

The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain, by Guy Ortolano (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2009; pp. 308. £55).

Unlike many books, the contents of Martin Parr's runaway hit *Boring Postcards* (1999) get a withering write-up on the publisher's website. 'They are', it says, 'exactly what they say they are, namely boring picture postcards showing boring photographs of boring places, presumably for boring people to buy to send to their boring friends'. In black and white, and occasionally slightly faded colour, Parr's book reproduces images of motorways and shopping precincts, bus stations and caravan sites. It also shows a postcard of Churchill College, Cambridge.

At first sight, this seems like an entirely unremarkable choice. Pictured in Parr's book, Churchill College does look dull—a plain, brick and concrete box. Yet appearances are deceptive. When founded in 1958, Churchill was a monument to modernity: a college established to promote science and technology and thereby build the future Britain. The architecture, too, was avant-garde. As Mark Goldie has recently shown, Churchill College was a hugely ambitious architectural experiment, and one that was greeted by critics with great

excitement.¹ Thus, like many of the *Boring Postcards*, far from being inherently dull, the college in fact illustrates something rather different: a moment when simple concrete and brick buildings actually seemed rather exciting.

The cover of Guy Ortolano's marvellous new book is adorned by another picture of Churchill: the entry by Howell, Killick, and Partridge for the 1959 competition to design the college. Far from being boring, this is intended to be a vision of the future. An undergraduate sits and reads beneath a tree, enfolded in the two wings of a massive, monumental concrete building. Although the author does not mention it, the island behind the student was intended to hold the mausoleum for Winston Churchill himself. This was to be a national monument as well as a shrine to science.

The story of Churchill College, which takes up much of Chapter Three in this book, is just one of the subjects that Ortolano explores. Other chapters look at the development of social history, debates over national 'decline', disputes about overseas development and the expansion of the university system. At the heart of the volume, as the title suggests, is the battle between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis over the idea of 'two cultures'—one scientific, one literary—that rolled on throughout the 1960s. What unites these ostensibly disparate themes is the author's sense that they illuminate a moment—the 'meritocratic moment', from 1945 to 1975; a time when 'British society came to be dominated as never before by complex institutions managed by specialized professionals' (p. 17).

This is a highly original reinterpretation of the 'two cultures' debate. Previously, most writers have been willing to see it in the terms apparently set out by Snow and Leavis themselves: a battle between science and art, somewhat analogous to the fight between T.H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold eighty years before. What Ortolano is able to show is that it was also a struggle between two competing forms of liberalism—the 'technocratic liberalism' of C.P. Snow, and the 'radical liberalism' of F.R. Leavis. Both men were scholarship boys who, through sheer hard work and ability, had risen to prominence within the heart of the establishment. Yet each had a different analysis of contemporary Britain. For Snow, modern society was industrial, technological, and progressive. For Leavis, modern society was fragmented, ersatz, and on the decline. Both men admired talented individuals. But, while Snow wanted them to work through existing institutions to extend the benefits of modernity, Leavis hoped they would challenge the *status quo* and sustain creative thought against the threat of modernity.

To go beyond this entirely convincing conclusion, and to argue that this debate illuminates a whole period, might be thought to place undue emphasis on the internal politics of Cambridge University. Much of this book is, indeed, about common-room gossip and the mechanics of academic life. A cynic could go on to observe that Snow and Leavis themselves scarcely deserve this degree of close attention. However influential Leavis was as a scholar, his public profile was never very high. However popular Snow was as a novelist, his reputation collapsed even before his career had finished. A couple of minor mistakes also stand out—the Robbins Report, for example, did not create polytechnics (p. 107).

1. Mark Goldie, *Corbusier Comes to Cambridge: Post-War Architecture and the Competition to Build Churchill College* (Cambridge, 2007).

It is the great achievement of this book that any doubts soon dissipate. Ortolano triumphantly achieves his aim of reconceptualising the 'two cultures' debate and, at the same time, demonstrates that it sheds light on a whole period. He also brilliantly reveals the way in which this 'meritocratic moment' stuttered and stalled in the 1960s and 1970s, leaving both Leavis and Snow equally dissatisfied. They found their belief in élitism challenged by egalitarianism, and their emphasis on merit undermined by a new focus on the market.

Just like Parr's *Boring Postcards*, Ortolano's *Two Cultures Controversy* forces us to look again at what, at first sight, seems all too familiar. By revisiting these notorious debates and famous debaters, it captures a relatively brief moment which could easily be lost by less sensitive and interesting writers. This is a book that will be of value to anyone interested in the history of modern Britain, and it announces the arrival of a very significant historian indeed.

WILLIAM WHYTE

St John's College, Oxford

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