

AN AMERICAN PROFESSOR'S REFLECTIONS ON OXFORD¹

BY S. E. MORISON

They are not long, the days of wine and roses.

Dowson's verse keeps running through my head, beating time with the engine that drives me every moment farther from Oxford and nearer to America. I must hasten to jot down impressions, before the rush and stress of American academic life blurs them into a dream of gray walls and green fields, vivid youths on motor-cycles and modest maidens on push-bicycles, dinners in hall and evenings in common-room, the Friday luncheons that fell on Mondays, and the history luncheons where everything but history was discussed. Unfortunately, even impressions have to be generalized on paper; and Oxford is the most complex, the most unsystematic, the most paradoxical, and the most difficult of institutions to generalize.

No other university is at once so hospitable and so indifferent to new individuals, disciplines, and subjects. The undergraduate body is the most varied in the world as to nationality, race, and color; yet no one manages to resist some trace of the 'Oxford manner.' The faculties include specialists on almost every branch of knowledge; but if the specialists want pupils, they must conform to regulation and tradition. A newcomer either remains isolated within a little wall which he alone does not see, or he is absorbed into the tepid current of donnish life, and the world knows him no more,

unless through his books. A reforming commission is lost if it comes to Oxford and accepts the gracious hospitality of the colleges. For no sensible man who knows Oxford would wish greatly to change it. Rather must he be chiefly concerned to preserve the many things of worth and beauty that time has tested, and spared.

To an American sojourner, the note of freedom is dominant at Oxford; not merely the corporate freedom that the University enjoys within the State, and the colleges within the University, but freedom of the individual within either. All three are closely interrelated. Almost all university and college business, of the sort that in American universities is settled by presidential or decanal fiat, in Oxford is referred to a number of boards and committees. The time consumed is well worth the loss in efficiency, for the system gives everyone an official finger in many pies, and an opportunity to air his views. The universal craving to mind other people's business is thereby satisfied; and Oxford harmlessly employs in administrative activity the 'nosey' and talebearing sorts of individuals that are the pest of American faculties. Collegiate autonomy seems at times almost anarchical to one who is used to the modern centralized university; but the history of Oxford, as of the United States, shows that federalism permits a more varied and wholesome life than centralization. Nowhere in America or on the Con-

¹ From the *Spectator* (London Moderate-Conservative weekly), November 7 and 14

tinents would it be possible for organizations so diverse as Ruskin College, the women's colleges, Ripon Hall, Campion Hall, Manchester College, and the Catholic Workers' College, to share the benefits of a great university without losing their individuality. Oxford and Cambridge, alone of modern universities, are really universal.

The keystone in this arch of liberty, and the most enviable and precious thing in all Oxford's rich inheritance, is the self-government of the University — its almost complete control by the resident and teaching M.A.'s. The University is poor, but gifts or endowments purchased at the price of the thinnest wedge of outside control would be too dearly purchased. Yet there is no reason why gifts should be so purchased; and in view of the many wealthy men among Oxford graduates, it seems to an American scandalous that the British taxpayer should be called upon to help support the University, or that institutions like St. Edmund Hall should want funds.

Oxford and, apparently, all the British universities are happily free from the unreasoning and malicious criticism that every American university has to bear from press and public. They are not expected to be all things to all men; nor is admission to their colleges demanded as a right. It matters not whether this sound attitude of the British public be due to appreciation or to indifference; the universities are left free to serve the nation as their own members think best. University extension work in America too often takes the form of advertisement, or of a sweet sop to a nagging public; in England it is performed by those who are interested, for the benefit of the few who want it. Within the University there is, not only complete freedom of speech, but complete privacy. A professor need never fear, as

in America, lest one day's classroom witticism appear the following day in a screaming headline. Nobody outside Oxford knows, and nobody within Oxford cares, if a certain professor be Communist or Fascist.

In only one respect do I venture to suggest that collegiate autonomy is abused: in the admission, by certain colleges, of a considerable number of idle and brainless youths on the ground of athletic ability or social position. One often hears that these men are 'useful' in the sense of helping their college to better its place on the river. Many of them, however, are more decorative than useful, and others are positively unwholesome. They would be less numerous if the undergraduates enjoyed some measure of self-government and internal police, instead of leaving such matters to governing bodies and proctors. An undergraduate council, as at Edinburgh, might also be a means of bringing the undergraduate point of view to bear on contemplated changes.

In curricular matters, the pass schools might well be abolished, and 'never would be missed,' save by undergraduates of whom the same might be said. But the honor schools, although capable of some improvement in detail, are collectively the best system of undergraduate instruction in the English-speaking world. To American readers I should explain that the word 'school' in Oxford means a branch of study. The pass schools are ridiculously easy, and for that reason are despised, although they admit to the Bachelor's degree; and some colleges refuse to admit pass candidates. After passing 'Mods' in the middle of his Freshman year, an Oxford undergraduate generally studies for an honor school, the grades — or 'classes,' as they are called in Oxford — being awarded solely on the basis of a

series of examinations, usually two three-hour papers a day for ten consecutive week days, at the end of his third or fourth year. There is no such thing in Oxford as a course, in the American sense of the word. The examining system of first-year 'Mods' and last-year 'Finals,' administered by boards whose decisions can seldom be unjust, and never be questioned, seems to me perfect as it stands. A division of the three-year schools into two parts, as at Cambridge, would be a step backward toward spoon-feeding.

About the tutorial method of preparing candidates for the honor schools, I leave Oxford less enthusiastic than when I viewed it from afar. Tutoring is admirably fitted for teaching *literæ humaniores*, for which it was devised; but more modern subjects, such as the promising new school of philosophy, politics, and economics, are somewhat refractory to one-man teaching. Tutoring tends to become mere cramming, both with facts and with clever answers to 'spotted' questions; the college tutors, in supplanting the paid coach, have not eliminated his defects. In some of the honor schools the system neither affords a good general education nor produces scholars.

The Oxford 'first' has an admirable command of language, and a brilliant style that comes of writing to impress clever people. He can make less knowledge go further, and write what he has to say far better, than the *summa cum laude* men of American universities. But he has seldom gone to the bottom of anything, or approached it so near as an American B.A. who has done an honors thesis. Full of self-confidence, he is ready to get up any subject in the world for you in two weeks. Inordinately proud of the things he does not know, the humbling process takes at best a long time, and, if he become an Oxford Fellow, may never take

place. There is something to be said for catching your tutor young, but there are too many college Fellows who took a first, won a prize essay, and have done nothing since. Interested only in winning good classes for their pupils, or writing cramming-books to help the process, they thwart the efforts of more scholarly or ambitious colleagues to provide something more than academic honors for the better sort of student. Traveling Fellowships are wanted so that colleges can afford to send their candidates for tutorships abroad for two or three years, and to require evidence of ability to do research, before they appoint.

The college Fellows at Oxford are underpaid but not overworked in comparison with the younger members of American university staffs. An American instructor is lucky to get an hour's recreation a day; his terms extend to thirty or thirty-five instead of twenty-four weeks of the year; he gets no extra pay for examining; and instead of dining he merely eats. Those Oxford Fellows who have the taste and ability for research manage to find the time; and the quality of their contributions to human knowledge is so high and distinctive that one wishes there were more of them. Further, unless a don have a taste for writing or research, his soft routine is apt to pall after ten or fifteen years. Few suspect how many of those, around the age of forty, are wishing to be anywhere but at Oxford.

If the life of the Oxford don seems enviable to the harried and hard-worked young American instructor, the life of an Oxford professor is ideal beyond the dreams of his American colleagues. He really has time to study his subject, and it rests wholly with his own taste and conscience whether he does even that. But he is curiously uncoördinated with the University.

The statutory Commission has wisely proposed to provide every professor with a seat in the governing body of some college. There will remain, in many faculties, an underlying antagonism between professors and tutors that no parliamentary commission can dissolve. For Oxford is essentially a master's university; and the professor, after some centuries of trial, has not yet found his place. New blood comes into the professoriat, when it is already old blood, which will not mingle with that which has already been dyed an Oxford blue. Hence, a professor who comes up with an unbecoming zeal to teach his subject must struggle for years against prejudice and vested interest to almost certain defeat; or he may ignore the undergraduates and write books, which is what the University expects of him. There are a few brilliant exceptions, like Sir William Osler, who manage to teach and do research and many things beside; and there are others who do nothing but potter about. Recent and well-deserved promotions of tutors to professorial chairs point out one way to end the ancient feud, which makes the most conspicuous waste of energy and talent that I have noticed in Oxford.

Professors might also be used more than hitherto in directing post-graduate research. In some of the sciences, research appears to be well organized and admirably guided; in the humanities it is, for the most part, wholly unorganized, and lamentably guided. Owing to political pressure, Oxford recently and reluctantly established a D.Phil. degree; an *Ersatz* Ph.D. The candidate merely chats with a 'supervisor' twice a term for two or three years, submits his dissertation, and wins or loses on the opinion of two examiners, who have no accepted standard. A new university statute offers some promise of seminars, and

a real training in method, but the statute was so emasculated in passage, through the efforts of those who do not believe in research, that it is little more than a promise. The faculty boards may, if they wish, establish seminars and advanced-study courses; and it is to be hoped they may, for it would be a pity if the Oxford D.Phil. proved in the end to be an inferior article to the American Ph.D.

Among the other discouragements to scholarship at Oxford must be counted the libraries. They are hopelessly uncoördinated, and so decentral-ized that it requires years to learn what books on one's own subject may be found there. Conditions in general, and no one in particular, are to blame for this situation. I was forced to add to the confusion by founding a special American History Library. The Bodleian, considering its small income and staff, is highly efficient, even by American standards; it spends few more pence in cataloguing and shelving a new book than any American library spends dollars; but with the enormous output of modern presses the Bodleian will in a short time be unable to cope. The process of burrowing into the water-logged soil of Oxford cannot long be continued, and dumping books into other buildings merely adds to the confusion, as I was forced to do in founding a special library of American history. It is time for Oxford to face the apparently disagreeable fact that eventually a new Bodleian must be built, and probably in the now thrice-violated Parks. In the meantime, with the expenditure of a few hundred pounds, the treasures already in Oxford libraries could be rendered more accessible by a card-index catalogue of the whole.

Cecil Rhodes, in his notebook, expressed the wish that Oxford dons might annually repeat to their pupils

his economic credo. Fortunately, there is no danger lest Oxford dons repeat homilies to their pupils at stated intervals, or post up pious maxims in hall. If Cecil Rhodes really expected his scholars to be indoctrinated with some form of political orthodoxy, he chose the wrong university for his experiment. Oxford has outlived many dogmas, and outgrown the fashioning of dogmas. Few persons there are even a little afraid — and the theologians are not the least afraid — of new ideas; and nobody runs after them because they are new, which they seldom are. There is something in the discipline and genius of the place that makes it superior to propaganda, and zealous only in the search for truth. A don is apt to be a radical in respect of his own subject, and conservative in respect of those things he does not profess to have studied.

Yet some concession in the matter of content might well be made to the imperial vision of men like Rhodes and Beit, by giving undergraduates more opportunity to study the history of the Dominions and the United States. Chairs have been established for that purpose and professors appointed; yet Imperial and American history are still peripheral to the appropriate honor-schools. There is nothing in the statutes, but everything in fact, to discourage an undergraduate from spending time on tracing the

history of the British race overseas. In modern history, for instance, he must spend so much time on the Anglo-Saxon and Norman kings, on whom he is certain to be examined, that he has no time for Lord Durham and Abraham Lincoln, on whom he is certain not to be examined. America and the Dominions lose by this, for their history much wants writing by the literary historians that Oxford occasionally produces. Possibly the undergraduates of to-day and rulers of to-morrow might also benefit by some knowledge of the history and problems of the Dominions and the United States.

If these suggestions have any value, they will in the end be adopted. For Oxford, with all her diversity, has a sort of inner and corporate wisdom that enables her to ignore unsound advice, to adapt herself to the needs of successive eras, and to save all that is best of the age that is passing for the age that is waiting before.

The voyage is nearing its end, and America lies just below the horizon. To-morrow I shall taste Walt Whitman's 'joy of being toss'd in the brave turmoil of these times.' But there will be many moments when I shall regret the soft and sheltered days within Oxford walls, the conversation and the company of the most humane and intelligent group of people I have ever known. My days of wine and roses are over.

QUEEN ALEXANDRA AS I KNEW HER¹

BY SIR HALL CAINE

THERE must be many who knew Queen Alexandra better than I knew her, therefore many who are better able than I am to write about her at this solemn moment when her sudden and unexpected end has sounded a moving death-note in every household in the land. But I knew her in some degree for twenty-five years; I saw her several times at what I may perhaps call close quarters; I possess a large number of her letters, — not fewer than a hundred, — some of them written by her own hand, and some by the hand of her devoted friend and constant companion, Charlotte Knollys. If this limited acquaintance justifies me in paying the tribute of a few poor personal recollections to the lovely and beloved queen whose death is to-day a whole Empire's loss and sorrow, I shall look upon it as my proud if melancholy duty to attempt to do so.

I ask to be pardoned for a moment when I begin by saying that my earliest recollection of Queen Alexandra was for me a sad one. It is the recollection of her wedding day, sixty-two years ago, which was also by unhappy chance the death day of my little sister. We were both children. She was five and I was nine, and we had heard of the beautiful princess of nineteen who was coming from Denmark to marry our English prince, and had promised ourselves the wild joy of walking with our school-fellows in the procession that was to celebrate the event. But when the

great day came she was dying on the sofa in our small parlor, surrounded by our parents and grandparents, and I was sitting through long hours alone on the steep steps on the outside of our front door. The street was empty and silent, for everybody else who lived in it had run off to the neighboring road through which the procession was to pass. Over the roofs of the opposite houses came the sounds of the Volunteers marching, with banners and flags, to the music of their brass bands, and — cruellest of all — of the voices of the children singing 'God Bless the Prince of Wales,' with an added verse which we had learned off in honor of the princess. I am not likely to forget the wedding day of Queen Alexandra. It nearly broke my heart.

But this is perhaps too personal, and in happier homes than ours the day was quite different. Within a few weeks portraits of the young princess with her young prince — in my mind's eye I can see them still — were hanging on the walls of every house in the kingdom, down to the humblest and the poorest. It was a case of love at first sight if ever there was one. No sooner had she shown her sweet face than the daughter of Denmark was clasped to the breast of the whole British nation.

The second of my personal recollections of Queen Alexandra is at least more cheerful. A few weeks after King Edward's recovery from the dangerous illness which compelled him to postpone his coronation, and while he was making a roving yachting-cruise after the

¹From the *Sunday Times* (London pro-French Sunday paper), November 22