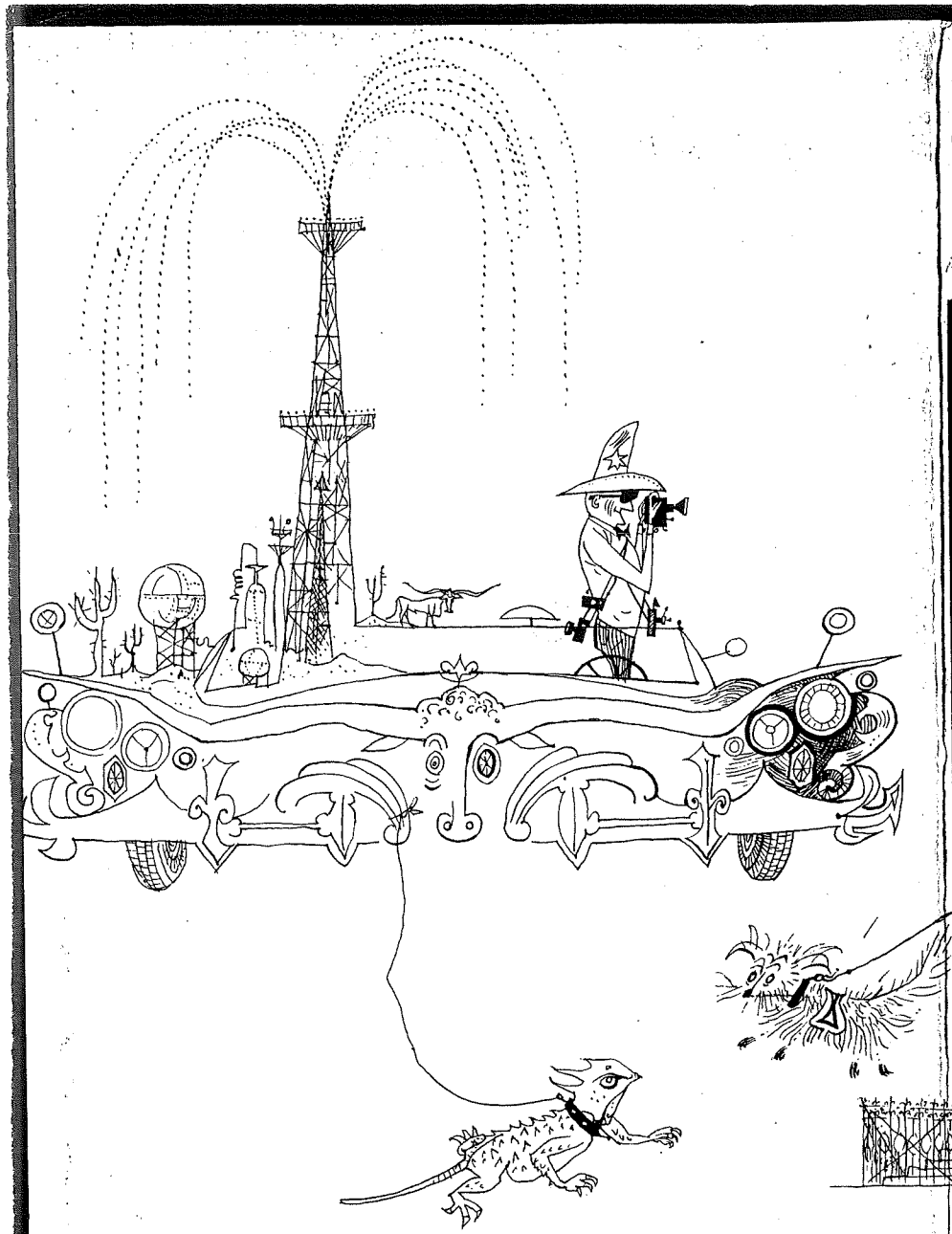


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WILLIAM W. MORRIS: *A Texan at Oxford*

I REMEMBER THE FIRST ESSAY I WROTE AT OXFORD AS a Rhodes Scholar fresh from the University of Texas. The tutor, whose habit was to sink into an easy chair near the fire, cross his legs, and look out at his students with a kind of bemused suspicion from his vantage point slightly above the floor, had assigned me something on the Reform Act of 1832. I had stayed up through a cold, windy October night polishing this mighty effort to its Wagnerian conclusion. I read the next-to-last sentence, "Just how close the people of England came to revolution in 1832 is a question we shall leave with the historians," and was about to move on to the closing statement. "But Morris," interrupted the totor, subversive as Socrates, "we *are* the historians."

There it was, right at the start, the stark assumption, the monumental confrontation that Oxford embraces the young student as an individual, a participant—not as an outsider or an interloper—in the process of learning. This was my earliest and most valuable lesson. It was also the hardest.

It was remarked some months ago by Lord Elton, in his valedictory as secretary of the Rhodes Trustees, that above all else an Oxford education aims to teach a man to recognize nonsense when he sees it, especially in himself. Considering the rampant romanticism the place has inspired, I would do well to keep his aphorism in mind here. Every year or so a new set of reminiscences comes off the presses, dealing more often than not with the peculiar color of the dawn after the commemoration ball, the smell of the Meadows in a spring rain, or the spry footwork of the bulldogs chasing some dear and now slightly mildewed old contemporary down Magpie Lane on Guy Fawkes night after the Turl Tavern has closed.

I would prefer to avoid the gentle stereotype, even though it represents a very real part of Oxford. But being fresh out of the place and caring greatly for it, I still remember the strange, bewildering, and sometimes oppressive Oxford that confronts an American student just emerged from the provinces. The adjustment problem is often traumatic. If, from the academic perspective alone, I leave no other impression than that of the challenge of my first tutor, Herbert Nicholas, my job will have been done.

We Americans found ourselves, quite suddenly, taking meals in those darkened medieval dining halls, surrounded by portraits of heroes and warriors and kings, princes and scholars and poets, prime ministers and parliamentarians and ecclesiastics; living for the first time amid crumbling walls and towers predating the discovery of America; eating at society dinners with silver two or three centuries old; humbly served as gentlemen-scholars, we aggressive democrats, by distinguished greying scouts who shined our shoes, replaced our bicycle chains, brewed our coffee, and called us "sir," even though back home they might have passed as Rotary officials or assistant professors of English. In college quads we heard the sounds of echoed footsteps; we saw in the stairs leading to hall the deepened grooves made by two-score generations like us. In college chapels we read the memorials to the dead of several wars, inscribed with names by the tens and hundreds. On those first Sunday afternoons, after the sun had disappeared sometime in late morning, all the bells in the old town rang—wild hymns to loneliness and the years.

Under these circumstances, as I understand now in retrospect, every day those first few months involved an often frenzied search, somewhere down in the subconscious, for self-identification. In that first winter, had it not been for Suez and Budapest and Adlai Stevenson's second defeat, America for us might just as well have been nonexistent amidst the memorials to centuries of English greatness, our own history seemed comparatively insignificant and all too easy to deny.

The dons were shadowy, rather terrifying figures who dwelt somewhere on the peripheries of ordinary human existence. They looked as if they might be judging the rest of us as subjects for some massive yet clever history to be written for the quiet edification and sober entertainment of equally illustrious Oxford dons of the early twenty-fourth century. Within a twenty-five yard radius of one of these Olympian gentlemen, my claims to seriousness only barely exceeded those of Abimelech V. Oover, Max Beerbohm's Anabaptist from Pittsburgh. Their table in the dining hall was a foot or so above the undergraduates, just under the portrait of the founder, with whom they seemed to share some cosmic exemption from human frailty. Old William of Wykeham, looking down from above during our nightly bouts with vintage potatoes and alleged roast beef, might have asked the college classicist to pass the claret, and I, Abimelech, would merely have noted the event in order to describe it in my next letter home.

Those weekly or twice-weekly essays, some of them written after reading five or six books, others hastily contrived two hours before tutorial time after perusing three chapters of George M. Trevelyan's *Illustrated History of England,* were at the start frightening intellectual exercises. After six typewritten pages of sometimes unmitigated nonsense, an Oxford don's "Yes, hmmmmm," an expression whose meaning—like the English "thank you"—depends largely on intonation and accompanying bodily rhythm, was the stern rebuke of the hoary ages not only for the reader of the essay, but presumably for Columbus' voyage and the subsequent appeasement policies of various Indian chieftains.

The English students, moreover, seemed uniformly brilliant, articulate, and informed. Even in casual conversations they used the language beautifully, with a fine regard for all the nuances of the English idiom. I have never heard infinitives, for instance, used with such poetic intensity as in those first few days at Oxford: infinitives as subjects, as objects, and as verbs, split only rarely and then on principle and for the sound of it. These students could talk at discreet length on a broad range of subjects which usually included various fine points in American politics, literature, and diplomacy. Were they some superbreed of the intellectual man? So they seemed, and so, indeed, many of them turned out to be.

The warden of Rhodes House, one of the great sons of modern Oxford, had been advising us to feel out the terrain warily, to take things rather easy for a time. On the face of it, this might seem the simplest approach of them all. But the problem involved in accepting an expansive leisure as the core of a system of education was a problem not to be surmounted overnight, not after the furious daily pace of an American university. A West Point graduate said he spent most of his first two weeks going to bulletin boards looking for an order. There was, of course, no compulsion to attend lectures, many of which were as exciting as television weather surveys; indeed, according to one of her many biographers, Christopher Hobhouse, Oxford has looked with some disdain upon lectures as somewhat obsolete since the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century.

Examinations were comprehensive and came at the end of three years. With the weekly or twice-weekly essay the only formal requirement, a student could do very much as he pleased: read Hemingway novels, take walks along the river, sleep till noon, go to London, patronize the pubs, or spend sixteen hours a day reading for the next tutorial. The necessity for gradual adjustment to this venerable technique in learning, with the student the sole master of his fate, incited an occasional puritanical apprehension that one was being slowly subverted, alienated from the old frontier urge to get things done. If Eugene Gant's professor (Merton, '04) in *Look Homeward, Angel* had boasted that Oxford discourages the "useless enthusiasms," might not the place in the long run annihilate the useful ones as well?

Lest this seem a confessional on the inherent psychic inferiority of the American student, let it be said that happy adjustment came with time. A poet from some deep Southern state had coined the plea in November, "Oh to be in April now that England's here." By the time April came, we dexterous products of John Dewey's genius had not only transcended many of the early difficulties; we had become so immured in the tight little community, a world in itself, that we speculated whether it might not be exceedingly difficult to get us out again.

Already the most brilliant in our group were being informally groomed for the expected First. The walls and towers of the town, once such grey and forbidding structures, became friendly and familiar landmarks. Even the dons grew mellow and gracious, human enough for their alleged eccentricities to be widely discussed. (One of them used breadcrusts for bookmarks.) At the high-table, under the portrait of the founder, I dined one evening late in the year, sipped claret and watched the faint shadows from the candles dance across the woodwork on the high arched ceiling, and eavesdropped on a conversation across the table: "Are you by any chance writing his obituary for the Academy?" It was a long way, I will note, from the Yazoo City High School cafeteria.

Behind their façade of exquisite language, we began to see that the English students had great gaps in their learning as well, that in some instances our American education had encouraged us to be more flexible, imaginative, and wary of pointless preciosity. We discovered that as Americans we could skirt the class distinctions which separated some groups among the undergraduates, those subtle distinctions which inspired a clannishness we found surprising; we were equally welcomed socially by the Tories and the Socialists. We realized, finally, that our presence was the result of a decision arrived at years before, the decision to make of Oxford a genuine academic center of the English-speaking world. For when it accepted the principle of the Rhodes Scholarships, the ancient university was gambling that a large community of exuberant aliens would contribute to the excitement and intensity of life there.

By the late fifties, of course, Oxford had undergone far greater domestic changes than the annual influx of three-score or so Rhodes Scholars could ever have brought about. Preserving many of the outward forms and much of the old elegance, the university has actually experienced since the war a quiet revolution. Oxford, with Cambridge, is today at the apex of welfare-state education. In a national system of education with entry and advancement based on the merits of the individual student, the competition for places in the two oldest universities has grown increasingly keen. Both universities will retain their monopoly on the best young scholars in the country—for the very simple reason that the able student with the opportunity of choosing between Oxford and Leeds, or Cambridge and Nottingham, will continue to choose on the basis of age, excellence, and respectability. The persistence of the old gentleman-scholar motif embodied in the two universities may seem somewhat anachronistic in a country becoming more and more devoted to the idea of democracy in education. But the paradox has been in some measure resolved; and the manner in which this resolution has occurred over the last decade or so has been one of the interesting features of contemporary English society.

Just about destroyed is the old stereotype of prewar Oxford, where the young sons of the gentry consumed immense quantities of champagne, followed the hounds in the afternoons, and courted London debutantes while treading at a gentleman's pace the respectable surface of history or the law. In the Oxford of today, the shooting of a deer in Magdalen Park by the son of a lord (promptly "sent down" for it, I might add) is as exotic as the presence of a coal miner's son at Christ Church would have been in 1928. The majority of students now are on state grants of one kind or another. More and more are coming from state grammar schools, the sons and daughters of lower-middle-class and working-class parents. Confronted at the start with venerable college tradition, attended by deferential college servants, raised far above their parents' status by virtue of the social prestige of being an Oxford student, many of them—perhaps most of them—will soon join the ranks of the new English middle class, composed of those growing numbers of young people discovered, trained, and rewarded in the postwar welfare-state democracy.

The old stereotype has been further modified. With existing college facilities unable to accommodate the increasing enrollments, most students must move into digs in the town their second year. The old and admirable idea of the closely-knit college society, the leisurely community of gentlemen-scholars living within the walls of the college, has suffered immeasurably. Many students of limited means spend their last two or three years in two-pound-a-week bed-sitting rooms, often dismal places three or four miles from college in working districts like Cowley, or in dingy quarters along Walton Street near the gas-works.

One could hardly avoid noting, after vacation time, the quiet frustration of many of those students whose parents had left school at fourteen or before. They went home at the end of term, these boys, to the dismal, restricted life of the provincial town or the Midlands industrial city; they sat in their cramped parlors and watched the "telly" by the hour; they felt the growing and perhaps inevitable alienation from their families and from their parents' limited vistas. These young people themselves are victims, as many of them well understood, of the relentless welfare-state pursuit of talent and ability. The mixed feelings of alienation, gratitude, and guilt which this situation engenders sometimes produce bitterness.

One of the most stimulating of my college friends was Dennis Potter, author of the widely praised diatribe, *The Glittering Coffin.* Potter, the son of a coal miner, was a brilliant and dedicated young socialist who spent a good part of his three years at Oxford writing and debating on the cultural shortcomings of the new welfare-state society. When he brought his fiancee to Oxford, daughter of a coal miner from the same village, I remember he took pains to invite only

Americans and his more committed socialist friends to meet her. Yet it is a commentary on the tenacity of the old institutions, as well as on the direction the paths toward reward and accomplishment are taking in modern England, that when Potter left Oxford he took a position with the B.B.C., since the twenties one of the unerring symbols of the Establishment and its values.

The paradox and variety of contemporary Oxford are curiously illustrated in its social life. There are social functions right out of Edwardian Oxford—from quiet sherry in a don's room on Sunday morning to the raucous society dinners with their four or five wines or the fabulous commemoration balls with the all-night champagne and the array of London orchestras. Perhaps the most elegant party I attended was given by the warden of our college in honor of graduating students. At twilight one June evening, in the medieval atmosphere of the college cloisters, the guests—ranging from recent graduates to lords and ladies of Her Majesty's realm—sipped champagne and heard madrigals sung by a boys' choir. I thought of the monks who had known and loved those walks in more solemn moments and I felt they were blessing us that evening with a smiling indulgence if their hovering spirits were agile enough to avoid the steady cross-fire of champagne corks.

There was a time, also, for pork pie and cheap red wine at someone's digs in Cowley. There was a time for the Saturday night parties given by the poorer students where, in one or two close and smoky rooms, dozens of undergraduates were crowded beyond escape. Here invariably was the white wine concoction, the sound of American jazz from a gramophone stationed in a corner, the shy and awkward talk between boy and girl, the quaint and incongruous offerings of the white-coated college scout: "Fill it up, sir?"

Perhaps the truest impression an American can take from Oxford, and the one he may most deeply appreciate because of its absence in his own society, is the almost universal deference paid there to privacy—privacy in the broad, human sense. At Oxford, more than any place I have ever known, every person has it; and it is his own domain, not to be invaded lightly. In an institution of learning, this uncompromising homage to privacy implies a kind of informal recognition of self-sufficiency and maturity in the individual student, as well as a faith in isolation itself as a way of treating problems of adjustment. In encouraging that genuine participation in one's discipline on which my tutor had insisted at the very start, this privacy is regarded as an essential for the independently rational person the University seeks to develop. It is the student's physical privacy, the separateness of always separate rooms, and it finds expression in the haunting loneliness of the place. Further, the community does not interfere with, does not choose to judge, one's personal habits. In fads and eccentricities, as in the paths the mind takes, the Oxford student is protected by

a soft, gentle tolerance. The young Trotskyite who wore the same maroon pullover every day during winter and sadly refused to wear his false front tooth when the Tories had aggravated him, and the young lord with the pince-nez and black cape and cane who was engaged in writing a history of European dungeons, felt no compunction whatever to conform.

On Sunday afternoons in early spring the tourists, in their streamlined American Express buses with the expansive glass domes, touched down long enough to see their two typical Oxford colleges en route to a typical play by Will Shakespeare, in his home town to the north. Laden with cameras, light meters, and tripods, they would remain for the requisite half-hour, diligently exposing themselves between poses to the fleeting, grey sensual impressions of the old town. Then, with a monumental rattle of paraphernalia, they were off again.

In the end, of course, like the tourists we were transients in Oxford. We too collected our paraphernalia, mostly books, leaving behind healthy deficits with Mr. Blackwell, and returned home again to America. The Yoders, the Oomses, the Sniegowskis, the Hammonds—from Carolina and Illinois, Kansas and California—all of us knew it had been the freest time of our lives, and rare was the scholar who had not sooner or later discovered there what kind of person he was, his abilities, his faults, his deepest convictions, and his darkest prejudices.