

Reminiscences of the Abolition of Religious Tests in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

AS one of the few survivors of that prolonged conflict, I may be allowed to draw the attention of the younger generation to the importance of that crisis in the history of religious freedom. I entered Cambridge as a subsizar of Trinity College in 1859, and was in residence there until I took my M.A. degree in 1866. My elder brother, William Steadman Aldis, was two years senior to me academically, though three years older; and my younger brother, Thomas Steadman, passed the Tripos three years after me. The fact that three sons of an eminent Baptist minister, the Rev. John Aldis, of Maze Pond, London, and afterwards of King's Road, Reading, were successively debarred by the religious tests then in force, from taking fellowships to which their places in the Tripos lists would undoubtedly have entitled them, had a great share in stimulating the agitation which finally carried through Parliament Lord Coleridge's Bill for the Abolition of Tests. This sentimental appeal to the Nonconformists of that day was no doubt enhanced by the fact that the mother of these three wranglers was the youngest daughter of Dr. Steadman, the founder and first President of the Baptist Academy at Horton (Bradford), now transformed into Rawdon College.

My mother was a woman of high intellectual ability. In later life she was more or less of an invalid, and liked to be read to. On one occasion I read to her Dean Mansel's Bampton Lectures *On the Limitations of Religious Thought*. This book is very stiff metaphysical reading: many a University graduate would be glad to throw it up before he was half through. My mother simply revelled in it; she took to it as a duck takes to water. My father always said that we owed our mathematical tendencies to her. She of course had never any opportunity of testing herself in that direction; and her father's own educational facilities had been meagre. His first teacher, at a dame's school, used to rap him over the head if he failed to pronounce each of the words "ton-gue, pla-gue" as two syllables. In his

Life, he states, " My library consisted of little more than a Bible, Fisher's *Young Man's Companion*, Mill's *Arithmetic*, Bunyan's *Works*, etc. With these helps I became well acquainted with arithmetic in all its branches, and the outlines of mensuration and geography. To the mathematics I felt a strong inclination, and had I been furnished with moderate assistance . . . I should have pursued the study of them with great pleasure and success."

My brother William in his whole physique took after his mother, and was obviously a Steadman rather than an Aldis. Dr. Steadman's frustrated aspiration came to its consummation in him. My father's abilities were in the line of languages. He used to read his Hebrew Bible through regularly once a year; and his Greek Testament, I think, twice. And he spoke both French and German so perfectly that he was often taken for a foreigner. Some of his Maze Pond congregation were wealthy people who used to take him as their interpreter when travelling on the Continent. He made the most of these opportunities. That two of us were able to pass the Classical Tripos in spite of having to devote almost all our time to mathematics, we certainly owe to him.

There were three distinct stages in the status allowed to Dissenters at Oxford and Cambridge. Originally these Universities were intended to be training-places for the clergy of the Establishment. Later on lay-students were permitted; but of course they had to be members of the Church of England. Gradually other lay-students came in, though not actually members of that Church. They were tolerated as mere students; but they could not enter for the Tripos examinations. That was the first stage: in the second stage they competed in those examinations, and so gained a public record of their academical honours; but they were not allowed to take any degrees. Then came the third stage, in which my brothers and I passed our time at Cambridge. All through our undergraduate course the question of creed was never mooted. We passed the Tripos and took our degrees, just as others did. But our degrees were merely titular. The M.A. degree did not confer any real membership in the University, unless you signed a declaration that you were " a *bona-fide* member of the Church of England." Nor could you be elected a Fellow of any College in the University unless you signed the same declaration.

This was a serious hardship. My father used to boast that the education of his three sons at Cambridge had never cost him a penny. That was because we went up to the University from the City of London School, which had at its disposal many scholarships, awarded either on the ordinary schoolwork, or on the results of special examinations. One of the tutors of Trinity

College, Cambridge, was an intimate friend of our Headmaster, Dr. Mortimer. This tutor, Mr. Mathison, used to visit the school from time to time, to pick out any specially promising boys. If their parents were poor he admitted these boys as sizars, or 'poor scholars.' No social stigma attached to these sizarships; the only relic of the obsolete tradition that originally they had to act as waiters at the Fellows' dining table, was the custom that on grand feast-days all the superfluous confectionery and goodly meats were brought from the Fellows' table and placed on the sizars' table for the second dinner. There were always two dinners in immediate succession, as the Hall could not accommodate anything like all the undergraduates at once. Thus the sizars were objects of envy. The ordinary undergraduates watched them feasting on venison, turkeys and game, under arches of glittering sugar candy, triumphs of the College pastry-cooks' art. These "poor scholars" were entered first as sub-sizars on very reduced fees; thence they were promoted by merit whenever vacancies occurred among the "full sizars." A "full sizarship" was worth about £100 a year. In their second year they could compete with the other Trinity undergraduates for a Foundation Scholarship. This had not a higher money value, but it conferred a social distinction, and it could be held until you took your M.A. degree three years after the B.A. if you continued in residence. I used to tell my friends that to be a Scholar of Trinity was as great an honour as to be a Fellow of one of the small colleges. This was hardly an exaggeration of the truth.

But with the attainment of the M.A. degree the onward path was barred against all Dissenters. Normally the college-scholarship would be transmuted into a Fellowship after taking the B.A. degree. Such Fellowships could be held for life if the holder devoted himself to College work, *e.g.*, as a tutor or lecturer, or they could be held without residence for a term of years long enough to enable the holder to go through his special professional training, and keep himself until he had begun to make an income by his profession. But the Dissenter of moderate means, unless he signed the obnoxious declaration, would have to earn his own living while studying for his profession. This is practically impossible. So Dissenters were all shut up to the profession of schoolmasters. And even there they were excluded from the better-paid posts by the mere fact of their dissent.

That my brothers and I ever went up to Cambridge we owed to Dr. Mortimer. Such an idea had never crossed my father's mind. When his son William had finished his education in the highest of the commercial classes at the City School, my

father arranged to remove him, and have him placed in some business firm. As soon as Dr. Mortimer heard of this, he sent for my father, and told him that such a course would be supreme folly: the boy obviously was destined for an academic career; and he simply must go to Cambridge. My father saw in this a clear leading of Providence: so he kept his son at school till it was time for him to go to Cambridge in 1857. A further leading of Providence soon showed itself. The Charity Commissioners had recently discovered some unused municipal funds wherewith they founded in perpetuity the "Marshall's Charity Scholarships" tenable at Oxford or Cambridge. These scholarships, of £100 *per annum*, were to be given in the first instance to boys educated at St. Olave's School; failing any such, to boys born in Southwark. The first examination was held in 1857; St. Olave's School had no boy qualified, and there was only one other candidate from Southwark; so my brother easily secured the prize. When my turn came in 1859 I was the only candidate.

While I was at Cambridge the agitation for the removal of religious disabilities began to take a prominent place in political circles. Cambridge just then was an admirable place for Dissenting undergraduates to hold firmly by their convictions without being narrowed by sectarian antagonism. Our headquarters were the Baptist Chapel in St. Andrew's Street, then under the pastoral care of the Rev. William Robinson. His congregation contained an unusual number of highly educated, intelligent people with whom we were encouraged to be on friendly terms. But it was Mr. Robinson's own personality that held us together, and made us feel like one family. His house, with its beautiful secluded garden, was a home where we were always made welcome. And his fixed determination was to make his chapel a place which should attract University men by an intellectual atmosphere worthy of its academic surroundings. He was a close reasoner, a fearless thinker, and a most original theologian. I have never met a minister from whom I have learned so much. And he was a keen controversialist. About the time I came into residence (or shortly before) he had published a pamphlet, *The Sin of Conformity*. This pamphlet made him for conservative "Dondom" an object both of hatred and of fear. He never missed an opportunity of attacking the ecclesiastical and academic authorities whenever they laid themselves open to his strictures by acts of bigotry or intolerance.

But he was far from being a mere intellectualist. I have never heard a preacher who made one feel more deeply that his whole being was aflame with the realised presence of the ever-living Christ. I can see him now, in such ecstatic moments,

as he leaned forward over the pulpit with his supreme message : " In the path of present duty strive earnestly to be well pleasing to the Lord Jesus " ; his face aglow with divine fire, his eyes piercing through one's very soul.

Before giving the history of the opposition to tests in Cambridge, one point must be explained. In ancient times men were placed in order of merit by their success in public disputations (hence the name *wrangers*). Gradually the system of written answers to printed questions was introduced, at first to supplement, later on to supersede, this *viva voce* work. Through the influence of Newton, mathematics took the place of the old exercises in Latin, logic, and philosophy. The Mathematical Tripos was instituted in 1748, and until the advent of the Classical Tripos in 1824, was the only examination by which a man could take a degree with Honours. But in 1769 a further examination was added, which took place soon after the publication of the results in Mathematics. This was the examination for the two Smith's Prizes, which were given for familiarity with the highest branches of mathematics, and for evidence of real originality and genius. Thus the Smith's Prizes supplement, and may correct, the Mathematical Tripos lists. A man may become Senior Wrangler solely through having a prodigious memory, with an unlimited capacity for hard work, and sufficient skill in the application of the regular formulæ to the solution of problems. But no one can gain the First Smith's Prize unless he is a real mathematician. As a rule the Senior and second Wrangler took the first and second Smith's prizes respectively, but there have been many exceptions. The last of the real Senior Wranglers was in 1882. After that date the higher mathematics were removed to a separate ordeal, Part III. of the Tripos, afterwards Part II.; though the name of Wrangler was still kept for those who only took the earlier test.

Between 1769 and 1882, twenty-one Senior Wranglers failed to win the first Smith's Prize. In estimating a man's worth the Smith's Prizes must always be taken into account, as well as the place in the Tripos.

With one important exception, the " Nonconformist martyrs " were all Wranglers, though a few took classics as well. No Senior Wrangler ever took the Classical Tripos after 1835. The work of the Mathematical Tripos grew too exhausting to allow double honours : that was why this Tripos was truncated in 1882.

Trinity College was by far the largest of all the colleges : St. John's came next : the others were called " small colleges." Trinity, moreover, as the college of Newton, Barrow, Bentley, and Whewell, had a reputation to keep up. Yet from 1847 to

1859 inclusive they never once had a Senior Wrangler. How great was their delight when in 1860 their man Stirling was Senior Wrangler and First Smith's Prizeman! But he belonged to the United Presbyterians, and refused to sign the declaration: so he was lost to the teaching staff. In 1861 W. S. Aldis was Senior Wrangler and First Smith's Prizeman: he was a Baptist, so he was similarly excluded from their Fellows. These two sledge-hammer blows, coming in immediate succession, shook the stronghold of conservative Dondom to its foundations. In 1863 I was sixth Wrangler, and seventh in the 3rd Class of the Classical Tripos. This was a far inferior degree, but well within the Fellowship range. The *Calendar* shows that several Trinity men were elected Fellows who took lower places in mathematics (eighth to sixteenth) and never attempted the Classical Tripos.

In 1866 my younger brother, Thomas Steadman, was Second Wrangler, second Smith's Prizeman, and sixth in the 3rd Class of the Classical Tripos; a degree of almost more merit than any merely mathematical degree, however high.

From this time onwards the agitation (both in the Press and in Parliament) for the Abolition of Tests became more and more insistent. In 1869 a fresh surprise awaited the Dons. A Jew, Hartog of Trinity, was Senior Wrangler and Second Smith's Prizeman. To take a degree one had to kneel before the Vice-Chancellor, who was arrayed in his scarlet robes, and seated on his throne at the head of the crowded Senate House; one had to place one's hands, palms together, between his hands, while he recited the formula, "*Auctoritate mihi commissâ, admitto te in gradum baccalaureatum, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Sancti Spiritus, Amen.*" That was all. But Hartog felt that to submit to this ceremony would be equivalent to renouncing the monotheism of his forebears and of his race. So he refused to take a degree under those conditions.

It was within the power of the Dons to pass a resolution of the Senate of the University (technically called a *Grace*) exempting Hartog from the Trinitarian formula. There was also a statute which they could neither ignore nor override; a statute which could only be altered by Act of Parliament, with the consent of the Sovereign. This statute provided that in any given year none of the men who had passed the Tripos could take his degree until *after* the Senior Wrangler had taken his.

So the Dons were in a dilemma. Either they must pass this special Grace, or deprive 114 men of their B.A. degrees. George Otto Trevelyan (afterwards Rt. Hon. Sir G. O. Trevelyan) whom I remember well as a Scholar of Trinity, and a graceful satirist of our College in his *Horace at Athens*, was then an M.P. He interviewed the Dons, and warned them that if they

did not give Hartog his degree he would rouse such a storm in the House of Commons that they would never hear the last of it. The Dons were cowed, and passed the requisite Grace.

Sir Philip Hartog, a younger brother of this Senior Wrangler, married a niece of an intimate friend of ours. Finding themselves a few months ago in our neighbourhood, they called on us, and I got the above story in all its details from him. The Cambridge *Historical Register* merely says in a footnote to Hartog's name at the head of the Tripes, "As a Jew he was excluded from a degree, but he was admitted by special Grace of the Senate."

The conservative Dons were now getting the worst of the fight. But later on in the same year a bombshell burst in their midst.

For some time previous to Hartog's degree a section of the University had been advocating a simple solution of the declaration difficulty. They maintained that everyone who was neither an Atheist nor a Mohamedan, any one who ever attended the Prayerbook service, above all every one who had regularly attended College Chapels (which all undergraduates did, as a matter of course) was practically a member of the Church of England within the meaning of the disputed formula. Consequently all Nonconformists should sign it as a mere matter of conventional form; just as a Duke when writing officially to a costermonger will sign himself "Your obedient servant."

This notion seemed to be gaining acceptance, though of course many strongly opposed it. One of the Fellows of Trinity, a Senior Classic, Sidgwick, took the lead in this opposition. And he clinched his arguments by a decisive act. He had signed the declaration himself, because he was by birth and education a Churchman; he had done so as a matter of course. But since taking his degree he had thought more seriously on such questions, and he felt that he no longer agreed with the doctrines of the Prayerbook sufficiently to sign himself a *bona fide* member of that Church. He therefore made a public explanation of his position, and renounced his Fellowship. That was a staggering blow to the Dons. To keep so brilliant a scholar on their teaching staff they created a special post for him, and made him Lecturer on Moral Science. In this way they retained his services, but they all felt that they had lost the battle against Nonconformity. No one henceforward could pretend that signing this declaration was a mere matter of form. The abolition of religious tests was now undoubtedly imminent. To my mind this one "Martyr" eclipses all the rest. It is one thing to forgo a Fellowship because you are unwilling publicly to sign a document you do not believe: it calls for far more moral courage to give up a

Fellowship that you have held for nearly ten years, when there is no external cause to compel you to do so.

One more "martyr" remains, whose martyrdom was very brief. Hopkinson, the Senior Wrangler of 1871, who was bracketed with the fourth Wrangler for the Smith's Prizes, was a Nonconformist. This was in January. In June the Tests were finally abolished; so that he had no difficulty in securing a Fellowship not much later than would have been the case had the Tests never been in force. His name is starred as a Fellow in the 1871 Tripos list of the *Historical Register*.

That is the full story of the abolition of Tests as seen from within the academic pale. But it is more important for us to notice the effect of these Tests on the intellectual, moral and spiritual life of the Universities themselves. One point is obvious. They hindered the bulk of Nonconformists from sending their sons to college, and thus very largely deprived the Universities of a class of exceptionally keen students, gifted by tradition, home education, and heredity, with the austere morals of the Puritans, and their firm grasp of religious truth. Furthermore these Tests had been in force for so long a time that they could not fail to impress a definite character on the corporations which they controlled.

As regards intellectual life we have it on the authority of Mr. Conybeare (*Cambridge Review*, April 29th, 1909, p. 349) that up to the year 1860, Cambridge men looked on it as bad form to be strenuous in study or in sport, or to exhibit any marked enthusiasm of any kind. Indeed, a University in which the teachers were compelled to be "inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost" to retain salaries of some four or five hundred a year (holy orders were usually a condition for permanently retaining a Fellowship) was self-doomed to intellectual as well as spiritual paralysis.

As regards religion, we have more definite evidence. Mr. J. W. Clark (*Cambridge Review*, March 4th, 1909, p. 303) tells us that a certain college dean (before the forties of last century) "hauled up" an undergraduate for not attending chapel. The young man's defence was that the early hour of service and the chilly weather made it impossible for him to fix his mind on his prayers. "Sir," said the dean, "we don't want your damned prayers in chapel, we want to see your damned face." The mere fact that a clergyman, the dean of his college, could say such a thing, proves that the whole atmosphere of religious teaching and worship was one of mere formalism.

My own personal knowledge is confined to the sixties. Of course I attended College chapel regularly, and as a Foundation Scholar had to take my turn in reading the lessons morning and

evening every week-day: and though free on Saturday evening and Sunday I almost always went for the sake of the glorious organ-music and choral singing. Trinity men used to boast that their chaplain read the service so fast that he could give any other chaplain up to "Pontius Pilate" and yet come in easily first with the Benediction. A space round the Communion Table was always crowded on Saturday evenings and Sundays with undergraduates, because it was out of reach of the Dean's eye. It was called "Iniquity Corner"; the men there played cards while the prayers were going on. We were regularly fined sixpence if we failed to attend chapel on the morning of the first Sunday of each month. This was because on that one occasion there was a Communion service and collection, and the Dons assumed that if you absented yourself it was simply to avoid the collection. So the sixpence was duly entered in our weekly buttry bill; a curious commentary on the offertory sentence read at the communion, which enjoins giving "not grudgingly or of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver."

Of course the men were not compelled to communicate: almost all of them came out pell-mell immediately after the Prayer for the Church Militant, leaving a few "pi's" to shiver in the empty cold. One of these "pi's," whom I will call Smith, for some special reason came out one Sunday with the non-communicants. A burly boating man cannoned against him in the crush, and, suddenly recognising his friend, called out, "Hullo, Smith! how is it you're not stopping to lunch to-day?" For this story I can vouch, having got it at first hand. Such an irreverent speech would be impossible in Cambridge now, when many colleges have a well-attended voluntary eight o'clock communion service every Sunday morning.

Of course there were plenty of men whose personal piety was undoubted. But such men owed their religion to their home-training and its traditions; the University as such in no way helped them, except perhaps in the University sermon preached every Sunday afternoon, attendance at which was voluntary. I used to go regularly; and though as a rule the sermons were formal and commonplace, occasionally they were both instructive and rousing. Among the preachers whom we heard on these occasions was Kingsley.

There was one religious organisation at Cambridge which was a sort of *imperium in imperio* in the University. Its headquarters were at Caius College, and its leader was Clayton, an ultra-Evangelical clergyman. Caius College was largely attended by medical students, who had the reputation for being the rowdiest men in the University. This college was popularly divided into "Heaven, Earth and Hell"—the first consisting of

the Simeonites under Clayton; the last of the medical students; while a small minority of reading men kept aloof from both extremes. One incident will reveal clearly what was Canon Clayton's attitude towards the University and Caius College. There was a schoolfellow of mine, Garrett, a medical student at Caius, whom I knew almost solely by name. One day I heard that he had been ill. My informant thought that he had gone home, but was not sure. So I called on Canon Clayton, who was tutor of the College. I explained my errand. He paused for a moment to recollect. Then he repeated the name "Garrett, Garrett, m'mm. Ah, yes! Garrett. I'm afraid he is not a converted character. I never see him at any of our meetings."

That one sentence shows that Canon Clayton looked on the University and his own College simply as a vantage ground for converting undergraduates to his own religious beliefs. His followers were even more egotistically exclusive. I think popular report must have exaggerated the wildness of the Caius medical students: when I walked Addenbrooke's Hospital (1864-66) I never saw any sign of it. But to whatever extent their reputation may have been founded on fact, I feel sure it was mainly a natural reaction against the ostentatious pietism of the Simeonites. The chief influence they had on the religion of the University was to make men dislike and despise Evangelicalism itself.

Such being the state of religion at Cambridge in the sixties of last century, it follows that the morals of the undergraduates must have been very unsatisfactory. I can hardly imagine anything worse than what I saw and heard of them in my time. But the great improvement in this respect which undoubtedly has taken place since 1871 has largely resulted from outside influences. To investigate the share in this improvement which is due to the abolition of religious tests would be mere guesswork.

The moral of this story is obvious. All attempts to enforce uniformity of religious belief or ritual by the compulsion of pains and penalties, or of social deprivations, can never bring about anything better than a half-hypocritical uniformity. Such attempts will always react upon their originators. They will inevitably dwarf intellectual development, and more or less poison the moral and spiritual life.

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