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Cambridge, in the US state of Massachusetts, is a suburb of Boston and is known for Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), two of the most prestigious universities in the world. Since its founding in 1636 by Puritans, Cambridge has developed into one of the most successful cities in North America, has been home to a number of successful and influential individuals, and has been the birthplace of countless new ideas and inventions. The title *Born in Cambridge* by Karen Weintraub and Michael Kuchta refers to this record.

The aim of the work is not to present biographies of the most important players in Cambridge since its founding—one book would not suffice for that—but rather to provide a cross-section of the diversity and wealth of ideas that the citizens of this city have produced again and again, and which often helped to overcome crises and led to further development, despite all the problems and difficulties. The subtitle of the work, *400 Years of Ideas and Innovators*, is based on a relatively broad definition of innovation. Not all the topics presented were invented in Cambridge, but very often ideas, inventions, new practices, and discoveries presented here already existed but were improved or used practically and with great success for the first time in Cambridge. The term "innovations" here thus refers to things that were fundamentally different from what preceded them and changed what followed them.

Weintraub and Kuchta divide the variety of these actors and topics into eight blocks, and in them cover a total of about fifty individual events in detail and with appropriate visual material. First is the large "Literary-Industrial Complex," which includes poets, authors, and publishers who lived in this city. The block on social reform describes people who worked to expand the rights of women, African Americans, and same-sex couples. It is clear here that Cambridge has had a very liberal outlook over the centuries. Because of its famously liberal politics, the city is often called "The People’s Republic of Cambridge."
The block on the industrial development of the city reports on large and small products that were invented or manufactured here, such as Elias Howe’s sewing machine, Polaroid photography, or the yellow Hi-Lighter marker. Unfortunately, the Cambridge Assembly of the Ford Motor Company, in whose factory Polaroid was located and which is now owned by MIT, is not described in more detail. The Ford factory had the first vertically integrated assembly line in the world.

The thematic block "Origins of a Research Enterprise" looks at scientific ideas that originated in Cambridge, particularly in the nineteenth century. Of particular note here is the work of Benjamin Waterhouse. He was the first physician to test the smallpox vaccine in the United States, which he did on his own family. The introduction of a large telescope produced in Munich (Germany) for observing the stars in 1847 is often referred to as the turning point in the history of science in America, when people first invested in "Big Science" and soon enjoyed great success. The telescope was the largest in America for twenty years. This example can also be used to show what seems to be typical of Cambridge: although there were existing producers of lenses for this telescope, and they could easily have been bought, an entrepreneur in Cambridge set out to make and sell better lenses. Alvan Clark and Sons of Cambridge thus became the leading American producers of telescope lenses of the highest quality.

In the next block, six examples illustrate the achievements made in Cambridge during the Second World War to strengthen the Allied forces technologically. Here, the microwave radar is highlighted, but also the development of napalm for flame-type weaponry.

Innovators and innovators of the period after the war until today are reported in the next blocks, which deal with advances in computer technology and the internet, as well as the harnessing of biology. Finally, cultural innovations that took place in Cambridge, such as modern American football or the long-running radio show *Car Talk* (1977-2012) are not left unmentioned.

Particularly interesting, and unfortunately comparatively brief, is the last chapter, in which the two authors, as a conclusion to their findings, attempt to identify eight points that, in their view, have made Cambridge such a successful city. These points are labeled "lessons" to indicate that they are exemplary and recommended for imitation. They include the importance of a high level of education, a liberal atmosphere, high population density and diversity, and easy access to investors and banks. Likewise, Cambridge has always built on its own strengths and has been able to establish new economic sectors on this basis when an old industry lost momentum. Unfortunately, Weintraub and Kuchta only describe success stories, and not failed projects that could have been used to illustrate this change. In this context, it would have been interesting to see a chart showing the development of some key figures such as the unemployment rate and the age structure, and possibly a comparison with other university cities, such as Berkeley in California.

The suggestion made by Weintraub and Kuchta that the Puritanism of the first settlers of Cambridge may have played an important role in creating a creative culture of innovation in Cambridge recapitulates the ideas of Robert K. Merton. In 1938, Merton developed the Merton thesis, named after him, according to which the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century was essentially carried by English Puritans, though it has been debated since.[1]

Weintraub and Kuchta recognize the danger that Cambridge could become a victim of its success. The cost of apartments and houses is rising, and many citizens and employees can no longer afford to live in the city and have to look for new housing outside. There is a threat of gentrification with all its negative consequences, such as the replacement of entire population groups and the emergence of social problems.
Weintraub and Kuchta’s book is worth reading for people who want to approach the phenomenon of Cambridge and are looking for possible answers as to why this city has been able to attract so many talented people over the centuries. However, they will not find a conclusive picture, if there can be one at all, because such a diverse cultural achievement as has existed in Cambridge for four hundred years, and which serves as a breeding ground for successful ideas and innovators, is the result of a constantly ongoing process and evolution.

Note


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