

# Paradise grasped

By Michael H. Levin

**T**HE twentieth anniversary of the Thouron Awards did not begin well for a black-tie affair. Strong winds whipped up sheets of rain as we forded Walnut Street toward the Faculty Club, trying to look elegant despite the squooshings in our dress shoes. Going up the stairs, I saw some people wearing ties with Thouron insignia and others wearing floor-length Thouron skirts. When I went to Oxford in 1964 as one of five American fellows, there was scarcely a Thouron organization. Now, on the dinner program, the directory of 400 former fellows, the matchbooks punctuating each banquet table, bloomed a coat of arms with lion rampant, splayed eagle, and vaguely British coastlines framing a big blue T. The evening was beginning to assume the porcelain formality of a Saturday-afternoon dance class, or a fraternity reunion whose participants have rummaged up their lapel pins but can't quite connect after the handshakes. What was I doing here? What past do you return to, when you do go home again?

Then I saw Bill Hamilton across the reception room. As Proust knew, certain sounds or sights can become poles of buried experience, which wheels into view when they're met again. Though our contacts have been erratic, Bill seems to be that kind of trigger tonight. We've worked together briefly by phone, but I haven't seen him since that wet April day in 1966 at the House of Commons, when he gave up his seat in the Visitors Gallery and went elsewhere

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## A former Thouron Fellow's musings about his stay in Oxford years ago, as it was and as he remembers it

with his new wife so I could stay with my new wife to see a debate. The wives we're with now are still the same wives, and he's a professor of management and technology in the Wharton and engineering schools. There's a lot to catch up on, and catching up carries us to our places for the first course.

Moving to our table, I can still smell the damp wool and leather of that vanished afternoon in Parliament. That was when the pound was worth nearly three dollars and the British had half-crowns and shillings, when England was neither a suburb of Kuwait nor Milton Friedman's last best hope. It was when we were going to win Nobels by the time we reached 30.

Suddenly, I am not listening to the speeches. I am considering that person who disembarked at Southampton and confidently boarded the boat-train for Oxford (falling out of the taxi because the tip of his new umbrella had gotten caught in his pants cuff). He is still inside me, strange but familiar. I inspect him as Veronica Lake inspected the reporter who discovered her waitressing in the Catskills and asked what she thought when she saw her old movies on TV. She tossed back the famous dip that hung over one eye and stared at him. The silence grew. "I think," she said softly, "I think, how could anyone have been so young?"

### IN THE BEGINNING

*"Look to your right, sir," grinned the train conductor. "You'll see spires any*

*minute now." He had bright furry eyes and a pocket watch like a March Hare out of Alice in Wonderland. The train was an hour late. No one complained. It would have been bad form. In England, you don't ask why the train's late. You say it's only an hour behind schedule. In England, an hour behind schedule is doing fine. "Look," said the March Hare. "You'll see spires any minute now. You'd not expect there'd be anything. And all of a sudden you're there."*

There is never any beginning to Oxford. It has suburbs, department stores, developments, and 120,000 people. It is the headquarters of the MG car company and the site of the palace in which Richard *Coeur-de-Lion* and King John were born. But you never see these sides of Oxford unless you look for them. All you see are colleges. Each college is self-contained and independent; each has its own dining hall, bedrooms, sports grounds, library. When you start living in college, the town outside starts ceasing to exist. There is never any beginning to Oxford if you come to study here. You cross Reading and the flat farm country from London and the spires are all around you, Gothic and reaching. The spires are all around you, and they're all you ever see.

Streets in Oxford are often called "the." You stop a student in the Broad. He wears pimply hair, black leather jacket, tight blue jeans, heavy leather boots. He might be a delinquent; he looks like he could grow up to engineer a minor Brinks job. But you know he's a student because he's wearing the short black academic over-gown that undergraduates have been required to wear since the days when you had to be in holy orders to take a degree. You ask the way to the market. He tells you. "Capito?" He's not Italian. In fact, he's from Nottingham. He speaks Italian to make you think he's continental. You thank him and go on.

Oxford's cold is not like Philadelphia's; it's alive. No matter how warmly you're dressed, you feel it creeping up your trousers and over the collar of your shirt.

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There is no central heating. The English don't believe in it. They say it dries out your skin. So you huddle over your electric fire and think of the story about the monks coming to Oxford to found a university because they could study here and mortify their flesh at the same time. You laugh. Then you shiver. Then you go down to the Junior Common Room—a sort of student union—to try to get warm.

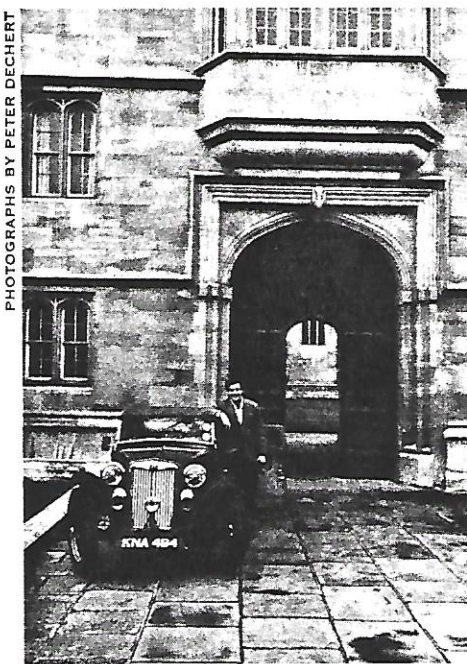
Sometimes it's warm and sunny, and the light turns the spires golden and bounces between them like a ping-pong ball in a fast match. But usually it's cold, and usually it rains, and the cold whips through the cracks around the windows above your desk and chaps the backs of your hands when you try to work. There are no storm windows. The English don't believe in them. So you rub vaseline on the chapped spots to keep the cracks from working down to blood. The English don't use vaseline. The English keep their hands in their pockets and say it isn't cold.

Before you came to England, you thought the English would be quiet and reserved. Then you thought you'd never met such friendly people. It took a while to realize that you might reach a certain point of friendship the first five minutes you met. To get past that point would take the rest of your life.

There is a long tradition of apparent dislike between townspeople and students in Oxford. This is the original "town and gown" and dates from the fourteenth century, when the townsmen, angry at students' affairs with town girls, did regular pitched battle with the scholars in the High. The feeling seems to remain. The town matrons sniff and say the students aren't gentlemen anymore. The shop girls say they wouldn't be caught dead with one of the creeps. But the matrons still call the students "sir" and "young gentleman," and the shop girls are seen going out with the creeps all the time.

Always, there is the stone. University College, chartered 1249. Merton College, 1264. Oriol College, 1326. New College, Magdalen, Christ Church, Balliol, Trinity, Exeter, St. John's. There are 26 men's colleges in Oxford. With the five women's colleges, they form the university of 10,000 people. Univ. is officially oldest because it was chartered first. But Merton was built before Univ., and New had the first college quadrangle. All of them claim they're the oldest, of course. Tourists argue about this, depending on which oldest college they were brainwashed in first. It doesn't matter. The important thing is that the colleges are there.

Each college is surrounded by a high stone wall usually topped with broken



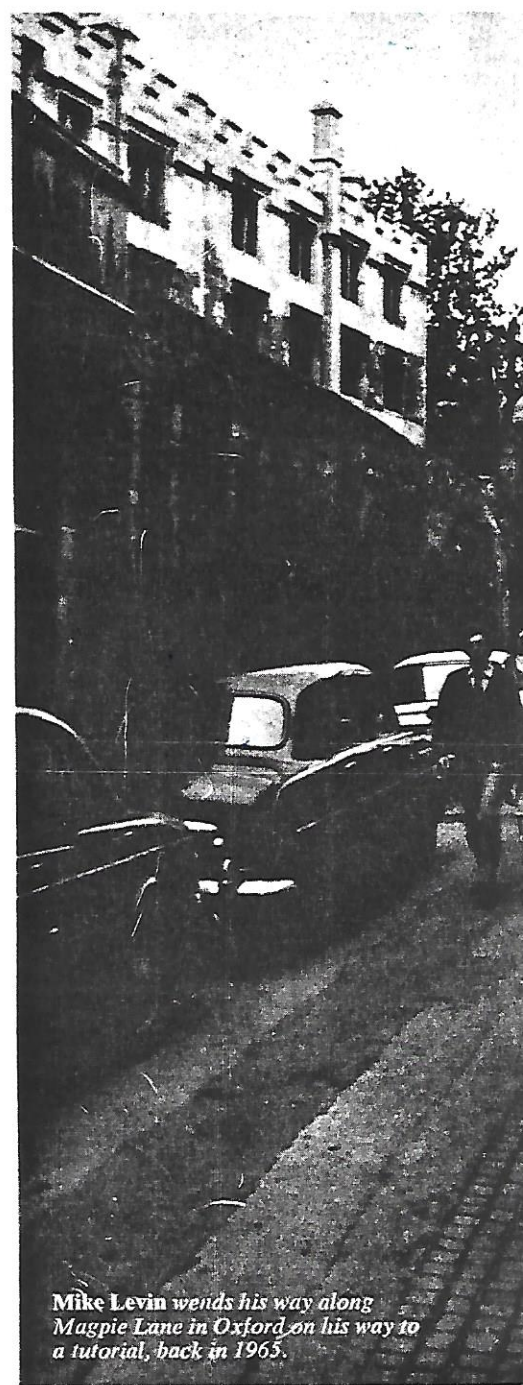
At the main gate of Wadham College



In the well-manicured Quad at Wadham

glass. This was originally for keeping townsmen out in case of siege. Now it's for keeping students in; you pay a gate fine when you don't get back before curfew. The walls don't work, of course. Ways of climbing them to avoid gate fines are passed down through generations of undergraduates. But they make the colleges comfortably uniform and medieval, and every college built since the Renaissance has retained them. Except St. Catherine's, which is Eero Saarinen modern and has a moat.

Each male college has several quadrangles, and rooms for its first-year men and most of its second-year men. A normal undergraduate degree takes



Mike Levin wends his way along Magpie Lane in Oxford on his way to a tutorial, back in 1965.

three years to complete, so last-year men live in flats or bed-sitting rooms called "digs" and come in to the college each day to work. Each college has gardens, lecture rooms, a chapel, a beer cellar, a Junior Common Room for undergraduates, a Middle Common Room for graduates, and a Senior Common Room for tutors, fellows, and God—if He should be invited. Each has a playing field. Most have squash courts. All have a dining hall in which their students eat. In the dining hall is the high table.

Oxford's American colony has a standard joke which goes, "What's a high table? Well, you've heard of a



butler brings wine to high table with each course. There are seven courses. You eat them in the light from a sixteenth-century silver candelabrum. As the meal proceeds, you think you're beginning to know what Oxford's all about. You look toward the undergraduates below you: they are eating floury soup, boiled potatoes, watered peas, limp pork. British institutional food can be said to lack a certain imagination. There is a strong desire to sneer as you finish your *sole meuniere*. You don't sneer, though. No one does. That would be bad form.

#### A PUB FOR ALL SEASONS

*"See here, Yank," said the man in the pub through the foam on his moustache. He wore checkered shirt, striped tie, button-up cardigan under tweed jacket—normal country afternoon dress. "The only good thing you ever sent us was Glenn Miller's dance band." You looked at him and grinned. "Well, sure. That's why we took it back so fast." He laughed and bought you a beer.*

There are no pubs in the States. There are neighborhood bars where you sometimes meet your friends, but usually don't. There are university bars where students drink, theater bars where actors drink, agency bars where admen drink. There are bars for doing business in, for finding women (or men) in, for relaxing-before-catching-the-train-home in. But there are few bars where you can be sure you'll meet people you've been drinking with all your life. There are few bars which feature the same faces every night, from the town beggar through the town mayor. There are few bars where you can hear a university professor, an insurance executive, and a socialist waiter having a quiet conversation behind you. There are many bars in the States. There are few you go to to talk. There are many bars in Philadelphia. They are rarely second homes. That is the main difference between bars and pubs.

Thanks to the licensing laws, there are no all-night pubs in England. There aren't even any all-day pubs. Hours vary from town to town, but most pubs open three hours for lunch and four or five hours until 10:30 in the evening. This is all right once you get used to it. In the beginning, though, it's upsetting that everything closes down before 11:00. The reason the English are happy with early closings, says the National Ministry of Health, is that they don't really go to pubs to drink. They go there, says the Ministry, to talk. It's true. By 10:30, they're so tired from talking that all they can do is stumble past the pink elephants and weave their way home to bed.

The King's Arms Tavern stands in the center of Oxford, next to Wadham College off the Broad. It's been here since the early 1800s. Once, it was a genuine inn. Then Wadham bought it to use its bedrooms for tutors and undergraduates. Its ground floor is still a pub. Behind its bar is Pepe, in gray hair and a white jacket. Pepe is stocky and Greek Cypriot and speaks seven languages badly. He looks like an educated pirate. No one knows his last name; there's a rumor it's Le Moko and he's the original hero of *The Casbah*. This is hearsay. He looks at you behind half-rimmed spectacles.

"Hello, Pep."

"Lo. What you want?"

"Lunch, Pep."

He snarls. His eyes light up happily. "What you mean, lunch?"

Pepe likes to play tough. If you come in to order, he growls. Then he insults you for being American. Then he insults you for being in Oxford. Then he insults you for bothering him. All the time, his eyes light up happily. All the time, he scares away tourists who fail to translate the eyes. But the management thinks he's worth it.

"What you mean, lunch?"

"Lunch. You know. Food. Eat."

You point to your mouth and make starving noises. "You put on plate. I put in stomach. I pay you. Everybody happy."

"Lunch? This time of day?" It is one o'clock in the afternoon. He smothers a grin. If you're a regular, the rules are different. Then you are tacitly permitted to play tough to Pepe on alternate days. In between, he plays tough to you. Today, it's a draw. "Okay. All Yanks crazy. What you have?"

*"See here," said the man in the pub. "The only good thing you sent us was Glenn Miller's band." His face went distant. "But I suppose you're not old enough to remember that." He paused. His eyes went blank. "My first wife was killed in the Blitz." You stirred uncomfortably. There was nothing to say. He had no right bringing it up in the middle of a casual conversation. Then he was happy and it wasn't 1942 and London anymore. "God bless you, Yank," he said. "You did some good things for us. Have a pint of mild."*

#### A KNOWLEDGE OF SOMETHING IN THE END

Oxford is three things when you are a student there. Stone, weather, people. Always it is stone, tall above you in towers and gargoyles and crenelated battlements, more a part of the fog than the fog is. Always it is weather, wet and chill. Always, it is people. It is mostly people in the end.

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highchair . . ." This is misleading. A high table is nothing like a highchair. It is a raised table in the dining hall at which the fellows of the college and their invited guests dine. When you are invited to eat there, you go past the undergraduates to the head of the hall. You wear your gown—not only because it's required, but because it's good protection: waiters in hall often mistake the back of your neck for a soup plate. When this happens, you smile politely and wait to be sponged off. You never squirm. That would be bad form.

When Grace is finished, the fellows sit down. You sit down with them. Then the undergraduates sit down. The

*The canon of Christ Church College was showing you around. He was thin and gray-haired and very English. He wore a clerical collar and a braided fellow's gown over a Savile Row suit. He was the most English person you had ever seen. He stopped at the great front quadrangle built by Wolsey before the Dissolution. It stretched away bigger than two football fields. Continuous arches ran the walls. Your eyes followed them automatically till they merged with the stone on the far side of the quad. In the center was a statue of Mercury in a fountain. The whole quad was covered like a putting green with manicured bent grass. Compared to the cut-up spaces of other colleges, it looked like Piccadilly Circus under grass.*

*The canon turned. He looked more English than ever. He was very dignified. Then his eyes twinkled. "It ain't much," he said in his best Brooklyn accent. "But any place yez hangs yer hat is home."*

Other towns have rich people and poor people. Oxford has rich colleges and poor colleges. It also has colleges which describe themselves as not poor. This is called tact. Wadham is a not-poor college. It is not as rich as St. John's, which is reputed to own the Bristol docks and half the financial section of London. It is not as rich as Christ Church, which has public-school boys, a genuine cathedral, a dozen former Prime Ministers and Jack Profumo among its graduates. It is not as rich as Magdalen, which has public-school boys, a deer park, a tradition of genteel decadence, and Oscar Wilde among its graduates. But it is not a poor college, and it has Sir Maurice Bowra as its warden, which more than makes up for what it may lack.

*You met him one night before first term when the college had closed early. There was the hell of a racket coming from the main gate through the gloom. Someone was cursing and trying to kick it down. He was short and chunky and wore a Draculan cape and florid face. You went up to him helpfully between sections of fog. "It's locked. They can't hear you. You have to ring."*

*"I know it's locked. Don't tell me what they can't do," roared Sir Maurice Bowra, K.B.E. "Don't just stand there—kick it down, kick it down!"*

He is almost as broad as he is short, with a heavy head and drooping jowls and piercing gray eyes that make you forget everything else about him. He looks like an intelligent gray gnome. Once, he was a famous figure on the literary tea circuit, a friend of the Bloomsbury Group and Eliot and Yeats. Then he became warden of Wadham at 35, which is like being president of Yale at 20. Now he does

## Other towns have rich and poor people; Oxford has rich colleges and poor colleges and not-poor colleges

nothing but fracture undergraduates with his annual Christmas sermon and publish a book every nine months. He has written books about Shakespeare, philosophy, religion, education, French literature, Australian aborigine folk songs, Chinese art, the Romans, the Greeks. No one can quite believe he knows enough about all these subjects to write a book on each. No one can quite believe anything about him. After 40 eccentric years in Oxford, he is too legendary. Anecdotes collect around his figure like filings on the ends of a magnet.

When Adolf Hitler wanted to see a real Oxford don, the Chamberlain Government packed Bowra off to the Reichschancellery by way of appeasement. At the main entrance, two towering S.S. guards barked "Heil Hitler!" Bowra peered up at them and walked on. At a large door, two towering S.S. guards barked "Heil Hitler!" Bowra peered up at them and walked on. Bowra walked down a corridor. Finally, Bowra was ushered into a huge room. Hitler was at the other end of the room, on a dais, behind a desk. Bowra peered up at him and walked on. Hitler greeted him with the Nazi salute: "Heil Hitler—Heil Hitler!" Bowra raised one eyebrow a fraction of an inch. "Heil Bowra," he said.

The story is almost certainly not true. But knowing Sir Maurice, you are never completely sure.

Wadham is a direct-grant college. This means that most of its students come to Oxford on scholarships from local education councils, from all over England and all kinds of economic levels in every kind of town. They like girls; they dance well; they know the difference between a cross-cut and a rip-cut. They can balance the carbs on a sports car. They are poker fiends. They play guitars, or mandolins, or a hot alto sax. They wear what they damn well please. They are very bright. They are also very young.

*Stewart knocks on your door. Stewart is only one of his first names. He has three others. He also has long fair hair in bangs on his forehead and lives in the room above you. He's from the roughest section of Newcastle, a rough town, and likes to*

*pretend he's a junior-type Capone. He's not very good at it, though. He gives you his tough-guy smile, feet wide apart and rocking. "Ey—found a party. Come." Five years ago, you would have, but you're not 17 any more. You would be bored at his parties. He would be bored at yours. He knows this. He asks you to come to show you he likes you. He can't say he likes you; that wouldn't be tough. You grin at him. "No, thanks. Bring me some back to remember you by." He unhooks his fingers from his jeans and smiles. It is not a tough smile any more. He clatters down the stairs.*

There are no classes or courses at Oxford. Instead, there are tutorials. A tutorial is a weekly meeting with a personal tutor in your major subject. Each college has tutors for every major subject; you choose your major and are assigned a tutor before you arrive for your freshman year. If you are an undergraduate, you are required to prepare a short essay on a selected topic each week and discuss it with your tutor. This is almost all you are required to do. There are no midterm exams. There are no term papers. There are no term finals or grades. There are university lectures, which are like American lecture courses, but few students go to them, unless a star like Isaiah Berlin is speaking. It is part of the Oxford tradition not to.

*Early one morning, at 4:00, your roommate was climbing into college over the garden wall. He slipped and fell 12 feet into a bramble bush. A window opened in the warden's lodgings above him. "Christ," he muttered, plucking brambles from his hands and face. "No—Bowra," came a Biblical voice from the window. Your roommate tried to hide under the bramble bush. "Are you badly damaged?" asked the voice worriedly. "No," he said, rubbing a sprained left wrist. "I'm not damaged. I'm kilt." "Good." The voice chuckled happily. "That's the way we like it. Not enough to destroy them, just enough to let them know it's dangerous to try." The window rattled shut. Your roommate limped up the stairs and bandaged his wounds and wrote till dawn. He had a tutorial that day at 10:00.*

There are three terms a year at Oxford: Michaelmas, Hilary, and Trinity. They are each eight weeks long. What the tutorial system means is that no one works very hard the first term if he is an undergraduate. He just reads the prescribed books and writes his essays. Then he goes home or to the Costa del Sol for the six-week Christmas vacation. He works harder second term. He works very hard third term, for at the end of third term are year-end exams. For first-year students,

these cover the work of the entire first year. For third-year students, they cover everything since you've been at Oxford. These are called Final Schools papers. They last five to nine days at three to six hours a day. There is a great deal of tension over them.

Because Schools come in the spring, undergraduates do silly things to relieve the tension, like climbing college buildings at night or swamping punts on the Cherwell. How you do in Schools decides what level of degree you get, and what level of degree you get still decides in England what you'll be doing for the rest of your life. There are nervous breakdowns over Schools. There are also suicides. It is bad form to talk about them.

*It is a windy night two weeks before Schools and there are three of them. They want to climb Tom Tower. Tom Tower is the gate tower of Christ Church College. It is 70 feet high and surrounded by concrete. If you fall off, you break all your bones and your head. It is too windy for such nonsense. Besides, you have no exams.*

*The next morning, you hear that they were severely reprimanded by the university proctors for conduct unbecoming young gentlemen. They had climbed Tom and passed three hours bombarding the public-school boys with tomatoes and rotten eggs. Like any university, Oxford produces children as well as adults. The children often have more fun.*

If you take a graduate degree at Oxford, you have no tutors, essays, or Schools. You have five or so hours of lectures a week, for one or two terms. You have a supervisor in your field of study who oversees your thesis and attempts to stop you from making an idiot of yourself in print. Your supervisor is not usually attached to your college; he can be anyone in the university—or outside it, provided the university approves. You see him once every two or three weeks. He asks you over for sherry or tea. He doesn't ask about your work. He figures when you're ready, you'll show it to him. Your time is your own. You're treated like a responsible adult. You try to act like one because they trust you. And in two or three years, you take your degree.

*They came into the Junior Common Room while you were reading the movie guide. One was tallish. The other was blond and short and broad. The short one was Junior Common Room president. He was doing English in between politicking and wanted to know if you were researching O'Casey. You told him O'Neill. "Aha," he said to the other one. "I told you. You owe me two quid." "It's all right," you chuckled. "These O guys—O'Casey, O'Neill, O. Henry, O'Dickens,*



Mike Levin: three degrees and two kids later

*O'No. They're all the same." They laughed and went out into the wet. And you went with them.*

On a rare sunny afternoon, you walk through the town. The stone is golden in the unhabitual light. The spires vault skyward. People pass smiling in cobbled streets.

When you're in love, Oxford is as young as Brasilia. When you're depressed, it's as old as depression. In the sunlight, you think it's just like any other town. But it's impossible to explain it to anyone. It is not different. It's just strange. It's not the tradition; you get used to that in a week. It's not the gowns, or the cobbles, or the high tables. You get used to them, too. But Oxford has a kind of mystery, as though passing generations of monks and kings left something which hovers over buildings and breathes out of the stone into the fog. You never feel quite at home in Oxford. You are dispossessed by history.

But the cold air stings in your nostrils. The frost crunches underfoot. You breathe deeply. You are working hard and well. And Oxford is a good place to be.

I haven't been back to England since 1970, when I returned for oral exams. I'm no longer sure I want to go back. That trip was a celebration, a triumphant parade past grass tennis courts and favorite places in the warm June English light. When we walked unannounced into the Elizabeth Restaurant after an absence of four years, Julio, the huge headwaiter, seized me in a bear hug of instant happy recognition. The daffodils were up all over Oxford, flowering Judas trailed purple blossoms, the hundred-foot copper beech still flourished in Wadham's garden, Pepe

was still king of the King's Arms. Nevill Coghill (who returned from the trenches with Tolkien, Graves, and Auden to translate Chaucer, start the Oxford University Dramatic Society, and train Richard Burton, among other exploits) was still my supervisor, and his idea of exam preparation was a four-course butlered lunch in his sunny rooms overlooking Merton back quad: white asparagus vinaigrette with Chablis, cold poached Severn salmon with Moselle, strawberries and Devon cream with champagne. When I staggered off to Schools, I could barely remember my name, let alone my thesis. I certainly don't remember the examination. It was the most relaxed test I've ever taken in my life.

Now I hear England has turned snarly and service is better in New York. Oxford's American colony is leading a drive to coeducate the colleges; cries of elitism have replaced tranquility. Yet the sense of my Oxford has grown stronger for me, distilled by years and selective memory. It is the sense (as Archibald MacLeish once said of his class at Harvard) of having been part of a wave that rose and broke and is now receding. Already the drops in that wave have scattered. Bowra and Coghill, both dead and unreplaceable. Jimmy Adler (Thouren '65), who surfaced briefly in my law school class but disappeared from there, and the face of my earth, before finals. D. T. Sanders (Thouren '66) who started life as a Psi U from Darien, astonishingly went to Bristol Drama School and also disappeared. John Wideman (Thouren '63), friend and witness, self-exiled to Wyoming by affirmative action and service on too many academic committees.

There are no Nobels in the wind now and the real prizes have been my children. The course is longer than we thought, and like the new England, I've turned inward, trimming my sails. That other England remains though, composed of love of conversation and excitement over ideas, reedy afternoons on the Cherwell, the luxury of small responsibility, good talk and good food: a bright snapshot pulled from time, serene and golden, quintessentially un-American. It is a measure behind events, paradise grasped, a thousand years of felt civilization, retreating as the current pulls us on. It is resonant as the last scene of *2001* when, after the long gauntlet of inhuman technology, skinless space suits and plastic food tubes, the battle with the computer, the hero streaks through his time warp to a resurrection defined by china, crystal, and the strains of Bach. It opened the world for me, and my world has never been the same. The test for that, at least, is easy: I left Philadelphia for Oxford almost 17 years ago. In every real sense, I've not been back since.