it is impossible for any single scholar to write a *histoire totale* of Oxford, and thus many distinguished hands have contributed to this volume as the list of contents attests, so no single reviewer could hope to do justice to all their works. Topographical changes, economic and demographic developments and the changing role of the University, sitting like a great cuckoo in the City nest, are of interest to this reviewer's scholarly side, while the changing fortunes of its MPs have a considerable personal fascination.

Our knowledge of the extent of the walls and built up area of the early city has been greatly aided by recent excavations; they have also helped with the appreciation of what it actually looked like. The intensive building activity of the 12th and 13th centuries has long been inferred. Much more is now known, thanks to excavation, of the narrowness of the buildings themselves, and of their cellars and outbuildings. Little is yet known by comparison of early medieval expansion of Oxford beyond the walls. The documentation reveals equally much of the decay of the eastern part of the town in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but little of what must have paralleled it nearer the western extremes around the castle. Indeed, in a city whose core is so dominated by the changing demands on its space by the colleges and university, the whole volume is as strong on its suburbs as its centre, and rightly so. Each period had its area of suburban extension, each becoming in its turn then part of the established built centre. Turl Street broke through the northern wall before 1550, and Broad Street, Holywell Street and George Street grew up along it in the seventeenth century. Here the building plots were longer than in the medieval core. The suburbs were not, as the population of the city stagnated in the later 17th century and for much of the 18th century, to share in the great new building of a Bath or a Cheltenham, adequate local stone though there was. The fascinating story of the development of the north Oxford suburb in the mid- and late-19th century gets the treatment it deserves, though even this supporter of the V.C.H.'s long tried editorial arrangements would have liked even more integration of matters architectural with matters social in their consideration.

No discussion of the economic history of Oxford can be free of the looming presence of the University, either; in early medieval Oxford, it is true, the dominance was barely developed, and in its trade structure, Oxford echoed on a smaller scale places like York or Lincoln. Oxford had like them its merchants and its Jewish community, these last getting but one brief paragraph, vitally important though they were. The occupational structure of the town at the time of the poll tax in the 1370s was much like that of any other similarly sized town of the day, but already demonstrated the growing dependence of many of its service trades on the University. These of course existed in some numbers in other towns; it is just that there were in Oxford proportionately more in the food and drink trades than in other towns of similar size, while bookbinders and parchmentmakers would not have been found in most of them at all. This trend of early medieval times became the established fact of early modern Oxford.

It is good to see in the discussion of the economic history of 16th and 17th centuries some attempt made to compare Oxford with other towns, the better to appreciate such facts as its well developed service structure; it would probably have been a good thing to push this process further, without straying too far outside of the project's iron bounds. This trend was to continue into the 19th century, but was at its peak, perhaps, during the slump in matriculations in the 18th century; then Oxford stood to a degree outside of the mainstream of English urban life, not developing even the minor manufacturing interests

of many of its southern cousins. The late medieval and early modern periods may have been those when the formal subservience of the town to the university was at its height, even though the town corporation long after still continued to make public recompense for its part in medieval riots; but the 18th century was *the* century of town-to-gown subservience, as low undergraduate numbers linked to growing standards of consumption brought tradesmen into the closest symbiosis with their clients. The credit system that evolved was probably more highly developed than any other in the country, save that of Cambridge. It was even reflected in the social geography of the town, certain streets having more shops giving credit to young bloods than others. I only wish that visual presentation of what is known from documentary and archaeological sources of the population distribution and economic activities of the town could have been considered. Tables tell us of the different occupations; descriptions tell of where some of them were concentrated, though this is rather more anecdotal than systematic; some contemporary maps give us the rough spatial context. What is needed is more reconstruction, difficult though that may be, of the social and economic topography of medieval and early modern Oxford, compared to what is all too easily obtained in the excellent accounts of 19th and 20th century developments, culminating in the eruption of the motor industry at Cowley.

A continuing theme of this volume is the dominance of town by university. From the early 13th century the University was protected by King and Pope; any attempt by the town to free itself failed, as it did even after the riot of 1298 when the collegiate structure hardly yet existed. By the time of the lay subsidies of the 1520s more than a fifth of the townspeople were employed by the University, and many more dependent on it; they submitted to the Chancellor's power to summon them for the 'health of their souls', and even to excommunicate them. That theme lasted well into the 19th century, affecting not just the relationships of Chancellor and Alderman, Undergraduate and Tradesman but of college servant and those of the same class employed in gasworks or railways. Even at the turn of the 19th century, one marvellous piece of oral history tells us (p.183) a working man felt this to be the case — 'Of course, there was the college servants, but they wouldn't look at the likes of us!' To consider University and Town together in one volume was rejected in the 1940s and 1950s. By and large the efforts of those writing in this City Volume have succeeded in usefully integrating the parallel stories and integrated development. It is in some ways a turbulent story, in others peaceful and evolving.

The careers of those who represented the City in Parliament were sometimes as turbulent. Poor John FitzAlan, a 15th-century carpetbagger, fell from grace as Oxford's MP in the 1450 Parliament to having his goods sequestered by the King in 1451. By the 1620s Parliament sat in Oxford, bringing with it the Plague and crisis mortality; this was not so bad as in 1603 when grass, it is repeated (p.77), perhaps a little uncritically, 'grew in the market place'. By the 18th century City politics were as corrupt as some aspects of University life; a town corporation which had seen its MP arrested by Royalist forces in the Civil War was busy trying to bribe its MPs by 1768. How different the elections of the day were; the Tory success of 1695 saw the Rowneys, father and son, hold one of the City seats for 64 years; patronage was all, Lord Harcourt's influence great in the 18th century. In 1753 his secretary wrote (p.153) 'if the leaders of the town are nice, it may be proper to consult their opinion . . .'. How different the contemporary political scene is compared to the early 18th century, when Thomas Rowney built and lived in magnificence in St. Giles's House, later used as the Assize Judge's Lodgings, and now for the entertainment purposes of St. John's College. Different even from the early 20th century when Viscount Valentia held the seat for the Tories against the strong Liberal challenge of 1906 and increased his majority thereafter whilst coming progressively less and less to the constituency! The peculiar Parliamentary history of the City, with its dual university and

town seats in later years, is looked at very much from the internal City point of view, and consideration of Oxford men on national affairs considered only in passing and by chance.

In this and in most other respects, this is a volume both for non-specialists to dip into, and for scholars to study in depth. Certainly its illustrations are well chosen; not only the portraits, old maps and engravings that one would have expected, but interesting modern photographs, ranging from the infamous Cutteslowe Wall to the now vanished St. Ebbes. The last 215 pages of reduced typeface cover, somewhat epigrammatically in the style of this great undertaking, everything from Boundaries and Courts to Education and Charities. Suitable background material for the scholars who started this project at the end of the last century, and those who still rely on it. Suitable stuff then for dipping into by those who were the often leisured subscribers and patrons of the V.C.H. in its early days. Today, the volume is way beyond the pocket of the ordinary reader with its £50 price tag, and, I suspect, largely unknown to him or her. A pity to have it so inaccessible. Why not try to make it better known? After all, the 'Story of Oxford' told in the first 259 pages of big type is fascinating and reproduced in paperback would have some considerable appeal. Something for the publishers Dawsons who take over distributing the V.C.H. from O.U.P. in 1982 to consider?

JOHN PATTEN