G.R. Evans, *The University of Oxford, a new history* (London, 2010), ISBN-10: 1848851146, hardback, RRP £35.

There are many ways in which a history of Oxford may be written. Popular accounts, such as guide books, tend to start with the buildings, their antiquity, the grand vistas and shady corners they afford today's visitor to the city. Other books give pride of place to the cast of characters - some tragic (Cranmer and Latimer), some heroic (Thomas More, perhaps), some quirky (Dr. Spooner) and many of the best known entirely fictitious – who have strode or shuffled across Oxford's stage over the centuries. Gillian Evans' new history does not overlook these possible approaches; all the well-known characters, from Alice Liddell to Anthony Wood, will be found in its pages.

As to imagined townscapes, the first few pages of the Introduction, sub-titled 'Coming to Oxford', almost suggest that the reader is about to be seduced into the dreamlike world of Alice, 'Brideshead' and Inspector Morse, that mythic city which, Evans writes, 'fills the mind of even the casual visitor with lingering images of dappled shade on immaculate lawns under great trees in college gardens, and which, for those who spend time there as students or dons, becomes a woven fabric of associations.'

After that lyrical introduction, the opening paragraphs of the first substantive Chapter provide a firmer guide to the author's intention - to explore the religious, political and philosophical ideas which have been debated in Oxford over the centuries and which have helped shape the university and the colleges we know today. Titled 'Towards Oxford Today', that first chapter kicks off not with the university's medieval beginnings, but the great religious, political and philosophical battles of the Victorian era. 'Modern Oxford was shaped by the generation born as Victorians', Evans argues: the Inklings, the impact of two world wars, financial constraints, the religio-scientific debate, and the increasing involvement – financial and dirigiste – of government lead the reader at a smart pace to the present day. Evans relates the battles currently being fought (rather more decorously, but no less determinedly, than those between Tudor and Stuart

monarchs and recalcitrant dons) between the 'managerialists' and what she sees as the 'democratic' dons, as to just how a 21st century university should be run and paid for.

These are battles which Evans has had good opportunity not only to observe but to participate in. A national press interview around the time that her companion volume on Cambridge appeared at the end of 2009 was entitled 'One woman's fight against the system'; it recounted her long-running dispute with that university over its failure to promote her. She contributes regularly and forcefully to the dons' newsletter *Oxford Magazine* on university governance, freedom of expression and the creeping cult of managerialism.

Having been both undergraduate (St. Anne's) and Dip. Ed. Student at Oxford, Evans has spoken elsewhere of how her heart has remained in Oxford, the 'sense of belonging' having been implanted in those youthful years; she continued to live in the city throughout a distinguished academic career culminating in the professorship of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History at Cambridge; she is also author of several score works on theology, medieval thought, and present day university administration (not forgetting a brief but fact-packed biography of the poet Chaucer).

A key passage in that first chapter summarises differences between Oxford and Cambridge in terms of current interest in university government, including the debates which took place in the Sheldonian theatre in 2006 and which resulted – at least for the time being – in Oxford preserving academic self-governance, perpetuating, Evans hopes, 'the medieval democracy which has served it for more than eight centuries.'

Only after these 20th and 21st century struggles have been covered – and if you are interested, then Evans is certainly the author to lead you through them – is the reader taken back to Oxford's beginnings as the Anglo-Saxon town to which, in the 12th century, travelled the first community of scholars. From that point onwards this 'new history' is more straightforwardly an account of the growth of medieval halls, colleges and university institutions, the people who inhabited them, the ideas they debated and fought over, and their relations with the townsfolk.

Somewhat qualifying, one might argue, those eight centuries of democracy which Evans prays in aid of current anti-government interference, her chapter on the 'Interfering Tudors' demonstrates that 'Academic freedom is a comparatively modern idea'; later, the 'official' burning of the works of Milton in the Bodleian quadrangle suggested that such 'freedom' could be a sickly concept. Edward VI's Statutes of 1549 were no less intrusive into the life of college and university than anything that would later be imposed by Victorian or 20th century legislators at Westminster. The involvement of both Oxford and Cambridge with the religious struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries, rather more physically menacing than today's differences over, say, who governs the Bodleian library, were followed by disputes with non-jurors and anti-scholasticists of the 18th century. There followed that 'Nineteenth Century Transformation' when much of Oxford's modern curriculum was introduced, along with state interference and the threat of externally applied 'reform,' as the newly enfranchised classes flexed their political muscle.

The chronological arrangement of the material in this book, with the most recent battles narrated first, may strike some readers as odd, but this is a trivial criticism compared with the usefulness of the work as a whole. It offers a fully documented, colourful and readable guide to the changes that the University of Oxford and its constituent colleges have undergone since that handful of medieval scholars walked along the causeway across the Thames and set up home here.

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