

RIOT AND RAG

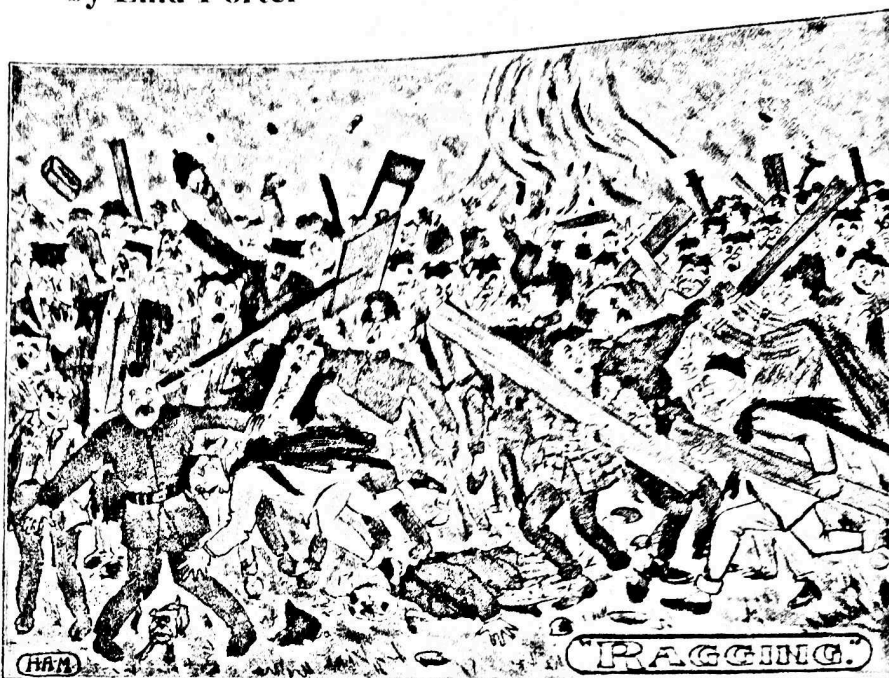
by Enid Porter

Reports of noisy student demonstrations come in, nowadays, from many parts of the world with almost monotonous regularity. In Cambridge, fortunately, student protest is more reasoned and far less violent than elsewhere, but this was by no means always the case. Over the centuries the peace of the city has, on many occasions, been shattered by clashes between students and university authority, between students and townspeople, between students of different nationalities and even between the undergraduates of one college and another.

The earliest students in Cambridge, and in Oxford too, were wandering and turbulent scholars who, although they united in riotous attacks on townspeople, fell out sometimes among themselves. The majority of the Cambridge scholars came, probably, from the Eastern Counties, East Anglia being, in the 13th and 14th centuries, the most densely populated region in England. But some came from the north and it may be that their "foreign" accents made them objects of ridicule to those from the south. Whatever the reason, friction between the two groups certainly existed.

In the year 1261 a North country scholar had an argument with a fellow student from the south. Blows were exchanged and before long there was a general riot in which even the townspeople of Cambridge joined. Injuries were inflicted on both sides, houses were plundered and university records were burned. Peace was eventually restored and the King ordered an inquiry. Twenty-two southerners were found guilty, but were later pardoned, while to escape from any further tumult, some of the more peaceful scholars left Cambridge and went to Northampton. Here a university had already been established following the exodus from Oxford of a number of students who also wished to continue their studies away from incessant rioting and brawling.

On at least two occasions the plays which were regularly performed in the colleges seem to have occasioned outbreaks of violence. In 1595 some members of the University who, for some reason, were excluded from watching a comedy at King's College,



gave vent to their anger by breaking a number of the college windows. They were called before the Vice-Chancellor who, having reprimanded them, discharged them on condition that they paid for the damage, which amounted to £2. 8s. 2d.

Five years later, students of Trinity College attacked a number from St. John's who had come to Trinity to watch the performance of a play. The offenders were brought to the Vice-Chancellor's court. Among the evidence given was that of a woman who said that four Trinity men, coming to her tobacconist's shop, had told her of the supply of stones they had laid in as missiles, and of the buckets they were going to provide themselves with for pouring water on the St. John's men. Six boys told the Vice-Chancellor that they had been given the job of taking the stones up to the top of Trinity tower.

Violent Demonstration

Dissension between the men of Trinity and those of St. John's seems to have been not uncommon. In 1620, for example, when some Johnians went to play football on Sheep's Green, they found Trinity men in possession of the field and, it seems dared not venture on it for fear of attack. When the same thing occurred

a few days later, the angry Johnians broke down the back gates of Trinity and with long poles drove everyone they met back into the college.

A violent demonstration against the Senior Proctor took place in 1829. A crowd of undergraduates assembled in front of the Senate house and, when the Proctor emerged from the building, booed and hissed him and pelted him with missiles. As he walked along to his college they followed him, still shouting and hurling stones, and then took up their position outside the gates where they remained for several hours. Some of the undergraduates were punished, while a week later the Vice-Chancellor announced that anyone who insulted an officer of the University should be immediately expelled.

Politics, as is often the case today, could cause students to demonstrate. A lecture delivered in 1839, in the Barnwell Theatre, against the Corn Laws attracted a mob of noisy undergraduates. Scuffles broke out until the Proctors finally cleared the theatre. Two students were later fined for assault.

Rioting between town and gown occurred regularly from, probably, the arrival of the first scholars in Cambridge. Before the Colleges were built, and before even official hostels were provided, the students lodged in

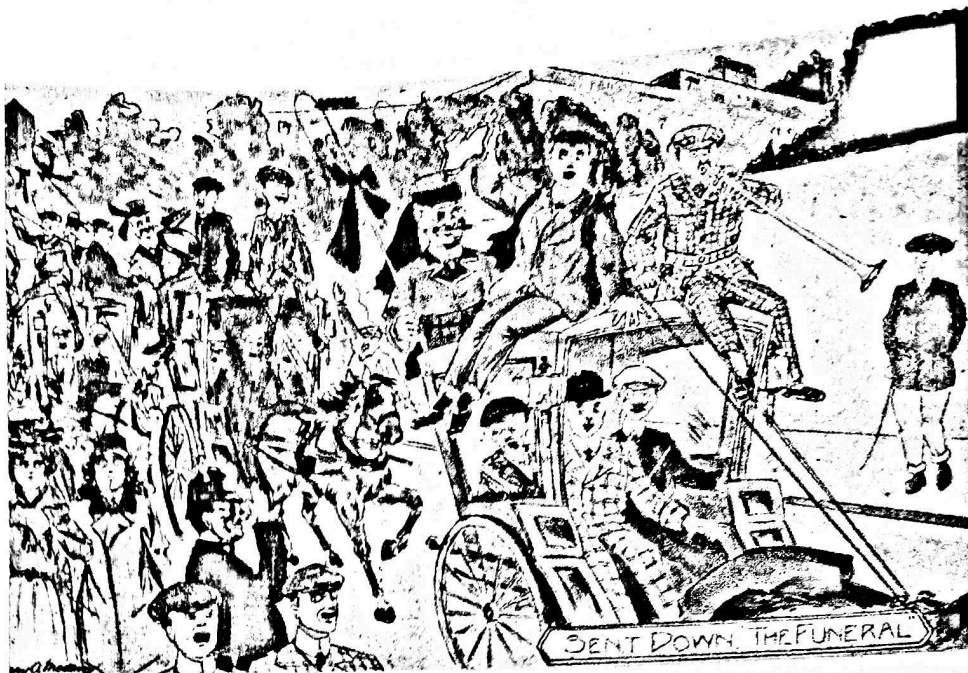
the houses of the townspeople who must, in many cases, have cheated and over-charged. Certainly the students often accused them of so doing, while the many privileges enjoyed by members of the University aroused the anger as well as the envy of militant Cambridge residents.

Town v Gown Fights in Streets

The Town v. Gown fights, which took place in the streets and, usually, at night, were violent and often bloody affairs which must have been alarming to those who lived nearby or who were innocently drawn into them. A chance word, an insult, real or imagined, an accidental treading on a toe in a crowded thoroughfare could spark off a fight. Reinforcements would be hastily called for by both sides, and for hours the battle would wage, until order was restored by police or Proctors. Sometimes the senseless rioting would continue for 3 or 4 nights on end. Windows were broken, doors, fences and shutters were damaged and severe personal injuries were inflicted; sometimes even death could result.

From time to time the undergraduates demonstrated against the civic authorities of Cambridge. In 1875 John Death, the Mayor, tried hard to curb the violent students who were causing a great deal of annoyance at that time; a band of them had even broken up a concert in the Corn Exchange at which the Mayor and Corporation were present. Seven undergraduates were arrested for this, and on the following evening their friends burned an effigy of the Mayor on the market place and stormed noisily through the streets, smashing windows and fighting with anyone who got in their path. On the third day, when the case of the arrested students came before the magistrates, Market Hill was crowded with undergraduates who, when they learned that heavy fines had been imposed on the culprits, set off to the Mayor's house which stood at the end of King Street. The police managed to prevent them from entering the house but did not succeed in dispersing the mob before a great deal of damage had been done to nearby property.

Gradually these Town and Gown riots simmered down and undergraduate exuberance came more and more to find an outlet in what we



know now as "Rags" — a word that is first recorded in University slang in 1892.

At first the Rags were little more than acts of hooliganism which caused a great deal of damage to property. In 1898, when an Honorary Degree was conferred upon Lord Kitchener, undergraduates celebrated the event by lighting bonfires about the town, feeding the flames with wooden shutters, doors, fences and anything they could lay hands on. The Relief of Mafeking and the signing of the Armistice at the end of the first World War were celebrated in similar fashion.

Hoaxes

Sometimes Rags have taken the form of well-planned hoaxes. One of these occurred in 1905 when the University and municipal authorities received "the Sultan of Zanzibar" and conducted him and his entourage to the Guildhall, the Senate House and other places of interest. Among the last was King's College Chapel which presented a problem to the hoaxers, for they did not like to enter with their heads covered and could not, of course, remove their turbans and so reveal their false identity. They got out of the difficulty by intimating, through an "interpreter", that their religion forbade them to enter a foreign place of worship.

The best Rags were those carried out between the two world wars, for they were entertaining, and harmless, to both onlookers and participants, were arranged often on the spur of the

moment and were kept a closely guarded secret to the last minute.

In 1924 Tutankhamen's Tomb was opened in Egypt; a similar opening took place in Cambridge, only there the tomb — the public lavatories on the market place — was that of "Toot and Come In" and yielded an astonishing variety of curious objects to the "excavators".

Mock Marriage

The "first marriage according to the New Prayer Book" was performed in 1927 on Market Hill. The "bridal pair" first drove round in an old cab, greeted on the way by members of Dr. Jeremiah Peabody's Purity League and of the Undergraduate Society for Equal Wrongs for Women. After the wedding ceremony speeches were made on the evils of modern marriage, and two healthy undergraduate "twins" were baptised.

In the same year Joanna Southcott's Box was opened by a party of "Bishops". The contents of the box proved to be a quantity of red tape, a teddy bear, football boots, race cards, the leg of a shop window display figure and a number of examination papers. Joanna's "spirit", wearing large paper wings, moved about the crowd as the box was opened.

It was in the inter-war period that the Pavement Club was founded. Groups of undergraduates, invited to rest from their arduous studies, sat on King's Parade and played Ludo,

Halma and games of cards; it often took some time to get the traffic moving normally after drivers had slowed down to watch the proceedings. In these years, too, occurred from time to time such light-hearted undergraduate incidents as the bowling of hoops through the centre of Cambridge, or the wheeling of very large "babies" in very rickety prams. Modern traffic conditions have put an end to events such as these.

Mock Funerals

In the late 19th century and in the early years of the 20th, mock funerals were often arranged whenever a popular undergraduate was sent down from the University for some breach of discipline. The "body" was conveyed to the station in a cab, followed by a long procession of "mourners" and "clergy".

At the station the "corpse" was placed in the guard's van while his sorrowing fellow-undergraduates "knocked the nails into his coffin" by clambering on to the train roof and beating on it with sticks and broom handles. On one occasion the "corpse" escaped from the van.

There was a mad rush back towards the centre of Cambridge where the "dead" man was finally caught up with as he made his way, with "clergy" and "choir" back to the Market Place where a collection was taken up for him.

Occasionally a Rag has been carried out which has needed much careful planning and technical skill. Shortly after the first World War, for example, a German gun which had been presented as a trophy to Jesus College was stolen one night by Caius College men. The gun, which stood in Jesus grounds near the corner of Victoria Avenue, was drawn through the streets and taken into Caius College by a side door. Many people will remember the car which was found in 1958 parked on the roof of the Senate House. It had been placed there by undergraduates who had succeeded in carrying out the daring manoeuvre completely unseen. It was not removed until the Civil Defence had made two attempts to bring it down.

It was in 1921 that the first of the long series of Poppy Day Rags in aid of the Earl Haig Fund was held. These Rags have always been highly organised affairs, with parades of decorated floats through the streets, cabaret shows in College courts,

battles on the river between "armies" on punts using soot and flour as weapons, and every imaginable diversion. Based on the Rag Days of provincial universities, these Poppy Day events have raised annually a great deal of money. Then, in 1966, after much discussion, it was decided that not all the money collected should go to the British Legion but should be divided between that charity and two others. In that year the first of what was to be a new series of "Camrags" was held on November 19th; but the financial result was disappointing. Cambridge people had already given generously to the house-to-house collection made by the British Legion, and many did not approve of the Rag funds being divided. The following Rag was also less successful in raising money and was, moreover, marred by hooliganism amongst youths of the town. This year the Rag was held in February and for the first time there was no parade of floats; instead, shows were restricted to College courts. Again, the sum raised has fallen below the hoped-for target. Whether these charity Rag Days will continue is not certain; it may be that, along with the true university Rags of the past they may disappear completely.

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