



A. B. EMDEN

David Peters

ALFRED BROTHERSTON EMDEN

1888–1979

ALFRED B. EMDEN was born on 22 October 1888 at West Ealing, Middlesex, and died, a bachelor, on 8 January 1979 at Headington within the Oxford city boundary. He was the elder son of Alfred Emden, a barrister and eventually a county court judge and the author of a standard treatise on building contracts. The son consequently had a comfortable upbringing in the home of a man described as 'a character of marked individuality' and in 1903 was sent to The King's School, Canterbury, where his father had been before him. In 1907 he entered St. John's College, Oxford, and after one term migrated to Lincoln College, where he had been awarded an Open Scholarship in Modern History. He graduated with a second class in Modern History in 1911. H. W. C. Davis, later Regius Professor of Modern History, whose lectures he attended and who, on graduation, urged him to pursue high level historical research, seems to have been among those who expected him to get a first. That he did not do so has been variously attributed to some undefined 'strain', possibly his father's death in the preceding February, or to his failure to answer more than one question in any paper, excellent though the actual answers were.

On leaving Oxford he joined the Inner Temple, his father's Inn, but, though he passed his Bar examinations, he was never called. Instead at the suggestion of Sir Alexander Paterson (as he later became), the prison reformer, he was appointed the head of Edghill House, Peak Hill, Sydenham, a boarding-house for south-east London boys or youths with unsatisfactory home conditions. His acceptance of such a post was perhaps due to the influence of his father, who, to the distaste of some barristers, was renowned for seeking to promote the interests of the poorest litigants. In 1915, after the outbreak of the First World War, Emden enlisted in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve for service in a brigade of the Royal Naval Division, and spent most of his wartime service as an able seaman in the destroyer HMS *Parker* in the North Sea.

On release he accepted in 1919 an almost chance offer of the post of modern history tutor of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, then

a society of little account, both in numbers and repute, and at the Hall he remained for over thirty years. He became Bursar in the same year and Vice-Principal in 1920. It seems that he was at first restive. Tentative suggestions made in 1923 that he might become Education Officer to the London County Council, and in 1924 Secretary of Faculties at Oxford, imply that he had put out 'feelers' for a move. The 'feelers' had no outcome, and he probably gambled on the prospect of becoming Principal. Such preferment seemed to be within reach in 1928, when Dr G. B. Allen moved from the principalship to become suffragan bishop of Sherborne. To the regret of many Emden was not then chosen, but Allen's successor died very soon afterwards and Emden took his place. He remained Principal until 1951, when, after bouts of ill health, he resigned at the early age of 63.

His principalship was distinguished by his successful efforts to elevate the prestige of his society within the university. This he achieved partly by stabilizing the Hall's finances, restoring its buildings, erecting new ones, and fostering high standards among Fellows and undergraduates, and partly by freeing it from the tutelage of Queen's College under which it had rested since the sixteenth century. As a builder his monument is the Canterbury building, opened in 1934, which completed the front quadrangle. More remarkable was it that through his deftness two university statutes were promulgated in 1937, whereby Queen's transferred the site to the Official Trustee of Charity Lands and the nomination to the principalship to a body of management trustees. These measures gave the Hall a more liberal constitution, though they did not confer upon it full collegiate status. To the regret of many in the University, including some of the then Fellows, his deep pride in the fact that his society was the last surviving medieval hall prevented him from advocating that status, which, under his successor, was attained. Other achievements of this period were the establishment of the *St. Edmund Hall Magazine* in 1920 and the St. Edmund Hall Association, an assemblage of *alumni*, about 1924.

Outside the Hall Emden won a notable place as an administrator in both educational and academic circles. Between 1935 and 1947 he sat on the Hebdomadal Council of the University and between 1932 and 1947 on the University's Committee for Appointments, of which he was Chairman from 1935 to 1945. He was a member of the governing bodies of Cheltenham College (1937-45), The King's School, Canterbury (1933-62),

Radley College (1932–45), and St. Edward's School, Oxford (1933–57). Of the last he served as Chairman almost from the outset until 1951. He was a Trustee of the Oxford Preservation Trust from 1932 to 1967. In 1940 he signed the report of a committee of three, appointed by the Headmasters' Conference, on the future of the Public Schools, and he was a member of a Commission, which reported in 1943, set up by the House of Bishops of the Church Assembly to consider the remuneration and housing of the clergy. Probably, however, his most distinguished part in public administration was played in the middle years of the Second World War. He had long wished to parallel Oxford's Officers' Training Corps and Air Squadron with courses for naval cadets, and the war enabled him to do so. Following pressure that he applied to the Admiralty such courses were established, and Emden, who had been commissioned as a Lieutenant-Commander in the RNVR, Special Duties Branch, assumed command in 1943 of what was called the Oxford University Naval Division. He relinquished his commission in 1944 in order to concentrate on the post-war rehabilitation of the Hall.

Those wishing to assess Emden as an academic administrator must note not only the posts that he occupied but those for which he was suggested as a fitting candidate or that were actually offered to him and declined. A list of such approaches can hardly be complete but it must certainly include the Vice-Chancellorships of Manchester (1935), Liverpool (1936), Birmingham (1937), and Leeds (1937) Universities, and the Headmastership of Cheltenham College (1940).

On retirement many of the earlier burdens were discarded, but Emden's concern for the Hall itself did not then flag; some may even have felt that it remained a little too obtrusive. Howbeit, to the Hall he gave paintings, drawings, engravings, historical collections, and plate at retirement, and continually made fresh gifts, including flowering shrubs to adorn the quadrangles. When the church of St. Peter-in-the-East was turned into the College library in 1973–4, it was he who paid for colouring its roof. Far more important, however, was his bequest to the Hall of the residue of his estate, amounting to over £400,000 gross. A new residential block, brought into use in 1969, was named after him. The Aularian Association, as a tribute to him, equipped the Emden Room, a meeting-place for parties, in 1953, and furnishings for a new dining-hall in 1968–9.

His administrative gifts coupled with much stimulating teaching would have been enough to win Emden an honoured place in the academic fraternity. In addition, however, he began from his early days as a don to absorb himself in the medieval history of European universities. His first relevant contribution was a history of the Hall itself, *An Oxford Hall in Medieval Times*, which appeared in 1927. The Clarendon Press, as publishers, initially demurred to taking on such a work; it was against their policy to publish books on individual institutions, and they feared that any compromise would fell the barriers and release a rush of imitators. P. E. Matheson, however, a Perpetual Delegate of the Press, turned the scale in a note to Kenneth Sisam, Secretary to the Press Delegates, that read 'I think we should take him if we can', and Sisam lived to call *An Oxford Hall* in 1942 'an excellent book'. It was reissued with corrections in 1968 and remained in print until 1972. It is much more than a pious piece of domestic history; rather it is a thorough investigation of the early Oxford system. Its author refuted earlier theories that the hostels of medieval universities were voluntary associations of students grouped under a chosen principal. They originated, he argued, in the enterprise of graduates who received students into their own establishments and so protected them from exploitation by lodging-house keepers.

The book was followed by further contributions to Aularian history. The 250th anniversary of the consecration of the Hall chapel was commemorated in 1932 by *An Account of the Chapel and Library Building of St. Edmund Hall*, a thorough and lively description of the construction and contents of both. Later the Hall's history was carried into modern times by the appearance in 1954 of an article by Emden in the *Victoria History of Oxfordshire*, Volume III, work on which had been initiated in the thirties but halted by the outbreak of war in 1939. It is the only complete history of the college.

The appearance of *An Oxford Hall* had two sequels in its publication year. First Sisam invited Emden to write a one-volume history of the university. This plea was not rejected and Sisam was urging him in 1943 to 'press on' with the book once the war had ended. Emden himself, when consulting Sisam about the project for his great *Register* in 1946, said that he had 'not forgotten' the invitation of the twenties. Many must have regretted that such a breviate remained unwritten. Secondly Professor Sir Maurice Powicke, as he eventually became, who was then planning a new edition of Hastings Rashdall's

Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages (1895), asked Emden to revise its Oxford part; Sir Edmund Craster had consented to do so, but had been obliged to abandon his undertaking. The invitation was issued at the instigation of Dr H. E. Salter, Emden's friend and inspirer, and was at once accepted, and the new edition appeared in three volumes in 1936. The two editors collaborated throughout, but Emden was particularly concerned with the third volume. To it he prefixed his own introduction, which showed the directions in which new evidence had reduced Rashdall's credibility so far as Oxford was concerned. First, Rashdall had exaggerated Oxford's debt to Paris. That debt was considerable, but Oxford, which owed more to the English monasteries than Rashdall had perceived, was only doubtfully planted by Parisian migrants. Secondly, the Oxford *hospicia* were not born of democratically-minded schoolboys, but, as *An Oxford Hall* had shown, were largely spawned by young graduates. Consequently Rashdall had overplayed the role of the Oxford colleges, lacking which medieval Oxford would have been little the worse. Thirdly, Rashdall had underestimated Oxford's part in educating the higher clergy and hence the influence that they had exercised on public administration. Fourthly, he seemed to have exaggerated the crushing effect on Oxford's intellectual climate by the suppression by Archbishop Arundel of Wycliffism, which 'crushing' he attributed more generally to England's fifteenth-century disorders. Fifthly, Rashdall's estimate of the Oxford curriculum was too heavily weighted in a fifteenth-century direction; the subsequent addition to public knowledge of the curriculum of the thirteenth century made adjustment possible and Rashdall's perception of Oxford's place in the history of medieval thought was too confined. Finally, Rashdall shared the view that prevailed until the early thirties that Cambridge was of minor importance; here and later Emden was to show him mistaken. Lasting benefits that all the revised Rashdall volumes bestowed were the incorporation of exhaustive critical bibliographies, surveying the relevant literature since Rashdall, and of notes on special topics, sometimes, in length, amounting to distinct excursions. If the new edition had a fault, it was that, in the opinion of one friendly critic, the original work was too far slanted in an institutional direction and too little in an intellectual and social one to justify a mere revision rather than a complete rewriting. Powicke himself eventually regretted having agreed to a revise.

In 1946, and therefore well before he resigned his principalship, Emden began to negotiate the future publication of his *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to 1500*, which appeared in three consecutive annual volumes in 1957–9. Like many other great works of scholarship this seems to have begun in a small way, in fact as a pastime during the course of nocturnal air raid alerts. It drew initially on the publications of the Oxford Historical Society, which under Salter's distinguished editorship had been in production since 1885. It was meant to fill the gap left void by Joseph Foster, whose *Alumni Oxonienses* in eight volumes had appeared between 1887 and 1892, and to parallel the earlier coverage of J. and J. A. Venn's *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (1922–7, 1940–54).

Like its precursors the Oxford *Register* differed from conventional biographical dictionaries in two respects. First, it aimed within its defined terms of reference at comprehensiveness. Consequently it included many persons of apparently little account, but who might, through further research, prove unexpectedly significant. Secondly it did not seek to assess the merits of the policies, opinions, or achievements of those obituarized but simply to chronicle certain specified known facts about them. While, however, it was partially bed fellow to Foster and Venn, in its catchment area and its use of sources, the new *Register* differed markedly from them. It was not concerned to obituarize only 'academical clerks' and the Fellows of Colleges; it covered also the university's chief lay officers, that is its bedels, and from the fifteenth century its high stewards and their deputies; and it gathered in the incumbents of Oxford churches—since students who worshipped in the churches could be influenced by their priests—and the town's chantry chaplains. Medieval Oxford, before Emden came forward to change the perspective, had too often been viewed as a quaint curtain-raiser to the collegiate community of our times. Emden, here as elsewhere, demonstrated that it was not a congeries of colleges, which were neither numerous nor populous, but rather a consortium of students living largely in hostels and convents, and not necessarily graduating but seeking training and illumination in a variety of ways.

Upon the sources for the canon of Oxonians two things need to be said. First Emden's range was extremely wide. The university's own records start only in the late fifteenth century. Much, however, is to be gleaned in varying degrees from college registers and financial documents, papal registers, the

acta of the mendicant orders who had Oxford convents, wills, deeds, inventories of plate and vestments, the rolls of the Chancery, and the issue rolls of the Exchequer. All these were exhaustively sifted. Only the unpublished records in the Vatican remained unexplored. In his introduction Emden critically appraised his sources in a fashion which is by no means useful only to those who need immediate recourse to the *Register*. Secondly he began his work upon unpublished documents in a different world from ours. Local record offices were few, and, in particular, diocesan registries, so important to him, were sometimes hard of access. These things have later much improved, for episcopal and to a lesser extent capitular records have now mostly reached public custody. Had improvement occurred sooner, Emden would have been the gainer.

The *Register* entries are arranged on a systematic and invariable plan. The aim was to include particulars of birth and place of origin, licences to study, college or hostel, college and university offices held, degrees, courses of study, ordination dates, ecclesiastical benefices and dignities, secular appointments, dates of death and burial, bequests to Oxonians, benefactions, and lists of works compiled. A particularly valuable and unexpected feature are lists of books that Oxonians owned. Naturally all those facts could be completely supplied only in a minority of obituaries; so the foregoing inventory is one of aspirations rather than of achievements.

While working on the Oxford *Register* Emden naturally collected the names of very many *magistri* who could not with any confidence be associated with any particular university but who might have been Oxonians all the same. To cater for this mass of 'possibles' an appendix was supplied giving the *curricula vitae* of all persons who from the last quarter of the twelfth century were made bishops or who had been qualified to incept in one of the higher faculties on the assumption that such people could well have spent some part of their academic life at Oxford. Some, however, of the problematical *magistri* came to be recognized as Cambridge men and that discovery led on to a project for revising the earlier part of the Venns' *Alumni*. Cambridge had fared better under the Venns than Oxford under Foster, if only because the Venns had begun at the presumed beginning. Their work, however, was weakest on the Middle Ages, for the range of their sources, especially the manuscript sources, was restricted. Emden's Cambridge discoveries attracted notice there and as early as 1950 Sir Roger Mynors

(as he became), then a Cambridge professor, suggested to the Press Syndics that they might negotiate with Emden for a sister survey. In the upshot, thanks to much encouragement from Professor C. R. Cheney, agreement was reached in 1963, and a single-volume Cambridge *Register* appeared next year. It was on identical lines to its Oxford fellows, though the existence of an unbroken sequence of Cambridge grace books for the later fifteenth century made it possible to give precision to Cambridge graduations over a longer period. In the upshot Emden was able to add over 2,800 names to the Venns' pre-1501 entries.

The Oxford *Register* had stopped at 1500 mainly because Foster had begun his work with the dawn of the new century. Emden, however, came increasingly to realize Foster's shortcomings; many names had been omitted and unpublished college records had been ignored. Accordingly in 1967 he proposed to the Delegates a supplementary *Register* to run up to Henry VIII's death, a terminus that was later wisely altered to 1540, the end of the monasteries. The Press accepted the proposal, began to set the text by vari-type in 1972, and published the supplement as a single volume in 1974. It is organized like its predecessors except that the inventories of book-holdings are grouped in an appendix because the printing-presses of Europe had greatly swollen the libraries of Oxford men. The physical aspect of the volume distressed its editor. 'It will look so very ill-favoured', he wrote during the setting stage, 'when compared with its 3 elder brothers' and he described the type-face as 'barbaric'. The failure to justify the lines and the inevitable sameness of the type makes it far harder to use than the other *Registers*.

There are perhaps a few defects in this magnificent sequence of volumes. First they lack indexes. Emden had planned a topographical index in 1946 and with the support of Sir Richard Southern, though with none from the Press, he reverted to the idea in 1967. Anxious, however, to make the best progress with the sixteenth-century volume, he let matters drop. Such an index would have been of immense value and there could additionally have been some subject indexes, for example of notaries. Secondly Emden had compiled biographies of *privilegiati*, university hangers-on mainly occupied in the book trade. These he had meant to append, but eventually decided to exclude them because the late Graham Pollard was preparing to cover that ground. Pollard died before his work could be published, and we should have been the better off had Emden

been less self-denying. Thirdly in his entries Emden printed all the surname forms that he had found. None should cavil at that, but the particular forms printed as the headings and therefore in Clarendon type, seem sometimes capriciously chosen and more variant forms could have been drawn together. In partial compensation Oxonian forenames were printed in an appendix, which, other things apart, will aid those who in the future take up the topic, so little examined hitherto, of the distribution of those names.

Thus came forth the biographical details of over 27,600 Oxford and Cambridge men, of whom some 20,500 are ascribed to the first category and 7,100 to the second. They amount, in a sense, to a medieval *Crockford*, but since so many of the medieval clergy were politicians they are something much more. Emden, his reviewers, and survivors were conscious that here was but a fraction of those who belonged to those academies and Emden was the first to accept that corrigenda would be constant. For as long as possible he caused them to be published in succeeding volumes of the *Registers* and in 1961 he persuaded the Bodleian to insert them in its *Library Record*. Since 1964 this has occurred.

People hoping to launch such *Registers* today would try to raise funds from one of the great western-world foundations, and, if successful, would recruit a team and hire an office. Emden, with little help beyond the warm encouragement and spontaneous literary contributions of his friends, worked alone. Only those who have been intimately connected with such almost 'faceless' works of reference know how immense such an effort must have been and also how such works can wholly transform fields of scholarship which they did not initially aim to touch directly.

Some three years after Emden's sixteenth-century volume appeared Dr Donald Watt published through the Oxford Press his *Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Graduates to A.D. 1410*, the year in which the first Scottish university was established. This was without doubt a work of discipleship and its editor, who was permitted to have it set in hot metal, paid tribute in it to conversations with his master on 'dark Saturday evenings' during which the gelid 'world of scholarship' was thawed by 'the warmth of personal relationships'. Watt, however, was not the only disciple and there are in preparation in the United States learned works whose author has drunk just as deeply from the Emdenian fount and with as much satisfaction.

The authors of works of deep historical scholarship which are not cast in the form of historical narratives risk being overlooked in the *cursus honorum*. Thankfully Emden escaped that fate. He became an Hon.D.Litt. (Oxford) in 1959, an Hon.Litt.D. (Cambridge) in 1964, a Fellow of the British Academy in 1959, and a Corresponding Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America in 1968. He had become an Hon. Fellow of Lincoln College in 1939 and of the Hall in 1951.

When such compilations as the Oxford and Cambridge *Registers* reach completion their authors are left with valuable by-products. Emden was no exception, but, unlike some others, he did not stow away those wares but put them on display. Thus his 'Dominican Confessors and Preachers licensed by English Bishops' appeared in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, xxxii, in 1962, and his 'Survey of Dominicans in England based on the Ordination Lists in Episcopal Registers (1268-1538)' in *Institutum Historicum . . . Praedicatorum Romae*, xviii, in 1967. In presenting the former he noted the greater relevant richness of English episcopal registers when contrasted with those of other parts of the European 'west'—one of the factors that had made his own *Registers* so full of detail. The second, arranged chronologically, constituted a biographical index of about 5,250 entries, with an index of convents. It showed the normal age at which friars graduated in theology and the relatively large number of aliens, mostly from 'Germany', immigrating in the fifteenth century.

It has been mentioned that Emden cared greatly to know what books were owned or used by scholars. That curiosity led him to supplement in 1968 M. R. James's *Ancient Libraries of Canterbury and Dover* (1903) by publishing through the Oxford Bibliographical Society's *Occasional Publications*, iv, a discourse called 'Donors of Books to St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury'. This showed that of the 150 identifiable donors, mostly monks, 48 could be assigned to the period before 1300, and that after the 'Black Death' gifts declined and in the fifteenth century were few indeed.

Emden was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries only in 1969. Had his election occurred earlier he might have become a leader in the Society's counsels, for, in the best sense of the word, he was supremely an antiquary. His inclination in such a direction was first aroused when he was at school and it later took positive shape when in 1937 he became practically interested in the decorated paving tiles of medieval England.

That greatly neglected subject was to prove his ultimate intellectual activity. In 1948 he had published an illustrated paper in the *Winchester Cathedral Record* (no. 17) on the tile pavement, probably of Edward I's time, in the Cathedral retro-choir—the largest of such pavements surviving in any English cathedral. When in 1968 St. Edmund Hall arranged for the excavation of certain parts of the church of St. Peter-in-the-East in preparation for the conversion of the building to the college library Emden closely examined the tiles in the eastern part of the church and published next year an illustrated catalogue in *Oxoniensia*, vol. xxxiv. In 1970 he advised the governors of Winchester College on re-laying the tiles in Audit Room there in accordance with the original design, as an article in the *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club*, vol. xxxi (1976), reveals. Finally in 1970–1 he was the most prominent figure in setting up a nationwide census of tiles designed to survey the surviving remains of this heritage county by county. A Director was appointed, the Antiquaries agreed to house the accruing records, and Emden, then over eighty, helped to raise the funds. He himself published in 1971 the first county survey, *Medieval Decorated Tiles in Dorset*, an area particularly rich in those products. It perfected the investigations of the preceding thirty years, and, though some of its heraldic conclusions have been questioned, is likely to form the pattern for succeeding surveys. But for Emden's driving force, which included the stimulation of people very much younger than himself to become tile-conscious, this notable enterprise might never have risen from the ground.

Emden was tall and handsome, a generous and dignified host, and, in the manner of a former age, deeply courteous. None could overlook his sense of humour though it was perhaps rather laboured. He did not become familiar, in response to modern egalitarian fashions, and none outside his domestic circle would have thought of calling him 'Fred'; some of the younger dons might call him 'Abe' and he might be alluded to as 'the Abe'. He was a Christian. His integrity was absolute and he was free from self-seeking. He was generous not only to the institutions which he most favoured, especially the Hall and St. Edward's School, but to many undergraduates whom he unobtrusively helped out of their financial and other entanglements. From the average examinee's standpoint he was not an outstanding teacher; he was antiquarian-minded and slow to frame provocative challenges. Nevertheless, he inspired in all

his pupils, whether prospective dons or actual 'blues', a love of the past. Though ever remote, he understood and minded greatly about the young, and the young, though ever awe-stricken, responded with a reverence and devotion that few Heads of Houses can have experienced.

His views were strongly held and were varied only with great reluctance. He was disinclined to delegate. Although, therefore, during his principalship, there was always outward friendliness, it cannot be denied that some of his colleagues found his rein irksome, and resented the atmosphere in which they worked; it seemed to them to resemble that of a school common-room rather than that of an Oxford college. Notwithstanding such superficial reserve he was constantly consulted by headmasters, scholars, social workers, and the Crown's advisers on ecclesiastical preferments.

Apart from his historical and antiquarian specialisms his interests were wide. In 1941 he publicly urged the reform of the diplomatic service in directions that have subsequently been partially followed and in 1951 he supported the preservation of the British Council. During the depression of the early thirties his concern for the unemployed was never muted and he was a longstanding supporter of youth clubs. From The King's School days, when he won a prize in that subject, his devotion to natural history—botany and ornithology—was sustained, and the Cambridge Public Orator, when presenting him for his doctorate, recalled his skill as a rose-grower and his hospitality to birds.

RALPH B. PUGH

Note: Among the varied sources for this account special mention must be made of the small residue of Emden's own correspondence, now deposited in the library of St. Edmund Hall, the official files of the Oxford and the Cambridge University Presses, courteously made available by those bodies, and the *St. Edmund Hall Magazine*. For more personal services especial thanks are due to the Revd Dr J. N. D. Kelly, Emden's successor as Principal of the Hall, and to Professor C. R. Cheney, Mrs Elizabeth Eames, Mr William Kellaway, Professor Guy F. Lytle, and the Revd Professor J. McManners.