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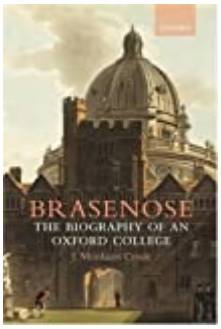

J. Mordaunt Crook. *Brasenose: The Biography of an Oxford College.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xvi + 555 pp. $165.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-954486-8.

Reviewed by Natalie E. Latteri (Purdue University)

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Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

Latteri on Crook

With his biographical narrative *Brasenose*, J. Mordaunt Crook joins an esteemed community of scholars able to eloquently situate the intellectual, cultural, and political trends of a remarkable institution of higher learning within the broader Oxford, British, and global context. He provides a succinct account of pertinent policies informed by the interests of founders and leading administrators from Brasenoseâs collegiate origins in the sixteenth century through the early years of the twenty-first century. As has come to be expected of monographs spanning a half-millennium, Crook organizes his text into lengthy chapters that canvass decreasing increments of time through the modern era, presumably due as much to the availability of sources as to the quicker pace of innovation in the last two centuries. Throughout the text his approach is holistic. In contrast to the institutional biographies that are burdened by an excess of information regarding administratorsâ personal lives and public policies, Crook laudably emphasizes the cohesive dynamic of academic institutions affected by and effecting change.

Chapter 1 discusses Brasenoseâs architectural elements and its first incarnation as a studentsâ lodging in 1313, its emergence as a hall by 1381, and finally, its position as an esteemed college at Oxford by 1509. Crookâs primary focus of the chapter, however, lies in tracing Brasenoseâs 1509 founding by William Smith (bishop) and Richard Sutton (lawyer) under the reign of Henry VIII, through 1688, the year of James IIâs exile and the landing of William of Orange at Torbay. Here, Crook presents the political, cultural, and pedagogical views of collegiate authorities and a sampling of students to support his contention that Brasenose served as a microcosm of England at large.

This period of flux, initiated by the religio-political climate of the Henrician Reformation and carried on by the later Tudor and Stewart monarchs up to the Glorious Revolution, has been viewed by revisionist historians, such as Robert Whiting, as one of tepid conformity rather than conviction.[1] To an extent, Crook agrees. He shows that both the Catholic piety and the scholasticism of medieval England only gradually gave way to human-

ism and the predominance of English Protestantism in the course of the sixteenth century due to increasingly severe initiatives of the ruling elite, and that the country and its institutions were reluctant to return to Catholicism yet again in the wake of the English civil wars of the seventeenth century, especially under a weak monarch. According to Crook, this zeitgeist was reflected in the curriculum and in the composition of Brasenoseâs student body. The type of pupil shifted in the sixteenth century from aspiring clerics mostly from Lancashire and Cheshire to those hoping to prove themselves in the professions, as well as the occasional member of the gentry. The college bore the emergence of the tutorial system to accommodate this new model.

To Brasenoseâs credit, and in an attempt to present the college as a true microcosm of early modern England, Crook also highlights the collegeâs most notable Puritan and Catholic alumni who became prolific writers and infamous politicos, such as John Foxe and possibly even William Shakespeare. They influenced the masses on either side of the religio-political divide as much as their peers melded into the general English populace. Crook indicates that during the reign of James II, though, Brasenose remained sympathetic to Catholicism and that the college served as a predominantly Jacobite community–one loyal to the deposed monarch–throughout the majority of the seventeenth century. It accepted the terms of the Revolution Settlement, which mandated Protestant succession to the exclusion of Catholic claimants to the throne (not to mention any other outlying groups), only when the Hanoverian dynasty rose to dominance in the early eighteenth century.

Chapter 2 concentrates on socioeconomic rather than religio-political matters. Its focus lies in describing Brasenoseâs escalating position from a middling Oxford college of limited means to the hub of Oxford life, chronicled in bills of sale that pepper the chapter. This shift, according to Crook, resulted predominantly from the erection of Radcliffe Square and Camera (1749), geographically situated at Oxfordâs center. The fortunate positioning served to increase the student body, rent, and status of Brasenose; and the ever-rising importance of the wealthy commoner helped to fill the collegeâs coffers even without the number of gentry attending other Oxford colleges. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Brasenose was fashionable.

The brief span of thirty-seven years and three surnames mark the subject of the next chapter. From 1785 to 1822, Principal William Cleaver, Principal Frodsham Hodson, and the Brasenose dynastic family, the Hebers, dominated the college. The first helped to double Brasenoseâs rising annual revenue; the second reformed pedagogy yet again to meet more strenuous standards of scholarly work in the modern era; and the Hebers cemented the collegeâs position in politics through their gentry standing. Chapter 4 similarly covers a brief period in Brasenoseâs history, the thirty-one years between 1822 and 1853, yet it returns to the role of religion and reform in the college. Here, Crook explains the effects of sectarian divisions among Tractarians–a group who vied for the inclusion of Catholic ritual within the Anglican liturgy, also known as Anglo-Catholics–and those Anglicans who rejected Catholicism as well as further pedagogical reform. He focuses on the replacement of Latin with English account books and the new tiered level of degrees, which included those students who (barely) passed their exams. This latter reform resulted in what Crook describes as increasingly formulaic lectures for undergraduates and a new syllabus system void of the older emphasis on Christian religion.

Chapters 5 and 6 broach the topics of criticism and athleticism at Brasenose as well as the increasing inclusion of students suited for the British military and gentry, respectively, during the span of 1853 through 1918. The former holds the years 1853 through 1886 as an age of notable athletes and critiques. While it is dominated by a discussion of the figures Walter Pater, Brasenose fellow and noted essayist and art and literature critic, and Edward Hartopp Cradock, Brasenose fellow and eventual principal, this chapter significantly illustrates the importance of sport–particularly rowing and cricket–and scholarly work as unifying agents of collective identity at Brasenose. The latter chapter commences with an in-depth treatment of the architectural advances made to the college in the late-nineteenth century by Thomas Graham Jackson before presenting what reads as a collection of mini-biographies of Brasenose gentlemen who enjoyed the aforesaid improvements and who would later serve in the British military during the First World War, when little attention was paid to either aesthetics or athletics.

Chapter 7 is, by far, the most interesting in Crookâs monograph as it deals with three significant changes occurring between 1919 and 1920: the acceptance of funding from the British government; a farewell to the stuffy Greek language requirement; and the admission and conferral of degrees to women; Crook maintains that the first change of these three changes was enacted as a result

of the widespread financial and scientific need resulting from the First World War. Though society was largely bankrupt, the need for technological advancement was pressing. The latter two had been discussed since the Victorian era and finally actualized due to external and internal pressures to open Oxford up to merit beyond the confines of sex and antiquarian impracticality.

The final chapter covers the period from 1948 through the first decade of the second millennium and reveals the continued struggle for the achievement of democratization that was begun by the previous generations. Crook shows that Oxford in general and Brasenose in particular were grappling with very real questions at this time: âWould it ever be possible to universalize privilege; to reconcile equality and talent? Were the higher forms of civility … ultimately compatible with the democratic impulse?â (p. 385). For Crook, the answer to the latter is an unequivocal yes. Brasenose made–and continues to make–a valiant effort to find an equitable center ground in which potential is recognized, and merit rewarded, in students from around the world.

Crookâs *Brasenose* was a pleasure to read. His ability to engagingly narrate a five-hundred-year Oxford biography is truly admirable and not likely to be duplicated anytime soon. The broad range of sources employed–from architectural remains to charters, memoirs, photographs, and letters–lend themselves to a most inclusive history, which effectively weaves together the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural composition of Brasenose College. One can only hope that Crookâs cohesive approach will not only be imitated, but also serve to supplant the long tradition in histories of British universities in which pedagogy, architecture, and tolerance, to name a few topics of exploration, are discussed with little recognition of context.

Note

[1]. Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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