

Modern Oxford

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO THE COLLEGES AT OXFORD WERE everything ; and the university was nothing much more than an occasional committee of the heads of colleges. To-day the position is reversed, as the result of successive interferences by Parliament. The colleges are looked upon as picturesque, but not very important entities ; while all power and control is in the hands of the university. The once proud position of the head of a college is sadly dwindled ; and anything up to a third of the income of each college is confiscated for the university's purposes.

True it is that there survives the curious system whereby the Vice-Chancellor, the acting head of the university, is appointed by annual rotation from among the heads of colleges. The proctors are also appointed from among their younger fellows by all the colleges in turn. But these offices are not what they used to be. Formerly the Vice-Chancellor was a dictator, and the proctors were the dreaded instruments of his discipline. Nowadays, all the work of the university is carried out by a hive of committees and "delegations." One unimportant busybody may sit on a dozen different committees, while his more useful colleague can scarcely find the time for one. An able Vice-Chancellor can exercise much influence, but he can get very little done against the drag of such a system. The proctors are reduced to trivial duties. They endeavour to enforce a complicated code of rules concerning the use of motor-cars, or the suppression of drunkenness, or the discouragement of political violence. It cannot be said that the disciplinary rules of the university are either intelligent in themselves or intelligently enforced. The proctors do succeed in keeping the streets of Oxford fairly clear of undesirables. They still patrol the city just as they did when it was a sleepy little market town ; but their endeavours are practically hopeless in the setting of a large industrial centre. In theory, no undergraduate is allowed upon licensed premises ; but it is possible to spend three years in residence, and fully a tithe of that time on licensed premises, without being made aware of the existence of this rule.

Of recent years the proctors have lost much of their dignity by



107 The High To-day



108, 109 Life in a Women's College



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a series of ill-judged attempts to put a curb on undergraduate politics. Communism and Pacifism make a strong appeal to many undergraduates at about the age of twenty. These harmless devotees label themselves as "students," a word abhorrent to the older generation. They start "student groups" and "student movements." Unfortunately, by exploiting the morbid interest which the daily Press takes in all Oxford affairs, they find it all too easy to create "student demonstrations" by means of simple publicity stunts. When it comes to disturbing the annual Armistice Day services, these performances cease to be a joke. The proctors, as representatives of the senior members of the university, are expected to take measures to prevent the junior members from behaving like the "students" of Cairo or Calcutta; but with their singular ignorance of the methods of the modern Press, they have been apt to flounder deeper and deeper into the very scandal they have sought to avert.

The statutes of the university now apply impartially to women as well as to men. There are some 750 women in Oxford altogether. They were admitted to the lectures of the university in the year 1880, to its examinations in 1884, and to degrees in 1920. There are now four women's colleges. Lady Margaret Hall was founded in 1878, Somerville College in 1879, St. Hugh's in 1886, and St. Hilda's in 1893. Though their numbers are so small, a casual visitor to Oxford might well gain the impression that the women form an actual majority. They are perpetually awheel. They bicycle in droves from lecture to lecture, capped and gowned, handle-bars laden with note-books, and note-books crammed with notes. Relatively few men go to lectures, the usefulness of which was superseded some while ago by the invention of the printing press. The women, docile and literal, continue to flock to every lecture with mediæval zeal, and record in an hour of longhand scribbling what could have been assimilated in ten minutes in an armchair. Earnestly they debate the merits of their teachers—the magnetism of X, the eloquence of Y, the spirituality of Z—as though these insignificant pedants were so many Abelards.

The assiduity of the women undergraduates is stupefying. After the long morning's round of lectures they swarm to the Bodleian. Radcliffe Square is dark with their bicycles. After dark, in their own college libraries or in their comfortless little college rooms, they huddle for hours on end, stooping and peering over standard text-books. They are tremendous sticklers for tradition and routine. Every rule and regulation of college or university is literally observed; the prescribed books are read from cover to cover; the stereotyped opinions are faithfully noted and dutifully believed.

The women undergraduates have a truly Teutonic respect for their own dons, who in their turn take full advantage of it.

Spinsters almost to a woman, the female dons present a terrifying caricature of the mediæval tutor. They estimate work by quantity rather than quality. The fact that there is very limited accommodation for the women at Oxford, and that many hundreds of aspirants are yearly turned away, constitutes in the hands of the female don a scourge with which to drive on her pupils to ever more exaggerated efforts. By nature as industrious as bees, the unhappy girls are perpetually goaded on to the inevitable breakdown. If one of them shows a desire to select or discriminate among her subjects, if she deviates by inches from the prescribed routine of study, there is always the dreaded reminder held over her that others are waiting to take her place. Short-cuts are not allowed; originality is forbidden; however wasteful or slow, the whole of the scheduled course must be covered. The results of this obsession are clearly seen in the examination class-lists. Many of the women suffer actual nervous breakdowns; others become stupid and mechanical. The great majority end up as school-teachers.

The women dons devote much of their thoughts to the dangers of masculine society. They have elaborated a code of rules and restrictions concerning the social relations of the sexes, which are strictly enforced upon the women undergraduates, and wholly ignored by the men. In a community so small as Oxford, the mixing of the sexes cannot be made impossible: it can be and is made a tiresome bore. To take a girl to a dance is a tremendous business, requiring special permission; but nothing is easier than to take her all day in a punt on the river.

In practice, but little danger lurks in the path of the "undergradette." About half the men in Oxford are no more adventurous than new-born lambs; the rest, if they adventure at all, look in other directions than St. Hilda's or St. Hugh's. Very few of the women take the least pains to be attractive or even mature. Fifty years have not mellowed them; they still care nothing for appearance or comfort. They run no tailors' bills in the High Street, but deck themselves in hairy woollens and shapeless tweeds. Germer's luxurious hairdressing saloons are unknown to them; their hair is braided into stringy buns. Their domestic background is equally repellent. Instead of a quiet pair of rooms, guarded by an impenetrable "oak," upon a secluded staircase, each girl has a minute green-and-yellow bed-sitter opening off an echoing shiny corridor. Instead of deep sofas and coal fires, they have convertible divans and gas stoves. Instead of claret and port, they drink cocoa and Kia-Ora. Instead of the lordly breakfasts and lunches which a man can command in his own rooms, they are fed on warm cutlets and gravy off cold plates at a long table decked with daffodils.

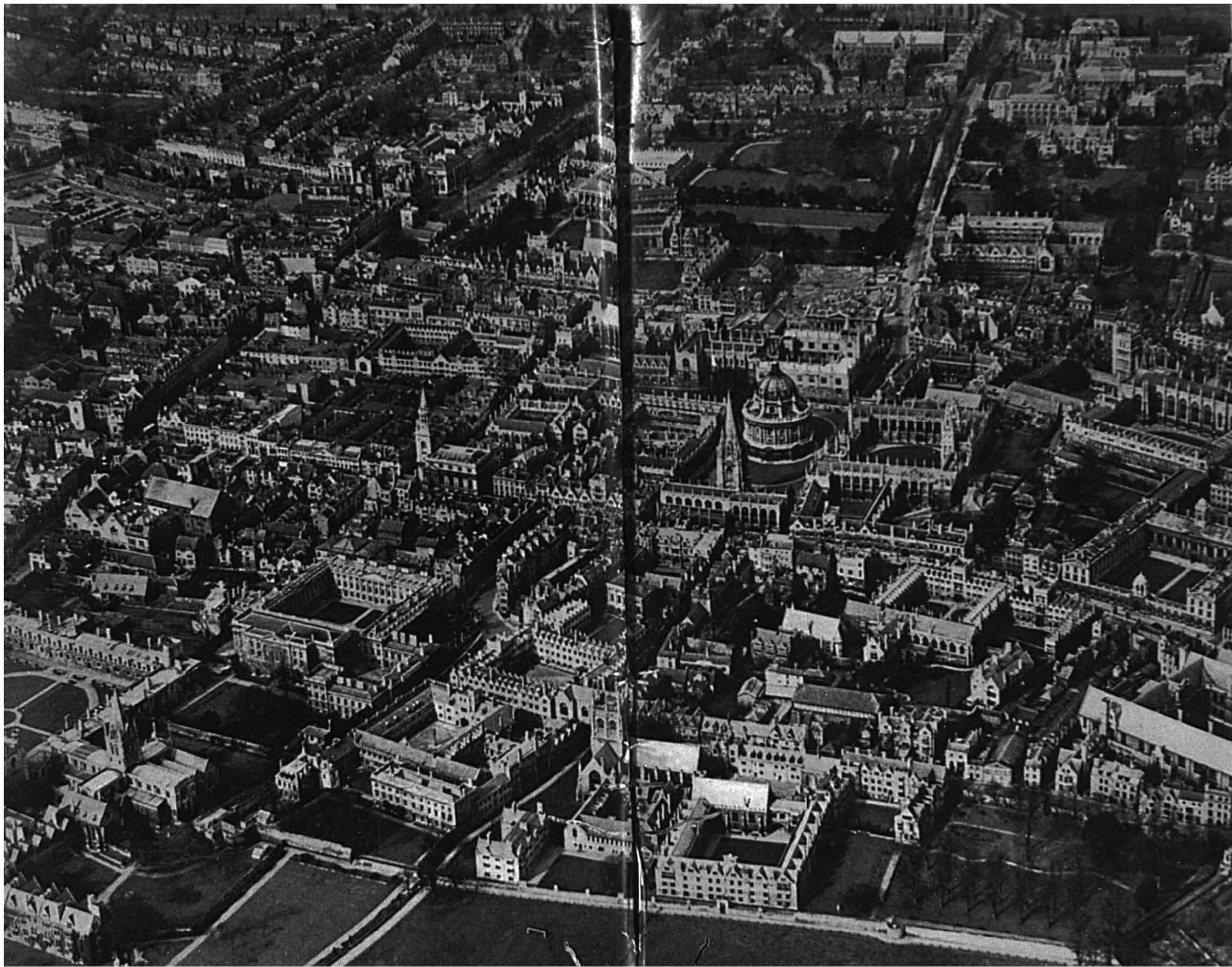
In this setting the mind of the Oxford woman grows narrower

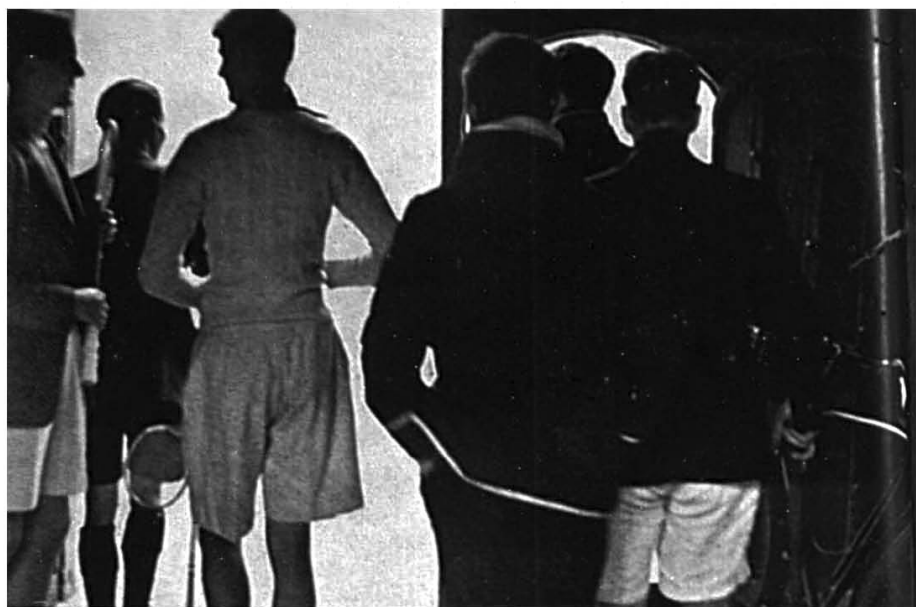


110 Leaving a Lecture, Balliol



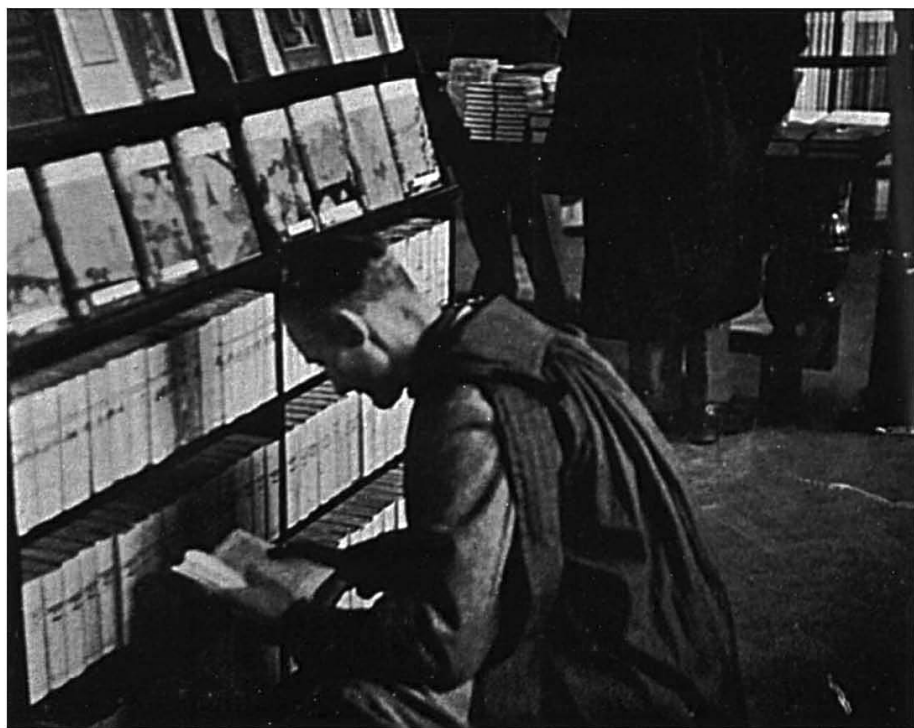
111 The Pursuit of Knowledge





113 Early Afternoon, Merton Lodge

114 Between Lectures, Blackwell's Bookshop



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day by day. In a detective novel called *Gaudy Night*, Miss Dorothy Sayers has described to perfection the small and unwholesome atmosphere of a woman's college. If any parent can read that book and still wish to send his daughter to Oxford, he will deserve what he will get. But there exists another organisation, the Society of Oxford Home-Students, which offers an Oxford education without a college life. This society was started for the assistance of the poorest, who cannot afford the dues of a college. Its members live in lodgings or at their homes, and number about a quarter of the total of women undergraduates. It is quite arguable that they come off better than their wealthier rivals.

Barely fifty years ago there were few scholarships at Oxford, and those were for the most part "close" scholarships from a particular school to a particular college. To-day it is estimated that fifty-four per cent. of the undergraduates receive some form of assistance by way of a scholarship.

Cecil Rhodes began this wholesale endowment. His last will, made in 1899, devoted a part of his wealth to the strengthening of the British Empire and of Anglo-American friendship in the interests of perpetual peace. He provided 60 scholarships for the British Empire, and 96 for the United States. His scholars were not restricted to any individual college; they were to be chosen for their physical vigour as well as for their intellectual powers. By a later codicil, Rhodes allotted 15 scholarships to Germany; these were abolished in war-time, and only in part re-instituted since then. On the other hand, the Rhodes trustees have created a further 40 Empire scholarships, so as to redress the founder's somewhat lop-sided geographical conceptions.

The Rhodes scholarships have been of untold advantage to all parties. Oxford has been invigorated by the colossal heartiness of the unscholarly "scholars." Its fame and subtle influence have been spread the world over by their dispersal. In the year 1989 a young Canadian parson, educated at Christ Church on a Rhodes scholarship, returns to claim the richest of all Oxford's prizes, the Deanery of its cathedral and the headship of its greatest House.

Apart from the Rhodes scholars, most of Oxford's poorer undergraduates are assisted by public educational authorities out of the public funds. Their presence in great numbers has brought about a change in the attitude of every type of undergraduate towards the university. Oxford is now less regarded as an experience to which he is entitled as of right, so long as his family can find the money. Instead, it is a place to which hard work and good fortune have brought him. The three years' education is no longer regarded as a pleasing interlude between the discomforts of school and the difficulties of the world. Instead, it is a strenuous period

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of self-improvement and self-justification. The State-aided undergraduate is apt to be very immature when he arrives. He does not mix much outside a small circle. He works incessantly: perhaps he will take part in the jejune debates of that seedy rump which perpetuates the name of the Oxford Union. His means are narrow, and his future struggle for subsistence casts a gloomy shadow over his present independence. This anxiety, and the strenuousness which it engenders, spread their infection even among those who have neither past struggles to recall nor future worries to confront.

When an undergraduate succumbs to this peculiarly morbid state, his adolescent mind, so far from being enlarged, is apt to be daily narrowed. He plays for safety. His inclination towards pedantry hardens into bigotry. He gains information in the place of understanding. His tendency towards liberalism is crushed beneath the weight of catch-phrases and ready-made opinions. He emerges into the world with the disenchantment of age added to the immaturity of youth.

This frustration of the whole spirit of the university is actively abetted by a certain class of don. In every generation the don tends to retain, long after they have become obsolete, the dogmas that were in fashion during his intellectual prime. In the small world of Oxford, a man of fifty may wield influence and win respect by the mere repetition of the phrases and theories which gained him his fellowship in happier days. Teachers of this description seize upon the dissatisfied undergraduate. His discontent, a by-product so full of possible values were it to remain fluid and molten and red-hot, is canalised and cast into old-fashioned moulds to form a dead weight of stereotyped opinion—cold, hard, and rigid. Liberalism's loss is Leftism's gain. The shelves of Oxford's bookshops are crowded with the works of Mr. and Mrs. Webb and Mr. and Mrs. Cole; while scarcely a whisper is heard of the tremendous tides of thought and action which rock this island.

Parochial as it is, Oxford's leftist tendency is greatly exaggerated in the public mind. Even here, though slowly, change is felt and fashions die. At the Union, a Conservative President succeeds a Communist. There is a large and thriving Labour Club; but there is also a still larger Conservative Club, and a considerable body of Liberals. The members of the two latter organisations are poor and irregular attendants at their own meetings. They are men with many other interests and activities; they take their politics rather for granted. By contrast, the Labour Club is almost a religious body; and its members are never happier than when passing resolutions, appointing sub-committees, moving amendments, distributing circulars, and writing letters to the Press. Their devoted activities, added to those of the "student"



115 Dons on Duty



116 Bullers off Duty



117 In Balliol Library



118 Dinner at the George



119 A Scout

120 Dinner in Hall





121 The Union Committee of 1895 : Centre row : F. E. Smith (Lord Birkenhead) (second from left); Hilaire Belloc (second from right); J. A. Simon (Sir John Simon) (extreme right)



122 "The Education of Arthur by Merlin": one of the Pre-Raphaelite murals in the Union Library

bodies already mentioned, create a public noise and impression out of proportion to their numbers.

On one occasion, the leftists of Oxford made news which echoed all round the world, and caused an impression which is still far from being effaced. In February 1938, the Oxford Union passed by 275 votes to 153 a resolution that "This House will in no circumstances fight for its King and country." There was immense sensation at the time; there was apoplexy in Cheltenham and Bournemouth, and whoops of joy in Berlin and Rome; but it would be altogether wrong to attach any serious weight to the resolution. Quite a few of those who attend the Union debates are Hindus of the minor lawyer class, who deny allegiance to any king, and would be loth to fight for anything but a rich client. It is much more remarkable that on any single night 153 ordinary, independent undergraduates could have been got to endure the tedium of a Union debate in order to defend the good name of that moribund body. And at the date of this celebrated vote, Herr Hïtler had been Chancellor of the German Reich for less than a fortnight.

One way and another, the left-wing bias in Oxford politics is far less important than it seems. Many parents, with Oxford traditions behind them, have hesitated to send their sons to what appears to be a mere factory for the mass-production of socialist dons. Others, quite inconsistently, lend ear to tall stories of extravagance and degeneracy, of night-clubs, racing cars, and midnight orgies. They may reassure themselves. Behind all the newspaper noise and fuss, Oxford retains most of its old virtues, with all its old vices. It is exactly the supreme virtue of Oxford that it gives free play for the vices to work themselves out. Among the more well-to-do undergraduates, the drinking is still heavy, the debts still mount, and the snobbery of the minor gentry grows rank. But if these practices are not indulged early at Oxford, they will be indulged later in London, or worse still, abroad. Anyone who visits Oxford on a Saturday night will find himself in a bedlam of ill manners and conceit. Drunken louts throw food about the restaurants and make shindies in the cinemas. Each despicable little clique finds some other to despise. When one compares the behaviour of a Frenchman of nineteen or twenty, one may despair of English education. Yet before long, all these stupidities will be over and forgotten. Undergraduate behaviour, if it were indulged in a grown-up world, would lose a man all his friends and maybe his career. At Oxford he may behave as badly as he pleases till he tires of it, and start afresh with no ill-feeling.

Much unwelcome publicity has come upon Oxford through the use of its name by the Buchmanite movement. The adopted title of the "Oxford Group" is avowedly disingenuous. "It was about time for another religious revival of sorts in Britain. The last

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had come from Wales. That the new one should emanate from Oxford was befitting. Oxford would contribute the dignity so essential to a revival of religion. There was only one institution in England more suitable as the starting-point when regarded as news, for Cambridge had never produced a real live revival. But mostly I thought of Oxford as the home of new religions." Even so, it was not until this "religious revival of sorts" had been under way for nearly ten years that "Frank," with his wonderful sense of news, looked to Oxford to "contribute the dignity so essential" yet so conspicuously wanting among the intrinsic virtues of the "new religion." Nobody need fear that in sending his son to Oxford he will expose him to this particular form of proselytism. Buchmanism makes little or no appeal inside Oxford itself. In these days, its affinity with National Socialism is far too obvious for the tastes of most undergraduates. In its organisation and publicity methods, in its attitude towards money matters, in its boycott of the poor, it is altogether too redolent of the Brown House. Oxford will have none of it. In a hostelry where all comers may drink freely of the most rare and precious vintages of religion, of Catholic burgundy and Laudian claret, there are few who call for Wincarnis.

That Oxford survives at all is the fault of the public schools. With few exceptions, they still send out their boys at nineteen as immature as they arrived at fourteen. For five years every English boy in the ordinary public school is brought up in a biblical fairyland, where everything is either black or white, and every question is a question of morals. Women, he is taught, alcohol, tobacco, and the *Daily Mirror* are Wrong; football, early services, prizes, and *The Times* are Right. This, Dr. Arnold's perspective of life, it is Oxford's duty to unravel and rearrange. The undergraduate must learn from the beginning the social scale of values. First he must learn the meaning of a bore; secondly, that alcohol can be a bore; lastly, that sobriety can be a bigger bore than alcohol. He will then be fit to take his place as a member of society. It must be admitted that he takes a terrible time about it.

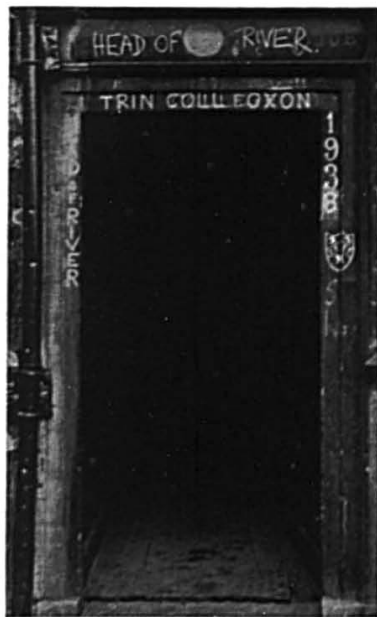
Max Beerbohm wisely remarked that Oxford's business was to put back all the nonsense that was knocked out of us at our public schools. Some schools, and Eton in particular, still encourage "nonsense" in the sense of individuality. They send their sons to Oxford in a state of comparative maturity. For them, if they are otherwise qualified to start life straight away, the years at Oxford are a waste of time. But they waste it very pleasantly. Their rather more civilised existence is hidden from the eyes of the casual visitor. They entertain in a quiet but far from stolid fashion; the undergraduates give lunches in their own rooms, and the dons give dinners and—an enchanting Victorianism—





124 Activity on the River

126 A Trinity Doorway





125 Tea in a College Barge

127 The Banks of the Isis





breakfast-parties. They have their clubs, of which the Gridiron is the chief, where rolls of bread do not fly through the air, and belching is not thought a social accomplishment. They have two small political clubs, the Chatham and the Canning, at which the level of discussion is kept extremely high.

Oxford's small plutocracy centres round the Bullingdon club. This body is vaguely connected with fox-hunting, and conducts an annual point-to-point. Its members attend fabulous dinners in expensive coats of a special colour. They are mostly very rich and agreeable young men, though a faint air of Junkerism clings to them and their Bentleys and hunters and hard-boiled fiancées.

More Bohemian, but still very civilised, is the Oxford University Dramatic Society, always known as "The Ouds." This club is a great feeding-place, apart from its dramatic activities. The public performances, mostly Shakespearian, are extremely good, all things considered. To more select audiences an annual performance, called the "Smoker," is exhibited with much wit and more indecency. The O.U.D.S. is Oxford's hotbed of intrigue. Its members are ceaselessly scheming to get on the London stage, to get a play accepted, to get Mr. Korda down to dinner, to get a commission from the *Daily Express*, to get the editorship of the *Isis* or the *Cherwell*, those two very dreary undergraduate weeklies. The greatest of all O.U.D.S. intrigues gave birth to the O.U.B.F., or Oxford University Balloon Federation. This organisation, which lived for about a month, gave out that Miss Tallulah Bankhead would rise in a balloon from the Oxford gasworks, and that Mr. G. B. Shaw would attend a public lunch before the ceremony. The latter proved to be Mr. Glen Byam Shaw; while Miss Bankhead confined herself to kissing the aeronaut. However, a large public paid to see the fun; and the revenue from newsreels and newspaper articles paid the balloon-hire many times over.

Some conception of the variety of Oxford's clubs may be formed by looking in at the porter's lodge of any college and studying the notice-board. For every ten undergraduates, there must be at least one society of some kind or another. This boundless variety of interests is one of the fascinations of Oxford. A man who is bored by all of them would be bored by anything. Those who are best catered for are the musicians. There is always good music in Oxford. The tradition, which existed already when the first music-room in Europe was opened in Holywell Street, survives in all its strength. In empty chapels, the organ scholars enunciate their fugues; and the world's most skilled performers fill the Sheldonian with their harmonies.

No account of Oxford activities could aim at being comprehensive, since they themselves change and increase with every day and hour. In this account, particularly, no mention has been made of the innumerable bodies which exist to provide organised sport

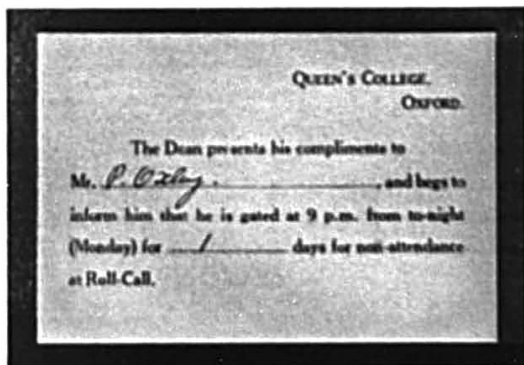
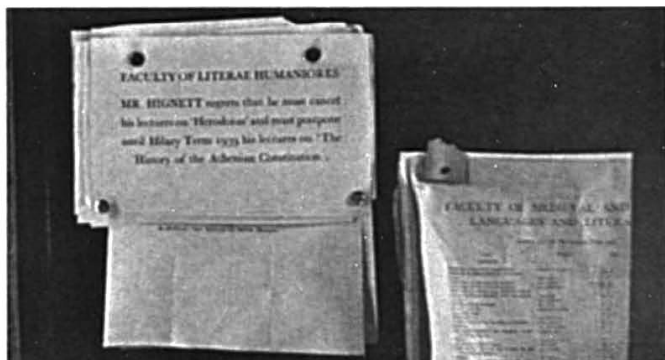
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for those who were not surfeited with it at their public schools. But enough has possibly been said to suggest that life of the modern undergraduate is less drastically changed than the setting in which he lives it. It may not long be so. Privileges are being taken away, and unpleasant changes are foreshadowed. But Oxford is still a place of boundless possibilities. One undergraduate may put nothing into it and draw nothing out. His neighbour can still put in a little and draw out a hundredfold. The experiment is still worth trying, so long as a little of Oxford's character survives.

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EXHIBITION

WORKS OF LEARNED LADIES





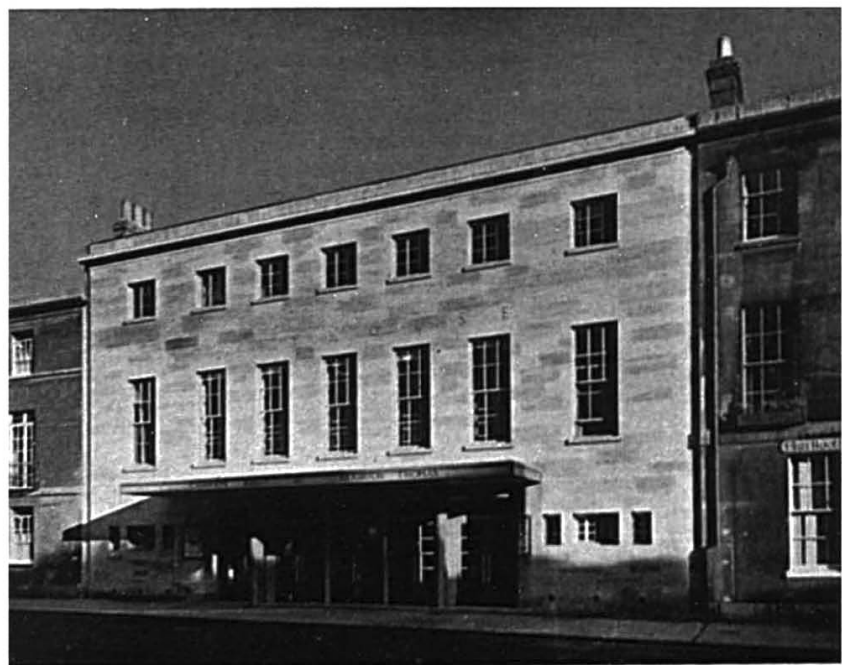
132 Saunterers in the High



133 Outside Queen's Lodge



134 Rhodes House



135 The new Playhouse in Beaumont Street