

UNIVERSITIES OF LONG AGO

Learning In Medieval Times

By R. D. McK.

WITH results of University examinations upon us again, it is amusing to consider what oaths candidates for examination used to have to take in medieval University days.

They had to swear, for one thing that they would not offer bribes to the examiners; and the examiners had to swear that they would not receive bribes.

And in some ancient Universities the students had to swear not to execute their vengeance by knife or dagger upon a "ploughing examiner."

This serves to remind us of what a different life the modern University student leads to that of the youth of mediaeval times who sought higher education.

In the Middle Ages, questions were given in Latin, and before the student could profitably attend University lectures, he must have learned to read, write, and understand such Latin as was used in the schools.

Such a rule today does not exist, as there are many students who know very little Latin upon entry into a modern University.

Young Undergraduates

IN ancient days the minimum age at which one could become a Master of Arts was 20, and the full course in arts lasted seven years. Therefore, 13 might be considered the normal minimum age for admission, but as a rule the freshman would have been between 13 and 16. What a young community of lawyers and doctors we should have with us if students went to their Universities at the age of 13 nowadays!

In olden days it was not necessary, or even customary, for the student to live under the nominal supervision of the master; he might seek out his own lodgings in the town, or join a party of students in hiring a hall, where one of the party was made the principal, and exercised a certain authority over the rest.

But even when the student was fairly imprisoned in this hall, it must not be supposed that he was forthwith subjected to the discipline of the modern student. The University of Paris made a serious effort to put down disgraceful faction fights, which formed the favorite pastime of the mediaeval undergraduate, by ordering the Rector and Proctors—as they were then called—personally to superintend the chastisement of the youthful rioters.

Drinking And Quarrelling

BUT killing was not a terrible offence in those days. At Ingolstadt University, Bavaria, when a student killed another in a drunken quarrel at a banquet, the University resolved on the confiscation of his scholastic effects and garments, and therewith contented, did not punish him with expulsion. But a Prague Master of Arts, believed to have assisted in cutting the throat of a Friar Bishop, was actually expelled.

Mediaeval students were, in general, perfectly free to roam about the streets up to the hour at which all respectable citizens were in the habit of retiring, and, until that time, they were allowed to frequent the taverns and drink as much as they pleased.

Who would be considered our respectable people of today, to act as a guide for the modern student in helping him to determine the time at which he had to retire inside the college "bounds"? And where is our modern tavern, whose proprietor could feel at ease housing a bunch of undergraduates in a drinking bout until they felt like going back to college to bed?

Regulations

VERY curious was the minuteness of some of the old University statutes. For instance, in a certain University a fine was imposed on a student for lifting a stone or other missile with the idea of throwing it at a master, even though the student did not actually throw it. And there was a still higher penalty for the successful marksmen. At another University a Doctor of Divinity was scolded a quart of wine for having picked a pear off a tree in the University garden.

Certain Oxford statutes of that time laid down regulations against swearing, games of chance, dishonest talkativeness, walking abroad without a com-



A 14th century University lecture.



ANCIENT ENGRAVING

panion, being out after 8 p.m. in the winter, or 9 p.m. in the summer, entering another man's quarters without his consent, odious comparisons of country with country, speaking English except at a principal feast.

A definite penalty was imposed for every offence, ranging from a farthing for not speaking Latin to 6/8 for assault with "effusions of blood."

Sports Banned

A STRIKING feature of the medieval University life—at least in English eyes—was the almost total absence of authorized or respectable amusements. The statutes of the college founder or University disciplinarian on such matters were often more severe than they were in the repression of crime or vice. A 16th century statute included the machinery of tennis or fives among the "indecent instruments, the introduction of which would generate scandal against the college"—though it charitably allowed playing with a soft ball in the college court.

As to the keeping of dogs, hawks, ferrets, "unclean beasts or birds," the practice was viewed by the college disciplinarian with a traditional horror, which (as regards dogs) still lingers with the Deans and Proctors of Oxford and Cambridge.

At another college there was a comprehensive prohibition of "chorus singing, dancing, leaping, shouting, tumult, and inordinate noise, and pouring forth of water, beer, and all other liquids in the hall," on the ground that they would be likely to disturb the occupants of the champlain's chamber below.

For the bolder medieval student there were sporting excursions made into the country. The University of St. Andrews, Scotland, with unwonted liberty, actually allowed its students to go a-hawking, provided they went in their own clothes and not in "dissolute habiliments borrowed from lay cavaliers."

Comedies Allowed

THE comedies which began to be acted in the halls towards the end of the 15th century formed almost the only amusement of an intellectual character which relieved the stern monotony of academic life. And this innovation was looked upon with considerable suspicion, though not altogether prohibited by the University disciplinarian.

What talent the 20th century University has produced in the way of the student of song and dance might shock some of the public, but the University

has not yet been prompted to tighten its reins on such "modern students."

Many of the minor steps in the career of a medieval University student were celebrated by feasts and drinking parties given by the successful and elated candidate. And it was not only after a University exercise, but during its progress, that the need of refreshment was apt to be felt. Many statutes allude—some by way of prohibition, but not always—to the custom of providing wine for the examiners by the examinees, whether before, during, or after an examination.

Where is the student today who would ask his examiner to have that "spot" with him, even if he has done splendidly at his examination?