

## Through Foreign Eyes

Universities are cosmopolitan places. Citizens of the world of learning rarely seem to 'be still and know', as the motto on the crest of a notably unstill English university has it. Even those of us who are not among what the French call '*les turbo profs*' get about a bit. This movement provides unusual opportunities to see, and be seen, through foreign eyes. We invited five well-travelled observers to reflect upon this theme, and encouraged them to write, about us or them or the others, in whatever way seemed appropriate. Our 'Viewpoint' in this issue also addresses a topical example of cultural clashes and (mis)perceptions.

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### Cambridge: Sleeping Giant or Quiet Achiever?

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Whenever I try to describe Cambridge seminars to uninitiated Americans, we end up laughing, usually when I get to the part about the sherry. Not that they are really that funny, it's just that they would be so incongruous anywhere else. So would Cambridge for that matter.

The Middle Ages survive and flourish there. One sees friars on the hoof looking like St. Francis of Assisi, and hears of 'halls', 'feasts', 'fellow commoners', and 'masters'. It was hard not to snicker when I first heard a grown man say, 'yes, master' and mean it. If it were anywhere else I would have looked for black leather.

There is an unabashed theatricality about Cambridge, again left over from earlier ages. University and college ceremonies are costume parties for grown-ups staged against a backdrop of marvellous medieval architecture, much of which predates Victoria. The first time I saw Trinity's 'Great Court', lit by a full moon, with the odd shafts of electrical light glowing here and there through arched doorways and lancet windows, I couldn't help feeling that it had been done by the Royal Opera and that one day someone would come along, unfasten it at the bottom, roll it up, and carry it away.

Within this make-believe atmosphere, however, there lurks an institution that has changed the world again and again, more than any other university, including Oxford and Harvard, the two with which Cambridge tends to compare itself. Unlike them, however, it does take time at Cambridge to be sure that one is in even a first-class institution, much less a world-shaker. The day that I walked into the University Library and saw that catalogue I thought that I had entered a time warp. The crackle of those pages! That man pasting in entries! But if you don't leave on the first day, you discover that it is one of the easiest libraries in the world to use. Like much

of Cambridge, it is quietly, slowly addictive. In this it is far different from Harvard or Oxford. In both of them you know at once that you are in one hell of an important place. Whether or not you like them is scarcely a relevant issue.

There is always a bit of humour floating around Cambridge at American expense, including jokes about tourists looking for the 'campus'. Actually, I doubt that the university's layout surprises many Americans. Its sprawling polycentric character is not too different from many American universities, and they tend to think that the colleges are just some sort of fancied up dormitories. It is when they know a little more about it that things start to seem really peculiar, for example, the independent nature of the colleges and the fact that some are poor as church mice while others are among the nation's richest institutions. There are other things also that are quaint, bizarre, and maybe in the end, endearing, which brings us back to the seminars.

In the US students register for seminars. In fact, they even apply for admission to some of them at Harvard, and chew their fingernails while they await the decision, never mind that they are already admitted to the university. They work furiously, and if they pass, they get a 'credit'. To do that, they had better go to all the meetings, or nearly all, and do every bit of the staggering amount of assigned reading that they physically can.

Talking about it in Cambridge, England, always made me feel as though the system were designed by Von Moltke, and, in fact, I suspect a German influence. At Cambridge you wander in if you have nothing better to do, have tea first, then a nice nap because the topic is so hopelessly arcane, then sherry between paper and discussion, and eventually you are asked to give a paper

yourself because you keep coming back, God knows why, probably for the sherry. That's education!? I am American enough to have some doubts, but I would hesitate to scuttle it, even if I could. For one thing it is anthropologically fascinating, like so much of Cambridge, and for another, it has such charm, again like so much of Cambridge. Some seminars are being conducted under slightly more controlled circumstances, but they are sports, and it is still far from clear that they will develop into a new breed.

Harvard is hard, not just difficult, hard. Bright, fast, slick (but don't think it's not deep). You sense it all the moment you set foot in the place. Absolutely top intellectual quality as advertised. Some jargon, sure, it is America, after all (I suspect the Germans, there, too). And you work, baby! Remember, you're at the top and you want to stay there, right? Right! Many don't manage, don't forget that.

And therein lies what I think is an interesting difference between America and Oxbridge, interpretation of the work ethic. To understand it, one must understand the degree to which Americans work. They work like almost no one else on earth, day and night, night and day – work, produce, achieve. Even American diplomats, engaged in a profession that is internationally dedicated to ease verging on sloth, work like coolies. (To what effect? Ah, that calls for at least another article.) Furthermore, Americans constantly badger people around the world to work harder. Take Australia, for example. There leisure-worship has almost a religious quality that has always baffled and irritated Americans. US Embassy advice during a recent economic slump was – work harder; never mind nose-diving commodity prices, the result partly of an EC-USA groin-kicking match. I think, in fact, that this is the right advice in many instances, but then, I'm a Yank.

Americans, certainly middle-class Americans, believe not only that you should work almost beyond endurance, but that you should be seen to be working. Every bit of sweat should show. The best-selling book, then Broadway musical, 'How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying', advises filling your office full of empty coffee cups and overflowing ash trays after hours. You've been there all night, haven't you? A butt-down Hercules sacrificing, but above all, sweating for the firm. Of course, you haven't, but the point is, you get ahead by letting the sweat show, and not just by the results.

And at Oxbridge? Sweat?! What?! At Oxbridge you shouldn't even glow. Glittering prizes, absolutely. Glistening foreheads, forget it. The Oxbridge ideal is to win the Nobel Prize with a thought that came to you while losing a tennis game because you crippled yourself with champagne the previous night, a thought you then scribbled on an envelope while going to a theatre party in London and which you subsequently forgot for weeks until a porter mentioned that something was about to fall out of your pocket, whereupon a perceptive friend snatched it, read it, fell against the wall in amazement, and insisted that you send it to Stockholm. I am not suggesting that this is the prevalent life-style, only that it

is a kind of ideal – Crocodile Dundee for Oxbridge. Americans with their sincere stories of endless labour and hard-won goals ruin the fantasy. It's like sumo wrestling in a petunia bed.

That brings us to sincerity, which, like sweat, the British tend to wipe away before it shows. Otherwise, things might get sentimental, in extreme cases mawkish, and invariably embarrassing, and the British become embarrassed more easily than any people I know. Given the most trivial social misfiring – saying goodbye and then meeting again, for example – Britons can become excruciatingly uneasy, even to the point of 'not seeing' you the second time. But I'm wandering. The worst thing about sincerity is that it tends to take the fizz out of conversation, and Brits, especially at Oxbridge, relish the fizz. Sincerity is for poetry, maybe for prayer, certainly for the confessional (if you are of that persuasion) but not under any circumstances whatsoever for high table. When I was making plans to come to Cambridge the second time, I asked the woman who was to propose me to a college what the main requirements were. She said, 'You must not be boring, full stop'.

I believe that the emphasis on being bright, sparkling, and supremely articulate puts an enormous strain on educated Brits, helping to create people who are extraordinarily interesting and amusing, but often painfully nervous and high-strung. I have lived in several countries and travelled in many more, but have never encountered the amount of stammering that one finds among the most educated class in Britain. I have no expertise here, but I can't help guessing that there is a connexion. Nevertheless, if you could only talk to one person for the rest of your life, you would do well to pick someone from Oxbridge.

One admonition. Great native ability, relentless training almost since infancy, and a culture that worships verbal expression have combined to produce people who can express themselves brilliantly. Don't think, however, that they necessarily will, especially at the two universities. In fact, don't assume that they will talk to you at all. Oxford is far worse in this regard than Cambridge.

There are people who, by standards almost anywhere else, could be expected to observe your presence. No fawning, no flourishes, no time-consuming conversation necessarily, just a nod, maybe a word or two of greeting. Don't expect it. You have met someone on a number of occasions, had one-on-one discussions with him more than once, lunched together the day before. He is lunching today at the next table two feet away. He walks past you two or three times to go to the bar or the buffet. Yet he never acknowledges your presence, and you cannot catch his eye. Surely to a degree this is a protective device that results from social shyness – 'if I don't see you, you can't snub me'. There is also the embarrassment factor again – 'I am all tied up with this other party and can't handle an additional involvement, so don't expect a nod'.

The British frequently ridicule Americans for relentless, bland friendliness. They have a point. Nevertheless, I have discovered on several occasions that even they

find their own detachment troubling. An Oxford man, for example, with dining rights in a very traditional Cambridge college, commented frequently on the friendliness of my college at Cambridge. 'Wonderful', he used to say, 'how everyone speaks to each other'. He did not realize how much the tone was set by the large number of visiting Yanks, Canadians and assorted other foreigners who are not quite as tightly wrapped as the Brits.

But it is not always shyness, these snubbings; the arrogance that you invariably suspect is occasionally there. At Oxford it can be so artfully delivered that you almost admire it. Cambridge, being more provincial, has a harder time with it. Arrogance there tends to become preposterous and almost endearing, like the gargoyles.

I spent years in Latin America where one finds an extraordinary courtesy between peers. It must not be thought to be more than it is. It is not friendship, commitment, or admiration, and it does not extend to lower classes. It is simply respect, and it is expected to be reciprocated. It was probably designed to help keep the peace in Latin societies in Europe and America that were once very volatile, and in some places still are. Whatever its roots, it is a beautiful plant. Could it grow in Oxbridge gardens?

Oxford is prouder and more worldly than Cambridge, and also is plugged far more into the Establishment in London. I can't possibly prove that, it's just an impression. Yet I met more influential outsiders in a term at Oxford than I did in three and a half years at Cambridge. I firmly believe that if an enterprising M.Phil. aspirant studied high table guest lists for all colleges at both universities over a ten-year period, we would see why Oxford got the fast trains and the new highway years before Cambridge. Perhaps, however, things are changing. Science Park, for example, may prove to be a powerful link for Cambridge to the world of money, power, influence, and who knows, perhaps even convincing arrogance.

The more provincial character of Cambridge may also mask its high quality, at least at first. There is no buzz there, no ferment, no crackle of intellectual excitement. It is a very quiet sort of place for a leading intellectual centre, but if one looks and listens very closely, one discovers that it is packed with brilliant people. Consequently, with a little effort the relatively assured graduate student or a post-doctoral researcher can arrange a great deal of intellectual stimulation, all of it delivered in a very calm manner, mind you, no dashing to the barricades.

I know much less about the life of undergraduates, but I assume that they fare very well indeed intellectually, in a quiet kind of way. The ones that I knew shared a common interest in theatre, which I discovered is a Cambridge subculture that feeds talent constantly to the British stage and television. The people involved in it were bright, flamboyant, sensitive, and irritating, certain that they could make everything all right on the night and starting every show under-rehearsed by at least five days. Tutors invariably would tell the really serious ones

in the middle of their second year that they had to give up theatre. And indeed they did. Sometimes for as much as a week. They were not there for English, maths or history; like Griff Rhys Jones, the star of the crop from my first stay at the university, they were there for theatre. The problem is that Cambridge, one of the country's great drama schools, does not, in fact, teach the subject. And that, of course, raises some fascinating questions about the whole teaching process, doesn't it?

Another question, which may be more vital for Cambridge today, is how to remain first-class in stringent times. Unquestionably, a great university devours gargantuan amounts of money, and if less comes from the government, more must come from elsewhere – most likely from alumni, foundations, corporations, or all three.

I understand British reluctance to talk about money, to say nothing of asking for it, but the time has come for new approaches. I get more pleas for support from my secondary school than I get from Cambridge, which is, of course, easily done inasmuch as I get none from Cambridge. The secondary school nailed me by phone one time. When I answered, there was a lovely, sweet teenybopper voice (my school is co-ed now). I became instantly charming in what I imagined was an old worldly sort of way. A mistake; it cut off my retreat, and 'zap', she stuck it to me. That evening I wrote a cheque for \$10.00; mingy, I admit. It was the least I could negotiate and still maintain any shred of my Maurice Chevalier image. Nevertheless, the contribution is on the record, helping to prove to big foundation and corporate donors that the alumni care.

I hear the cries, oh Lord, I hear them. 'Crass! Awful! Chicago, what would you expect!' and so on. Well, of course, the approach might have to be changed a bit for local taste. Even a different medium might be needed, considering British and particularly Cantabrigian suspicion that the telephone is the Devil's device and certainly an unsatisfactory means of communication, especially compared with little notes left in pigeon holes.

Mail is not nearly as effective, but it can be used also. If you are ever worried about a lonely old age, enroll in an American university. You will receive letters for the rest of your life, begging letters, but still it's mail. Go to Cambridge, and if you pay a small fee you will get a very nice magazine called *Cambridge*, which, however, has not one request anywhere for help for the university, much less an envelope in which a small remembrance might be sent back. Perhaps alumni support does not have the same significance in the UK as in the US, but it can't hurt. Furthermore, universities and government clearly need to work out some new arrangements. Certainly the Cambridge alumni, who are among the most influential people in Britain, can help that process.

I hope that they do and that it endures, that beautiful, idiosyncratic, delightful Cambridge of ours. Surely it must. It might even prevail, as Faulkner said ... 'With a little bit of bloomin' luck, as Doolittle said.