Cobban, Alan *The Medieval English Universities: Oxford and Cambridge To c.1500*. Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1988. 465 pp. £30.00 ISBN 0-85967-753-2.

This is a very 'English' study, with the advantages and disadvantages that this label suggests. We are given a very thorough survey of the present, although rapidly developing, state of knowledge of the two medieval English Universities. Article material that has appeared in a variety of sometimes obscure publications is discussed and its contents, where relevant, incorporated into the text. More recent 'prosopographical' work, some of it undertaken by the author himself, is used to give a 'modern' appearance to these investigations. Alan Cobban has decided, perhaps wisely in view of the patchy and controversial nature of present research, that he will refrain from any discussion of the role of university studies in arts, law, medicine and theology. Nor does he give a very detailed account of the methods of teaching adopted by the various faculties. Essentially his study is a Rashdall writ large and brought up to date: a solid and well written examination of the constitutional and structural development of the two institutions in the light of new sociological techniques. As with Cobban's earlier *The Medieval Universities* (1975), expressions of gratitude at the appearance of so useful a work are tempered by misgivings that an opportunity may have been lost.

For what we need from those well acquainted with the history of medieval – and renaissance – Oxford and Cambridge is some awareness of how both reacted to common problems that were threatening the stability and traditional policies of northern universities. In what ways and why was the response of the English institutions different from that of continental foundations, especially of the more recently established 'arts' universities? What happened to the teaching and study of arts and theology in a period when the widely accepted dominance of Paris had been destroyed by religious, political and military manoeuvres? How did two ancient universities maintain their position when so many rival foundations, claiming to teach those very subjects, arts and theology, where Oxford and Cambridge had established their reputation, had been successfully organized in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? Are charges that the English universities were declining gracefully into a backward insularity justified?

Alan Cobban does not appear to have space or inclination to discuss the full implications of these important questions. Indeed his use of continental – and Scottish – material is limited and not very assured. It is disappointing, for example, not to have a fuller discussion of the role of the salaried lecturer, especially in the faculties of arts. Here was one area where the English universities, especially Oxford, seemed to be lagging well behind continental practice. But there may have been good reasons for this reluctance to innovate, and it would have been useful to know if the continental experience was as successful as has often been assumed. The growing 'laicization' of continental university institutions that is so clearly seen in many early Italian towns and which spreads to the north in the late fifteenth century must surely have also made its

mark on the history of the English universities. When students no longer assumed that their careers would be in the Church and their lives at least nominally sober and celibate, the impact of such an attitude on Oxford and Cambridge, where colleges with strict disciplinary regulations were increasingly powerful, must have been profound. The are hints, but little more, that Cobban is aware of these problems.

However, it would be wrong to review this volume only for what is not there. For the general reader, requiring an up-to-date survey of the foundation and development of these two most influential institutions, no better study exists. The specialist will return to the article material, so well used by Cobban, and the more recent highly detailed volumes that have appeared for each University since this book was planned. Here, however, in a concise form we are given the story of the mythological and actual origins of the two Universities, a detailed description of their constitutions and administration and a note of the growth of their colleges and halls. A less convincing section on teaching, the distribution of students amongst the various faculties and the reception of humanism follows. Finally, relations between the Universities, the Church and their host societies are examined, and a glance is given at the structure of the university communities and their academic and social life. It will be apparent that Cobban touches on almost all aspects of university activity and the general reader will be stimulated by many perceptive remarks. Sometimes one has the impression that the effort to comment on everything has produced a rather 'breathless' and rushed style of writing, and the repetition of information and statistics can make for heavy reading. Earlier writers certainly over-emphasized the violent, humorous and salacious aspects of academic life. Cobban has perhaps gone to the other extreme; he presents his masters and students as somewhat boring, but he is probably correct!

As we finish reading this substantial work, how stand the English universities on the eve of the Reformation in Cobban's eyes? He notes how the 'democratic' character of the early universities was maintained longer at Oxford and Cambridge than elsewhere in Europe by the authority of the Congregation of regents and non-regents. He emphasizes the absence of strong 'nation' and 'faculty' associations in contrast to the experiences especially of French and German universities. As one would expect, the role of the colleges, growing at the expense of both the halls and the central University, is discussed and some indication of their future strength given. Cobban suggests that the study of law, especially civil law, was expanding in both Universities, although perhaps his conclusions here must be received with some caution; he shows how the 'capture' of common-law studies by the London Inns of Court deprived the legal faculties of both Universities of what could have been a major source of recruits and strength. The beginning of the infiltration of the Universities by the sons of the aristocracy is recorded. Finally, Cobban stresses how both Universities shared a late medieval English pride in their own achievements and how they followed the national trend of support for and cooperation with the English royal house.

The volume is attractively printed with few major printing errors. There are sixteen well-produced and relevant illustrations.

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