

Essay Review

IVOR GUEST, *Dr John Radcliffe and his Trust*, London, The Radcliffe Trust, 1991, pp. xvi, 595, illus., £45.00 (0-9502482-1-5).

When this volume of 600 pages of detailed history of the Radcliffe Trust arrived on my desk, it seemed a daunting task. The author, who has been the Secretary to the Trustees since 1966, was asked to undertake this work by Sir Ralph Verney, the Chairman of the Trust, and it is published by the Radcliffe Trust. It is, in other words, an inside job.

The problems of institutional histories are, of course, well known. Authors who are members of the institution have the advantage of easy access to sources and inside knowledge, but they may lack the skills of a professional historian. They may also have such strong loyalties that they find it hard to remain detached. Historians who are hired to write an institutional history will, or should, possess those skills; but as outsiders they may miss some of the feel, the nuances, of the institution. They may also find that access to confidential sources is restricted, and their work may end up by offending certain members of the institution, leading to disputes about authorial independence and an institution's right to censor the manuscript. I can say at once there is none of those problems here. This is historical scholarship of the highest standard, the style is superb, and the detail is justified by the amount of new material about John Radcliffe and the work of the Trust.

As a consequence, far from being daunted, I have become entranced by this book, although I must declare a personal interest. I write within a stone's throw of the Radcliffe Observatory and the Radcliffe Infirmary, and I have been associated with both in various ways since 1948. The libraries I use most often are the Radcliffe Science Library and the Radcliffe Camera. Further, when I or anyone else in this part of Oxfordshire falls seriously ill, we will probably be taken to what has become known to everyone as "The J.R."—the new John Radcliffe Hospital on Headington hill, an unappealing conglomeration of white-tiled blocks, like a vast bathroom turned inside out. Radcliffe is a household word around here.

John Radcliffe (1652–1714) was an interesting but not a lovable physician. He could be very abrasive. He told his protégé, Mead, that the sure secret of making a fortune was to "use all mankind ill" (p. 35). He made his fortune by persuading his patients to believe what he believed himself, that he could cure where others could not. He cultivated the rich, charged high fees, and invested his money skilfully. True, in 1688 he put £5,000 in a risky overseas venture which was totally lost when the goods were captured on the high seas by a French warship. But it was typical of Radcliffe that he laughed it off, saying he had only to climb 250 pairs of steps to recover his loss (p. 38). His rise in London was "meteoric". In the early 1690s it was estimated that his fortune amounted to £30,000. By 1707 it had grown to £80,000 and at the end of his life it was rumoured, with some exaggeration as it turned out, to be £140,000 (pp. 27 and 47). Like so many of the very rich, he combined episodes of compulsive large-scale generosity with miserliness and a suspicion bordering on paranoia of being cheated of ha'pence by innkeepers and tradesmen.

Radcliffe liked to eat and loved wine. He was convivial, cultivating many friends and admirers as well as the enemies he made by his outspokenness. He owned grand houses and a collection of paintings which included a Rubens, a Frans Hals, a Jan Brueghel the elder, and two important Rembrandts. In his early days, when asked where his study was, he pointed to some phials, a skeleton and a herbarium, and said, "Sir, this is Dr Radcliffe's library" (p. 9). Even at the end of his life his library consisted of no more than 200 books for he was not an author, and certainly not an academic. It is therefore all the more surprising that when he died, after bequests to family, friends, servants and University College, he left £40,000 to be used, after the decease of his sisters, to build a library. This is the Radcliffe Library (now generally known as the Radcliffe Camera), probably the most beautiful eighteenth-century library in the world. He also left £150 per annum for a "Library Keeper" and £100 per annum for the acquisition of books. A number of designs were produced, and it is a pity that the illustrations of these in

Howard Colvin's *Unbuilt Oxford* were not included in this book.¹ The architect was Nicholas Hawksmoor who had been responsible for the front quadrangle of Queen's College, the Codrington Library of All Souls, and what is now the Clarendon Building. The library was formally opened with a celebratory performance of Handel's oratorio *Esther*, in April 1749.

Radcliffe had always intended the library to be used by the University, but the first Keeper, Francis Wise (an archaeologist who had recently been pipped at the post for the Bodleian Librarianship) thought otherwise and put a lock on the door. The Vice-Chancellor had the lock removed at once. Wise, who was perhaps an early example of the archivist-librarian who sees his first duty as the protection of books and manuscripts from the prying eyes of readers—not that there was much in the library to be read—put the lock back on again. This time the Vice-Chancellor not only removed the lock but sent a searingly ferocious letter threatening legal action. Wise scuttled back to his benefice in Elsfield. Soon he asserted that ill-health greatly reduced the occasions when he could commute to Oxford.

It was not a happy start. Initially the library had no policy on acquisitions. Some books and manuscripts were donated, a few were bought, but the library was little used. During the year ending June 1837, nearly ninety years after it was opened, the library recorded 4,611 visitors; but only 47 of these came to study, of whom 25 were members of the University and 5 were doctors practising in Oxford (p. 180). In the nineteenth century it became primarily a library of science and medicine, a function now served by the Radcliffe Science Library. In 1927 the Radcliffe Trustees conveyed the Library to the University.

At the end of the eighteenth century, if you set off from central Oxford towards Woodstock, you would have left the town behind you and travelled through open country for half a mile (passing some gravel pits on the left said to be the haunt of highwaymen) before you came to the Radcliffe Infirmary, a handsome but orthodox eighteenth-century hospital which was a slightly larger version of the Gloucester Infirmary, for both were the design of a builder with the memorable name, Stiff Leadbetter. The Radcliffe Trust made a large donation to the Infirmary which was opened to patients in October 1770, formally opened with a ceremony in July 1771, but not completed until October 1771.

Beyond the Infirmary you would have seen the strikingly beautiful tower of the Radcliffe Observatory, "the architecturally finest observatory of Europe"² standing in nine acres of open ground and arguably the Trust's greatest architectural achievement. It owed its origin to the energy and vision of a young Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Thomas Hornsby, who was elected Savilian Professor of Astronomy in 1763. His predecessor had been content to set up his telescope in a back window of the old Ashmolean Museum (now the Museum of the History of Science) but Hornsby decided to establish a proper observatory with the most modern instruments. A practical astronomer who was also determined to use the Observatory for teaching the theory and practice of astronomy, he persuaded the University to approach the Radcliffe Trust which agreed to finance the project once the Infirmary bills were paid.

In 1767, however, Hornsby was in a hurry. He wanted his instruments to be made by the leading astronomical instrument maker of the day John Bird of London, who was chronically ill with the gravel, unable to travel, and unlikely to last much longer. Bird accepted the commission and produced a magnificent set of instruments which he regarded at the end of his life as his crowning achievement. No observatory in Europe had finer instruments. Over a period of 36 years Hornsby produced such a vast volume of observations—some 80,000 transits and 20,000 zenith distances—that it was not until 1932 that the greater part of his work was finally computed and published. The observations proved to be astonishingly accurate. In 1973 Hornsby was honoured by the General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union by renaming a lunar crater in the Sea of Serenity, formerly known as Aratus CB, as Hornsby's crater.

¹ Howard Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 68–75.

² J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner (eds), *The buildings of England. Oxfordshire*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974, pp. 271–2.

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As well as making daily observations, Hornsby gave lectures in the Observatory accompanied by his servant. The servant had two duties: to assist with the instruments and to stand watch over his master who was prone to epileptic fits which could occur in the middle of a sentence. When the servant saw the first signs of a fit he placed Hornsby gently in a chair until the fit had ended. Hornsby then continued as if nothing had happened at exactly the point where he had been interrupted by his malady. The astronomical instruments were completed well before the building, whose foundation stone was laid in 1772, but it was not completed until the late 1790s. Initially, the architect was Henry Keene, who had executed work for several colleges in Oxford, but the Trustees decided to employ in addition a young but very fashionable architect, James Wyatt, whose only disadvantage was a character reminiscent of Toad of Toad Hall. He was very enthusiastic at the beginning of a project but tended to lose all interest as soon as a new one turned up. Nevertheless, it was Wyatt's stroke of genius to design an irregular octagonal tower, or "canted square", based on an engraving of the Tower of the Winds in Athens. The sculptor John Bacon was employed to carve the stone reliefs of the winds which surround the top of the tower and also the figure of Hercules and Atlas supporting the Globe. More notable are a series of reliefs made in a new form of artificial stone called Coade stone after a founder and director of the company, Mrs Coade. It has proved to be almost completely weather-proof. The exact composition, and the temperature and length of time for which the material was fired, was a trade secret which was lost in the mid-nineteenth century until it was rediscovered very recently by modern means of physical and chemical analysis.³ Bacon, the sculptor of the winds, arranged for his associate, John Charles Felix Rossi, to model Coade stone panels of the signs of the Zodiac as well as three large panels showing Morning, Noon and Evening which are some of the outstanding features of the Observatory.

Hornsby died in 1810, aged 76. The next two observers were, as a matter of course, Savilian Professors of Astronomy. With the death of the third observer in 1839 the University tactlessly appointed a new Savilian Professor without consulting the Radcliffe Trustees. The Trustees responded by asserting their independence. They appointed a brilliant young astronomer as Observer who was, in the University's opinion, unsuitable for the Chair in Astronomy. Thus the link between the University and the Observatory was severed for ever, and the University built its own observatory. Astronomical observations continued at the Radcliffe Observatory, but by the end of the nineteenth century it was no longer one of the leading observatories in Europe. Its severance from the University had been the beginning of its downfall.

Meanwhile, the Radcliffe Infirmary needed to expand. Several offers to buy Observatory land were turned down, for the Trustees were aware of the need to keep a clear field of vision for observations. But the town flowed north and around the Observatory and it all became a bit too noisy and crowded. In the 1920s, after a succession of overcast and rainy summers, the Trustees decided to move the Observatory to Pretoria in South Africa, partly for better weather, partly to explore the relatively neglected skies of the Southern Hemisphere.

Although the formal connection between the Observatory and the University was severed in 1839, the University, or at least a faction of it, objected in 1930 to the proposed move. The faction was headed by Professor Lindemann (1886–1957), later Lord Cherwell and nicknamed "the Prof.", a prickly, aggressive and snobbish man who became Churchill's favourite scientific adviser in World War II. It is probably significant that Lindemann's father was an astronomer of distinction.⁴ Lindemann saw the decision as a slur on the state of science in Oxford and maintained that the Observatory site was originally conveyed to the Trustees "for the benefit of the University". As for poor weather, he pointed out that an observatory had recently been transferred from London to Cambridge where the weather was as bad if not worse than Oxford, and that Pretoria lay in a country which "whatever its climatic conditions, has only recently, and possibly only temporarily, become a part of the British Empire" (p. 311–12). The Trustees were not impressed. Their independence was not to be questioned, and it happened that the decision to move to Pretoria coincided with the plans of Sir William Morris (later Viscount Nuffield) to

³ Alison Kelly, *Mrs Coade's Stone*, Worcester, Self-Publishing Association, 1990.

⁴ *Dictionary of National Biography*.

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establish a post-graduate clinical research centre based on the Radcliffe Infirmary. Nuffield's plans were dependent on acquiring the grounds of the Observatory. The Trustees named their sum: £100,000, and the offer was promptly accepted. Thus the Observatory became the Nuffield Institute of Medical Research until, in 1977, it was incorporated into Green College.

The Radcliffe Trust continues to support an extraordinarily wide range of institutions and activities including architecture, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, theology, the fine arts, dance, crafts, heritage and the environment, and so on (see appendix P). Here, in an already long review I have done no more than touch on a few parts of a book which must become a standard reference for historians of Oxford University, historians of astronomy, and historians of medicine in Oxford. It is immensely readable for two reasons: the author's style, and his skill in handling a huge volume of material. There is, for instance, a long section (pp. 234–42) on the problems of the design, manufacture and delivery of the astronomical instruments to the Observatory in the 1760s and 1770s. I know little about astronomy and nothing about astronomical instruments, yet I found these pages completely riveting. That is what it is like: a gem of a book.

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