Oxbridge and the Nurturing of An 'Urban Gentry' -
The Reform of Oxford and Cambridge in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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Abstract
By the mid nineteenth century Oxford and Cambridge had begun to adjust to the demands of educating the future elite of a more fully industrialised nation. Through a series of reforms, Oxford or Cambridge became a more desirable and accessible destination to an expanding section of the middle class. An Oxbridge education became a seal of gentlemanly status in a society where rank counted. Also, through the reforms, it was hoped that the new mid-nineteenth century intake would merge into an 'urban gentry' ready to take on an active public service role within Victorian society. The need for a new elite with a strong public service ethos reflected the desire for social improvement of the mid Victorian decades. This presentation will chart how Oxbridge adjusted to the new reality of the nineteenth century.

At the start of the nineteenth century, English higher education remained Oxford and Cambridge, unchallenged by rival institutions since their foundation in the late twelve and early thirteenth century. The Scottish universities provided a different model of higher education, one cheaper, more accessible, and broader, where students first studied Classics, philosophy, and science, then progressed to a professional training in medicine, law and theology. Oxford and Cambridge offered a more limited curriculum - essentially, classics at Oxford, mathematics at Cambridge - for students drawn fairly exclusively from the aristocracy (large landowners) and country gentry (minor landowners).

Oxford and Cambridge upheld the established order. The protestant Church of England remained the national church since the Act of Uniformity of 1662, and was allied to what most felt to be a Anglican state. Around two-thirds of Oxbridge graduates during the eighteenth century became Anglican clergymen (Gascoigne, 1989, p. 21). A liberal education rather than a theological education was deemed better preparation: clergymen were focal points within the community, and by the cultivating influence of a liberal education graduates entered the Church more culturally rounded. Indeed, Oxford and Cambridge were tasked to shore up the foundations of what still remained a widely deferential society (Harrison, 1971, p. 117-118; Cannadine, 1998, p. 95-97). Future churchmen were educated alongside aristocratic young men and the sons of country gentry. This ensured the wider social elite was replicated, an elite that was very much 'landed' and Anglican. From 1740, half of all MPs were Oxford or Cambridge graduates; by 1820 it was 60% (Anderson, 1995, p. 22), and around three-quarters of Oxbridge graduates entered the Church (Curthoys, 1997, p. 482). Very few Oxbridge graduates entered the professions or the civil service in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Through the eighteenth century the old universities had become progressively more moribund. Edward Gibbon only lasted fourteen months at Oxford in the early 1750s, the 'most idle and unprofitable' of his whole life, before fleeing Magdalen College and its fellows 'steeped in port and prejudice' (1984, p. 76, 143). Student numbers had fallen from roughly 3000 in 1700 to half that by 1800 (Anderson, 2006, p. 17). After a brief surge in admissions after the Napoleonic War (Sutherland, 1990, p. 138), the annual intake stagnated during the second quarter of the 19th century (Sanderson, 1983, p. 41), The old universities seemed beset by intellectual and social parochialism. Lord John Russell (1792-1878) claimed he was sent to Edinburgh University in 1809 by a father who thought "nothing was learned in the English universities" (as cited in Sutherland, 1990, p. 140). Oxford and Cambridge would muddle along until large-scale reform appeared unavoidable. One reason Oxford and Cambridge carried on as before was that other forms of education were available. More modern subjects like engineering were taught at the Scottish universities; there was, too, still an apprenticeship system where young men learnt a trade. The narrow curricula at Oxford and Cambridge initially failed to entice the new industrial middle-class, as did the expense, both financial and moral, of a seemingly idle and feckless college life.

The poet Thomas Campbell was among the campaigners for a new sort of university, more in line with changing times: "a great London University [for] multifariously teaching, examining, exercising, and rewarding with honors in the liberal arts and sciences, the youth of our middling rich people" (as cited in Searby, 1997, p. 427).

The University of London (1828) renamed University College London in 1836, imposed no religious tests on its students and was not residential. The Church of England vilified it as the "godless institution of Gower Street" (as cited in Searby, 1997, p. 428). Its wide curriculum was more professionally focused, for careers in law and medicine, for instance. Lectures formed the basis of teaching, with professors paid directly from comparatively low tuition fees, starting at £22 per annum (Searby, 1997, p. 428). The more Anglican, King's College (1831) and Durham (1832) followed. These two institutions offered wider curricula than Oxford or Cambridge, and while attendance at Anglican prayers was obligatory, King's placed great stress on its medical school and Durham its engineering school. In 1845 Robert Peel's government founded new universities in Belfast, Cork, and Galway to rival the older Trinity College, Dublin, in its day modelled on Cambridge. The new colleges offered a broad curriculum to students paying relatively low tuition fees (£28 for a three-year course). The non-denominational Owens College Manchester, the heart of a more industrial and entrepreneurial England, was founded in 1851.

As society industrialized and expanded - by 1831 Britain's population had effectively doubled over a 50-year period (Hilton, 2006, p. 6) - what propelled the founding of the new universities was the idea of 'utility'. Richard Edgeworth's *Essays in Professional Education* (1809) stressed the practical usefulness of university teaching, that a broader range of subjects on the university curriculum addressed the needs of the wider society more fully. Teaching at the old universities had grown stale and complacent, encouraging professors to stick to traditional subjects and methods. "Nobody doubts," Edgeworth stated, "that there are parts of most college courses, which are useless in the business of the world, and ridiculous in the present state of society, but which gothic custom has retained." (as cited in Evans, 2010, p. 260). The review of Edgeworth's book in the *Edinburgh Review* underlined the need for a refined idea of utility: classics may be useful for cultivating those aristocrats and gentry entering 'society' but of equal value were disciplines with a more obvious vocational emphasis: "We should not care whether he were chemist, naturalist, or scholar, because we know it to be as necessary that matter should be studied, and subdued to the use of man, as that taste should be gratified, and imagination inflamed" (cited in Evans, 2010, p. 262). As Edgeworth himself put it, "the value of all education must ultimately be decided by its utility" (as cited in Sanderson, 1983, p. 43). An age of reform would soon gather force and reconfigure many of the nation's institutions. The old universities were not exempt.

There were greater forces both reflecting and shaping the movement towards reform. By the mid-nineteenth century Britain was a fully-fledged industrial nation. The provinces could no longer be ignored; Birmingham and Sheffield, for example, doubled in size by the 1830s, whereas Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds grew even more impressively (Thomson, 1991, p.12). The following decades saw continued urban growth, Bradford, for example, had grown from 13,000 to 104,000 from 1801-1851 (Hilton, 2006, p. 6). Anglicanism still threaded its way through institutions, education and public discourse, but the diversity of 19th century Christian belief was self-evident. The repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 extended the civil liberties of Dissenters, and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1833 had allowed Catholics into parliament, although both bills were more symbolic than substantive. Economically, the Poor Law Act of 1834 treated the poor extremely harshly, storing up discontent through the next decade. Politically, the 1832 Great Reform Act had

extended the franchise to certain sections of the middle classes and done away with many electoral absurdities, but 82% of the adult-male population was still excluded. Entry to the civil service and commissions in the army were down to patronage and money. Change had been uneven and gradual during the early nineteenth century. The decades after Waterloo were a restive period of riots, agricultural distress and financial crises. The agrarian and industrial revolutions were proving both wonderful and worrying in their impact. The late eighteenth century had unleashed new political ideas and demands that continued to inspire some, and trouble others. Worrying unrest was evident as parliamentary reform was debated during 1830-32, and after, with Chartism simmering throughout the 'hungry forties'. As mid century approached the need for reform of some sort, however unsettling, now seemed unavoidable, even desirable.

This period of political instability eventually encouraged the State to adjust to and accommodate such forces when pressed (Hewitt, 2012, p. 10). There emerged during the mid-nineteenth century a will among politicians, intellectuals, philanthropists and others to improve society for all. Britain was still a country of vast inequalities of wealth, education, and opportunity, and one beset with social problems like prostitution and crime, poor public health and housing. Pursuing reform, of politics, law, public sanitation, and education was cast as a noble endeavour (Heffer, 2013). Public education was indeed a pressing matter as Britain edged towards a wider franchise. Not far behind was the issue of elite education; an industrial nation needed an elite, but was the existing elite still the right one, and, if not, who exactly should be admitted?

Britain was changing, radically and irreversibly, but the desire was not to reconfigure the two old universities as tools of democratic social engineering They would still be required to educate an elite. The composition and role of the elite was changing, however. It was necessary for the two old universities to turn out a more useful aristocracy to the changing demands of an industrial nation. The reform was not led by Oxford and Cambridge. As Lord Melbourne reminded the House of Lords in 1837, "Universities never reform themselves: everyone knows that" (as cited in Brock & Curthoys, 1997, p. 145). Nor was reform dictated by the state. It came through compromise and collaboration between those within and outside of the universities. Like other institutional adjustments in mid-nineteenth century Britain, Oxbridge adapted to new demands rather than radically overhauled existing practices. As the nation became more industrial and democratic its institutions needed to reflect this change - and exploit it for the greater good of the nation.

When Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria, was made chancellor at Cambridge in 1847, he was keen to apply his well-known zeal for reform to the old university. Albert was mystified at the narrowness of the Cambridge curriculum and the lack of rigour among masters and students, and was eager to introduce more practical modern subjects like those taught at the German universities (Heffer 2013, p. 446). William Whewell of Trinity College shared Albert's desire for a broader curriculum that included "some of the most valuable portions of modern science and literature" (as cited in Heffer, 2013, p. 446). Whewell, however, did not share Albert's desire for immediate reform, proposing a brake on teaching new scientific theories of 100 years in order to test their validity (Heffer, 2013, p. 447). Prince Albert found more willing allies in vice-chancellor Robert Phelps and Henry Philpott. In 1848 the Senate

approved the establishing of a degree in natural sciences, and one for the moral sciences (history, law, political economy and moral philosophy), together with a new mathematics degree. Oxford established schools of natural science, law and history in 1850; the following year degrees in natural science and modern science were introduced at Cambridge. The expanding curriculum meant more teachers were required, at Oxford a 40% increase from 1845-1858 (Harvie, 1997). Until 1866 the new schools were exclusively for students who had graduated from 'Greats'. Laboratories were also established: the Oxford Museum in 1855, the New Museum at Cambridge in 1865 and the Cavendish Laboratory in 1871. Despite this, an increase in the numbers enrolling in the new subjects took time.

This limited internal reform was the start of greater reforms as pressure from outside exerted itself. In 1852 Royal Commissions examined the state of the two old universities. Lord John Russell pinpointed the aim of reform, to ensure good feeling among the wider Victorian society "by opening easy means of transition for the promising youth of one class to rise into another" (as cited in Evans, 2010, p. 302). The Commissions led to Acts of Parliament for Oxford in 1854 and Cambridge in 1856. These Acts allowed non-conformists to enroll on degree courses - but not ones in theology - by abolishing the need to sign the Thirty-Nine Articles. Oxford freshman had to affirm their belief in the Anglican creed by signing this document outlining the doctrine of the Church of England. Oxford and Cambridge fellows, too, were expected to be ordained soon after taking up their appointment, and were also to remain celibate. The Acts of the 1850s did away with an important impediment to widening access to old universities and with it, rejuvenating an elite so that it was more in tune with the changing times. Matters of faith within the college walls seemed increasingly petty and insignificant given that revolution was sweeping through Europe in 1848, bringing social and political issues dramatically to the fore that had simmered through the 1840s. The railway had reached Cambridge by 1845, allowing more contact with London and the wider world (Harvie, 1976, p.33), chipping away at the parochialism of the port-soaked dons. Looking back on the period, Goldwin Smith, Oxford don and secretary to the Commission, saw in the move to reform the Oxford a desire "to strike off the fetters of medieval statutes from it and from its Colleges, set it free from the predominance of ecclesiasticism, recall it to its proper work, and restore it to the nation" (Heffer, 2013, p. 448).

There were some who thought such changes did not go far enough. The two old universities had clearly forgotten how and why they were founded so many centuries past. Charles Kingsley reminded his contemporaries of how inclusive Oxford and Cambridge once were: "the Universities were not founded exclusively, or even primarily, for our own class; that the great mass of students in the middle ages were drawn from the lower classes" and relied on scholarships and bursaries expressly designed for them Kingsley also pointed out that it was from the late medieval period, that higher-born sons, exploiting their clear advantages, secured the scholarships originally designed for boys of humbler origins. "Does not the increased civilization and education of the working classes call on the Universities to consider they may now not try to become, what certainly they were meant to be, places of learning and training for genius of every rank, and not merely for that of young gentlemen?" (as cited in Heffer, 2013, p.210, 211). Mark Pattison, a key reformer within Oxford, reminded the Royal Commission assessing the university in 1850 that their goal should be "opening up the University to the Nation and the world," allowing Oxford

to "strike its roots freely into the subsoil of society, and draw from it new elements of life, and sustenance of mental and moral power" (as cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 36-7). This was not quite the consequence most had in mind.

Another obstacle to an expanded Oxbridge-educated elite was the barring of non-Anglicans from becoming fellows, and the insistence that only students who signed the Thirty-nine Articles could receive Masters degrees, prizes and distinctions. This was an increasing anomaly as religious belief was waning among Anglicans, and Nonconformists had become a significant presence in provincial towns and cities. Some warned that if the old universities admitted Nonconformists through the University Tests Bill this would adversely affect the teaching of religion; and anyway, had not such people done well from being excluded, science was in rude health as such people were steered away from Oxford and Cambridge. Others worried that meddling in this issue would eventually lead to disestablishment of the Church of England and the repeal of the Act of Uniformity (Heffer, 2013, p. 501). The Universities Religious Tests Act of 1871 was initially rejected by the Lords in 1870, but was then amended and passed by 40 votes. As TH Huxley, newly appointed Rector of University of Aberdeen, declared in 1874, "Change is in the air…It insists on reopening all questions and asking all institutions, however venerable, by what right they exist" (as cited in Evans, 2010, p. 310). The ending of the religious tests would lead to a greater separation of intellectual work from religious belief.[1] As the celibacy rule was removed fellows could marry and consequently perceived their role as more permanent and professional rather than a stopgap before entering the Church (Whyte, 2005, p. 19).

The supplanting of oral exams by uniform written exams was also a significant reform in bringing more utility to an Oxbridge education. In 1780 Cambridge started the Senate House exam, chiefly in mathematics; Oxford began their Public Examination in 1800, mostly in classics with some mathematics. By 1850, written exams were the only means of assessment. Students were initially ranked in numerical order, and then grouped into classes, as now. Teaching focused on examinable subjects, and many students hired private tutors. The class of degree mattered; someone achieving a First was destined for great things (Anderson, 2012, p. 485). The value of examinations and the need for professionalization was evident elsewhere. The civil service reforms of 1855 and 1870 established an exam as the means of entry to replace the system of nomination that had existed. The 1853 Northcote-Trevelyan report sought to establish competitive exams and promotion through merit, as well as a separation of 'intellectual' and 'mechanical' jobs. The Civil Service exams were a sign of growing professionalization of British society - that personal qualities in a more professional age should trump personal connections (Reader, 1966). Of course, patronage and nepotism still operated. Yet for aspiring middle-class families an Oxbridge education served as a springboard to social and professional advancement - to make the right connections but also to learn the right things. A closer partnership formed between a reformed Oxbridge and a reformed government service. The 1853 report's recommendations were first applied to the Indian Civil Service. The exams were college level and garnered great prestige among parents and peers. As Gladstone

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[1] The end of religious tests did not mean an end of religious observance at the two old universities. However halfhearted it may have been in practice, many colleges insisted on chapel attendance for Anglican students up until the 1930s; and new colleges were founded to train Anglicans for the clergy, like Selwyn College and Keble College (Anderson 1995, p. 46).

stated when MP for Oxford University, the emphasis on an intellectual stream of the civil service would "open to the highly educated class a career and give then a command over all the higher parts of the civil service" (as cited in Hoppen, 1998, p. 112). This took time, but by the close of the Victorian era, Oxbridge accounted for 75% of civil service entrants (Curthoys, 1997, p. 496) with the majority coming from professional families (Curthoys & Howarth, 2000, p. 577-78, 496; Brooke, 1993, p. 601-3).

Exams were one way of getting on in the world, and an Oxbridge education was a useful stepping stone to exam success. What also drew increasing numbers of upper middle-class young men to Oxford and Cambridge was the belief that it offered an education in becoming a 'gentleman'. The desire for status was strong motivation in a society where rank mattered. Contemporaries viewed Victorian society as a viable hierarchical society. Inequality was divinely sanctioned, and the functioning of society relied on the maintenance of social ranks (Cannadine, 1998). As J. S. Mill said, "the very idea of equality is strange and offensive" to the English (as cited in Houghton, 1957, p. 103). The issue surrounding wider reform was how best to preserve the social existing order. One way was to assimilate new social forces within the existing hierarchy. Through an Oxbridge education those of talent could smoothly assimilate into a time-honored, hierarchical society. As Walter Bagehot said, Oxbridge education bestows "…a certain cultivation, certain friendships, certain manners" (as cited in Briggs, 1985, p. 313). In Thackeray's novel *The History of Pendennis*, the hero's uncle views Oxbridge as a means of making "his first *entrée* into the world as a gentleman, and take his place with men of good rank and station" (1899, p. 213). Such assimilation would maintain the existing hierarchy rather than threaten it, and serve to head off the revolutionary contagion like that of 1848.

A reinvigorated and expanding public school sector played its part in supplying new Oxbridge men. The nine old public schools[2] had been reformed in the middle decades, and were joined by a hundred more by the close of the nineteenth century (Honey, 1977), which, whether major or minor, offered an preliminary moulding of gentlemen 'all-rounders' through a classics-heavy curriculum, a useful grounding for Oxbridge. The railways and the move to town suburbs gave upper middle-class lawyers, doctors, clergymen, higher-ranked civil servants a less provincial, more outward and aspiring perceptive (Harvie and Matthews, 2000, p. 97) that surely influenced how they chose to educate their sons. Upper middle class boys would invariably go on to Oxbridge, their public school education had made it a natural extension. Oxford undergraduate admissions went from 163 public school boys in 1848/9 to 558 in 1861; Cambridge from 105 to 305 (Honey & Cuthoys, 2000, p. 566). By 1878/9 the Oxford graduating sons of professionals and businessmen outnumbered those of landowners and clergy (Cuthroys and Howarth, 2000, p.578).

It was not just the sons of professionals that entered Oxbridge The new wealth of the manufacturing middle-class allowed their sons to be educated in public schools. Fed on a diet of classics and sport, many were steered away from the entrepreneurialism of their fathers who had made Britain the workshop of the world (Harvie and Matthews, 2000, p. 97-98). Some went into public affairs, like William Gladstone,

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[2] Eton, Winchester, Harrow, Charterhouse, Rugby, Westminister, Merchant Taylors, St Pauls, Shrewsbury.

son of a Liverpool merchant, had done a generation earlier. Others chose careers in commerce and banking. By the late nineteenth century, as the USA and Germany emerged as major forces, Britain's continued preeminence was looking more uncertain, a situation allegedly speeded up by the neglect of - or downright hostility to - the values of business and industrialism bred in the public schools and old universities (Weiner, 1981). Character was what mattered.

It is mistaken to assume the old aristocratic order relinquished power. Cannadine (1994) states that the old aristocracy survived difficult times through shifting from agriculture into property investments, as titled directors of railways, and marriage to new (often foreign) money. What the opening up of Oxbridge represents is part of a profound process whereby the old aristocratic order sought to assimilate their emerging rivals into a wider elite (Best 1971, p. 254), to ward off potential discontent within this class. Better that their energies be channelled within the establishment rather than outside of it. This widening of the elite did not yet diminish the prestige of traditional hereditary power. Lineage and titles, the basis of aristocratic authority and the source of deference for centuries, were not yet questioned (Cannadine, 1994). Widening access to the old universities encouraged deference towards men more clearly of the new industrial age rather than those with land and titles. A reformed Oxbridge was instrumental in creating a new 'urban gentry'. These mid- to late nineteenth century Oxbridge men were not merely gentlemen, but gentlemen of such obvious *quality* of character and attribute - of resolution, tenacity, and vigour - that a comparable level of deference was generally given by Victorian society (Best 1971, p. 256).

It was hoped that the new university men would also take on the widening responsibilities and not just the manners of an elite. As Britain urbanised and government modernized and expanded, society was becoming more complex and less self-regulating than before. A need grew for a wider, more professional elite for the fledgling modern administrative state. Georgian Britain had relied on religion, deference and war to bind society together. In the rapidly changing society of the nineteenth century, fear and doubt were ever-present, that the new industrialized world would outstrip the Victorians' ability to control it. An expanding 'intellectual aristocracy' able to take on the responsibility and leadership vital to a changing nation was the answer. Oxbridge produced good 'generalists', graduates, John Henry Newman claimed, who could "fill any post with credit and master any subject with facility" (as cited in Sanderson, 1983, p. 44). Foreign visitors to Britain in the mid-nineteenth century were often struck by the elevated tone of public affairs that ensured "the widest and richest field for the appearance of men of the highest talents and character" (as cited in Langford, 1999, p.118). The education the new upper middle class intake received at Oxbridge or Cambridge fostered in many a desire to take on the responsibilities of 'men of quality' within a transforming nation. As J. S. Mill declared, it was "the especial duty [of the universities] to send forth into society a succession of minds, not the creatures of their age, but capable of being its improvers and regenerators" (as cited in Briggs, 1985, p. 303). A reformed Oxbridge enabled and encouraged the creation of a functional elite forming "a caste of educated, active citizens: a society of well-meaning gentlemen" (Wythe 2005, p. 23) ready to steer Victorian society away from trouble, and blunt some of its extremes.

The reform process largely benefitted the upper middle-class rather than the poor. True meritocracy still had few adherents in such a long-standing hierarchical society. The goal for the mid-Victorian generation, as FML Thompson underlines, was "fashioning the elements of a new society in step with the appearance of its material and human components" (1988, p. 29). Compromise and adaption were the guiding themes. The reform of Oxford and Cambridge enabled the emergence of a more functional elite – but an elite nonetheless – one that combined the traditional aristocratic value of patrician duty with an earnest desire to actively improve the national community, one that was both more urban, industrial and democratic. What the mid-nineteenth century reform of Oxford and Cambridge represents, and what makes it characteristically Victorian, is a successful attempt at reconciling forces of continuity with discontinuity, in adjusting elite institutions to new demands.

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