

Francis Bennion's Oxford Freshman Journal

INTRODUCTION

Since leaving school at sixteen I had intended to go up to Oxford when the business with Hitler was done. I think this was due to encountering Dorothy L. Sayers at an impressionable age. I saw the first staging of her play *Busman's Honeymoon* in 1936. The only thing I remember about it is that I was bothered by the fact that the actor playing Lord Peter Wimsey had red hair. In my imagination Lord Peter was truly a buttery blond. The social attitude depicted by the play seemed to me then convincing and appropriate. I rather wish it still prevailed, being one of the Logan Pearsall Smith school. He said, I don't remember where-

'I have always felt that it was more interesting, after all, to belong to one's own epoch: to share its dated and unique vision, that flying glimpse of the great panorama which no subsequent generation can ever recapture.'

It is a very silly piece of egotism to fancy that the way people view things at this moment in time is the only right way to view them. Yet that seems to be the present world view.

I chose Balliol as my Oxford college only because Lord Peter Wimsey went there. Maurice Roy Ridley was the tutor for admissions when on demobilisation from the RAFVR in 1945 I applied to the college. He wrote telling me I would have to sit an entrance examination. I replied by return, withdrawing my application. I pointed out that I was no longer a schoolboy, having spent the past five years rescuing my country from Hitler & Co. Ridley wrote back soothingly. News of the war had, he said, reached Balliol. The examination would be tailored to the experience of ex-servicemen (nowadays called veterans, at American behest). Later I discovered that Ridley was the model upon whom Dorothy L. Sayers had based Lord Peter Wimsey. It is said she was in love with him.

So in October 1946 I took up my abode in Holywell Manor, the Balliol annexe. One might call me still gauche and naïve, despite five years of war service. I was one of the world's finest examples of the late developer. I was ignorant about the University of Oxford and its doings, and felt myself lucky to have obtained entrance there – as indeed I was. I had no family background at Oxford – or any other university. I gathered later that I owed my admission to a rave report from my pederastic headmaster Oscar le Beau who, as I have recounted, fell in love with me when I was aged eleven and had never swerved in his devotion.

At the outset, the great city of Oxford duly induced in me that form of depression well known to receptive creatures who attend as students. The *genius loci*, or presiding spirit, appears unkind. Throughout many centuries illustrious scholars have sojourned here. What is more they have mercilessly examined the less illustrious, and conscientiously found them wanting. To the timid, which usually means the percipient, Oxford must at first present itself as unscalably grand, ineluctably aloof, and decidedly disdainful.

Many of Oxford's sons and daughters do not succeed in shaking off this early impression. The most doubtful and insecure forever feel they are interlopers in that golden city, having no business there. That is why they seldom go back. Yet all this is quite mistaken, as I came to realise over the years. The golden city, modern equivalent of Milton's olive grove of Academe, is not like that.

The clue is to sever the current academics from their current surroundings. More precisely it is to grasp that Oxford consists of people, memories, and a place. Each of these is distinct. At any moment Oxford is a collection of people of the present age housed in a highly suggestive

historical environment. All, to a greater or lesser degree, are overwhelmed by it. Nearly all have come from elsewhere, and will quickly pass on. It is the environment that is intimidating, not its current transient inhabitants.

But then any place with a long and grand history must overwhelm the sensitive person who approaches it. What he or she needs to remember is that the extent to which it is overwhelming is the measure of his or her historical imagination. To the ignorant or unthinking, Oxford is no more a golden city than is Tooting Bec or Ashby-de-le-Zouch. It is a shopping centre, a workplace, a football ground, an ice-rink, or what you will. But to the knowledgeable and aware it is history. It is the birthplace of the earliest university in the British Isles. It is the location where Parliament met in its nascent days, where in 1258 the Provisions of Oxford were drawn up, which helped to tame the power of the Crown. It is the site of many other historic events, with historic buildings to remind the knowing. Above all, it is a place that issues a challenge to all equipped to respond to it, especially the young. In the last resort, it is a city of the young.

On arriving for my first freshman term, my first thought was to write home. My weekly letters form the Journal that follows.

Balliol College
Oxford
13 October 1946

Since my arrival three days (weeks? months?) ago I have been living in a sort of vague dream, disturbing, terrifying, satisfying. I find that I had built up a mental image of college life – mostly subconsciously – in which the main feature (from my own point of view) was the enormous superiority of everyone I should encounter. This image had gained such a hold on me that it is not fading quickly, and, although not altogether borne out by reality, still looms large on my mental horizon. Everyone I have met here has been approachable, even kindly, but nearly all have moved in an aura of intellectual loftiness (real or imagined) which tends to extinguish my small ego. I am perpetually on the defensive; I feel an interloper, a charlatan, a gate crasher. This feeling is not subdued by the fact that no one has seemed to regard me as such, that I have been treated with respect and consideration. The only cure for it is to prove to myself that I am not inferior. If I cannot succeed in this I shall leave Oxford; I believe, with due modesty, that I can and shall succeed.

On arriving at Paddington on Thursday I found the station crowded with young men all easily recognisable as being University-bound. They were mostly freshmen (the others would not be going up till later) and they mostly wore rather apprehensive looks. Two shared a carriage with me. We exchanged fearsome glances; no word was spoken, but the carriage echoed to our clamouring thoughts. We were all decanted at Oxford and stood, luggage at our feet, till some taxi-man should take pity on us. Eventually I found myself at Balliol and was told that I had been given a room in Holywell Manor, the Balliol annexe. I trudged off with my luggage and found the Manor after walking about a mile. I was shown to my room: it was a large, bleak apartment tolerably well furnished. Normally it would serve as a sitting room for one man, with a bedroom across the passage. Now, under the ‘doubling-up’ system, it serves as a double sitting room by day and a single bedroom by night. As I arrived after my room-mate (who had been in residence over a week, having just arrived from Canada) I lost the chance of a separate bedroom. Although I had only just arrived at Balliol I felt an absurd desire to get out of it; after a hurried wash I rushed into the town to look for some tea. Freshmen swarmed everywhere; they seemed to have lost the apprehensive look and appeared quite at home. I entered a tea shop. It was full. I entered another and climbed to the top floor. There was one seat, at a table for two. I sank into it. Opposite was an undergraduate. Our glances met, and quickly looked away. We sat for an age before a desiccated and decrepit waitress took our order. I sipped tea, chewed a tasteless bun and tried to overcome the seething numbness that

had gripped me at Paddington and had grown worse every minute. I'd hardly spoken to a single person since leaving Brighton. I felt utterly, utterly miserable.

I returned to the Manor and began to unpack (the trunk had been unpacked for me). After a while my room-mate came in. He was a Canadian I discovered, with mixed feelings, and a hearty one at that. His name is Bob Moyses, and he is a Rhodes scholar. Although my heart sank at first, I found that he is quite a pleasant chap, and seems serious about working. I am resigned to 'Goddam' and 'son-of-a-bitch' – after all I've heard them before! Moyses brought in another chap in our corridor. His name is Billy Whiteley and he is an ex-Naval officer (as Moyses is). We got on well and have struck up a friendship. My spirits rose as we talked and, by the time we had to go back to college, I was almost cheerful.

All the freshmen were addressed by the Dean in the JCR.¹ He is in charge of college discipline and gave us hints on our behaviour. Afterwards we trooped off to Hall for dinner.

Hall was impressive; the polished oak refectory tables gleamed and winked as the lighted table lamps were reflected in a thousand pieces of ancient silver. The walls towered upwards and the roof was hidden in a cosy gloom. Dimly visible was the crimson and gold of the portraits of the great men of Balliol which lined the walls. The organ pipes gleamed dully thirty feet above our heads. The meal was good, and after a simple speech by the Dean, we drank a toast: 'Floreat domus de Balliolo'.

The time since has been spent in seeing tutors and arranging the term's work. This term I am concentrating mainly on Politics (which is to be my main subject) and Philosophy. I have started on the work and do not find it so very difficult to concentrate. (I may manage, by the way, to do the course in two years.)

So much has happened during these three days that even in this long letter, a lot seems to have been omitted. I haven't mentioned, for example, how we had a tea party in our room (tea-set much praised), or how I played bridge and swore it was for the last time at Oxford (too distracting!). And by next Sunday it will all be ancient history!

Balliol College
20 October 1946

The past week has been one of the most eventful in my whole life. The fit of depression soon wore off – it was rapidly proved to be quite unwarranted – and I threw myself with zest into the life of the college. Last Sunday there was a meeting of the boat club, which I attended. As I hope to play some part in this form of activity I will tell you something about it.

The first big event is the Morrison Fours, a race for freshmen only, which takes place next month, followed immediately by the Morrison Fours dinner, at which the freshmen will suitably celebrate their release from training. ('Fours' by the way refers to the number of oarsmen in the boat, or had you guessed?) I think that each college puts on just one boat for the race, so I have little chance of taking part, as there are several freshmen here who have rowed for their schools. Next term the big event is the Torpid races ('Toggers' in the juvenile varsity slang). This is for crews of eight, and last year Balliol put on four boats, so I should have a chance of getting into one of the crews. Toggers is only for those who did not row in the first eight last year, which is an extra chance for beginners like myself. Then, lastly, comes the big event of the rowing year (apart from the Boat Race) in the Trinity (Summer) Term. This is 'eights week', in which the best men of every college take part. Following it comes the great 'Commem. Ball', and it is quite common for parents and sisters etc. to come

¹ Junior Common Room.

up for eights week and the ball. The weather is usually lovely, and a great time is had by all. It would be nice for Val, at least, to come up for a few days and join in the fun next year.

At the meeting we were suitably impressed with the necessity for keenness and punctuality in turning up for practice, and I made a good impression by offering to turn up whenever required. It seems they have difficulty in attracting people to rowing, because a largely incorrect impression prevails that it is exhausting and even dangerous to the physique. The fact that the rowing-club men are all healthy specimens, though not equipped with prize-fighter physiques by any means, is sufficient disproof of this. I have rowed on four afternoons this week, and have not experienced the slightest strain or even stiffness afterwards. They use a boat called a 'tub pair' for beginners, and two neophytes, with an instructor as cox, propel themselves painfully up the Isis, although quite soon one gets into the swing of it. This is not nearly so exhausting as rowing in a race of course, but it is largely a question of training and practice.

I hope I have not bored you by holding forth at such length about rowing, but, as you know, I have always taken pleasure in it, and am now glad of the chance of doing it in real earnest. Don't think that because I have not talked of studying first I am neglecting it. On the contrary I have worked quite hard, stimulated by the example of those around me, and have managed to satisfy the tutors that my presence here is not entirely presumptuous. (You may find that in reacting from feelings of profound humility and diffidence I tend to go to the other extreme – if so I crave your indulgence.) I had to write an essay on the Reform Bills of 1830-2 for Mr Finer who is my tutor this term in political history, and found myself enjoying the necessary research in the recesses of the Radcliffe Camera very much. (I have found myself, wherever I happen to be, whether on the river, in the College Hall, at a lecture, or even in bed, raising my eyes, looking around, and saying to myself with immense satisfaction, 'to think that *I* should be *here* – how wonderful!') For my other tutor, Mr Crombie, I had to study a work called 'The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics' by Kant. I found it not so terrifying as its title and managed to understand this reputedly difficult philosopher well enough for the tutor to say I had grasped it remarkably well for a beginner. Which praise was music in my ears, as you may imagine.

I will now tell you something of the friends I have made here. First there is Whiteley, whom I mentioned before. He comes from Sheffield, and went to Giggleswick School. He is a quiet type, fond of music and literature (his memory for quotations is tremendous) and a Times-crossword addict. He is taking Law, with the object of becoming a barrister. I think he is the only real friend I've yet made though there is a whole coterie of cheerful acquaintances ready to be sociable when one comes up for a breather from work. I can't call Moyse a friend exactly, though he is very *friendly*. Our temperaments are so very different, though, as yet, they have not clashed.

My extra-College activities have been rather restricted, but I did go with Whiteley to the opening meeting of the OU Liberal Club, which was adequately addressed by Dingle Foot. He has a cold, lucid style, not calculated to throw the meeting into transports of enthusiasm, but quite convincing. His fault was a common one with liberals today – a convincing exposé of the faults of Tory and socialist, but nothing solid to put in place of their dogmas. We also heard C S Lewis (author of *Screwtape Letters*) lecturing in Balliol Hall at a meeting of the Student Christian Movement. He is a stout, jolly man, not the reedy aesthete some of us imagined, and he talked persuasively of the logical necessity of Christian belief. I had tea with Bill Hood yesterday. He is working for a Civil Service exam. in three weeks (as a sideline). He is doing Modern Greats but concentrating exclusively on economics. He has got engaged since I saw him last, and hopes to be married in June. He was two years in India as a Coastal navigator on Liberators. He got out last December under Class B and has been at Oxford ever since.

This afternoon Whiteley and I cycled to Woodstock, about 8 miles from Oxford. It was the first time I'd been away from Oxford for centuries and I enjoyed it very much. Woodstock is the site of Blenheim Palace. We walked through the magnificent grounds and admired the crumbling mansion, now surrounded by army huts. (Sic transit . . .!)

I see I am stroke of one of the two fours for tomorrow, so perhaps I may manage the big race yet!

Oxford
27 October 1946

I have now settled down into a regular routine, which is very necessary if the work one has to do is to be accomplished. The past week has gone by like an express train – it has been difficult to find the time for doing *essential* things without any account of all the desirable things one would like to do. I am only allowing myself one free night a week, i.e. Friday, although I usually don't work in the afternoons, leaving them for taking very necessary exercise. The daily principle of work - fresh air and exercise - work is very effective and prevents one getting stale. On the free night this week three of us went to see Priestley's new play *Ever Since Paradise*, with Roger Livesey. (It may go on to Brighton before the west end appearance). It is a light satire on marriage, and only to be enjoyed by the young or the happily-married. One line sticks in my head – a definition of a husband as 'a costing-clerk, a lecturer, a stomach and a thirst!'

The big event in Oxford this week was of course the visit of the King and Queen to open the new Bodleian Library. Great crowds followed them everywhere and I got caught up in the one waiting for them to open the library itself (it lies on the route from the college to Holywell Manor). After half an hour the royal procession emerged from the Sheldonian Theatre, crossed the road and mounted the steps of the Bodleian to the accompaniment of raucous cheers. The King was in naval uniform and the Queen wore grey with a forest of feathers perched aloft. Behind them came the Chancellor of the University, Lord Halifax, in robes of black and gold so flowing that a train-bearer was required. Breathlessly we watched the King insert the silver key into the lock and waited for the door to open. It didn't budge. The King tugged and pushed, assisted by Lord Halifax, but without effect. The crowd was nearly having hysterics with laughter and the King had a broad smile too. Finally a mace-bearer was sent round the back to open the door from the inside. The procession passed into the building with its dignity somewhat impaired and the crowd dispersed, having been entertained more than it had had any right to expect.

I am glad to say that my relations with Bob Moyse, my room-mate, are developing satisfactorily. In fact it would not be too much to say we have become friends. His personality contains a sensitiveness I had not suspected, and although, as I said, we are in many ways poles apart there are points of contact that may make our relationship quite a firm one.

We duly became matriculated members of the University of Oxford in a brief but impressive ceremony in the Sheldonian theatre on Tuesday, at which we had to wear white ties and mortar-boards. The vice-chancellor, Sir Richard Livingstone, murmured the Latin words which gave us the status of members of the university.

Abingdon
3 November 1946

I am writing in the Abbey grounds at Abingdon, having cycled in from Oxford for the afternoon. It is a pleasant run of about six miles, through Bagley Wood and over Boar's Hill,

from which the best view of the 'dreaming spires' is to be had. (Unhappily the factory chimneys and electric pylons now far outnumber the spires.) Abingdon is a pleasant little market town, with one or two interesting features. One of these is the huge Market Hall which was built by Christopher Kempster, who assisted Wren at St Paul's. This is an imposing and graceful edifice but quite dwarfs the quaint little buildings lining the square. The Abbey grounds are quite pleasant. There is a lake (by which I am writing, with my back against a chestnut tree) and the remains of two large 13th century rooms which were the prior's study and bedroom. In addition there are some amusing 'pseudo-ruins' erected by some Victorian borough council – presumably because the existing attractions were not considered sufficient to encourage tourists to visit the town!

Last Sunday we had an address from the Master in the college hall. He has just returned from America, where he has been attending celebrations in connection with the bi-centenary (I think) of the University of Princeton. (He was also scalp-hunting and came back with an honorary degree.) In appearance he seems a very benevolent old gentleman (I was reminded, irreverently, of Santa Claus and Robert Benchley) but I hear he can be most awe-inspiring when dealing with fools or young gentlemen with exalted ideas of their own importance. He spoke about the need for objectiveness among humanists as well as scientists. (He is a great humanist, and barely concealed his poor opinion of 'unhumanized' scientists.) He also impressed upon us the need for quiet periods of reflection and meditation, which is so often forgotten by the hard-pressed student. The Master related the story of a young Oriental student of Balliol who endured a term and a half and then came to him and said: 'Master, in my own country, I have three hours each day for meditation. That is not possible here, so I must go back home.'

I have not done much this week apart from working, rowing and playing squash. I find there is little time to spare for outside amusements. There are two essays to write each week, and a great deal of preliminary reading is necessary. I can't remember whether I have described the work I'm doing this term – anyway if you have been told already I beg forgiveness. I attend lectures in economics, moral and metaphysical philosophy and 19th century political history, but only have tutorials this term in the latter two subjects. (A tutorial, as I've probably told you already, is the arrangement whereby you prepare an essay each week and read it to the tutor, thereafter submitting to criticism and instruction from him.) My tutors are Mr Finan (modern political history) and Mr Crombie (philosophy). I have got on well with both of them and my work seems to be satisfactory, though I suspect they are probably handling us lightly while assessing our capabilities. There are some extremely brilliant men among the tutors of course, and some rather eccentric ones. One of the latter type (who shall be nameless) does the most extraordinary things. There is a story of how, at some elaborate dinner, he bit the Bishop of Oxford's leg – through gaiter and all – under the table! A fellow I know went into his room the other day for a tutorial, and, not seeing anyone in the room, sat down to wait. Suddenly he was startled by a voice issuing from under the table which bade him, in irritable tones, to 'get on and read his essay then!' While he was reading the tutor made pungent criticisms in pencil on the underside of the table-top.

Harking back to the lectures, I have been disappointed to find that without exception they are read, word for word, from notes. Even brilliant men like G D M Cole, L S Amery and Lord David Cecil follow the practice which, in my opinion, detracts so much from the interest of the lecture. Still I suppose it is difficult to talk well extempore for an hour on the diffuse topics dealt with by the Faculty of Social Studies. Scientific subjects lend themselves better to spontaneous treatment . . . I remember how well Sir D'Arcy Thompson at St Andrews used to do it.

Apparently I was misinformed about the Morrison Fours. They are not for freshmen after all, but for the most experienced oarsmen. Only about eight boats enter and this year the winners were Oriel, who had three blues in their boat. Balliol were beaten by University College in

their first heat. The dinner, at which I hope to blossom forth in evening dress, takes place next Thursday.

Well the clock of St Nicholas's Church has just struck four, and the evening chill has entered the air. The waters of the lake look gloomy and repugnant, also a squadron of midges is attacking me on all sides.

I must go ————— !

Sandford
November 10 1946

This Sunday I have not been so ambitious, and have only reached Sandford, a little village on the Thames about 3½ miles from Oxford. I meant to go to Dorchester, which is some five miles further on, but found I had started out too late to get back before dark. Next Sunday, if it's fine, I shall begin earlier and try to reach Dorchester, as I hear it has a very fine abbey.

The first half of the term ended in a blaze of glory on Thursday with the Morrison Fours Race and Dinner. At last I know the true facts about Morrison Fours! – apparently it has nothing to do with the race I told you about last week, which was the University Coxless Fours – i.e. for boats with four oarsmen and no cox – but is purely a race for Balliol freshmen.) Two crews were put on for this race and the boat I was in contained three other men who had all rowed at school. Stroke had been in the Eton eight and set a very fast rate of striking, which threw poor me into a terrible state keeping time! Amid great excitement we won by one length, although it was really five because we had been given a four lengths handicap.² To add to our difficulties it rained heavily throughout the performance! After the race I rushed round to the Sheldonian Theatre, where I had a ticket for a concert being given by the Griller Quartet with Frederick Thurston (clarinet). Relaxing to the music provided a pleasant contrast to the exertions of the previous hour – the sort of contrast which makes Oxford so delightful. The Dinner was held in the Massey Room in the College. It was quite enjoyable; the usual sorts of toasts and speeches were forthcoming, and the party afterwards adjourned to the rooms of the Captain of Boats where the usual songs were sung and a good time undoubtedly had by all.

I have written eight essays so far this term and am beginning to detect improvements in their standard – which shows how necessary it is to keep in practice. The latest one, on the subject of 'Which is the more deplorable, a humanist with no knowledge of science, or a scientist with no knowledge of the humanities?' I consider to be quite good, and have thought of entering it for the Master's Prize (for the best Freshman's Essay). I have not yet read it to the tutor, however, and he, of course, may have quite different ideas concerning its quality! It is to be read to Mr Ronald Bell, whom you may remember as the Tutor for Admissions. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society and one of the foremost physicists in the country. I fear he is not likely to view my work very highly!

Last night I went with a young Canadian, Ken Brown, another Rhodes scholar, to the Champs Elysées Ballet. There was some good dancing, but the production was poor and the choice of material rather unambitious (Coppelia, Swan Lake etc.). In the afternoon I had been with Whiteley to see the great Oxford rugby side play Blackheath. As you may have noticed in the papers this team is said to be one of the finest ever to wear the varsity colours. Up to now they have won all their six matches and have a points record of 202 for and nine against. Half the players are from the Dominions – among them Donnelly, the New Zealand test cricketer.

² Just for the record, here is the crew which won the 1946 Morrison Fours Race: Hon. N. Ridley, Stroke; Emmett, 3; Bennion, 2; Bazell, Bow.

I have just watched the London train go by. Only just over three weeks now and I shall be on it, with a term of Oxford behind me. I can say now that I have liked Oxford far more than I had expected to. I had somehow thought to find myself outside the main stream of things, but instead it is quite different. Oxford seems made for me, and I for Oxford. I never cease to bless the decision, and the help, which brought me here.

I am afraid I must bring this to an end now; I have retreated from a position on the river-bank because I felt cold and now the tomb-like air in the fireless lounge of the King's Arms Hotel has brought on another sneeze or two!

Oxford
17 November 1946

The weather today is too miserable for an outing, so this is being written by the fire in our sitting-room. It occurs to me that I have been perhaps too introspective in these letters, and have tended to harp too much on my own puny activities. Today therefore I shall try to be more impersonal, although you should bear in mind that it is not the worker toiling at the centre who sees the beehive as a whole.³

Oxford today is too full. I have no hesitation in saying that, even though its remedy might end my presence here. Everywhere one encounters hordes of earnest seekers after knowledge (many of them, especially women, are unbelievably and quite unprofitably earnest). Lecturers, who long ago had resigned themselves to audiences of about a dozen by the third week of term, are congratulating themselves on their newly-developed powers of oratory as the earnest hordes continue to fill the lecture-rooms to such an extent that late-comers are forced to crouch on the floor or stand awkwardly in the way of someone else's vision. Moribund university societies take new life – especially those, like the social studies group, whose objects are worthy and not frivolous. The political clubs are flourishing – the Communists have recently been placed on a footing with their more respectable brethren – and the Union is, I believe, returning to something like its pre-War standard of eloquence. [I have not attended any debates as I have not thought it worth while to pay the 30/- membership fee this term.] On recent occasions the policy of the government, the power of the trade unions and the state of the nation's humour have all received deprecatory votes in the Union.

The hordes have had a greatly adverse effect on the college atmosphere. In Balliol it has been necessary to have two sittings for dinner, with most freshmen at the second sitting. As the fellows at high table usually attend the first sitting it means that the valuable sentiments of fellowship and unity usually associated with Hall are denied us. Tutorials are also affected; instead of having an intimate tête-à-tête with one's tutor, at which problems and personal difficulties may be freely discussed, it is usually necessary to have another undergraduate present. Possibly even more serious is the necessity among large numbers of undergraduates for sharing their rooms. This inevitably adds to the distractions interfering with concentration and study and many are complaining that their work is suffering. If the room-mate is of uncongenial temperament (which I have been lucky to avoid) these difficulties are increased. There are many other ways in which the benefits of Oxford life are vitiated by overcrowding. One is prepared to accept the fact that such conditions are unavoidable just now, but the complaints of the socialists and communists here that too many are being excluded, and that even greater numbers must be crammed in next year, seem stupid and uncomprehending to those who realise that a university is not some vast elastic bag which can never be so full that there is not room for 'just one more student'.

³ Apologies for the platitude!

I was very pleased to get Dad's letter; as he will see from what I said higher up my knowledge of the political condition of undergraduates in the Union and elsewhere is small. It would be necessary to join the Union and the three main clubs and attend meetings regularly in order to get a clear idea of feeling in the matter. This I have not been prepared to do this term – next term I shall probably throw myself more enthusiastically into university politics. However I believe, for Dad's information, that the Conservative Club has the largest following, followed closely by the Socialists (particularly strong in Balliol of course). The Liberals have a fair amount of support. (I have become a life member at a cost of 12/-.) Religious feeling is also quite strong in Oxford. There are a lot of societies in this sphere too – ranging from Puseyites to Presbyterians – not to mention the Existentialists!

Another effect of the hordes in Oxford, which you will doubtless have read about (there was a correspondence in the Times) is the Great Book Shortage. Great numbers of people are given the same few books to get and as a result these books are rarer than a Cultured Communist, and, when found, their prices are exorbitant. In view of this state of affairs I conceived the idea of going off to some place far from Oxford, and students in general, in the hope of finding what I wanted at a reasonable price. I decided on Cheltenham, and went there yesterday. It proved a very sound move; I was able to obtain no fewer than sixteen volumes, at an average cost of less than two shillings each. (In Oxford they would sell for three or four times as much.) I also took the opportunity of going to Gloucester and looking up the Benfields (with whom I was billeted while stationed there). Young Michael is getting on splendidly – he is quite the healthiest and most intelligent and best behaved young child I have ever known.

Some of us went to a talk the other night given by Mrs Joan Robinson, the famous Cambridge economist. She spoke on 'the obstacles to full employment' and seemed to think they would not prove too severe if our economy was not linked too closely with that of America. She seemed to think, however, that the present government were passing completely under American domination by continuing the policies of the last year or so. [The paper has run out before my thoughts – but more next week!]

Oxford
November 24 1946

You may congratulate me (although I'm not sure that commiseration wouldn't be more appropriate!) on having become a member of the college first eight. We had our initial outing as a crew yesterday, and it was an experience none of us will readily forget. As you know the river has been in full flood for several days, and yesterday there was a very strong current. To add to the difficulties a powerful wind was blowing *upstream*, which was of sufficient velocity to blow the boat upstream against the current when we were not actually rowing. The fact that it rained the whole time was of little importance because most of us got drenched to the skin by big waves breaking against the side of the boat just after we started out. All the experienced oarsmen who took part in the outing (we had a coach, John Lascelles, who was a blue two years in succession) were agreed that they had never rowed in such frightful conditions. We went twelve miles altogether, down to a railway bridge below Radley and back, passing through two locks – at Iffley and Sandford. On the outward journey the Sandford lock-keeper refused to open the gates, saying it was too dangerous, and we had to wait while Lascelles (who was accompanying us in a motor launch) persuaded him to change his mind.

We arrived back in almost complete darkness, sore and exhausted, and altogether feeling more dead than alive! As you see from the enclosed cutting we were not the only ones to suffer on the Thames that day!

SIX BOATS SINK IN THAMES RACE

So rough were conditions for the first Schools' Head of the River Race from Hammersmith to Putney yesterday that six of the 14 boats sank and one broke in half when being towed back.

As far as work goes, this week I have had a specific encouragement and some rather general discouragement. The encouraging thing was that Mr Crombie, the philosophy tutor, said he thought I should specialize in philosophy, as he thought I had the right type of mind for it. On the other hand I have not been pleasing the history man, Mr Finer, as much as previously. I find the facts of nineteenth-century political history so bewilderingly diverse that my mind seems unable to grapple with them. The amount of memorising necessary tends to be too much for my always rather capricious memory. However I think that the difficulty may be partly due to staleness. The contrast between the six hectic weeks just passed and my former leisurely existence is becoming rather wearing, and I am looking forward very much to the vacation. The wisdom of having only an eight-week term is becoming more and more clear to me!

Last Sunday I went to evensong at Magdalen Chapel. It is a beautiful building in the Perpendicular and Decorated styles, and the effect of the service was heightened by dozens of candles which were set at each place in the stalls and which provided the sole illumination. The choir and organ are both excellent, and the service was more impressive than any I have attended since my Gloucester days. The Balliol Chapel, though richly panelled in walnut and having a magnificent silver altar, lacks a religious atmosphere. It was built, one feels, with the wealth of eminent Victorians, and belongs more to them than to God. The chaplain is a tutor in logic, and his sermons, though excellent in their way, contain more syllogisms than spiritual wealth.

On Friday I attended a matinée performance of 'Anthony and Cleopatra', with Edith Evans and Godfrey Tearle. I imagine they are trying to take advantage of the demand for this sort of thing created by the successes of The Old Vic Company and Donald Wolfit. However this company lack the genius of a Richardson or Olivier, and they have chosen a play which is not one of Shakespeare's best. There are long, dull stretches which need to be lit up by inspired acting, and this they hardly receive in the present instance. However I enjoyed the play, as much as the discomfort of a gallery seat would allow.

I must stop now for tea – and then to grapple with the Boer War!