

## Book Reviews

### EAGLETON'S DELICIOUS SKETCHES AND HIS ANGLO-SAXON ATTITUDE

*The gatekeeper*. Terry Eagleton, 2001. London: Penguin; ISBN 0141005920, vii + 178 pp., £6.99, paper.

'Most literary biographies deal with the material infrastructure of writing ... rather than with the thing itself. It is like an account of Versailles that focuses mainly on the plumbing', complains Terry Eagleton in a review in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (18 March 2005). There is lots of 'plumbing' in this profoundly English book. In this narrative, the personalities obscure the politics. Brecht, for example, is portrayed as a 'Marxist maverick', whose always ready-packed suitcase accompanied a man who kept his outside safe and his revolutionary thoughts to himself. Its in-jokes are for those who grew up in the world it describes. In particular, any academic whose career has spanned roughly the same decades and been spent largely at the teddy-bear's picnic of Oxbridge is likely to feel at home.

I recall an undergraduate life at Oxford, in the days before colleges were mixed, when today's 'access' questions had not even been thought of. Such murmurings as there were concerned the inequities of admitting one girl for every ten boys, but most of those from working-class backgrounds such as mine had had a top-class education free at a grammar or direct grant school and had no tuition fees to pay as students. There were grants on which it was realistic to live and the great divide among the girls, as I remember it, was between those who had been to boarding schools and were used to living away from home and those who were simply homesick. The social confidence or the lack of it divided both sexes, and the most striking comparison with the lot of the new student today (apart from the problem of student debt) is probably the quite different kinds of street and other 'cred' which imbue the modern eighteen-year old with a sense of *savoir faire*.

After some years of teaching in a school and in two red-brick universities, the main decades of my own professional life have been spent in Cambridge, watching it evolve from the world Eagleton describes, which embedded itself deep into the memories and emotional 'take' on life of the generation of academics that is moving towards retirement now. Young and green, I experienced the mixing of colleges not as a student but

as a college fellow. It was uncomfortable for the women at first, for they did not know quite what to do with us. But we were the one in ten and, by and large, we could cope. The old idea was that everyone had a vote, one for the vice chancellor and one for the youngest college fellow or lecturer. Individuals put their names to 'Memorials' or other calls for action or resistance in the best Cornford traditions, and there was much plotting and counter-plotting in the corners of Combination Rooms or in the open air of King's Parade or the Broad, where the point was to be seen by chance in conversation by those of other factions. I learned on my pulses the ground rules of Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica*, for that elegant little study of 1908 remains the last word on the politics. Oxford and Cambridge are still run as Athenian democracies, with a heavy admixture of the spirit of the cathedral chapter. C.P. Snow's novels of the mid-twentieth century are scarcely dated at all at the level of power play and plotting the overthrow of colleagues.

New on the scene, but largely left out by Eagleton, is the effect of the attempted introduction of modern management practices into universities, even Oxford and Cambridge. Both modern universities are increasingly commercially oriented and spin-ridden. Old academe, peopled by such eccentric figures as Eagleton sketches, and others, including myself, whose battles with the 'system' shape them into oddities, is being overlaid by a new academe where the power is in the hands of smooth managerial types who do not read or write books much; below them, the young scholar on a temporary contract on soft money, perhaps from a big corporation, is impotent to resist these trends if he or she hopes to have a continuing career. There has been a shifting of tectonic plates as collegiality is overlaid by line management and the old 'civil service' ethos among administrators of universities is replaced by the attitudes inculcated by the MBA on offer from the Judge Institute of Management and the Said Business School. I have seen in a quarter of a century of professional academic life in one of the ancient universities and more decades still in intimate observation of the other, how that democratic freedom is being eroded by the arrival of this new kind of plumbing. Matters of principle became matters of expediency. Colleagues become nervous of letting their names appear. A few years ago, one Cambridge Head of Department placed a note repressively on top of a petition which had been left in a common room for signature. He forbade anyone to sign it. Perhaps the most dramatic recent episode of this kind occurred in May 2005, when some of 'Oxford's finest', dedicated teachers of generations of students, received letters criticizing them for failing to produce enough of the kind of research required if Oxford was to earn the maximum points and the maximum state funding in the forthcoming national Research Assessment Exercise; or if they were doing the right thing, they were told

that they were not doing it rapidly enough. They were informed that this failure on their part could become a disciplinary offence and that they might be sacked for non-compliance with the requirements of the management. There was outrage, a debate and a public vote in which 600 took part, and the management was, for the time being, routed.

However, these things have their after-effects, and the confidence in their own ways, which characterizes the eccentrics of Eagleton's story and makes some of them remarkable, is in danger of being eroded. This takes us close to what is wrong with this book, as well as what is right with it. The method is to use 'exempla', anecdotes and 'characters' to make points in verbal pictures. Substructures, themes and theories are alluded to in passing and the reader (laughing out loud) may miss them. There is plenty of caricature and exaggeration, designed to sharpen the insights pointed to. The New York MA class of modern nuns that Eagleton once taught 'could sense the Holy Spirit stirring in a corkscrew or a bag of chips' and led a modernized and extrovert version of the profoundly erotic life of the medieval mystic. 'They murmured slogans to each other like ... "He's coming, He's coming!"', which [Eagleton] took to be eschatological rather than erotic, and gave each other ham-fisted versions of the Black Power salute.' This makes for a vastly entertaining read but it cheats the reader of the balanced self-assessment which is required of a full autobiography.

The organizing principle of the book is thematic rather than chronological, in keeping with its episodic structure. Nevertheless, a unifying thread of instructions on religion, sex, politics and power runs grippingly throughout for the reader who is looking out for it. The first chapter ('Lifers') is given to members of the priesthood and the religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church, whose exaggerated eccentricities energetically embrace an ability to reconcile the contradictions in their lives and to accommodate various 'spiritual backfirings'.

The second chapter, on 'Catholics', tackles the machinery of Roman Catholic doctrine and the way it is imparted to the 'cradle Catholic', until he grows up 'lacking all instinctive feel for the liberal sensibility', while finding it relatively easy to move between extreme positions. 'The path from the Tridentine Creed to Trotskyism is shorter than it seems.'

The title of the third chapter is 'Thinkers', but it begins with money. It moves on smartly, via the hypothesis that those brought up in a financially underprivileged scene may overcome their early disadvantages by over-compensating, to Eagleton's own 'problem' that he cannot stop writing. This has made him 'overproductive' among 'normal, psychically blocked, unproductive academics'. He considers a series of notables, including Wittgenstein (who disliked Cambridge as much as Eagleton did), in the context of the misfit who finds himself by trying too hard, but never quite belongs. He moves on to 'Politicos', still pursuing the theme of class

difference and its consequences in the life of those who move from one fully featured world to another, as he finds he himself did in the numerous ways which provide him with his chapter headings. 'Losers' follow, those who dwell in the working-class world. In this chapter, the tension for Eagleton is between utility in its modern and its nineteenth-century sense; and the focusing question is where an aesthetic is to be found. His chapter on 'Dons' will be meat to those still bent on making Oxbridge out to be elitist, for in his undergraduate days it was. He captures mercilessly the life of privilege and leisure then led by many academics, for whom the college wine committee might indeed be a higher priority than writing (for publication was thought to be in slightly bad taste). 'The traditional don was an amphibious animal, moving between Mayfair party and ivory tower rather like a monk untrue to his vows.'

He moves on to his own early years as an academic and gives us the other side of the tutorial or supervision, selecting his literary victims from among the 'upper-class twits' who appeared before him, mannered, with their essays. Eagleton's Cambridge is a not a great distance from *Porterhouse Blue*. The problem is that there are aspects of the place which are indeed like that. The egregious Dr Greenway, formerly philosopher and lawyer, but for Eagleton an English don, is an authentic Cambridge character. It is a university which remains nervous of ideas and Greenway's encyclopaedic culture left him, Eagleton says, 'not only bereft of ideas but passionately opposed to them'. 'He was as allergic to ideas as a wrestler or a stockbroker.' Greenway would speculate in supervisions with Eagleton about leaving Cambridge, but in the tones of one who knew it was 'utterly absurd or logically impossible, like taking a day-trip to Saturn or sprouting a pair of antlers.' 'Oxbridge colleges ... have an infantilising effect on their longer-term inmates.' Very possibly, but it is rash for an author who is also an academic to say so in a survey of his own life. Nevertheless, it is all there in the story of Greenway sitting at the feet of Wittgenstein, the admiring of intellectual greatness in one's colleagues while resenting the implication that one's own academic status may be lower; the loyalties stronger than those to any football team which may be felt for a college (though never, I think, for a faculty or department); the nervous withdrawals at the slightest slapping of a wrist. Academe has its heroes, who are alternately adored and resented by their colleagues, sometimes on the same day.

In 'Aristos', the final chapter, Eagleton confronts his demons most frankly. They are the malign spirits of class warfare, for he still thinks of himself as not of the upper classes, despite having moved securely in among at least their lower reaches. There is lively writing here, as one would expect. The book is full of the unexpected, the paradoxical turn of the sentence which keeps the reader turning pages not only to find out

what happens next, but also, with a critic's puzzlement, in an effort to 'place' the genre. The book is described as a 'memoir'; a positively Chaucerian moral-tale-with-social-commentary results. The delicious sketches are fuller of implications than they seem and repay return visits, but the central character is never quite in full view. He remains observer and not observed. Eagleton is rightly confident that his readers will be so enchanted by his stories that they will not gaze too hard at the Anglo-Saxon attitudes being struck by the narrator himself.

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**BOTH WARNING AND MEMORIAL: A MAJOR BOOK ON  
WORKING-CLASS LIFE**

*The likes of us: a biography of the white working class.* Michael Collins, 2004. London: Granta Books; ISBN 1862076006, 240 pp., £12, paper.

Michael Collins was born in Walworth, southeast London, in 1961, and has written 'the inside story of a tribe on a particular reservation and during a particular period, as told by an erstwhile native son' (with special thanks to his dad in the Acknowledgements). His age, class and gender are significant ingredients and vantage points within this biography: 'A native attempt to take an audit of the area and its inhabitants, including my family, from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, and to cast an eye over those aforementioned missionaries who attempted to bring about change' (p. 11). Collins' tripartite structure further evokes a sense of ethnographic quest. 'An Excavation', 'An Evocation' and 'An Expedition' draw you in through history and auto/biography, as he identifies southeast London as 'an educational desert' of 'destitute and depraved children' (p. 30) with 68% below the poverty line in the 1890s (p. 44); 'a culture created in isolation, distinct from the official culture of the country' (p. 54).

Stigma, social and economic disadvantage, marginality, disruption, endurance mark this story; as well as 'lives of love and perseverance' (cited p. 80), lived in conditions of gruelling poverty, indefensible overcrowding and inhumane working conditions (p. 101). It was in the 1930s that Collins's grandmother, 'an efficient working-class housewife' (p. 118), whose story threads through the book from beginning to end, reached her lowest point since losing her first child, a two-year old son: 'Even though she and Bill were in work, their incomes could barely help them sustain a decent standard of living. The bills piled up, and she seriously considered suicide' (p. 119). The familiar features of white