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REVIEW ARTICLE:

LOCKE THE REPRESENTATIVE OF AN AGE?\*

Intended for the "general reader" — and presumably for the "general reader" in North America to whom Oxford in the seventeenth century is remote both in time and place — *Oxford In The Age Of John Locke* presents a vivid picture of the intellectual and political life of this famous university town in the seventeenth century. Professor Hargreaves-Mawdsley, who is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, divides the book into five chapters. The first one is a brief account of the history of both the university and the town from their respective foundation to the seventeenth century, a history that was filled with animosity between the two that often resulted in riots. In chapters entitled "Oxford's Inner World" and "Oxford and the Outer World", the author describes life in the university in the second half of the seventeenth century when it attained intellectual and architectural eminence in Europe; and the intricate involvement in this period of both the town and the gown in the affairs of the Church and the Crown. The entire Chapter IV is devoted to science at Oxford at this time, to the works of the men who contributed to the reputation of the university. Finally, in this context of political turmoil and exuberant intellectual activities the career of John Locke (1632-1704) at Oxford, from 1652 when he entered Christ Church from Westminster School to his departure for the United Provinces in the autumn of 1683, a year before the deprivation of his Studentship at Christ Church by the royal mandate, is summarised.

The author thinks that Oxford in the seventeenth century far outshone the following two centuries in its scientific and cultural achievements, and in its political significance in the history of England. To the present reviewer, moreover, the author's description in the fourth chapter of the scientific activities of the seventeenth-century Oxford is the most interesting, and is based on the best source available.

Apart from some vague points and inaccuracies<sup>1</sup>, there is one point which needs some discussion here.

This book could have simply been entitled "Oxford in the Seventeenth

\* *Oxford in the Age of John Locke* (Vol. 32, University of Oklahoma Centres of Civilisation Series). By W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley. University of Oklahoma Press, 1973. 132 pp. + xi, \$3.50.

Century". However, since Locke is chosen to represent Oxford in this century, the "general reader" may well ask, and in fact the author himself raises the same question near the end of the first chapter: Why should Locke be chosen to give his name to an age of Oxford?

The reason seems to be two-fold. According to the author, Locke reflected the numerous activities of the Oxonians of his time; and he lived to influence the intellectual climate of Europe "as no other Englishman of his era save the Cantabrigian Isaac Newton". So far as his influence is concerned, Locke's political thought is said to have conditioned the climate which led to the French Revolution; and in embracing the new science and its critical attitude, in adhering to concrete experience while rejecting abstract speculation and mystical enthusiasm, Locke was the founder of the Age of Reason (cf. x and pp. 20-23).

The author's assessment of Locke's influence invites comparison with what Locke's more recent biographer said: "John Locke was a great man; indeed so great a man that his biographer cannot grasp the measure of that greatness. . . . But this at least one can say here: Locke did not merely enlarge men's knowledge, he changed their ways of thinking."<sup>2</sup> However, is the "general reader" likely to be convinced by the author's *own* account of Locke's career at Oxford that Locke, as he says, was "the typical Oxonian of his age, with even wider interests than Wren" (p. 20), or that Locke "took a leading part as student (that is, fellow) of Christ Church in the intellectual life of Oxford" (p. 21)?

According to Professor Hargreaves-Mawdsley, Locke was praised for his knowledge in medicine by Sydenham and Guenelon (p. 22). One may also add here that from the very beginning of his life at Oxford Locke had an interest in medicine; later he attended the lectures given at Christ Church by Willis and was following a systematic study of this science in 1666 when he met Sydenham: they both propounded the clinical or "historical" method which emphasised the investigation of the history of diseases and the effect of remedies. Locke's contempt for orthodox medicine as taught in Oxford of his time, which resulted in his shrewd but futile effort at obtaining the degree of doctor of medicine while bypassing the courses leading to the bachelor's degree, is succinctly related by the author (cf. pp. 108 & 110-113). Then under the influence of Robert Boyle, Locke acquired an interest in chemistry: attending lectures given by Peter Stahl who had been brought over to Oxford by Boyle, Locke had an enthusiasm for experiments, especially experiments in distillation (p. 84), which was probably connected with his interests in alchemy. Again under the influence of Boyle, Locke dabbled in meteorology, keeping records of conditions of weather in Oxford over long periods (p. 88). This in the account given by the author is the extent of Locke's interests and achievements, which is by no means very significant when compared with that of many of his contemporaries and near contemporaries, whose activities the author discusses in Chapter IV, "Oxford and Science".

Consider, for instance, Christopher Wren (1632-1723), soon to be a fellow of All Souls when Locke entered Christ Church. Not only was Wren to present to Oxford in 1669 his first architectural monument, the Sheldonian Theatre, but he was also,

as the author says, the leading light of the University from 1661 to 1673. Excelling in astronomy, physics, meteorology and mathematics, Wren carried Oxford's scientific fame to the Continent where even Christian Huygens acknowledged him as an equal (cf. pp. 68; 71; 76 and 90-91). Wren was Savilian Professor of Astronomy from 1661 to 1673; but even as an undergraduate he had made observations of Saturn whose wax model he tried to construct in 1665, and he later formulated a theory of the moon's libration. Inquiring into the laws of motion, the velocity and power of water, and the problem of navigation, he shared with Robert Hooke the glory of Oxford mechanics. Again, like Hooke, he was an ingenious practical inventor: the extent of his activities included attempts at turning salt water at sea into fresh water (cf. pp. 86-88). Wren realised the importance of keeping weather diaries in different parts of the country, and hoped that a law of seasons and a pattern of weather conditions at various periods of the year would eventually be established. With this in mind he designed the first self-recording weather instrument containing a revolving drum and pencil. Furthermore, as much as Locke, Wren also became a civil servant, a man of the world; and it was in order to concentrate on his duties as Surveyor of the King's Works that he resigned from his Savilian Chair in Astronomy in 1673.

Given Professor Hargreaves-Mawdsley's description of their respective range of interests and achievements, it seems hardly appropriate to say with him that Locke had "even wider interests than Wren"; or that Locke "took a leading part. . . in the intellectual life of Oxford", especially since among his illustrious contemporaries and near contemporaries there were, besides Wren, John Wilkins, Robert Hooke, Edmund Halley, not to mention Robert Boyle who made Oxford his residence between 1654 and 1668, all of whose works the author discusses in the book. If Locke had indeed taken a leading part in the intellectual life of Oxford of his time, the author certainly has not presented his case very convincingly.

Perhaps a defect of this book is that although reference is made throughout the book to Locke, the last chapter which directly deals with his life at Oxford is too sketchy, and is unduly based on the by now incomplete biography of Locke by Fox Bourne. This in itself should not detract from the value of the book as a whole, which, as it must be emphasised, is about Oxford, not Locke; but it is rather regrettable that in writing his chapter "John Locke at Oxford" the author did not seem to have consulted the *Lovelace Collection* or even books on Locke which have been written since its discovery. Thus, the author's description of Locke's intellectual pursuits could have been substantiated by reference to Locke's authorship during his Oxford days. As von Leyden has shown,<sup>3</sup> between 1660 and 1664 Locke penned two treatises on the civil magistrates, defending the power of civil authority on all indifferent actions; and eight essays — which grew out of the former — arguing for the existence of a law of nature, a subject on which he was lecturing when he was Censor of Moral Philosophy in 1664, and with which his Valedictory Speech delivered at the end of his Censorship was closely connected. Locke never published these early works, probably because his later theories of toleration and consent superseded his authoritarian views expressed in the two

treatises, and the theological and metaphysical implications of his early doctrine of a natural law became unacceptable to his mature thoughts. However, that part of the essays which deals with epistemological matters found its way into the two early drafts as well as the 1690 and subsequent editions of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The belief, moreover, that the law of nature as the declaration of God's will is the standard of right and wrong was an important assumption in the two *Treatises of Government* published in 1690. In addition, by 1668, Locke was also working on the problem of interest, and his plea for a new approach to this problem became the greater part of his book on economics of 1692.<sup>4</sup> Locke's career at Oxford, therefore, was more significant than what Professor Hargreaves-Mawdsley has conveyed in this book.

Notwithstanding his election to the Royal Society in 1668, and in spite of his influence on posterity, however, Locke was never a virtuoso in the way that many of his Oxonian contemporaries were. Ultimately the question arises as to the nature of his achievements and influence.

On this, perhaps, Locke himself was more perceptive. It was as an under-labourer, in contradistinction to the master-builders in the sciences, that Locke regarded himself: his task was to clear the ground, and to remove, among other rubbish, vagueness in the use of words, so that knowledge could be more easily and further advanced by the master-builders.<sup>5</sup> Yet this was no mean task, for it involved building a theory of knowledge which though having its background in the corpuscularianism of Robert Boyle was new, and which became influential. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* defended Boyle's new approach to science against the Scholastic tradition and furnished it with a firm epistemological foundation.<sup>6</sup> Hence, although Locke did not turn into another Newton or Wren, he did not merely learn to "speak in the language of the new sciences and was enabled in the future to communicate with scientists in their own parlance" as the author indicates at one place (pp. 102-103). Rather, on the basis of the new science Locke also constructed an epistemology which changed men's ways of thinking, and which provided the main philosophical tenet of the Age of Reason. Professor Hargreaves-Mawdsley has rightly claimed that Locke's initiation of the Age of Reason constitutes part of his great influence on the intellectual development of Europe, although the history of this influence itself has yet to be written. Thus, rather for his influence on posterity, than for an outstanding career during his Oxford days, can Locke be chosen to represent Oxford in the seventeenth century.

#### Footnotes

1. For instance, on p. 116: "Charles II. . . ordered (Parliament) to meet in Oxford in May, 1679" is soon followed by "On March 21, 1681, the new Parliament met in Oxford". Were there two Oxford Parliaments between 1679 and 1681? However, from what is said on pp. 57-58, one can infer that the author does not think, at least there, that Parliament met in Oxford in 1679. On p. 110, "The mission succeeded" is misleading, for the mission to the Elector of Brandenburg in the winter of 1665-66 did not succeed in the sense that it won for Charles II the alliance, or even the neutrality, of the Elector. On p. 21, "By 1670, Locke had begun to sketch out a draft of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* . . ." should read "By 1671. . ." if the author intended to mean the two written drafts of the said *Essay*.
2. Maurice Cranston: *John Locke, A Biography*, Longmans, 1957, p. 482.
3. Cf. the "Introduction" of his edition of *John Locke, Essays on the Law of Nature*, Oxford, 1954.
4. Cf. Maurice Cranston, *loc cit.* pp. 117-118.
5. Cf. John Locke's "Epistle to the Reader" in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.
6. Cf. Chs. V and VI of R.S. Woolhouse's *Locke's Philosophy of Science and Knowledge*, Blackwell, 1971.