THE UNIVERSITY CULTURES
OF EARLY-MODERN OXFORD & CAMBRIDGE
A Folger Institute Faculty Weekend Seminar
Directed by Nicholas Tyacke
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Themes, Readings and Questions

1. Revolutionary Changes?

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, numbers attending the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge may have quadrupled while the national population little more than doubled. At their peak, university admissions together perhaps totalled a thousand students each year. As part of this process, grammar schools similarly expanded – catering in both cases not just for the sons of the gentry but for those further down the social scale as well. According to the late Lawrence Stone, these educational changes – along with increased admissions to the Inns of Court in London - were a major contributory cause of the 'English Revolution' of the mid seventeenth century. Although Stone has been criticised on statistical and interpretative grounds more generally, it remains far from clear that he had the worst of the argument.

Readings:
L. Stone, 'The Educational Revolution in England 1500-1640', *Past and Present*, 28 (1964)
E. Russell, 'The Influx of Commoners into the University of Oxford before 1581: an Optical Illusion?', *English Historical Review*, 92 (1977)
D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (1980)
L. Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642*, intro. J. Brewer (2002)
N. Tyacke ed., *The English Revolution c.1590-1720: Politics, Religion and Communities* (2007)

Questions:

(a) Do Lawrence Stone's statistics concerning Oxbridge admissions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stand up to scrutiny?

(b) Was there an 'educational revolution' in early-modern England?

(c) Consider the pros and cons of the idea of an 'English Revolution' as having occurred in the mid seventeenth century?

2. Colleges and Communities

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge are still in many ways confederations of colleges, and this has always been a source of tension. Moreover, the individual colleges retain their own distinctive characters. In the early-modern period, however, these features were undoubtedly more pronounced – so much so that it has been claimed by Victor Morgan that university expansion at this time served to reinforce localism rather than (a la Stone) break it down. Certainly it is the case that both in terms of geographical origins and religious outlook, there were marked differences between the colleges. Yet it does not follow that this precluded wider horizons; indeed religion itself, notably puritanism, clearly had the capacity to generate more transcendent allegiances. An important antidote to Morgan is the work of Clive Holmes, as part of his wider critique of the so-called 'county community' thesis.

Readings:
V. Morgan, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, ii (2004), ch. 6
C. Holmes, 'The County Community in Stuart Historiography', *Journal of British   Studies*, 19 (1980)
J. Venn, *A Biographical History of Gonville and Caius College*, i (1897)
J.&J.A.Venn, *Alumi Cantabrigienses*, pt i, 4 vols (1922-7)
D. Cressy, 'The Social Composition of Caius College, Cambridge 1580-1640', *Past and Present*, 47 (1970)

Questions:

(a) To what extent did early-modern Oxbridge serve as a 'melting pot'?

(b) What was the relationship between geography and religious allegiance?

(c) Is the concept of a 'county community' a hindrance rather than a help to historical understanding?

3. Politics and the Wider World

For Stone and others writing in the same tradition, it is a salient fact that "on paper the members of the Long Parliament were a remarkably, perhaps a uniquely, well-educated body." From this perspective, university education served to empower people politically. Conversely, successive regimes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sought to tighten their control over the universities – most obviously via the office of chancellor; one obvious driving force here was the religious changes consequent upon the Reformation and the need to ensure that Oxford and Cambridge toed the official line. The initial challenge of Catholicism was soon overtaken by that of puritanism, but both had oppositionist implications. More problematic is the extent to which either the content of what was studied, for example Tacitus, or the skills inculcated, such as rhetoric, also impacted on political belief and behaviour.

Readings:
V. Morgan, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, ii (2004), ch. 4
N. Tyacke ed., *Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, *History of the University of Oxford* iv (1997), esp. ch. 4
M. Curtis, 'The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England', *Past and Present*, 23 (1962)
M. Todd, 'Anti-Calvinists and the Republican Threat in Early Stuart Cambridge, in L. Knoppers ed. *Puritanism and its Discontents* (2003)

 Questions:

(a) Was it mainly concern about religion that prompted central government to intervene in English university affairs?

(b) Were the English gentry politicised by attending university?

(c) What caused English graduate clergy to become puritans?

4. The Nature of the Curriculum

Early-modern Oxford and Cambridge have had a bad press as regards their alleged educational failings ever since the days of the nineteenth-century reformers. Partly this is

because of the apparent decline which set in during the eighteenth century and cast its shadow backwards. But the criticism runs much deeper than this. Renaissance and 'scientific revolution' alike are said to have bypassed the English universities. Despite the vigorous counter-arguments of Mark Curtis, and more recently Nicholas Tyacke and especially Mordechai Feingold, such views die hard. Although early-modern Oxford and Cambridge were not research intensive institutions, humanism and the 'new philosophy' increasingly permeated the old Aristotelian framework. Particularly important as regards science were the Savilian professorships of astronomy and geometry at Oxford, followed later in the sevententh century at Cambridge by the similar Lucasian and Plumeian chairs.

Readings:
C. Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1965), esp. ch. 2
M. Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition, 1558-1642* (1959), esp. chs 4, 5   and 9
N. Tyacke, 'Science and Religion before the Civil War', in D. Pennington and K. Thomas eds.
      Puritans and Revolutionaries (1978)
M. Feingold, *The Mathematician's Apprenticeship: Science, Universities and Society in England, 1560-1640* (1984)
N. Tyacke ed., *Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, *History of the University of Oxford* iv (1997),
      esp. chs 5 and 6

Questions:

(a) What were the attractions of an English university education?

(b) How successfully was the new 'science' incorporated into the old arts
      curriculum?

(c) What was the relationship between the academic subject matter studied at
       Oxford and Cambridge and the mental training involved?

5. Worship and Theology

With the emergence of a predominantly graduate English clergy by the early seventeenth century, the religious influence of colleges and tutors became increasingly crucial. The seven year arts curriculum (BA and MA) did not include religious teaching as such, the latter being conveyed instead by more informal and mainly college mechanisms—catechising, preaching, and chapel attendance as the focal point of worship. Despite all being nominally protestant after the accession of Elizabeth I, colleges varied greatly in their religious outlooks, which moreover were liable to change over time. A striking case in point is Emmanuel College, Cambridge, noted for its puritanism under Elizabeth I and the early Stuarts but a bastion of high churchmanship in the reign of Charles II. Historians continue to disagree about the nature and pace of religious change in this period, of which the universities were a microcosm, and even agreement over basic terminology can prove elusive!

Readings:
K. Fincham & N. Tyacke, *Altars Restored: the Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547- c.1700* (2007), esp. pp. 183-6, 229-31
N. Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: the Rise of English Arminianism, c.1590-1640* (1990), chs 2 and 3
C. Dent, *Protestant Reformers in Elizabethan Oxford* (1983), esp. ch. 7
D. Hoyle, *Reformation and Religious Identity in Cambridge, 1590-1644* (2007)
S. Bendall, C Brooke & P. Collinson, *A History of Emmanuel College, Cambridge* (1999),
      esp. chs 6, 8 and 9

(a) Was there ever a 'Calvinist consensus'?

(b) What was novel about Laudianism?

(c) How great a loss to the English Church was the expulsion of puritans after the restoration of Charles II?

6. The Purposes of a University

Oxford and Cambridge had never been without their critics, but these became particularly virulent with the abolition of the monarchy in 1649. Radical puritans especially now called for root and branch reform of the universities as training grounds for godly clergy. At the same time, Oxford and Cambridge were attacked as elitist and for failing to provide an education with practical applications. A leading spokesman for this more plebeian and utilitarian agenda was John Webster. It fell to Seth Ward, future bishop and recently appointed Savilian professor of astronomy at Oxford, to respond. According to Ward, Webster had provided a caricature of the kind of teaching currently on offer, notably at Oxford; he also challenged his assumptions about the purposes of a university and his desire to make higher eduction much more widely available. Some of this debate has a very familiar ring, but we need to bear in mind that many of the reformers were inspired by millenarian beliefs far removed from those of most modern educationists.

Readings:
A. Debus, *Science and Education in the Seventeenth Century: the Webster-Ward Debate* (1970)
C. Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (1974), ch. 5
C. Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626-1660* (1975), ch. 3
N. Tyacke ed*., Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, *History of the University of Oxford* iv (1997), ch. 6
J. Twigg, *The University of Cambridge and the English Revolution, 1625-1688* (1990)

Questions:

(a) Why did English universities come under such fierce attack in the mid seventeenth century?

(b) To what extent was Webster's account of Ward's Oxford a case of mistaken identity?

(c) Was there a clear winner in the Webster-Ward debate?

7. Decline and Fall?

From the late seventeenth century, numbers studying at Oxford and Cambridge began to plummet, and this has been widely perceived as symptomatic of decline more generally. The growing costs of attending university and the increasingly antiquated education on offer, as well as a Toryism out of step with the Hanoverian regime after 1714, have all been invoked by way of explanation. Yet many puzzles remain. Most obviously, where instead did all the potential students go? For the very wealthy, there was the option of private tuition and even the grand tour. Alternatively, there were continental or perhaps Scottish universities. Dissenter academies may also have helped to bridge the gap, their more 'modern' curriculum offsetting possible religious objections. Conceivably, however, there was an absolute decline

in higher education. This whole area remains desperately under-researched. Moreover, eighteenth-century 'decline' seems difficult to reconcile with the introduction of the famous Cambridge mathematical tripos. At Oxford in this same period, scientific lectures proved a great draw with students. Individual colleges, too, would seem to have varied greatly in their educational provision. Finally, how safe is it to equate bigger with better, smaller with worse?

Readings:

L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England 1640-1900', *Past and Present*, 42 (1969)

L. Sutherland and L. Mitchell, *The Eighteenth Century*, *History of the University of Oxford* v (1986), esp. ch. 24

J. Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment* (1989), esp. chs 3, 6 and 9

P. Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge* iii (1997), esp. chs 4 and 5

Questions:

(a) What is the evidence for the 'decline' of Oxford and Cambridge during the eighteenth century?

(b) How far did Newtonianism become scientific orthodoxy in eighteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge?

(c) If not at Oxford or Cambridge, where was higher education to be found by eighteenth-century English men?

Nicholas Tyacke
UCL