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“I have never known such undisguised arson”: the Ladysmith Rag,
the Mafeking Bonfire and the battle for order in late nineteenth-
century Cambridge

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Abstract

The celebrations in Cambridge to welcome the relief of Ladysmith in March 1900 took the form of a huge illegal bonfire erected in the town market place by students and townspeople, fed by wood taken without permission from public and private buildings in the city and accompanied by a firework fight. This was the third such bonfire to be lit in the market place in almost as many years, and it contributed to a crisis developing in the city over the extent and effectiveness of the control exercised at street level by both the town and the university authorities. The crisis sparked off by the relief of Ladysmith gave particular importance to the preparations

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being made for the expected relief of Mafeking later in the year, which became the vehicle for an effective reassertion of authority and control by the town council. The article also considers the way in which the bonfires reflected conflicting perceptions of masculinity and the long-running rivalry between the university and the town.

Keywords:

Cambridge, Cambridge University, Boer War, bonfire, disorder, Mafeking, Ladysmith, women's education, masculinity, police, students, undergraduates

Introduction

Anyone who has ever battled with officialdom will sympathise with the plight of Mr J.B.N. Hennessey, a retired Indian civil servant living in Dulwich who in March 1900 embarked on an ultimately fruitless correspondence with Cambridge City Council to get compensation for damage done to a house he owned in the city on the night news arrived of the relief of Ladysmith. His garden fence had been torn up by a crowd of overexcited undergraduates, carried off to the market place² and thrown onto a huge bonfire which they had built with wood they had scavenged in similar fashion from houses and

² The market place in Cambridge is known formally as Market Hill and is often referred to by that name, sometimes abbreviated to 'the hill', in documents of the period. Since it does not stand on any discernable slope, it is possible that 'Hill' might be a local term for an open area; an adjacent and equally level space is named Peas Hill. The term 'market place' was widely used at the time alongside the official name and is now in universal use, and is therefore used in this article.

public buildings across the city. Mr Hennessey, himself an MA of Jesus College, was shocked:

Except in the great Indian Mutiny & some kindred occasions, I have never known such undisguised arson, nor could I anticipate such conduct at Cambridge.³

Mr Hennessey undoubtedly had a point. As well as his garden fence, the students' search for combustible material encompassed advertising and builders' hoardings, market stalls, handcarts, planks, publicity boards from outside the New Theatre, wooden bicycle crates taken from behind a cycle shop, and the music stands and much of the seating from the city's bandstand. The students had also engaged in a lively firework battle with those in the houses overlooking the market square, which had resulted in numerous broken windows and fire damage to curtains and carpets.⁴ Others seeking compensation from the Council therefore included the Cambridge and District Advertising Company, claiming for twelve of its advertising panels, the Lion Hotel, which had had two armchairs brazenly taken from its smoking room, the Cambridge Ladies' Association and the New Theatre.⁵ All were turned down with the familiar bureaucrat's excuse that their claims were submitted too

³ Cambridgeshire Archives: CB/2/CL/24/11/3 Hennessey to Mayor, 18 Mar. 1900.

⁴ *Cambridge Graphic*, 10 Mar. 1900, 12-14; *Cambridge Express*, 3 Mar. 1900.

⁵ Cambs Arch.: CB/2/CL/24/11/3 *Letters &c. re Riot on March 1st 1900 the day of the Relief of Ladysmith.*

late or not on the proper forms. A rare exception was a Mrs Everett, whose claim for £1-9-6 for firework damage to her sitting room was granted; the Town Clerk explained to unsuccessful claimants that, having missed out on compensation for similar damage on a previous occasion, Mrs Everett had made sure to get her claim in on time and on the proper form.⁶

Riotous scenes of celebration were common throughout Britain on Ladysmith night and became even more famous when Mafeking was relieved later in the year. Oxford too saw various student-created bonfires, though Oxford undergraduates seem to have put their own college furniture on the fire first before scouring the town for other people's.⁷ What made Cambridge's bonfire so remarkable was the surprisingly harsh response of the city authorities. Appearing the next day before the Police Court, under the chairmanship of the Mayor, a group of six students was charged not, as might have been expected, with disorder but with theft of the various pieces of wood, for which they were given fines of £5 and £10 plus 12s 6d costs; two townsmen were fined 10s each plus costs and another, a labourer called William Bell with a long record of appearances before the bench, was sentenced to three months' hard labour.⁸ The Mayor, Mr E.A. Tillyard, commented that, "It was simply a disgrace that at

⁶ Ibid. Town Clerk to W.B. Redfern, n.d.

⁷ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 10th Mar. 1900, 7.

⁸ *Cambridge Weekly News*, 16 Mar. 1900; *Cambridge Daily News*, 2 Mar. 1900; *Cambridge Independent Press*, 2 Mar. 1900.

Cambridge occasions of public rejoicing should be marred by wanton destruction of property, especially on the part of members of the University”, adding that if necessary he would not shrink from sending undergraduates to prison.⁹

The sentences appeared harsh, especially when compared with the £1 fine imposed on a student for kneeling a policeman in the groin, and unequal in the discrepancy between the heavy fines imposed on the students and the lighter ones imposed on the townsmen, who had been found guilty of much the same offences.¹⁰ As one letter writer put it:

How comes it that an undergraduate is charged with “stealing” a crate from the back of 68, Regent-street and is fined £10 and costs, while a tailor, of City-road, is merely charged with “carrying away” a crate from the same premises, and is fined 10s and costs. The evidence in both these cases was identical, and if the description “stealing” was not justified in the second case, it certainly was not in the first. ... in Cambridge there are two laws, or, at any rate, two methods of administering the same law, one for the ‘Varsity man and another for the “Townee”.¹¹

⁹ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 2 Mar. 1900.

¹⁰ *Camb.Graph.*, 10 Mar. 1900, 9.

¹¹ *CDN*, 6 Mar. 1900.

Shortly after the sentences were passed, the *Cambridge Daily News* reported the opinion of an unnamed “eminent lawyer” that a conviction for felony would blight the career prospects of the undergraduates, debarring them from entry into a range of professions, including the Church, medicine and the armed forces.¹² Although a couple of wiser voices pointed out that this was highly unlikely, local opinion quickly turned in favour of leniency towards the students, and a petition was got up to the Home Secretary for a pardon for all those convicted, including William Bell, who was then starting his sentence in Cambridge prison.¹³ To general, though not universal, local satisfaction, the petition was granted within hours of arriving at the Home Office.¹⁴ Reporting on the stir the affair had caused in Cambridge, the *Oxford Journal* commented, inevitably, “We managed matters more quietly in Oxford.”¹⁵

Why did the “Ladysmith Rag”, as it was immediately dubbed in the local press, cause such controversy? Cambridge was generally indulgent towards student disruption, itself hardly an uncommon occurrence: a cartoon in the *Cambridge Graphic* showed a bedraggled undergraduate in torn cap and gown apologising to the

¹² Ibid., 5 Mar. 1900.

¹³ *Camb.Graph.*, 24 Mar. 1900. Dissenting voices were in *Camb.Ind.P.*, 16 Mar.1900, *Cambridge Review*, 8 Mar. 1900, 252.

¹⁴ *Camb.Graph.*, 24 Mar. 1900; *CWN*, 23 Mar.1900.

¹⁵ *Jackson's Oxford Journal* 10 Mar. 1900.

stately figure of “Lady Cantabrigia”, saying, “Thanks very much: I’ve given you a lot of trouble, but it shall not occur again – till next time.”¹⁶ Mr Tillyard, who also edited the *Cambridge Independent Press*, was understandably exasperated at the overturning of his judgement, commenting in an editorial:

The doctrine that an undergraduate is free to steal and destroy as much property as he pleases, provided he pays for the damage done, is a most mischievous one, and ought not to receive any countenance, direct or indirect, from the authorities of either University or Town.¹⁷

Tillyard’s point was reinforced by the fact that the damage from the Kitchener bonfire had been estimated at £500, of which only £95 was actually raised by subscription; at the time of the Ladysmith bonfire, various residents testified that they had not received a penny. However, Tillyard was even more concerned that the authorities were in danger of losing what was in effect a battle for control of the streets. After the Home Secretary’s pardon, the *Cambridge Independent Press* commented bitterly that, “The undergraduate is now all-powerful”, and sarcastically suggested that the city authorities send a humble embassy each year to the students, led by the Mayor with a halter round his neck, to pay them

¹⁶ *Camb.Graph.*, 24 Mar.1900.

¹⁷ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 2 Mar. 1900.

a sort of danegeld of “shutters, fences, hoardings, church notice boards, band stands, hand-carts, seats, boxes, bicycle crates, tool-houses, &c, &c,” in return for a year’s peace.¹⁸

Tillyard pointed out further that, far from being a time-honoured tradition, the practice of burning huge bonfires in the market place could be traced back precisely three years, to the University’s decision in 1897 not to grant degrees to women.¹⁹ That event had been celebrated with an enormous bonfire accompanied by a firework battle, which set the pattern for a second bonfire a year later, to celebrate the arrival in Cambridge of Lord Kitchener. The Kitchener bonfire, which had similarly been fuelled by wholesale theft of wooden articles, prompted angry claims for compensation, including Mrs Everett’s earlier unsuccessful one, and led to calls for measures to be taken to prevent a repetition.²⁰ On 3rd December 1898 the Vice Chancellor invited members of the town council to dinner and assured them that student bonfires without permission were henceforth forbidden and that the University officers would enforce his edict.²¹ The Ladysmith bonfire a little over a year later

¹⁸ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 9 Mar. 1900.

¹⁹ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 16 Mar. 1900. The point that the lighting of bonfires was a “tradition” of recent origin was supported by various correspondents, who claimed it had not been done in their own undergraduate days. A correspondent signing himself ‘Octogenarian’ wrote to the *Cambridge Chronicle* in 1902 to say that he had lived in college for seven years as a young man “and I certainly never saw a bonfire on Market Hill, and as far as I can remember, never heard of one.” *Camb.Chron.*, 13 Jun. 1902.

²⁰ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 2 Dec. 1898.

²¹ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 9 Mar. 1900.

was the undergraduates' gleefully defiant riposte to this assertion of university authority.

Just as worrying to the authorities was the way in which undergraduate disorder was allowing the "rough element" of the town to run amok, not only demolishing wooden structures for fuel but joining with the students in a series of violent assaults upon the police and the proctors, the university officers. To Tillyard, the students' behaviour was all the more reprehensible because it lowered them to the level of what he termed "the lowest cads of Barnwell" (a rapidly-growing working class area in the eastern part of the city). The remark provoked a storm of protest from the inhabitants of Barnwell, especially as not one of the townsmen brought before the Bench had actually been from there, and Tillyard had to retract his comments hurriedly.²² Such was his unpopularity, however, that his house had to be protected by ranks of police and proctors from a large crowd of students and townsmen who trudged to it a few days after the Rag, with the evident intention of attacking it.²³ The incident served to underscore Tillyard's main point: whether or not they realised it, these expensively-educated young gentlemen were providing an opportunity for the working-class population of Cambridge to defy authority and get away with it.

²² *Camb.Ind.P.*, 2 Mar. 1900; *CDN*, 2 Mar. 1900; *ibid.*, 3 Mar. 1900; *ibid.*, 5 Mar. 1900; 6 Mar. 1900.

²³ *CDN*, 3 Mar. 1900.

With the relief of Mafeking on the horizon, when even greater celebrations were expected, Tillyard was far from alone in his concern that what some regarded merely as horseplay needed to be effectively dealt with if the authorities were to retain any sort of control in the centre of the city. This article will consider the nature and significance of these three large bonfires and of the measures taken to break the cycle of disturbance in time for the expected Relief of Mafeking.

The Women's Degrees Bonfire

The 1897 proposal to admit women to degrees was the result of hope rather than expectation and was never likely to succeed. Although women's colleges had been taking students since 1871 and their students took the same examinations as the men, they were not admitted as full members of the university and were not allowed to take degrees.²⁴ Instead they were awarded a Tripos Certificate, which meant nothing to most people outside Cambridge, with the result that Cambridge women found themselves at a severe disadvantage when competing for jobs with full graduates of other universities.²⁵ The *prima facie* case for considering degrees for

²⁴ What became Girton College actually started life at Hitchin in Hertfordshire in 1869. Newnham College, which opened in 1871, was the first college to receive students within Cambridge itself. See Christopher N.L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge IV: 1870-1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993, 301-330; Elisabeth Leedham-Green, *A Concise History of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996, 176; G.R. Evans, *The University of Cambridge: a new history*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010; Rita Williams Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, rev.ed. 1998.

²⁵ *Cambridge University Reporter*, 1 Mar. 1897, 586-599.

women was established, but it was clear from the terms of the debate that it stood little chance of being accepted; even its proposers did not countenance women becoming full members of the university.²⁶

Nevertheless, the proposal generated much dismissive comment from those outraged at the idea of women penetrating Cambridge's all-male establishment and on the day of the vote in the Senate House, a large, almost exclusively male crowd assembled, fully equipped to make their feelings known. As members of Senate and MAs arrived at the Senate House for the vote, they were bombarded with fireworks and hundreds of bags of coloured flour, red and blue, enterprisingly provided by a local corn chandler at 6d a bag.²⁷ Effigies of female undergraduates were paraded and suspended above the crowd, including one mounted on a bicycle, who had a hose trained on her which knocked her head off, before she was carried off and her sodden remains unceremoniously dumped at the gates of Newnham College.²⁸ The outcome of the vote, a defeat for the women's cause by 1,713 to 662, provoked a fresh round of

²⁶ *Cam.Uni.Rep.*, 1 Mar. 1897, 586; *ibid.*, 26 Mar. 1897; *ibid.*, 4 May 1897, which includes the redraft of the original proposal to make it even clearer that neither the proposed women graduates nor women undergraduates were to become full members of the university.

²⁷ *Camb.Rev.*, 27 May 1897, 375; *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897.

²⁸ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897. It was accompanied by a large crowd apparently intent on storming the college. They were deterred by the college dons assembled in front of the firmly closed gates, who appealed successfully to their "gentlemanly instincts" (Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge*, 116).

celebration and then, after a pause for coffee and buns, the crowd reconvened in the market place, where they engaged in the second firework battle of the day, this time with the people looking out of upstairs windows.²⁹ Meanwhile students and townsmen joined forces to start a bonfire opposite the offices of the *Cambridge Independent Press*, using nearby market stalls for fuel.³⁰ This was an appropriate place to choose, as the paper had been a consistent supporter of the Women's Degrees proposal, and it was fierce in its denunciation of the "academic timidity" which had scuppered it.³¹ Although the general tone of the disorder was good humoured (roman candles which went neatly through open windows were greeted by cries of, "Good shot, sir! Another, sir! Another!" as if it were a game of cricket) and there was general praise for the restraint shown by the police, local opinion was still taken aback by this outburst of disorder.³² The *Cambridge Chronicle* described the scene as "the Barbarians at Play" and hoped that things would calm down now that "the undergraduates have had their fling".³³

The Kitchener Bonfire

²⁹ *Camb.Chron.*, 28 May 1900. Several fireworks were also let off inside the Senate House, during the vote: *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897.

³⁰ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Camb.Chron.* 28 May 1897.

³³ *Ibid.*

All such hopes were dispelled, however, by the patriotic hysteria with which Cambridge greeted the arrival, a year later, of Lord Kitchener, *Sirdar* (Commander) of the Egyptian army, fresh from his victory in the Sudan, to be awarded an honorary degree and the freedom of the city. Honorary degree ceremonies were notoriously rowdy occasions, with students packing the gallery to heckle the dignitaries below; on this occasion students suspended the figure of a Dervish above the heads of the assembled academics and their guests while spraying them with water from a hose.³⁴ Kitchener himself seemed more amused than offended by the rowdiness until it began to detract too much from the solemnity of the occasion, when his “smile grew fainter, and ultimately vanished as the interruptions continued.”³⁵ He submitted with a good grace to having his horses unhitched and his open carriage pulled through the streets by the undergraduates, but there was general disapproval of attempts to break into the Vice Chancellor’s garden while he was entertaining the *Sirdar* to lunch and into an evening function at Christ’s College, where Kitchener was staying.³⁶

34 *Camb.Chron.*, 25 Nov. 1898. The decorum of honorary degree ceremonies was not helped by the long Latin speeches, without any English translation available, with which the Public Orator hailed the various distinguished, often foreign, graduands. Undergraduates were in the habit of drowning the speech out with cries of, “Who are you?” *Camb.Rev.*, 29 Apr. 1897.

35 *Camb.Ind.P.* 25 November 1898.

36 *Camb.Rev.*, 1 Dec.1898. ‘Sirdar’ was Kitchener’s title as commander of the Egyptian army and was the title by which he was generally referred to throughout his visit to Cambridge.

The day was marred by an unfortunate incident in which the press of the crowd outside the Senate House caused the railings to collapse, injuring some people quite badly.³⁷ However, the main expression of public disapproval was reserved for the bonfire, of “gigantic proportions” and fuelled, in addition to the now usual hoardings and handcarts, by wood pillaged from college gardens along the Backs and even the goal posts from Clare College’s rugby ground.³⁸ The students’ intention was to produce a bigger blaze than the Women’s Degrees bonfire and it was generally thought they had succeeded: the Kitchener bonfire stretched from one end of the market place to the other and generated enough heat to shatter and melt a street lamp.³⁹ Attempts by the police and proctors to apprehend troublemakers led to running fist fights, both with the police and between undergraduates and townsmen; indeed, at one point a group of students intervened to rescue a proctor surrounded by “the rougher section of the townspeople”.⁴⁰ As the people of Cambridge surveyed the damage the next morning – one pub in the market place was described as looking as if it had been sacked by an invading army – the Captains of the university sports clubs gave an undertaking to raise a fund to compensate people for the

³⁷ *CWN*, 25 Nov. 1898.

³⁸ *CWN*, 25 Nov. 1898; *Camb.Chron.*, 25 Nov. 1898; *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898, 108.

³⁹ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 2 Dec. 1898; *Camb.Chron.*, 25 Nov. 1898; *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898, 108.

⁴⁰ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 23 Nov. 1898.

damage to their property.⁴¹ However the more urgent question was how to avoid a repetition of the disorder: indeed, it had to be asked whether the rule of law applied in Cambridge or not. One householder and member of the Senate was not at all sure that it did:

...the inhabitants of the town perceive that they are at the mercy of an irresponsible organised mob, which at any moment of excitement may wreck their premises and wantonly destroy their property.⁴²

The Ladysmith “Rag”, barely eighteen months later, seemed to confirm his pessimism.

“What can be expected of a pro-Boer?”

As British forces closed in on Mafeking in the late spring of 1900, therefore, the authorities in Cambridge had to work out a way of defusing a complex power struggle being fought out in its streets between the undergraduates, young working-class townsmen, and the police and proctors. Their problem was compounded by the fact that the Mayor had lost much of his moral authority by his comments about “Barnwell cads” and by having his judgement

⁴¹ *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898, 108; 21 Jan. 1900.

⁴² *Camb.Chron.*, 2 Dec. 1898.

overturned by the Home Secretary. Tillyard, a Liberal, strict non-conformist and teetotaler, dubbed by the *Cambridge Graphic* “a nineteenth-century Ironside”, was already the subject of local suspicion for his critical editorial stance in the *Cambridge Independent Press* towards the war.⁴³ While not opposing it outright, he was sceptical about the need for resorting to arms in the first place and he apportioned blame in equal portions to the two sides:

The war party at home has vast resources at its command, and where there is plenty of money in the background there are always clever men, willing to make the worse appear the better reason. Among the Boers there has also been a war party, reinforced by a foreign element, which has not been above using ignorance and prejudice for its own schemes of aggrandisement, and the extreme men on both sides have succeeded in embroiling the two nations.⁴⁴

Even more provocatively, he refused to subscribe to the general belief that the British were fighting for freedom and civil liberty against an oppressive Transvaaler government and portrayed the war as a straightforward grab for territory:

⁴³ *Camb.Graph.*, 3 Feb. 1900.

⁴⁴ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 22 Dec. 1899.

The war in South Africa is for supremacy, whether Boer or Briton shall have the upper hand over certain territory, and the brute beasts fight in exactly the same way. Of course, all this is glossed over with fine words, and some better motives come in, but at bottom, as in every war, so in this war, there is a layer of crude savagery.⁴⁵

To much local opinion, Tillyard's stance on the war and his harsh treatment of the patriotic undergraduates seemed all of a piece: he saw the same animal savagery in the statesmen who launched the war and in the undergraduates who celebrated it. "What," asked a disgusted correspondent to the *Cambridge Independent Press's* rival, the *Cambridge Daily News*, "can be expected from a pro-Boer?"⁴⁶

For Cambridge, therefore, the relief of Mafeking, when it came, threatened to be a make-or-break moment in this triangular contest for control between the authorities, the undergraduates and the townsmen. If the last two groups succeeded in raising a fourth bonfire in the market place, feeding it again with purloined wood, it would be as good as an admission by the authorities that they were powerless to protect either private or public property in the city

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *CDN*, 6 Mar. 1900. One correspondent wrote to the *Cambridge Daily News* to suggest that the Bench was "mainly composed of little Englishers". *CDN*, 5 Mar. 1900.

centre from the power of the student body and its “townie” allies, even when the intention to raise a bonfire was open knowledge.

Three themes can be discerned in this developing conflict in the Cambridge of 1900: first, the apparently unstoppable rise of the power of the Undergraduate; secondly, a clash of significantly different understandings of manliness; and thirdly, the continuing rivalry for control of Cambridge between the University and the Town. All of these had to be taken into consideration by the authorities as they drew up their plans for the expected celebrations on Mafeking Night.

The Undergraduate

It is difficult to appreciate nowadays the sheer power exercised by the late nineteenth-century undergraduate body in Oxford and Cambridge. Although neither university was as exclusively recruited from the landed elite as is often popularly supposed, the experience of attending either “Varsity” allowed these young men to form a ruling elite of their own.⁴⁷ Nearly all the most familiar traditional characteristics of Oxford and Cambridge, such as the sporting clubs, the Boat Race, the two Unions, the theatrical societies, dining clubs

⁴⁷ Brooke points out that “there was also a significant element in Cambridge from really poor homes.” Brooke, *Hist. Uni Camb.*, 250-1, 292. The unfortunate Mr Noaks in Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson* is a good example of the figure of the Oxford undergraduate of modest background portrayed in satirical fiction. Beerbohm said of himself that he was not unpopular at school; “It is Oxford that has made me insufferable”. *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, 61:11.

and the tradition of celebrating the end of each academic year with a spectacular ball, as well as the whole paraphernalia of college-coloured caps, blazers, ties and scarves, either started or flourished in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁸ All of these societies and institutions were run by the undergraduates themselves. With college boathouses springing up along the Cam, the river an undergraduate playground and more land given over to college playing fields, the undergraduate was literally changing the face of the city for his own convenience and pleasure. Cambridge had long resented the way in which the University dominated the life of the town, but these late Victorian young lords really could regard the town as a sort of private estate which existed largely for the convenience and pleasure of the “Varsity”.

One way in which undergraduates displayed their swagger and power was by a relentless refusal to be awed by the university authorities or the dignity of university occasions; one don described the annual honorary degree ceremony as “hardly better than an exhibition of rowdyism”.⁴⁹ The insolent rough treatment handed out to the dons arriving for the Women’s Degrees vote was merely an extreme example of the sort of “rag” which students habitually indulged in on university occasions. The undergraduate press was

⁴⁸ The first college boat clubs were founded in 1825 and Fenner’s, the university cricket ground, dates from 1852. Most sports grounds and boathouses date from much later in the century. Brooke, *Hist.Uni.Camb.*, 292.

⁴⁹ *Camb.Rev.*, 1 Dec. 1898, 122.

open in its defiance of authority: “Why is it that rioting is such a lost art at the older Universities?” asked *Granta*, a couple of weeks before the Kitchener bonfire: “Is it too much to hope that every University man should experience at least once the surprising joy of organised, unthinking mob rule?”⁵⁰ Undergraduates were contemptuous of the authority of the police or the Town Council: after the Kitchener bonfire *Granta* noted scornfully that, “placards had been posted [in the market place] by an egregious and impotent Council forbidding bonfires and making the letting off of fireworks A PENAL OFFENCE”; it is hardly surprising that so little notice was taken of the Vice Chancellor’s edict.⁵¹ As Mafeking night approached one nervous don even wrote to the Town Clerk to advise him to make sure the market stalls were cleared away well before the students came out of hall and to drop plans for a procession and a band, because “that is not to the undergraduates’ mind”.⁵²

The power of the overmighty undergraduate was obvious to the *Cambridge Independent Press* from the moment the Women’s Degrees proposal was defeated. Undergraduates had threatened to decamp to Oxford if the proposal were passed, and the paper was convinced that this had been the deciding factor in the outcome:

“The appearance of the undergraduate as the controlling-force in

⁵⁰ *Granta*, 12 Nov. 1898. The sentiment may have been intended satirically, but nothing else about the context suggests it is to be read other than seriously.

⁵¹ *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898.

⁵² Cambs. Arch.: CB/2/CL/24/11/2 J.H. Gray to Town Clerk, 19 May 1900.

University affairs", it commented, "is the great event of the week".⁵³ In theory, the university's authority over the students was exercised by the proctors and their university constables, known universally as bulldogs. However, the three bonfires had demonstrated the inadequacy of the proctoral system in practice if the student body as a whole chose to defy it. Far from imposing their own authority on the undergraduates, the proctors had frequently had to call on undergraduates to rescue them from hostile townspeople.⁵⁴ In the aftermath of the Ladysmith bonfire the proctors even wrote to the Council Watch Committee criticising the police for not having done more to prevent it and arguing, not entirely convincingly, that it had been townsmen and not undergraduates who had started the bonfire:

The Proctors are unanimous in thinking that the bonfire on that occasion was not due to members of the University and that had it not been for the actions of others there would probably have been nothing more than a noisy demonstration in the streets.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897. See also G.R. Evans, *Uni. Camb. New Hist.*, 15-17; *Cam.Uni.Rep.* 1 Mar. 1897, 559.

⁵⁴ *Camb.Rev.*, 27 May 1897, 325; *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 Nov. 1898; Cambs. Arch.: CB/2/CL/3/24/2 Watch Committee, Minutes, 12 March 1900, 581: Vice Chancellor to Mayor, 12 March 1900.

⁵⁵ Cambs. Arc.: CB/2/CL/3/24/2 Watch Committee, Minutes, 12 March 1900, 581. All written reports of the evening's event agree that the bonfire was lit by students and townsmen in at least equal numbers. The proctors claimed that large numbers of students were attending the New Theatre and knew nothing of the bonfire until it was lit; however, the review of the show that appeared in the *Cambridge Daily News* made it clear that it was sparsely attended. *CDN*, 2 Mar. 1900.

The *Cambridge Independent Press* was convinced that the onus now lay on the University to reassert its authority over its junior members:

It must be restored to what it was before, nay more, it must be carried to a higher standard, for it has always been short of perfection.⁵⁶

That meant it would be essential for the University to be involved in planning for Mafeking night, so that the authority of its proctors could be successfully asserted without offering students or townspeople the chance to undermine it.

Competing Visions of Manliness

At the heart of each of the three bonfires was an exuberant celebration of triumphant manliness. This is most obviously true of the 1897 Women's Degrees bonfire, which celebrated the defeat of what was seen as an attempt by women to move away from their scarcely tolerated presence on the outskirts of the university into

⁵⁶ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 16 Mar. 1900.

the fraternity of undergraduates and graduates that lay at its heart. This was, after all, a world in which undergraduates were commonly referred to simply as “the men”, and the MAs who travelled to Cambridge for the vote were still very much part of this boisterous male world: the *Cambridge Review* reported that most of them “heartily enjoyed the fun”, one being heard to remark, at the height of the firework battle at the Senate House, “Well, I was in two minds about coming up this morning, but I wouldn’t have missed this for £10”.⁵⁷ “The men” were reasserting male dominance of Cambridge’s central spaces, King’s Parade and the Senate House for the university, the adjacent market place for the town. Male contempt for the women who had tried to intrude on their preserve was clear from the treatment of the effigies of female undergraduates which were brandished aloft and then, with obvious physical and sexual symbolism, pelted with missiles as soon as the outcome of the vote was known.⁵⁸

There are only fleeting references to the presence of women at any of the bonfires. All the main participants were men; the only form of female participation was the vicarious presence of the singer Miss

⁵⁷ *Camb.Rev.*, 20 May 1897, 358. The *Times* had helpfully publicised train times from King’s Cross for the benefit of MAs wishing to travel to Cambridge to vote against the proposal. Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge*, 115.

⁵⁸ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897 describes “a grotesque effigy of a girl graduate” suspended from an upper window and a statue of Dr Caius (founder of Gonville and Caius College) decked in wig and dress. Placards carried by the crowd included, “Varsity for Men, and Men for the ‘Varsity!” and “Frustrate Feminine Fanatics”.

Clara Butt, whose face was on some of the theatre hoardings thrown into the Ladysmith bonfire while she herself was singing in the Guildhall.⁵⁹ The most direct reference to a female presence serves to underline the masculinity of the whole event:

The heat drives the crowd back, and the GOLDEN CONFETTI FROM THE FIRE is causing much alarm to the ladies who have not hesitated to mingle in the crowd. They are like moths, and so they must get their wings burnt.⁶⁰

The fire, rather like the university itself, is thus presented as dangerously attractive to women, but they should draw back before they get hurt by powerful forces they are ill-equipped to understand.

The masculinity of the university was closely linked to that of the public schools from which most of its undergraduates came, a physical masculinity heavily based on team sport and pugilism: the students were described as “carrying on a sort of Rugby ‘scrum’” with the police outside Christ’s college during the Women’s Degrees riot and, as we have seen, the firing of fireworks and squibs was treated as a sort of game of cricket.⁶¹ An undergraduate committee consisting of the heads of the main sports clubs organised the

⁵⁹ *Camb Express*, 3 Mar. 1900.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Camb.Chron.*, 28 May 1900.

gatherings and laid down rules for keeping the disorder within the bounds of gentlemanly behaviour. Thus, throwing bags of flour or soft oranges was acceptable; throwing eggs, as some townspeople did, was not and the committee organising gave orders for the practice to be stopped by force (though one unfortunate don, who was first pelted by students with flour while walking down Trinity Street and then had a jug of water poured on him from an upstairs college window might have thought the difference between eggs and coloured flour and water too slight to be worth worrying about).⁶²

There were even unwritten but clear rules about the correct way in which to assault the police. A policeman might fairly be knocked down in order to release his prisoner; he should not be trampled upon, however, unless it was deemed that he had initiated an assault upon the crowd.⁶³ It was entirely in order to take a policeman prisoner: one policeman on Ladysmith night was handcuffed with his own handcuffs while students went through his pockets.⁶⁴

Policemen's helmets were a legitimate target, sometimes being

⁶² For the unfortunate don, see *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897. For attitudes towards different missiles, see *Camb.Rev.*, 27 May 1897, 375. The women's columnist of the *Cambridge Independent Press* agreed that throwing rotten eggs belonged with "lewd fellows of the baser sort", but insisted that, nevertheless, some undergraduates had sunk to throwing them. *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897.

⁶³ See, for example, *Camb.Express*, 26 May 1900.

⁶⁴ *CDN*, 2 Mar. 1900. In Oxford on Mafeking night a brave policeman who tried to prevent the students taking a panel of builders' hoarding was carried through the streets to the bonfire on top of the hoarding. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 26 May 1900.

thrown on the fire but more usually kept as trophies.⁶⁵ Punching a policeman was manly and acceptable, apparently even to the police themselves; kicking or, worse, carrying knives, was ungentlemanly and unacceptable, the sort of behaviour to be expected of townsmen.⁶⁶ The policeman giving evidence against the undergraduate accused of kicking him in the groin and on the shins testified that he had asked the accused “if he called himself a gentleman for kicking like that, and he made no reply”.⁶⁷ Unlike the undergraduates accused of taking wood, who freely admitted what they had done, the defendant in this case strongly denied the charge, his defence counsel pleading that:

A sharp distinction might be drawn between the assaults made by members of the criminal class or by men under the influence of liquor, and these assaults which did take place at times in university towns.⁶⁸

In other words such a deliberate and violent assault could not, by definition, have been carried out by an undergraduate and could

⁶⁵ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897, *Camb.Chron.*, 28 May 1897, *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 Nov. 1898. The Bertie Wooster stories of PG Wodehouse have the stealing of policemen’s helmets, learned at Oxford or Cambridge and traditionally practised on Boat Race night, as a recurring theme.

⁶⁶ *Camb.Rev.*, 10 Nov. 1898. At the time of the Mafeking night bonfire, when police were gathered in the market place in case of trouble, a Cambridge Special Constable boasted proudly to one of the policemen drafted in from outside of the Cambridge undergraduates’ ability to punch. *Camb.Express*, 26 May 1900.

⁶⁷ *CWN*, 16 Mar. 1900.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

only have been carried out by a townsman; the constable, in understandable agony, must simply have reached out and grabbed the first person to hand as the culprit.⁶⁹ Such court cases, involving allegations of ungentlemanly fighting, had the potential to undermine the case for “manly” bonfires; more usually, however, the police were praised for the “manly” way in which they put up with their rough treatment.⁷⁰

The Kitchener and Ladysmith bonfires added the excitement of celebrating military success to this triumphant assertion of masculinity. Both Kitchener and Sir Redvers Buller, the commander who had relieved Ladysmith, presented strong, manly figures, with firm jaws and splendidly luxuriant moustaches; the same was true of Baden-Powell for the Mafeking celebrations later in the year. An undergraduate who climbed up a lamp post during the Ladysmith rag (and was transferred overhead by the crowd to another to escape the police), was actually trying to deliver an address to the

⁶⁹ Ibid. After lengthy deliberation, the Bench found the defendant guilty but imposed a fine of only £1. There seems to have been some doubt about whether or not the policeman had correctly identified his assailant; the case was also being heard while the controversy over the theft convictions was at its height, so the bench, again chaired by Tillyard, may have erred on the side of caution. In any case, counsel for the defendant gave immediate notice of an appeal.

⁷⁰ *Camb.Chron.*, 28 May 1897. The paper also noted that “throughout the town, there is but one consensus of opinion respecting the behaviour of the Police; everyone agrees that they displayed the greatest good feeling and intelligence during the most trying time of probation, and in admitting this the college students themselves have been foremost.” It went on to suggest a special Police Recognition Fund, which would present each policeman in the Borough Force half a guinea, as a reward for their putting up with being beaten up on celebratory occasions. “It is anticipated that large numbers will respond heartily”, the paper added, rather optimistically. There is no evidence that anyone subscribed a penny.

crowd on the virtues of “Good old Buller”.⁷¹ Moreover, both Kitchener and Buller had defeated enemies who were routinely viewed as uncivilised and unmanly. The popular image of the Sudanese was that of a “fanatical” Dervish, and precisely such a figure was suspended from the gallery of the Senate House for Kitchener’s visit, while President Kruger was regarded with withering contempt as scarcely human. A cartoon in the *Cambridge Graphic* imagined a sort of parody of Kitchener’s visit, with Kruger being paraded through the town on a rail, ducked in the river, pummelled into the ground by the rugby XV, and eventually displayed as a scientific specimen, squashed into a glass jar, in the zoology laboratories.⁷² Boers, Dervishes and women undergraduates were all seen as unmanly figures who had paid the price for daring to stand up to the overwhelming power of British manly supremacy.⁷³

The bonfires provided an opportunity for students to gain vicarious experience of battle, the ultimate manly experience. Like everywhere else in the country, Cambridge took a keen interest in

⁷¹ It was a curious feature of Kitchener’s public image that he seldom needed to be referred to in posters or headlines by name. The Cambridge papers mostly referred to him simply as the Sirdar, The Cambridge Weekly News printing a suitably stern-faced portrait of him in a fez labelled “the Sirdar” and headlined “Gordon’s Avenger”. *Cambridge Weekly News*, 25 November 1898.

⁷² *Camb.Graph.*, 3 Feb. 1900.

⁷³ A cartoon in the *Cambridge Graphic* for 14 April 1900 showed a hapless Kruger in goal as various British generals, portrayed with appropriately noble profiles, approached to shoot at his goal with a football marked ‘British Supremacy’. Kruger holds a white flag in his hand, a reference to the stories circulating in Britain of Boers having misused the white flag, opening fire after apparently having surrendered, which was seen as another example of unsportsmanlike and unmanly conduct on the part of the Boers.

the Boer War: the local press carried regular updates on the Cambridge men who had volunteered for service, including the Cambridge University Rifle Volunteers, the only university corps actually to gain a battle honour for service in South Africa, and whose band played in the marketplace on Ladysmith night.⁷⁴ Students arrived for the bonfires on each occasion armed with pockets full of fireworks and the houses on the market square were subjected to a sort of artillery bombardment in miniature. The newspaper accounts of the bonfires were full of military language and analogy: “a pretty warfare”, “mimic bombardment”, “toy artillery warfare”, “a well organised defensive force”, “a miniature battle”.⁷⁵

Not everyone, however, was impressed by these manly displays of what the *Cambridge Review* called “the glorious Saturnalia of disorder”.⁷⁶ The women’s columnist of the *Cambridge Independent Press* reported the words of one man, who, on hearing about Women’s Degrees riot, exclaimed, “that it made him ashamed of being a man”.⁷⁷ By comparing them to “Barnwell cads”, Tillyard had

⁷⁴ The Cambridge University Rifle Volunteers did not go to the war as a unit, but some of its members served in the Suffolk Volunteers and therefore the unit qualified for the battle honour. Hew Strachan, *The History of the Cambridge University Officers Training Corps*, Tunbridge Wells: Midas Books, 1976, 91-105:92.

⁷⁵ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897; *ibid.*; *Camb.Chron.*, 28 May 1897; *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 Nov. 1898; *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Camb.Rev.*, 27 May 1897, 574.

⁷⁷ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 May 1897.

suggested that the undergraduates' behaviour had been about as unmanly as it was possible to be: in his editorial role he hit even harder, saying of the centre of Cambridge after the Kitchener riot that it looked "like a town which had been looted by a party of marauding Boers".⁷⁸ Similarly, a woman protested against the students pulling up her garden fence, screaming out at them, "Do you call yourselves gentlemen?" "The question," noted the *Cambridge Express*, "is not answered."⁷⁹ One of the *Cambridge Independent Press's* readers was quite certain that the students had fallen well short of the masculine ideal:

For Heaven's sake let us have a better exhibition of what the greatest leader of men in modern times called

MANHOOD.⁸⁰

The students could not be expected to take much notice of Tillyard and the liberal *Cambridge Independent Press*, but they would give more weight to the opinion of J.W. Clark, the University Registrar, who asked of their conduct at the Kitchener bonfire:

⁷⁸ Ibid., 16 Mar. 1900. Similarly, the *Cambridge Review* described the Kitchener rioters as behaving 'in a manner more befitting Dervishes of the Sudan than English gentlemen.' *Camb.Rev.*, 1 Dec. 1898.

⁷⁹ *Camb.Express*, 3 Mar. 1900.

⁸⁰ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 9 Mar. 1900.

Why did the bonfire have to be in the market place? Why did the fuel have to be stolen? And, above all, why had the students stooped so low as to 'obtain the co-operation of the lowest riff-raff of the town in plundering the shops of respectable tradesmen and in wrecking college gardens?'⁸¹

These different understandings of the most appropriate form of masculinity to adopt in moments of national celebration had important implications for the planning of Mafeking night. A bonfire was generally expected, as a suitably masculine form of celebratory destruction, as was military music and display, but the bonfire needed to be as different as possible from the three market place bonfires. Those had been intended as much for the destruction of property as for creating a suitable atmosphere of rejoicing: what people turned out to watch was not simply the fire itself but the actual stoking of it and the frenzied search for wood. These fires were elemental, savage phenomena, which crept across the market place, "in the shape of a gigantic slug", as *Granta* put it, because the heat was so intense it forced people to deposit wood at the fire edge rather than its heart.⁸² The students divested themselves of their caps and gowns as they piled more wood onto the flames and were described as looking "like glorified stokers", or even demons.⁸³

⁸¹ *Camb.Rev.*, 1 Dec. 1898, 122. The Registry is a senior administrator within the University of Cambridge; the title is more normally 'Registrar'.

⁸² *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898, 108.

⁸³ *Camb.Express*, 3 March 1900. The *Cambridge Independent Press* said of the Kitchener bonfire that, 'Once started the demon of destruction seemed to possess

Mafeking night's bonfire, therefore, had to be large enough to stand comparison with the market place ones, but it should generate excitement purely from its aesthetic spectacle, rather than from the process of creating it. Fireworks, similarly, should be presented in display form only, and not as ammunition to be fired against neighbouring houses.

"Town and Gown"

One of the most alarming aspects of the bonfires from the point of view of the authorities was the way in which the undergraduates had teamed up with the local youths. Cambridge had a long history of rivalry between "town" and "gown" at all levels, inevitable, perhaps, in a town so dominated by its university.⁸⁴ The town had long resented the legal powers over its commercial life that the university enjoyed and resentment sometimes flared into street fights between students and townsmen: the terms "town" and "gown" (by the late nineteenth century the latter was often replaced by "'Varsity!") were rallying cries to summon help in street fights. Tradition held that the market place would be the venue for an annual town and gown showdown each November 5th and crowds would gather to watch, though by the 1890s "the Fifth's" reputation

the students.' (*Camb.Ind.P.*, 25 Nov. 1900). *Granta* described them as looking like DEMONS STOKING INFERNAL FIRES. 26 Nov. 1898, 108.

⁸⁴ For the long story of town and gown rivalry in Cambridge, see Rowland Parker, *Town and Gown*, Cambridge: Stephens, 1983.

had outstripped reality and *Granta* described it as fizzling out like a damp squib.⁸⁵

Since the 1856 Cambridge Award Act many of the university's legal rights over the life of the town had gone and the rigid social separation that had long existed between the two communities was beginning to weaken. Since 1882 dons had been allowed to marry and live outside college, and they began to take large houses in the expanding west and north parts of Cambridge, where they combined their academic roles with their new ones as local residents and ratepayers.⁸⁶ Under the 1889 Local Government Act, six members of the town council were to be university representatives. The most important symbolism of the weakening of the university's hold on the lives of the local citizens was the closure in 1901 of the Spinning House, a female House of Correction run by the university into which the proctors had the right to send any women they suspected of soliciting on the street. It was a much resented institution and had been the subject of a couple of celebrated successful legal challenges in the 1890s.⁸⁷ It was to be replaced by a new police station, which would come under the aegis of the joint town and university Watch Committee, chaired by the mayor. The building work was still going on in March 1900 and it is

⁸⁵ *Granta*, 12 Nov. 1898, 68.

⁸⁶ Brooke, *Hist.Uni.Camb.*, 292.

⁸⁷ Parker, *Town and Gown*, 151.

perhaps significant that in the Ladysmith Rag the old Spinning House was one of the first targets in the hunt for builders' hoardings to throw on the bonfire.

However, while Cambridge expanded westward to cater for its affluent professional middle classes, industrial development was also expanding it eastwards, in the suburbs of Barnwell and Romsey, where streets of cheap terraced housing sprang up to house railway and industrial workers.⁸⁸ Like other towns, Cambridge was nervous of the industrial working classes, who were often designated by derogatory terms such as "rough" or "lowest elements". Students very seldom ventured into these areas, so the apparent alliance of students and "townies" at the bonfires was an unwelcome surprise, especially since, as *Granta* pointed out, the question of degrees for women was of complete indifference to most of the local population.⁸⁹ Some town involvement, like that of the helpful corn chandler, was along what might be called traditional lines, other examples might appear more spontaneous or opportunistic:

Then a townsman lent a sturdy hand [to a student tearing a shutter from its hinges] and town and gown, on destruction bent, succeeded.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Tony Kirby and Susan Oosthuizen, *An Atlas of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire History*, Centre for Regional Studies, Anglia Polytechnic University, 2000, 74-5.

⁸⁹ *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898, 67.

⁹⁰ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 28 Nov.1898.

However, it soon became clear that many “townies” were out to attack any authority figures, proctors as well as police. The *Cambridge Review* thought it amusing that “the Town thought to propitiate the favour of the gownsmen by ‘going for’ the Proctors, which was instantly regarded as a liberty”.⁹¹ Certainly the alliance of undergraduates and “townies” was not a deep one: townsmen who did not keep to the undergraduate code of disorder were liable to find the students turning on them, as *Granta* noted after the Kitchener bonfire:

...the rougher elements from Newmarket indulged in unseemly remarks, which in several cases were repressed by the Undergraduates, and certain SPORADIC SCRIMMAGES consequently occurred.⁹²

Students were happy to accept town help in constructing the bonfires, but on the whole they preferred to have these occasions to themselves, without the involvement of “gangs of rough townsmen”.⁹³ Answering accusations of going too far over the Kitchener bonfire, one student wrote that, while the students had sought only to celebrate with a bonfire, it was “the riff-raff of the

⁹¹ *Camb.Rev.*, 27 May 1897, 375.

⁹² *Granta*, 26 Nov. 1898, 108.

⁹³ *CDN*, 3 Mar 1900.

Town” who had wrecked a summer house and tried to sell its pieces to the students, and “Town roughs” who had broken a tobacconist’s window and stolen £20 of his stock.⁹⁴ One correspondent, voicing a common theme in town-gown bickering, thought the townsmen ought to reflect on how much they owed their own prosperity to the presence of the university before they started casting aspersions about undergraduates:

As a matter of fact *all* the windows that were broken were smashed by townsmen. Of this I and others were witnesses. Not one pane of glass on the square was broken by an undergraduate.

It is absurd to imply that the University should pay for damage done by the townspeople, and moreover, you seem to have quite forgotten the fact that the prosperity, nay, the very existence and livelihood of the town depends upon University men, and a very good picking the town gets out of the ‘Varsity men.⁹⁵

Ironically, the fact that the students had worked alongside townspeople in building the bonfires made it less clear than it would otherwise have been exactly where the blame lay, and opened the

⁹⁴ *Camb.Chron.*, 9 Dec.1898. It was also pointed out of William Bell, the much-sentenced townsmen sentenced to three months after the Ladysmith Rag, that he had taken wood for his own use rather than for the bonfire. *Times*, 20 Mar. 1900, 6.

⁹⁵ *CDN*, 5 Mar. 1900.

door to accusations and counter-accusations of negligence or failure. For precisely this reason, the *Cambridge Daily News* feared that the Rag “imperils the good understanding that had been arrived at between the Town and the University”.⁹⁶ The challenge of Cambridge’s Mafeking Night celebrations would therefore be to heal the town-gown alliance at the top while avoiding a town-gown alliance in the street.

The Mafeking Night Bonfire

Preparations for Mafeking Night were therefore made with great care. They were to be handled by a special Bonfire Committee, with representatives from both town and university. Normally the Mayor might have been expected to chair such a committee but the Vice Chancellor made it clear that he thought neither he nor the Mayor should be on it and this view was communicated to Tillyard by the Town Clerk.⁹⁷ Instead, the committee was to be chaired by the Deputy Mayor, Alderman Horace Darwin. Darwin, the youngest son of the naturalist, was immediately acceptable to all sides: he came from an impeccably “gown” family, but he ran a successful scientific instrument business in the city and had already served once as Mayor.⁹⁸ Darwin wisely co-opted the informal undergraduate

⁹⁶ Ibid., 2 Mar. 1900.

⁹⁷ Cambs.Arch.: CB/2/CL/24/11/2 Town Clerk to Tillyard, May 1900.

⁹⁸ His niece, Gwen Raverat, recorded that, “We children thought it grand that he should be Mayor; but at the same time we felt that it was very kind and condescending of him to consort with the Town on equal terms like that! The University and the Town kept themselves to themselves in those days; Uncle Horace tried hard to bring them closer together.” Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece: a*

celebrations committee, consisting of the Captains of all the major sports clubs plus the President of the Cambridge Union; their names were prominently listed at the bottom of all notices issued by the Bonfire Committee. That the celebration should take the form of a bonfire was clear from the start; it was equally clear that it should not be in the Market Place. One possibility was Parker's Piece, a large open area of land on the south side of the city centre; this was rejected in favour of Midsummer Common, a larger open area along the riverside, adjoining Jesus Green and therefore with very few houses in its vicinity.⁹⁹ It was pointed out in a letter to Tillyard that the chosen site had the added advantage of being much further from his house.¹⁰⁰

Where the market place bonfires had crept along the ground as they grew, the Mafeking bonfire was to be high, properly constructed by the Borough Surveyor. Wood was to be freely donated at special collecting points around the town, designated as such by official notices. The growing pile was fenced off with police on guard to prevent undergraduates from attempting to fire it prematurely: the bonfire was to be ceremoniously lit by the Deputy Mayor, who would

Cambridge Childhood, London: Faber and Faber, 1970, 204. For Darwin's career in business see M.J.G. Cattermole and A.F. Wolfe, *Horace Darwin's Shop: a History of the Cambridge Scientific Instrument Company, 1878-1968*, Bristol and Boston: Adams Hilger, 1987.

99 Cambs.Arch.: CB/2/CL/24/11/2 Bonfire Committee, Minutes, 14 May 1900.

100 Cambs.Arch.: CB/2/CL/24/11/2 Town Clerk to Tillyard, May 1900. It was a common complaint of the Oxford bonfires, which were held in the public streets, that they were dangerously close to houses and shops. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 10 Mar. 1900, 7.

light a trail of gunpowder leading to a small barrel of gunpowder at the bonfire's centre, which would then ignite the pile. The bonfire would carry appropriate patriotic and anti-Boer messages, such as "Cheers for Baden-Powell" and "Down with Old Kruger" and a large Transvaal flag would fly at half-mast on the top, much like traditional bonfire effigies of the Pope or Guy Fawkes.¹⁰¹ To draw crowds well away from the Market Place, the Committee drew up and advertised well in advance the route of a torchlight procession, accompanied by the Volunteers Band, which would wend its way through the streets to Midsummer Common.¹⁰² To keep the crowd amused and prevent them drifting off towards the Market Place, a spectacular firework display was arranged with a local fireworks supplier, who was also prevailed upon to close his market place shop early and set up a stall on the common, thus removing an important source of weaponry from the danger zone. Applications from local publicans to stay open one hour longer were refused, and the Vice Chancellor gave permission to undergraduates to attend the Midsummer Common bonfire but threatened "severe punishment" to anyone who attended illicit bonfires anywhere else.¹⁰³ Finally, the Market

¹⁰¹ *CDN*, 19 May 1900. There had been angry consternation on Ladysmith night when the Post Office had appeared to fly, among a string of national flags, the flags of France and the Transvaal Republic. The intended fate of this Transvaal flag was clear from the start. *Camb.Graph.*, 10 Mar. 1900.

¹⁰² Posters advertising the expected route are available in *Cambs.Arch.*: CB/2/CL/24/11/2; *ibid.* Bonfire Committee, Minutes, 17 May 1900; *ibid.*, 19 May 1900.

¹⁰³ *Cambs.Arch.*: CB/2/CL/24/11/2 Bonfire Committee, Minutes, 7 May 1900; *ibid.*, 14 May 1900; *ibid.*, 17 May 1900; *Camb.Uni.Rep.*, 22 May 1900.

Place itself was to be held by a large force of police, many of them brought in from neighbouring towns.¹⁰⁴

The evening triumphantly rewarded Darwin's careful preparation. An estimated 20,000 people took part in the procession, some three quarters of the adult population of the town, and the bonfire, at 32 feet 6 inches in height and 30 feet in circumference, more than met the requirements for an impressive structure.¹⁰⁵ The Boer flag on top was well received by the crowd and one student also produced an effigy of Kruger to throw onto the flames, though it was largely torn to pieces by the crowd before he could get close.¹⁰⁶ The firework display was a great success, despite competition from a second firework display from the Goldie boathouse on the other side of the river. The only problem was in trying to keep the woodpile intact before the ceremonial lighting. Various students tried tossing lighted matches at it, and one actually managed to ignite it with a well-aimed rocket. Perhaps the least well thought-out aspect of the evening was the torchlight procession, since there were only forty actual torches (which were in fact broom handles with brown paper dipped in tow stuck on the end) and as soon as the torchbearers reached the Common they all threw their torches onto the woodpile to set it alight. The evening did not entirely escape a firework battle

104 Cambs.Arch.: CB/2/CL/3/24/2 Watch Committee, Minutes, 10 Mar. 1900, 580.

105 Cambs.Arch.: CB/2/CL/24/11/2 Bonfire Committee, Minutes, 19 May 1900.

106 *CDN*, 21 May 1900.

either. Students fired them at the band while it played before the procession set off, one student commenting that “it could not have been much hotter in Mafeking”, and a full-scale firework battle broke out between the tenants on either side of one of the streets in the city centre.¹⁰⁷

The real test of the evening, however, would be its success in containing student and “townie” disruption. At the scene of the bonfire itself, students and townsmen amused themselves by running round and round its base, making as much noise as possible. Some townsmen tried to provoke a fight, which did briefly break out, though before long “the combatants suddenly fell to throwing their arms around each others necks (metaphorically)”.¹⁰⁸

The key testing ground, however, was the market place. Here a large crowd gathered once the Midsummer Common festivities were over, expecting to witness trouble. It seemed about to begin when the crowd surged forward to rescue an undergraduate arrested by a policeman; when the “foreign” police began to attack the crowd things turned nasty. One policeman was thrown down and trampled, and the *Cambridge Express* noted that, “There were strong elements of maliciousness in the vast throng”, but concluded that this was largely the result of the “forwardness” of the policemen

¹⁰⁷ *Camb.Express*, 26 May 1900.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

brought in from outside.¹⁰⁹ Despite the violent scenes in the market place, the cycle had been broken: there had been no bonfire nor any attempt to build one. As one correspondent put it:

CAMBRIDGE UNDERGRADUATES v PROCTORS, BULLDOGS &
POLICE

This match was played in the vicinity of the market place on
Saturday evening. ...

Cambridge Undergraduates: 0 (all out)

Proctors, Bulldogs and Police: 100 (for no wickets)¹¹⁰

Above all, as the *Cambridge Independent Press* pointed out, the Cambridge celebrations had been better organised than in Oxford, “where the police were compelled to charge the looting crowd”.¹¹¹

Aftermath

Cambridge’s Mafeking night was generally hailed as “a triumphant success”.¹¹² Darwin in particular emerged with enormous personal credit. The local press was unanimous in hailing the bonfire as a triumph; the Market Place disturbance was dismissed as a failure. It was also unequivocally a defeat for the students, and some student

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *CWN*, 25 May 1900.

¹¹¹ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 25 May 1900.

¹¹² *CDN*, 25 May 1900.

opinion was therefore, predictably, less than enthusiastic about the official celebrations. *Granta* grumbled that the Mafeking bonfire had been ‘a failure – an abject failure’ and an unmanly failure at that:

What possible amusement can University men get out of a large bonfire lit in a field a great distance from most Colleges and surrounded by an iron railing so that no one can get at it? It is really ludicrous that the authorities should get up such child’s play to amuse us.¹¹³

It warned that the students would strike again, and so indeed they did. In December 1900 there was an attempt at a market place bonfire to mark the visit of a party of colonial troops to Cambridge, which proved notable mainly for “its absolute silliness.”¹¹⁴ A better chance for the students to avenge their Mafeking night defeat came with the peace treaty in 1902. Darwin’s original suggestion that the bonfire committee remain in existence had not been accepted and the authorities, who were in any case taken up with planning for Edward VII’s coronation, had no contingency plan.¹¹⁵ Notices and barricades were erected around the market place, but the students surged onto the square and the barriers ended up on the inevitable

¹¹³ *Granta*, 26 May, 1900, 712.

¹¹⁴ *Camb.Graph.*, 17 Dec. 1900.

¹¹⁵ Cambs. Arch.: CB/2/CL/25/11/2 Darwin to Town Clerk, 31 May 1900. See also *ibid.*, Bonfire Committee, Minutes, 31 May 1900.

bonfires, despite the attempts by the police to stamp them out.¹¹⁶

The crowd gleefully helped the students in their work, warning them of the approach of the police and helping to rescue anyone the police grabbed hold of, while the students fed the flames in the usual way, grabbing market stalls, shutters, and this time the builders' wood and even many of the bricks from a complex of underground toilets under construction in the centre of the market place. To the *Cambridge Independent Press*, it seemed as if the gains of Mafeking night had been reversed:

...since the disorderly element, both in University and Town, was defeated on the occasion of the Mafeking rejoicings there has been a fixed determination to turn that defeat into a victory, and that it unfortunately succeeded in doing on Monday night.¹¹⁷

Yet appearances were deceptive. The police had successfully contained the destruction within the market place and there had been no firework battle; for the first time, some members of the crowd expressed disapproval of the destruction of property; and the two student prosecutions afterwards were for assaulting the police; there was no petition for clemency and both pleaded guilty.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ One policeman trying to stamp out the initial stages of a bonfire had methylated spirits poured over his shoes. *Camb.Chron.*, 6 Jun. 1902.

¹¹⁷ *Camb.Ind.P.*, 6 June. 1902.

¹¹⁸ *Camb.Chron.*, 6 Jun. 1902.

Conclusion

The Mafeking bonfire marked a watershed in town-gown relations in Cambridge. The power of the undergraduate was not broken – the 1902 bonfire showed that – but it had peaked and the university and town had shown that, if they worked together, it could be successfully countered; if they did not, the students would take advantage. Undergraduate disturbances would continue to plague both Cambridge and Oxford for many years to come, but never again would celebrations devastate the city centre as they did on Ladysmith night. Cambridge's relief had come from the Relief of Mafeking.