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OXBRIDGE:

The Nonidentical Twins

Oxford and Cambridge are the strangest places in the British Isles. They're about 150 kilometres apart, and yet they're talked of in the same breath and indeed in a single word: Oxbridge. On the intellectual map of the nation, this lies somewhere in the clouds above Middle England – an island above the island, elitist and yet so popular that every year millions of viewers switch on to watch two universities – to whom they are otherwise totally indifferent – jump into boats and row the hell out of each other.

There are some places that have become for ever associated with their products, like Sheffield steel or Cheddar cheese, but who has ever heard of a town being associated with another town? They are like Castor and Pollux, the heavenly twins, shining down from their academic heights, and there is nothing else like them, with the possible exception of their transatlantic cousins Harvard and Yale. Thus it is, writes Javier Marías, 'that the Oxonians, who react with spontaneous contempt to the graduates of any other university in the world, show selective respect (which can well be the expression of a deeply rooted hatred) to the Cantabrigians, as if they could only feel comfortable in the company of those with whom they must share their uniqueness.'

By comparison with the ages of Oxford and Cambridge, Oxbridge is a youngster. William Thackeray was the first to circulate this synthetic product, in his Bildungsroman *Pendennis*. The hero, Arthur Pendennis, studies (and fails) at 'St Boniface, Oxbridge'. It was not, however, until the middle of the 20th century that this made-up word (and not Thackeray's variant 'Camford') entered into common usage. The name Oxbridge and the spread of such a 'disrespectful term' signalled the end of a myth, as the Reverend Eric William Heaton, Senior Tutor at St John's Oxford, wrote in 1970: 'Once people went to

Oxford or Cambridge, but today Oxbridge is an alternative to the dozens of other universities that we now have in England.’ The universities that sprang up in London and the provinces from the beginning of the 19th century challenged the monopoly of Oxford and Cambridge, offering alternatives of mind and material: first brick, and later concrete and glass. Now there are even new buildings of red brick and plate glass in Oxbridge as well – perhaps to the chagrin of the ‘happy few’ within the old college walls.

For centuries, these twins were England’s only universities. Their origins go back to the Middle Ages, and the world of the monasteries. Latin was the equivalent of the Internet for European scholars from Paris to Oxford, from Padua to Cambridge, while Greek philosophy and Christian morality were their spiritual basis. After the Reformation, the colleges managed to survive the dissolution of the monasteries thanks to their status as private foundations. Their autonomy was guaranteed by royal decrees and acts of parliament. Thus Oxbridge played an ambivalent role between Church and Crown, and enjoyed its privileges as a republic of the mind and a refuge of the Establishment.

Through the Anglican High Church, which became the church of the State, the Crown ensured that the two universities would remain loyal and peaceful. After the turbulence of the Civil War, the Act of Uniformity (1662) banned Catholics, Jews, and Nonconformists of all kinds from the colleges, and this continued more or less unabated until the middle of the 19th century. In Oxford every student had to swear an oath on matriculation that he would abide by the 39 Articles of the Anglican faith, whereas in Cambridge this took place on graduation, which at least allowed some dissenters to study, even if they could not finish up with a degree.

No other private institution has had a greater influence on England’s history than these two universities. They have provided the Church and the State with veritable hosts of officials, priests and teachers, who have in turn gone on to spread English language and

culture throughout the land, not to say the world. They were a homogeneous elite, whose sense of duty was exceeded only by their self-confidence – classic preconditions for those offices of leadership associated with kingdom and with empire. But Oxford and Cambridge were always far more than elitist training grounds for the nation. Alongside the Prime Ministers the colleges also sent out the cleverest spies that Communism could recruit, and next to the Archbishops stood the great heretics and reformers – John Wycliffe, John Wesley, Cardinal Newman; there were the rebellious geniuses of literature, from Lord Byron to Salman Rushdie, and large numbers of the lateral thinkers and eccentrics to whom English culture owes its rich abundance.

In the Middle Ages Oxbridge was the stronghold of scholasticism, and from the Tudor Age onwards, it produced the finest administrators in the realm. What about today? Even now its influence is striking within the corridors of power. Both critics and apologists seem to enjoy nothing more than the social game that constitutes the great Oxbridge race: who has risen from which college to the highest position?

The present director of the National Gallery in London, Charles Saumarez Smith, is a Cambridge graduate, as is the present director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, and at the head of the British Museum stands a Scotsman from Oxford, Neil MacGregor. The British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Paul Lever, is an Oxonian, and at the beginning of the 1990s, out of 370 Conservative MPs in the House of Commons, no less than 166 were from Oxford or Cambridge. Margaret Thatcher (Oxford) had nine Cambridge ministers in her cabinet of 22. Her successor, John Major – the second non-graduate Prime Minister since 1945 (after Jim Callaghan) – made up for this handicap by appointing ten Oxonians and six Cantabrigians. As it turned out, this may not have been the ideal safety net for the son of a former trapeze artist. His successor, Tony Blair, was made in Oxford, while the latter's top spin doctor Alastair Campbell first wove his magic in Cambridge. Even after the triumph of New Labour, every sixth MP was still an Oxonian.

More than half the senior officials in Whitehall are Oxbridge graduates. The mandarins of the Civil Service, and especially the Foreign Office, turn instinctively to Oxbridge to spawn their new generations, for as a rule no less than 40-50% of the most coveted vacancies go to the high fliers with light or dark blue wings. At the bar, the percentage is even higher. Whether it is in Whitehall or Fleet Street, the BBC or the banks of the City, you will hear the same story. The myth perpetuates itself through an excellence that has persisted down through the centuries. ‘Everyone thinks we’re good,’ said Sian Griffiths, President of the Cambridge Student Union. ‘It may not be true, but so long as people believe it, it works.’ On the other hand, though, the old school tie has long since ceased to guarantee a top job, in spite of the new Internet agency Oxbridgejobs.com.

Six unemployed arts graduates from Oxford came together in London. In order not to starve, they drew lots. Whoever drew the shortest straw was to kill himself, and the two who drew the next shortest straws were to sell his body for scientific research. No sooner said than done. With their dead friend draped over a wheelbarrow, off they went. When they returned several hours later, they still had the body with them. ‘Hopeless,’ they moaned. ‘People only want scientists from Cambridge.’ This story, emanating from the highest academic circles, is not, of course, about the employment market in London, but about the rivalry between the two universities, which goes back to even before the Boat Race, and is more complicated than the laws of cricket. ‘If Oxford were not the finest thing in England,’ wrote Henry James, ‘the case would be clearer for Cambridge.’ Are they really so very different? Or are they even more different than they think they are?

Both cities lie on rivers – the Cam and the Thames. Both had fords and bridges and developed quickly into trading centres, holding their own markets and fairs. Oxford had the more favourable situation, in the heart of England, in the urban Thames Valley within smelling distance of the Court. Cambridge remained more isolated in the wilderness of the Fens, a quiet little country town, which in many respects it still is. Oxford is not. It

has grown into a large industrial city. There is no physical link between the two – not even a proper road – and if it were not for the universities there would be no link at all. The locals didn't even need these, but once the colleges were there, they had to come to terms with the new reality, which they did with great reluctance and in very different ways: Oxford became a city with a university, and Cambridge became a university with a city.

Even though the two have always gone their own way, Oxford and Cambridge belong together like Adam and Eve. Perhaps feminists no longer grimace when they hear the tale of Eve being made from Adam's rib, but just try telling a Cantabrian that his or her university was founded by an Oxford scholar. The year: 1209. The reason: obscure, but maybe murder. Not the most enlightening of stories. Cambridge, an Oxford colony. It started as a secession, almost a hundred years after teaching had begun at Oxford. You can never make up for such a late start – anyone with older brothers and sisters can tell you that. You are always the latecomer, even if you catch up, or overtake, which is often the case. But this little defect of birth, if such it was, brought about a rivalry that has fuelled the fires of fantasy and given the world some of its finest contests: scientific, academic, sporting, political, artistic, rhetorical, to the level of utter absurdity.

'Oxford for arts, Cambridge for sciences' – such slogans may please the masses, but they come nowhere near the truth. Oxford has a scientific tradition that goes all the way back to Roger Bacon, even if theology remained dominant there for longer than it did at the university of Newton and Darwin. If one of Cambridge's strengths lies in mathematics, certainly the most imaginative of mathematicians belonged to Oxford: Lewis Carroll, who took his Alice to a Wonderland far beyond the bounds of calculability. The more prosaic folk of Cambridge set up a Science Park with profitable high-tech firms some thirty years before their Oxford counterparts.

Cambridge has more Nobel prizewinners, but Oxford has more Prime Ministers: Attlee, Eden, Macmillan, Douglas-Home, Wilson, Heath, Thatcher, Blair – all Oxford men (except, of course, Thatcher, who is generally believed to have been a woman), making No.10 into a kind of Oxford annexe. This, however, never made much of an impression on the serene folk of Cambridge. Oxford people think they rule the world, whereas Cambridge people don't care who rules the world. Since the 1930s, in fact since Stanley Baldwin, Cambridge has produced not one British Prime Minister. But it has sent forth a remarkable number of spies: Anthony Blunt, Donald MacLean, Guy Burgess, and Graham Greene's 'Third Man', Kim Philby, were all notorious Soviet spies from the murky corridors of left-wing Cambridge. No-one in Oxford disputes Cambridge's supremacy in this field, although they also had a Communist spy network there, but it was never uncovered because it never really came out and showed itself. Thus the treason of the 1930s was solely a Cambridge phenomenon. It was an Oxford historian, however, who made the most provocative claim – namely, that in the quest for absolute moral truth, Cambridge people tend to consult gurus, while in sceptical Oxford all dogmas and authorities come under far closer scrutiny. 'This intellectual difference,' wrote Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'seems to me to explain why Cambridge rather than Oxford was more susceptible to absolute certainties and hence to the temptations offered by the recruiting agents of Communist Russia.'

The roots of this different morality reach far back into the history of nonconformist Cambridge. Among its students were Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley – all promoters and martyrs of the English Reformation, concerning whom the (Cambridge) historian Thomas Macaulay wrote: 'Cambridge had the honour of training those glorious Protestant bishops whom Oxford had the honour of burning.' An example of symbiosis *par excellence*.

Oliver Cromwell and John Milton studied in Cambridge, which was the university of the Puritans who provided a stronghold of support for the parliamentary troops during the Civil War. Oxford was the bastion of the Catholics, became the headquarters of Charles I, and a mouthpiece for the Royalists. When the House of Hanover acceded to the throne, Cambridge demonstrated its loyalty, and George I presented to this university of the Whigs a lavish gift of books. To Oxford, however, in the very same year of 1715 he sent a regiment of cavalry, because it was rumoured that at this university of the Tories there were still substantial Catholic, Jacobite sympathies.

Anyone who has lived long enough with such tales will end up believing that in Oxford even now he can sense the Anglo-Catholic, Baroque heritage, and a carefree, relaxed attitude towards life, whereas Cambridge still labours under the severe, often pedantic spirit of the Purists and the Puritans. Even the rain, we are told, is drier there than in Oxford. ‘In Oxford things are more brilliantly formulated, in Cambridge things are more seriously thought through,’ suggests Benjamin Thompson, a fellow of Somerville and a connoisseur of both universities. Cambridge has a reputation for taking everything seriously – especially itself – but Oxford cultivates the style of effortless superiority, with a weakness for extremes, for eccentrics, and for lost causes. For those seeking to understand these differences of mentality, a great aid is the Monty Python Test. England’s classic comedy sextet came, of course, with one exception from Oxbridge, and in accordance with their respective origins, they can be clearly distinguished by their style and their personalities. The Oxford men (Michael Palin and Terry Jones) radiate absurdity, visual imagination, and warm-heartedness; the Cambridge men (John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle) are logical, sarcastic, unscrupulous. Monty Python is a prime example of how well Oxford and Cambridge go together – as contradictory and as complementary as Yin and Yang.

Each likes to call its rival ‘the other place’, rather like the inhabitants of heaven. The former President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker, having already received an honorary doctorate from Oxford, was given the same honour by Cambridge in 1994. The fact that Oxford had got there first was dismissed in Cambridge with the observation: ‘Never mind, there is always a chance in life to improve oneself.’

((pp282-286))

Three for Trinity: Newton, Byron and Prince Charles

‘In the whole of the world and throughout infinity,
There is nothing so great as the Master of Trinity.’

Anonymous

The only people in Cambridge who wear bowler hats are the porters at Trinity College. They stand there chatting on the grey cobblestones in front of the Great Gate, while above them at the entrance the King holds on to an elaborate chair leg in place of a sceptre. Not even the apple tree on the lawn beside the gate is a normal apple tree. ‘It’s Newton’s apple tree,’ the porter informs me. There is no doubt about it, the tree of knowledge grows here.

Let’s get rid of the superlatives: Trinity is the biggest, richest, most important college in Cambridge. It was the birthplace of Bloomsbury, the home of the Apostles, and the cradle of high treason. It produced top spies Kim Philby and Anthony Blunt, Prime Ministers like Arthur Balfour, Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi, future kings like Edward VII, George VI and his grandson Prince Charles. It can boast 29 Nobel prizewinners – more than any other college in Cambridge or Oxford, and in the 20th century it spawned

Fellows of the Royal Society in virtually every branch of the natural sciences. It is largely due to this college, and a range of scientists from Ernest Rutherford to Alan Hodgkin, that Cambridge has earned its reputation as the foremost seat of scientific learning in Britain.

Trinity is also, however, a college of writers, from Lord Byron to Vladimir Nabokov, and an intellectual powerhouse where Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the American cyberneticist Norbert Wiener used to meet every Thursday in Russell's rooms to split the philosophical atom at their 'mad tea party' in Nevile's Court. 'Maurice's clique would have laughed about Trinity, but they could not ignore its proud glamour or deny its superiority, even though hardly anybody here actually bothered to point it out,' wrote E.M. Forster in his novel *Maurice*.

Trinity College is as large and as flamboyant as its founder, Henry VIII. It came into the world when the King dissolved two older colleges and combined them into a single one. In 1546 Michaelhouse and King's Hall turned into The College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, with a view to accommodating a Master and sixty Fellows – bigger than any existing college, and bigger even than Cardinal Wolsey's Christ Church in Oxford. With plunder from the monasteries, Henry was able to endow his college with massive wealth, and one of its sites was turned into a goldmine during the 20th century with the establishment of the Science Park (see p. 220 f.)

With four crenellated corner turrets of Tudor brick, the Great Gate of Trinity (1518-35) was once the entrance to King's Hall, which Edward III had founded in 1337. It is a gatehouse that seems like a heraldic database of English history. Above it flies the college flag of Trinity, Edward III's standard, which also unfurled itself over the battlefields of Crécy and Poitiers, for in order to symbolize his claim to France, the King was the first to cross a French fleur-de-lys with an English lion. Edward III's coat-of-arms, placed right in the centre above the entrance, is flanked by those of his six sons – one of whom (with

ostrich feathers) was the Black Prince, while another died in infancy and left behind a coat-of-arms that was white and blank.

Trinity's links with royalty are not confined to the figures that adorn the gatehouse – Henry VIII himself and James I, facing the inner court, along with his wife and son, the future King Charles I. This is the only college whose Master is not elected by the Fellows but is appointed by the Crown. 'We have a nice little ceremony,' I was told by Paul Simm, the Junior Bursar. 'When he takes office, every new Master has to knock at the gate and wait outside. The Head Porter asks for his royal certificate of appointment, and then carries it on a silver platter to the Fellows, who are gathered together in the college chapel. The Deputy Master reads the certificate to them, then the Fellows troop out, open the gate, and let the new Master in.'

Even without the ceremony, it's a triumphal entrance. Ahead of us lies the Great Court – a broad green expanse with buildings all round, like a grandiose mixture of piazza and village green, with a fountain in the middle whose gentle, endless babble echoes on all sides and keeps out the noise of the traffic beyond. The Great Court is, of course, bigger than any other court in Cambridge or Oxford, but what makes this court so special is not just its size, or the quality of buildings around it – the Chapel and Hall, the Master's Lodge, the living quarters and the gatehouses. These you will find in any college court. What makes this one so impressive and so different is that it is neither square nor rectangular, and its lawns and paths are not symmetrical, and none of its three gateways stand in the centre of their wings. As in medieval squares, the heights, ages, materials and even quality of the buildings vary from one to the next. Some have stone facades, others are plastered, many are covered with plants like wisteria, roses, clematis and Virginia creepers. It has the charm of irregularity, the variety that blends into unity with the living confidence which can only reside in something that has developed down through the centuries. The whole spectacle centres (though in fact it is off centre) on the splashing

arabesque that is the fountain, which once supplied the college with its drinking water. It is a late Elizabethan, columned baldachin with a filigree ogee arch cover (1601-15, renovated in 1715). This eye-catching centrepiece balances out the proportions of the huge court, providing a focal point in the vast and uneven spaces that surround it.

The Great Court in its present form is mainly the work of Thomas Nevile, who became Master of Trinity in 1593. It was he who brought together the disparate elements of Henry VIII's foundation, financed the new refectory out of his own pocket, and even replaced an entire gatehouse. In order to unify the court, Nevile did not demolish King Edward's Tower (1427-37) but had it dismantled stone by stone and then rebuilt some twenty metres away on the west side of the chapel. King Edward's Tower was the original entrance to King's Hall, and the first gatehouse of its kind in Cambridge, but Nevile's early example of conservation was less concerned with architecture and history than with continuity and with economics: building materials were expensive, but labour was not. The lantern on the tower was added by the Master, as was the statue of Edward III in Elizabethan armour. After all, this King had not only beaten the French and founded the order of the Garter, but he had also brought Flemish weavers into the country – an enlightened forerunner of European ideals.

King Edward's great clock has just struck – two beats for every hour, the first one heavy, the second light. Wordsworth, sitting in nearby St John's, called it 'loquacious'. But for more sporting natures, this was the greatest challenge of their Cambridge career. Once a year, at midday in October, the students race against the clock in the Great Court Run. Before the clock has finished striking its twenty-four hammer blows (which it accomplishes in 45 seconds), you have to complete the full circuit of the court – 370 metres, to be precise. The first winner of this eccentric race was Lord Burghley in 1927, and he went on to become an Olympic champion. Not until 1988 did two more record-breakers, Sebastian Coe and Steve Cram, beat the clock, but it was said that they cheated,

because instead of taking the paved path, they ran on the cobbles, which saved them a good 15 metres.

The Great Court Run which made film history in David Puttnam's *Chariots of Fire* ended in front of the Chapel. Mary Tudor, daughter of Henry VIII, financed this Late Gothic building (1555-67), which was one of the few ecclesiastical edifices constructed during the reign of the Catholic queen. The Georgian interior – choir screen with columns, seating, canopied retable – was provided by a none too polite classical philologist, Richard Bentley, Master of the College, who used to call his Fellows asses, fools and dogs. He has been resting here – possibly in peace – since 1742. The entrance hall is even more interesting than the Chapel itself, for here we can find a whole galaxy of Trinity stars, commemorated by brass plaques, marble busts and statues. In this Valhalla sits Lord Tennyson, his pipe half hidden beneath a laurel wreath, and opposite him the great Elizabethan polymath Sir Francis Bacon, who at the age of 12 declared that the Trinity curriculum was out of date. And towering over everybody, with his genius proclaimed on the socle ('Qui genus humanum ingenio superavit') the figure of Sir Isaac Newton, complete with prism, portrayed as a young man without a wig – a masterpiece by the Huguenot sculptor Louis François Roubiliac (1755). This marble statue inspired Wordsworth's immortal lines in *The Prelude*: '...Newton with his prism and silent face, / The marble index of a mind for ever / Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone.'

Newton spent 35 years of his life at Trinity. In his own shorthand he recorded his student sins, from skipping chapel to 'using Wilford's towel to spare my owne.' In 1669, there occurred the rare event of a teacher giving up his post to his student, because the latter simply knew more than he did. The rooms of the 27-year-old maths professor, decorated in his favourite crimson, were in the Great Court, Staircase E. It was here that he wrote the scientific treatises which formed the basis of a new view of space and time so revolutionary that, in the words of Alexander Pope: 'Nature, and Nature's Laws lay

hid in night: / God said, *Let Newton be!* And all was light.’ When he wanted to relax, Newton went walking in the garden which in those days lay in front of his rooms, right next to the Great Gate. The apple tree that stands there now was in fact planted in 1954 – but it’s not a complete fraud. It descends from a cutting taken from the garden of his parents’ home in Lincolnshire, where in summer 1665, as everybody knows, an apple fell on his head bearing all the gravitas of the law of gravity. The variety of this historic fruit: Flower of Kent – “absolutely uneatable” according to one brave soul who’d tasted it.

Almost every week, someone asks permission to film in Newton’s rooms, but the bursar has to refuse because one of the Fellows lives there. ‘We don’t keep rooms as monuments. We’re not a museum – this is a workplace.’ If you just take Staircase E alone, the names resonate: William Makepeace Thackeray, novelist; Thomas Babington Macaulay, historian; James Frazer, anthropologist. And just like biblical genealogies, one name begets another: Macaulay leads to his great nephew George Macaulay Trevelyan and his teacher Lord Acton, on to Trevelyan’s pupil Steven Runciman, chronicler of the Crusades, and from there to E.H.Carr and Orlando Figes, creating a phalanx of Trinity Fellows who carried on the great tradition of Anglo-Saxon narrative history. Trevelyan’s *English Social History* was a bestseller, and he himself became Master of Trinity. In admiration of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, he acquired the telephone number 16 88. The present Master is Amartya Sen, who is married to a Rothschild, is an expert on world poverty, and has won the Nobel Prize for Economics.

In the southern wing of the Great Court, whose gatehouse is embellished with a statue of Elizabeth I, a new student took up residence in 1967. He stemmed from the House of Windsor, had rooms on Staircase K, and for three years studied anthropology and history. Prince Charles was the first royal student ever to sit the exams and actually earn his B.A. (Cantab.). He was never one of the Cambridge wits, but on at least one occasion he certainly made his fellow-students laugh. They were sitting together discussing what they

would do after the exams, and what career they wanted to pursue. Charles simply announced: ‘I want to be King of Europe.’

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Getting into Oxford or Cambridge is highly competitive. The Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) also prohibits you from applying to both. Therefore you want to choose the right university before you begin the application process. While Oxbridge might have a lot in common, there are many key differences which weâ€™ll break down to help you decide which one is right for you! Oxford vs Cambridge, they share many similarities and differences. Finally the Oxbridge debate is settled, which is the better university?Â Oxford vs. Cambridge. Two universities renowned for being world-leading institutions of learning. Which is better? The Oxford and Cambridge university application process is more complicated than some other unis too, as they typically include an entrance exam and an interview. Why is applying to Oxbridge different from other universities? Firstly, you need to decide on a particular college to apply to. If you think of Oxford or Cambridge as a village, each college is a bit like a house in the village. Each college has their own campus, learning spaces and accommodation. Rivalry between the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge is a phenomenon going back many centuries. During most of that time, they were the only two universities in England and Wales, making the rivalry more intense than it is now. The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, sometimes collectively known as Oxbridge, are the two oldest universities in England. Both were founded more than 800 years ago, and between them they have produced a large number of Britain's most prominent... Similarities and differences between Oxford and Cambridge. Oxford and Cambridge teaching methods. Applying to Oxbridge. Oxbridge league table performances. Law: Oxford or Cambridge? Medicine: Oxford or Cambridge? Economics: Oxford or Cambridge? Engineering: Oxford or Cambridge? Which university is better? Known all around the world, these prestigious institutions have many similarities â€” but many things set them apart.