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Stray, Christopher. *An American in Victorian Cambridge: Charles Astor Bristed's "Five Years in an English University."* Exeter, Eng.: U of Exeter P, 2008. 448 pp. Cloth \$85.00.

IN EARLY DECEMBER 2009, THIS REVIEWER STEPPED OUT OF ONE of the libraries at Duke University on an urgent errand—to feed a parking meter. It was at the top of the hour and classes were changing. Among the many students crowding the flagstone walkways, a young man in an academic gown, black with purple bands on the sleeves, was more than conspicuous. His sartorial accoutrements included Chuck Taylors (or the Chinese replica) and shades, and he paused occasionally to shout *Eruditio et Religio* while executing patterns of curious hand jive. Echo-like, the phrase *Eruditio et Religio* was heard again from a distance, and three similarly clad young men appeared from across the quad, also making strange gestures. Back in the library, I mentioned what I had seen and asked, “What in hell was that?” “Oh, it’s the last day of classes. That’s the Old Trinity Club; they’ve been performing that ritual for ages.”



C. A. Bristed, from Appleton's *Cyclopedia of American Biography*

Charles Astor Bristed (1820–74) was the favorite grandson of furrier John Jacob Astor, perhaps the wealthiest American of his day. Under his own name and as “Carl Benson,” Bristed became a much published essayist and critic with readers on both sides of the Atlantic. His father was Dorset-born, Episcopal cleric and author John Bristed (1778–1855), who immigrated to America in 1806. In the 1820s his mother Magdalen Astor divorced the Reverend Bristed, her second husband whom she had married soon after her divorce in 1819 from Adrian Bentzon, colonial governor of the Danish colony of Santa Cruz. In 1832 when he was twelve, the younger Bristed’s mother died, and he spent the remainder of his formative years living with his grandfather in the Astor household. He was graduated with honors from Yale in 1839 and attended Cambridge University from 1840 to 1845, remaining there until 1846. An inheritance in 1848 from his grandfather’s estate freed him from the necessity of gainful employment and allowed him to follow his chosen profession as a writer while suffering few of its constraints or pecuniary embarrassments. He is the subject of an article in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)* by Christopher A. Stray, who also has edited, annotated, and indexed this new edition of Bristed’s *Five Years in an English University*.

Stray, an honorary research fellow in the department of Classics at Swansea University, has written and published widely on classical education and educators in England, on English academic traditions in the nineteenth century, on the history of textbook publication, and on several private languages that have at least distant relevance to the Carlyles’ own “coterie speech.” His *Mushri-English Pronouncing Dictionary: A Chapter in 19th-Century Public School Lexicography* (U of Reading, 1996) is a monograph of exceptional charm, and its lively and learned text, apt annotation, and attractive graphic design bring to life the classroom of Winchester College schoolmaster Edmund Doidge Anderson Morshead (1849–1925; *ODNB*). With much patience and skill, Stray has performed a similar resurrection upon Bristed’s forgotten literary classic, and he has further refreshed it with the addition of contemporary illustration by John Lewis Roget (son of *Thesaurus* Roget).



Roget's pen-and-ink renderings, such as this oft-repeated example, reinforce the literary portraiture with a simplicity of line that anticipates later English illustrators E. H. Shepard and C. G. Harper. This new edition benefits further from a panoply of useful, and at times comical, annotation, which comes from seven sources (five in addition to Bristed and Stray). Patrick Leary, independent scholar and founder of the *Victoria Research Web*, introduces the volume with an appreciation of Bristed the writer and a chronicle of the Anglo-American cultural context. Stray's own introduction provides particulars of Bristed's life as well as a glimpse into ancient traditions, academic and social, of Cambridge University and its colleges—most important, an explanation of the mathematical tripos and the classical tripos. Stray summarizes the critical review of Bristed's book in the contemporary press, and he explains his method of incorporating critical marginalia into this new edition. Appended is a bibliography of sources quoted in the front matter and footnotes, an exhaustive bibliography of Bristed's complete literary output, 1838–74, and an index that is focused and reliable.

Five Years in an English University was published in three editions during Bristed's lifetime, the first and second both appearing in 1852. George Otto Trevelyan (Trinity, 1857), upon re-reading *Five Years* in 1910, remarked, "I think this book, as I always thought it, with all its faults incomparably the best account of an English university in existence." Bristed's core text is timeless and transports its reader much as does, say, David Masson's *Memories of London in the Forties* (1908). Both books perfectly convey the atmosphere of a single decade, and though the societies described are very different, Masson's

and Bristed's pen-portraits and pen-landscapes share much by way of style, vocabulary, and cadence. Masson, like Carlyle, came to London from the Scottish lowlands. Bristed came to Cambridge University from New York and New Haven at a time when relations between Britain and the United States were cool and often hostile. Patrick Leary explains: "In the nineteenth century, the world's two great Anglophone cultures were separated by barriers a great deal more troublesome and tempest-tossed than mere ocean vastness. From the 1820s through at least the 1860s, Anglo-American relations were wracked with conflict, permeated by suspicion, and enveloped in a fog of mutual incomprehension." Perhaps all nations at all times must fear a great enemy with a threatening political philosophy: whereas for most of the twentieth century the American bugaboo was *communism*, for most of the nineteenth it was *monarchism*—compounded with the residual memory of great wars with England in 1775–81 and 1812–15.

Per Bristed's reception at Cambridge, it is likely, even if he doesn't report it, that his native egotism brought him as many detractors as admirers. Early in his account, he declares "I made a very tolerable representative for the reading section of Young America to send among English scholars," to which Stray appends this multi-layered footnote (his are always in square brackets):

[Trevelyan comments, "That was not Macaulay's impression on the only occasion that he met Bristed." In his journal for 19 June 1850, Macaulay wrote: "Breakfast party Mahon, Lord Carlisle—Young Hallam, Milnes—a raffish Yankee named Bristed intruded himself—he had been introduced to me years ago by young Campbell and must, I think, have got scent of this breakfast. For otherwise he would hardly, ill bred and impertinent as he is, have come at such a time in the morning, and have forced himself on me when he knew that I had guests. It was all I could do to be civil—though educated here at Cambridge he had the vilest nasal twang and all the manners of a thorough Jonathan." ("Jonathan" or "Brother Jonathan," a common term for Americans in 19th-century England.) My thanks to William Thomas, whose edition of Macaulay's Journal was published by Pickering and Chatto in 2008.]

To one cis-Atlantic reader of the above, Lord Macaulay comes across as an officious snob who might have learned a thing or

two had his ossification not been so advanced. Still, Bristed was successful at least once in effecting at Cambridge the transfer of a particular American enthusiasm:

. . . one fine summer afternoon I say, while we were thus occupied, he broke out with, "Bristed, did you ever drink sherry cobbler?"

I confessed that I had. "Can you make it?"

This was a question that took longer to answer. Though it was many years since I had last been engaged in the process (on which occasion a young lady from the neighboring nation of South Carolina had particularly insisted on my putting in *enough sherry*), I probably recollected enough of the theory to put it into practice again; but there was a difficulty in procuring some of the requisite materials—ice for instance. Here they looked astonished, *ice*, as it is commonly understood in England, that is *ice-cream*, being a very common article of consumption at Cambridge. But simple ice, sufficiently clear to be put into a beverage, was at that time unknown in England; they have become familiar with it since, thanks to Lake Wenham [*here Stray includes an eleventh footnote, see below*]. However, the original mover of the matter thought he had sufficient influence with the confectioners, or, failing that, chemical knowledge enough of his own to obtain the rare luxury by artificial means, and two others of the party undertook to procure the necessary description of straws. So I invited the company to meet in my rooms three days from that time and *try sherry cobbler*.

It was not necessary to put a private laboratory at work for freezing the ice. The crack confectioner of the place undertook to supply it, though somewhat puzzled by the order, coupled as it was with one for soda-water glasses, or tumblers of the largest size; and equally puzzled were the milliners' girls at the application of our foraging party for straws. But all these preliminary difficulties being happily overcome, the six assembled on the appointed day, in my *summer* room (I was luxurious enough to have two) to test the transatlantic beverage. I was conscious of ten curious eyes watching my every movement, as I proceeded to concoct the cobbler. Having at length arranged it to suit my taste, I took an experimental suck, put in another straw and handed the glass

over to our authority who, grave as a judge, proceeded to the trial. The eyes of the party were now directed to him with an anxiety in which I alone did not participate, the few drops imbibed having satisfied me that the national beverage was able to take care of itself.

F—— laid hold of the straw and applied his lips to it for a few seconds without manifesting any emotion in his features. Then he paused a moment, took a longer draught and rolled up his eyes, making a great display of the whites—a trick he had learned during his excursion into the Methodist Church—then removing his lips reluctantly from the straw, he uttered his oracular decision, “It will do.” Forthwith every man seized a knife and a lemon, and the manufacture of cobbler went on. I do not undertake to say that these were the first made in England, but they certainly were the first made at either University: it did not take long to naturalize them at Cambridge. As the beverage is a much weaker one than the Cantabs had been in the habit of drinking, besides that it requires to be imbibed more slowly than unmixed wine, I may congratulate myself on having done something to promote the cause of sobriety, as well as of table aesthetics. But republics are not the only communities that show themselves ungrateful to their benefactors. In less than three years the origin of the drink was forgotten. Before I left the University, an Eton Freshman at a wine party, asked me, *if we drank sherry-cobbler in America!*

For callout 11, at Lake Wenham, Stray offers a gem of a footnote:

[Lake Wenham near Boston, noted for the purity of its water. Thousands of tons of Wenham ice were imported to England via Liverpool from the mid-1840s onwards; it was claimed that newsprint could be read through a two-foot thickness.]

It may be that in this day of email, texting, and tweets, a well-written footnote has become as rare as a well-written letter. And it is too bad: precise annotation brings clarity; indifferent annotation, conversely, can make the most extraordinary text dull and ordinary, if not utterly opaque.

This edition incorporates many very fine footnotes other than Bristed’s and Stray’s. George Trevelyan, for example, wrote

copiously in the margins of his copy, the single volume second edition of 1852. This copy, now in Trinity College Library, had once belonged to Thomas Flower Ellis, a friend of Trevelyan's uncle, the aforementioned Thomas Babington Macaulay. Stray has located additional copies with marginalia and has identified the sources, and thus readers are treated to the separate asides of five Cantabridgian critics, four of them from Bristed's time, or just before it. In addition to Trevelyan (T), they are: Frederick Bowring (B, Trinity 1840); Francis Ellis (E, Trinity 1842) or his father Thomas Flower Ellis; Henry Hodgson (H, Trinity 1834); the historian John Saltmarsh (S, King's 1926); and, Frederick Whitting (W, King's 1856). Stray informs his readers that those commentators not found in the *ODNB* are listed in Venn and Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses, II*. In addition to providing the identities of many figures in Bristed's anecdotes, there is a natural counterpoint in the graffiti-like quality of many of these marginal markings: "Absurd" (T); "Where do you hang out" (B); "Horrid tyranny" (T); "I doubt this" (B); &c.

In November 1856, a few years after the appearance of *Five Years in an English University* (in the first and second editions), *Fraser's* magazine published an essay "What Are the United States Coming To?" Carlyle believed it had been written by Charles Astor Bristed, but according to the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, the article was contributed by another American, Charleston-born William Henry Hurlbert (1827–95). Ignorant of his error, Carlyle wrote an unusually enthusiastic endorsement to publisher J. W. Parker (which we may presume Parker did not forward):

There is, in the last *Fraser*, a very pretty little article on America and its Kansas, &c. troubles; which I recognise for the work of Mr. Bristed, a gentleman whom I have long heard with pleasure on all such subjects. Candid, loyal, clear, intelligent, a thorough 'gentleman,' as we define it;—the only man who throws any real light to me on American questions. He might do a great deal of good to both countries, and gain the gratitude of all considerate men in both, by continuing and extending in all ways this fine function of International Interpreter between America and England, for which he has such capabilities. I charge you let him want for

no encouragement on your part. As a mere *writer* I find him very good; style perfect for his purpose. Only I wish he would give up saying 'at the North,' 'at the South,' which is a mere solecism and careless Yankeeism: no mortal would think of saying 'at Germany.' (*CLO*: TC to JWP, 21 November 1856)

Thomas Carlyle is listed thrice in the index of this edition and does not figure notably in the narrative. Otherwise, Carlylean connections are even more fleeting. Bristed's fellow student and friend Tom Taylor, playwright and long-time contributor to *Punch*, sent to Jane Welsh Carlyle on at least one occasion complimentary tickets for an opening night performance. In 1867, the widower Bristed married Grace Sedgwick, laterally related to the Dwights and the Cabots of New England. Grace's distant relative Ellen Twisleton, who was close to the Carlyles, had died in 1862. Finally, what Bristed and the Carlyles shared most was an Age and its influences, many mutual friends, and, for a short time, proximity of place. There is no evidence that they ever met or corresponded.

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