

Academic Renaissance in England

WHILE he was visiting his home in Wellington recently, Dr. J. W. Davidson, Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, talked to *The Listener* about English university life in the years since the end of the war. He described how in the Michaelmas term of 1945 he found himself in the midst of what he termed an "academic renaissance," when thousands of ex-service-men undergraduates returned to their interrupted studies, some of them after absences of five or six years. He spoke of the effect on undergraduate life of the vastly greater sums now being spent by the British Government on scholarships, and of how a position was being created in which the business world was looking more and more for its best brains from amongst university-trained men.

Mr. Davidson is a New Zealand graduate who first went to Cambridge in 1938, and subsequently became a Lecturer in History there. At the war's end he gave up writing on a volume of the official war history—that dealing with the Colonial Empire—to return to teaching at the University. Then for a short period in 1947 he visited Samoa, both before and during the visit of the United Nations mission, to take part in the preparation of proposals for constitutional reform which have since been adopted. He now has 18 months' leave from Cambridge, and at the invitation of the New Zealand Government is going back to Samoa to help make these proposals work.

But it was Cambridge which became the main topic of conversation.

"Many of us wondered," he said, "when we went back to the University, about the situation which had grown up there during the war with most of the younger dons and the older students away in the forces. Undergraduate numbers had fallen to about half the pre-war figure; students were coming up at an earlier age so that they could get in a year or two of study before they were called into the forces at 18; and the lecturers were mostly men beyond military age. The resulting disparity in age between the staff and students had meant that the informal contacts between them which had always been such a large part of university life had fallen away.

Doubts Dispelled

"But any doubts we had were soon dispelled when we saw the vigorous activity that was going on. Within a few weeks of the end of the war the whole scene was transformed. The Colleges became crowded with a great mass of men of different ages, many of them married, some of them taking up their undergraduate studies from where they left off in 1939, and all of them filled with an extreme enthusiasm. It wasn't only enthusiasm for their work, but there was a genuine desire to return to and take full part in the academic way of life. This could be seen in the revival of many of the clubs and societies which had tended to languish during the war.

The English club, for instance, seemed to have far more men than it could cope with who wanted to get up and read their poems; the membership of the Fine Arts Society jumped to over a thousand; dramatic activity was never so vigorous; and there was even a notable increase in chapel going.

"It all seemed part of an escape from the highly regimented life they'd led during the war period, and it came out in other ways too. There was a tendency to emphasise the formality of student activities—there were more formal dinners, for instance—while the proctors didn't find any of the disciplinary problems they'd expected, and in such matters as being back in college by midnight and wearing gowns in the streets after nightfall, the students conformed to academic ritual without much evidence that they found difficulty in doing so.

Accommodation Problems

"Accommodation was one of the most difficult problems faced by the University after the war," Dr. Davidson continued. "Before 1939 nearly half the undergraduates lived out of college in lodgings in town. But during the war many of these rooms became occupied by evacuated civil servants, and the families of men in the services whose homes had been bombed out or who wanted to get away from the main cities. A considerable proportion of these people remained, so that although undergraduate numbers were up by 30 or 40 per cent., the lodgings still weren't available. We overcame this partly by fitting more students into the colleges, although it often meant that two or three men had to share a set of rooms originally intended for one, with obvious disadvantages as far as work was concerned, and in denying a man the chance of escaping from his friends if he wanted to. Yet in winter time, with the great shortage of fuel that there is in England at present, they would probably have had to work in groups anyway.

"Staffing has been another problem, for although the proportion of staff to students is much higher than it is in New Zealand, Cambridge still considers itself understaffed. In Cambridge, as in Oxford—and I am thinking especially of the arts subjects here—more importance is given to individual tuition in college rather than to lectures. For instance, it has been the custom for the history supervisor to take one or two men for an hour a week, and we have only been able to maintain that by doing twice as much teaching as would have been regarded as the maximum in pre-war days. Nevertheless, we felt well justified in doing the work, because we found the men needed more assistance in getting back into the ordinary way of working, and in seeing the relevance of purely theoretical studies to their practical problems.

"In political philosophy, for example, many of the older men who at first sight appeared to have taken the subject just to make up the number of papers for their degree, showed, when they saw its relevance to clarifying their



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