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## THE STUDY OF ENGLISH AT OXFORD

TO UNDERSTAND the study of English at Oxford it is necessary first of all to appreciate some of the fundamental differences that exist between Oxford and the average American college.

It is to be hoped that one need not apologize or give any explanation for taking Oxford as the ideal of academic attainment toward which the American college more or less imperfectly strives. There are many criticisms which we may legitimately make of Oxford, and I shall certainly spare you the "effusive Oxonolatry" which is sometimes heard from the lips of Anglo-Americans. But when all is said and done, we of this newer academic world must recognize in our elder contemporary (if it be not an offence to refer to one's grandmother as contemporary) a depth of scholarship, a breadth of intellectual interest, a solidity of learning, which are in no danger from our immediate rivalry, great as may be our hope ultimately to surpass them.

Indeed, between Oxford standards and those of any American university there is a great gulf fixed. In comparison with our first-year men, so many of whom are as innocent of spelling as they are indifferent to grammar, Oxford freshmen, with their literary tastes and their writing of Greek and Latin verse, seem a different order of being. The contrast at a later stage is equally striking. Perhaps there is no better way of suggesting to you this contrast than by quoting from *The Education of Henry Adams* the passage in which Adams, a brilliant Harvard graduate, tells of his meeting with A. C. Swinburne, a brilliant Oxford man. Adams and others sat, says the account, "till far into the night, listening to the rush of Swinburne's talk. . . . . They could not believe his incredible memory and knowledge of literature, classic, mediæval, and modern; his faculty of reciting a play of Sophocles or a play of Shakespeare, forward or backward, from end to beginning; or Dante, or Villon, or Victor Hugo. They knew not what to make of his own unpublished ballads . . . which he declaimed as though they were books of the Iliad . . . Swinburne, though millions of ages far from them (his listeners) united them by his humor even more than by his poetry. The story of his first day as a member of Professor Stubbs's household was professionally clever farce if not high comedy, in a young man who could write a Greek ode or a provençal chanson as easily as an English quatrain . . . Then, at last, if never before, Adams acquired education . . . One felt the horrors of Longfellow and Emerson, the doubts of Lowell and the humor of Holmes, at the wild Walpurgis-night of Swinburne's talk." And what Adams felt before Swinburne, many an American college graduate has felt, in somewhat milder form, before the brilliant and rounded Oxford graduate.

I have used, I confess, a somewhat striking illustration to suggest to you the superiority of Oxford academic standards—a superiority which is not altogether flattering to ourselves until it is accounted for, if even then. Oxford is, of course, an older university in an older civilization, while we have not long emerged from the pioneer stage. Again, the intellectual hierarchy of England is pretty well concentrated in two universities, Oxford and Cambridge; ours

is scatttered all over the country, in fifty or more great universities. The English public schools (Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester, Shrewsbury, etc.) give a broad and thorough training which our mass-production high schools, well as they may perform their different function, can never give to the thousands whom they each year graduate and who each year storm the walls of the colleges in such numbers that they are able to force an entrance almost on their own terms.

But the whole discrepancy between Oxford standards and our own may be explained by the fact that we entertain differing conceptions and differing ideals of university education. Our system is broadly democratic; Oxford's is thoroughly aristocratic, either socially or intellectually. Our system has to recommend it a certain breadth of humanity, a generosity of purpose, a nobility of conception; its danger is that we may be, indeed are being, subjected to the tyranny of mediocrity or even to the dictation of inferiority—swamped under a mass of material which forces down our standards to its own levels. Humanitarianism and democracy have their own places and their own uses. But if Woodrow Wilson was right in calling the true ideal of the university an *intellectual* one, where shall the profit be, though we gain the whole world, if we lose touch with that intellectual ideal which is a university's soul?

It is to be hoped that before long our American colleges will be indeed places of *higher* learning and that their standards will not be debased by the presence of the intellectually incurious and of high grade morons who have somehow or other amassed the number of units requisite for entrance. When that time comes we shall approach more nearly to the academic position of Oxford.

The first step, then, in attempting to visualize the work in English at Oxford is to dismiss from our minds all thoughts of the elementary training in composition, grammar, rhetoric, which still—alas!—plays so important a part in our freshman English course, and also of such a cursory and elementary survey of English literature as is sometimes attempted in this course. An English publisher would have no occasion to send to a university teacher such an advertisement as that which I recently received from a prominent American textbook house. It read as follows:

"As the college enrollments increase, the English departments find themselves more and more harassed by the problem of the unprepared freshman. For those students who can barely read and write the instruction has been made as simple as it can be without becoming downright imbecile, while for those above the grade of illiteracy various aids have been devised. But many colleges are now proving that all freshmen, good, fair, bad, and terrible, profit by a brief compulsory review of grammar along with theme-writing."

It would seem that even the commercial publisher is becoming aware of a situation which has long been disturbing our college officials. Such a gibe the friend of the American college, if he is honest, must endure in silence; the publishing firm that wrote so in England would but make itself ridiculous.

The English university student is presumed to write his own language with some facility and to have read a reasonable amount of his own literature. In fact, one of the first things that impresses the American at Oxford is the wide range of the English student's literary interests and accomplishments. It has long been an American observation that all Englishmen somehow acquire a style, and that even the English scientist, engineer, or economist reads his literature with zest.

It may surprise you to learn that, in spite of all this natural aptitude for literary pursuits, the English university has been slow in accepting English language and literature as a legitimate subject for university

study. Indeed, though Oxford has been a university since the latter part of the twelfth century, not till within the last twenty-five years has English been admitted to its curriculum as a proper subject for degree examination and credit.

This fact may seem strange, but the reasons for it are fairly obvious. First, the English university has never been troubled with the problem of mass illiteracy. Second, it has assumed that every man interested in acquiring an education will of course not neglect the pleasure and profit afforded by his own literature. Third, it has been distrustful of attempts to instil literary appreciation. Fourth, being committed to a somewhat stoic view of education as mental discipline, it has regarded the study of one's own literature and language as too easy and as unworthy of a serious place in a university curriculum. Fifth and last, since the time of the Revival of Learning English education, primary, secondary, and collegiate, has been built around the study of the classics, with mathematics and later the sciences and history as its satellites. In England tradition is strong; thus "the dominance of Latin for many a day made the study of English seem despicable and unworthy."[1]

The recognition of English as a subject for which the B. A. degree might be awarded is at Oxford an affair of the twentieth century. Just before this—in the latter part of the nineteenth century, that is—definite provision for the teaching of English literature and language (apart from Anglo-Saxon) began to be made in various British universities. The academic teaching of English seems to have begun in Scotland and Ireland. The Professor of Rhetoric at Edinburgh dealt with the formal side of English, as did also the Professors of Logic at Edinburgh and St. Andrews. A Chair of English Language and Literature was founded at Glasgow in 1861, at Aberdeen in 1893, and at St. Andrew's in 1897. When the three Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork, and Galway were founded in 1845, Chairs of "History and English Literature" were established. In 1908 separate chairs of English Language and Literature and of History were established. In the University of Dublin (Trinity College) a Chair of English Literature, of which Edward Dowden was the first holder, was founded in 1867.

The academic teaching of English, then, is a comparatively recent development in England. "It is true that a Chair of Poetry was founded at Oxford by Henry Birkenhead in 1708, but the lectures were delivered in Latin, and dealt with classical authors on the traditional lines of humanist criticism. Yet the chair was not without influence on the study of English literature. The seventh Professor (1757-67) was Thomas Warton, the younger, whose lectures dealt with classical subjects but who did memorable service to English scholarship in his *Observations on The Faerie Queene* (1754) and his *History of English Poetry* (1774-81). Keble's lectures for the Chair (1832-41), though concerned with Greek and Latin poets and dramatists, contained valuable incidental passages on Shakespeare and other English writers. Not long afterwards the regulation by which the lectures were given in Latin was rescinded, and since Matthew Arnold's tenure of the Chair (1857-67), when he delivered lectures *On Translating Homer and The Study of Celtic Literature,* it has been held by a succession of distinguished critics, who have largely influenced the study of the national literature."[2]

Similarly, one must mention the establishment at Oxford of various university prizes in the field of English—for instance, the Sir Roger Newdigate prize awarded annually for the best composition in English verse by an undergraduate. One finds

[1]*Essays on a Liberal Education,* 1868.

[2]*Essays on a Liberal Education, 1868.*

among the winners of the Newdigate many names since conspicuous in English poetry. The Chancellor's Prize is given to the successful competitor in three fields of composition—Latin verse, English essay, Latin essay. The Matthew Arnold Memorial Prize and many others are given for the best English essay in a subject proposed each year. The various colleges, too, offer poetry and essay prizes, and thus stimulate excellence in literary expression.

But all this was indirect and sporadic. Comparatively little was done to promote the study of English at Oxford until, as a result of the Royal Commission of 1877, the Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature was founded there in 1885. "Owing to the choice of the first Professor the Chair became identified with the teaching of language, but in 1904 its linguistic side was transferred to the Rawlinson Chair of Anglo-Saxon, and the Merton Professorship of English Literature was instituted. In 1908 the Goldsmith's Company founded a Readership in English, and afterwards two University Lectureships in the subject were established. In 1920 an additional Chair of English Language and Literature was instituted. There are also about a dozen lectures and tutors, chiefly connected with the women's colleges."[3]

The study of English at Oxford, as elsewhere, incurs the reproach, or enjoys the distinction, of attracting women more numerously than men. But even at Oxford it is rapidly advancing in masculine favor.

At all events, Oxford has now a full quota of eminent professors, lecturers, and tutors in the school of English. One remembers with especial gratitude the lectures of that most lovable scholar, the late Professor Sir Walter Raleigh, for many years the most popular lecturer in Oxford and the man who, as Merton Professor, has done most to establish the high standard of the English school. Around him clusters a distinguished company, including his successor, Professor Gordon, H. C. Wyld, the philologist, D. Nichol-Smith, W. P. Ker, W. A. Craigie, Percy Simpson, C. T. Onions, A. J. Carlyle, and other scholars whose names will have a familiar sound.

At this point, in order that you may understand how the study of English proceeds, I shall have to tell rapidly something of the Oxford system of education—how the twenty-odd colleges prepare their students under the tutorial system for examinations given by the university. The chief function of the University is that of an examining body. Its Convocation passes the Examination Statutes, which are then interpreted in the form of practical regulations by its various boards of the faculty; the University also appoints all examiners, generally three each year in each subject. Guided by the Statutes and the regulations, the college tutor undertakes to prepare his students for the examinations in their respective chosen fields. Specialization begins at an early stage and continues throughout the course—for the Oxford B. A. is given in a single subject rather than in all knowledge conveniently defined as sixty-odd session-hours chosen from certain air-tight compartments known as groups. There is no class instruction. Lectures are entirely optional, and except in the case of the most eminent professors they are generally very lightly regarded and slightly attended. The student depends upon the guidance of his tutor and upon his own reading to pass examinations, though he gets a great deal of intellectual inspiration from extra-curricular associations, group discussions among students, and his various contacts with the complex Oxford life. But I must take this background more or less for granted and deal more specifically with the curriculum and the place it gives to the study of English.

In proceeding to the B. A. degree, with or without honors, the candidate must pass successively three examinations: Respon-

[3] *The Teaching of English in England*, 1921.

sions or entrance examinations; an intermediate examination known as the First Public Examination (or its equivalent in the preliminary or previous examination to some final honor school); and lastly, the Second Public Examination, which is the final examination for the degree. Each of these so-called examinations is really a series of from four to a dozen examinations of three hours each taken at the rate of two a day for the requisite number of successive days. And at the final stage particularly, widely-different examinations are set and widely different requirements are made for those who do and for those who do not seek honors.

In the earlier stages of the curriculum English makes a very humble appearance as an optional subject, generally as a possible substitute for either Greek or Latin (not for both). In this form English appears among the subjects which may be offered for Responsions, for the First Public Examination (without honors), and for the Second Public Examination (without honors). The examination consists in the writing of an English essay on one of several suggested subjects, together with questions on certain prescribed texts (among them generally some plays of Shakespeare). For instance, in the Second Public Examination (without honors) the following books are to be specially prepared: Chaucer, *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* and *The Franklin's Tale;* Shakespeare, *Henry IV,* Part 1 and Part 2, and *Antony and Cleopatra;* Milton, *Paradise Lost,* Books I-IV; Johnson, *Lives of the Poets;* in addition to this, a general acquaintance with the History of English Literature *either* from 1476 to 1660 *or* from 1660 to 1850 is required. But all of this amounts to very little, and my subject, "The Study of English at Oxford," would be a very piddling one indeed if this were the whole story. But it is not the whole story.

The triumph of English at Oxford is not that it has received this grudging recognition as a possible elective on these earlier "pass" examinations, but the fact that it has recently achieved the dignity of a final honor school, equal in rank with Literae Humaniores, or Classics, otherwise known as "Greats," the renowned school of Latin and Greek Languages, Literatures, and Philosophy.

The "pass" examinations just referred to serve a useful purpose in providing a goal which is within the reach of the less brilliant and in thus allowing the dull or idle sons of the nobility and others to remain in Oxford where they may contribute what they can to Oxford life and get what they can from it without dragging the University's standards in the dust. But otherwise "pass" work is negligible in its effect on Oxford—except perhaps to give ground for the remark about Oxford's "young barbarians all at play." The final honor schools are Oxford's crowning glory. They make her, and as much as any one thing they account for her position in the academic world.

Something of the jealousy with which these honor schools are guarded, something of the sanctity with which they are surrounded, may be gathered from the fact that no student, not though he have a Ph. D. from three American, five French, and all the German universities, may take these examinations until he shall have resided in Oxford as a member of the university for two full years. By such means is the high standard set for these schools maintained.

Final honors examinations at Oxford are much more august phenomena than any of the glorified tests with which the American college student is periodically confronted. Our little examinations are a sort of academic itch recurring every three months, to be met without anxiety by a little hasty scratching among books and lecture notes. Oxford final schools are a crisis of great moment, a period of intellectual child-birth, when in labor and prolonged effort the student must bring forth the fruits of his long

mating with Oxford life. This cluster of nine or a dozen examinations taken in six days is the far-off event, divine at least in its augustness, toward which his whole creation has been moving for at least two years. Little college tests ("collegas"), to be sure, there have been, to test whether or not he was prepared for the major ordeal of "schools." But they had counted for nothing, were, indeed, only private affairs between himself and his tutor. This is the be-all and the end-all here, when all the world is to be let into the secret of his academic standing.

So from the point of view of the student Oxford final schools are a much more serious business than our examinations. The Oxford student has no class grade to fall back upon in case of need. Nor has he experienced accommodating professors whose lectures have already given him in exact form the answers to his examination questions. Indeed, his papers are set by examiners who have had nothing to do with tutoring him or lecturing to him. All that he knows is the general subject in which he is to be examined and the university statute outlining the scope of the examination. With this information and with his tutor's assistance, he reads and works out his own salvation. He is not spoon-fed out of easy text-books; he is sent to the original documents and the most authoritative works to dig for himself. Final honors work at Oxford is strong meat, not meant for babes, or morons.

But what, you are asking, are these final honor schools of which you have heard so much? Final honors are now offered in ten schools, which are (in the order of their foundation) (1) Literae Humaniores; (2) Mathematics; (3) Natural Science, including separate honors examinations in Physics, Chemistry, Animal Physiology, Zoölogy, Botany, Geology, Astronomy, and Engineering Science; (4) Jurisprudence; (5) Modern History; (6) Theology; (7) Oriental Studies, including separate honors examinations in Sanskrit, Arabic, Hebrew, Persion, and Egyptian; (8) English Language and Literature; (9) Modern Languages, including separate honors examinations in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Mediæval and Modern Greek; and (10) Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, a recent addition to the nine older schools. The Oxford B. A. degree with honors is awarded to the candidate who successfully passes the examinations in any one of these schools.

But we are concerned with only one of these schools—English Language and Literature. To indicate the content of this school I cannot do other than quote from the statutes the regulations outlining the scope of the examination required. It will be remembered that all candidates have passed Responsions and the First Public Examination (taken a year after entrance), and that they have devoted two full years to the study of English in preparation for this examination. The Statute reads as follows:

> Every candidate shall be expected to have studied the authors or portions of authors which he offers (1) with reference to the forms of the Language, (2) as examples of literature, and (3) in their relation to the history and thought of the period to which they belong.
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> He shall also be expected to show a competent knowledge (1) of the chief periods of the English language, including Old English (Anglo-Saxon), and (2) of the relation of English to the languages with which it is etymologically connected, and (3) of the history of English literature, and (4) of the history, especially the social history, of England during the period of English literature which he offers.

The Regulations of the Board of the Faculty interpret these statutes more explicitly, as follows:

> I. *Philology and History of the English Language*
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> All candidates will be examined in the philology and history of the English language. They will also be expected to show a competent knowledge of the relation of English to the languages with which it is etymologically connected. (Prescribed texts are then listed.)
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> II. *History of English Literature*
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> This includes the history of English Literature, of criticism, and of style in prose and verse, together with prescribed authors or portions of authors. For the purposes of this examination English Literature is divided into eight periods, of

which every candidate will be required to offer six consecutive periods—

1. Old English Literature, with a special study of Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg.
2. Middle English Literature to 1370, with a special study of *Havelock* and *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight.*
3. Chaucer to Surrey, with a special study of Chaucer, Langland, and Gower.
4. The Age of Shakespeare, with a special study of *Othello, Henry IV* (both parts), and *Julius Cæsar.*
5. The Age of Milton, with a special study of *Paradise Lost.*
6. The Age of Dryden, Swift, and Pope.
7. The Age of Johnson and Burke.
8. The Romantic Movement and the Nineteenth Century.

III. *The History, Especially the Social History, of England*

Questions on this subject will be set in each of the papers on the last six periods of English Literature.

IV. *Special Subjects*

One may be chosen from the following list:—(1) Gothic and Old Saxon, (2) Old Icelandic, (3) Old French Philology, (4) Ballad Poetry, (5) Satire, (6) History of Periodical Literature, and (7) One of the periods of English Literature which a candidate does not offer as a stated subject.

It would be well to supplement this information from the Statutes by glancing over a typical examination paper. But space does not permit this.

But the mere reading of the Examination Statutes, together with the inspection of papers, will give a very inadequate idea of the standard of these examinations. Their severity consists rather in the type of answer judged satisfactory than in the amount of work outlined or in the type of question asked. The questions may be general, but they call for a very complete and detailed treatment; questions may seem definite enough to be briefly answered, but only a minute and thorough discussion will satisfy the examiners. A great deal of attention is given to the *form* of answers. Each question must be answered in the form of a finished essay. (This is true, by the way, in subjects other than English as well. It is one of the reasons why a separate school of English has not been so necessary at Oxford.) The candidate is always given an opportunity to display originality of thought and ability to handle problems arising out of the subject of his study—to show, in other words, what real mastery he has of his subject. The written examinations are always supplemented by viva voce or oral examinations before three examiners. It has been said that, in contrast to our American Phi Beta Kappa and other academic honors here, the highest honors at Oxford go not to the mediocre man who has worked hard, nor to the brilliant man who has not worked hard, but only to the brilliant man who has also worked hard.

Such is, then, as briefly as I can put it with any advantage to you, the character of the B. A. honors work in English. If you have thought me long-winded, I invite you to read instead that thousand pages of unintelligibility known as the Examination Statutes. I need scarcely dwell upon the excellence of Oxford as a place for graduate study and research in English. The Bodleian Library, with its adjoining Radcliffe Camera, constitutes easily the richest university library in the world. In manuscript collections and priceless early editions indispensable to research in English, the Bodleian is second only to the British Museum Library. For centuries scholars have been settling quietly at Oxford to do their work. More recently some attempt has been made to organize graduate study and to offer degrees for advanced work. The B. Litt. degree awarded upon completion of a piece of original research covering usually two years, has long been recognized as more than the equivalent of our Ph. D., and until about five years ago it was the only graduate degree offered in the field of English. Since the late war, largely in response to a demand from American students who found the possession of a doctorate valuable in securing teaching positions, Oxford has introduced its own Ph. D., or D. Phil., as it is called there. It differs from the B. Litt. nominally by requiring usually three years of work on a dissertation instead of two years. As a matter of fact, the

difference between the two degrees has not yet been made entirely clear, but either is a worthy goal for the graduate student of English.

But one who speaks on "The Study of English at Oxford" and limits his remarks to the curriculum is guilty of unpardonable stupidity. At Oxford, perhaps more than anywhere else, education proceeds outside of the academic routine in various discussion groups voluntarily formed by students. These discussion groups vary all the way from the formality of the Oxford Union, where undergraduates in speeches bristling with epigram pit their wits against such able debaters as Lloyd George, Asquith, Ramsay Macdonald, and Stanley Baldwin, to the informal group of friends who assemble in one another's rooms to read plays, to criticize each other's poetry, to discuss problems of literature or philosophy. Oxford is full of such groups, perhaps unknown to any save their members, but contributing richly to the stream of Oxford life.

Next after London, I should call Oxford the literary center of England. Few indeed of the eminent literary men of England fail to visit the university city about once a year to address some club or to take part in some discussion. Mr. John Masefield and the Poet Laureate, Sir Robert Bridges, live in Oxford, and frequently descend from Boar's Hill to talk before some group. Mr. William Butler Yeats has a house in Broad Street and lives there part of the year. Distinguished visitors are continually coming to Oxford, and usually they do not escape without appearing at some group meeting and joining in its discussion. A literary education under circumstances which permit the direct exchange of ideas with such men as Mr. Walter de la Mare, Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. John Drinkwater, Lord Charnwood, Mr. E. V. Lucas, Sir Philip Gibbs, Mr. Bertrand Russell, Dean Inge, Mr. G. K. Chesterton, Sir Gilbert Murray, and Mr. Rudyard Kipling, is a literary education indeed.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note the report, published in 1921, of a committee headed by Sir Henry Newbolt appointed to investigate the position of English in the educational system of England. The report declares that "the time is past for holding, as the Renaissance teachers held, that the Classics alone can furnish a liberal education," and it asks that still greater prominence in the university curriculum be given to the study of English. So before long Oxford may look for further improvement in the status of English.

Meanwhile, the student of English at Oxford cannot be deprived of his participation in the spirit or atmosphere of the place, perhaps the most valuable part of study at Oxford, a spirit especially congenial and worth while to the man of literary instincts, a spirit still best interpreted in the familiar words of Matthew Arnold: "Steeped in sentiment as she lies, spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the Middle Age, who will deny that Oxford, by her ineffable charm, keeps ever calling us nearer to the true goal of all of us, to the ideal, to perfection—to beauty, in a word, which is only truth seen from another side?"

Arthur Kyle Davis, Jr.

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Physical education is a required subject in all public elementary and high schools of Virginia. To stimulate interest in the matter, especially in rural sections, the State board of education offers special financial aid to counties and cities employing physical directors conducting satisfactory courses in health education.

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An increase of more than threefold in the appropriation for State-aided libraries, most of which are in rural schools, has been made by the Virginia General Assembly, according to announcement of the State department of education. This makes it possible to aid every year 1,000 rural schools in the purchase of library books.