

# OXFORD MAGAZINE

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ONE of the many checks and balances that help to promote reflective, unhurried and well-considered decision-making in this University is the office of Proctors, an office dating back to the thirteenth century. Apart from its main role in distributing justice in student discipline and welfare the office has the effect of creating a cohort of academics newly familiarised with the inner workings of the University in all its aspects – some of whom will go on to occupy further important University offices. The

Proctors' annual report is a commentary on the present state of the University – a sort of self-review from a relatively dispassionate and initially innocent viewpoint.

This year's demitting report (*Gazette* Supplement (1) to No 5235, Vol 149, 20th March 2019) has two main themes, starting with student welfare. "Applications to be examined under special arrangements have increased in a single year by 50%, the chief cause being not physical impairment but anxiety". This astonishing and extremely worrying revelation needs urgent investigation and appropriate action. By way of possible explanation the report briefly hints at the changing circumstances and expectations of today's students, such as new habits of reading or use of libraries and unfamiliarity with handwritten 3-hour modes of examination, all against the background of the pressure of tuition fees and prospective job insecurity.

The second theme is equally serious. "(T)his city is home not only to us academics but to 100,000 people who already resent the cost and inconvenience of over-population. The rapid expansion of the student body to which the strategic plan commits us is regarded with understandable wariness by the City Council; it is not regarded with any more pleasure by students, junior

academics and administrators who foresee that its first effect will be to aggravate the scarcity of housing. .... Because of [the supposed imperative to maintain our pre-eminence in the world], we are told, we must have more students to assist us with our research, and the consequences must simply be borne by those who do not enjoy the emoluments of this research." In an understated tone these brief comments echo views more strongly expressed on several earlier occasions over the last year in

this magazine regarding the absence of convincing arguments for the growth agenda in the face of all its obvious potentially damaging knock-on effects.

This is clearly, perhaps understandably, a carefully worded report which invites more than a usual amount of reading between the lines. Parks College is not mentioned at all. "(T)he business of Congregation, which, notwithstanding the omnipresent murmurs of discontent, appears to have fallen back into its customary state of resigned indifference." ... "a sense of participation... is all too often lacking at the level of a faculty or division". As the report says: "(I)f we still believe in democracy after Brexit, we are surely aware that it cannot flourish except where the majority of the community have a strong sense of their common needs, their mutual dependence and above all of their mutual obligations."

On 7th May Congregation meets to consider – for the first time since the Parks College plan was suddenly announced last December – and to approve or challenge the legislation needed to put the plan into effect. The principles at stake could hardly be more important and fundamental: have the policy decisions resulting from last year's strategic plan been sufficiently open to scrutiny; is it wise to create an entirely new form of 'college'

## Save the Date

– 7th May

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that could potentially distort and destabilize the collegiate system as a whole; why should considerable central University funds be used in this way for such a narrowly defined project; what is left of the value we place on libraries if the RSL is in effect to be closed? Will there be time—and procedural opportunity allowed—in the one Congregation meeting to freely consider, to thoroughly debate and to amend responses to the questions to Council put down by Professors Edwards and Robertson? How can Congregation properly approve it on 7th May when Council itself requires further information (by July) before finally approving the plan?

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As our supreme legislative body Congregation dates, like the Proctors, from the foundation of the University as a guild in the thirteenth century. Its present state of “resigned indifference” is deeply worrying because it is a signal of disengagement, of general unconcern outside and beyond our own narrow job specializations, and because it can only lead on to loss of trust in our administration which, as illustrated by the planning of Parks College, can increasingly just go ahead and do its own thing.

There are signs that Wellington Square and Council have understood the problem of inadequate internal communication and are looking for ways to address it. Council’s three yearly, 2018/19 self-review (“Effectiveness Review”) has just been published\*. Its complete set of recommendations on “Communication” are as follows:

“The challenge of communication both to and from Council was the issue most commonly highlighted by Council members and by those attending the consultation sessions. It was acknowledged that whilst information was often published it could be both difficult to locate and not always presented in a user friendly way. Some of those consulted [sic] felt that too many of Council’s minutes and papers were redacted, it was suggested that only those matters that were clearly commercially sensitive or dealt with sensitive personal information should be redacted. The current guidance for members of the University wishing to raise matters of concern to Council is complex and likely to deter colleagues from flagging issues that may require Council’s attention. A simpler mechanism to enable matters to be brought to Council’s attention should be developed.

i. The presentation and content of Council’s web pages will be reviewed taking account of user input to redesign the pages to provide clearer and more accessible information.

ii. A more consistent approach to the accessibility of council sub-committee information and web pages linking to the main Council pages will be implemented.

iii. The policy setting out which items of business are treated as confidential will be reviewed to ensure that only those matters which should not be disseminated more widely within the collegiate University are redacted.

iv. The schedule of planned Council business will be made available to members of the University so that they are able to engage with items of business in advance of Council meetings.

v. An email summary of Council business including headlines with links to Council papers should be circulated to members of the University.

vi. A series of open meetings will be offered with Council members to provide a chance for members of the University to discuss areas of concern in an informal setting.

vii. Summaries of the issues raised by colleagues will be published with a note of subsequent Council action where appropriate.

viii. A review of the membership and conduct of the business of congregation should take place to consider how it could operate as a more effective forum for its members and how the links and communication with Council might be improved.”

Council’s plans for addressing the indifference problem are very welcome indeed. There is every reason to think that the self-review correctly identifies the seat of the problem and that the proposed solutions could actually work.

Other recommendations concern “Management of Meetings”, “Council Members” and “Council Committees”. The surprise recommendation to increase the number of external members on Council from four to six—why not five?—is baldly asserted without any supporting arguments or evidence whatsoever: “Statute VI should be amended to increase the number of external members on Council from four to six”.

That is all we are told—hardly a good example of policy-making likely to gain support and trust from wary Oxford academics.

\* The report is hidden behind a sign-on security wall (SSO): [https://council.web.ox.ac.uk/system/files/council/documents/media/c1905\\_council\\_self-review.pdf](https://council.web.ox.ac.uk/system/files/council/documents/media/c1905_council_self-review.pdf)

T.J.H

## NOTICE

The Editors of the *Oxford Magazine* regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author’s name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.

## NOTICE

Jane Griffiths, literary editor of the *Oxford Magazine*, will be pleased to read literary submissions of any description—e.g. verse, critical prose, very short stories, segments of dialogue, reviews of new dramatic productions and books, etc. Submissions should be no longer than 750 words, and where possible should be sent by email attachment to [jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk) together with a two-sentence biog.

# The RSL – Change’s Constant Companion

GIGI HORSFIELD and ISABEL MCMANN

DURING the Parks College Q&A session on March 25th at the Natural History Museum,\* there was a slide proclaiming what the “new” Radcliffe Science Library (RSL) will be offering:

- The aim of the redevelopment [of the Radcliffe Science Library] is to improve the usability, comfort, quality and layout of the library.
- It will continue to be run by Bodleian staff.
- It will be open to all students, but some of its services will be tailored to the needs of graduate students (including 4th-year undergraduates).
- It will offer a wide range of services, including:

High-bandwidth wi-fi  
Electronic access to journals and research monographs  
Data visualisation, including AR and VR  
Dedicated spaces for informal and formal study

Most of these features the RSL already provides. We support both undergraduate and graduate students from MPLS and MSD in both our collection and training programmes. We offer Virtual Reality and 3D-Printing services and would happily add Augmented Reality if given the funds. Over the years the RSL has not only been leading many of the services that are now taken for granted, but we have incorporated several Departmental libraries’ unique collections and merged with the Hooke Undergraduate Lending Library though this meant the loss of a library dedicated to the science and medical undergraduates.

Though Parks College/Society might both offer a solution to those graduate students and research fellows without a college affiliation and provide the funding to improve the infrastructure of the building, staff fear that the latest RSL Redevelopment plans will greatly diminish our services to the undergraduate science and pre-clinical medical students. First, the RSL Redevelopment Project Board wish to reduce the number of bookcases by over half, which could lead to the undergraduate books being moved to another library. Second is the concept of sharing the library space with college events that might affect the opening hours of the library and impinge on the quiet study areas with distracting activities.

By removing all bookcases on the first floor (Levels 5 & 6) the plan will cut the RSL print collection by 54%. This is after previous weeding (based on usage, keeping reading list items and newly published books of the last two years) that shrunk our open shelf stock by 62%. We might not be able to keep both undergraduate- and graduate-level books at the RSL with this reduction in shelf-space. We have been told by the Project Board that students no longer use print books. However, our statistics (which have been provided to the Project Board on numerous occasions) show this to be inaccurate. Last year we lent out a total of 12,605 individual books about

21,554 times; this is an average of 66 lendings each day the library is open. In our 2017 student survey, readers found being surrounded by books helped them to feel cosy and focus on their studies; they liked the library atmosphere.

There are college libraries; but their provision of books is highly variable, and students may only borrow from their own college library. There are departmental libraries; but many have been closed (Astrophysics, Chemistry, Engineering, Geography, Ornithology, Physics, Physiology, Experimental Psychology and Zoology) and those which remain open tend to be restricted to members of the department (or only allow their members to borrow) and focus more on graduate than undergraduate students.

The following alternatives have been suggested by the Project Board:

(i) *The undergraduate books could be moved to another Bodleian library or even split between libraries.*

However, the RSL is well located for the sciences; students can rush in between lectures to borrow books. Plus, a mixture of graduate-level books amongst the standard undergraduate texts helps to broaden their studies; those graduate students involved in interdisciplinary research would be in need of some introductory books too. Also, the students would have to walk between the libraries where their books are and the RSL where they can study (should the other libraries be full) or get subject specialist support.

(ii) *We could replace print books with e-books.*

Unfortunately, only around 30% of reading list material are available electronically and not all of these are on a platform we can support (or are prohibitively expensive). With time this may be a possibility; but not all readers find e-books easy to use, particularly when they are studying and comparing several books at the same time. Lecturers will be required to recommend books on their reading list that have an online version.

(iii) *Most of the books could be sent to Swindon.*

Under the Book Storage Facility’s current policy only one copy of each title will be accepted. Special permission can be granted; but this runs the risk of increasing book requests which could exceed the current delivery van capacity. Students will be unhappy in having to wait a day for their books to arrive too.

The other aspect of Parks College/Society that concerns us is the concept of re-configurability or sharing of space in the building. At a staff Q&A session we were told: “It may be RSL space between 9 am and 5 pm, and then college space from 5.30 pm to 8 pm.” Will this affect the time of access for Bodleian readers?

Many post-grads and working readers can only come after 6pm to make use of our collection. Students come to study during the evening and weekends, particularly during exam periods, to avoid distractions in their rooms. If the RSL does stay aligned with Bodleian opening hours, will our readers find themselves surrounded by chatting members of clubs and workshops in the study areas?

Another issue is how we will serve our readers during the year that the library is closed for renovation. The staff had hoped the work could be done in stages, starting with the basement and then each wing, so we could keep a presence at the site; but we were told it wasn't possible. There was talk of moving the reference

material to Swindon and the lendable books to other Bodleian libraries along with the staff; but those discussions have halted. This loss of support over a year or two could be detrimental to the student's studies.

Last of all, paraphrasing a comment made by a senior manager: "We have 28 libraries, and they are not used as much to justify the expense. We are all very aware of making the best use of space in the centre of Oxford because we don't have that luxury." We wonder which library will be next for 'redevelopment'?

\* Future projects – Parks College – Find out more and get involved – Q&A sessions – Slide 10 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/future-projects-parks-college/find-out-more>

# Interdisciplinary research at Oxford

PETER EDWARDS

INTERDISCIPLINARY research and projects\* are now an underpinning mantra across all national and international funding agencies, and of course, our own higher education sector.

Without question, any meeting or any documentation on the current state and future of science, for example, is leavened by obligatory statements about the importance of enabling researchers to work seamlessly across (traditional) disciplinary boundaries. Also mandatory are the usually solemn declarations that some—perhaps, apparently all—of the most exciting and important problems in 21st century research are inevitably those which span the participating disciplines.

I have been privileged to have been involved in major interdisciplinary research initiatives for over 3 decades. With colleagues from 5 participating departments, I established the first-ever Interdisciplinary Research Centre in the UK, that in Superconductivity in the Cavendish Laboratory; I was a member, then Chair, of the EU Advanced Investigator Award Panel on Synthesis and Advanced Materials. More recently, with Sir David King, and colleagues from the Smith School in Oxford, we established a programme to study the environmental and socio-economic impact of advances in catalysis science on energy use and accompanying CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in hydrocarbon fuel processes.

Through my own experiences—and (hopefully) some successes—in attempting to advance and enrich the ethos and practice of interdisciplinary research, I offer some observations and comments relating to a specific initiative at Oxford:

**1. Strong interdisciplinary programs can only be built in circumstances in which strong disciplinary programs already exist. It makes no sense whatsoever to sacrifice ongoing successful disciplinary efforts to appease perceived interdisciplinary needs;**

**2. Any successful interdisciplinary program must demonstrate to the broad community that its depth, creativity and pure, intellectual rigour must at least match—but hopefully exceed—that of individual disciplinary programs;**

**3. Genuine, high-level interdisciplinary programs are correctly based on guaranteed long-term support—my experience is that a minimum of 5 years is critical if one is to work on broad and challenging themes;**

**4. Many initiatives intended to strengthen and advance interdisciplinary research—and to foster partnerships—have floundered because the principal participants never changed their research programme, just renamed it to obtain funding;**

**5. My experience throughout has been that the best and most exciting ideas come from the bottom up; that is, from practicing researchers themselves and some of the most spectacular ideas can come from early career researchers.**

One such example that beautifully highlights the power of natural, high-level interdisciplinary research is the recently-announced EPSRC/Oxford Inorganic Chemistry for Future Manufacturing Centre for Doctoral Training (OxICFM CDT). This new £10.4M centre will educate, train, mentor and inspire the next generation of world-class researchers in inorganic chemistry—the chemistry of the elements of the periodic table—as it applies to manufacturing. It clearly addresses the urgent national need for resilience, growth and innovation in key manufacturing sectors, and will be delivered through an integrated learning environment involving ten industrial stakeholders (spanning diverse size ranges and business areas), our departments of Chemistry, Materials, Physics and Engineering, and seventeen international centres of excellence.

OxICFM was one of only 75 such centres funded by the EPSRC in the physical sciences and engineering (across the whole of the UK) for the period 2019-2027 (and one of only five in Oxford). Particularly noteworthy is that this is the only centre for doctoral training in this area that EPSRC is currently funding; as such it presents an ideal opportunity for Oxford to develop a 'flagship' presence in the area—both physically and intellectually in terms of the quality of postgraduate student education, training and research output.

OxICFM's vision and goal is to equip and enable a new generation of scientists capable of addressing leading interdisciplinary scientific and societal challenges at the interface of advanced synthesis and manufacturing. A key provision of the proposal, as funded by the EPSRC (which recognizes the critical role of synthesis as a central enabling discipline) was the co-location of OxICFM with the continuing (industrially funded) Synthesis for Biology and Medicine doctoral training programme at Oxford. In so doing, an over-arching Oxford Centre for Synthetic Excellence can now be established, spanning the entire breadth of synthesis, from the interface with biology on one hand, to physics and engineering on the other.

The Inorganic Chemistry teaching laboratory was always identified as the location for this joint centre, reflecting the size and training needs of the joint cohort (ca. 30 doctoral students/ year). With that in mind, I and other colleagues were surprised and concerned to find (following the announcement in December that EPSRC had confirmed funding for OxICFM) that alternative plans for this key space are now to be put before Congregation;

and with only a space commitment for the teaching laboratory of less than 2 years for this 7 year programme. The first tranche of postgraduate students will arrive this September. Congregation is to be asked on 7th May to approve the allocation of this space to Parks College, with the sessions scheduled for the discussion of the academic programme (and other matters) only in late April and 1st May.

The interdisciplinary programme of research in this new Centre for Doctoral Training at Oxford is the most exciting advance now planned in the science and application of chemical synthesis, both in its advancement and its dissemination. To succeed it must be fully supported by the University. The knowledge, education and training in this interdisciplinary programme will be a driver for building major new bridges across science and technology, vital in order to truly address grand societal challenges.

<sup>4</sup>Many of these sentiments derive from the visionary and insightful contributions on interdisciplinary research by Professor Richard N. Zare of Stanford University and past chairman of the US National Science Board.

## From 'Project Rooster' to 'Parks College' – the story behind the scenes

G.R. EVANS

*"I think the issues will be:*

*–how certain are we that we can get to financial sustainability in 5 years  
–are we moving too fast  
(–possibly ... is there really a business case for more graduates—but a bit late for that?)*

David Prout, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Planning and Resources) email of 15 February 2019 on Parks College, to the Vice-Chancellor and Professor Tarassenko.

*Are they moving too fast?*

On May 7, in a single afternoon, Congregation will be invited to create a new Society in the University, implicitly approve its Regulations<sup>1</sup> and allocate four tranches of 'space' for it. Business will begin with the reading of a Congregation Question and Council's reply, but if Supplementary Questions are asked there can be no answers published in the *Gazette* before Congregation decides.

Rarely has Congregation's vigilance been more important. Freedom of Information Disclosures suggest that Council and the Committees it relies on<sup>2</sup> would have had a job to exercise much vigilance in the face of an apparent reluctance to respect their constitutional roles. The Vice-Chancellor wrote to Bodley's Librarian on 27 November 2018 during the drafting of the press<sup>3</sup> release of 7 December which first announced the project:

*"I wouldn't feel very strongly about the absence of a reference*

*to Congregation; but it is always good to spike any potential resentment or cries of foul, as these will always attract disproportionate attention."*

Council seemingly was taken by surprise at its 26 November meeting. David Prout's replies to two (un-minuted) questions from Council members show what uphill work an ill-informed Council faced in doing its job. One 'asked what authority we had to announce' the plan ('we were merely announcing an intention in order to allow the team to talk to people openly' was the answer), another 'who had appointed' Lionel Tarassenko to be Head of House ('we were lucky to have him' in answer).<sup>4</sup>

'We should have given Council an advanced copy of the announcement. I should have thought of that,' replied the Vice-Chancellor to David Prout (11 December). She added, 'We'll have to do some prep work to make sure this lands softly in the February meeting'.<sup>5</sup> Council Committees were apparently treated persuasively too. On 15 February the Vice-Chancellor wrote to Lionel Tarassenko 'I think it will sail through Finance Committee quite easily'. (In the *Gazette* of 21 March may be read its recommendation that the 'overall envelope' for the project should be increased to £40m).

Only now, when the decision is before Congregation does Council have a finger hovering over a 'pause' button. The *Gazette* says Council is to receive a *Report* from the Parks College Programme Board on 15 July and may then postpone the admission of the first students for one year. Congregation is asked to give its full consent on 7 May with that uncertainty unresolved.

### *The self-appointed few and the policy of secrecy*

What is this ‘Programme Board’? It began as ‘Project Rooster’, discussed by a small group in the strictest secrecy. On 3 November Lionel Tarassenko wrote to the Vice-Chancellor listing only four.<sup>6</sup> ‘Integration’ with the planned RSL redevelopment was already in the scheme. That had a Client Progress Group with neither agendas or minutes. Then it mutated into a CPG for Parks College as an ‘operational group’ that too kept no minutes, although it did have agendas, which allocated time to consider each item, usually 5 or 10 minutes each.

The Parks College Programme Board began to meet on 12 December as the Executive Project Board, when it appointed an Additional Steering Committee ‘overseeing the project as a whole’ consisting of the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro-Vice-Chancellors and the Registrar. The Programme Board appears to have had no formal Agenda. (For its meeting on 15 January the Strategic Outline Business Case ‘had been circulated by email at 7:57am that morning’). However, it kept Minutes, which reveal a body at work on that Strategic Online Business Case mentioned by David Prout when he wondered in February whether it had put together the arguments for more graduate students.

Council was first told about the Rooster Project on 26 November in an oral report. There was no accompanying paper.<sup>7</sup> The Council took no decision. The Minute records no delegation of authority to the group to take decisions on behalf of the Council.<sup>8</sup> An email of 20 November mentions that ‘the Estates Programme Board will not be asking us to pause the project as it’s currently configured’, so the RSL development work was to continue as scheduled until the Parks College Programme Board were ‘ready to change course’, to reconfigure the building for the Society.

Although one of their Libraries was at the centre of the plans, the first the Curators of the University Libraries were told about it was at their meeting of 3 December.<sup>9</sup> Anne Trefethen, in her capacity as the Chair of the Curators, gave a ‘verbal’ statement to ‘alert Curators to the RSL plans’, as she put it in an email. Again there was no paper.<sup>10</sup> It was confirmed in a later email that ‘as discussed after the CUL yesterday, the Curators only noted this, and did not agree’.

PRAC was not told anything until it met on 11 December, four days after the press release of 7 December. Its Minutes record at item 10 that ‘members noted the announcement by the University that it intended to establish a new college at the Radcliffe Science Library’. There was no accompanying paper and again the Committee merely ‘noted’ the information.<sup>11</sup>

From 27 November, the Rooster Group had a list of ‘stakeholders’. This did not include Congregation. A limited informing of Heads of House was initiated by the Vice-Chancellor ahead of the press release. She telephoned those of the two existing ‘Societies’, Kellogg and St. Cross, and also St. Anthony’s. The Master of St. Cross expressed her concern that ‘it may look as though it has come out of thin air and that being at the end of term the Governing bodies will be surprised by it’. On 5 December the Vice-Chancellor emailed to say that she had now also spoken to ‘the Heads of all the graduate colleges about Project Rooster. No opposition defected (*sic*) so far’. Lionel Tarassenko wrote on 6 December

that he had ‘spoken with the HoDs and I think they may well have spoken to members of the Divisional boards. I don’t see they are on the critical path at this stage’. The governing bodies of the rest of the Colleges were sent the ‘Confidential’ *Case for Parks College* document only towards the end of the following term.

### *The future of the Radcliffe Science Library*

On 30 November the Director of the Museum of Natural History was given some information which he was to treat as ‘strictly confidential’. Bodley’s Librarian held a meeting with the RSL staff on 6 December and wrote to Lionel Tarassenko that at the meeting there had been ‘a lot of shock and a degree of discombobulation’!

It may not be obvious to Congregation that on 7 May it is invited to allocate the whole Library to Parks College, not merely to approve a sharing between Library and new Society. The reason given in the Minutes of the ‘Executive Project Board’ on 15 January is solely ‘to demonstrate the commitment of the university to the college to a potential donor’. The approval would be ‘subject to the negotiation of a space-sharing agreement between Parks College and the Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM)’, but on what terms or for how long is not made clear.

There is a warning sentence in the *Case for Parks College*:

“the Bodleian librarians are looking again at the provision of physical study spaces and collections, and consolidating where feasible and appropriate.”<sup>12</sup>

Members of Congregation will remember the removal of the History Faculty Library to make way for the Martin School, the battle to save the Oriental Studies Library from closure, and the serial closures of science Faculty libraries.<sup>13</sup> If Parks College has ultimate control of the hours of availability and the actual remaining Library space the future of the RSL as a library seems potentially at risk.

### *‘Is there really a business case for more graduates – bit late for that?’*

The two Societies at present in existence cater for what are still in truth ‘non-collegiate students’.<sup>14</sup> The new Society cannot be a true college because it will not be a corporation in its own right. It will be a department of the University and its students will lack the dual membership a College would offer them. So what are these additional graduate students of the University really being offered?

The ‘Explanatory Note’ in the *Gazette* calls it ‘an environment for interactions between researchers’, within ‘a special focus on cross-disciplinary interaction’.<sup>15</sup> A ‘strong view’ was put at the Strategic Capital Steering Group on 30 January ‘that the range of subjects for the College to take graduates in was too narrow’. Another member made a ‘request’ for ‘more social science courses to be included’. David Prout reported in an email to the Vice-Chancellor that day that it was agreed that ‘for now we would not be precise on these matters’.

What is certain is that there will be no physical ‘environment’ ready for these ‘interactions’. At the Programme Board meeting of 12 December ‘it was queried whether it would be possible to start the intellectual life of the college before the building was available,’ (and ‘planning permission for a listed building could take 12 months’).<sup>16</sup> There was also concern not to make misleading claims since ‘the offering is subject to the legislation on marketing’.

The building cannot be available for the Society for a considerable time. For the Planning Application for the Grade-II listed RSL building even to be launched Congregation must create a Society and a deal must be negotiated for and future use as a library.<sup>17</sup> The completion of the replacement for the Tinbergen Building is admitted to be going to take ‘a great deal longer than scheduled’, and it can hardly be hoped that the admittedly compressed timetable for the RSL can be kept to.<sup>18</sup>

The proposed allocation to Parks College and to the new Society of ‘the Abbot’s Kitchen, the western wing of the Inorganic Chemistry Lab and connecting space’ are also subject to negotiation, with an ‘agreement’ so far, mentioning handover of the space (decontaminated) in 2021.<sup>19</sup> However, in late March 2019 the Abbot’s Kitchen and the chosen lab space and adjacent areas were all being measured, ahead of consent to the intended handover of the space by Congregation.

Council recorded its own doubts in the *Gazette* as to whether ‘the student experience in the first year will be satisfactory before the central site of the society is ready’, echoing the concern which had by then been expressed several times in the *Oxford Student*.<sup>20</sup>

What of the Fellows? Parks College ‘is not offering employment to Official Fellows, rather an association’.<sup>21</sup> University employees (in RSIV posts and Grades 9-10) will be ‘appointed for a period of five years in the first instance, with re-appointment for successive five-year terms, subject to satisfactory performance of their society duties’.<sup>22</sup> But how will this mesh with their employment status with the University and the procedures for dismissal to which they are entitled under Statute XII?

It had been hoped that Fellowships in a new Society might help to address the insecurity of the growing number of researchers on fixed-term contracts, but this seems far from clear since there will be no employment security, only that ‘association’.<sup>23</sup> The *Case for Parks College* speaks of ‘appointing entrepreneurs and innovators in residence’<sup>24</sup> and the *Gazette* of 21 March confirms that holders of ‘external non-academic appointments’ will also be appointed as Fellows, leaving their relationship with the University undefined.

*‘How certain are we that we can get to financial sustainability in 5 years?’ The cost and risk to the University*

Governing bodies were assured in the *Case* document that:

*“The creation of a new graduate college will provide a new income stream to the University in terms of additional ongoing student fee income and additional research income and overheads.”<sup>25</sup>*

The *Gazette* gives details of the estimated costs, excluding redevelopment of the accommodation in Wellington Square.<sup>26</sup> An annual ‘operational deficit’ of £3m for the Society for five years or so is mentioned before ‘it is expected to break even’. Risks highlighted mention ‘the need to secure endowment and donations and the possibility of the operational budget needing to absorb unknown or unexpected costs’. Council has approved the £40m already mentioned, in reliance on the Finance Committee. The total income of Oxford Brookes for last year was under £200m. So that £40m to be risked by Oxford University to launch the new Society represents a fifth of the working funds of a well-regarded University in the same city.

### *Some constitutional questions*

#### *(a) Statute V, creating a new Society*

The Legislative Proposal if approved will add Parks College to the list of Societies in Statute V. There seems to have been some constitutional confusion among those who became the ‘Steering Committee’ of the Programme Board. On the 18 December the Vice-Chancellor wrote to the Registrar with a query ‘about using the St Cross Statutes’. She meant the Regulations made by Council subject to challenge by Congregation, for of course, unlike Colleges, St. Cross and Kellogg do not have their own Statutes. Colleges make their own Statutes under the Oxford and Cambridge Acts of 1877 and 1923, subject first to the University’s approval and then to that of the Privy Council.

David Prout responded on the same day:

*“I tend to agree. A new kind of college needs a new way to run itself, particularly in the early days when fleet of foot executive decisions will be made. My strong advice would be to start with a small fellowship and governing body and take time to grow the culture in a way that does not try to mimic the old colleges.”*

It seems to be constitutionally unclear whether Congregation is to be taken to have approved the Regulations in the *Gazette* if it approves the proposal to create the new Society, since they have not yet been made by Council and surely Council must make them before Congregation can approve them. But then it has also not been stated when the Society will come into existence if Congregation approves its creation.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, for example, there is no definition of a Society in the Statute but the ‘part-time’ Society proposed looks like something new. The stated ‘aim’ is ‘for the college to function as a hub for interdisciplinary exchanges, mainly at lunchtime and in the late afternoon/early evening’.

In the Regulations printed in the *Gazette* with the Legislative Proposal there is mention of ‘the academic policy of Parks College’ on which if ‘Council thinks it appropriate, Council may direct the governing body on certain courses of action’.<sup>28</sup> So the Society will not control its own academic affairs. Neither of the other two Societies has such a provision in its Regulations.<sup>29</sup> ‘The intention is to build a collaborative research and social community’ restricted to a limited range of research:<sup>30</sup> ‘The society will appoint as Official Fellows as

champions for each of its clusters.<sup>31</sup> Would-be Research Fellows of the society will also be required to have ‘relevant research interests’.<sup>32</sup>

### (b) *The Resolution under Statute XVI, A,4*

*“No allocation for University purposes of a site the area of which exceeds 1,000 square metres, or of a building the overall floor area of which exceeds 600 square metres, shall be made unless approved by resolution of Congregation under section 1 of Statute IV.”*

The case made for approval of the four-part Resolution to allocate space to Parks College<sup>33</sup> has many ‘assumptions’ and mentions of essential but uncompleted ‘negotiations’ and also some admitted ‘innovations’. Thus, for example:

1. *No start date*: In an email of undisclosed authorship to David Prout and the Vice-Chancellor on 18 February:

*“Each allocation should have a start date – ordinarily this would be the date on which the recipient department is expected to put the space into operational use....[but] charging could easily be tied to PC/handover of a finished facility. An alternative would be to allocate the space from the point that it is to be available for the purposes of the Society (which would include availability to be refurbished).”*

2. *No end date*. The same email notes that:

*“For completeness, an allocation to an academic department would usually have an end date. An end date does not [emphasis in original] seem appropriate in this case of allocation of space for a society.”*

3. *Allocation of unidentified space*: In the case of the accommodation, the email added that to ask Congregation ‘to allocate space without being certain of the location of the space’, ‘would be a entirely new approach and may not be welcomed’. Moreover, if it were decided to:

*“put to Congregation the allocation of 60 rooms in Wellington Square, and in the event that the planning permission is not secured, bring an alternative solution to Congregation for allocation is necessary....the disadvantage is the potential need to go back to Congregation.”*

David Prout ‘approved’ the decision to take that risk by email on the same day, then the Vice-Chancellor emailed to say ‘I agree’, and that is the form in which the allocation is framed in the *Gazette* for Congregation’s approval.

4. *Permanent allocation of graduate accommodation to Parks College?* While the juxtaposition of the RSL with the ‘science area’ is advanced as a reason for placing Parks College in the Library and allocating Chemistry space to the college, the same argument does not appear to apply to the provision of student accommodation. This will not be ‘on the RSL site owing to a lack of space’.<sup>34</sup> 157 ‘units of accommodation’ are to be allocated to Parks College if Congregation agrees, one ‘scheduled to be ready for use by September 2020’ and the other not until two years later.<sup>35</sup> If the principle that

there is to be no ‘end date’ applies to these too, they would consequently not be available for other graduate students of the University.

<sup>1</sup> Not yet ‘made by Council’ for the purpose.

<sup>2</sup> Committees of or reporting to Council are listed at <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/committees/> and do not include the bodies mentioned here working on the Parks College ‘project’.

<sup>3</sup> David Prout had originally wished to keep the news release until after Christmas, ‘Sensitivities’ were mentioned. However, press interest was kindling (‘the FT, Times and Telegraph keep calling’). 7 December was chosen for press day. The Vice-Chancellor wrote to suggest that a way to ensure this would not ‘be a major national story’, if ‘we stick with the planned timing, given BREXIT saga’). (The then intention was that Parliament’s ‘meaningful vote’ would be held the following Tuesday.)

<sup>4</sup> Email of 11 December.

<sup>5</sup> Email of 11 December.

<sup>6</sup> David Prout, Anne Trefethen, Professor Milner-Gulland and Luke Swanson of the Public Affairs Directorate.

<sup>7</sup> FOI disclosure.

<sup>8</sup> Under the requirements of Statute VI.

<sup>9</sup> The press release was still evolving until 4 December but it made no mention of their role (FOI disclosure).

<sup>10</sup> FOI disclosure.

<sup>11</sup> FOI disclosure.

<sup>12</sup> *Case for Parks College* (5.5.2)

<sup>13</sup> With closure of the Language Centre Library also planned, though that is not one of the Bodleian Libraries.

<sup>14</sup> The statutory Societies of Oxford developed from the provisions of the late-nineteenth century which allowed ‘non-collegiate students’ to be matriculated through the 1868 ‘Delegacy for Unattached Students’ and read for degrees while living in lodgings about the town.

<sup>15</sup> *Gazette*, 21 March.

<sup>16</sup> The urgent need to repair the leaking roof of the Grade II Listed St. Cross building and its libraries got the necessary Planning Applications in February, but the planning record shows that gaining the consents for the work recently done on that building took from April 2015 to November 2016, <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/17502845.rescue-plan-for-oxford-universitys-leaking-st-cross-building/>

<sup>17</sup> *Gazette*, 21 March.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ox.ac.uk/staff/news-listing/2018-11-26-tinbergen-building-redevelopment>

<sup>19</sup> *Gazette*, 21 March.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/02/01/new-grad-college-to-share-rsl-as-flexible-space-university-reveals/>

<https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/02/23/university-scales-back-parks-college-ambitions/>

<https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/03/07/vp-for-graduates-on-new-parks-college-almost-nothing-set-up-except-a-weekly-pizza-night/>

<sup>21</sup> *Gazette*, 21 March.

<sup>22</sup> This is not in the Regulations of the other two Societies.

<sup>23</sup> In the proposed Regulations are addressed some concerns which have arisen as a consequence of omissions in the drafting of Statute XII which leave employees in Societies who are subject to Statute XII without express protections:

*“Any powers or duties afforded to a Head of department by statute, regulation, policy or procedure shall fall to the President or their nominee. Where a statute, regulation, policy or procedure specifies an action or role to be carried out by a particular officer that does not exist in or for Parks College, the Registrar shall appoint an alternate on behalf of Council”* (Gazette, 21 March).

Amendment of Statute XII would require a separate Legislative Proposal and Privy Council approval and take some time but it seems unsatisfactory to leave these gaps to be filled by such ad hoc arrangements under mere Regulations.

<sup>24</sup> *Case for Parks College* (2.10). Will ‘a clause colloquially known as the “coffee room clause” to explain what happens to IPR that arises in casual conversation rather than in pre-planned activity’ be needed in the case of the external ‘entrepreneurs’? Dr. A.C.Norman, Cambridge Reporter, 27 January 1999, <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/1998-99/weekly/5762/16.html>

<sup>25</sup> *Case for Parks College* (6.4).

<sup>26</sup> Gazette, 21 March.

<sup>27</sup> There is no statement as to when the change to Statute V will come into force or into effect. (Normal practice requires publication in the Gazette of the change having been approved.)

<sup>28</sup> Gazette, 21 March.

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/#soci>

<sup>30</sup> Gazette, 21 March.

<sup>31</sup> Also in Gazette, 21 March.

<sup>32</sup> Gazette, 21 March.

<sup>33</sup> Under Statute XVI, A, 4. “No allocation for University purposes of a site the area of which exceeds 1,000 square metres, or of a building the overall floor area of which exceeds 600 square metres, shall be made unless approved by resolution of Congregation under section 1 of Statute IV”.

<sup>34</sup> Gazette, 21 March.

<sup>35</sup> Gazette, 21 March.

# The erosion of active oversight and its consequences: the case of the Committee for the Language Centre

ROBERT VANDERPLANK

As I write this article, the petition on *change.org* ‘Save the Language Centre library’ has been signed by over 1600 people opposing the decision by Language Centre management to close the library, disperse its unique collection of materials for language learning and make the librarian and her assistants redundant. The angry and impassioned comments of some of the signatories bear testimony to the wider University view which, in the past, would have been provided by the Committee for the Language Centre, had it not been abolished by Council in June, 2017. Are we now to rely on petitions rather than committees to check management actions?

The committee was made up of representatives of its key user/stakeholder faculties (MML, the OI, History, Classics, LPP, Education), the divisions, Continuing Education, the Conference of Colleges, the Assessor and two OUSU Vice-Presidents (undergrad. and post-grad. affairs). Until the governance reforms in the early 2000s, the Language Centre had been a General Board department with a Committee of Management, chaired by a college head, a Pro-Vice-Chancellor without portfolio. Following the reforms, the Language Centre became part of Academic Services and University Collections (ASUC). The ‘management’ role of the committee was dropped and it became a committee representing the wide user and stakeholder interests of the University, chaired by the P-V-C (ASUC). This continued for some years until, after a re-arrangement of P-V-C roles, the P-V-C (Education) took on the role of chair of the committee. The committee had oversight of Language Centre policy and operations, met termly, and was responsible for appointing the Director and Assistant Director. It

also played a key role in the periodic formal reviews of the Language Centre.

In 2015, when a slimmed-down ASUC became GLAM (Gardens, Libraries and Museums), the Language Centre was moved under Academic Administration Division and the Director reported to the Academic Registrar. The Committee for the Language Centre continued to function throughout 2015-2016 under the chairmanship of Professor Sally Mapstone, then P-V-C (Education), and there was no hint that it was felt to be superfluous when I retired as Director of the Language Centre in autumn, 2016. Indeed, as a major review of the Language Centre was due to take place following my retirement, it should have played a part in shaping the future direction of the Language Centre. However, my understanding is that it did not meet in 2016-17 prior to its being disbanded.

Why was the committee abolished? The note in the Gazette (Gazette, Vol.147, p.550, 8 June 2017) baldly states:

*“Council, on the recommendation of Education Committee and of General Purposes Committee, proposes that the Careers Service Subcommittee of the Education Committee and the Committee for the Language Centre be disbanded, on the basis that the work of the relevant services can be overseen through regular engagement with representatives of key constituencies, oversight by Education Committee and panels and subcommittees and normal line management arrangements.”*

We know (or should know) that the pious hopes for ‘oversight’ and ‘engagement’ are usually hollow given the busy lives of the ‘key constituents’ and the over-

crowded agendas of other committees and sub-committees. During my 20 years as Director, I provided a report to the committee each term and never, in all that time, was a meeting cancelled for lack of business. Successive chairs and members of the committee were invaluable sounding boards and sources of support and critical advice to me. I would certainly not have taken forward proposals for any significant changes to Language Centre policy and practice without putting them to the Committee for the Language Centre first. On many occasions, the (often robust) views of the chair and committee members helped to shape and improve proposed changes in policy, thereby ensuring that they fully reflected wide University and college views.

I can imagine the close scrutiny which the committee would have given a proposal to close such a valuable and

unique resource as the Language Centre library. The belated decision by Language Centre management to consult current library users via a Language Centre webpage was only taken once the petition had gathered wide support.

Committees may be considered to be inefficient and time-consuming by those in management positions but in a self-governing academic institution, they are an essential element in making management accountable and in ensuring that the decision-making process is open and transparent, especially where University-wide interests are involved. In the case of the Language Centre library, it is a sad day indeed when we have to rely on a petition via [change.org](https://www.change.org) to provide a University-wide view.

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# Death of a Library

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LUCILE DESLIGNÈRES

I was shocked, in my last meeting with Language Centre managers, to be told that my post as Language Centre librarian was “at risk of being made redundant” and then absolutely horrified to hear that the Language Centre library would be dispersed away into several of the Bodleian Libraries, including the Swindon bookstack.

I was looking for jobs elsewhere anyway, as I was no longer happy in my work place. I was also saddened to hear that the Modern Language Instructors, many of whom have offices in the Language Centre, would soon be moving to the Language Faculties. They have been, over the years, a great source of knowledge in the Library. I had thought, simply, that after my departure my job would be downgraded with some cuts in the library purchasing budget and that some of my tasks would be distributed elsewhere. But to be told that the library, as well, would go, made me very sad, and angry.

What surprised me mostly also, is that nothing happened after that meeting: there was no announcement anywhere about the proposed changes. A business plan, given to me at that meeting, stated that the usage statistics were bad, omitting to include the online statistics, which, in fact, significantly improve the picture<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the registration numbers indicate new library users only. For example, the current number of all library users is 800, which is rather more than the 87 new registrations recorded for weeks 0-3 of Hilary Term. I could have explained that, had I been asked. But, in any case, this is quantitative data only, and if there was such a problem with the statistics, how come I had not been told before? There was, beyond figures, nothing else shown in the business plan. No student voice, for example. It was evident that no public consultation had been carried out through a survey, an open forum, or any group emails.

It is difficult to measure the impact a library has in someone’s life: it can be in helping students get better grades, providing them with extra materials that are

unique to the collection, like graphic novels for French finalists. It can be about offering more materials to borrow and for longer for students with disabilities, or about providing class textbooks for the less privileged who undertake courses at the centre. The impact can also be for members of staff: from NHS staff to the field researcher, for retired members of staff who wish to keep active, for non-UK ERASMUS trainees who gain work experience, for library staff who can borrow a few books for their studies in librarianship, for UNIQ students, open day visitors, school and language centre librarians to have a visit. The list is long and obviously does not end here.

So, one week after that meeting, I started a petition, “Save the Language Centre Library” on [change.org](https://www.change.org) so we can, at last, hear what students and others have to say.<sup>2</sup> I am so glad I did, and so touched by the high number of signatures and comments. They come from current library users and ex-users but also from other UK language centres and departments: Leeds, Glasgow, Cambridge, and Warwick. The support shown from library staff colleagues has brought tears to my eyes: from All Souls to Wolfson, Keble to Nuffield, I’ve had great and kind support. And I should also mention Bodleian staff, in particular from the Taylorian, but also the History and the Music faculties. And Language Tutors, Instructors, Lectors, of course, have participated *en masse*. Even the ever-so-busy Professor Mary Beard took the time to retweet one of my comments. And of course, the UCU, my union, which has been supportive all the way. At the time I’m writing this, more than 1600 people have signed. So, from the bottom of my heart, I’d like to say thank you to them all.

And I really wonder what would have happened if I had not created a petition? Would there have been a “public consultation” organised by the Centre management, were it not for this campaign? Even so, there are

serious questions to be raised about this “consultation”. For example, why was the deadline for the “public consultation” set for the end of May when my deadline (to accept or reject an offer of voluntary severance) was at first set for mid-May?

I put “public consultation” in quotation marks as not all language centre users were contacted; for example library-only users were not. Furthermore, the users contacted by the Language Centre were invited to send their comments via email. The process I believe, is not as transparent as an online consultation. I have also recently discovered that there is now another consultation organised by the Centre in the form of a survey. Once again, this is not as transparent as an online consultation. There will be, however, an Open Forum on 7 May and I regard this as a positive step.

The whole project seems rushed; one cannot decide and plan to get rid of a library in half a year. That Open Forum should have been organised at the beginning of the academic year, in week 0 of Michaelmas Term, and not so late in the academic year and at such a late stage of the process? And what of the subsequent steps? Will the Language Centre collections have to be reclassified using the Library of Congress classification, a system dating from colonial times and not at all adapted to the collection here as we have materials from all over the world? Dewey classification then? Not any better. Surely, at Oxford, there are places to house the library. Or simply keep the collections at the Language Centre itself? After all, the accommodation on Woodstock Road, next to the

Language Centre building, belongs to the University as well. Wouldn’t it be possible to make some comfortable study spaces there for the Language Tutors rather than using the library space? Or, as it was previously planned, the library could move to the ground floor.

I care deeply for the Tutors of the Language Centre and I am happy that, thanks to management and the work of UCU, they have now been offered better contracts. However I worry that all the extra work they have to do (more admin, more VLE-related duties, more time spent on acquiring language learning materials) might have an impact on their teaching. As a Language Centre student, where I learned, or tried to learn, five languages, I was always struck by the high quality of the teaching offered, and it was evident that the tutors had as much fun teaching than we did learning.

But I wonder... Is the Language Centre going to become a learning factory for only 12 languages with increasingly expensive teaching hours and electronic resources, or dare I say “products”, on the new VLE CANVAS, that will be for registered students only? Will the students become, as Yuval Noah writes in his latest book *21 lessons for the 21st century*, “a pair of eyes and a pair of ears connected to ten fingers, a screen and a credit card”? I very much hope not!

<sup>1</sup> The online resources, created by Library staff from 2014 onwards, got an IT OxTalent award for supporting the needs of Modern Language students

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/save-the-language-centre-library>

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# A Tale of Two Engineers

PETER OPPENHEIMER

A few weeks ago Oxford said farewell to Roger Ainsworth. Roger was indisputably the outstanding Oxford Head of House of his generation. Combining professional distinction (and industrial experience) in engineering with focus on academic standards and student welfare across the board, he was also a skilful administrator and the chairman of choice for a remarkable range of outside bodies concerned with education, health and the environment. By the same token he was—in the well-chosen words of the Vice-Chancellor—“a deeply committed University citizen.”

Not the least of his contributions to the University was to have overseen, as chair of its building committee for 13 years, capital projects totalling some £750 million—a task nowadays usually assigned to Executive Pro-Vice-Chancellors remote from daily academic life. As the obituarist of the *Daily Telegraph* so delicately put it, “In an earlier era a don of Ainsworth’s stripe might naturally have risen to the Vice-Chancellorship. But as a college man par excellence, he was not always comfortable with the University’s shift in the 2000s towards a more corporatist and centralised management model.”

The discomfort was, as it happens, magnified by an

episode of personal legal confrontation which should not be forgotten. Back in 2005-6, when much of Oxford’s funding still came direct from Whitehall, Ainsworth had been appointed by the Conference of Colleges to a three-person “Quantum Review Group”. The other members were Bill Macmillan (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Planning and Resources) and, in the chair, Sir Victor Blank, an external member of the University Council—and incidentally an Honorary Fellow of Ainsworth’s college, St. Catz. The task of the Group was to review the allocation of Oxford’s public funding between central University structures on the one hand and the colleges on the other—a matter from which the public authorities themselves had withdrawn only in 1999. Under a formulaic agreement reached in July 2000 between the University and its colleges, the aggregate sum transferred annually to the latter was referred to as the Quantum.

Ainsworth found himself at odds with the Review Group’s Report on a basic point. This was Sir Victor’s personal opinion—emphasised in a lengthy letter dated 6th June 2006 to the Vice-Chancellor and the Chairman of the Conference of Colleges—that the abovementioned agreement of July 2000 had become “impossible

sensibly to interpret and apply so as to allow a detailed calculation of the Quantum uplift in the changed circumstances of to-day.” Instead, the Report’s majority recommendation envisaged a purely pragmatic or *ad hoc* approach to fixing the Quantum from year to year. Ainsworth, on behalf of the Conference of Colleges, demurred, fearing that the colleges would be short-changed. Indeed he observed, in his own letter to the Chairman of Conference on 13th June 2006, that their share of the financial aggregate in question had already fallen year by year from 25.3 percent in 2003-4 to (prospectively) 23.5 percent in 2006-7.

His choice of words in that missive was, alas, incautious. While finding Sir Victor’s letter unconvincing, he suggested also that it contained “a number of serious misrepresentations” which he—Ainsworth—offered to put right on the basis of available documents. The response was a letter from libel specialists Carter-Ruck, demanding an apology for imputing “dishonesty or recklessness” to Sir Victor. When Ainsworth, somewhat stunned, did indeed circulate an apology to Heads of House and Estates Bursars, the lawyers followed up with a further requirement that any college Fellow copied in to his letter of 13th June be likewise made aware of his retraction.

Subsequent events may or may not have been a sequel. Moves were initiated from Wellington Square to re-appoint Sir Victor to an exceptional third term on the University Council, on the grounds that one of his standard terms had been less than full-length. These moves elicited grass-roots opposition led by a college bursar. Sir Victor declined to be a candidate for the extra term.

Back to the present, and we have another distinguished professor of engineering, Lionel Tarassenko, nominated in December 2018 as Senior Responsible Owner of the Parks College Project (*sic*)—and latterly in more orthodox terminology, as Head of House (President) of Parks College. Happily, Professor Tarassenko seems in no danger of being sued for libel. Unhappily, by virtue of his new appointment, he has become an emissary and accomplice of the central command structure, and has been duly prominent in the series of repetitious and manipulative communications emerging over recent months from Wellington Square on the subject of Parks College.

These communications began with a Press Release on 7th December 2018. They culminated, in the *Gazette* No. 5236 on 21st March 2019, with a three-page Explanatory Note on two Resolutions to be put to Congregation on 7th May 2019, establishing Parks College as a part-time talking shop (with quiet spaces) in the Radcliffe Science Library. As it happens, this Explanatory Note is immediately preceded in the *Gazette* by a lengthy list of questions—from two members of Roger Ainsworth’s college—querying Council’s high-handed conduct in its launch of the Parks College Project. Earlier in the communications trail, we had been presented with Professor Tarassenko’s “Parks College—a brief update” (*Oxford Magazine* No.405, Eighth Week, Hilary Term 2019), in part an attempt to suggest that much of the University community was falling over itself to applaud and assist the Project. This was done chiefly by naming a dozen or more committees from the central administration and the Conference of Colleges which have had the matter on their agendas, followed by an expanded

list of the “interdisciplinary research clusters” which Parks College is slated to accommodate. Item (c), “Cellular Life”, had been hastily added to the earlier ones of (a) Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning and (b) Environmental Change. Moreover, “Once there is a full complement of graduate students, it is anticipated that Parks College will have 6 to 8 inter-disciplinary clusters.”

The flannel, however, does not conceal the facts that the Project has been hand-to-mouth opportunistic and that it is driven and directed from Wellington Square. “A further issue being considered by Personnel Committee is the selection of Parks College Fellows....” By Personnel Committee! Moreover, “The Programme Board (which already had strong GLAM representation) is now being expanded to include representatives from each of the four Divisions and it will continue to guide our thinking.” You don’t say. The Divisions, of course, constitute the layer of central command immediately adjoining the Executive Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Council. Along with GLAM, they will now get their opportunity to put forward non-academic Personnel for appointment to Fellowships. This, only hinted at in the Tarassenko article, was explicitly confirmed in the Explanatory Note: “Associate Fellows who hold relevant internal or external non-academic appointments will also be appointed...”

While hand-to-mouth and self-promoting, the policies pursued by Wellington Square are not burdened with undue consistency. The Strategic Plan 2018-23 promises to alleviate the shortage of affordable housing for University staff. And at the same time it requires the University to go on growing: student numbers are projected to increase further by several thousand, and headlong expenditure on non-residential estate to continue. All of this can only aggravate the housing squeeze for University and city alike. And we now see (in the self-same Explanatory Note) parts of that process in illuminating detail. Additional living accommodation for graduate students was expressly named in the Strategic Plan as a key reason to create one or more extra colleges—and has been just as expressly sidestepped for Parks College, by allocating to it residential units already in prospect or even in existence, and totally inadequate in number.

Nor did the growth agenda itself stem from any overall consultation of the academic community by the authors of the Plan, a matter emphasised in the writer’s “Post-Truth in Wellington Square” (*Oxford Magazine* No.405, Fifth Week, Hilary Term 2019). Their tactic has been to refer to limited areas where there is a plausible case for bigger numbers—and then make believe that this justifies expansion in the aggregate. Such expansion, of course, provides pretexts for maintaining a vastly oversized central administration and, in the case of graduate student numbers, for exercising greater authority over the colleges. But the problem goes deeper than that.

Take the obvious example of undergraduate studies in computer science, where Oxford’s small student quota has become a bad joke. To make room for computer science by trimming undergraduate numbers elsewhere would be perfectly feasible. But it is not in the power of Wellington Square to deliver. Trimming would require agreement across the academic grass roots in both colleges and faculties—in other words, re-admittance of those self-same grass roots to the central governance

process. This is not something that Wellington Square oligarchs seem to feel obliged to contemplate, or even to consider contemplating.

Nor, apparently, does Council. Its 2018-19 “Self-Review” talks extensively about seeking better “communication” between itself and various University constituencies. To shortcomings or lacunae in its actual decision-taking it is entirely blind—a risible omission in view of the simultaneously running episode of Parks College, to name only one.

Shockingly, behind Wellington Square's obsession with growth lies a failure to confront the issue of strategic financial management. (Rather like UK politicians and civil servants, espousing schemes such as HS2 until they realise what a waste of money they represent.) The financial threats to the University are these. The present system of UK-government-sourced undergraduate fees is ultimately non-viable, and is already under political scrutiny. A sizable fraction of postgraduates on taught courses are being charged exorbitant fees for

goods of questionable value, with unknown long-term consequences for the University's reputation. Research income is always uncertain, and in any case two-thirds of it goes to Medical Sciences which are semi-detached from the rest of the University. In such circumstances, the highest priority should be given to increasing the University's endowment—in line with the example set by America's leading universities, as well as many Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Any finance director of a modest charity would have thought this obvious.

In stark contrast, Wellington Square announced early in 2018 its intention to spend the proceeds of a £750 million centenary bond issue on buildings, and without stated justification. Rumours have recently surfaced of a vast new structure projected for the so-called Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, mainly to house sections of the central bureaucracy, but with a few academic spaces to pre-empt faculty opposition. If true, this would be wholly consistent with the way in which the University has been misgoverned for the past twenty years.

## The need for a new research ethics regime

RUBEN ANDERSSON

OVER the past decade, research ethics procedures have increased in complexity and scope across UK universities, and Oxford is no exception: witness the ever-expanding workings of the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC), involving divisions, departments and faculties. For some, this may be a welcome development, as it seems to professionalise ethical clearance, minimising the risk of missteps and downright unethical practices in research. But for many of us, especially in the qualitative social sciences, the emerging ‘ethics regime’ is rather proving at odds with—even inimical to—good research. A change of course is urgently needed.

The shift in the ethics regime is perhaps particularly stark in my own line of work, ethnography. The past years have seen a sharp move away from considering ethics as an embedded, context-dependent process in fieldwork, replacing this with a view of ethics as protocol. This shift, in turn, is based on an application of dominant ideas around ethics in the medical and behavioural sciences, as well as on increasing demand from funders for the right boxes to be ticked. While this protocol-based model has helped protect ‘human subjects’ from powerful forms of experimental research ever since safeguards were first introduced in Cold War-era United States, it is fundamentally at odds with the aims of non-experimental research, particularly of a qualitative kind. Yet this is where it is now being applied with zeal, to worrying effect.

Today, in Oxford and elsewhere, academics applying for or approving ethics forms via departmental research ethics committees are increasingly having to work around a system that is growing more complex and inscrutable year on year. This bureaucratisation of research ethics—like so many other aspects of our academic life, from ‘research excellence’ to ‘impact’ and

‘travel risk’—is gradually spiralling out of researchers’ control, with potentially far-reaching consequences for what kind of research is deemed legitimate, ‘approvable’ and indeed desirable.

Consider the CUREC take on ‘informed consent’. On the current ten-page-long CUREC 1a form for low-risk research, consent is defined in a legalistic manner that excludes other forms of consent-seeking in fieldwork. The CUREC preference is for each individual ‘human participant’ to sign a legal-looking form, ticking boxes as they go, after having perused a long-winded ‘participant information sheet’. Now, this model may well be the most appropriate when asking individuals to participate in a randomised control trial, where there are risks involved in the ‘treatment’ provided, ranging from risks associated with medical treatment to behavioural and emotional manipulation. However, it is far from appropriate for ethnographic field research or similar qualitative social scientific endeavours. Having conducted long-term research among undocumented West African migrants on the fringes of Europe—under earlier ethics regimes, and at other universities—I cannot for a moment imagine handing them sheets and forms to sign: it would seem like a suspiciously official-looking practice, or else like a crude commercial transaction, obliterating any trust and rapport established between us. It would, in short, reduce our human interaction to an extrication of ‘data’, while also problematically identifying the interlocutor in ways that may stir legitimate fears of state capture of the information. Beyond these problems of trust looms a larger practical difficulty, if not impossibility, of applying such an informed consent model to every single encounter in the everyday settings in which we are participating and observing.

Behind the informed consent model, then, lurks a peculiar positivist model of research as data extraction. The problem is not limited to long-term, ‘holistic’ fieldwork among those less powerful than ourselves, however. If our first step when interviewing officials, for instance, is to ask them to browse ‘information sheets’ and sign legalistic forms, we will fundamentally alter the nature of the encounter. At best, this alteration can lead to the interlocutor adjusting what they tell us, to the point of rendering the exchange useless; at worst, they may feel inclined to decline the interaction altogether owing to time constraints—especially likely when we are interviewing people in positions of power—or due to concerns about why we are playing up the ‘risks’ of an ordinary interview in this disproportionate fashion.

In these varied lines of social scientific research, ‘informed consent’ as it is promoted via CUREC stands in stark contrast with ethics as an ongoing interaction where the watchwords are trust and rapport, and where tickboxes and signatures on the dotted line serve to erode or foreclose the relationship built in the encounter. Imagine for a moment if the ethics codes of anthropologists or qualitative sociologists were to be applied to the biomedical sciences—before each randomised control trial, the researcher would have to build long-term trust and rapport with each individual participant, and only once this had been achieved would the ‘treatment’ be administered. This would be nonsensical; and so it is with the reverse scenario, which is now the regime under which we are working.

Ethics, of course, is at the core of all research, and we must have checks on unethical fieldwork practices. This is, after all, the purpose of the discipline-specific ethics codes developed over the decades in ways that are fundamentally aligned with the research methods and objectives of each field. But in Oxford’s apparent striving to ‘mainstream’ ethics as protocol—taking its cue from the medical field, funding bodies and impact-heavy and commercialised areas of research—this rich heritage of ethics in ‘basic research’ is being reduced to a tick-box at the end of the CUREC form, undermining legitimate forms of discipline-specific checks and balances.

While the bureaucratisation of consent is only the starkest example of this, another is provided by the rigid interpretation of data protection. In the past year, a range of new and bewildering questions on data has been added to CUREC forms, puzzling approvers and applicants alike. GDPR was rolled out to deal with the misuse of Big Data by corporations, including via electoral data-grabs of the kind exemplified by the Cambridge Analytica scandal. It is ironic, however, that just as Big Tech is swiftly taking steps to shield itself from GDPR’s most onerous obligations, the regime is now trickling down to universities where it is starting to hit legitimate, qualitative and small-scale research with a range of confusing semi-prohibitions. As with last year’s barrage of GDPR spam sent out by nervous companies and charities, universities are now erring on the extreme side of caution. Instead of using the GDPR exemptions for academic research to the full, they seem to be interpreting the regulation in a strict and exceedingly complex way—seen, for instance, when the CUREC form makes the assumption that ‘pseudonymous’ data is traceable back to the ‘human participant’, thus enforc-

ing GDPR compliance on researchers (anonymised data is not covered by GDPR).

The problem, I should emphasise, is systemic: the people involved in the ethics regime (in Oxford and elsewhere) are sensible and well-versed in varied research traditions, and are often the first to note the tensions and problems. Yet all of us, as we become involved in this system (in my case as a Departmental Research Ethics Committee member) tend to adhere to its parameters in an increasingly rigid manner, often based on a hazy idea of what is strictly required. Indeed, the ethics regime does allow for other forms of consent than sign-on-the-dotted-line, yet amid a general climate of risk aversion, the dominant protocol model nevertheless gets progressively strengthened. For instance, as an approver of forms, I have frequently read applications stating that all interview recordings or original fieldnotes will be destroyed after X amount of time, obliterating a valuable resource; and when this is not stated, I feel compelled to inquire further before approving. This in a context where it remains utterly unclear how a regime targeting Big Data relates to interview transcripts or free-text ethnographic field notes, held and read in most cases only by the individual scholar for the purpose of basic, non-commercial research in the public interest.

And on it goes, with all of us complicit to some degree. CUREC requires interview questions to be submitted for approval, with those of us on ethics committees scrutinising these, presumably for signs of any ‘sensitive’ topics. The box specifically inquiring whether the researcher will ask participants about ‘sensitive issues’ keeps incentivising researchers to self-police by saying ‘yes’—and approvers then similarly err by asking for further information, potentially affecting the scope of valuable research concerned with important topics such as race and politics. Asked broadly about ‘ethical issues’ on the form, applicants frequently start raising the risk of traumatic experiences for interviewees even when these are, say, officials rather than vulnerable individuals prompted to relive difficult past experiences. Such self-policing is worryingly aligned with the legalistic and ‘medicalised’ framing of the CUREC form—risking, as one colleague at another UK institution put it to me, the pathologisation of conversation.

What can be done? Oxford may have a more cumbersome bureaucracy than most institutions, but it is also supposedly ‘self-governing’. It should be in our power as an academic community to shift the ethics regime back from a rigid one-size-fits-all protocol to an ethics process that is in tune with the disciplinary variety and richness across divisions, faculties and departments. Much can be done to shift the systemic parameters one bit at a time: for instance, ensuring that Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) members know about the substantial leeway they (should) have in approving context-relevant forms of consent, data handling and so forth; embedding ethics concerns into DPhil and postgraduate supervision, rather than treating it as a tacked-on form-filling exercise; finding a workaround for small-scale student research that does not involve having to fill in the long form (and that allows students to use the material in publications, an option that is not available at present); creating methods-specific procedures for more extensive research projects, with small-scale, qualitative research forms focused on

free-text discussion of ethical issues rather than on tick-boxes and dotted lines; and pushing some of the more onerous ‘tick-box’ checks back up to the divisional bureaucracy for amendment and/or for block approval, rather than heaping these checks onto departmental academics’ shoulders.

In other words, the task must be to rethink the ethics regime by bringing in a more supple model that diversifies rather than ‘streamlines’. In fact, in exercising this form of ethics governance, Oxford may be able to produce a different ethics model that will act as catalyst for other institutions and funders to follow suit. Across Europe, institutions are (worryingly) adopting many of Oxbridge’s metrics-based and tick-box practices, from the REF to ethics; if we take steps to do the opposite, we may have a chance to revert this trend.

The ethics regime is symptomatic of a set of larger problems, including the spread of a ‘corporate’ model for UK universities, under which a key task is to ensure that the central institution is protected against liability, with such liability (and its associated risks) instead being pushed further down the chain, to departments, faculties and individual academics and even research participants. Taking on the current ethics regime, then, inevitably involves tackling a wider set of imbalances in power and responsibility. Amid our extremely hectic schedules it may seem tempting to let this pass, and to muddle through in the familiar Oxford way. However, I believe this position is increasingly hard to sustain. The rigid ethics regime is already having a chilling effect on legitimate research. I know this from our own students, who are discouraged from conducting even a small number of interviews with officials due to the ten-page tract (plus numerous appendices) they need to produce before doing so. I know this from my own experience, as contemplating, say, new pilot projects under this ethics regime involves extremely detailed forward planning to a degree that our daily academic life does not easily allow. And I know it from approving ethics forms,

where I can see first-hand how researchers modify their important research on topics such as forced migration or the politics of climate change in ways that force their fieldwork options into the mould of protocols, forms, safe topics and rigid ‘recruitment procedures’.

To be clear: ethics is one of the key problems we face in academia today. Yet as we focus our energies on form-filling and scrutiny of small-scale basic research, we are reducing the academic time available to deal with the real ethical problems that matter on a higher scale—ranging from increased governmental steer on research to opaque philanthropic funding arrangements, and from the unequal relationship between PIs and participant institutions in poorer countries to the risks of commercialised research into data-driven AI and behavioural modification.

Considering the latter field, let me end with a thought experiment: if a social scientist now wishes to interview a Zuckerberg or a Google AI chief about their advanced experiments on human behaviour and psychological profiling (which have frequently involved university participation), we will presumably have to ask them to read participant information sheets and sign consent forms after having assured CUREC approvers that our interviewees and their data will not be put at any ‘risk’. Meanwhile, such corporations may continue engaging in their free-for-all experimental research on millions upon millions of ‘human subjects’ for commercial ends via their data surveillance operations. The irony is that the ethics regime as we know it today was forged precisely on the back of concerns about the power of such experimentation—at the time conducted by states—over human wellbeing and freedom. Yet today, the regime is being applied down the scale, hitting basic qualitative research in the public interest with an alien template while leaving the ‘top rung’ rather untroubled. We urgently need to shift this balance, and where better to make a start than at Oxford?

## Oxford Magazine distribution arrangements

### Plastic-free deliveries

The *Gazette* team has been working with Oxuniprint to reduce the amount of waste generated by the distribution of the *Gazette* and *Oxford Magazine*, and we are pleased to announce that the *Gazette* is now plastic-free. From this issue onwards, you will see the following changes to *Magazine* deliveries:

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# Flying the Flag

ANDREAS HAENSELE

THE Council of Europe celebrates its 70th anniversary this year on 5th May. This institution is not the same as the European Council, the gathering of prime ministers and other EU leaders that sets the general direction of the EU and has the final say on all matters of importance. It is also not to be confused with the Council of the European Union, which brings together the government ministers from the different EU countries depending on their subject area and which, together with the European Parliament, passes EU laws. And, of course, it is not related to the European Commission, a cabinet consisting of one commissioner per EU member state, tasked with proposing legislation and enforcing EU law<sup>1</sup>. Still following?

In fact, the Council of Europe has nothing to do with any of these institutions—it's not even part of the EU. The Council of Europe, founded in London on 5th May 1949 in the wake of the Second World War, is an organisation that aims to foster human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Europe. All 28 member states of the EU are also members of the Council of Europe, in addition to a further 19 countries—essentially every single European country except for Belarus, Kosovo and the Vatican City. Perhaps its most famous achievement is the drafting of the European Convention on Human Rights, and through it the establishment of the European Court of Human Rights. It is less well known that the Council of Europe was also responsible for the design of the European Flag and encouraged other European institutions, such as the EU, to adopt it<sup>2</sup>.

The flag is simple: a circle of golden stars on a blue field. It was clear very soon that these would be the key features of the design, but how many stars should it be? According to Paul M. G. Lévy, who helped choose the flag, the Germans didn't want fifteen stars, corresponding to the number of members of the Council of Europe at the time, because it would've meant recognising what today is Saarland as an independent state. Fourteen stars were unacceptable to the people of Saarland, and the Italians thought thirteen would be bad luck. And so, through this most notable of all European qualities—coming to a compromise—it is that the number twelve was suggested. A number with high symbolic value: there are twelve hours in half a day and twelve months in a year, there are twelve signs in the Zodiac, and twelve labours of Hercules, twelve is the number of apostles and sons of Jacob, and in Christian art, Mary is often depicted with a crown of twelve stars<sup>3</sup>.

Colleges and departments across the University will fly this flag of unity on 5th May this year in celebration of the Council of Europe's efforts to uphold human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Europe in the 70 years since its foundation.

<sup>1</sup> [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies_en) (10th April 2019)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/who-we-are> (10th April 2019)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/the-european-flag> (10th April 2019)

# Geeky but interesting stuff

DAVID PALFREYMAN

A dedicated bunch of HE nerds, the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group, has churned out 90 pages on the funding model of UK universities (February 2019), based on TRAC data (Transparent Approach to Costing, as compiled and collated since 1999).

The core activity of teaching UK/EU UGs brings in c£13.25b of income and 100% covers its costs (Full Economic Cost—the FEC). But within that overall picture subjects vary in matching fee income to their FEC—in short, even after some HEFCE top-up grant subsidy for STEM, there is an internal transfer as subsidy to STEM from the cheap-to-teach and massively expanded subjects such as Law and Psychology, as well as the cheap but less expanded Humanities.

The international fee income is c£4.5b, with a third of such high fee-payers coming from China. The FEC is more than covered—leaving a ‘profit’ of 40% which is transferred to subsidise Research.

This research activity is c£9.25b (£1.5b as HEFCE QR and the rest as grants/contracts from various

sources). And it recovers only c75% of its FEC. Of the types of research grants those from Government cover 80% of their FEC, from Industry and the Research Councils 75%, from the EU 65%, and from Charity 60%. The overall loss on R will, therefore, vary according to the mix of R funding from these various sources. The Russellers, of course, lose the most, but are best placed to get in the fees from International Students by way of market position to charge high fees and to get a good volume of punters.

A thing called ‘Other Activities’ generates c£5.5b and has a 15% profit on its FEC—again a source of subsidy for over-trading in under-priced R.

And the challenges/threats to this financial model?

- Any wobble in the UK share of the global student market—especially since most universities in their financial projections make happy assumptions about conveniently growing their International fee income.

- The hikes due in employer contributions to USS and to TPS.
- The freezing of the £9250 UK/EU UG fee.
- The impact of Brexit (if ever the UK can actually escape the clutches of the EU) on EU UG numbers and their fee income—although the loss of EU R grants when every one involves a subsidy of 40% of the FEC would be no bad thing!
- The known unknown of whether the Augar Review really will recommend UK UG fees reduce from £9250 to, say, £7500—and, even if it does, whether any Government ever implements the proposal.
- Just how those universities that have borrowed massive amounts will be able to service the interest payments as the above happens—let alone save up so as one day to repay the capital.

Told you it is an interesting document!

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But the Oxford context is, naturally, radically different:

- We manage not to recover our FEC even on UK/EU UGs, having to use subsidy from Endowment while over-trading by c1000 UGs on an under-capitalised/endowed base.

- We fail to expand International UGs to rake in as much dosh as other universities do; but we do expand PGTs to rake in International fees using our brand value to charge high fee levels—while guessing/hoping that such PGT activity does really cover its FEC and might even make a profit that subs our R.

- The R probably has more very inadequate Charity FEC funding than for other universities, but at least we get a massive dollop of HEFCE QR via our stellar REF performance.

Are we any more financially sustainable than most universities and HE Plc generally? Probably, since our EU customers will still flow in post-Brexit and as profitable Overseas students; our debt is very low interest and not due to be repaid for 100 years; even if overall International students fall we can cream off our complement given our global brand value as No1 Uni; and, if Augar came to pass, we could eschew the devalued Queen's £7500 and 'go private'.

*David Palfreyman is a Member of the OfS Board but does not here express any OfS policy or thinking, and is rightly barred as conflicted from any Board discussion of Oxford University as now an OfS registered 'Higher Education Provider'.*

## The Life of Bryan

JULIAN ROBERTS and SIMON CALLOW

THROUGHOUT our lives we all play multiple roles, but few fulfil as many as Bryan Magee. A casting dream, if ever there was one. Magee, who turned 90 in April 2019, found time to teach philosophy at Oxford, host seminal television programs involving leading philosophers and serve as member of Parliament for 12 years. Magee also authored or edited over 25 books, including memoirs, social commentary, poetry, volumes of philosophy and novels. This year sees publication of his latest memoir: *Making the Most of it* (Curtis Brown 2019)\*, over sixty years after his first book was published (*Go West, Young Man*, Purnell and Sons 1958). The latest work completes a trilogy begun in 2000 with *Clouds of Glory: A Hoxton Childhood* (Pimlico 2004) which won the J. R. Ackerly Prize for autobiography in 2004. This final volume covers key periods in his life, beginning with his early days at Oxford and concluding with his return to the city 70 years later.

Magee's most lasting contribution lies in bringing philosophy to a mass audience through his books and programs. Over two BBC television series in the 1980s (*Men of Ideas* and *The Great Philosophers*) he interviewed all the leading philosophers of the time—Chomsky, Murdoch, Berlin, Ayer, and Nussbaum—to name just a few. Each episode began with a succinct introduction by the host, followed by dialogue with the philosopher. The programs may be found on 'YouTube' where they continue to attract viewers. Watching them is at once enriching and dispiriting.

Dispiriting? Because Philosophy has all but disappeared from the world of television. Why, exactly, is unclear. There is no shortage of history programmes, no penury of cheesy reconstructions of Roman Britain or Tudor England. And there is a surfeit of telly dons who spend more time in front of the camera than the subjects they discuss. Magee's programs, in contrast, offered little beyond 'talking heads': the expression and exchange of ideas was sufficient. And riveting.

The programs had an immense reach. I recently purchased a Magee book in Toronto. The shop owner described Magee as his personal philosophy tutor—referring to the television programs of over 30 years ago. Magee's programmes promoted contemporary philosophy to an audience in a way reminiscent of Kenneth Clark's 'Civilisation' series. The academic study of philosophy greatly benefitted from the subsequent growth of interest in the field. By their widespread popular appeal, Magee's programs and books anticipated by decades the current fashion in the Academy to stress the impact of scholarship on the wider community and the general public.

One volume stands out. Magee's concise account of the work of Sir Karl Popper influenced generations of social scientists. Popper, a hitherto relatively obscure philosopher of science, became widely read. Popper had devised a clear definition of scientific theory: an experimental hypothesis had to be falsifiable; all else was pseudoscience. According to Popper, Science ad-

vanced through falsifying hypotheses, leading to more valid versions. The idea was most counter-intuitive at the time. Surely scientists proposed a theory and then sought to verify the theory with supportive evidence? One attempted to verify a theory about the world. The principle of falsifiability rapidly supplanted the earlier 'Verification' principle. Without Magee's volume (*Popper*, in the Fontana 'Modern Masters' Series, Fontana 1973) Popper's views would never have achieved their currency in the scientific community—as Popper himself acknowledged.

More generally, Magee's popular volumes (e.g., *Men of Ideas*, BBC 1978; *The Story of Philosophy*, Random House 1998; *The Great Philosophers: An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, Oxford University Press 2000) achieved a wide, international impact. His overview of Western Philosophy summarized for generations of students the principal schools of thought. The work supplanted an earlier volume by Bertrand Russell and remains a brisk seller today. Perhaps his finest work is *Confessions of a Philosopher* (Random House 1997). Subtitled *A Journey through Western Philosophy*, the work is both a personal memoir beginning in childhood and a series of chapters each exploring a specific philosopher. Magee knew many of his subjects personally, including Russell, Murdoch, Popper and Ayer. The volume continues to serve as a most readable introduction to key modern philosophers.

In 2017, Magee published *Ultimate Questions* (Princeton University Press 2016), a volume of philosophical reflections focused tightly on some of the hardest questions confronting us. John Cleese, who listed Magee's Popper volume as one of the key books in his life, strongly recommended *Questions*. Few philosophers can claim that diversity of readership.

And so to *Making the Most of it*, the final volume of autobiography. This volume is more personal than its predecessors. Oxford book-ends the memoir which begins with the author's matriculation and runs to the present day (he returned to live in the city a decade ago). The Oxford he found when he went up in 1949 was another world, although echoes of the undergraduate experience persist to this day. Magee led an apparently gilded life as an Oxford undergraduate, culminating in being elected president of the Union. Then, as now, the role created life-long opportunities for the incumbent. After leaving the University Magee began to travel, with his visit to the US providing the material for one of his early books. The author describes his tumultuous relationship with his Swedish wife and mother of his child. For years both remained unknown to even close associates.

From here the narrative describes the many stages of Magee's career, as a broadcaster, politician and author. The publication by Oxford University Press of his volume on Schopenhauer (*The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, OUP 2002) changed his life. This work, which consumed ten years work, rendered the writings of Schopenhauer, one of most challenging modern philosophers, accessible to general readers. At this point in his life, Magee was able to devote himself wholly to writing. The coda to the volume supplies a moving late life reflection on the subjects that have attracted the author's attention over a long and productive life. Yet it is anything but a denouement. Magee poses the ultimate

question 'What next?' and responds with an affirmation of life in the face of adversity and impermanence.

The reach of Magee's books and programs extended beyond members of the public with an interest in philosophy. They helped change the theatre, and the study and reach of philosophy, indeed society itself—as the following memoir by actor, author and scholar Simon Callow reveals.

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### *Bryan Magee and Me*

It was in 1966, when I was 17, that I happened upon the name of Bryan Magee. 1966 was still the dark ages as far as homosexual identity was concerned. I had read, voraciously, anything on the subject I could lay my hands on. I had no doubt about my sexual inclinations, and felt no shame about them, but I was well aware—as a Catholic—of the intense disapproval abroad in society. The widely available Pelican book *Homosexuality* by the former military doctor D.J. West was profoundly depressing, predicting for me a life of shame and obloquy, with desperately little emotional or indeed sexual satisfaction. Fiction was no help, either. There were lurid novels, like those of Genet and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which saw a homosexual existence as a kind of state of ecstatic martyrdom, and others, like Mary Renault's, which rather movingly celebrated the love of men for other men, but nothing that suggested what I felt, that it was a perfectly normal part of the human condition.

Then I stumbled on *One in Twenty*, by Bryan Magee, and I realised that I had found my answer—a perfectly lucid, calm and straightforward account of the condition of homosexuality and a dismissal of the absurd laws which sought to suppress it. It was not missionary, it was not militant: it was factual and transparent. I felt hugely relieved and instantly empowered. I had, though I had never met him, a friend and mentor, and I formed then the view from I have never deviated: that the desire of some adult men for each other is part of life's rich pattern, a fine example of what a later writer has called "biological exuberance".

Reading Magee's book when I did was a life-saver: I never succumbed to the angry and often self-defeating hysteria which afflicts the oppressed. Now all the legal changes he recommended in the book have been adopted; indeed, they have exceeded them to a degree that he (or any of us) could scarcely have imagined. The book appeared at exactly the moment that the first important changes to the law were being hotly and in some cases savagely debated; the cool and calm tone of the book was much needed. I have no idea what sales were like, but I can scarcely believe that I was the only gay man to have been heartened and strengthened by its existence.

From then on, I looked out keenly for books by Bryan Magee. Two years later, I was enchanted to find a small, slim volume entitled *Aspects of Wagner* bearing his name. I wouldn't claim that my relationship to Wagner was quite as central to me as the question of my sexual orientation, but it was not untroubled. I had succumbed to the overwhelming charisma of the music and its oceanic emotional force, but a little light reading had made me aware of ugly and disturbing features of the com-

poser; I was also somewhat unnerved by the degree of instability it seemed to provoke in me—I didn't seem entirely in control of myself while listening to the music, and indeed for some time after.

Step forward, again, Bryan Magee, who somehow seemed to be hovering in the wings, like some thoughtful tutor, Aristotle to my Alexander, ready with crystal clear analysis, in five short, distilled essays which remain as succinct an account of what made—and makes—Wagner exceptional, unique, unprecedented as anything I have ever read on the subject. He tackled head on the issue of anti-Semitism, placing it—without exonerating Wagner's nefarious views—in the context of the sudden emergence of Jews from the ghettos at the end of the 18th century. As before, he spoke with impeccable lucidity. Reading the book cleared my mind about what Wagner had actually achieved and the degree to which he was conscious of what he was doing and set me on a course of lifelong fascination with the composer.

But how was Magee able to speak with such authority on musical matters? As a Labour MP, he had obviously had to think about issues of sexual law reform; he had thought more clearly and more usefully about them than anyone else, but it was still perfectly within his job description. The flyleaf of the book told me that he had studied music under the composer Anthony Milner; that he had covered the Bayreuth and the Salzburg Festivals for the *Observer*; and that he was on the board of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Clearly he was some sort of Renaissance Man, a view which was confirmed by the next book of his that I read, the brilliant short study of Karl Popper in the Fontana Modern Masters series. I was instantly sucked in to Magee's intellectual ambit, which soon expanded to included virtually all known Western philosophers, alive and dead, accessible and arcane. Now he was on the radio and the television, endlessly and tirelessly shining light onto dark corners of the intellect: there seemed to be nothing that he couldn't explain.

Later, I read the first volume of his autobiography, revealing an entirely unexpected background, and considerable emotional frustration. No wonder he had been drawn to philosophy; the need to stand back in order to make sense of things must have been immense.

At some point, I was introduced to Bryan at a party, perhaps, or some gathering or another—and was able

to express my gratitude to him, and experienced at first hand his keen, almost (but not quite) daunting intellectual avidity, the keenness of his attention, shining the brightest of lights on what one was saying. One grew smarter as one spoke to him; one had to.

Time passed. One day I was doing my one-man show about Shakespeare at the Oxford Playhouse and found a copy of his book *Wagner and Philosophy* waiting for me at the Stage Door, with a charming note from him saying that I might find it of interest. It proved to be a prescient gift. A year later, I was asked by the Royal Opera House to write and perform a show about Wagner for the bicentenary in 2013. So now I have to add to his other accomplishments that of clairvoyant.

In fact, I hadn't yet read the book when the commission came, and I hurled myself at a huge number of books about the great man (a mere fraction of those in existence) and could find no way through to a possible show. Then, absurdly late, almost as an after-thought, I turned to Bryan's book, and it proved to be the key that opened every door for me. An intellectual biography of Wagner, it provided me with the dynamo of the piece—Wagner's incessant quest to crystallize his thinking before he could compose anything, and the strategies by which he harnessed his inspiration. Thanks to Bryan's laser-beam clarity about Wagner's encounters with the major philosophers by whom he was so profoundly influenced, I was able, for the purposes of the show, to reduce Schopenhauer to half a dozen lines without entirely betraying him.

When I realised how strongly I was going to be drawing on his work, I arranged to meet Bryan and, over a good lunch at the Ashmolean, he further clarified what was going in inside Wagner's head—which then became the title of the piece. He refused to take any credit, much less a royalty. In truth, the show ended up as more discursive and anecdotal than I had originally expected, but it had a spine and that spine was provided by Bryan, whom I am now, as a result of all this, proud to call my friend. But his presence in, and influence on, my life pre-dated our friendship by several decades. I owe him a great deal—as do we all.

\*B. Magee. *Making the Most of It*. London: Curtis Brown, 2019), pb: 494 pp, £14.00.

# George Cawkwell

MARTIN EDMOND

I was staying with George Cawkwell, Emeritus Fellow and former Praelector in Ancient History at University College. When I was organising my research trip George, as a younger contemporary of the eminent Roman historian Ronald Syme's, was suggested as someone I might write to. (It was the Syme papers, in the Bodleian Library, that I was going to examine during my week in Oxford.) Why he offered to put me up, as he phrased it, is another question. He didn't know me and I didn't know him. "It might save you a bit of money," he said. I thought he couldn't possibly be serious. Then I looked at hotel prices. B & Bs. Air B & B. Colleges which rent out rooms during holidays or other breaks in term. These options were either inordinately expensive, far from the centre of town, highly inconvenient, or merely grotesque. I wrote back to George and accepted his kind offer. Now I was on my way to meet him.

George was then 95 years old. Born 1919, a year before my father, in Auckland. He went to Kings College, where he was Head Boy, and to Auckland University College. During the war, again like my father, he served in the Pacific. My Dad was in the air force, while George joined the Fijian Infantry and fought with them, under American command, in the Solomon Islands. Nevertheless, they might have met—either in Fiji or the Solomons. Dad was at Guadalcanal too, but only once the worst of the fighting was over. After the war, George married his sweetheart, Pat Clarke; and took up a Rhodes Scholarship. He was a rugby player; he had represented Scotland in a test against the French in 1947 and was at the time of writing the oldest surviving Scottish international, even though that game in Paris was the only one he played. He was a lock forward but they picked him out of position, he said, at prop.

He met me at the door. A big man, slightly stooped, with a quizzical expression and kindly eyes, wearing a jacket and a tie. In the hallway was a picture of him robed as Xenophon, the Greek historian: a special study of his. "Come in, come in," he said and ushered me through to the kitchen, where the interrogation took place. Where was I from? Who were my parents? Where did I go to school? University? Once these facts were ascertained, he didn't ask anything else. Instead, after remarking that a spell in the army was a good preparation for the teaching of Classics, he rose and intoned: "Let us go then, you and I ..." and took me up to his study for a whisky. He kept a stick at either end of the stairs and hauled himself along using the banister rail. Lines of poetry, not necessarily by T.S. Eliot, were a feature of his conversation.

As we sipped our Scotch—he behind his desk, I, like a dutiful student, sitting opposite—George outlined my itinerary for the week. He had, with exemplary generosity and careful forethought, set up a series of meetings with people he thought I should see. Ronald Syme's literary executor, for instance. The archivist at Wolfson College, where Syme lived out his years. A scholar who'd

recently delivered the annual Syme lecture, which fortunately I had already read. And so forth. I took notes on what I was to do. That, and the whisky, accomplished, we went down for dinner: macaroni cheese which George had heating in the oven. He favoured a high-end range of pre-cooked meals; and served them as the main course with, invariably, a soup for starters and a dessert afterwards. And then, fruit and cheese. We drank a bottle of wine, an elegant light red. Before beginning to eat, George clipped a linen napkin to his jacket lapel, using a clothes peg, and made his apologies. "I'm old, you see," he said. "I can't always be sure of getting the food properly to my mouth. I don't have all my teeth, either." The way he managed his dental plates was an elaborate ritual I won't attempt to describe.

After dinner, in a small downstairs sitting room—"Pat's study"—we watched a DVD. It was not what I expected: *Midnight in Paris*, the 2011 Woody Allen film. It's a time travel movie in which the lead character, a troubled writer, each night accepts a mysterious ride and is transported: first to the 1920s, later to *La Belle Époque*; the private eye who tracks him ends up even further back, at Versailles before the Revolution. "Marvellous film," said George, "absolutely marvellous;" and fell asleep. He woke and dozed and woke again throughout. "I can't help it. It's my age, you see." I think what he liked about the movie was the way various figures from the past appeared before us: Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Josephine Baker, Man Ray, Picasso, Bunuel, Gauguin, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec.

My room was upstairs at the back of the house, overlooking the garden; with a double bed, an ensuite bathroom with a bidet, and an exquisite Persian miniature of a warrior riding a blue horse on the wall. It was not a print. There was a full bottle of whisky, of the same kind we had enjoyed earlier, plus Evian water, on a tray on the dresser. "I thought you'd be younger," George grumbled as he showed me the way. "Still, you're a New Zealander, aren't you? We're a race apart you know. Have to look after each other." He said he would see me in the morning; and not to be alarmed if I heard voices. He had a woman, Judy, who came in each day to do the housework. She would be knocking on the door at seven o'clock sharp; and he would expect me down to breakfast half an hour after that. "That is if I wake up tomorrow. I hope to God I don't." He snorted, whether from amusement or something darker I could not tell; then went back down the hall to his own bedroom—which he had not altered one jot, he said, since his wife died, suddenly, eight years before.

I woke to the sound of laughter. A low bass rumble and a lighter tinkling fall. Two people, a man and a woman. I lay there listening. There would be murmurs of conversation, the words of which I could not make out, then a renewed gust of laughter. Must be George and Judy, I thought. How lovely. But when I went down to breakfast, there was only George at the table, already kitted out in his jacket and tie. He explained that his

earliest memory, when he was about four years old, was of standing on a stool in the family kitchen in Auckland having a tie knotted around his young neck. "I wear a tie every day of my life, you know." Breakfast was another ritual. Tea, juice, cereal and nuts, followed by toast and marmalade or jam, then fruit and coffee. My preferences were duly noted and I was offered the same things again each morning thereafter. Judy joined us near the end of the meal, for coffee. She was a bluff working class woman about the same age as I am, the wife of a policeman. As fond of George as he was of her, and inclined to tease him; but if she went too far he would admonish her. "I know my place," she said after one rebuke; but what place was that? She was both his servant and his salvation.

The morning laughter, which, like everything else in that household, recurred, arose during George's daily ablutions. Because of a skin condition, he wasn't able to bath or shower so each week day morning—she didn't come in on weekends—Judy would rub him down with some kind of oil. I was curious as to the composition of this unguent but didn't like to ask what it was. It seemed the daily anointing was both an intimate moment and a shared pleasure—of which neither of them was in the least bit ashamed. Judy was otherwise brisk and efficient and inclined to boss George around, which he liked, but only up to a point. Later he told me that his great fear was of losing her. "I don't think I could go on without her," he said. He was, as I have already indicated, still mourning his wife. One day when they were going out for lunch, Pat realised she'd forgotten her gloves and went upstairs to retrieve them; she did not come down again. A stroke, I think.

George was one of those lucky men whom women love. Over the week, I saw him in various public situations and also met and spoke at length with people who knew him well; if they were women, without exception, they adored him. It was his innate sweetness of nature; his habit of self-deprecation, allied with a weather eye for the little absurdities that make up any life; the ability to make light of what might otherwise appear desperate or dark. He was a kind man, empathetic too; who would not willingly hurt another soul; except, perhaps, in the stern correction of a classroom error. After I got to know him a little better, I asked him if he had actually liked Ronald Syme? It was the only time I saw him lost for words. "Well," he expostulated. "Well. He was a fellow New Zealander, wasn't he! He was one of us!"

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I'd agreed to cook dinner for George. And so, after a day spent in the library, split in two by an enjoyable lunch at Brasenose College with Ronald Syme's literary executor, Fergus Millar—who gave me a handsomely bound copy of a thesis on Syme written by a Spanish scholar living in the Canary Islands—I made my way down to the Tesco on Magdalen Street to do the shopping. I bought bacon, onion, garlic, capsicum, zucchini, tomato, basil and a few other things as well. A block of Parmesan cheese and a packet of pasta. I was concerned about quantity: George had an aversion to leftovers and instructed me, more than once, that I must cook the meal in such a way that there weren't going to be any. I remembered the sardonic summary of an Australian

friend: "You Kiwis and your leftovers—put them in the fridge then throw them out later."

I wasn't too worried about the sauce itself: it is a simple recipe and I have cooked it often enough now that I can do it anywhere, in any kitchen, with any collection of pots, pans and other implements. Or even round a campfire. We had, as always, a soup for starters and then I served the pasta, *al dente*, in the sauce I had made. George put his teeth back in, took a mouthful and smacked his lips. Good. George liked food, ate well and did most of the shopping himself. He was in the habit of taking his stick and his bag and walking over to Summertown most days to buy the necessities. He hated those occasions when rainy weather or icy pavements made this difficult for his 95 year old body to do.

So my meal passed the taste test. Now we had somehow to eat it all; and still find room for dessert. When we'd both finished what was on our plates, there was a small serving of the pasta languishing, like a rebuke, between us. I looked doubtfully at it: prepared to consume it if necessary but not really wanting to. Then George said "Do you mind?" reached over and helped himself. I filled our wine glasses. Delicious, he pronounced as he finished the last mouthful; and, leftover free, we moved on to dessert which, this night, was poached pears served in a yellow custard, with ground nutmeg sprinkled upon it.

I think it must have been over the pears that George told me about a young American Rhodes Scholar he taught at University College back in 1968 or 69, whom he advised to study Classics as well as Politics as a way of broadening his grasp upon things. This was William Jefferson Clinton, from Hot Springs, Arkansas via Georgetown University in Washington DC, later to be the 42nd President of the United States. "What was he like?" I asked. "He was a nice enough fellow," George said. "Not that I knew him very well. A decent rugby player, too." That was perhaps the ultimate accolade.

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One night I went out to East Oxford to have dinner with Janet Wilson. I didn't stay late. I was travelling on public transport and George had said that he wouldn't be able to get to sleep until he knew I was safely back under his roof again. I caught two buses, one down Cowley Road to town, the other up Banbury Road to North Oxford; when I let myself into the house the lights were blazing, upstairs and down, but there was no sign of George anywhere. I looked in the kitchen, in the downstairs study where he watched television, in the sitting room and the dining room, then went upstairs and looked in the study there. The door to his bedroom was open but he didn't seem to be in there either. I went into my own room and took off my jacket and my shoes. I was trying not to feel alarmed: George often joked, half longingly, about his imminent mortality and I wondered if the fatal moment had come at last?

If so, what should I do? Who should I call? George and Pat had three children, two boys and a girl, all of whom were in close touch with their father, calling often on the telephone: but I didn't know how to contact any of them. What about the emergency services? What number do you ring for help in England? 999? I did an-

other circuit of the house, upstairs and down. Then, as I came up the stairs for the third time, George walked out of his bathroom wearing magnificent red striped pyjamas with the jacket tucked into the trousers, looking like—I don't actually know what he looked like, something out of a *Boy's Own Annual* perhaps, or from a subtle satire upon Englishness. I was so relieved I could have hugged him but of course I didn't. We merely exchanged polite small talk then said goodnight and went to our respective bedrooms to sleep.

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I tried to articulate my Ashmolean intuitions over lunch on Sunday. Well, said George, noncommittal, after hearing me out, that is what we historians do. "Try to find out from whence we came." He had guests that afternoon, a troubled young man he was mentoring and his girlfriend, wife, or wife-to-be. I stayed in my room, broaching the whisky bottle and spending the time reading Jan Morris' book *Oxford*, a paperback of which I'd bought at Blackwells that morning. The hardback, published in 1965 under the name of James Morris, was on George's bookshelves and I'd been dipping into it all week. At that time James was already transitioning into Jan but the voice—civilized, humorous, witty, wise and perceptive—didn't change as the sexual designation did. Later, after George's guests had gone and I rejoined him, he rebuked me: not for tippling on his whisky but because I had not bothered to come down to meet them. I did not know how to say I thought he would not have wanted me to do that. It was the only uneasy moment I recall between us.

George had a head full of verse and was inclined to declaim at odd moments. Now, perhaps because of the incipient awkwardness, he broke into:

*For the field is full of shades as I near a shadowy coast,  
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,  
And I look through my tears on a soundless-clapping host  
As the run stealers flicker to and fro,  
To and fro:  
O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!*

Francis Thompson, a few months before his death in 1907, had a ticket to go to Lords to watch his team, Lancashire, play Middlesex; but instead he wrote the poem, called *At Lords*, of which this is the refrain—remembering a time in 1878 when he had seen Lancs. play Gloucestershire at Old Trafford. I didn't know the poem and thought George might have been foreshadowing his own death. He wasn't, not exactly. He was taking me up to his study to show me a video of a speech he had made on the occasion of his 95th birthday, and 65th anniversary as a Fellow at University College. It was, I suppose, a valedictory of a kind.

We were going to Univ that night, to Evensong in the Chapel, then dinner at the High Table in the Hall. Perhaps that was why he broke into verse again:

*The sable presbyters approach  
The avenue of penitence;  
The young are red and pustular  
Clutching piacular pence.*

*Under the penitential gates  
Sustained by staring Seraphim  
Where the souls of the devout  
Burn invisible and dim.*

I knew it was T.S. Eliot but didn't know which poem; I memorised a phrase and looked it up later. It is from the last stanza, in which Sweeney, after all that high-toned speech, shifts on his hams in the bathtub. George quoted the second half of Mr Eliot's *Sunday Morning Sermon*. Then he set about finding me a tie to wear. It is blue and has small golden tyrannosaurs, each holding a book, upon it; I have it still, because he insisted I keep it, along with the broken comb he gave me so I could tidy up my hair, which was long and curly then, and of which he disapproved.

Sunday night at Univ was a ritual; he went every week. And, like so many rituals, it had its irritations. George always called a taxi van because, using the sliding door on the side, he was able to get in and out of the back of the vehicle more easily. They sent a car. He was furious, not least because this had happened before. Well, we got there eventually and then there was the ritual of disembarking: down Logic Lane to an obscure gateway where the ground was level and ingress easy. We were meant to be met there by the porter, who would open the gate, but the porter wasn't there; it was only when some random students exited that I was able to catch and keep it open. The porter was in his lodge, playing with his hound, a red setter. There was a tortoise in a terrarium, too, mumbling over a piece of lettuce. We had to stop again, so George could pee. I idled outside waiting. It was night, the lights were on and an unearthly glow was coming from an unseen room along the corridor.

A statue, in white marble, of a drowned youth, lay naked on a slab; surrounded by water as if floating upon an invisible sea. It was supported by two bronze lions, rampant, and between them sat, head-down, weeping, a bronze sea-nymph; the whole upon a stepped pink marble plinth. There was a blue dome above, pricked out with silver stars; and on the pale magenta-coloured walls, lines from a poem were inscribed:

*Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
Until Death tramples it to fragments.*

I knew them. My sister had in her school days written them upon her pencil case; and would often quote them out loud in her poetry voice. Shelley's *Adonais*.

In the Chapel, the choir was more numerous than the congregation; the singing, unearthly beautiful. The chaplain, a gingery Belfast man, preached a sermon about St Valentine, whose day it was, and the place of love in our hearts. George, exempt from kneeling at prayer, was given a printed copy of the sermon, in case he couldn't hear it. He dozed, off and on. Afterwards we took a glass of the palest, most astringent sherry I have ever tasted before going in to eat at the High Table. During Grace, spoken in Latin by a young woman down the other end of the table, George seemed to have nodded off again; but when the long oration ended, he raised his ancient head and pronounced: "No mistakes!"

I wish now I could remember what we ate. Or talked about. I was sitting on the left of the Master, an excessively formal American named William, whom George treated with exaggerated respect. Taking a taxi back to North Oxford afterwards was only a little less complex than going there had been. George sighed when we were finally back inside the house. "I'm getting too old for this kind of thing," he said. "I may not go again." And then, unexpectedly:

*Golden lads and girls all must  
As chimney sweepers come to dust.*

He twinkled at me.

*Ghosts unlaid forbear thee!  
Nothing ill come near thee!*

he intoned and went up to bed. He was a lovely man.

*George Cawkwell passed away on 18th February 2019—eds.*

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# Frost in the Morning

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MARK LEECH

I prefer frost to snow. There's great pleasure in stepping out onto a fresh fall of snow, in hearing the muffled sounds of a snowy day, in following bird and animal tracks, and in throwing snowballs. But there's also the knowledge that after will come slush and sogginess. Frost, however—a real, thick frost that bites into the hands, into the stems of plants—has no such aftertaste. It is what it is, and when it goes all surfaces gleam with meltwater.

Such frosts are rare these days, but this past winter one came, and I was lucky—no commitments early that morning. I hurried along the roads of south Oxford to a patch of "waste" ground between some houses and the railway line. The air was so cold, to breathe in was to invite chill right into my core. My fingers burned when I took off my gloves to take photographs. The sun, sending beams horizontally through the tall, adolescent-looking willows, gave little warmth but much still, pale light.

The waste land is thick with stems in winter. Brambles arc darkly, their leaves tenacious around thorns. Stretches of reeds and other tall grasses cover much ground with their crowds of pale yellow. Bare saplings reach out, bark shining in all weathers. Cow parsley plants loiter in groups where the grass cover is shorter, each one with many hands—last year's spent flower heads—lifted palms up towards the sky.

On a wet day, such a collection of plants wouldn't have much remarkable about it, just a bit of liminal land squeezed in between human activities. But in frost, it's like walking into a dream.

The brambles have taken on silver auras, which frame each leaf, stem and thorn with light, no matter which angle they are viewed from. Rather than a threatening tangle, as if outside Sleeping Beauty's castle, they become complex crystalline structures shimmering in the clear light.

Around, the grasses and reeds have become pure lines. At first, they are individually visible. But as the eye advances into the stand they start to merge with one another, line becoming form, until at last a shadow falls across them and they are stems again. Meanwhile, my

breath rolls from me in loose, unaccommodated clouds, oddly vast in comparison with the shallowness of my inhalations in this freezing air.

I go looking for cow parsley. There have been single plants here and there, like alien forms among the other plants. But I want to see a stand of them.

This bit of ground has many paths made by dog walkers who cross the little stream behind the nearest houses to give their pets some exercise. These ways loop and wander apparently at random, and suddenly open up into clearings ringed with small saplings—perhaps the offspring of apples munched on summer days. In one of these clearings I found what I was looking for—twenty or thirty cow parsley plants standing cloaked in frost.

Ghosts of plants, strangely insubstantial, always seeming on the verge of roaming off—they might drift past me, their frozen flowerheads casting even greater chill as they move by my shoulders. Or they might be encountered at a turn in the paths, their silver whiteness lingering at the edge of sight even when they are behind me. Or they might vanish among the reeds and trees, the last glimpse of them a flower stem just fading into nothingness, and only an overpowering silence remaining.

For all that, the plants I looked at were still, beautiful in their angles and branchings against the darker backdrop of the reeds. The sun had reached them just as I did, and a thin vapour of mist was beginning to unfurl from those icy forms. Soon the frost would be gone.

The birds knew this. Other than them, I and my breath, clouds made the only movement in that landscape. The birds lost all colour against the blue sky and flickered from twig to bare twig, shadows parted from their bodies and frantic with that liberation.

I could tell them by their calls—great tits, robins, dunnock. Further off, a blackbird's alarm call and the easy glide of a broad gull. They were the harbingers of full day, when the sun would finish off the ice, leaving the roads and tree trunks gleaming. I wandered a few minutes more, putting off the start of my day to savour the last of the deep cold.

# A Note from Buenos Aires

BEN BOLLIG

AFTER a day in bookshops I go to see Miguel Cohan's *La misma sangre* (Common Blood) at the Village Recoleta Cinema, the glitzy mall that backs on to the city's most famous cemetery, resting place of Evita Perón. Like the building itself, the movie is well-made commercial fare, a twisty domestic thriller with capable performances from Óscar Martínez (*The Distinguished Citizen*) and the ever likeable Dolores Fonzi. If the plot itself doesn't thrill—an at best intriguing exploration of crimes that aren't so much murders as convenient and avoidable deaths that the guilty party has done nothing to prevent—the film does offer an example of current trends in film financing. Netflix plays a part, but so too does Chilean money, which is the only plausible explanation for a gratuitous trans-Andean backstory, but also a decent excuse for the presence of Luis Gnecco (*Neruda, A Fantastic Woman*) and Paulina García (*Gloria, The Summit*), two of Chile's most respected and reliable screen and stage actors.

The next day I visit the Cine Gaumont, downtown, which hosts the INCAA space—something like Argentina's BFI. For a tenth of the price of the Village (tickets cost AR\$30, which is less than £1), there are eight or ten national films shown a day. You also get a short film before the main feature, and I'm treated to *Los fuegos artificiales*, part of an ever-expanding corpus of Latin American flicks about the lives of maids and domestic workers, in this case a series of scenes inside a posh house as viewed by their elderly, devoted, housekeeper/gardener/chef. Given that *La nana* and *Roma* already exist, it's hard to see how much more mileage there is in this sub-genre.

The main feature, *Entre gatos universalmente pardos* (dir. Damián Finvarb and Ariel Borenstein; the title is a pun on a popular expression in Spanish, translated roughly as "At night all cats are dark"), tells the life of Salvador Benesdra. Benesdra is cult author of the 1990s who took his own life at the age of 42 having failed to publish his only novel, *The Translator*, a work that would, post-mortem, become one of the biggest critical and commercial successes of the era, still today cited by literary historians in Argentina as one of the country's greatest novels.

Benesdra was a trained psychologist and self-taught translator—he spoke seven languages and at the time of his death was learning Japanese. After a spell as a left-wing political activist—partly inspired by his reading of Erich Fromm—and time spent in exile, he joined *Página/12*, the pioneering left-wing newspaper of the post-dictatorship era. There he worked as a columnist and translator, but earned a reputation as a firebrand union organiser, and, after a bitter strike in the mid-1990s, was eventually sacked. He suffered from episodes of mental illness throughout his adult life, and was interned on several occasions, often suffering violent "treatment" at the hands of medics—including at one stage breaking his little finger in an experimental form of aversion therapy. There is a moving sequence in the film, consisting mostly of talking-heads style interviews with friends and ex-colleagues, in which a former partner shows photos of Benesdra—and

calls our attention to his eyes—before and after one such incident.

Benesdra was, like so many gifted artists, by all accounts a very difficult person to live or work with. He left behind two major works. *The Translator* is a semi-autobiographical realist novel that tells of Argentina's neoliberal reform in the 1990s—within what was then its most high-profile left-wing daily—and the narrator-protagonist's struggles with paranoid delusions. More troubling in the novel is the central character's horrendous treatment of his partner, who is obliged to prostitute herself, despite her firm religious convictions to the contrary (his name, Ricardo Zevi, we are told, was inspired by that of a rabbi who married a prostitute, for theological reasons).

Some of this was drawn from Benesdra's own life, as were many of the delusions he suffers, including a belief in alien intervention on Earth. As one of the interviewees notes, Benesdra's version of realism was to take typical characters in typical situations, but to push them to extremes. An earlier feature film, based on the novel and directed by Osvaldo Torre, caused controversy by naming the main character Salvador, rather than Ricardo, and was heavily criticised and subject to legal action by members of Benesdra's family, ending up, rather like the author himself, as something of an underground classic. The second book, *El camino total* (The Total Way), is a self-help manual, which, perhaps given the tragic circumstances of Benesdra's death, made less impact than his fictional work, for some critics the Dickens or Tolstoy of Argentina's post-dictatorship era.

I dash half a dozen blocks from the Gaumont to the Teatro San Martín, a well-preserved theatre complex that has something of the Royal Festival Hall about its cavernous interior and sixties furnishing. A brass plaque marks the installation of a pioneering system of electric lighting at the end of the 1800s. I'm here to see *Petróleo*, which proved harder than it might have been—tickets were selling out online within hours of their release. The semi-circular auditorium is very nearly full soon after the doors open—not always the case in Buenos Aires, not just because of economic hardships, but because *porteños* rarely turn up on time—and there is an excitable buzz in the hall.

*Petróleo* is the latest play from the Piel de lava group, a four-woman ensemble, consisting of Pilar Gamboa, Laura Paredes, Valeria Correa and Elisa Carricajo, the latter of whom OM readers will remember from a review of *Cetáceos* last year. Since the early 2000s, they have combined regular original pieces with independent careers in stage and cinema; Gamboa, for example, is a go-to supporting actor for a certain type of quality drama, while Paredes appeared in Martín Rejman's very funny tale of urban dislocation and recorder playing, *Two Shots Fired*. Recently, the four starred in Mariano Llinás's 14-hour epic *La flor*, shot over almost a decade. *La flor* screened at the ICA last year as part of the London Film Festival and is set to return in the autumn. Llinás's picture, as much as it was about anything, was about Piel de lava, setting the

four actors in a variety of sub-movies, settings, and genres, showcasing their adaptability and screen presence.

*Petróleo*, which is co-directed by the company and Laura Fernandez, adds a particular twist to their work, namely that the four play male oil-workers, squeezing out the last drops from a rapidly drying well in Patagonia. Petroleum extraction, environmental damage, and energy sovereignty, have all featured prominently in recent debates about politics in Argentina, but this is only tacitly a work of social comment. Rather like *La flor*, this is a piece about Piel de lava, or more specifically an exploration of acting techniques, and within it, what “masculinity” might be and mean. In that sense, it’s a very timely work—Argentina has recently witnessed energetic if not angry debates over women’s rights, in particular with regard to possible relaxation in laws on voluntary termination of pregnancy (a law eventually blocked by the Senate), but also more widely over violence and discrimination against women, in a general culture of machismo. In the theatre, there have been denunciations of actors and directors, and last year a polemic erupted after a version of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* with a part-female cast was pulled, following pressure for the author’s agents. Even the local poetry scene is going through its #MeToo moment, with a controversy over abuses committed by an influential figure towards a number of women writers.

The play opens with a series of physical theatre exercises: in almost darkness, the actors, hooded and covered in black overalls, move equipment around stage while industrial noises sound. Each then stands alone, a piece of music playing to introduce them. Zype, one of Argentina’s most innovative soundtrack musicians, provides the accompaniment. At this stage I rather worried that I was going to see an extended Kanye West video (think “Black Skinhead”), but we move into something more stagey and conventional. What struck me first, and most strongly, was how quickly I forgot that I was watching women playing men. Gamboa, who sports a hedgehog wig and a grotty beard, and Correa, who is minute, perform physical comedy so all-consuming that the cross-dressing conceit soon falls into the background.

Thus we can concentrate on the mens’ wider dilemma—the well is drying up, and none of them have much in the way of alternatives—and the petty rivalries and fleeting acts of tenderness between them. The tension is caused by the presence of Carricajo, a relative newcomer, but well informed about labour law, professional education, and the wider political situation. If Gamboa’s “El Carli” carries the script in the first half, Carricajo comes to dominate in the second—and their literal and very funny arm-wrestle acts out the struggle between them. In the macho world of oil exploration, each man tries to outdo the other, even during conversations that risk feminising them—about sex or domestic chores. There is one especially brilliant exchange in which Carli attempts to justify peeing sitting down, in strictly macho terms. But as the lights cut out, and Carricajo regales them with stories of anarchist ghosts, it becomes clear that masculinity is an act not just for the cast.

*Petróleo* follows a line traced by the Uruguayan author Juan Carlos Onetti, and his *The Shipyard*, about a group of workers pretending to run a busy ship-building plant, while faking orders and selling off whatever they can. The piece was written collectively by the group, part of their very particular method of creation. But it’s also rooted in

contemporary Argentine theatre—Rafael Sprengelburd’s work, for example—in its combination of the realist and the absurd. It is very funny, in part because of the repartee, but as the play moves on because of series of increasingly strange set pieces in which the gender of the cast—unknown to the characters—comes to the fore. Carricajo’s character is buying luxury clothes for his wife, which he occasionally likes to try on. It is revealed that he also wears her underwear, to make up for missing her, and there’s a particularly big laugh as he bends over towards the fridge and very deliberately shows off a pair of tights and frilly knickers. Carli is increasingly concerned by his colleagues’ exotic outfits, but is eventually persuaded to join in the fun, and so we see Pilar Gamboa, rubber phallus on display, in shaggy boxers and ill-fitting t-shirt, thoroughly in character as a man, trying on a pair of high-heeled shoes and then remarking on how good the view is from up high. Formosa (Correa), at this stage in a sequined dress, but still sporting a scruffy goatee beard and a baseball cap, is trying to paint his lips. It makes perfect sense, while being absurdly amusing.

At just over 80 mins long, *Petróleo* never sags, gets belly laughs from the audience throughout, and wins three curtain calls and a nearly-standing ovation. Only as the four bounce off stage the final time does anyone break character, at which stage it’s stranger to see them out of role than it had been in. A very happy audience leaves accompanied by the punk track “Caigo en un pozo”—“I’m falling into a hole/well” by Ricky Espinosa.

Back at the Gaumont the next day I miss the start of the short—*Inflexión*, by Victoria Hidrovo Sánchez. It’s about fibromyalgia, and despite its slightly unlikely topic combines moving first-person testimonies with some striking performances that visualise the physical and emotional pain of sufferers, imaginatively conceived and impressively shot in the ruined coastal tourist town of Villa Epecuén. The main feature is *Tampoco tan grandes* (Not Quite Adults), a rather charming, if slight, romantic comedy about 20/30-somethings who can’t quite grow up, directed by Federico Sosa, a young cineaste with half a dozen features and shorts to his name. A minor success on the festival circuits, the movie sees Lola (Paula Reca) travelling south with her ex-boyfriend (Andrés Ciavaglia) and his recovering-addict sister (Maria Canale), in a decommissioned school minibus.

29-year old graphic designer Lola has suffered a car crash and is trying to cope with the discovery that her, as she thought, long-dead father has in fact only recently passed away, having abandoned his family 30 years ago to live with another man. And that Lola’s mother lied to her about her birthday, too, so she has now turned thirty and is the wrong star-sign. Reca is the star of the film, and there’s nothing quite to match Reca’s Hepburn-esque cheek and charm—making even her shoplifting habit rather endearing. Strong supporting performances come from the often bewildered and/or exasperated Ciavaglia and Miguel Angel Solá, a veteran of small and big screen playing the widower of Lola’s father with poise and humour, even in the scenes in which he’s hugging the phallus-shaped oriental vase that holds his deceased husband’s ashes, and a set of other compromising items that remaining characters have tried to hide—an engagement ring, a pen drive, and a locket full of cocaine. The film deals with maturity and commitment—with quips that might not be out of place

in an episode of *Fleabag*: “putting on high heels doesn’t make you a grown up”. Quite.

That evening I head to the Teatro Nacional Cervantes, which regular readers will recall is one of the most vibrant centres for contemporary theatre in Argentina, supporting major works (Sprengelburd’s *Stubborness*, or the upcoming *Tadeys* based on the novel by Osvaldo Lamborghini and directed by Albertina Carri and Analía Couceyro), smaller pieces, and touring performances. Tonight the offering is *En lo alto para siempre*, a loose adaptation of works by David Foster Wallace, the title a translation of his “Forever Overhead,” staged in the intimate Orestes Caviglia auditorium—a former bar, now used for small-scale pieces. The writers/directors, Camila Fabbri and Eugenia Pérez Tomas, move the action to Argentina, and thoroughly rework the narrative, to tell the story of a depressed woman who refuses to come down from the roof of her flooded house in the wake of her son’s taking his own life.

Despite the bleak premise, Maria Onetto—who many readers will know as the star of Martel’s *The Headless Woman*—combines pettiness and petulance with fragility and charm as the mother, making her residence up high seem entirely rational. The exchanges with Delfina Colombo, as her exasperated and heavily pregnant daughter, in which Onetto insists she make more of an effort to expand her vocabulary, raise a laugh amid the despair. Sergio Boris is funny and tender as the vertigo-suffering plumber called on to fix the leak, who ends up trying to talk down his client—and who having overcome his fears (very convincingly, I should add, as a vertigo sufferer myself)—is then not able to come back down. There is a lightly comic note to the action—at one point the cast dance Bolivian “Tinku” to Alanis Morissette, for reasons that aren’t wholly clear—and the dialogues ramble in plausibly realistic ways, skirting around the tragedy and loss that imprisons the characters. The gymnast and acrobat Pablo “Kun” Castro shows off just some of his impressive tumbling skills as a ghostly reminder of the son’s death, as well as a muscular sequence of free-running and “Tinku” dancing around the small stage.

A final note—the performance is accessible, which includes thoughtful introductory and concluding comments, and—as far as I can tell—intelligently staged and convincingly performed Argentine sign-language description. There is a strong contingent of blind, partially sighted, and hearing-impaired people in the audience, and the additional elements added to my enjoyment of an intense and intimate piece of theatre. Outside I admire the poster for *Tadeys*, and wonder if the cost of a flight could be justified by one performance. Buenos Aires, as ever, is a theatre- and film-lover’s delight.

# Lilies from America

*In memory of Tanti Saftica*

You shall have white lilies  
Like the ones you grew all your life  
In your front garden.

Over three nights of wake,  
On your final walk through the village  
And at the last church service,

When you will leave your space  
In the choir, and your living candle  
Will be blown out, moved to the candelabra

At the altar, where the candles for the dead  
Weep in sand, you shall have  
Madonna lilies next to you.

I ordered them from America.  
They didn’t put the phone to your ear  
So I could say I love you once more.

They said there was little breath left in you  
And the drops of water they squeezed  
On your rigid lips, spilled over.

You shall have white lilies that grow  
In glass houses this bitter January,  
For the scent of spring that will no longer

Return to you, but will arrive to me  
Without you in it. You are with the angels now,  
Oh, you are with the angels,

And your body is laid out in the front room  
With your hands holding the cross,  
Wearing the black winter coat.

We are so far away, we who left  
Thirty years ago this year, and visited  
Twice, when you touched us

As if we were dreams about to vanish.  
Your last words to me were “I know  
I will not see you again, I know.”

I knew you did not believe me, but  
I am learning we must sometimes  
Make promises we cannot keep.

This morning I sent you white lilies  
And a wreath of white roses, for the time  
When stars will blink above your grave.

CARMEN BUGAN

Carmen Bugan’s new and selected poems, *Lilies from America*, will be out this September. She is also the author of three other collections of poems, a critical study on Heaney and East Europeans, and the memoir *Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police*. She lives in Long Island, NY, and teaches at the Gotham Writers’ Workshop in Manhattan.

## The University Card

Sir –Unlike Fergus Millar, I am happy to gate-crash the Encaenia garden party without a formal invitation, but I am not happy with the process of renewing my retiree University Card.

First, the form is fussy and confusing. A photocopy, by which I suppose the office means to include a print-out, which is not a photocopy, is meant to be printed on both sides of the paper. Can be done, but a bit tricky and frustrating, as one finds that the internet version has to be downloaded and shrunk to fit A4: if this unjustifiable demand is meant to save paper, it does the opposite, as most of us will only discover this after several botched attempts.

Second, the information about where your card will be sent is different on different parts of the form, and is unnecessarily complicated. Could do better there.

Third, the charge is a rather steep £15. Why is the card not free? This would save a deal of office time, and the not very substantial income lost could be compensated for *a la* Oppenheimer by simply reducing the salary of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor or admitting another overseas postgraduate student.

Finally, I ask myself why this renewal process is needed at all. I must comply because if I do not I will lose my e-mail addresses, which will be cancelled presumably to avoid some IT congestion, also beyond my comprehension. But why cannot a retiree card be valid until the retiree is finally incapable of using it? What frauds on the University, or on society in general, are avoided by this time- and paper-wasting obligation. I think we should be told.

Yours sincerely  
MALCOLM DEAS  
St Antony's College

## Free Speech

Sir –I would like to thank Mr Michael Biggs, whose letter (*Oxford Magazine*, No.404, 2nd Week, HT 2019) about my recent speech at Mansfield College debunking the idea of a crisis of free speech on campus, while meant to be critical, inadvertently proved my central thesis.

Mr Biggs's letter reports that, on his and other campuses across the country, one can find widespread picketing, vociferous campaigning, vilifying utterances and other entirely legitimate acts of free speech reflecting disagreements over the issue of the rights of transgender people. He names several academics (including himself) targeted by protests relating to their views on this issue, none of whom, as far as Mr Biggs can report, have been denied their own right to speak freely in response.

Indeed, Mr Biggs exercises his own right to free speech liberally on the pages of this magazine by making false statements about advocacy I engaged in during my tenure at the U.S. Department of Justice,

## TO THE EDITOR

an error he is free to make and others are free to witness by reading for themselves the publicly available legal submissions I prepared in the case he references.

I am grateful to *Oxford Magazine* for providing a forum for the two of us to work together to illustrate the robustness of free speech and open discourse on UK campuses.

Yours sincerely  
COREY STOUGHTON  
Liberty

## Climate Change

Sir –Mayer Hillman (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 405, 5th Week, HT 2018) informs us that he does not share my view that reducing economic inequality is key to facing up to climate breakdown. I thought I should set the record straight.

This is not my idea. I first came across the evidence that this was the case upon reading the 2015 report by Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty: “Carbon and inequality: from Kyoto to Paris” (<http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/ChancelPiketty2015.pdf>). Since then I have not found a single economist who has studied the relationship and not landed upon the same conclusion. Economic inequality is a key driver of the pollution that harms our climate and would be one of the key contributions required for reversing the process which is causing the ice caps to melt and sea levels to rise.

The UK is the most economically unequal country in Europe. Although it is not enough, we need to do a lot more than reduce levels of economic inequality in all rich countries to those low levels enjoyed by the most equitable countries. That, alone, is the largest contribution we could most quickly make to reducing pollution. More unequal affluent nations pollute far more, per head. Everyone in more unequal nations consumes and pollutes more; the rich being far more profligate than the rest.

Perhaps an example would help? Consider a series of colleges in Oxford. They all admit a similar number of undergraduates. Some colleges are stinking rich, others just mildly rich (or in relative terms ‘poor colleges’). Each college has a heating bill, that heating bill is much higher for the richer colleges because they have so many more buildings to heat on their estate; but they also don’t have to worry quite so much about the running costs given the annual growth of their endowment, and can also award their students travel grants to fly

away during the long vacation for the purposes of working on their undergraduate dissertation.

Which undergraduates in which college do you think would have the higher carbon footprint? And, if this were a normal university in a more equitable country by how much would all their carbon footprints be reduced by the change in behaviour that would result? How do you think the carbon footprint of Oxford undergraduates (and academics) might compare to their counterparts in Germany, Norway, Japan or the Netherlands?

Yours sincerely  
DANNY DORLING  
*St Peter's College*

Sir –While I agree with Danny Dorling that the inevitability of disaster from climate change is “almost certain”, I do not share his view that “reducing economic inequality is key to facing up to climate breakdown.”

Of course the elimination of income inequality is important for many reasons; however, it would make no contribution to reversing the process which is causing the ice caps to melt and sea levels to rise. This can only get worse and worse as average global temperatures increase.

Key to mitigating the effects of climate change is the unlikely goal of achieving zero carbon emissions speedily in order then to hope that a credible breakthrough will be found to reduce their concentration in the atmosphere.

Yours sincerely  
MAYER HILLMAN  
*Oxford*

## A new College

Sir –The *Oxford Magazine* has long made a sterling contribution to the record of the University’s debates with itself. J.B. Bamborough, the first Principal of Linacre, reflected in the issue of 4th Week, Hilary Term 1965, on difficulties arising in the governance of this three-year-old ‘Society’. It had been created like the proposed Parks College as a department of the University.

To be a member of a ‘Senior Common Room’ had proved ‘difficult’ he said until the University abolished the Delegacy for Linacre and the Senior Members were ‘now styled “Fellows”’. Part of the original conception which has not worked is the idea of Associate Members’, he wrote. He also mentioned Linacre’s need, three years in, for a ‘new building’ and ‘new site’.

Since then the experimentation with Societies has continued, with St. Cross (1965) and Kellogg (1990) still awaiting royal charters. It remains a concern that the governance and management of non-collegiate entities ‘established by a University Statute’ as Bamborough put it, can

prove problematic. There has never been a review of the satisfactoriness of the Societies' Regulations (originally part of their Statute) as governing instruments. Kellogg faced a case in the Employment Tribunal in 2013-4 in which some confusion on that point was remarked on.\*

The published Legislative Proposal for 7 May is accompanied by Regulations for Parks College, with the explanation that there will be two innovations. Parks College 'is not offering employment to Official Fellows, rather an association to those otherwise employed by the University'. And the Regulations are:

*'to address some anomalies in the position of societies in terms of University governance, by establishing the role of the President and Governing Body of Parks College in administering the society's affairs, while also confirming the position of Parks College within the University's framework of statutes, regulations, policies and procedures.'*

On 18 December 2018 David Prout wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, the Registrar, Lionel Tarassenko and Anne Trefethen, to say:

*'A new kind of college needs a new way to run itself, particularly in the early days when fleet of foot executive decisions will be made. My strong advice would be to start with a small fellowship and governing body and take time to grow the culture in a way that does not try to mimic the old colleges.'*

Council 'appointed Professor Lionel Tarassenko as the first head of house (President) of Parks College' on 4 February, but it is unclear how the Society is to identify the first Official Fellows to take those 'executive decisions'. Should we expect a worried article by the President of Parks College in the *Magazine* in a few years' time?

*\*Carter Jonas v. Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Oxford, 2701958/2013 ET*

Yours sincerely  
G.R. EVANS  
Oxford

## Interdisciplinary Research, and the Proposed New College

Sir – Recently, there has been discussion about the need for a new College in Oxford that has seemingly come from out of the blue!

Specifically a justification was suggested that it would draw together disciplines especially in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, Environmental Change and rather oddly, "Cellular Life". This seems to be a rather narrow, limited and unnecessary objective given the University's existing collegiate system that has nurtured and championed interdisciplinary research for many years. It was particu-

larly sad to see that this plan is proposed at the expense of taking away space from the Chemistry Department at a very critical time when it needs the space for both undergraduate and graduate teaching.

The whole idea is flawed and does not recognise the real needs for Oxford University, and that is to boost the research laboratory space in departments and to consider the "what happens next" question of research outcomes. The University needs to think more about the translation of ideas to wealth and job creation, and this requires space for pilot plants, for colleagues to work together with industrial collaborators in a supportive environment.

This cannot and should not take valuable and generally inaccessible space in the middle of the science area. The University has space at Begbroke for such activity and it has a growing presence at Harwell. This is where the efforts and funding should be channelled, and not spent on the "fantasy" of a new and unneeded College in Parks Road.

Yours sincerely  
PETER DOBSON  
*The Queen's College*

# REVIEWS

## Inspiring but puzzling

G. Lindop. *Charles Williams: The Third Inklings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), hb: 554pp £25.00 / pb: 493pp, £12.99.



THE introduction to this book, acting almost as a fly-leaf synopsis, paves the way for what is to come. It notes this to be 'the first full biography of Charles Williams' but also that he was 'an extraordinary and controversial figure' and 'the strangest, most multi-talented, and most controversial member' of the Inklings (the informal gathering of friends and colleagues in Oxford to discuss a range of topics and hear the work in progress—the two most famous members being C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien). The rest of the book does not disappoint in confirming these statements.

Grevel Lindop has produced a comprehensive and studious study of

Williams' life and work which will prove an essential reference work for those interested in the Inklings and also the history of OUP—especially its London branch in Amen House before it relocated to Oxford during the Second World War. We are taken in detail through Williams' growth as a scholar, his work as an editor, and his own publications as a poet and novelist. His network of contacts was also extraordinary as he rubbed shoulders professionally through his work with OUP, and also as a peer through his own writings, with the likes of T. S. Eliot and others.

Williams was a productive writer and critic: seven novels, numerous non-fiction essays and books, over twenty plays and pageants, seven biographies, around a dozen collections of his poems. He also nurtured and helped edit some of the major collections from the OUP stable in the mid-twentieth century. The man himself comes across as someone who inspired but puzzled others, exuded an attraction and magnetism which in turns seemed at odds with his looks and

occasionally awkward behaviour. His knowledge of literature and culture put him on par with the more noted members of the Inklings that he rubbed shoulders with when in Oxford, but his life was one of struggle in terms of gaining academic recognition until he received the support at Oxford from C. S. Lewis (mainly) and was invited to give lectures for the English Faculty. By all accounts these were a *tour de force*.

As noted earlier this is a weighty study and will be indispensable to scholars interested in the field, but the book does suffer from two issues—one minor, and one major. The first is a small gripe in terms of style. Occasionally the author moves back and forth between years citing the months only, which can at times leave the reader somewhat confused. Whilst the chapters more or less follow a chronological progression the compact nature of the facts and events would benefit greatly from a repeat mention (occasionally) of the year being referred to (especially during the War years as we move through the Oxford terms).

The second issue is more fundamental but at the same time something the author was powerless to do anything about—it is Charles Williams himself. Whilst we may come to respect his scholarship and output by the end of the book, and have sympathy with his somewhat troubled relationships, this will be outweighed by the oddities surrounding his personal life. This begins with his interactions with A. E. Waite and the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross (which in fairness was not unique to Williams), and his own theory of co-inherence ('mumbo-jumbo' according to the reviewer in *The Independent*). This then leads to the rather more distasteful experiments in mild sadomasochism involving devoted younger female followers (which the author quite rightly passes over without any sensationalism).

Some readers may also feel disappointed by the presentation of the book. On the front cover a large profile of Williams looks across at smaller depictions of Lewis and Tolkien, under the highlighted subtitle of 'The Third Inkling'. The Prologue opens with a beautiful vignette of Williams lecturing at the Divinity School in 1940 accompanied and supported by both Tolkien and Lewis. Yet Lewis then does not reappear until page 254 (the end of Chapter 14), Tolkien until page 256 (and then only mentioned in a letter by Lewis), and the critical Oxford period which may be of interest to most readers does not commence really until Chapter 17 (page 300).

If readers are coming to the book to read an in-depth analysis of the Inklings from Williams' perspective this really only occupies the last quarter of the book. In fairness, the author may believe that this period has already been covered in the books by Humphrey Carpenter, Colin Duriez, or Philip and Carol Zaleski but this may feel a missed opportunity by many readers. In addition, with Williams one comes away feeling this is a life of fits and starts without a major climax to build a biography around (in the sense of producing the definitive work or works he is widely known for such as *The Lord of the Rings*)—again no fault of the author. One almost feels that within him there was such a book, but unfortunately it was in the wrong hands.

To return to the positives though, of which there are many, this book will be an essential reference point for scholars of the Inklings and those interested in OUP. It is full of detail, meticulously researched, and does give us an insight into 'the dramatic and contradictory life' of the subject. I for one now have a list of Williams' books I will endeavour to revisit (such as *All Hallows' Eve*) or to read for the first time (e.g. his study—*Witchcraft*). For this I must offer my thanks to the author for renewing interest in a man who up to now was always a curious add-on to my work on Tolkien.

STUART LEE

## Next to Nature, Art

John Holmes. *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science*. Yale University Press, 2018. £30.00.



EVERY SO OFTEN A FASHION COMES ROUND, INVOLVING LUSTROUS-LOCKED MODELS CLOTHED IN DIAPHANOUS RAIMENT MODELLED ON BOTTICELLI, FILTERED THROUGH ROSSETTI AND BURNE-JONES. AND THEN IT'S CONSIGNED TO THE WARDROBE, AND MINI-SKIRTS AND SEVERELY CROPPED HAIR, OR SOME OTHER MARKETED FAD, RULE THE ROOST. COWGIRL GINGHAM AND PLAITS PERHAPS?

What has this got to do with science one asks? Well nothing. Pre-Raphaelitism has two branches, one to do with stunners and escapist archaism, the other to do with hard-edge reality. It's the latter that is involved with science, and is John Holmes's subject. Our view of science tends to place it diametrically opposed to art, and for us even nature is opposed to art; but in the Victorian period, when science was more genial and acceptable and more in touch with familiar nature, there was less of an either-or conflict between the two. It was easy for Walter Savage Landor to say, 'Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art.' It is this now almost forgotten view of a ready alliance between science and nature that Holmes brilliantly recreates in his very sumptuously presented book. What has to be remembered is that in 1848 science was often associated with natural theology and figures such as Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and William Paley (1743-1805), and it only gradually gave way to scientific naturalism. Some were reluctant to accept the transition.

The in-house organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was *The Germ*, and this provides an excellent guide to the two branches, and almost forms a manifesto of what it was up to. What the young Turks wanted was truth, originality and a change from the stultified traditions cherished by the Royal Academy and old schools. In the nineteenth century this was largely represented by the word 'science', which stood for honest engagement, especially with the facts of the physical world. An impressive roll-call of scientists impinged on the culture, and science also became part of the popular discourse. At one end of the spectrum was brilliant and ground-breaking research; at the other end there was popular science, pursued by leisured amateurs.

Reviewing the 1877 Picture Season Henry James described the phenomenon, and it had been going for decades:

*"I should say that, in the educated classes eight English persons out of ten have some small speciality of the artistic, scientific, or literary sort. Of course I include both sexes.... [They] either sketch, or 'play', or sing, or botanize, or geologize, or write novels; they are*

*amateur antiquaries, entomologists, astronomers, geographers, photographers, engravers, or wood-carvers... The ladies in particular cultivate their little private plot of aesthetic or scientific learning, thereunto impelled in a large measure, I imagine, by that peculiarly English institution of country life which is so beautiful, so stately, so respectable and so dull."*

It reads like a pre-*vision* of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). There were all kinds of lectures one could attend to improve one's mind, and James provides a caustic glimpse of the resource in chapter 17 of *What Maisie Knew*:

*"It stood out in this connexion that when you came to look into things in a spirit of earnestness an immense deal could be done for very little more than your fare in the Underground. The institution — there was a splendid one in a part of the town but little known to the child — became, in the glow of such a spirit, a thrilling place, and the walk to it from the station through Glower Street [sic] a pathway literally strewn with 'subjects'. Maisie imagined herself to pluck them as she went, though they thickened in the great grey rooms where the fountain of knowledge, in the form usually of a high voice that she took at first to be angry, plashed in the stillness of rows of faces thrust out like empty jugs. 'It must do us good — it's all so hideous,' Mrs. Beale had immediately declared."*

Much of this was reasonably low-key, and corresponds to the desultory interest in science in our time, catered for by television and its talking heads, but one should not mock it, because the attention paid, however spasmodic, does at least inform thinking to a degree, and sets standards of awareness. A little learning is not necessarily a dangerous thing.

The Pre-Raphaelites took an interest in science, some more than others, and it informs their work. This has been known about for some time, but Holmes engages in a more comprehensive and in-depth study than has been undertaken before. And it goes across the cultural range, to include poetry, painting, sculpture and architecture. The book-jacket has a reproduction of John Brett's magnificent *Glacier of Rosenlaui*—which I used to open my lectures years ago, asking how on earth it was to be reconciled with Rossetti's *Venus Verticordia*.

*The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* has a very Oxford bias, since so much of the material is associated with the city, so it should prove interesting here—especially since 2019 is the bi-centenary of the birth of one of the god-fathers of the whole movement, also strongly associated with the town: John Ruskin. Oxford readers will be particularly interested in the detailed account of the Oxford Museum, whose foundation stone was laid in June 1855. A contemporary print shows the young Angelina Acland on the platform. She later went on to become a pioneering

photographer. The museum is not merely a shell to house exhibits, but a building reflecting the attitudes to science, and its rich range of unfailingly impressive sculpture.

Probably very few visitors going under the central arch realise that Hungerford Pollen's angel is holding not a book but a single cell. Ruskin's influence pervades it, but finally he was disappointed. And not just by the iron work, which he would have preferred to be wrought rather than cast. He had inveighed against the frightful cast-iron spire stuck on Rouen Cathedral by Jean-Antoine Alavoine, which he viewed, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, as 'not architecture at all'. In a lecture in Tunbridge Wells he expressed himself disgusted by cast-iron.

The sculptures for the Oxford Museum were executed by the Irish O'shea brothers, and they were brilliant exercises in naturalism. In theory this satisfied the demands made in the famous Ruskin chapter 'The Nature of Gothic' that workers should exercise their initiative, but the carvings were, finally, too close to nature, and failed to exhibit sense of design. It was a difficult path to tread, and the brothers had got it wrong, as Ruskin explained in a lecture in the Museum of 17 November 1877:

*"And in saying that ornament should be founded on natural form, I no more meant that a mason could carve a capital by merely looking at a leaf, than that a painter could paint a Madonna by merely looking at a young lady. And when I said that the workman should be left free to design the work as he went on, I never meant that you could secure a great national monument of art by letting loose the first lively Irishman you get hold of to do what he liked in it."*

He went on say that what he wanted was 'the study of natural forms disciplined into the strictest formalities of service and the daintiest intricacies of design.'

In 1874 he experienced an even graver disappointment, when he had to face up to the fact that he was a sort of Frankensteinian figure, who had spawned neo-Gothic monstrosities, some of them public houses. And similarly he experienced disappointment in 1859 when he realised that his recommendation of earnest accuracy in painting had led to the soul-less *Val d'Aosta* by his protégé John Brett.

The question of appropriateness of function was important for Victorian architects. Since modern science was broadly under the aegis of Bacon it would have made sense to have something Jacobean for the Oxford Museum—a Cotswold manor on steroids say. In certain quarters it was plausible for George Edmund Street's Law Courts in London to be Gothic, but Hardy was not convinced. This was his reaction attending the Crawford-Dilke case in 1886:

*"As to the architecture of the courts, there are everywhere religious art-forces masquerading as law symbols! The leaf, flower, fret, suggested by spiritual emotion, are pressed into the service of social strife."*

Other buildings, as Holmes demonstrates, were constructed which had a similar close relationship between design and content, such as the Natural History Museum in South Kensington and the Naturhistorische Museum in Vienna (c. 1884-85), with pterodactyls and crocodiles on nightmarish caryatids. And there's the Royal Ontario Museum (1929-33), with a weird tympanum sporting an Assyrian winged beast and a bison. It's amazing how things connect up; the principal advocate was Charles Trick Currelly, who was a close friend of Holman Hunt.

There is plenty of discussion surrounding Pre-Raphaelite painting. It was controversial at the time, and has remained problematic, because of its tendency to have detail uniformly presented in foregrounds, middle-distances and backgrounds. For certain viewers this does not correspond to human vision, in which sharp focus is maintained only over a limited depth of field. John Tupper defended it, saying that the viewer could wander over the canvas, rather as he or she would encountering an actual scene. This does mean though that in a certain sense a Pre-Raphaelite painting as a whole does not correspond to or represent the phenomena of experienced vision—it is more like the pre-state of that vision. There is a difference between monocular vision and binocular vision. Ruskin in *The Elements of Drawing*, seems to throw in the towel and retreat to monocular vision: 'Your drawing never can be made to look like the object itself, as you see the object with both eyes, but it can be made perfectly like the object seen with one, and you must be content when you have got a resemblance on these terms.' He has a footnote to this in which he says, 'If you understand the principle of the stereoscope you will know why if not, it does not matter; trust me for the truth of the statement, as I cannot explain without diagrams and must loss of time.' Leonardo da Vinci, bless him, exercised his brain with this problem, and Ruskin cites him in an early Slade Professorship lecture on Line (9 March 1870): 'You will find Leonardo again and again insisting on the stereoscopic power of the double sight; but do not let that trouble you; you can only see from one point of sight, but that is quite enough.' The stereoscope had been invented in 1833 by Sir Charles Wheatstone, and improved by David Brewster.

Pre-Raphaelite painting has often been regarded as revolutionary, but in one sense it was very much of its time, in that it relied, as did other contemporary work, on narrative richness. Holmes has a very detailed reading of the story and psychology in James Collinson's *Answering the Emigrant's Letter* and *The Emigration Scheme*

which reminds me of a scene Henry James encountered in 1877, faced with what he recognises as regrettable features of the British art-scene, in the presence of a Marcus Stone: 'Two ladies stood near me, entranced; for a long time they were silent. At last—"Her mother was a widow!" one of them gently breathed.' They regarded the picture 'above all things as history.' It needed the Aesthetic Movement to undo the delusive distractions of narrative.

Pre-Raphaelite painting is famous for its accurate depiction of natural fact. Alongside it the poets also kept a sharp eye on things. I was first made aware that lime-buds are bright red by Tennyson's 'a million emeralds break from the ruby-budded lime' (*Maud*). Rossetti's 'Silent Noon' painted an hallucinatory image of nature in close-up: 'Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly/ Hung like a blue thread loosened from the sky.' Holmes makes a goodish case for regarding the long poem by Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, as imbued with a sense of scientific objectivity – even though it purports at the beginning to reject the 'snorting steam and piston stroke.' This poem prompted a review by Pater, which was recycled as the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, highlighting the unpalatable facts, for some, of a Heraclitean universe. Sermons were preached in Oxford against it, and his Brasenose colleague John Wordsworth (grand-nephew of the poet and later Bishop of Salisbury) took serious umbrage.

Nature started to look altogether less substantial as scientific theory advanced, and attempting to understand phenomena via analogies meant that the mental activity of the scientist often resembled that of the poet. A typical approach could be seen in a work not mentioned by Holmes, Mary E. Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* (1834). There is a splendid photograph by C.L. Dodgson of George Rolleston (1829-1881) and others inspecting the skeleton of a fish in the Lee Laboratory in Christ Church. Rolleston (who had more success dissecting a brain for George Eliot) it was who failed to impress Ruskin with an anatomised frog, in an episode which shows him being left behind as science advanced:

*"So I went myself yesterday to Professor Rolleston for a little anatomy... and the Professor brought me a fine little active frog; and we put him on the table, and made him jump all over it, and then the Professor brought in a charming Squelette of a frog, and showed me that he needed a projecting bone from his rump, as a bird needs it from its breast, – the one to attach the strong muscles of the hind legs, as the other to attach those of the fore legs or wings. So that the entire leaping power of the frog is in his hump-back, as the flying power of the bird is in its breast-bone. And thus this Frog Parliament is most literally a Rump Parliament – everything depending on the hind legs, and nothing on the brains; which makes it wonderfully like some other Parliaments we know of nowa-*

days, with Mr. Ayrton and Mr. Lowe for their aesthetic and acquisitive eyes, and a rump of Railway Directors. (*Ariadne Florentina*)”

He couldn't resist playing the fool, given an audience. His last appearance in Oxford was at an anti-vivisection meeting. He said, ‘I cannot lecture in the next room to a shrieking cat, nor address myself to the men who have been—there's no word for it.’

There is an important omission in this study: Turner. He gets one brief mention, when Holmes thinks that Rossetti's ‘Wind and steam and speed/ And clamour and the night’ is an allusion to *Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway*, but I wonder if it is? This was in a poem concerning a train journey to Ghent, less romantic than Browning's Dirck and Joris rebuckling the cheek-strap and all that guff. Browning blew it when he tried to recite the poem ‘How they brought the good news...’ into a phonograph and garbled ‘me own verses’. Turner was interested in science, especially optics, and Ruskin, more or less plausibly, tried to market him as a Pre-Raphaelite *avant la lettre* in *Pre-Raphaelitism* (1851). What he recommends in this essay is in a ‘delineation of natural scenery a fidelity to the facts of science so rigid as to make [the artist's] work at once acceptable and credible to the most sternly critical intellect,’ but also a record of natural features ‘with the sweet veil of their daily aspect’ and the dazzling ‘splendour of wandering light.’ Ruskin was slightly alarmed that the tourist seeing the Alps with a geological hammer in his hand might lose the magic of impression. Certainly Turner was *au fait* with Goethe and his theories of colour (translated by Sir Charles Eastlake in 1840), and the researches of David Brewster (1781-1868). Walter Scott's friend James Skene of Rubislaw (1775-1864) wrote: ‘aided by the discoveries daily making in the mysteries of light, [Turner's] scrutinising genius seems to tremble on the verge of some new discovery in colour, which may prove of the first importance of art’. Incidentally, Skene spent his last years in Frewin Hall, a delightful country house just behind the Oxford Union, where I was privileged to spend my final year as an undergraduate. His daughter Felicia (1821-1899) was a heroine during the cholera epidemic in Oxford in 1854, and has a blue plaque in her memory in St Michael's Street.

In one important respect though Turner falls short; in painting after painting he regards rainbows as solid physical objects, which can be reflected in water: in *Buttermere* (1798), *Arundel Castle* (c. 1824-25), *Brougham Castle* (c. 1824) and *Derwentwater* (c. 1835). Hopkins could have put him straight, since in one poem he imagines different people looking at a rainbow near Maentwrog:

*It was a hard thing to undo this knot.  
The rainbow shines, but only in the thought  
Of him that looks. Yet not in that alone,  
For who makes rainbows by invention?  
And many standing round a waterfall  
See one bow each, yet not the same to all,  
But each a hand's breadth further than the  
next.  
The sun on falling waters writes the text  
Which yet is in the eye or in the thought.  
It was a hard thing to undo this knot.*

They are not seeing the same object either physically or mentally. It was for Hopkins almost too hard a knot for him to untie. Incidentally Hopkins does not appear in this study either—a serious omission, because he was certainly a kind of Pre-Raphaelite (consider his drawings), and tried to forge, both in poetry and prose, a fit language that would do justice to the multitudinous facts of nature. One should not forget that he contributed to Norman Lockyer's *Nature*. No space or time to deal with it here, but his dramatic fragment ‘I am like a slip of comet’ (September 1864) is an intriguing response to Ernest Wilhelm Tempel's Comet. Rainbows often present painters with problems. Millais's *The Blind Girl* (1856) had the colours the wrong way round in the double rainbow, and in the interests of scientific accuracy he had to repaint it.

In our time we can seem rather blasé about science, but as advances were made in the nineteenth century it must have seemed must more original and exciting. It was cut, alas, in a later edition of ‘The Palace of Art’ but the 1832 edition referred to a female astronomer looking through ‘optic glasses’ at ‘Clusters and beds of worlds, and bee-like swarms/ Of suns, and starry streams.’ This was quoted by Richard Proctor in *Essays on Astronomy* (1872). There is a moment in William Archer's *Real Conversations* (1904), an early example of celebrity interviewing, when David Masson recalled Tennyson looking through Norman Lockyer's telescope in his back garden at Fairfax Road, Finchley:

*“There was much interest at that time in the resolution of the nebulae, and we were all looking in turn through Lockyer's telescope, at that particular nebula, then most in favour for the purpose. Tennyson, after gazing intently at it for a long time, turned away from the telescope, and said to the one or two of us that were nearest him, ‘I don't know what one can say about the county families after that.’”*

This account corresponds very closely with Lockyer's autobiographical memory of the splendid event.

BERNARD RICHARDS

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