

# Exit Snobbery at Oxford

THE march of democracy in Oxford is well illustrated by the appointment of Professor W. G. S. Adams to be the new Warden of All Souls'. Thirty years ago the class snobbery of an earlier England was fast melting away in town and suburban life. But it still dominated the countryside, where members of the erstwhile governing class sat each enthroned over his rural estate—miniature kings, in effect, with heirs-apparent, children of the blood-royal, courtiers, retinues, Ministers, and different grades of subjects all complete. Every village squire's family could claim membership of the ruling caste, but nobody else in the countryside except (on a half-footing) the clergy.

Quite naturally there was a great deal of such snobbery in Oxford; for something like half the scions of this semi-royalty (all who did not go to the Army or Cambridge) went there as undergraduates. They were apt to live riotously, drink a great deal of wine, and treat the place as their doormat. In most colleges the average don either humoured or fawned on them, but the centre of their cult was All Souls'. It had no undergraduates, but only Fellows, and of these a large body were Prize Fellows elected at the rate of two every year.

Properly used, of course, these prize fellowships might have given Oxford what it then badly lacked—the beginnings of an endowment for post-graduate research in the humanities, philosophy, law, politics, economics, and so on. Instead they were used mainly to recruit a highly exclusive social club. Examinations were held for them, with general papers in the humanities and alternative papers in law and history; and in theory the best lawyer and the best historian should each annually be elected. But in practice they seldom were, the choice usually falling on the highest men in either list who were "well-connected."

This happened in 1901, when Professor Adams was a candidate. In the examination he headed the list on the history side. But neither he nor his opposite number on the law side obtained fellowships. Neither was "well-connected." But there were two men lower down the list who obviously were—one a well-known peer's son, the other nephew to a leading Cabinet Minister and also to a High Court judge. They were elected Fellows. Both were men of ability, but neither could on any academic reckoning have ranked among the two best men of the year.

In these days the Warden was the late Sir William Anson—an effective lecturer and a learned writer on law, an ineffective M.P., a hereditary baronet of distinguished manners, but imbued with class-feeling to his finger-

tips. Since his death All Souls' has long been evolving in a much better direction. By devoting its extra revenues to helping the foundation of professorships, it has made itself the home of a really fine body of learned men. And this has reacted on its elections of Prize Fellows.

An example of the first course gave Professor Adams his *revanche*. For when the Political Science Professorship was founded in 1912, the rejected of 1901 came back in quiet triumph as the holder of a chair, to which a permanent All Souls' fellowship was attached. That was in 1912. Now 21 years later the wheel has come full circle, and he is elected Warden. There has been no struggle about all this. Few, probably, have ever stopped to realize all that the changes over 32 years have amounted to.

Least of all would Professor Adams do so, for he is the most unself-conscious of men. But the most profoundly democratic. A Lowland Scot, the son of a schoolmaster, he exemplifies to perfection that Scottish sense of democracy which does not argue or protest about the thing but simply takes for granted that you should judge every man on his human merits, and refuses to let money or origins or "connections" count two straws.

I always imagine that the Scots owe a good deal of this to Burns, and particularly to his magnificent song, "A Man's a Man for a' That!" But the best Scottish democracy in our day is really in advance of Burns; for where he had then to strive and cry about it, now it claims, as I have said, to be taken for granted. Without clamouring that men are social equals, it persistently treats them as such.

Of course, as I have said, the changes at All Souls' have been gradual. A few years ago they elected to a Prize Fellowship Mr. A. L. Rowse, the brilliant son of a working man, a Cornish clay-miner. In Anson's time such an election would have been quite inconceivable, unless, perhaps, the candidate had been a Conservative and had possessed exceptionally winning gifts of social adaptability. Mr. Rowse was a class-war Socialist, very far from all that.

On that occasion the college, which was formerly the stronghold of Oxford snobbery, set to all the other colleges a splendid example of class-fairness, which some of them still needed. Under the new Warden such examples may be expected to continue. Nobody has ever heard him breathe a syllable of resentment against the injustice which he himself suffered in 1901. But I cannot imagine his agreeing to repeat it against anyone else.

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