Main Contemporary Sources

Evidence of student life in the unreformed university comes from a variety of sources, official and unofficial. Of several first-hand accounts by students, the most notable is that of the American Charles Astor Bristed, whose book, *Five Years in an English University* (Bristed 1852), was published in New York to describe to his compatriots just what university life in England was like. Bristed’s book has been described as “the most detailed and the most thoughtful memoir of Cambridge undergraduate life ever penned.”

Rather earlier student recollections are those of Solomon Atkinson and his near-contemporary John M.F. Wright, who took the Tripos examinations in 1821 and 1819, respectively.

John Venn was equal sixth wrangler in 1857 and later became the President of Gonville & Caius College, a post second only to the Master. His book *Early Collegiate Life* (Venn 1913) concludes with a delightful appendix on “College Life and Ways Sixty Years Ago”, vividly describing his own student experiences in the 1850s. The writer Sir Walter Besant also makes interesting remarks on his education, first at King’s College, London and then at Cambridge during the 1850s (Besant 1902). By way of introduction, we use the writings of Atkinson, Wright, Bristed, Venn and Besant to illustrate student life and students’ views of the university: two from just before the period of Hopkins’ wranglers, and three towards its end.

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5 Atkinson (1825a,b,c; 1827); Wright (1827).
6 Searby (1997) reviews Bristed’s memoir and also the later description by another American, William Everett (1866). Among other contemporary accounts, those of John Delaware Lewis (1850) and Leslie Stephen (1865) were both written to amuse, making fun of wranglers, tutors and rowing men alike: these contain some interesting comments but less factual information. The recently published letters of Alexander Chisholm Gooden, a Trinity student who was Senior Classic in 1840 (Smith & Stray 2003), paint a picture of college life similar to, if less vivid than, that of Bristed.
The more comfortable lives of college fellows and university officials are illuminated by extracts from a rather different contemporary source. Joseph Romilly was a Fellow of Trinity College and, during 1832–61, held the post of Registrary at the University. This important position involved a prominent role at University ceremonies, the collection of fees, and the maintenance of official records. Romilly’s private diaries, never intended for publication, are an invaluable informal source of information and opinion that complements the official university and college records. These diaries fill forty-one notebooks covering the period 1818–64, and copious extracts from them have now been published. Quotations from Romilly’s diaries are dispersed through several sections of this book. So, too, are extracts from the letters of several students, including William Thomson, Francis Galton and James Clerk Maxwell.

The Struggles of Solomon Atkinson

It is remarkable that Solomon Atkinson got to Cambridge at all, let alone graduate as senior wrangler. His “Struggles of a Poor Student Through Cambridge”, and two more articles, were published in the London Magazine. Even allowing for some literary exaggeration, his background was a disadvantaged one. The son of a poor Cumbrian farm worker, the young Solomon tended sheep and cattle, made hay and gathered potatoes: though getting some education at the village school, he studied mostly on his own. An appeal to his estranged maternal grandfather, “a man of wayward and singular disposition”, gained him £100 to attend university; and Atkinson screwed up his courage to approach Isaac Milner, the Dean of Carlisle who was also the head of Queens’ College, Cambridge. Milner was impressed by the young man, and recommended that he apply to Queens’, rather than to Trinity or St John’s as had been Solomon’s ambition. But he warned him that he had no hope of gaining a fellowship at Queens’.

Atkinson was admitted to Queens’ in June 1816, as a sizar. He soon encountered the rapaciousness of his “gyp” (college servant), cook’s boys, and college tradesmen: “a set of cringing, knavish varlets, that would stoop to any mean- ness to empty the pockets of a gownsman.” Nevertheless, for Atkinson “The

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8 Atkinson (1825a,b,c).
9 A “sizar” was a needy student supported by the college: so too had been Isaac Newton in his first year at Trinity College. In earlier times a sizar had to perform mundane chores for his better-off peers. The term “gyp” is derived from the Greek for “vulture”, in recognition of their notorious habit of soliciting tips and other benefits.
whole scene was . . . an enchantment”, though he was much disappointed by the instruction offered:

I had formed a very high conception of the interest and importance of college lectures. But I was disappointed, wretchedly disappointed, and so I believe is every man who ever heard them. They are in general little more than a kind of desultory conversation,—meagre, unconnected, and barren, as can well be imagined. In nineteen cases, therefore, out of twenty, they are attended merely because attendance is required by the College. . . . To a reading man the lecture-hours are so much time wasted,—to the non-reading men, who merely sit in a corner picking their nails or sketching a caricature, they are a most intolerable nuisance. . . .

Beyond this, I cared little for the matter; I had never relied on the instruction of others, and therefore I did not feel the want of it.

He describes how a student aiming for honours usually seeks private instruction, which adds £100 a year to his expenses; and he suggests that a college tutor who is also a private tutor “must reserve . . . his most valuable information. To act otherwise would take away one half of his pupils.” Though the system was too lucrative to be abandoned, it favoured the rich student over the poor, and gave an unfair advantage in examinations where the tutor was also an examiner.

Furthermore, such “pupilizing” also harmed the tutors, inhibiting them from undertaking original work. On becoming fellows and tutors,

it is a pleasant thing to dictate to a perpetual round of young men of talent and wealth; they are accumulating large fortunes perhaps, if their love of wine parties and gay suppers does not lead them beyond their earnings, which is a very common case, even with the most popular tutors,—they acquire habits of indolence. . . .

After a residence of twenty years, some fellows had gained little learning: instead of a “vigorous, searching, and intelligent mind . . . they are mere undergraduates, mere algebraists”. In his view, the past thirty years had produced no intellectual titans like those of the past, who “have been succeeded by a degenerate and pigmy race”.  

The above quotations are from Atkinson (1825a), pp.501–503. Some other acute but uncharitable remarks about individual mathematicians are quoted in the next chapter.
Educating the Elite

Though academically successful, Atkinson’s own university career was marred by unwise decisions. After a year at Queens’, he migrated to Trinity, forfeiting a Queens’ scholarship for his second year. He probably did so in hope of obtaining a Trinity fellowship on graduation, having confirmed Milner’s prediction that he would not get one at Queens’. But he quickly fell into debt, and was forced to take private pupils. Even after gaining a scholarship in his third year, he was unable to afford a private tutor to prepare for the Tripos.

The students from St John’s were favourites for top honours, and during the summer vacation they “retired together into Wales with Mr G—n [Gwatkin]” to prepare, while Atkinson worked on his own in Cambridge. Atkinson describes how, as the January examinations approached, “when every minute should have been treasured up, I practised on the flute several hours a day” and continued to take private pupils. Nevertheless, to much surprise, he “carried off the single diadem of the Senior Wrangler” and was awarded the second Smith’s Prize.

Despite his success, Atkinson quickly became disillusioned:

I had expected that the knowledge which led to these distinctions would have served me when . . . I came to associate with men and take a part in the business of life. That knowledge never has served me. I have found it an useless acquirement, and the period of my academical studies an entire blank in the history of my life. Nor was it merely useless; I imbibed, in common with every other man who engages in the strife of University studies, prejudices that were pernicious, absurd, or ridiculous when put to the touchstone of common sense. I had not therefore merely wasted my time. I had learnt that which it was necessary to unlearn as fast as possible.

Instead of acquiring potentially useful information, he had wasted time “marshalling mathematical symbols, which in the process did not discipline my mind, and which . . . did not prepare it for any useful and active occupation.”

Though exaggerated for journalistic impact, there was much truth in his strictures. At that time, there was no great demand in the world at large for advanced mathematical skills, and the Cambridge system certainly did not encourage development of any others, apart from the classical languages. As a senior wrangler, Atkinson might easily have followed the common route to

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11 Atkinson (1825a), pp.501, 492.
a Church living or a headmastership, via a Trinity fellowship; but, soon after graduation, he debarred himself from a fellowship by marrying, and he did not wish to remain as a private tutor. Though his wife’s family were fairly well-to-do, they disapproved of the match and refused any support.

Almost penniless, the couple moved to London, where Atkinson joined Lincoln’s Inn as a lawyer’s apprentice. But his wife developed consumption (tuberculosis) after eight months, and, according to Atkinson’s account, was forcibly removed by her family into their care. He turned to writing for magazines and encyclopaedias, but with little success; and then took a steerage passage to New York. After a few months, he returned as poor as before, and virtually begged his way back to his Cumberland home.12

Another article in the London Magazine (Atkinson? 1827) entitled “The Regrets of a Cantab” is probably also by Atkinson. This is a less autobiographical piece, making general criticisms of the Cambridge system. The author again overstates his claim that too much mathematical study stultifies the mind, and that he has acquired no knowledge of the arts: “All the world except myself, seems to abound in ideas; and I have but one”, while “female society is to me a blank.” At Cambridge, he alleges, more appropriate and useful objects of study are neglected:

the churchman learns neither theology nor religion; the lawyer neither law, history, ethics, nor that logic which must form his logic; nor do they cultivate their own language . . . far less that rhetoric and that oratory on which the professions, both of the church and of the law so naturally depend. That the future physician learns neither physic, anatomy, botany, chemistry, nor pharmacy, nothing of all that constitutes his science and enables him to practice his art, is more than notorious . . . he must go elsewhere to learn everything that is essential.

He wonders how mathematical science qualifies a man as a statesman, legislator or government officer, while he feels unfit to become even a treasury clerk. If the University will not “reflect that its duty and business . . . is, to educate

12 Atkinson (1825b). In fact, Atkinson resumed his legal career with some success: he was called to the Bar in 1827 and later published several legal works. These include two short works on the effects of free trade (1827); three editions of J. Chitty’s A Practical Treatise on the Stamp Laws (1829, 1841, 1850); and several books: A Practical Treatise on Conveyancing 2 vols. (1829); The Conveyancer’s Manual (1830); The Theory and Practice of Conveyancing (1839); An Essay on Marketable Titles (1833); The County Court Extension Act . . . (1850); and The Law and Practice of the County Courts Under the Insolvency and Protection Acts (1850). He died in 1865.
young men so that they may be fit to the professions . . . our parents at least might ask themselves this question before they send us to waste our time and money. . . .” Despite the university’s emphasis on mathematics, he asserts that only one in two thousand becomes a real mathematician.\(^{13}\)

Not only was their education deficient: “young men arrive at Cambridge from the public schools, with very doubtful morals . . . it is but too notorious and lamentable that the university is an extensive school of vice and profligacy under all their forms.” Rather than waste their time at Cambridge, young men should seek practical training useful for real life. Declaring that “London is the real university”, the writer means the growing metropolis, the university of life, not the planned London University which had yet to open.

A year later, yet another highly critical article entitled “The Cambridge University Senate-House Examination for Degrees” appeared in the same London Magazine (Anon. 1826). The author is unknown: though Atkinson cannot be ruled out, the magazine’s editor seems more likely. The running head for most of the article is “Education of the Many”. The author asserts that, for most Cambridge students, a proficiency in the common rules of arithmetic, the simpler operations of algebra and four books of Euclid’s geometry are all that is expected or required. These, “the Many” or hoi polloi, are the “poll men”, whose “mass is nine or ten times greater than those who take honours creditable to them”, and three or four times the number of all honours graduates. For these men, who learn little, cheating and copying in examinations were common in order to scrape a pass: thus “the intellectual interests of more than two hundred students are annually sacrificed to those of some ten, twenty, or, on the most liberal allowance, thirty individuals.” Not only does the University “mistake fellowships and honours for the ends of study, and . . . neglect the majority who resort to her merely to be educated;—she does not appear to consider herself in the slightest degree responsible for their education.”

The writer believed that external criticisms from Scotland had not helped; for, “Aided . . . by the smears of Professor Playfair and his brethren, the calculus has triumphed, and the Edinburgh reviewers may enjoy the consolation

\(^{13}\) Atkinson (1825c), quotations from pp.438, 439, 444, 445. His “1 in 2000” estimate seems only slightly ungenerous, if, by a “real mathematician” Atkinson means someone who makes a major original advance in the subject. About 300 students then graduated each year, roughly 100 with mathematical honours, high or low. Atkinson’s estimate therefore allows one outstanding and productive talent every seven years, or about six in forty. Which of the researchers from our list of wranglers would qualify? Green, Sylvester, Cayley, Stokes, Thomson, Tait and Maxwell have the strongest claims and they are seven in number.
of having contributed, by their criticisms, to make a bad institution worse than it was before”. But he allowed that education of “the many” was better organised in the Scottish universities. Thus, at Edinburgh, the Athens of the North, “of the great multitude of dingy Athenians who fill the lecture rooms of their clumsy Parthenon, scarcely fifty go away [each year] without a competent share of philosophical erudition”, while at Cambridge “not above fifty leave with a competent portion of philosophical, or any other description of knowledge.”

Opponents of the planned London University had claimed that, among potential students from humble backgrounds, not one in fifty could actually succeed; yet Cambridge was no better than this at providing a real education. The writer urged the fledgling London University to “heed the Quarterly Reviewer’s injunction to disdain all ideas of comparison with the English Universities” in favour of the Scottish model. “The aristocracy will then have some chance of arriving at the enviable distinction of being the only ill-informed and ill-educated portion of the community.”

The Trinity Hall fellow Leslie Stephen also strongly opposed Cambridge’s concentration on mathematics and classics as a kind of mental gymnastics. He believed that, except for the very best students, “nothing can be more absurd than to make five hundred young men . . . give up three years to read classics and mathematics for their own sake. Perhaps fifty of them may be improved by such a discipline. . . . The ‘gymnastic theory’, as applied to those below first class, is a mere farce.”

The extent to which these polemical blasts were justified is a matter addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. They vividly exemplify the discontent with the Cambridge system that eventually led to reform towards the end of our period.

J.M.F. Wright’s “Alma Mater”

John Martin Frederick Wright was admitted to Trinity College in 1813 but did not begin his studies until 1815. Though a competent mathematician who might have been a high wrangler, he fell foul of a regulation that prevented him from competing in the Tripos examinations, and ended up with an aegrotat degree in 1819. With no hope of a fellowship, he stayed

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14 Anon. (1826), above quotations from pp.293, 296, 303, 309, 313, 314.
15 Stephen (1865), p.182.
on in Cambridge, earning what he could as a private tutor and publishing self-help texts of notes and examples. He even launched a weekly magazine, *The Private Tutor and Cambridge Mathematical Repository* (Wright 1830–31) designed for students who could not or did not wish to afford a private tutor. But this probably had little success, for private tutors were becoming indispensable.

His two-volume *Alma Mater*, issued anonymously (Wright 1827), purports to be a comprehensive guide to the University for those who wish to study there or send their children. It is also intended as a defence of the University against some of the criticisms levelled by the popular journals. According to Wright, John Playfair’s criticisms in the *Edinburgh Review* revealed his lack of knowledge of Cambridge; but the recent writers in the *London Magazine* deserved greater respect, “being distinguished members of the Institution they have thought fit to calumniate.” Aware that Atkinson wrote at least some of these pieces, Wright asserts that the author was, by his “own fault, excluded from the emoluments of the University”, and now, without a fellowship, was reduced to deriding the source of all the knowledge he possessed in order to earn a living. Later, Wright criticises “Solomon” (without mentioning his surname) as “gifted with as vigorous an intellect as any I ever fell in with, and yet, as to the imaginative, inventive faculties, as barren as the desert”, a fact not to be blamed on the study of mathematics.

But Wright’s own polemic undermines his credibility. Trying to establish Cambridge’s superiority, he launches a diatribe against Scottish education, Scots generally, and their involvement with the new London University. Yet these overstated views doubtless reflect some attitudes current at this time, and they deserve exposure as such:

> Every Cantab . . . knows full well, from the specimens every year exhibiting at College, that the Scotch are a nation of pedants.—They skim the surface of literature, indeed, but never reach its bottom. . . . If you fall in with a Scot, you get hold of a bore and a pedant; who, first taking you for swine, casts his small stock of pearls before you, without mercy; and then, upon

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16 He appears simply as “John Wright” in Venn & Venn (1940) and in Rouse Ball & Venn (1911). Searby’s (1997), p.120 account is based on Wright’s own [Wright (1827), v.2, pp.46–97]. According to this, Wright missed a preliminary “act” or disputation in his third year, claiming to have been gored by a bull. On learning that this debared him from taking the full Tripos examinations, he quarrelled with Peacock, the examiner, and withdrew from the Tripos. On being “gulphed” by the examiners, he was fortunate to be given an *aegrotat* degree. Warwick (2003), p.347, gives a full list of Wright’s self-help texts.
your turning round upon him, and exposing the scantiness of his information, amuses you with a flaming account of the Latinity of ploughboys, and milkmaids wooing in pastorals of Virgil; tells you the story of the admirable Crighton, . . . and ends with a pompous rigmarole, about the wealth, honours, and erudition of Aberdeen, St Andrew’s, Dumfries, Glasgow, and Edinbro’.

. . . During the seven years I resided at Cambridge, [I] cannot recall a single instance of a Scotchman, Scottishly educated prior to his entrance here, having succeeded to the honours or emoluments of Trinity.

As for the projected London University, this is “fathered by Campbell [the poet] . . . fostered by Brougham and Dr Birkbeck the physician—Scottish all.” Consequently, all the major posts there will be filled by Scotsmen and dissenters. “Scotticism, Dissenterism, and Radicalism were never so closely united . . . the only learning to be had for your subscription will be a ‘mouthful’, whilst a ‘bellyful’ of disaffection to Church and King will be crammed into you gratuitously.”

Wright padded his two volumes with reprints of college, Tripos and Smith’s Prize examination papers, lists of prizes, exhibitions and scholarships, information on the fellowships at each college and their rules, lists of the salaries of lecturers and professors (not always accurate), and headmasterships and Church livings in the gift of each college. He observes that the seventeen colleges had no fewer than 294 Church benefices in their gift, worth about £300 each on average. His estimate of the total of all college receipts for maintenance of professors, fellows, scholarships, benefices, etc. amounted to about £300,000 per annum, which he tellingly observes is equal to the “principal, clubbing for by the signatories of the London University.”

Wright’s book was the subject of a hostile, also anonymous, review in the London Magazine. It states that Wright (identified by name), “After an unsuccessful residence at Cambridge . . . has been driven to seek his livelihood among the booksellers of London”; that his book is “the scrapings of the author’s life, collected industriously, for the laudable purpose of getting a dinner.” As for Wright’s criticisms of the Scots and of London University, “the men whom Alma Mater does not blush to own, would not entertain such opinions.” Surely the reviewer was none other than Solomon Atkinson.

17 Wright (1827); above quotations from v.1, pp.v–vi, 151, 134, 136, 138–140; v.2, p.205.
18 Atkinson? (1827); quotations from pp.441, 454.
Reminiscences of John Venn, Charles Bristed and Walter Besant

John Venn (1834–1923) graduated in 1857 as equal sixth wrangler. He was an able mathematician and philosopher who made significant contributions to mathematical logic and to what later became known as set theory. He published three treatises on logic, and he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1883. From about 1890, he was an indefatigable historian of Cambridge University: he published a six-volume biographical history of Gonville & Caius College (Venn 1898), and he began work, later completed by his son J.A. Venn, on the multi-volume register of Cambridge students, *Alumni Cantabrigienses...* (Venn & Venn 1940) which is of great use to historians. *His Early Collegiate Life* (Venn 1913) mainly concerns much earlier times, but concludes with personal reminiscences of “College Life and Ways Sixty Years Ago”.

Walter Besant (1836–1901) was eighteenth wrangler in 1859, and worked briefly as a mathematics master at Leamington College. He moved to become a professor in the exotic location of the Royal College, Mauritius, where he embarked on his writing career. Returning to England after six years, he went on to write several successful novels and many other biographical and historical works, notable for their advocacy of social reform. He was knighted in 1895 for his charitable work. (His older brother, William H. Besant, was the senior wrangler of 1850 and a fellow of St John’s.) Walter Besant’s *Autobiography* (Besant 1902) describes his time as a student at King’s College, London and at Christ’s College, Cambridge.

In contrast, Charles Astor Bristed (1820–74) was an outsider, an American student whose father had emigrated from England in 1806. His time as an undergraduate at Trinity College during 1840–44 provided the material for his book *Five Years in an English University* (Bristed 1852).

On college teaching, Venn (1913) observed that “The inter-collegiate system was as yet unknown... Outside Trinity and St. John’s there was probably not a single College which provided what would now be considered the minimum of necessary instruction, even in Classics and Mathematics.” In his own Gonville & Caius College:

outside this narrow range all was a blank. Theology, for instance, was represented by a good-natured mathematician—his good nature being the cause of his accepting a post declined by his colleagues... his grotesque attempts at comment and interpretation... were the joke of the College.
In lectures on classics and mathematics, brilliant scholars from the best schools sat next to complete beginners,

and tried to make the most of the lecture, or at any rate of the time during which the lecture was delivered. . . . It compelled every student, practically, to resort to a private tutor, for the lecturers, as a general rule, gave no assistance whatever out of their official hours. In fact, as they were very frequently private tutors as well . . . it could hardly be expected that they should do so. I feel confident that I never received a single word of advice during my whole time from the tutor, unless it was what church I had better attend or avoid.

I feel as certain as one can be that during my first two years I never had a word of private conversation with any authority of this College as to my studies, and equally sure that I never paid an informal visit to any Fellow’s rooms.19

Clearly, nothing much had changed since the days of Atkinson and Wright, more than thirty years earlier. There was little female company, of course: Venn could recall only three or four occasions when, as a student, he “was introduced to ladies’ society . . . and these were not exactly lively functions.” The formality of university society is exemplified by his visit to two female cousins, briefly staying with William Whewell and his wife at the Master’s Lodge in Trinity College. Despite having already graduated as M.A. some five or six years earlier, Venn was advised to wear his academic gown in the Master’s presence: he refused to do so, and next day “received a serious remonstrance from my cousin, evidently inspired by the Master.”

College accommodation for most undergraduates was spartan and the meals relentlessly unimaginative, apart from those of a few members of the nobility who lived in some luxury at extra expense. Dinner was at 4 or 5 p.m., where “Nothing was regularly provided . . . but joints, potatoes and cabbage . . . we did all our carving for ourselves . . . the wasteful hacking . . . which ensued may be conceived. . . . Sweets and cheese had to be specially ordered. Soup, fish and game were absolutely unknown.” But beer, and probably wine, was readily available, and “such a thing as a ‘teetotaller’ was not to be seen or heard of in the whole College.” The college servants, too, risked intoxication, owing to the “pernicious practice . . . of giving beer orders . . . payable (in beer) to the bearer”.20

19 Venn (1913), pp.256, 258, 259, 263.
20 Venn (1913), pp.266, 270, 271.
Charles Bristed also commented on the crowd and confusion of the student tables at Trinity College dinner, which he likened to steamboat meals in the U.S.A. Except at the Fellows’ high table, “The attendance [service at table] is also very deficient and of the roughest sort.”

Venn recalls that his college had no running water, the whole supply coming from hand-pumps operated mainly by the gyps or bedmakers. When a piped water supply was eventually introduced on construction of the town waterworks, the college experienced its first typhoid epidemic. In winter, the jugs of water delivered to the rooms sometimes froze solid, a situation that lasted for several weeks in the hard winter of 1854–55. The construction of partitions between rooms was often flimsy, and Venn remembered a man who had thrown his sponge though the wall of his room, so hard had it frozen. If typhoid was not a risk until piped water arrived, smallpox certainly was: Venn caught a mild dose in college, but thankfully it did not spread though precautions were rudimentary. In addition, scarlet fever, consumption (tuberculosis) and influenza claimed lives, and the possible spread of occasional cholera outbreaks from other parts of England was much feared.

The physical activities of students had changed much during Venn’s lifetime. When he was a student, walking, not cycling, was the norm, and long afternoon walks were the commonest form of exercise. Some rowed on the river, and there was some cricket. But “Lawn tennis and croquet were unborn. Real tennis and hunting were of course confined to the wealthy few. Hockey and football were left to boys.” As a student, Venn never saw rugby played; but he relates his younger brother’s account of a new game from Rugby school, where “they all made a circle round a ball and butted each other.”

Walter Besant entered Christ’s College, Cambridge in 1855 after a year at King’s College, London. Despite winning several prizes at King’s, he had a low opinion of that college: the professor of mathematics [T.G. Hall] “was old and had quite lost all interest in his work”, and Besant could “never remember a single word of personal interest or encouragement” from any of the staff. But he believed that “it was much the same thing at most colleges of Oxford and Cambridge at this time. The men were left severely alone; so that, after all, King’s was not behind its betters.”

At Christ’s, Besant enjoyed the close-knit society of a small college, with only fifty or sixty students altogether. He believed that a very large college like Trinity offered fewer social and educational advantages. There,
a man may be simply swamped . . . ; if a man does not belong to any of the
great public schools, he will find it difficult to get into certain sets which
may be intellectually the best. . . . If he does not distinguish himself in any
branch of learning, if he does not do well in athletics, if he shows no
marked ability in any direction, it is quite possible for him to go through
Trinity as much neglected and alone as a solitary lodger in London.

Though he enjoyed the company of his fellow students, Besant thought poorly
of many college fellows at the smaller colleges, who had been appointed
before the very recent introduction of open competition, having achieved a
place “somewhere among the wranglers.” They were typically

from some small county town; they had a very faint tincture of culture;
they were quite ignorant of modern literature; they knew absolutely
nothing of art. As regards science, their contempt was as colossal as their
ignorance. They vegetated at Cambridge; their lectures were elementary
and contemptible; . . . they divided the posts and offices of the college
among themselves; they solemnly sat in the Combination Room for two
hours every day over their port, . . . and they waited patiently for a fat
college living. . . .

The dulness [sic], the incapacity, the stupidity of the dons brought the
small colleges into a certain contempt. The decay of Cambridge as a place
of learning threatened to overwhelm the University. I believe that for the
first half of the century the scholarship and science at Cambridge was a
laughing stock on the Continent.24

Charles Bristed was taken aback by the sexual and moral attitudes preva-

ten in Cambridge, about which Venn and Besant are discreetly silent. Soon
after his arrival at Trinity, Bristed had been shocked by the suggestion of a
fellow student, whom he had only recently met, that they go together to Barn-
well to visit a brothel:

The American graduate who has been accustomed to find even among
irreligious men a tolerable standard of morality and an ingenuous shame
in relation to certain subjects, is utterly confounded at the amount of open
profligacy going on all around him at an English University, a profligacy
not confined to the “rowing” set, but including many of the reading men
and not altogether sparing those in authority. There is a careless and

24 Besant (1902), quotations from pp.79–82.
undisguised way of talking about gross vice, which shows that public sentiment does not strongly condemn it.

That shop-girls, work-women, domestic servants, and all females in similar positions, were expressly designed for the amusement of gentlemen, and generally serve that purpose, is a proposition asserted to by a large proportion of Englishmen, even when they do not act upon the idea themselves.\textsuperscript{25}

The reference here to “rowing” men does not mean oarsmen, but high-living, rowdy students, who contrasted with the “reading men” intent on acquiring an education.

Bristed’s criticisms are supported by R.M. Beverley, who wrote (of a somewhat earlier period) that:

It is the nightly work of the Proctors to clear the brothels of the undergraduates, and Castle-end and Barnwell are constantly visited for this purpose. It was no uncommon thing in my day to make a party to go up to Castle-end immediately after the Sunday-evening chapel. It was the fashionable evening for such expeditions.\textsuperscript{26}

Bristed’s comments on other aspects of life at Cambridge, notably college teaching and private tutors, reinforce the views of Atkinson and Venn already quoted. Regarding morals, neither Bristed nor any other of our witnesses says anything about the prevalence, or otherwise, of homosexuality in or outside the colleges. Such activity was against the law, and regarded as a sin by all religious denominations. It was simply not written about nor openly admitted, though, like prostitution, it was probably tolerated and ignored unless offence was caused. Given the unchanging character of human nature, and the all-male society of the colleges and of the public schools which many of the boys had attended, it is hard to believe that the incidence of homosexual practice was much lower than it is today. But little evidence exists.

The laxity of moral attitudes certainly worried the parents of students, if not the mass of students themselves. An anonymous pamphlet “by An Anxious Father” (Anon. 1850) complained about the culture of extravagance, debt, gambling, hunting, etc. This father hesitated to send his son to train for the Church in such a place, citing the case of the son of a relative who ran up huge debts over two years. He urged the authorities to take immediate action

\textsuperscript{25} Bristed (1852), v.1, pp.40, 47, 48.

\textsuperscript{26} Beverley (1833), p.13.
to put their house in order. Similar views had earlier been forcibly expressed by Robert Mackenzie Beverley, in a published 1833 address to the Chancellor of the University. As well as citing examples of extravagant and immoral behaviour of students, he accused college fellows of similar depravity. Beverley had some local knowledge: he had been an undergraduate at Trinity College during 1816–20, before becoming a Dissenter and an outspoken critic of the Church of England. Among several replies in defence of Cambridge against Beverley’s “scurrilous pamphlet”, those from Professor Adam Sedgwick carried most weight. Though admitting that some misdemeanors undoubtedly occurred without the knowledge of the authorities, Sedgwick tried to reassure the public that most cases came to their attention and were appropriately dealt with. But Beverley persisted with his damaging allegations.27

Joseph Romilly’s Diaries

Joseph Romilly (1791–1864) was an ordained priest and fellow of Trinity College, who conducted occasional services, baptisms, marriages and funerals around Cambridge. But his main duties were as Registrary of the University of Cambridge, a post that put him at the heart of the running of the university.

In his diaries, Romilly indefatigably recorded his official and social activities, trivial and important, public and private. This great miscellany includes graduation ceremonies, high-level deputations, installations of Chancellors, grand dinners, sermons by visiting preachers, ailments—major and minor—of himself and his relatives, wins and losses at whist, and jokes and puns heard in college common rooms. He records his various college and university duties: collecting fees, disciplinary procedures against erring students, and licencing the sale of alcohol in Cambridge’s many public houses.28 Joseph Romilly was politically a Whig, a good friend of Adam Sedgwick, and—despite their different political persuasions—an admirer of his Trinity colleague, William Whewell.

Romilly’s accounts of the University’s disciplinary procedures against errant students provide another view of student life. He officiated at the Vice-Chancellor’s Court of Discipline, which had authority, in place of the civil

27 Beverley (1833; 1834); Sedgwick (1836).
28 In the last, he was assisted by one William Hunt, a fellow of King’s college and a barrister, renowned as the most notorious drunkard in the University: Bury (1967), p.245.
courts, to deal with student crimes. Typical minor cases were a son of Lord Godolphin, Osborne of Magdalene “an ill conditioned unmanageable profligate”, suspended for three terms for breaking lamps; four students suspended for two terms for being in a billiard room; and a student rusticated for one term, for being riotous and striking the police. Among more serious cases was an allegation that a Trinity student name Postle had drugged and then raped a girl, whose “Aunt (M[7] Whip) is a very bad woman & keeps a brothel. . . . Looks like a false acc’n:—else Postle has bought them off.” Only the most serious cases went before the magistrates of the Cambridgeshire Court of Assizes; for instance, one of child cruelty involving a married student and his wife. Though gambling, like playing billiards and visiting brothels, was officially prohibited among the students, the regulations were enforced only in extreme cases. Thus, in February 1834, two Trinity students were expelled for gambling when one won a huge sum of nearly £800 from the other, who was unable to pay.

Less serious misdemeanors were often dealt with by the individual colleges. For example, a drunken student riot at Trinity College by two Lords of the realm and ten of their friends resulted in destruction of lamps and part of a balustrade in Nevile’s Court: this was dealt with fairly leniently by the College Seniority (i.e. the Master and eight most senior Fellows or their deputies, a group that normally included Romilly), who confined the offenders to the “Gates and Walls” of the College for a time.

In February 1837, Romilly described “a most tedious case of discipline” following a breach of the peace by four Trinity men. Contrary to the accepted custom of returning the culprits to their college to be dealt with, the police took them to the police station and bail was demanded. The Vice-Chancellor, upset by this “gross violation of the Privileges of the Univ[ity]”, instructed the students not to pay the bail money. Shortly afterwards, the town magistrates disputed the University’s right to licence ale houses, and Romilly was required to provide the evidence of authority. These are just two instances of the often difficult relations between town and gown.29

29 Bury (1967); above quotations from pp.74, 117, 16, 29, 48, 115.
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