

AFTER OXFORD

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SHELLEY is but one of a parade of outstanding English writers who were "sent down", expelled, from Oxford. A probably apocryphal story concerning Evelyn Waugh, the novelist, is that he had a row with his Oxford tutor, vented his feelings with an oath, and was sent down on a charge of blasphemy. There are less drastic ways of compensating against difficult Oxford. Need for some compensation is felt by most Canadians during at least their first few months of actual residence there.

A new class of Canadian Rhodes Scholars are home from their Canadian college graduation exercises, and packing steamer trunks, not forgetting the emblems of their athletic or debating prowess. Beneficiaries of other less wealthy scholarships are putting books in boxes. Their particular Oxford colleges have instructed all of them on the date for the opening of Michaelmas term next autumn, and to arrive provided with sheets, pillow-cases, bath and hand towels and tea towels, table cloths and napkins, and a full equipment of silver and china and crystal, including a cruet. They have also been advised that they will be assigned to a suite of at least two rooms, and that they will have to furnish the rooms. However, the colleges happen to have been appointed selling agents for the furniture of the previous occupant of your rooms, and will let you have it at a fair valuation, and take it off your hands, less depreciation, when you leave.

The domestic arrangements integral to an Oxford education are some concern to the scholars back in their parents' homes in Canadian small towns. To the somewhat larger number of Oxford graduates in Canada, they may be a source of pleasant and amused recollection. Canadians who have taken post-graduate studies at Harvard may feel the interest of amazement. But can anybody else be interested, except, of course, parties from Cambridge seeking an occasion for derision?

Every travel tour of England includes Oxford, and every travel book. The personal histories of Rhodes Scholars back in Canada make a serial story for the magazines. Tourists all look at the ivied walls, and listen to the guide's conception of ancient college customs. The *Financial Post* measures living

individuals returned from Oxford to Canada in terms of success, and measures success by power. No Oxford graduate would acknowledge acceptance of this last criterion. Considering these diverse people and views of Oxford, it may be worth while, as well as pleasant, to give direct personal reflections of the place. This particular view, however, is across a space of time. What *was* Oxford, a question in the past tense, is all it can answer. But there is the intervening time itself that can also be considered, with the question, What difference did Oxford make? And from this there follows, for Canadian students, affected so many of them by the Oxford vision (or mirage), the question of what is to be done about it.

Five in the afternoon, with the sun breaking through clouds, on the Boar's Hill road, yields one of the best views of Old Oxford Town. There are the spires, not impressive, just very pleasant; subdued glints from the gilt on the weather-vanes, stone towers warmed by the sun, black slate and green copper roofs. But all is misted, slightly blurred. There is still rain in the air of this hollow among low hills. Mist is rising from the rivers. The stone is actually flaked, and looks like piecrust. Even the sharp spires casually arranged tend to merge. A scene indefinite, but absolutely identifiable. Although it has been seen in countless pictures, Oxford is one place to view that does not disappoint.

But the immigrant inhabitants will be some time before even seeing Oxford. Going from Canada means first an ocean voyage. To most of us ships are a novelty: the sea, in colonial days umbilical cord, is now not a part of us at all, in spite of our great overseas trade. We simply buy our passage. Of course the fishermen of Nova Scotia, British Columbia and the lakes are intimately concerned with specialized ships; but Canadians live so far apart, in such different environments, that they have little in common, and the average student going to Oxford is travelling much farther abroad than he has ever travelled in his own country. This is important, because he may return a Canadian better acquainted with the geography and peoples of parts of Europe than he is with Canada as a whole.

Going on board ship is a strange experience for the Canadian going to Oxford, and he will remain almost entirely surrounded by strangers for probably two years. Few Canadian college graduates, as a rule emotionally mature, are likely to feel the agonizing loneliness of a city child spending his first week alone on the farm. Alone in one's cabin on the ship, alone later in rooms at Oxford, the melancholy of writing letters to friends is not unbearable; alone even in crowded London, observing and

enquiring are pleasantly satisfying to curiosity. But all meetings are with strangers. A congenial companion more than doubles the satisfaction of new experiences, and the projection of those experiences into the future through memory being, I have found, another at-least-half of their value, the companion should be one with whom one will have opportunity to share memories. Too few even of Rhodes Scholars, who are carefully advised and assisted, make this arrangement from the beginning. So the first crossing is usually a total loss, though what can be a better holiday than an ocean voyage?

Reaching Oxford after this, there is for Rhodes Scholars a contrasting and unnatural welcome now, providing them an exclusive club, Rhodes House, and a staff paid to be their special advisers and friends. The Rhodes haven in Oxford enables some Canadians to avoid the continuous effort of meeting and moving among strangers. But as a result they do not see the same Oxford as the Europeans, the Indians, the isolated Americans and colonials, or even the Englishmen coming up alone from the smaller private schools and the State schools.

The Canadian may not begin to know what Oxford is until returning there after the first Christmas vacation, six weeks long, spent probably in Switzerland or Madeira or Paris. November, coming in the first term, is the depth of Oxford winter. The sun does not shine all month. You are always sharply conscious of outdoor conditions in England. Your rooms at Oxford are probably on the ground floor, which is at ground level. Your windows look out not on pavement but on the lawn and shrubbery and trees of a garden or park, all sodden and dripping. Outdoors is supposed, at Oxford, to be the most desirable place to be, even in November. You still wear flannel trousers, every woollen fibre sopping up moisture. The romantic old stone walls of all the passages are as wet as a block of melting ice. You have a fire in your living-room, but not in your bed-room, unless you are sick enough for a doctor. You would get pneumonia and re-cross the Atlantic in a box but for the hot water bottle that your scout put in your bed. So when your first term ends early in December, releasing you from this mouldy dungeon (smelling of T. H. Green), if you have the money you take a plane for the Riviera. Otherwise Paris.

Christmas vacation from Oxford is a full six weeks, following a term of only eight weeks. The next term you will have to serve in the new year is only another eight or nine weeks, and then there is a six weeks vacation or reprieve at Easter. Summer

term does not close until after the middle of June, at least a month later than at most Canadian colleges. So the Oxford Calendar does not leave as much idle time as might appear. It prevents people applying vacation time to commercial employment. Heavy reading assignments are given out at the end of each term. Also Canadians studying abroad count on a fair amount of travel in the British Isles and Europe. Oxford vacations are long enough for a real visit to the Cotswolds or Devonshire or the south of France or Sweden, a visit during which you settle down and get to know a district. The vacations are too short for the sort of quick tour of the whole of Europe during which you see nothing but the superficial.

In Paris his first Christmas, a Canadian is very likely to encounter several of the students from India whom he met at Oxford. They are a surprise, quick and alert, light-hearted, frank and friendly. The reserve, suspiciousness and almost sullenness, likewise the clannishness, that they exhibited at Oxford were an armour against the English, their rulers, their masters. Supposedly enlightened Oxford calls them "blacks". The Indians have been to Paris before; apparently they come there at every opportunity; there is no colour prejudice whatever in Paris. This appeals to a Canadian's principles, and besides, having had no contacts with other races, we are curious about them. White women and black men students from the Sorbonne are together in the cafés on the Left Bank of Paris where a Canadian will likely be staying. Promoting the racial harmony, which exists in more important matters as well as appearance on the streets in Paris, is the fact that the people of French colonies have been made citizens of France. They may not be as fully self-governing as some British colonials, but they elect their representatives to the central French Parliament, and open to them, welcome to them, is the full French culture, inferior to none in the world. As a social and civilizing influence, modern France seems superior to Great Britain in some respects. Anyway, the Indians are happier there. They speak French fluently, and love to tell their friends how they learned; they all have French girls, whom they do not often marry and take back to India. Although students of Oxford, they know the city of Paris well, and are at home in its libraries, book shops, cafés, theatres, night clubs, and with its intellectuals and artists. They accept a Canadian, who has felt himself a colonial among the English at Oxford, as one of themselves. Although not entirely for the same reasons as the Indian, it is quite possible

that an English-Canadian might get more satisfaction and value from electing to hold his Scholarship at the Paris Sorbonne rather than at Oxford.

Waiting in the glass and iron barn of Paddington station for the fast non-stop train that does the run from London in an hour, late in January, you know enough to buy a copy of the *New Statesman and Nation* and try for a corner seat in a third-class compartment marked *Smoker*. Secluded like an Englishman by pipe and paper, you become aware of the Oxford Gas Works suddenly, and then you are in the familiar railway station that looks and smells very evilly indeed. A taxi, a rattle-trap like the cars the farmers drive in Muskoka, Ontario, embarks you, squeaks around the traffic-jammed Carfax left-handedly—and there you are in your historic college again. You are in your own rooms, and there is a fire burning and letters waiting. Your scout brings tea. Someone drops in to ask about your vacation and compare experiences. It may even be an Englishman. At a quarter to five, surprisingly, it is still light and the sun may be shining. A stroll around the college buildings and through the gardens in company shows them amazingly beautiful. There is an invitation to breakfast in rooms next Sunday, to be followed by a long walk out to Beckley for lunch at the Inn. Still having some time before 7.30 dinner served in the Great Hall of your college (breakfast, lunch and tea are taken alone, or with friends in your own rooms), you go around to Blackwell's book shop and get an Ordnance Survey Map of Oxford District, one inch to a mile, the most helpful book any Canadian at Oxford can buy.

In this second term the Canadian may realize that he has arrived in the Oxford of his dreams. Its social life and customs may still seem thoroughly corpse-like and rotten, but the inanimate fabric of the town, an incomparable historical exhibit, becomes friendly and very enjoyable. Even the rumor about All Souls, the graduate students' college, which made even mention of the place utterly repugnant to a visitor from an unusually healthy and "normal" society, is now forgotten or overlooked in admiration for the harmonious architecture of All Souls main quadrangle and tower, and for the encouragement to creative scholarship that the endowment of brilliant men through their nomination to this club-like college provides.

The original wall of Oxford, a fortified town, is now part share of the wall around New College gardens. One notes Magdalen College cloisters; Tom Quad of Cardinal Wolsey's Christ Church with its broad green lawn, green in January; the "barrel" ceiling in

the oldest part of Worcester College. The Gothic and the Georgian here are genuine. Out beyond the slums, and the Morris Motors factories and workers' villas, in the countryside of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, the farming villages are full of humbler but equally authentic relics. There is the Manor House at Wood Eaton with a peacock on the lawn, the Inn at Cumnor, the church and cross at North Hinksey, just a short walk up the Thames (or Isis) tow-path the Godstow nunnery, and easily accessible through the Cowley suburb a Roman road, that can be followed across country for a magnificent walk to Dorchester.

Readiness to idle away hours, days and even weeks as regards studying is essential to getting to live in Oxford, the historical place. For the diligent Canadian who wins a scholarship this is not easy, but the frequent extreme dissatisfaction at first with the Oxford curriculum is a help, and also there is the example of the English aristocracy. There would be considerable benefit for Canadian scholars in a rule that during the first year at Oxford any diversion, except repeated visits to the College Buttery, or to Rhodes House, is more important than the ostensible business of studying. Oxford town and countryside are worth the time and expense of going abroad to know intimately. This rule will positively help the foreigner and colonial to become at home in Oxford and happy there. Proportional results from studying, for the class of people chosen to go to Oxford, will follow almost automatically.

A full course at a Canadian university usually taking four years, and graduation with a degree and high honors, are taken at Oxford as equivalent to English secondary school education and one year of the Oxford three-year course for an honors degree. A Canadian is not a graduate student at Oxford as he is when he goes, for instance, from McGill to Harvard. In the students' social life he is a complete newcomer and beginner, not a visiting athletic and debating star (unless he is an ice-hockey player). He is not even a trustworthy man, but a boy needing the discipline of being locked in his college at nine o'clock at night, attending roll-call so that he will be sure to get up in the morning, having to show that he is wearing his academic gown if met on the street by a university official (something like saluting a superior officer, at which Canadians are notoriously bad), being thoroughly isolated from the women of the town,—and being tolerantly allowed the safety valve of the horseplay of breaking up toilet seats to make bonfires in the college yard.

The effect of college rules on a reflective Canadian is to make him think that Oxford is too cluttered up and encumbered

by its mass and variety of traditions to produce anything that can be called education for the contemporary world. In the course of studies the classical languages seem to be given by far the most important place, the senior honors *school* being *Greats*, and actual acquaintance with the undergraduates, tutors and books read in this course being necessary to reveal that it is really a course in philosophy, and a very embracing one. The modern world has been formed by the natural sciences, and all the activity in these seems to be at the sister university, Cambridge. But after a year at Oxford a foreign visitor will realize that the most interesting and important aspect of science to-day, its social implications for a world whose masses of people are not yet scientific in their knowledge or attitudes, is best understood and being most productively studied at Oxford.

Lectures are as uniformly dull at Oxford as at most Canadian colleges. However, the dining halls of the various colleges in which the lectures are given are marvellously beautiful rooms. A mumbling obscurantist at the lectern is irrelevant during an hour's contemplation of the hand-carved scroll panelling in New College hall, especially if the windows are open and the choir boys are practising outside.

Stephen Leacock's description of the tutoring system at Oxford will live as long as there are Canadians going there, because of the aptness of expressions such as "being smoked over for a couple of years." There is no roll-call at lectures, but attendance is compulsory for an hour a week in the rooms of each of two or three tutors. Here is the most intense period of the learning process that Oxford does contrive to carry on. The setting is very intimate, just the two of you in the tutor's private sitting-room. But the tutor is an Englishman, and shy and aloof. The pipe smoking to which Stephen Leacock refers covers the tutor's embarrassment. He is determined not to force his friendship on you. If Oxford were staffed entirely by direct, natural uninhibited Americans, it would be the best of all Anglo-Saxon educational institutions. As it is, the independent reading of half-a-dozen books and the writing of an essay every week for each tutorial, then the detailed criticism of this essay, is the best system existing both for acquiring knowledge and for forming habits of study. As indicated in connection with the classical course, the curriculum is not narrow, and as you get to know your tutor, and he gains confidence in you, the range of topics for your essays broadens.

The questions on your final examination papers are very general, and allow you to write about the aspects of your subject

that have interested you. Your papers are marked by a board drawn from the tutors who have supervised your work. The oral examination which supplements your papers looks like a survival from the Middle Ages, but actually helps towards giving you a standing based on your progress in subjects that both you and Oxford can agree on as important. However, university examinations are given only once, at the end of your whole course, and the virtues of the Oxford system may not appear until then, or even later, in periods of reflection on what Oxford has meant to you.

As early as second term, beginning January of your first year, the beauties of Oxford town and countryside become evident, and even the English climate shows some attractions. The worst of winter is really over by Christmas, and that apparently absurd statement in Gilbert White's diary of Selborne about Spring coming in January appears actually true. There is occasional sunshine surprisingly warming, although more in the color it brings out from the stonework of Oxford buildings than in the feel. Clear skies are even more frequent at night, and there is brilliant moonlight, which is supremely beautiful on the monkish old buildings of Oxford. On the grassy slope of Cumnor Hirst, the fabulous skylark proves its reality. The Oxford crew starts training on the river, and the tow-path on the bank is gay with the scarves of Oxford Blues, the bright pink scarves and caps of the graduates' rowing club, and the Joseph's-coat colours of the various colleges. The meetings of the Union (apparently over-frivolous), of the League of Nations Club (over-serious), of the Labor Club or other political society, begin to have some point and reason.

But the people currently at Oxford remain a problem perhaps throughout a Canadian's whole time there. Collectively they seem to be a mob of over-grown boys from the snobbish English Public Schools running around aimlessly, wearing badly-cut white cotton shorts with elastic at the waist. On the average, they are at least two years younger than the visiting Canadian. This mob is a sticky mass erupted by a machine, uniform in consistency, but streaked in colour with the lines of class division of the English caste system. A Canadian rebels against the snobbishness of the upper classes, and at the same time sees clearly their reasons for being contemptuous of the lower classes. Except for the weak character who becomes an imitation Englishman at Oxford, the Canadian will never overcome his repugnance for and his enmity to the English caste system. Otherwise,

the problem, the personal problem at Oxford, is to get to know people as individuals. Quickest results can be obtained with foreigners. Fortunately there is an excellent assortment of them—the Indians, the Americans, the white South Africans and a rare Negro, a Dutchman who has been in America both North and South lecturing in colleges and working for Shell Oil, who is a graduate of Leyden and who has come here principally to meet G. D. H. Cole. All these people have exceptional individual qualities to have got here. In their company the individual Englishman will become known, and the Englishman who will break off from his herd to join this cosmopolitan group will usually prove to be exceptional, and will make a very fine friend.

In the second year, consciousness of an adjustment problem should not exist. Oxford the museum loses none of its fascination. More and more of the hinterland opens up through Sunday walks to village pubs. Favorites of the previous year, the *Trout*, the *Fox*, the *Bear and Ragged Staff*, must be revisited. Studies are now very purposeful in themselves, and there will be examinations in June. London is a place to live in, with friends to meet, shows to see, and even business like the interviewing of publishers to conduct. During the summer there was travel in Europe, to Prague or Oslo, but now there is a vast amount of unknown England, Yorkshire, Cornwall, Kent; Portsmouth, Liverpool, Bath. The time is too short.

But Oxford is just an interlude. While one is working at a Canadian university for a scholarship, it is likely to be an end in itself. This is just as well, because Oxford to-day is not on any straight path towards a whole life occupation, such as a university lectureship. Considering the question, what difference did Oxford make, with a perspective of some years, the first thing one recalls is the rehabilitation problem. Successful adaptation to Oxford means taking another undergraduate course and emerging with a simple Bachelor's degree. Canadian universities are interested only in Doctors, with the Assistant Lecturer's experience that a fellowship at an American university provides. The Oxford degree has no immediate cash value in Canada, and the Oxford learning is too broad for immediate application in a job. Some Canadians have insisted at Oxford on being allowed to do post-graduate work. They have been disappointed, have not got as much as they would have at, say, Harvard. One thing Oxford does not do is conduct a university to turn out university professors. It meets its

own needs by selecting a few English scholarship students early in their courses, and giving them very special training. The rest of its students are turned out on the cold world. Returning Canadians find the world very cold: they have lost touch, and also they cannot help having some idiosyncrasy, if not an English accent, then an enthusiasm for Post-Impressionist art, as a result of their years abroad. They must make a place for themselves in Canada, in journalism or some new profession such as radio, or in business. But in this they have the assistance of a much enriched personality, and considerable adaptability.

Other benefits secured are detachment from the local prejudices of their former homes, including complete detachment in their views of England, the Mother Country. Canadian Imperialism is not promoted by Canadian Oxford graduates. However, there are very good things to be learned from Englishmen, more especially from those exceptional Englishmen with whom Canadians at Oxford become well acquainted, for instance their capacity for disinterested activities. These people do not try to make a profession or a means of livelihood out of their particular hobbies or concerns; thus they may go into the Civil Service or into business, and still remain active in art or music or the pursuit of some special knowledge. The richness of English culture owes very much to this kind of service.

This being Oxford in retrospect, what is to be done about continuing the flow of Canadians to study there? How should individuals decide, and what advice should they be given? This is obviously very much an individual matter. The individual must not go for the sake of a soft job in Canada on his return. Oxford pays, if at all, by enabling you to work harder and hold tougher jobs. For an enjoyable interlude, you must go to see the world, not to grow closer to the Mother Country, not even to study as you conceive study from experience in Canada. After a way to live happily in Oxford has been found, the pleasure of it becomes as full and fine as anything ever known before. But the acquired ability to appreciate different England is a misfortune if it remains merely a love of things English: it should be carried back to any part of Canada as a power to find there more opportunities for enjoyment. In conclusion, I can say that I have not met anybody who regrets Oxford. I should like to have gone to Paris to live and study, too, and would find particularly interesting a comparison of the values for Canadians, considering their background and the future to which they return, of the Sorbonne and Oxford.