CONCLUSION

In the introduction, it was remarked that university reform at Oxford is a well-studied topic with little apparent need for another full-length study. Hopefully, by now it is clear that this book differs considerably from the majority of works which have looked at this issue, both recently and in the past. Most importantly, through an examination of the public discussion of possible changes to Oxford’s curriculum and examination system, what has been termed the ‘discourse of university reform’, it has attempted to provide a more complex interpretation of the various important changes introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century. Scholars working on the history of Oxford and Cambridge in recent years have shown relatively little interest in university reform as a problem requiring explanation. Indeed, with the growing popularity of the cultural historical approach and its particular interest in identity formation, the majority of studies have focused on the universities as a site for the development of ethnic and masculine identities. As Joseph Kett has remarked, there has been far less attention paid to accounting for change over time, particularly changes to the university curricula and examination systems.1 The few studies which have attempted to account for the introduction of competitive examination, a uniform syllabus, and a broad, modern curriculum at Oxford in this period, have usually treated such developments as the simple product of a desire for greater efficiency and improved educational standards, both on the part of the British government and internal reformers such as Benjamin Jowett and A.P. Stanley.

While not denying that such motives had an important part to play in the decision of senior members and MPs to support a reforming agenda, this book has suggested that the factors determining the nature and course of university reform, in the case of Oxford, were considerably more complicated than such a top-down model suggests. Contrary to the impression given by the majority of historical treatments of reform at Oxford, senior members were not the only actors involved. It has been a major concern to show that junior members, in particular, the undergraduate...

body, possessed a significant amount of agency too; indeed, that one of
the key relationships we have to focus on when attempting to explain the
character of university reform in this period is that between junior and
senior members. The changing dynamics of this often volatile relationship
were important for virtually every significant development in the curricu-
um, teaching and examination system at Oxford between 1800 and 1854.

As the first chapter showed, it was the significant participation of stu-
dents in the Jacobite riots in the first half of the eighteenth century which
prompted important reforms at a college level, designed to increase the
degree of supervision exercised by tutors over undergraduates, above
all, a more tightly controlled curriculum and more regular and exacting
college examinations, or collections. By the time of the American and
French Revolutions, which also saw considerable levels of student par-
ticipation, particularly in the former case, a rising student age and ten-
dency towards longer residence had combined to create a much more
confident, independent-minded undergraduate body, whose potential for
social and political radicalism was increasingly feared by senior members.
In the wake of events in America and France, support grew among a wide
cross-section of senior opinion for direct intervention at a university level,
to enact some of the key reforms which had been seen to work success-
fully within their own colleges in response to the Jacobite riots. Hence the
familiarity of many of the key provisions in the New Examination Statute
of 1800. Indeed, it was suggested that through the introduction of a stricter
syllabus and a system of regular, challenging and competitive examina-
tions, the Hebdomadal Board sought to boost their authority and regain
the control they were seen to have lost over junior members.

Over the next two decades, the fears of senior members were to some
extent realized with the emergence of the juniors as a separate interest
group within the university for the first time. Visible partly in the unprece-
dented number of clubs and societies which were founded in this period,
the key development, it has been argued, was a burgeoning culture of
student journalism in which significant numbers of undergraduates and
bachelors expressed their views about the behaviour of the college and
university authorities and their resentment of measures they perceived as
deliberately intended to restrict their freedoms and police their free time.
As we saw, they sometimes invoked emotive comparisons with Cam-
bridge, where they believed undergraduates were treated with greater
respect by the authorities, enjoyed considerably more freedom and had
access to a wider range of modern studies—mathematics and natural sci-
ence in particular. Through a detailed study of these poems, pamphlets