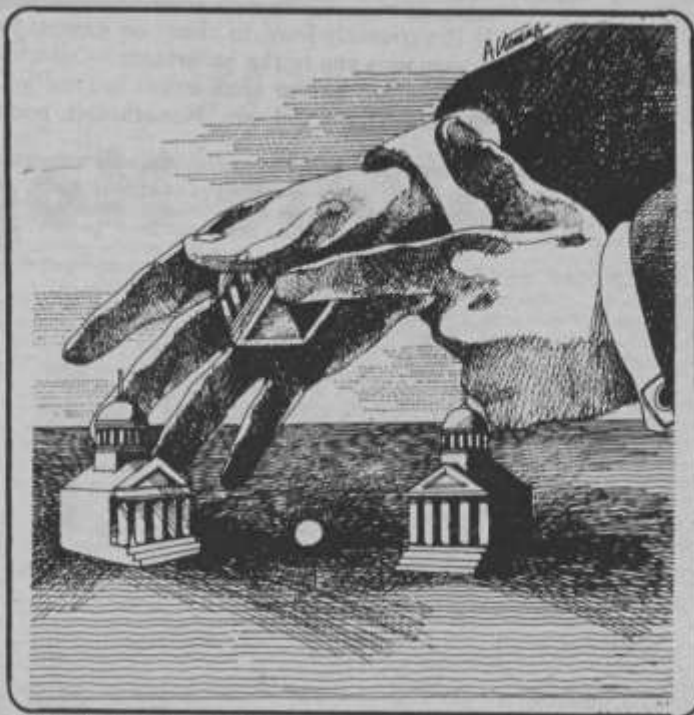


Oxford: Tradition and Wilde Times

by John Bendix

With convocation and orientation still moderately fresh in your minds, you might be wondering whether you would be better off elsewhere. Perhaps, but it's worth considering what the alternatives are like. Take Oxford, for example. Would you want to go to a place where a student was rumored to have kept a pet bear in his room? (It was supposed to have been Lord Byron). Or a place where you may be required to wear formal academic dress — graduation gowns — every night to dinner? If that doesn't daunt you, then perhaps a few other things about Oxford will.

First of all, the academic year is quite different. There are three terms, each lasting eight weeks. These are called Michaelmas, Hilary and Trinity; after Michaelmas there is a six-week Christmas vacation and after Hilary a six-week Easter vacation. Summer vacation is four months. Students are encouraged to do academic work during these vacations and are not supposed to take any paying jobs. This is not as much of a problem as it might seem, since students in England have their college education paid for by their local education authorities — town committees which fund education — and which enable you to go on the dole during vacations. The total cost of education is



only about 600 pounds (or \$1200) per year.

The people who teach in your college are called dons and they are academic (and formerly moral) tutors. Your main requirement as a student is that you appear at your two hour-long tutorials every week with an essay which you then proceed to read aloud and discuss with your tutor. The tutors find this something of a grind, since they may have to repeat in essence the same thing to 20 students individually each week. In the first year, there may be one, or possibly, two other people in these tutorials with you, but after that it is individual instruction. The tutors usually belong to a department that is located in some central building, although this applies much more to the sciences than to the arts. Formerly tutors did not belong to departments at all, since they were expected to be independent scholars and not need the contact provided by the department. The major university function that the tutors have is to proctor the university-wide exams — which means they both formulate the questions and must be present (invigilate) at the exam in order to answer any questions and to insure that no cheating takes place. More about that later.

As a student, the main thing that one does therefore, is write essays — even

lectures are optional. Sometimes, naturally, the essays don't get written, and there is a story that is told about Oscar Wilde, that is the epitome of what one does then, namely "waffle". Oscar Wilde, who had had a rather rolisterous time the night before his tutorial, had not succeeded in actually writing his essay. Therefore, he proceeded to walk into the tutorial with eight sheets of blank paper and read out an entire essay off the top of his head, pretending that he was reading from the pages. His tutor was lavish in his praise of what a "fine effort" the essay had been. Unfortunately, not everyone is Oscar Wilde, and the tutors are no dopes either. It does come down to writing a lot of essays in the end, and even to get into Oxford or Cambridge in the first place, you have to prove you can write essays by taking five 3-hour long exams which test both your knowledge and your writing ability.

Indeed, if you are English and are planning to apply to either university, you have to decide this years in advance because not only are you accepted in January of '75 for admission in the fall of '76, but you also follow an entirely different course of study while in high school in order to prepare for the exams. Women have a very hard time applying, partly because there are so few places in the university (5 to 1 ratio of men to

It is extremely hard to cheat on exams. Proctors accompany you to the bathrooms — which in turn are scoured before each exam in case you have snuck anything in there. Nonetheless, people still try.

women) and partly because the entrance exams are made deliberately tougher on women. For example, if you elect a French literature entrance exam, you will usually see printed on the top "Men candidates must answer no less than three questions and may write these in English; women candidates must answer no less than four questions, at least one of which must be in French. Time limit is three hours." (Actually, one year the instructions read: "Men candidates may answer in the language of their choice," and so one wit, instead of writing the exam in English or in French, wrote it in Hindi. He still got in — but the examiners had to call someone in from London to read that one paper for them.)

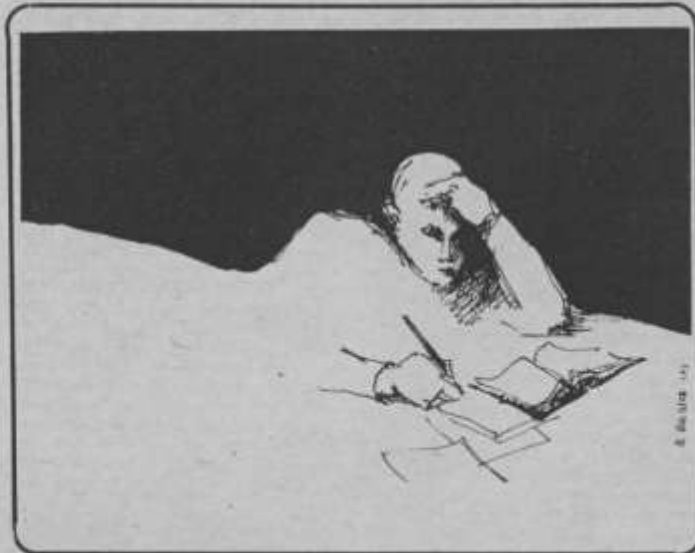
The B.A. course only lasts for three years (science degrees are usually four) and at Oxford it is expected that you have already received a good liberal arts education in high school; therefore you apply and are accepted in a particular field. In effect you declare a major before you are admitted and you study only that subject for the entire time you are there. A few programs at Oxford are broad (PPE — Politics, Philosophy and Economics; Human Sciences — Anthro., Psych., Biology and Sociology; Economics and Mathematics, for example) but the concept of taking courses that interest you outside your major is totally unknown.

But to the more interesting aspects of college life. Every morning at 8 you are awakened by a man (called a "scout") who knocks on your door and says "Good morning, sir (or madam)." The "sir" is optional, but the scouts (in effect servants of the gentry that attended Oxford) are still required to make your bed for you every morning. They used to be required to polish your shoes and stoke the fire in the hearth, but rising class consciousness and central heating have put an end to this. The scouts at St. Catherine's (the college I was in) also served meals and were required to wake you again at 11 in case you hadn't responded the first time. This was due to a college regulation which stated that you had to spend at least 26 nights of the term actually in your bed — a regulation which was universally ignored. (I was always under the impression that this regulation was established so that the scouts could satisfy their prurient interests as well as feed the gossip mill of the college.)

After breakfast you would check your pigeonhole in the Lodge (entranceway to the college that always has a "portee" on duty — a man who handles phone calls, stamps, intruders and students) and then move off to the JCR. In each college share are rooms for socializing. Known as the JCR, and the MCR and the SCR, standing for junior, middle and senior common room. All undergraduates belong to the JCR, all graduates to the MCR and all dons to the SCR. Each of these have their own politics (JCR Committee is like Student Assembly; SCR meetings are like faculty senate), but more importantly, each of these rooms have their own bar. The English do not make many mixed drinks (aside from Bloody Marys!) and instead the bar is stocked with an enormous variety of beer — Hook Norton ale, Guinness, Newcastle Brown, Tartan bitter, Morrell's light, etc. — all of which are served by the pint. Mixed drinks tend to be beer mixes — lager and lime (juice) or shandy (lager or bitter with lemon/lime or ginger beer) — although such concoctions as sweet vermouth with blackberry syrup are not unknown. You might find it odd that drink is mentioned so early in the Oxford student's typical day, but as the bar is run by students, it tends to be open almost all day, and there are

invariably a number of bar regulars who seem to be there every day, all day.

After the JCR, perhaps you have a tutorial, or you go to the library — in short you have a typical student's day, and the day passes in one way or another (for example watching cricket rather than doing your essay or spending 2 1/2 hours over tea rather than 1/4 of an hour), and eventually dinner rolls around, usually at 7:15. The meals were never fantastic at St. Catherine's, but some other colleges had a better time of it — Merton college's chief chef used to work at Claridges, a very posh London restaurant, for example. To compensate, the outward trappings at dinner were always quite a sight. Dining halls at Oxford are built on two levels — one for the students and one for the dons. The students eat at long tables (known as Low Table) in the main part of the hall while the dons eat on a raised dais at the end of the hall that has only one table on it (known as High Table). The food that the dons got was always miles better than what the undergraduates got, although the same kitchens were used for both. A High Table meal usually took 3-4 hours and might have up to 7 or 8 courses, not counting the coffee in the SCR afterwards. Dons must wear academic dress to dinner (eg. academic



gowns) and in many of the colleges the undergrads must also do so. (There are different sorts and lengths of gowns for undergraduates depending on whether you are a Commoner, an Exhibitioner, a Scholar or a Graduate). As napkins are virtually unknown in "Hall," the gowns serve a useful second function. Dinners are always served, and Latin grace is said, either by the Master (president of the college) if he is present, a don, or a student. Where students say grace, (Corpus Christi for example), there are competitions to see who can say the litany the fastest.

After dinner, there are innumerable activities — plays, movies, etc. — but some people prefer to study, and in Oxford this is especially necessary when one considers the exams. They are the major headache for students, since there are only two sets of exams during the three years: the First Public Exams (Prelims) and the Second Public Exams (Finals). Prelims are held sometime during the first year, usually at the end of Trinity term, and are exams to determine whether the college made a grievous error in admitting you. Finals are held at the end of your third year, also during Trin'y, and they determine your entire university grade. They may last for 2-3 weeks, 8 hours of exams per day. They test everything you have studied while a student at Oxford, but fortunately, you can't fail them (you can, however, fail the B.Phil., a higher degree). You either get a first (very hard to do — only 4% of those graduating), a second (90%), a third (4%) or a pass degree (2%). In England, a first or even an upper second is regarded as being quite something. It is definitely not "the done thing" to get a third or a pass degree because it indicates that you were "not worthy of the place" — an ethic that helps Oxford to have the highest suicide rate of any university in Great Britain. There is also a sharp increase in the admission of patients to the local psychiatric hospitals at exam time.

Let this seem too grim, exam time is also quite a sight. For any exam or university function (such as matriculation) in Oxford, you must wear sub fusc. Sub fusc for men consists in: black shoes, black socks, dark suit, white shirt, white bow tie, mor'arboard and gown. For women it is: black shoes, black stockings, white blouse, black jacket or sweater, black ribbon tie, cap and gown. (If you are unlucky enough to have a traditionally-minded tutor, you may have to wear this get-up to see) of your weekly tutorials!). You will be refused admission to the Examination Schools — a building where most university exams are held — if anything about your costume is not in order (eg. no cap, black



bow tie) and you either have to race back to your room and get the right item, thereby losing irreplaceable exam time, or leave the exam-taking until the next year. Despite the rigidity, it is quite a sight to see the streets clogged with students in sub fusc during exam time. London travel agencies are aware of this and offer bus tours to Oxford so that you can watch all the students sweat it out.

There are many old regulations on the books regarding conduct and privileges during the exams and some of the more archaic one that were never wiped off continue to be exploited. For example, in the 18th century, a gentleman had the right to wear a sword and cape to the exam and had the right to order drink during the exam should he need it. A finals student a few years ago found this out, and dressed in sub fusc with cape and sword, ordered a pint of beer from the proctors in the middle of the exam. The proctors had the last laugh though, since they charged him not only for the beer and their "traveling expenses" to the pub, but also fined him for not wearing the proper 18th century brooch to fasten his cape around his neck.

Trinity term in many ways is the best time, whether or not you have exams. The weather is usually very pleasant, and the heralding of summer comes with the May morning celebration, held on May 1st. Everyone gathers at dawn on Magdalen bridge (this year an estimated 10,000 people showed up) and at 6 A.M. madrigals are sung from Magdalen tower. Then there is a procession down the High Street, led by a spirit named Jack-in-the-Green (a fertility spirit), and English folk-dancers (Morris men) perform all morning in the street and in front of the library (which inci-

dentally is closed on weekends (after Saturday morning) — gentlemen are not supposed to work on the weekends. Later on in the term, in Fifth Week, there is Eighth Week. These are boat races, eight man shells, which race each other down the river on a ladder system. No prizes, but if you catch the boat in front of you, you exchange places with that boat for the next day. These races go on for 4 days; each college fields about 4-5 boats, and whatever the placing is on the last day determines what the placing will be the next year. There is some prestige to who is "top of the river" — in other words, which college's "first boat" rows down the river at the head of the race (which by the way is run backwards — weakest boats run first in the day) — and the rivalry in recent years has been between Oriel and Christ Church. Spectators are very partisan and watch from the boathouses — houses that each college owns on the side of the river exclusively for this race and these four days.

The events that epitomize Oxford for me were the formal all-night summer balls that are held near the end of Trinity term in the colleges. These can cost up to 25 pounds for a double ticket, and include some free liquor, dinner, rooms to crash out in, and all sorts of entertainment ranging from Punch and Judy shows to big-name rock groups to Morris dancers to West Indian bands to poling your way up and down the river in flat-bottomed boats (called punts) in the middle of the night. Formal dress is required, and the sight, at 5 A.M. of hundreds of people, dressed to the teeth, lying out on the grass, totally plastered after the night's frolic is really something.

What is also typical of Oxford are the pranks that get played. About a hundred years ago, students nailed a much-hated college administrator (the treasurer of Wadham) into a cupboard and left him there over a weekend. When he was released, he succeeded in getting nearly all the undergraduates in Wadham thrown out (called "being rusticated" or "getting sent down"). Not so long ago, some students at Magdalen decided that they wanted some venison as an alternative to the bland college food, so they crept out on evening to the Magdalen deer park (adjacent to the college) and with bow and arrow, shot one of the deer and roasted it over an open fire. They were caught and immediately sent down, for it turned out that the deer were in fact the Queen's private property, and damaging the queen's property is of course a serious offense.

So therefore, if you are thinking of leaving Amherst, do consider Oxford. It might be just the place for you.