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I

THE OXFORD STAMP[1]

ONE of the finest things that has ever been written about Oxford is a paragraph in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy.* In it Arnold comments on what is often called Oxford's ineffectiveness. He has his own theory as to the cause of this and he states forcibly his reason for believing that Oxford, the home of lost causes, and what Oxford stands for, are the salvation of English civilization. "Oxford, the Oxford of the past," says Arnold, "has many faults; and she has heavily paid for them in defeat, in isolation, in want of hold upon the modern world. Yet we in Oxford, brought up amidst the beauty and sweetness of that beautiful place, have not failed to seize one truth,—the truth that beauty and sweetness are essential characters of a complete human perfection. When I insist on this, I am all in the faith and tradition of Oxford.

[1] *North American Student,* June and November, 1916.

I say boldly that this our sentiment for beauty and sweetness, our sentiment against hideousness and rawness, has been at the bottom of our attachment to so many beaten causes, of our opposition to so many triumphant movements. And the sentiment is true, and has never been wholly defeated, and has shown its power even in its defeat. We have not won our political battles, we have not carried our main points, we have not stopped our adversaries' advance, we have not marched victoriously with the modern world; but we have told silently upon the mind of the country, we have prepared currents of feeling which sap our adversaries' position when it seems gained, we have kept up our own communications with the future."[1]

Opinions may differ as to the value of Oxford training, but, whether Arnold be right or wrong, it is undeniable that (saving a few exceptions which prove the rule) Oxford does make an impression, and that a deep one, upon her sons. Her influence works in complex and subtle ways which defy complete analysis. Yet the Ameri-

[1] *Culture and Anarchy*, ch. i.

can student, fresh from his experience in an American university, especially if he be looking forward to becoming a university teacher on his return, can hardly resist attempting such an analysis if only for the sake of making himself more broadly useful to the institution he is to serve. I wish in this essay to point out two or three ways in which it has seemed to me that the life at Oxford stamps upon the men who live it this distinctive character. I shall not resist the temptation to compare Oxford life with that in an American university, and if the result is to show that Oxford utilizes for good certain social and intellectual activities which in our colleges tend either to go to waste or to produce harm, my aim will have been achieved.

I

In speaking of Oxford and indulging in this fascinating attempt to analyze the nature of her influence, one naturally thinks and speaks first of "Oxford life." It is her distinction, as it is that of all educational institutions worthy of the name, that she molds the life of her sons in her

own way, gives it her character and her impress. This is perhaps the truest measure of a university—the life which it creates, the way in which, under its influence, men translate thought into action.

It is difficult to characterize Oxford life in general terms. At the first glimpse it seems to be all eating and drinking and sports and talk. It is luxurious in a way that college life rarely is in America, but not pretentious in the way that American college life so often is. For example, the Oxford undergraduate dresses badly by preference: he delights in rough tweed Norfolk jackets, gray flannel bags (deserving of the name in that they are never pressed), and woolen shirts and soft collars. The cap is the universal head-gear on week-days and the pipe the well-nigh universal smoke. But the Oxford undergraduate would never glory in an expensive room, bare of furniture and books, as rich young Americans have been known to do. He is more likely to make rather a point of a good showing of books and prints on his walls, of a window-box filled with flowers in the spring, and of a

cheerful, hospitable atmosphere in his room generally, with a plentiful supply of tobacco on the mantel-piece and a well-stocked sideboard.

It is impossible to understand the cheerful, hospitable, home-like life of the Oxford college man without some understanding of the Oxford college system. The colleges bear the same relation to the University that our states do to the Nation: a man is a member of the University through his membership in a college. There are twenty-two colleges, varying in size from thirty to three hundred and fifty men; the average is about one hundred and fifty. Each college has its buildings (usually built around quadrangles), where the members live, and each college furnishes a certain amount of instruction. The lectures provided by any one college are open to all the members of the University. While a man is always under the care of a tutor in his own college, he has open to him all the instruction which the University provides, and consequently the choice of a college has more social than intellectual importance, although it is true, and especially so at Oxford, that a man's associates

have a good deal of influence on his work. The college is a sort of enlarged American fraternity, heavily endowed, engaging in the business of instruction and discipline, determining the life of the undergraduate in all its human and social aspects. There is a so-called Non-collegiate body which is to all intents and purposes another college, which however is not provided with buildings, and the members of which are bound together by much weaker social ties.

The American at Oxford is forcibly impressed by the fact that there is much more social life than he has been accustomed to in his native university. Oxford testifies to the value which she puts upon this social training by her requirement of residence. The tutors and undergraduates recognize it in their plans of work. The average honors man does only a small part of his work during term time. He attends lectures, accumulates references, maps out the ground to be covered, but reserves his hard grinding for the vacations.

In college the Oxford undergraduate has two rooms to himself—a large and usually comfort-

able study where he lives and works, and where he eats all his meals except dinner, and a small, not too comfortable bed-room, where he sleeps, and where in the morning he splashes himself in a tin hat-tub. The Oxford day begins early, with a splash in the before-mentioned tin tub at half-past seven, followed by chapel at eight (or roll-call at five minutes to), and breakfast at half-past eight. Breakfast is the great social meal in Oxford, the most popular occasion for entertaining friends and for being entertained. It is a solid comfortable meal, and after it the undergraduates are likely to sit and smoke and talk until well into the morning. After this there are newspapers (which Oxford men read with a diligence unknown to me among undergraduates anywhere else), and more genial company in the Junior Common Room, so that the man is lucky who finds time for one or two lectures, and perhaps an hour of work, between breakfast and lunch. This meal is only a snack; it is eaten at one, and by two all Oxford is out-of-doors in some variety of athletic costume, engaged in some of the many forms of out-door

sport. Tea follows at about half-past four; again there is an opportunity for interchange of hospitality, and again the time floats away in talk and smoke, so that some resolution is needed to get in an hour of reading before dinner. After dinner, which is eaten in the college hall,—black-gowned undergraduates at long tables down the middle and black-gowned Dons at the high table at one end,—there is another chance for the sociable man to entertain his friends at coffee in his rooms, and this event may prolong itself into an evening of bridge, or the company may separate to read an hour or two before turning in.

A very idle life this seems to most American Rhodes Scholars when they come in contact with it for the first time. One effect of American university training has been to give them the feeling that time spent in social life is more or less wasted. Often of course it is time wasted; but, under favorable conditions, it is time spent in the most valuable way possible. It offers Oxford men an opportunity of acquiring, in the numberless discussions which this social

life makes possible, an openness and alertness of mind, a certain independence in thinking, and a readiness, which it is almost impossible to acquire in any other way. Perhaps there is no teaching equal in value to good conversation; perhaps there is no form of teaching which American undergraduates need so much and of which they get so little, largely because of the external arrangements of our college life. Cardinal Newman discusses this subject in a passage in his *Idea of a University* which is illuminating to the man who is trying to understand the secret magic of Oxford and also to the man who is seeking to add all possible good things to our own educational system. "I protest to you, Gentlemen," Newman says, "that if I had to choose between a so-called University, which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years, and then sent them away as the University of

Oxford is said to have done some sixty years since,[1] if I were asked which of these two methods was the better discipline of the intellect,—mind, I do not say which is *morally* the better, for it is plain that compulsory study must be a good and idleness an intolerable mischief,—but if I must determine which of the two courses was the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind, which sent out men the more fitted for their secular duties, which produced better public men, men of the world, men whose names would descend to posterity, I have no hesitation in giving the preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun. . . .

"When a multitude of young men, keen, open-hearted, sympathetic, and observant, as young men are, come together and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn from one another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and

[1] Newman was writing in 1852.

views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting, day by day. . . . That youthful community will constitute a whole, it will embody a specific idea, it will represent a doctrine, it will administer a code of conduct, and it will furnish principles of thought and action. It will give birth to a living teaching, which in course of time will take the shape of a self-perpetuating tradition, or a *genius loci,* as it is sometimes called; which haunts the home where it has been born, and which imbues and forms, more or less, and one by one, every individual who is successively brought under its shadow.'' [1]

Of course conversation and discussion will not supply intellect, or even information, where these do not exist; much of Oxford's social life offers only social training, which however is of so fine a sort that it has come to be regarded in England as the distinguishing mark of a university man. But at its best, this intellectual discussion, freed from pedantry and self-consciousness by the leaven of healthy, enthusiastic,

[1] *Idea of a University,* vi, 9.

undergraduate life, is the one characteristic of Oxford that we of the American universities ought most to envy. It is made possible only by a very comfortable, even luxurious, college life, by the fact that men can afford time to study in vacation, by the fact that the University is broken up into small groups of men who live together in colleges—groups which are not too large for intimacy of acquaintance, and which are yet large enough to afford some choice of companions—and lastly, this freedom of discussion is made possible by the fact that English university men, for the most part, follow their course straight through from beginning to end, thus keeping up their college associations.

II

One feature of Oxford life, developed to its present importance since his time, Arnold would not have approved of—the emphasis on athletic sports. His admiration for "our young Barbarians all at play" was mingled with thinly disguised scorn; play to him was only play, or at the most, a service to the health of the body.

I have written in more detail about this subject in another essay and need only say here that to me the principal value of Oxford sport, as of all true sport, is not physical, but moral. No other activity tests the character of the youth as do his sports; when well conducted they demand and develop courage, honesty, generosity, manliness, perseverance, temperance, and obedience. No one expression sums up so many of the qualities that a boy ought to have as to say "he is a good sportsman." "No preacher," says Dean Briggs of Harvard, "and no dean can do what a football coach can do in maintaining among students a clean, brave, sensitively honorable life. The reason is simple, he works in a field that young men good or bad instinctively love, and his results are seen and felt by thousands. If he teaches his players (forbidden by rule to use the fist) the art of using the end of the forearm with the hand turned back, he degrades not only them, but the whole university, and such universities as are affected by his prestige; if he teaches his players to play hard and fearlessly, never inflicting a wanton injury,

never slugging on the sly, never insulting an opponent to make him slug and get disqualified, never playing anything but a 'white' game from start to finish, he lifts up the sportsmanship of his college and, in some measure, of his country. Clean sportsmanship, as everybody knows, means honorable manhood." This is the reason we ought to train our boys in athletics, not for the sake of the physical health primarily, valuable as that is, but for the sake of the moral good—sportsmanship—which is more valuable still. In Oxford, participation in sport is well-nigh universal, and the benefit is thus shared by all. No one (or almost no one) is left, as with us, to be spectator; everyone is playing. There is almost no gymnasium work; athletics at Oxford means games, out of doors, practically every day in the year. In contrast with this our American athletics are feverish and unhealthy. We make too much of a few athletes and deny all chance of participation to the rest of the students. So long as we leave for them nothing but the trivial rôle of spectator they will not understand the true meaning of sport, and just

so long will their demand for victory at any price tend to lower the standards of our games, as is the case in our college athletics to-day.

III

This outline will suggest to the reader roughly what it is that men mean when they speak of Oxford life. But social life does not engross all the interests of an Oxford man, though it occupies during term time the center of the stage. There is also work to be done at Oxford—work which, at its best, in the case of the honors man, is hard and thorough and independent to a degree which is rare with us. Oxford work is organized not by courses, but by examinations. In preparation for his final honor "schools," as they are called, a man spends two years. He works constantly under the direction of a tutor, but at the same time he is thrown largely on his own resources. The whole system of teaching tends to that end. Tutorial instruction means anything but molly-coddling. It means that the undergraduate must bring to a focus a whole week's reading in a single essay which he dis-

cusses with his tutor at their meeting. The planning of this work is left to him: there are few "assignments" in our sense of the word. The tutor usually fixes the topic, but the choice of books to be read, of how much or how little shall be done, of the point of view from which the topic shall be treated—all these are left to the student. He may follow his own bent, may scant one subject and go to the bottom of another, finish a task or leave the greater part of it for the vacation, with only the mildest protest or praise from his tutor.

An undergraduate does not work for his tutor—he works for himself. He will be examined, not by the men who have taught him, but by strangers—possibly men from another university. A man's standing, it may be his whole future, depends on the result of his examinations: his duty is to prepare himself for that test. The difference between such work and that of an American university is best expressed by the comment repeated by generations of Rhodes Scholars, "In an American university a man takes courses; at Oxford he studies a subject."

The greater part of this work most Oxford men do in the vacations, which extend over half the year, six weeks at Christmas, six at Easter, and four months in the summer. The term is the time for blocking out what is to be done, for accumulating books and references, for hearing lectures, and for living the Oxford life: the vacation is the time for solid reading and thought.

Americans who go in for research at Oxford are confused by the lack of "organization" of graduate work. They find that they are expected to know themselves what they want to do and how. Oxford opens to them her treasures of men and lectures and books, but they must choose for themselves. Advice on specific points may be had for the asking: the amount of individual attention they may get from men, each of whom is an authority in his line, is almost unlimited. But no one is ready to shoulder the responsibility for the student's work; no one is ready to say, follow this plan and your study will be a success: all that is left to him.[1]

The unity, independence, and thoroughness of

[1] This was written before the institution at Oxford of the Ph.D. degree.

such work give the Oxford discipline its distinctive character so far as studies are concerned. The Oxford student is an individual, working out his own salvation. His relation to his tutor is that of man to man; his mastery of his subject is his own, not something which he has learned up, in common with a body of classmates, from some lecturer who has mastered it and who has authority to say what will be "required" on examination. The limitations of such a plan are that it is expensive to put into practice, that relatively less ground can be covered, that the irresponsible individual is likely to do very little, and that there is no means of compensating for the cruel injustices which the examinations occasionally work on the best of men.

But the judgment of Americans who are familiar with this system as well as our own is that the advantages of the Oxford method of training far outweigh its disadvantages. By this method at its best, one gets the reality of education and that is something to be held above price by men who have been through and are

destined to administer a system like our own, so likely to become mechanical and artificial and unreal in its results. It is not surprising therefore that in a number of American colleges and universities various features of the Oxford system are now being tried: the tutorial system at Princeton, the pass and honor system at Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Oberlin, and Minnesota, and a combination of the two at the University of Washington.

IV

In a sense this is a glorified picture of Oxford. It is an attempt to express not what she gives to every man, but what she gives to the man who is prepared to receive it. It is her best that we Americans should strive to understand and to appropriate. No sensible person would deem it possible or advisable to duplicate an English university in America, but some things we should do well, if it were possible, to learn from them. One is to make our social life an interchange of ideas, and thus to give it an intellectual value which it often has not at present. Another is to make our athletics really sportsmanlike and to

make them universal, which means to make them one of the most powerful moral forces in our student world. A third, and most important of all, is so to alter the administration of our courses as to put more emphasis upon individual effort, to make our programmes less pretentious and more thorough, to force our undergraduates to study subjects rather than merely to take courses, to lay emphasis upon thought rather than upon information, which is, after all, the secret of education.

This is the beauty and sweetness of Oxford as at least one American Rhodes Scholar has seen it. It is education of course in a wonderful setting, rich in the memories and beautiful in the building of centuries that have passed away. However, the deepest impression which Oxford makes upon her sons comes not from her age, nor from the beauty of her parks and towers and quadrangles, but from the living force of her educational ideals; it is her realization of these ideals which, in an age of shifting educational standards and amid kaleidoscopic changes in educational methods, will keep up Oxford's

"communications with the future"—her realization of them in a life which is luxurious without being soft, and in a discipline which is thorough without losing its humanity.