

Thomas Weber
*Our Friend "The Enemy": Elite Education in
 Britain and Germany Before World War I.*

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Can a transnational and comparative study of two venerable and important universities—Oxford and Heidelberg—contribute to a reassessment of German and British exceptionalisms and of European stability? Thomas Weber (The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey) answers here this question in the affirmative. In a well-researched, well-written, and provocative book that offers numerous perceptive insights, Weber argues that Germany and Great Britain were far more alike than they were different and that, although Heidelberg and Oxford had many troubling and dark sides, there was little at either place to suggest that European society at the dawn of the twentieth century was fatally flawed and that a cataclysmic reorganization was in the offing. On the contrary, life at both universities and in both countries was “slowly but steadily moving in the right direction” (223), one more implied than carefully delineated though.

The book sets out by introducing the two universities. More bourgeois than aristocratic institutions and academic powerhouses with different structures (one “steeped in the tradition of German *Wissenschaft* that gave its students far-reaching liberties” while the other “tried to instill a sense of civic duty and kept its students on a very short leash” p. 47), a quintessential Protestant character, a student body truly national in its origins, and strong links of dependency on their respective state, Heidelberg and Oxford produced a good number of the civil, political, and administrative elite of their countries. Weber concludes his first chapter by comparing the forms—not so different, he emphasizes—student life took at Oxford and Heidelberg: it centered on drinking, a liking for amusement, pranks, and frolics, and an emphasis on a privileged social life rather than academia.

Chapter two tells the story of Anglo-German life at Heidelberg and Oxford: it

witnessed expressions of Anglophilia and Germanophilia from both faculty and students. These many attempts at easing tensions between the two empires lead the author to conclude that a simple binary system of Anglophile versus Anglophobe and Germanophile versus Germanophobe totally misrepresents the character of Anglo-German relations before World War I and that, therefore, the importance of Anglo-German antagonism (*pace* Paul Kennedy and Konrad Jarausch, among others) has been greatly overrated. Indeed, for many, a wish for amicable Anglo-German relations and German nationalism were not contradictory terms.

“Of Oars and Rapiers: Militarism and Nationalism” investigates the differences between the most popular pastimes of Heidelberg corporation students (student duels) and Oxford college students (rowing). Both universities fostered nationalism and militarism but, and the distinction is an important one, neither was directed at each other. Indeed, if students did not push for any specific war (an Anglo-German one, for example), both military cultures nevertheless valued and promulgated qualities (duty, honour, loyalty, endurance, and team spirit) that help explain why they willingly followed the call, once they were called to arms: “(r)efusing to join up would have made students social outcasts” (133), maintains Weber. In a nutshell, there was a close nexus between nationalism, war, and masculinity in Heidelberg and Oxford student culture; students were socialized by male gender roles that taught them to serve the nation, even to die for it.

Chapter four deals with student sexuality at two institutions of higher learning that were literally “fortresses of masculinity” (136); in such a context, there was no space left for an acceptance of homosexuality, even though Heidelberg was sexually more liberal and permissive than was Oxford. Did women manage to make inroads into the male bastions of Heidelberg and Oxford? Chapter five argues that, in spite of continued resistance to emancipation, both universities moved slowly toward greater gender equality in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Actually, by 1914 opportunities were even greater at Heidelberg than at Oxford, even though the percentage of full-time female students still remained quite low (10 per cent at Heidelberg and 8.1 per cent at Oxford). Finally, chapter six introduces a university culture that was still xenophobic (Russian students at Heidelberg and Indian students at Oxford, for example, were the victims of discrimination) and anti-Semitic, but here too there were undeniably ever widening opportunities for foreigners and Jews.

How convincing is this revisionist approach to the traditional historiography that contrasts a pre-1914 liberal and tolerant Great Britain with a conservative and militaristic Wilhelmine Germany? Weber presents much persuasive evidence that simultaneously rehabilitates a somewhat maligned German culture and exposes a not so liberal British culture, but are these arguments strong enough to challenge the veracity of older interpretations—in particular, the one that inaugurates the German *Sonderweg* before, not after, the Great War of 1914–1918? Or to put it differently: was the assumption of a growing Anglo-German antagonism primarily a retrospective wartime construction, as Weber argues here? Scholars have offered different answers to this important question, one that is relevant to the very controversial topic of the origins of the First World War. While acknowledging that there was nothing

inevitable about an Anglo-German military confrontation, this reviewer suspects that not everybody will agree with Weber that the generation of 1914 was not dreaming of an Anglo-German war. Was not the virulence of the propaganda and the intensity of hatred that characterized the Great War, at least to some extent, prepared by a prewar intellectual climate to which universities, on each side of the Channel, had been important contributors? Weber is right to point out that patriotism is by no means incompatible with cosmopolitanism and that the responses of Oxford and Heidelberg to the challenges of European modernity were similar in many ways; nevertheless, in spite of these shared intellectual bonds, should not one conclude that, at the end of the day, our friend still remained the enemy?

This caveat does not, however, detract from the importance of Weber's achievement: any book that challenges so many received opinions and existing stereotypes is certainly worth reading!