

St Newman, Cambridge, and Liberal Education – A Short Causerie

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An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude. Hence it is that his education is called “liberal”. A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what in a former discourse I have ventured to call a philosophical habit.

– St John Henry Newman, *Idea of a University* (1859)

In 1859, perhaps by an English fireplace with sherry in hand, did St John Henry Newman jot down these immortal words on education. Today, a century after St Newman’s times, very few tertiary institutions around the global could assert with utmost certitude that such standards have been unequivocally met.

However, in an island country at a corner of this wide world, in an ancient empire whose sun has long fallen, an idyllic and minuscule town besides the river Cam has upheld St Newman’s aspirations for over eight centuries. Just as the calm waves of river Cam silently flow on the pleasantly green English pastures, so does the constituent colleges of Cambridge stand in placid solitude beside millennium-old Roman roads. Restful and aloof as the ancient gothic buildings may seem on a typical foggy British morning, to a visitor like myself, the town of Cambridge often, in my mind, projects a sense of surrealness. It was precisely amidst these cobble roads did some of the greatest names in human history trod, and it is also in such graceful and modest buildings are some of the ground-breaking discoveries pronounced and embark to reshape all human existence.

Today, there are perhaps three Cambridges. If the coronavirus had not hit Britain, Cambridge would be the tourist’s Cambridge – bustling and whirring tourists, often pompous self-important mandarin-speaking youngsters, roam through the streets with camera and GoPro in hand. For twenty-four weeks in a year, Cambridge would be the student’s Cambridge – brilliant and privileged young people, often Europeans born with a silver teaspoon in their mouths, are blessed with a mellowed three-year incarceration before knocking on the doors of the lustful and cunning real world. Yet, in the past eight centuries, Cambridge has been the scholar’s Cambridge – a

handful of fellows, chaplains and researchers, some of which inheriting a family enterprise in teaching and research, devoting their entire lives to the strife of intellectual advancement in the arts and sciences, nourishing innumerable young scholars to serve in all realms of the human enterprise.

As a member of St John's College who travelled to Cambridge on a study tour, to me, Cambridge was *all the three Cambridges*. King's Chapel's angelic choir and St John's vast pastures epitomise the "must-sees" in the tourist's Cambridge. Fine and formal halls at Pembroke and Churchill testify for the pleasantly dulcet tunes of Cambridge student' lives. Yet, to me, the essence and spirit of Cambridge lies in the scholar's Cambridge – a Medieval English trade town where time and space seem to stand absolutely still, where comfort in life and enjoyment in intellectual deliberation truly echo in harmony in the gothic time-worn bell-towers.

To make a sweeping and indeed unsophisticated generalisation, the spirit of Cambridge University, and indeed the entire idea of a university as St Newman writes, is to couple the noble cause of studies with the basic comforts of life. When the pursuit of intellect is stripped of all practical hassles and utilitarian concerns, when the acquisition of knowledge itself comprises life as a whole, how indeed is it possible for one *not* morph and ascend into the most spiritually noble and intellectually elevated scholar? To many and more people in the contemporary world, intellectual labour has become a necessary evil towards status and power, and university has become a somehow bothering nuance in their long quest towards a comfortable life. Alas, they do not see, that an affluent life with a hallow soul is itself hallow – university is not the *means* to the ends of a good life, a good life is the *means* to the ends of intellect. Bold and pathetic as this claim might be, perhaps the only two places in the whole world to preserve the spirit of true intellectual acquisition and deliberation is, sadly, the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford.

Indeed, intellectual labour is never always plain sailing and pure bliss. Quite the opposite, a lifetime in the academia is often one of persistent lonely ploughing, intensive thorough work and exhaustive efforts in research. However, as St Newman writes, and as Cambridge University's eight centuries of presence and prosperity attests, the reward of such toil is immeasurable and indispensable. A "philosophical habit" is one that transcends all sensual pleasures and that instils ultimate meaning to human existence. The peaceful and rippling waters of river Cam rolls along as usual, and so does the humans' pursuit for intellectual enlightenment. As the roman proverb goes "*ars longa, vita brevis*" – I aspire to set the quest of arts as a mission of life, and it would indeed

be an immense blessing if I were to continue this quest by the of River Cam in some the future of my life.