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Linacre House in the University of Oxford

J. B. BAMBOROUGH

Linacre House is an institution unique in Oxford, and not least unique in the way in which it came into being. Whereas the thirty-odd colleges which go to make up the university were founded—the earliest some 700 years ago—by the generosity of individual benefactors who very often wished to provide for students from particular parts of the British Isles, Linacre House was established in 1962 by the university itself as a society designed as a "home" for students from all over the world. It is essentially part of the university's recognition—a recognition which came none too soon—that it was faced with a problem which had come upon it almost unaware and which needed urgent solution: the problem, that is, of the graduate student. It may seem surprising, but it is nonetheless true, that only very recently have graduates and their studies been in the forefront of Oxford's concerns. Traditionally the English university regards a student's performance in his first degree examinations as the really crucial test of his ability, and at least until very recently, it would have been true to say that if he obtained a bad class in his final examinations as an undergraduate his prospects would not be much improved by taking a research degree, and conversely if his academic record as an undergraduate was very good it was not considered necessary for him to collect any more degrees (a simple proof of this is that very few older teaching members of the Oxford staff, especially in the Arts subjects, have more than the one de-

gree they obtained at the end of their undergraduate studies). Up to the beginning of the Second World War there were therefore comparatively few graduate students in Oxford, and the only degrees for which they could study (apart from some special diplomas in particular subjects) were "thesis degrees" for which very little in the way of instruction was provided. Since 1945, however, there has been a rapid and overwhelming change in the situation, and it is best expressed simply in terms of figures. Whereas in 1938 there were (in round figures) about 700 graduate students in a total university population of 15,000, today there are 2,000 in a total population of 9,000, and the number is expected to increase. Part of the reason for this change is economic. Before 1938 there was comparatively little money to support graduate work; now there are State grants, adequate if not liberal, which enable at any rate the brightest students from the United Kingdom to take higher degrees, while at the same time many other governments are providing funds for the students to study in Britain. Academically, it is the great advances in knowledge, especially in the sciences, which make longer periods of training necessary, and has radically changed the concept of graduate study, and Oxford is experimenting with new types of courses and methods of teaching to meet this need. Oxford may have realized these problems a little late, but it is certainly devoting much anxious thought to them today.

The great increase in the number

of graduate students has posed other problems. The colleges at Oxford (and at Cambridge) are a very special sort of academic institution. Although they are constituent parts of the university, and prepare their students for university examinations, they are autonomous bodies with absolute control over their own finances, and with complete freedom in their choice of students and methods of instruction. More germanely, they have evolved primarily as undergraduate institutions and they were not well prepared to cope with graduate students. An undergraduate may expect to live in his college for at least the first two years of his university career, and he will be taught by his one or more of the Fellows of his own College for most of his course; he is most often more aware of being a member of a particular college than he is of being part of the University. The position of a graduate student is quite different. Although he must be a member of a college he is unlikely to have rooms in it, and his supervisor, who is appointed by the University, is only infrequently a Fellow of his own College. If he is a scientist his work will be done mainly in his laboratory, and if he is in one of the Arts Faculties he will spend most of his time in one or other of the University libraries. It is still open to him to take part in the communal life of his college, but many graduate students feel that they neither have the time for this nor, especially if they are married, do they much wish to take part in what are mainly activities for undergraduates. Many graduates feel frankly unhappy and discontented in their college; normally this is not true of those who have taken their first degree at Oxford, but it is only too painfully true of those coming to Oxford as graduates from other universities. It was out of its awareness of the spe-

cial problems of such students that the university created Linacre House, and it is primarily for them that it exists. It should be said that in recent years many colleges have taken steps to improve the lot of their graduates, but Linacre House remains the biggest single attempt at a solution of their problem.

Linacre House is not a college by strict definition, since it is neither constitutionally nor financially independent of the university. It differs from the colleges also in that it has no residential accommodation in its main buildings, although there is a limited amount of accommodation in hostels under its direct control. It does however provide all the central facilities of a college—meals, common rooms, library and so on. It was decided from the start that while its students must all be graduates (or possess comparable qualifications) admission should otherwise be unrestricted not only by race, colour or creed (which is common to all the colleges in Oxford), but by sex or subject as well. In this respect also Linacre House is unique. All the older colleges are for either men or women only, and while there are two colleges especially for men or women graduates, they are limited sharply in their range of subjects. While the prime concern is with graduates of other universities coming to pursue advanced courses at Oxford, provision is made for Oxford graduates to transfer to Linacre House, with the consent of their undergraduate college. The great majority of the students are studying for an Oxford degree or diploma, but there are a few who are either not reading for a degree at all (mainly post-doctoral workers in the scientific fields) or who are reading for degrees of other universities but need to do their work in Oxford (because, for example, the manuscripts they

need are only to be found in the Bodleian Library).

The society which has been thus created is a very remarkable one. This year it has 175 students, and they represent between them 36 different nationalities. Naturally the biggest single group is formed by the graduates of United Kingdom universities (roughly 40% of the total); the other large groups are students from the countries of the Commonwealth and from the United States of America (there are thirty American students at present in residence). The remainder are spread out fairly evenly over the rest of the world, with perhaps rather more from Asia and Africa than from Europe. This mixture of countries is perhaps the most fascinating part of the experiment, but the range of subjects being studied is no less remarkable. In broad terms there are more students in the Arts faculties than in the Sciences (the ratio is almost exactly 3:2), but it is a fair statement that every subject which can be studied at Oxford is being studied in Linacre House. (As a demonstration I quote the thesis topics of the first four students on the alphabetical list. They are: "Magnetohydrodynamic generation from a moving plasma"; "Electoral representation in Indian legislation"; "Some problems in abstract algebra"; "The toxins of *Clostridium Sordellii*".) The age-range of the students is another striking feature. Naturally most are coming on straight from their undergraduate career, so that they are 25 or thereabouts. There is however, another cluster about the age of 35, which represents a group of those who have been out in the world and then come back to academic life (the present president of the student body for instance, is an Englishman who worked in Arabia for an Oil company, became interested in the local history of the

area, went through a course at the Middle Eastern Centre for Arabic Studies and is now writing his thesis on the Ya'rabi Dynasty of Oman). Some students, however, are considerably older. The oldest so far was 67 when he began his course of research, having retired as Headmaster of an English School and at the end of last academic year a student of 62 was successful in obtaining his Doctorate in Jurisprudence notwithstanding the fact that he is the head of a firm of lawyers in New York City and went home every vacation to look after his business affairs. (His youngest son, who is an undergraduate at an American University, came over to see his father have the degree conferred upon him.)

In addition to the student body—which is surely one of the most interesting groups of people in the world—there is a small group of Fellows, who are themselves teaching members of Faculties in Oxford. We cannot hope, of course, to provide teaching for this wide range of subjects, but in fact this is not necessary, since all graduate students have a supervisor appointed by the university. The Fellows, however, represent most of the major Faculties, and are available to give general help and advice to any student who may need it. It is our further hope to develop within Linacre House the study of subjects which are not provided at Oxford at the moment and to which our Fellows and students could make a contribution. One such subject is the social psychology of international relations. This is a study for which our multinational membership makes us specially suitable—and indeed in a small way we feel we are already making a contribution to international understanding. There are other developments which are under active discussion at

the moment: whether any of these projects come to fruition will depend on whether it is possible to find the necessary funds for them. One other area of study which interests us very much is that of the subjects which lie on the borders between Arts and Science—and this brings me to the point I have been saving for the end of this article. Why Linacre House? The answer to this question is simply that when the university was considering what to call its new Society it seemed right that, since it was to contain students in all subjects, and hopefully would bring about discussion and

contact among them—as in fact it has done, it would be appropriate to name it after Thomas Linacre; not only because he was a very distinguished Oxford man, whose name otherwise is commemorated only in the title of the Linacre Professor of Zoology, but because as a humanist and classical scholar who was also a scientist and physician he demonstrated the possibility of bridging what it is now fashionable to call "the two cultures." I would like to think that he would approve of what we have done at Linacre House, and his spirit may guide us in any future developments.

DEFINITION OF ANATOMY

"Your head is kind of round and hard, and your brains are in it. Your hair is on it. Your face is in front of your head where you eat and make faces. Your neck is what keeps your head out of your collar. It is hard to keep clean. Your stummick is something that if you don't eat it hurts, and spinach don't help none. Your spine is a long bone in your back that keeps you from folding up. Your back is always behind you no matter how quick you turn around. Your arms you have to pitch with and so you can reach the butter. Your fingers stick out of your hand so you can throw a curve and add up rithmetic. Your legs is what if you have not got two of you can't get to first base. Your feet are what you run on; your toes are what always get stubbed. And that's all there is to it except what's inside and I never saw it."

—by a very small boy