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CAMBRIDGE AND LITTLE DUNHAM

IN the eighteenth century the University like the Church had fallen on evil days; nevertheless quick and vigorous resurrection in the nineteenth century suggests that, as in the case of the Church, critics have been too sweeping in their condemnation.

In the University, as in Church and State, sinecures abounded. Oxford and Cambridge were infested by dons who neither lectured nor took pupils. A college fellowship in most cases involved both the taking of Holy Orders and temporary celibacy—a Fellowship in fact was not so much a stepping-stone to a university chair but to a college living sufficiently well-endowed to enable the incumbent to marry. D. A. Winstanley has pointed out that unless a don held college or university office he had no specified duties to perform and little incentive to advance his own scholarship or that of others. Those who failed to secure clerical preferment remained in the university leading a life of aimless ease.¹ Moreover it was perfectly possible for an undergraduate to be in residence for three years at a university without attending a single lecture. However, towards the end of the century the bishops required all ordination candidates at Cambridge to produce a certificate showing that they had attended a certain number of the lectures of the Norrisian Professor of Divinity.

Before 1820 it was difficult for a student wishing to read theology to find either books to read or a tutor to supervise his studies. Much of the teaching was done by private tutors, a system which lent itself, as we shall have occasion to see, to the prevailing corruption of the day. Most of the examinations

¹ D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge* (1935), p. 261.

were oral. In the case of Cambridge mathematics predominated. As this subject was not taught in many schools, a large number of students began their university careers with an almost complete ignorance of the subjects they were chiefly to be examined in. The northern schools were on the whole more progressive; in this John Venn was fortunate in having been at Hipperholme.

In the eighteenth century, as well as the familiar academic division into scholars and commoners, undergraduates were divided socially into four classes; noblemen, fellow-commoners, pensioners and sizars. Noblemen and fellow-commoners were drawn from noble, county and wealthy families; they were exempt both from lectures and examinations if they so wished. Sons of noblemen received the M.A. automatically instead of B.A. and that without tests, whereas many fellow-commoners were often content to leave the university without a degree. The main difference between them was that noblemen paid higher fees than fellow-commoners. The majority of the undergraduates were pensioners, mostly sons of clergy and professional men, often receiving financial aid in the form of an exhibition from school. Below them were the sizars, sons of the poorer clergy and small farmers. Their fees were low and service was originally required in return; though this was becoming obsolete by the end of the eighteenth century and though they were now no longer "gypts" given the privilege of working for degrees, they were never allowed to forget that they were charity boys: as late as 1770 Isaac Milner, as a sizar of Queens', was required to ring the chapel bell and serve the first dish to the Fellows at dinner.¹

These distinctions account for an outburst in a letter from Henry Venn to a cousin:

On Monday last your nephew was admitted to Sidney College, where both his grandfathers were before him. But oh, what a wound to my pride: he is admitted in the same rank as his father and Dr. Conyers were, a sizar. Will not this offend you too? Why should not we be a little higher in the world and make some figure? Who can be comfortable or even contented to remain

¹ See Winstanley, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-203, and M. Milner, *Life of I. Milner* (1838), p. 6.

towards the fag end of the gentry, if we are allowed even to rank amongst them? O money! money! money! in abundance that our hearts cry out for. Yet what is this universal idol able to do? To create a right spirit? No. To make us excellent and happy? No. To arm us again to the evils and crosses of life? No. Only to dress out, and feed, and lodge, in a larger house, or to carry about in a shining chariot, a poor vile carcase and a sinful soul.¹

However, in April 1777, six months before he went into residence, John Venn won a scholarship which enabled him to advance from sizar to pensioner; he also received a grant from the Fishmongers' Company.

The fact that John should go to Cambridge was not accepted by his father as a matter of course; in 1775 he tells Stillingfleet that he has asked Christopher Stephenson² to meet him in Oxford. "I want to know the state of religion amongst the students there, and incline to send Jacky there than my neighbouring university. We are so bad that some clergymen who are not over-serious almost scruple to send their sons, on account of the dissipation and extravagance there."³ That there was cause for alarm is confirmed by Gunning, who describes the years when in fact John was in residence as "the very worst part of our history"⁴ Henry Venn met Stephenson and five other like-minded students, but his inquiries about the state of the university did not convince him of the superiority of Oxford to Cambridge morality and in October 1776 he took John with him to enter him at a college for the following year. He first applied to Trinity, but the Master and Tutor were nervous of admitting the son of a notorious "Methodist". They then moved on to Sidney Sussex, where John was examined at some length by two of the Fellows. "He acquitted himself extremely well", Henry Venn tells Brasier, "and had great honour paid him, with appearances of all encouragement if he behaved well. This,

¹ H. Venn to Miss Martha Bishop, Oct. 9, 1776, in H. Venn, *Sketch of Life of John Venn of Clapham* (MS.).

² Christopher Stephenson of Worcester College, later presented to the living of Olney by Lord Dartmouth. See J. S. Reynolds, *The Evangelicals at Oxford* (1953), pp. 48-9.

³ H. Venn to J. Stillingfleet, Feb. 17, 1775 (MS.).

⁴ H. Gunning, *Reminiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge* (1855), preface, p. XII.

considering the name he bears, I thought very extraordinary. But I met with so much civility in Cambridge as made me astonished at the goodness of my God. What is infinitely better, there are some excellent students, who will be my son's companions, and are in earnest seeking the salvation of their souls."¹

On October 23, 1777, John Venn took up residence in college. Numbers were small; possibly not more than six hundred in the whole university. At this time only two colleges had more than fifty resident members *in statu pupillari* and only seven more than forty. Sidney Sussex was the third smallest college with between fifteen and twenty men excluding the Fellows.² Cambridge itself was then a country town of some eight thousand inhabitants.³ "Last week", his father told a correspondent, "my son left me to reside in College after near two years stay in my house. I am not able to express my thankfulness for his good behaviour and application to his studies. He is put under an admirable tutor, Mr. Hey. . . . He is very candid and very kind to my son."⁴ Dr. J. Venn in the *Annals* says that Dr. Hey was probably by far the best college tutor in Cambridge at the time.⁵ Although brother of Henry Venn's friend, William Hey, Dr. Hey was no "enthusiast".⁶

The first problem for John Venn was the furnishing of his rooms. His father writes from Yelling:

On Friday between eleven and twelve you may, without the help of Dollond's telescope,⁷ discover a phenomenon which no one ever saw before, a cartload of books belonging to J. V. Sid. Coll. Camb. . . . Pray take care and put your letters under lock

¹ Quoted by H. Venn in *Sketch of Life of John Venn of Clapham* (MS.).

² J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses*.

³ H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (1892), p. 6.

⁴ *Annals*, pp. 115-16.

⁵ He was also probably the most successful lecturer, drawing large audiences to his lectures on Morality and as Norrisian Professor of Divinity gaining a great reputation in that subject.

⁶ In fact his lectures on the Trinity were so conciliatory to the Unitarians that they caused considerable embarrassment to Isaac Milner and Joseph Jowett when they were passed for publication by the University Press in the nineties. See Smyth, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-8.

⁷ This family heirloom is still in the possession of Dr. J. A. Venn, John Venn's great-grandson.

and key. . . . Pray take care that your bed be thoroughly dry, and lay for the first night or two in your waistcoat, breeches and stockings. Before John¹ comes, will you buy some brass hooks to hang pictures on—a dozen—John will pay for them—I send you a guinea for the surplice.²

The next day John received another letter from his father which is a medley of advice on spiritual discipline and further hints on health and personal habits. John is to ride early as he did at Leicester in order to give him ample time for study and devotions.

Be attentive to your health. Be sure, stand much. You cannot study hard and sit without smarting for it, especially if you incline your body. Every other morning attend to your mouth and clean it well with snuff, which I find of great service to my teeth, and so does your Mama.³

In a later letter he adds:

I am glad you keep your room neat and clean—it is for your credit and comfort too. How do your books suit the shelves? have you room for them? I hope you mind your teeth and your posture in reading, making good use of your desk and standing full half your time.⁴

In the *Annals* there is a description of John Venn's appearance. "In stature he was rather below medium height, about five feet seven inches or thereabouts, and slender during his youth, though in after life he became somewhat corpulent."⁵ A portrait was taken by John Downman of him just before he left college. "It is a small one, representing him after Downman's fashion, in profile, as a rather handsome, fine-featured young man. He is dressed in the somewhat elaborate style which custom then required at College hall, with his hair carefully powdered."⁶

¹ Henry Venn's manservant.

² To John Venn, Oct. 29, 1777 (MS.).

³ H. Venn to J. Venn, Oct. 30, 1777 (MS.), not included in copy of letter in *Life of H. Venn*, pp. 241-3.

⁴ H. Venn to J. Venn, Nov. 11, 1777 (MS.). Quoted in part in *Life of H. Venn*, p. 248.

⁵ *Annals*, p. 121. The author says he owes this description of his grandfather to the latter's younger son, also called John Venn.

⁶ *Ibid.* The portrait is reproduced as frontispiece.