

featurette

Rhodes Scholar Speaks About Oxford

by BERNIE ADELL

Gateway features will carry throughout the year, articles from correspondents in other countries, in an attempt to give you some idea of life in other universities. Bernie Adell is a Rhodes Scholar at Nuffield College, Oxford. I have never met him, but I know his as a person through his letters (all pertaining to features, for the information of interested evil-minded parties) and I'm sure you'll find this feature interesting as well as informative. C.A.

"Bring Bird and Bottle" at the bottom of the invitation means you've been invited to a notorious "bottle party"—noisy, crowded, coarse, unfriendly—the least glamorous but perhaps the most characteristic of Oxford's many legendary institutions.

WOMEN COMPETE

These parties beautifully illustrate some of the important differences between English and Canadian university life. They're held right in college of course, and in what Canadian university could both liquor and women be found, openly and in large quantities, in a men's residence any night of the week?

But in spite of this superficial freedom, Oxford undergraduates are bound by many restrictions and conventions which would be unthinkable in Canada. Even the most rebellious undergraduate seldom protests against

having to climb the wall to get into college after midnight, or against the rule that white tie, dark suit, and mortarboard must be worn during exams.

To understand Oxford student life, one must know a bit about the setup of the University. Rather than being merely a collection of faculties, it is a federation of substantially autonomous "societies", or "colleges", each with its own buildings, its own long history, and its own tutors in nearly every subject. Each student pursues his academic and social life largely within his own college. The University itself merely conducts examinations, distributes money, and generally co-ordinates the activities of the colleges.

Oxford, like England, is still a very class-structured place. Students from "public schools" (i.e. private schools) are often different in accent, appearance, and outlook from "grammar school" (i.e. public schools) graduates.

Certain colleges are predominantly "public school", and are characterized (if one may over-generalize) by political conservatism, relative academic indifference, lavish parties, and a strong attachment to traditional sports. Others are largely "grammar school" in composition, and are noted for academic excellence, crude parties, and a mildly left-wing outlook. A perpetual debate goes on as to which school system is "better", and there is a regrettable amount of personal animosity between many public school and grammar school graduates.

Oxford academic life bears little resemblance to that at a Canadian university. There are no individual courses, and no annual exams. Lectures are abysmally poor and sparsely attended. Each student's college assigns him a tutor in his field of study, which is much more specialized than the Canadian undergraduate curriculum. Once or twice a week the student will have an individual session with his tutor called a "tutorial" or "tut", during which he reads an essay which he has just written, usually the night before, and then defends himself and his essay against a barrage of criticism from the tutor.

SUPERFICIAL FREEDOM

University exams, called "Schools", come only at the end of the three-year course. One can safely say that almost no Oxford male students have to put in the amount of study time required of a Canadian law or medical student, but that very few can get away with the amount of work done by most Canadian arts students.

Women students are in a touchy position. They have to compete very fiercely to get into Oxford in the first place, because there are only five women's colleges as against 22 for the men, and they allegedly have to study harder than the men once they're in.

The ratio of male to female students approaches 6:1—at first sight a great advantage for the women. But this disparity has been so well publicized for so long that the inevitable has happened—a large number of euphemistically-named "finishing schools" and "English-language schools" for girls have been established in Oxford. Most of the "students" at such schools come from well-heeled Continental families (usually Scandinavian, Dutch, French, or German), and very few have either the inclination or the need to do even a small fraction of the studying done by women undergraduates.

FEMALES HOSTILE

For this and other reasons, an ill-concealed preference is exhibited by male undergraduates for the imported product over the domestic equivalent, resulting in an equally ill-concealed hostility on the part of the latter toward the former.

Oxford's extra-curricular activities are, on the whole, depressing. Although there are clubs of every conceivable sort—from the O.U. Tiddleywinks Club and the CND to serious economic, political, and (anti-) religious study groups—most are incredibly badly organized.

Because of the college system, there is as yet no University-wide student government of any consequence (the famous Oxford Union is only a debating society with a bar), and the Junior Common Room (i.e. students' union) organizations in most colleges are impotent. The Fellows (i.e. the tutors) run nearly everything.

Because there are no large-scale student elections openly contested on party lines, the student political parties are completely irresponsible, and tend to gravitate toward either extreme. The Conservative Club is virtually controlled by High Tories of the old-school-tie sort, and the Labour Club seems constantly in danger of falling into the hands of a motley faction often called the "Grimy Left."

Living comfort in Oxford, whether in college or in outside lodgings ("digs"), is a very low level. Central heating is almost non-existent, and for ten or eleven months of the year one has to drop shillings into a little electric heater in a futile attempt to fend off the continually cold, humid English weather. Even the best English food is terrible, leaving college food rather difficult to describe.

Notwithstanding the many obvious defects in its student life, Oxford's air of complacency is not entirely unjustified. It is, in the words of the unofficial motto of one of its more pompous colleges, "effortlessly superior". Its traditions, its constant intellectual stimulation, and, of course, the unmatched market value of its degrees makes its students willing to put up with a lot of anachronisms.

McMaster Discusses Atheism

HAMILTON (CUP)—A crowd of 500 students jammed Convocation Hall at McMaster University to hear four professors discuss atheism.

Included on the panel were professors of mathematics, sociology, religion and philosophy.

The mathematician, Dr. Bernard Banaschewski, and the sociologist, Prof. R. K. N. Crook, found themselves in general agreement that there was room for doubt about the existence of a God.

The religion professor, Dr. P. G. Grant, said the world would be meaningless without God. And as far as he was concerned, the world was not meaningless.

The philosopher, J. E. Thomas, said there was no position which cannot be thrown into doubt, including belief or non-belief in a God.

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