

REVIEWS

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REVIEW ARTICLE: THE *HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD* – A FIRST SUMMING-UP

In November 2000 a reception was held in the Sheldonian Theatre to celebrate the completion of a remarkable project that had taken a third of a century to produce, namely the eight-volume *History of the University of Oxford*. Among those present that evening was Lord Bullock, who, back in 1966, had first campaigned for the creation of a full-scale history of the university, and who took a major role in negotiating funding for the project. Following Bullock's initiative, a long gestation period followed, until the volumes of the history appeared between 1984 and 2000. As finally completed, the *History of the University of Oxford* (henceforth *HUO*) is a formidable achievement: eight large volumes which contain between them the work of dozens of contributors, and which amount to well over seven thousand pages. As individual volumes came out, so they were subjected to reviews; now that the work is complete, it is at last possible to move from such detailed examinations to a more general discussion of the possible impact which *HUO* will have on the future study of the history of the University of Oxford.

Oxford has undoubtedly been lucky in such a display of piety. No other university in Europe has received a history on so generous a scale: plans for a similar project for Paris over a decade ago appear to have foundered, and for now Paris must rest content with a two-volume history by André Tuilier published in 1994. As for Cambridge, although it has commissioned a multi-volume history of its own (which should reach completion early in 2004), this will be a more modest venture than Oxford's, comprising four volumes, each by one author. The general editor's introduction to the first volume reveals a certain diffidence towards the whole project when he writes 'perhaps beside the great battleship launched by the Oxford Press there is room for a modest, serviceable frigate, sent from Cambridge'.

Each volume of *HUO* contains a judicious mixture of overall narrative chapters, with other chapters on college life in the period in question, university and college finances, and the activities of the various faculties. One happy result of this approach is that there are different ways of reading *HUO*. One can do the obvious thing, and read chapters in the same volume in a synchronic manner; but one can also read the history in a more diachronic manner, constructing virtual volumes by selecting individual chapters on similar themes from different volumes. A particularly good example of this is the body of chapters on college finances, which when read end to end would be worthy of a separate publication in itself. One can also do this with studies of Oxford's various faculties. Furthermore, although many of *HUO*'s chapters tend, unavoidably, to sum up existing scholarship, albeit very well, some chapters are able to incorporate important new research. Mordechai Feingold's tremendous study of the arts curriculum in the 17th century from volume IV is one such example.

One should therefore begin any discussion of *HUO* by expressing one's hearty gratitude for its existence. Those readers who have done detailed research of their own on individual topics might find little points here or there with which they might disagree; perhaps the occasional factual error might attract their notice. But such pinpricks should in no way

detract from the total achievement. We are witness to a ground-clearing exercise which has set the agenda for the study of Oxford as definitively as the history of Antony Wood did in the 1670s. *HUO* will soon become an essential port of call. Already, in my own work as a college archivist, I am regularly encouraging correspondents and visitors to 'look it up in *HUO*'.

Unfortunately the existence of so formidable a work may lead to an assumption taking root that 'it's all in *HUO*', and that there is little more to do in Oxford studies for the next generation. This is far from the case: we should remember that the bricks of *HUO* have been made with such scholarly straw as its contributors had to hand. I therefore wish to sketch out some of the areas where *HUO* has still left room for future research.

The first area is the membership of the university. Volumes I-II, and part of volume III, were able to exploit A.E. Emden's magisterial biographical registers of the university up to 1540, which have assembled so much information relating to the careers and backgrounds of known Oxford men. Unfortunately, later volumes have only had to hand Joseph Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses*, compiled in the 1880s and 1890s. Although some colleges have compiled biographical registers of their own members, Foster's work remains the only register for the majority of people who went to Oxford, and remains a formidable piece of work, especially for one man. Nevertheless it is now showing its age: it contains little detail on most of its members; there are the inevitable minor errors here and there; and, more disturbingly, it is not complete. Foster based his work almost entirely on the university's matriculation registers, and appears not to have consulted any college archives, except occasionally at second hand. Aside from the fact that the university's registers do not begin until the third quarter of the 16th century, they do not record everyone who spent time at Oxford. To take one example, my own study of the accounting and buttery records of University College for the 16th and early 17th centuries has revealed that, of the thousand or so people recorded as living there from 1551 to 1649, more than 10% are not mentioned in Foster. For administrative purposes, almost all of these 'new' members were treated identically with those who matriculated, and several of them in later years were happy to refer to themselves as former commoners of University College, and even gave money to 'their' old college. As a result, detailed statistical analyses of university membership based solely on Foster are unavoidably going to be somewhat provisional. Indeed, I would strongly recommend that the next big project to occupy the minds of historians of Oxford should be a new biographical register of the university starting in 1540.

The next area of research lies in Oxford's colleges. A work which calls itself the history of the University of Oxford has to decide how best to take account of Oxford's collegiate structure. From the late 16th century, just about every member of Oxford, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, has had to be attached to a college or hall. Gradually, decisions concerning the syllabus, the conferral of degrees, and matters of general concern became the province of the university, while the accommodation and teaching of Oxonians was the colleges' responsibility. Thus there arose a world in which members of Oxford came to feel a far greater loyalty and affection towards their colleges than to the slightly nebulous concept of the university.

HUO has certainly done its best to strike a delicate balance between the university and the colleges: in addition to discussing college finances, the volumes make space for college life and administration. Unfortunately, however, study of Oxford colleges has until recently suffered from two difficulties. The first is that, until the 1980s and 1990s, most colleges lacked the services of professional archivists, and researchers were dependent on finding a fellow or librarian with sufficient goodwill or enthusiasm to manage their archives. Although, to their credit, it appears that the colleges have been most co-operative with the research staff of *HUO*, nevertheless the latter will have had to deal, in many cases, with

archives which lacked decent catalogues for most of their contents – especially the post-medieval ones – and the presence of someone with a really thorough knowledge of the collection. An interesting study as to which colleges' archives were most accessible to the project's researchers might be made from *seeing* which ones receive most mentions in *HUO*'s footnotes.

The second difficulty is the lack of good modern college histories. Even now, the most recent histories of well over half the colleges founded before 1800 remain those written as part of a complete series published a century ago, with the long articles published in 1954 in volume III of the *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire* supplying useful, if brief, addenda. Whatever the merits of these histories, they are now a century old, and they all had quite strict limits set on their length and scope. Furthermore, many of these histories chose the path of discretion, and chose to end in the 1860s or 1870s. Many writers of *HUO* will therefore have felt acutely the absence of more companion volumes to V.H.H. Green's and John Jones's respective histories of Lincoln and Balliol, to name but two of the most distinguished recent works in this field.

It is true that – perhaps to the frustration of some contributors to *HUO* – some college historians may have wished to wait until *HUO* was complete: for example, the history of New College, which was published in 1979, explicitly declared that it was not a 'formal, learned history', and that the time for such a work would not be right until *HUO* neared completion. Now that *HUO* is complete, it is to be hoped that this might stimulate more colleges into commissioning new histories, but contributors to *HUO* might be justified in regretting that they will not have been able to benefit from such work.

Another problem is the institutional history of colleges, whose course is not always tracked in detail. Although volume III, which covers the 16th century, is subtitled 'The Collegiate University', and certainly analyses in detail the constitutional novelties exhibited by such colleges as Magdalen and Corpus Christi in being consciously created as a mixed society of fellows, scholars, and fee-paying commoners, nevertheless, less attention is paid to the remarkable metamorphoses which other, older, colleges, had to undergo to catch up with these young pretenders.

Furthermore, detailed study of colleges reveals great differences alongside basic similarities. This is not merely a matter of quaint and pleasant idiosyncrasies, from the Mallard Song at All Souls to May Morning at Magdalen by way of the Boar's Head Carol at Queen's. Until the late 19th century, almost every college preserved its own accounting system; the names given to college officers and heads vary subtly, as do the roles expected of them; and the divisions made in its members, junior and senior, foundationers and non-foundationers, according to their social or academic status, are not always the same from college to college. Unavoidably, the contributors to *HUO* will have had to make more of the similarities between colleges in order to achieve some control over their material; but the unwary reader of *HUO* might well end up perceiving a homogeneity between colleges which is more apparent than real.

The third subject for further research moves us from small-scale history to history on a much larger scale. A particularly difficult problem for the history of an institution is how far to take account of similar bodies. It can reasonably be argued that *HUO* aims to be a history of Oxford, pure and simple, and does not aim to be a history of universities in general. Nevertheless, some sense of a wider context is desirable. The early volumes, building on the work of Hastings Rashdall, are able to take account of universities elsewhere, but later volumes lack similar guides, and as a result Oxford sometimes appears in something of a vacuum: even Cambridge puts in but fleeting appearances in some volumes. Volume VI (published in 1997) includes a very useful chapter on the fate of universities outside England in the late 18th and 19th centuries, but this is rather exceptional. Even within the British

Isles, Oxford men spent parts of their careers in Cambridge, Trinity College Dublin, and the Scottish universities, yet not much account is taken of these institutions. Much comparative analysis of the post-medieval European university therefore awaits the researcher. For example, Oxford and Cambridge were not unique in Europe in having colleges, but they were special in being spared the upheavals following the French Revolution during which continental universities generally lost such collegiate structures as they had possessed.

This is an especially grievous gap as regards the Scottish universities: it has become something of a truism that in the 18th and early 19th centuries these were far more vibrant academic institutions than Oxford or Cambridge. Such claims demand proper study. Now that the history of Oxford has been studied in such detail, and the history of Cambridge is moving towards completion, we need more than ever some successors to Rashdall. In the aftermath of such detailed analyses, some work of synthesis is now required.

However, the most important work of synthesis is left until last. The General Preface to *HUO*, published in volume I in 1984, declared that 'no individual scholar could undertake the necessary research for the authoritative account that was possible and required; it would have to be a co-operative element' (vol. I p. vii). It is certainly true that a work on this scale was beyond the scope of one author, and that a multi-authored work will receive the benefit of so many specialists' expertise, but one feels a sense of regret that the history of Oxford has become too big for one person. For comparison, one turns back to the last large history of Oxford, that of C.E. Mallet, published in three volumes in 1924-7. Mallet's volumes inevitably show their age now, and Mallet himself could not hope to have read and inwardly digested all the information at the disposal of the contributors to *HUO*. Thus far, it might be easy enough to declare that Mallet has been, to all intents and purposes, superseded. Nevertheless Mallet has not yet shot his bolt. He provides a continuous and coherent narrative of the history of Oxford, with little sketches of each of the colleges, and, for the reader who requires a straightforward account and overall view of the history of Oxford, Mallet has yet to be properly replaced.

With a series of collaborative volumes, much depends on the toughness of the respective editors to keep their contributors in hand. While the work of a single author cannot hope to combine all the specialisations of a team of experts, one writer is better able to preserve an overall vision of the whole project, *seeing* the whole thing from one end to the other. The editors of *HUO* have done a first-rate job of keeping their contributors under control, not least in that most of the volumes include some narrative chapters to provide a firm base on which to read the others, but there are times when too much is taken for granted. For example, readers *seeking* a clear narrative explanation of the composition of the Laudian statutes might derive more benefit from Mallet's account. Furthermore, some contributors expect more of their readers than others. Some of the narrative chapters, not least those in volumes IV and V, can be read by the non-specialist, but some chapters on specific subjects can be very daunting (a study of logic in late medieval Oxford in volume II is a particularly formidable example).

There is another melancholy reflection: although the eight volumes of *HUO* provide the most magnificent of intellectual journeys, their very magnificence daunts. Few people will possess the stamina to travel *HUO*'s whole length: most readers will prefer to keep it company for a few chapters, a volume or two, and then go their way. There is therefore a great need for a concise history of Oxford, written by one author, which can properly digest the contents of *HUO* for the benefit of a wider audience. It is understood that such a work has been commissioned, and its publication will be eagerly awaited. In the meantime, therefore, Cambridge for one definitely enjoys the advantage over Oxford, thanks to Elisabeth Leedham-Green's excellent *A Concise History of the University of Cambridge* (1996).

Nevertheless, it would be churlish to chide *HUO* for what it is not, and what it never claimed to be. It has set new standards in university history in general, and will be indispensable for the study of the history of Oxford in particular. Future researchers should express their thanks to the editors and contributors – to say nothing of the sources of finance – which have made this achievement possible.

ROBIN DARWALL-SMITH

Michael Franks, *The Clerk of Basingstoke: a life of Walter de Merton*. Alden Press, Oxford, 2003. 141pp. £12, all profits to Merton Development Fund.

Reviewing in *Oxoniensia* a history described by its author as 'popular' is fraught with peril. Faced with *Oxfordshire: County of Imperishable Fame* by Arthur Mee, an earlier reviewer briskly observed 'this is hardly a book for thin-skinned intellectuals, and it seems rather too comprehensive for the mentally arrested' before settling on the recommendation that it 'would form an excellent work of reference for intelligent boys and girls in their early teens' (*Oxoniensia*, vol. viii/ix). It is therefore a pleasure to record that the present volume, whose intended audience is presumably visitors to the college, is careful in its use and documentation of sources and need offend no thin-skinned intellectuals.

In his introduction the author rightly stresses the shortage of material available to the historian. It is not the absence of records that is the problem, for the archive room of Merton is probably the best stocked of all college archive rooms for the medieval period; we are moreover very fortunate in that a number of distinguished scholars have laboured to publish much of this material, generally in the Oxford Historical Society series, with yet more volumes promised. But although the medieval college thought it important to record its property transactions, its account rolls, surveys and estates in huge detail, it saw no reason to record the lives of its fellows or of its founder. Like most names from the Middle Ages, that of Walter pops frustratingly in and out of our view in witness lists and property transactions, never staying to explain his presence.

Apart from his royal service, Walter de Merton comes to the historian's notice in five places: Basingstoke, Merton, Durham, Oxford and Rochester. To such records, which supply little more than dates and places, the author has added an account of the various institutions that Walter served, as they were in Walter's lifetime, with suggestions as to what such a person as Walter might have done in the contexts in which he may be placed. The result is enjoyable, lavishly illustrated with pictures of things Walter might have seen and maps from all periods, and helpful to anyone with an interest in the man; even those who have read all the available printed material on Merton will find occasional new suggestions. There is no point in complaining that it is not a fully argued scholarly history because, even given limitless time and access to source material, such a thing simply could not exist. Wittgenstein's rule, *wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen*, has never been felt to be binding on historians.

The parts of the book related to Basingstoke are at once the most complicated and the most interesting. Walter endowed or re-endowed the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, but beyond that very little is certain. Our business is with Walter and we gain only a glimpse of medieval Basingstoke, but the glimpse is enough to suggest plenty of scope for further research. The confusion of town, manor and hundred cries out for analysis. The separate manor of Basingstoke Merton, within the town of Basingstoke but separate from the entity described as the Manor and Town of Basingstoke, deserves and, as it appears, is receiving more study.

Mention of Durham raises the question of possible links with William of Durham and of a 'Durham connection' with each of the first three Oxford colleges. Highfield, who first pointed out the connections, added: 'to state the opportunities for influence is not to prove that these influences were exerted effectively' (J.R.L. Highfield (ed.), *The Early Rolls of Merton College, Oxford* (OHS n.s. xviii), 68).

The problem with the account of the foundation of Merton College is simply that, unlike the Basingstoke chapter, it is a story that has been told very many times. There will be few readers who are interested in Walter but not in his college, and anyone with a serious interest in the history of the college will want to read the account of the foundation in Martin and Highfield (G.H. Martin and J.R.L. Highfield, *A History of Merton College, Oxford* (1997)). Because we know so much about Merton College, this section of the book could easily have grown out of proportion to the rest, but the author has kept it firmly in hand and remembered that his subject is the man and not the institution.

Of Walter's final years at Rochester there is little to be said: his devotion to his *see* is described as 'somewhat half-hearted'. The account of his death and burial is followed by an assessment of his estate and an attempt to condense into five points his plans for his college. This is dangerous ground, because it is very easy to extract what appear from later history to be important features of the college and read them back into the early statutes. Whether the author has avoided this pitfall is something the reader must judge.

The author shows an understandable partiality to Walter, indeed he describes his book as a *debitum pietatis* to the founder of his college. So in cases when charitable or uncharitable judgements must be made on the few matters of plain fact we have, generally it is the charitable ones that we find. Consider the following: 'in 1240 the king granted the manor of Basingstoke to Walter for five years. Previously, the men of Basingstoke themselves, under a special arrangement with the king, had held the manor, but kept getting into arrears with their rent. It looks as though – as with other property transactions – Walter volunteered (or perhaps the king or his officials asked him) to sort out the mess and, at the same time, by his superior management gain some advantage for himself.' (Mysteriously, Walter *seems* to have retained a substantial part of the town for himself even after the mess had been sorted out.) This is a pleasant thought and I have not the slightest evidence to suggest that it is not the case; and for me to cite examples in other towns where the motives for such transactions were sheer rapacity and where the men of the town were sorted out very much to their disadvantage by Henry's servants would be idle speculation on my part. It would be just as vain to argue about whether Walter's well-documented concern for his family amounted to nepotism; perhaps the very distinction would have puzzled him. Of his pluralism we are simply told that it shows how good he must have been at his job to reap such rewards. He passed the unwanted livings on to his relations.

The press release that accompanied the review copy of this book opens with the words: 'As the future funding of our universities is debated Michael Franks' *The Clerk of Basingstoke* explores a fascinating part of 13th-century history which might give some pointers to how this 21st-century problem might be tackled.' Any reader with 2 billion pounds and lots of dependent relations take note. More wisely, I think, the author disagrees, stating that the temptation to draw such conclusions must be resisted. He then proceeds to his own conclusions which summed up briefly are that there is no point in having management skills if you haven't any money. That Walter had both and used both well is beyond doubt. By and large history has treated him well: his place has been usurped neither by his wife nor by King Alfred. It is fitting that of the many who visit his college, some may now learn of its founder from this excellent and approachable account.

TONY DODD

Royston F. Taylor (ed.), *Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of New Woodstock, 1588-1595*. Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 63, 2002; i + 158 pp.

There are references to, and fragmentary records of, Woodstock's borough court or portmoot from the 13th century onwards, but full records begin only in the late 16th century. This volume calendars the first court book in a series which then continues to the mid 19th century; it also incorporates additional material from two books of fair copies covering those same years, 1588-95.

The Woodstock portmoot usually met fortnightly on Mondays and, in common with local courts all over England, its chief concerns were small debts and breaches of contract, which, pursued through actions of debt, trespass, and *assumpsit*, accounted for two-thirds of the portmoot's business at this time, and by the early 17th century four-fifths. Because the Woodstock court was a court of record, and because it provided a comparatively swift means of seeking legal redress, it was popular with outsiders: only about a third of suitors were townsmen and some 42 per cent of recorded actions concerned matters outside the borough.

This first court book mostly provides a bare record of the progress of actions, with only brief indications of the judgments made and the sums of money involved; occasionally more detail is given, of witnesses' depositions, of arbitration awards, of freehold conveyances, of assizes of bread and ale. The next court book in the series (of which a published calendar is also planned), for various reasons has more vivid detail and will inevitably be more readable. This volume, however, makes an impressive start. The calendaring method is a good one, making it easy to follow cases through. There are full indexes and an extremely useful glossary explaining the relevant legal terms as well as obsolete words like 'dicker' and 'caper'. Above all there is a careful and thorough introduction, not always clearly expressed and certainly too cluttered with figures and percentages, but providing a complete summary of the workings of the court.

The calendar covers only seven years of court proceedings in a small market town, which in the late 16th century was only some 60 acres in extent with probably fewer than 600 inhabitants. Nevertheless, despite the narrowness of its scope, it is an important volume. Historians tend to sample court records in haste, looking for information on people or places, rarely pondering the nature of the record itself: they therefore struggle to understand, and indeed they frequently misunderstand, such sources. Thirty years ago, confronted by Oxford city's voluminous court records, I needed solid guidance on local courts but was dismayed to find that legal historians had written almost exclusively about central courts, assizes, and county quarter sessions: so not only was it difficult to work out what was going on in the Oxford courts, but also impossible to judge whether practices there were unique or commonplace. A gap existed which could only be filled by detailed local studies: this Woodstock calendar provides an exemplary contribution to that work. In another respect, too, it is a landmark volume, because it owes much to the concerted efforts of a well-run local history group. By aiming at the highest standards and seeking out scholarly advice when necessary, the Woodstock group has demonstrated that the involvement of 'amateurs' in historical research does not require any dumbing down.

ALAN CROSSLEY

Charles Tyzack, *Wychwood and Cornbury*. Wychwood Press, 2003. Pb. xiv + 168pp, b/w illustrations throughout. £12.50.

In 1910, Vernon Watney, the owner of Cornbury Park, published his handsome history of the house, park and Forest: *Cornbury and the Forest of Wychwood*. This had a traditional antiquarian approach, tackling first the architecture of the mansion, and then dealing with the history of the park and Forest chronologically through the lives of its grand and often noble residents.

Charles Tyzack, chairman of the Charlbury Society, uses Watney's text for what is, in effect, a new, updated and revised edition. But he goes beyond this; the content of the original has been wisely and effectively rearranged and supplemented to meet the needs of a more modern approach to local history, one which requires a broader scope and more analysis of the relevance of the Forest's history both locally and nationally. Where Watney begins with a thorough and beautifully illustrated history of the house, Tyzack offers a succinct account of Forest Law. He then goes on to describe how Wychwood Forest was administered during the medieval period by the Langley family, and how the park itself was established.

It is difficult for the period from the 15th to the 17th centuries to avoid discussing Cornbury's wealthy and influential Keepers and owners, but Tyzack continues to show both the national and local influence of these men in their development of the mansion and gardens, the use of the woods and coppices for revenue and pleasure, their part in the Civil War, and in the final decline of the Forest as a legal and physical entity.

Wychwood Forest was finally disafforested in 1853. For Wychwood, though, this was not merely the loss of its status – the old Forest offices of ranger, launder, bailiff, etc. were all abolished – but the Act of Disafforestation also signalled the grubbing up of vast swathes of woodland, the building of new roads, and the creation of new fields. Close to 3,000 acres of forest were cleared in a mere 15 months between October 1856 and January 1858, altering the landscape and human geography of north-west Oxfordshire forever.

Wychwood and Cornbury is essential reading for anyone interested in both the physical and social history of the Forest and its purlieu. Tyzack has taken an immense and important work of its time, and revived it for a new generation of local history scholars.

JUDITH CURTHOYS

Alun T. Jones, *Alun Jones's Maps: a cartographer's record of the history and landscape of Oxfordshire*. CPRE, Oxfordshire Branch, 2001 Pb. v + 48 maps. £10.00.

This atlas brings together 30 years' work by Alun Jones, consisting of 48 hand-drawn maps of various locations in Oxfordshire. The early maps were produced for sponsored walks organised by the Save The Countryside Committee, which included the Oxfordshire branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). The later items range from footpath maps to plans of country houses and their gardens, each accompanied by copious annotations and information.

The maps are each the result of several days' work. Based on early Ordnance Survey large-scale plans, the maps are entirely drawn by hand. The style is reminiscent of the late Alfred Wainwright's finely executed walking guides and the attention to detail extends to field names and other information of interest. The walking maps are filled with snippets of information on the local history, flora and fauna, all in a neatly-executed hand. They provide

both practical and informational guidance to the walker and although some of the maps are now dated, the information is still useful.

The maps of villages and town centres are extremely detailed, with many buildings identified and features such as old fish ponds and other archaeological features noted. As with the walking maps, each one has a concise account of the history of the locality, together with intriguing explanations and notes. The map of Church Enstone, for example, explains that 'Cling-Clang Lane' acquired its name from a rusty gate that swung on hinges, but elsewhere on the map the cryptic note 'Here are hens' has no further explanation to enlighten the user! Several maps are of houses and their gardens and these are a wealth of detail. Garden paths, beds and structural features are delineated and for gardeners there are notes on the trees and shrubs. Some maps even include floor plans (such as the plan of Broughton Castle) with notes on the architectural features.

The atlas is presented in ring-bound style, allowing the pages to be folded back. This enables the reader to view a single map with ease, which would be useful when taking it on visits. That said, however, the maps are printed on thin card, which makes this a rather heavy item to carry around. The use of glossy card does however enhance the presentation and apart from one or two minor instances of blocking-in of detail the print quality is extremely good. This atlas has a wealth of detail and will appeal to anyone with an interest in rural and historic Oxfordshire, and at this price it represents excellent value for money.

NIGEL JAMES