EDWARD THOMAS

OXFORD

Edward Thomas

Oxford

EAN 8596547220855

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

ON ENTERING OXFORD

CHAPTER I

ON ENTERING OXFORD

Table of Contents

PASSING rapidly through London, with its roar of causes that have been won, and the suburbs, where they have no causes, and skirting the willowy Thames,—glassy or silver, or with engrailed grey waves—and brown ploughlands, elm-guarded, solitary, I approached Oxford. Nuneham woods made one great shadow on the land, one great shadow on the Thames. According to an old custom, it rained. But rain takes away nothing from Oxford save a few nice foot passengers. It transmutes the Franciscan habit of the city to a more Dominican cast; and if the foil of sky be faintly lighted, the rain becomes a visible beatitude.

One by one the churches of St. Mary the Virgin and All Saints', and the pleasant spire of the Cathedral, appear; with the dome of the Radcliffe Camera, Tom Tower of Christ Church, and that old bucolic tower of Robert d'Oigli's castle on the west. For a minute several haystacks, a gasometer, and the engine smoke replace them. But already that one cameo from[Pg 20] February's hand has painted and lit and garnished again that city within the heart, which is Oxford. I think, when I see an old woodcut of a patron holding his towered foundation in his hand, about to bestow it as a gift, —as William of Wykeham is depicted, holding Winchester,— that even so Oxford gives to us the stones of church and college, the lawns and shrubs of gardens, and the waters of

Isis, to be stored in the chambers of the soul—“Mother of Arts!”

> Mother of arts
> And eloquence, native to famous wits
> Or hospitable, in her sweet recess
> City or suburban, studious walks and shades.

So ran my thoughts and Milton’s verse; and possessed, as it is easy to become in such a place, with its great beauty, thinking of its great renown, my mind went naturally on in the channel of that same stream of verse, while I saw the Christ Church groves, the Hinksey Hills, and the grey Isis —

> See there the olive grove of Academe,
> Plato’s retirement, where the Attic bird
> Trills her thick-warbled notes the Summer long;
> There, flowery hill, Hymettus, with the sound
> Of bees’ industrious murmur, oft invites
> To studious musing; there Ilissus rolls
> His whispering stream.

But the dark entry to the city, on the western side, suddenly changed my thoughts. It is well known. It is the most contemptible in Europe. It consists of a hoarding, a brewery, and suitable appurtenances. Of more recent date is the magnificent marmalade shop,[Pg 21] the most conspicuous building in Oxford. On the north and east the approach is not worse, consisting, as it does, of sermons in brick, arranged in perfectly successful imitation of Tooting. On the south the fields are melancholy in apprehension of a

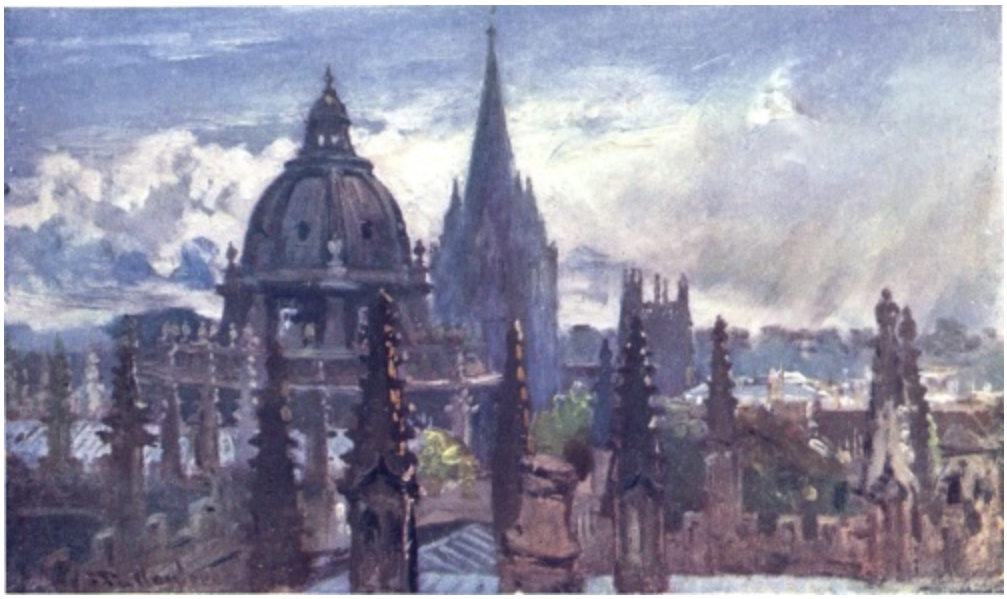
similar fate. In short, one ignorant of the city might believe that he was approaching the hub of the universe.

Then, the Norman tower appeared again, and the afforested castle mound rose up. A bell, and many bells, began to sound. The present vanished in charge of a westward-going motor car, containing three gentlemen with cigars and a lady; and the past, softer than the cooing of doves and more compelling than organ music, came with the twilight from the tower of St. Michael’s church.

At sunset or at dawn the city’s place in the world, as a beautiful thing, is clearest. Few cities look other than sad at those hours; many, unless hid in their own smoke, look cheap. Oxford becomes part of the magic of sunset and dawn,—is, as it were, gathered into the bosom of the power that is abroad. Yet, if it is one with the hills and the clouds and the silence, the human dignity of the place is also significant. The work of the ancient architect conspires with that of the sunset and of long, pregnant tracts of time; and I know not whether to thank, for the beauty of the place, its genius or perhaps the divinest series of accidents that have ever agreed to foster the forward-looking designs of men. In the days when what is admirable in Oxford was built, the builder made no pretence to[Pg 22] please his neighbour. He made what he loved. In many cases he was probably indifferent to everything else. But the genius of the place took care; and only the recent architects who have endeavoured to work in harmony with the place have failed. There is a gentle and puissant harmonising influence in Oxford which nothing can escape. I am no lover of Georgian architecture and am often blind to the power of Wren; but in

Oxford I have no such incapacities; and I believe that here architecture should be judged, not as Norman or classical, as the work of Wolsey or Aldrich, but as Oxford architecture. The library at Christ Church, or any other work of the eighteenth century, seems to me as divine a thing, though as yet it lacks the complete unction of antiquity, as Mob Quad at Merton or Magdalen Tower. To pass from the Norman work of St. Peter's in the East to the Palladianism of Peckwater quadrangle, is but to descend from one to another of the same honourable race. If certain extremely new edifices wear out a thousand years they will probably be worthy of reverence at the end of that time, and be in harmony with Merton chapel and Balliol hall at once. Nothing is so deserving, few things so exacting, of respect, from transitory men as age. Things change, and improvements are questioned or questionable; but, for me, age is as good as an improvement; and Oxford honours what is old with particular dignities and graces; under her influence the work of age is at once blander and more swift.

But this gentle tyranny,—as of the Mother of[Pg 24][Pg 23]



OXFORD, FROM THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE

On the extreme left of the picture shows the roof of the Schools; the dome of the Radcliffe Library, St. Mary’s tower and spire, and Merton tower, occupying the centre of the picture.

To the right, over part of Brasenose College, are the elm trees of the Broad Walk. In the foreground are the pinnacles and roof of the Bodleian Library.

The view is from the Cupola of the Sheldonian Theatre, looking south on a stormy day.

[Pg 27][Pg 26][Pg 25]

Christ, who, in Leonardo’s picture, unites angel and holy child and St. John with outspread hands,—is exerted not only upon the stones, but also upon the people of the place. A man may at Oxford rejoice in the company of another whom it is a self-sacrifice to meet elsewhere. He finds himself marvelling that one who was merely a gentleman in London can be interesting in Long Wall Street or on the Cherwell. The superb, expensive young man who thinks that there is “practically nobody in Oxford”—the poor, soiled scholar—

the exuberant, crimson-lipped athlete, whose stride is a challenge, his voice a trumpet call—the lean and larded æsthete, busily engaged upon the quaint designs of oriental life,—all discover some point in common when they are seen together in the Schools, or on the riverside.

I was never more effectually reminded of this Oxford magic than when I heard the City Band playing opposite University one day. I was indifferent, and for the time ignorant and incapable of knowing, whether the music was that of Wagner or Sousa. It seemed to me the music of Apollo, certainly of some one grander than all grand composers. And yet, as I was informed, what I had entirely loved was from an inferior opera which every street boy can improve.

It was another music, and yet symphonious, that I heard, when I came again to Addison’s Walk at Magdalen. I stopped at Magdalen cloisters on my way[Pg 28]—

> O blessed shades! O gentle cool retreat
> From all th’ immoderate Heat
> In which the frantic World does burn and
> sweat!—

Let any one who has laughed at Oxford discipline, or criticised her system of education, go there in the morning early and be abased before the solemnity of that square lawn; and should he be left with a desire to explain anything, let him take up his abode with the stony mysterious beasts gathered around that lawn. I like that grass amidst the cloisters because it is truly common. No one, I hope and believe, except a gardener, an emblem, is permitted to walk thereon. It belongs to me and to you and to the angels. Such an emerald in such a setting is a fit symbol of the university, and its privy seal.

It is still unnecessary to pass an examination before entering Addison’s walk. It is therefore unfrequented. A financier made a pretty sum one Midsummer-day by accepting gratuities from all the strangers who came to its furthest point—“a custom older than King Alfred.” But, although they are not vulgarly so called, these walks are the final school of the Platonist. It is an elucidation of the Phædo to pace therein. That periwinkle-bordered pathway is the place of long thoughts that come home with circling footsteps again and again. It is the home of beech and elm, and of whatsoever that is beautiful and wise and stately dwells among beech and elm.

More than one college history is linked with a tree. [Pg 30][Pg 29]Lincoln College reverently entreats the solitary

plane

BISHOP HEBER’S TREE

To the left are seen the steps leading to the Radcliffe Library, over which appears a portion of the buildings of Brasenose College, divided by a lane from the gardens of Exeter College, in which the Bishop planted the chestnut tree named after him.

The spire of Exeter Chapel shows to the right. The iron railings surround the Radcliffe Library.

[Pg 33][Pg 32][Pg 31]

tree. William of Waynfleet commanded that Magdalen College should be built over against the oak that fell after six hundred years of life a century ago. Sir Thomas White was “warned in a dream” to build a college at a place where there stood a triple elm tree. Hence arose St. John’s College. Two hundred years ago the tree was known to exist, and there is ground for the pious belief that a scion still flourishes there.

Nowhere is green so wonderful as at Magdalen or Trinity. But their sweetness is no more than the highest expression

of the privacy of Oxford. Turn aside at the gate that lies nearest your path; enter; and you will find a cloister or cloistral calm, free from wolf and ass. “The walks at these times,” said a vacation visitor, “are so much one’s own—the tall trees of Christ’s, the groves of Magdalen! The halls deserted, and with open doors inviting one to slip in unperceived, and pay a devoir to some Founder, or noble or royal Benefactress (that should have been ours) whose portrait seems to smile upon their overlooked beadsman and to adopt me for their own. Then, to take a peep in by the way at the butteries, and sculleries, redolent of antique hospitality; the immense caves of kitchens, kitchen fire-places, cordial recesses; ovens where the first pies were baked four centuries ago; and spits which have cooked for Chaucer! Not the meanest minister among the dishes but is hallowed to me through his imagination, and the Cook goes forth a Manciple.” With a little effrontery and an English accent you may enjoy the inmost bowers of the Fellows[Pg 34] or, *Si qua est ea gloria*, gather fruit from the espaliers of the president. The walls are barricaded only with ivy, or wallflower, or the ivy-leaved toadflax and its delicate bells. But the stranger never learns that the seclusion of Oxford is perennial, and that only in the vacations may he suffer from what the old pun calls *porta eburna*. The place is habitually almost deserted, except by the ghosts of the dead. Returning to it, when friends are gone, and every one is a stranger, the echoes of our footsteps in the walls are as the voices of our dead selves; we are among the ghosts; the past is omnipotent, even terrible. Echoes, quotes Montaigne, are the spirits of the dead, and among these

mouldering stones we may put our own interpretation upon that. And no one that has so returned, or that comes a reverent stranger for the first time to Oxford, can read without deep intelligence the lines which are put into the mouth of Lacordaire in “Ionica”:—

> Lost to the Church and deaf to me, this town
> Yet wears the reverend garniture of peace.
> Set in a land of trade, like Gideon’s fleece
> Bedewed where all is dry; the Pope may frown;
> But, if this city is the shrine of youth,
> How shall the Preacher lord of virgin souls,
> When by glad streams and laughing lawns he strolls,
> How can he bless them not? Yet in sad sooth,
> When I would love those English gownsmen, sighs
> Heave my frail breast, and weakness dims mine eyes.
> These strangers heed me not—far off in France
> Are young men not so fair, and not so cold,
> My listeners. Were they here, their greeting glance
> Might charm me to forget that I were old.

Some time ago I went into a grey quadrangle, filled[Pg 35] with gusty light and the crimson of creeper-leaves, tremulous or already in flight. A tall poplar, the favourite of the months from April to October, was pensively distributing its foliage upon the grass. There, the leaves became invisible, because of brilliant frost, and in a high attic I heard

once again the laud or summons or complaint of bells. That was All Saints’; that, St. Mary’s; that, the Cathedral’s; and that was their blended after-tone, seeming to come from the sky. Each bell had its own character or mood, sometimes constant, sometimes changing with the weather of the night. One, for example, spoke out sullenly and ceased, as if to return to musing that had been painfully interrupted. Another bell seemed to take deep joy in its frequent melodious duty—like some girl seated alone in her bower at easy toil, now and then lifting her head, and with her embroidery upon her knee, chanting joys past and present and yet to come. Once again I felt the mysterious pleasure of being in an elevated Oxford chamber at night, among cloud and star,—so that I seemed to join in the inevitable motion of the planets,—and as I saw the sea of roofs and horned turrets and spires I knew that, although architecture is a dead language, here at least it speaks strongly and clearly, pompous as Latin, subtle as Greek. I used to envy the bell-ringers on days of ancient festival or recent victory, and cannot wonder that old Anthony à Wood should have noted the eight bells of Merton as he came home from antiquarian walks, and would often ring those same bells “for recreatio[Pg 36]n’s sake.” When their sound is dead it is sweet to enter that peacefullest and homeliest of churchyards, St. Peter’s in the East, overlooked by St. Edmund’s Hall and Queen’s College and the old city wall. There is a peace which only the thrush and blackbird break, and even their singing is at length merely the most easily distinguishable part of the great melody of the place. Most of the graves are so old or so forgotten that it is easy—and

in Spring it is difficult not—to perceive a kind of dim reviving life among the stones, where, as in some old, quiet books, the names live again a purged and untroubled existence.

In Oxford nothing is the creation of one man or of one year. Every college and church and garden is the work of centuries of men and time. Many a stone reveals an octave of colour that is the composition of a long age. The founder of a college laid his plans; in part, perhaps he fixed them in stone. His successors continued the work, and without haste, without contempt of the future or ignorance of the past, helped the building to ascend unto complete beauty by means of its old and imperfect selves. The Benedictine Gloucester House of 1283 has grown by strange methods into the Worcester College of to-day. The Augustinian Priory site is now occupied by Wadham. St. Alban’s Hall is no more; but its lamp—“Stubbin’s moon”—is a light in a recess of Merton. Wolsey drew upon the bank of old foundations for the munificence which is still his renown. A chantry for the comfort of departed souls became a kind of scholarship.[Pg 38][Pg 37]

ST. EDMUND’S HALL

The picture shows the north wall of the Hall, pierced with windows looking on to the graveyard of St. Peter’s in the East.

The confused mass of chimneys and dormer windows give a picturesque appearance to this side of the Hall.

New College Gardens lie beyond the wall running across the picture.

[Pg 41][Pg 40][Pg 39]

Duke Humphrey’s library was the nest from which Bodley’s august collection overflowed; the very timber of the Bodleian was in part Merton’s gift. No city preserves the memory and signature of so many men. The past and the dead have here, as it were, a corporate life. They are an influence, an authority; they create and legislate to-day. Everything in the present might have been foretold, and in fact existed in some latent form, in the past, as Merlin was said to have foretold the migration of Oxford scholars from

Cricklade, *i.e.* Greeklade. Therefore, in Oxford alone, as I walk, I seem to be in the living past. The oldest thing is not as in most places a curiosity. Since it is told of Oxford, the story is not lightly to be discredited, that Ludovicus Vives, who was sent as professor of rhetoric by Wolsey, was welcomed by a swarm of bees, and that they, “to signify the incomparable sweetness of his eloquence,” settled under the leads of his study at Corpus Christi College, and there for a hundred and thirty years continued, until they dispersed out of sorrow for the fallen Stuart family. When dawn arrives to the student, after a night among books, and the towers and spires seem to be just fresh from the acting of some stately drama; or at nightfall, when the bells ring as he comes, joyful and tired, home from the west,—then the city and all its component ages speak out, as if the past were but a fine memory, richly stored and ordered.

Once, answering the call of one of those bells that are to a scholar as a trumpet to a soldier, I found[Pg 42] myself at a service that had in it elements older than Oxford. I was surely at a Greek festival. The genial, flushed, slightly grotesque faces of the College fellows contrasted with the white children of the choir, very much as the swarthy faun with the young god in Titian’s “Bacchus and Ariadne.” The notes of the choristers and of the organ were moulded to finer results by the severe decorations of the carven stone around and above. When one sang alone, it was as it had been a dove floating to the windows and away, away. There were parts of the music so faint and so exquisitely blended that the twenty voices were but as the sound of a reverberating bell. A voice of baser metal read the lesson

with a melancholy dignity that made the words at once pleasing and unintelligible. When the last surplice had floated past the exit, the worshippers looked a little pained and confused, as if doubting whether they had not assisted some beautiful rash heresy. Turning into High Street, I was rudely called back from a fantastic visit to Tempe, by the wind and rain of every day. The usual pageant of study and pleasure was passing up and down.

Here was a smiling gentleman, red as the opening morn, with black clothes, white tie,—one who scoffs at everything but gout. He notes in the fragrance of his favourite dishes omens of greater import than augurs used to read from sacrificial victims.

Here was a pale seraph, his eyes commercing with the sky. He has taken every possible prize. Nobody but his friends can think that he is uninteresting.[Pg 43]

Here was a little, plain-featured, gentle ascetic, one of the “last enchantments of the middle ages” that are to be seen still walking about Oxford. Five hundred years ago he might have ridden, “coy as a maid,” to Canterbury and told “the clerk of Oxford’s tale.” Now, the noises of the world are too much for him, and he murmurs among his trees—

> How safe, methinks, and strong behind
> These trees have I encamped my mind,
> Where beauty aiming at the heart,
> Bends in some tree its useless dart,
> And where the world no certain shot
> Can make, or me it toucheth not,
> But I on it securely play,
> And gall its horsemen all the day.

Bind me, ye woodbines in your twines.
Curl me about, ye gadding vines,
And oh so close your circles lace,
That I may never leave this place!

Here was a youth not much past seventeen. In his face the *welt schmerz* contends with the pride in his last *bon mot*. He is a wide and subtle reader; he has contributed to the halfpenny press. He has materialised spirits and moved objects at a distance. In the world, there is little left for him except repose and weak tea.

Here was one that might be a monk and might equally well be St. Michael, with flashing eyes and high white forehead that catches a light from beyond the dawn and glows. He is a splendour among men as he walks in the crowd of high churchmen, low churchmen, broad churchmen, nonconformists, and men who on Sunday wear bowler hats.[Pg 44]

Here was a shy don, married to Calliope—a brilliant companion—one who shares a wisdom as deep and almost as witty as Montaigne’s, with a few fellows of colleges, and ever murmuring “Codex.”

Here was one, watched over alike by the Muses and the Graces; honey-tongued; athletic; who would rather spend a life in deciding between the Greek and Roman ideals than in ruling Parliament and being ruled by society. He strode like a Plantagenet. When he stood still he was a classical Hermes.

Here was a Blue “with shy but conscious look”; and there the best of all Vices.

Here was a youth, with gaudy tie, who believed that he was leading a bull-dog, but showed a wise acquiescence in

the intricate canine etiquette. May his dog not cease before him.

Here was a martial creature, walking six miles an hour, pensively, in his master’s gown. His beard, always blown over his shoulder, has been an inspiration to generations of undergraduates, and, with his bellying gown, gives him a resemblance to Boreas or Notus.

Probably because the able novelist has not visited Oxford, men move about its streets more naïvely and with more expression in their faces than anywhere else in the world. There you may do anything but carry a walking-stick. (As I write, fashion has changed her mind, and walking-sticks of the more flippant kinds are commonly in use.) There are therefore more unmasked faces in half of Turl Street than in the whole of the Strand. Almost every one appears to have[Pg 45] a sense of part proprietorship in the city; walks as if he were in his own garden; has no fear lest he should be caught smiling to himself, or, as midnight approaches, even singing loudly to himself. A don will not hesitate to make the worst joke in a strong and cheerful voice in the bookseller’s shop, when it is full of clever freshmen.

Yonder they go, the worldly and the unworldly, the rich and poor, high and low, proving that Oxford is one of the most democratic places in Europe. The lax discipline that broadens the horizon of the inexpert stranger is probably neither unwise nor unpremeditated. It is certainly not inconsistent with the genius of a city whose very stones may be supposed to have acquired an educative faculty, and a sweet presence that is not to be put by. No fool ever

went up without becoming at least a coxcomb before he came down. In no place are more influences brought to bear upon the mind, though it is emphatically a place where a man is expected to educate himself. A man is apt to feel on first entering Oxford, and still more on leaving it, that the beautiful city is unfortunate in having but mortal minds to teach. There is a keen and sometimes pathetic sense of a great music which one cannot wholly follow, a light unapprehended, a wisdom not realised. Yet much is to be guessed at or privily understood, when we behold St. Mary's spire, marvellously attended, and crowned, when the night is one sapphire, by Cassiopeia. And the ghosts take shape—the cowled, mitred, mail-coated, sceptred company of founders,[Pg 46] benefactors, master-masons, scholars, philosophers, and the later soldiers, poets, statesmen, and wits, and finally some one, among the rich in influence of yesterday, who embodies for one or another of us the sweetness of the place.

For me, when the first splendour of the city in my imagination has somewhat grown dim, I see in the midst and on high, a room, little wider than the thickness of its walls, which were part stone, part books; for the books fitted naturally into the room, leaving spaces only for a bust of Plato, a portrait of Sir Thomas Browne, a decanter, and a window commanding sky and clouds and stars above an horizon of many towers. There, too, is a great fire; a dowager brown teapot; with a pair of slippers,—and to get into them was no whit less magical than into the seven-league boots. I see a chair also, where a man might sit, curled, with the largest folio and be hidden. I guess at the

face of the man under the folio. He was a small, shrunken, elvish figure, with a smile like the first of June often budding in a face like the last of December. In rest, that face was grim as if carved in limestone; in expression, like waters in Spring. His curled, ebony hair had a singular freshness and hint of vitality that gave the lie to his frail form and husky voice. Cut in wood, the large nose and chin, peering forward, would have served well as the figure-head of a merry ship, and to me he seemed indeed to travel on such a ship towards a land that no other man desires. His talk was ever of men, fighting, ploughing, singing; and how fair women be;[Pg 48][Pg 47]

THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF ST. MARY

The podium and part of one of the Doric columns of the Canterbury Gate of Christ Church show at the extreme left of the picture.

The lantern of the Radcliffe Library appears between the column and the picturesque house covered with greenery, above which rises the tower and spire of St. Mary’s, the University Church.

Between this house and a lower building—St. Mary’s Hall—runs St. Mary’s Hall Lane, emerging into “the High” opposite the porch of St. Mary’s Church.

The buildings on the extreme right of the picture are those belonging to Oriel College.

[Pg 51][Pg 50][Pg 49]

with jests and fancies that disenthroned all powers except fantasy and adventure and mirth. Out of doors, at Yarnton or Cumnor or Tew, he seemed near kinsman to the sun and the south wind, so that for a time we were one with them, with a sense of mystery and of pride. And, whether in or out of doors, he loved the night, because her hands were soft, and he found the shadows *infernis hilares sine regibus*, as in the world of Saturn. He would hail the morn as he saw her from a staircase window with “Sweet cousin” and such follies; and would go into the chapel on summer evenings without a candle to see prophet and apostle lit by the tender beam. He wrote, and never printed, much verse. When I look at it now, I wonder in what language it was conceived, and where the key is hidden, and by what shores and forests to-day, men speak or dream it. The verses seem to maturer eyes but as crude translations out of silence. Yet in the old days we called him sometimes the Last, sometimes the

First, of the Bards, so nimble and radiant was his spirit. He seemed one that might have written *Tamerlane* in his youth, after a pot of sack with Shakespeare at the “Crown” in Cornmarket Street. I know not whether to call him immemorially old or young. He had touches of the golden age, and as it were a tradition from the singer who was in that ship which

> First through the Euxine seas bore all the flower of Greece.

Unlike other clever people in Oxford he was brilliant [Pg 52]in early morning; would rise and talk and write at dawn,—go a-maying,—sing hunting ditties amid the snow to the leaden east and the frozen starlings, by Marston or above Wytham and Eynsham. His laugh fell upon our ears like an echo from long-forgotten, Arcadian existences; it was in harmony with the songs of thrushes and the murmur of the Evenlode. Coming into his room we expected to see a harp at his side. But where are the voices that we heard and uttered?—

> Are they exiled out of stony breasts,
> Never to make return?

Once more is the blackbird’s fluting a mystery save that it speaks of him, last of the Bards.

“Beautiful Mother,” he sang, to Oxford, “too old not to be sad, too austere to look sad and to mourn! Sometimes thou art young to my eyes because thy children are always young, and for a little while it was a journey to youth itself to visit thee. More often, not only art thou old and austere,

but thy fresh and youthful children seem to have learned austerity and the ways of age, for love of thee, graciously apparelling their youth,—so that I have met old Lyly in Holywell, and Johnson at the Little Clarendon Street bookshop, and Newman by Iffley rose-window,—with their age taken away, by virtue of a mellower light upon thy lawns and a mellower shade under thy towers, than other cities. Or have I truly heard thee weep when the last revelry is quiet, and the scholar by his lamp sees thee as thou wast and wilt be, and the moonlight has her will with the spires and gardens?[Pg 54][Pg 53]

IFFLEY CHURCH FROM THE SOUTH-EAST

The massive Norman tower of the Church shows to the left of the picture, the chancel extending eastward to the right.

A yew tree—perhaps of the same age as the Church—covers part of the building, serving to throw into relief the remains of a cross, the shaft and base of which are ancient.

[Pg 57][Pg 56][Pg 55]

Oh, to the sad how pleasant thy age, to the joyous how admirable thy youth! Yet to the wise, perhaps, thou art neither young nor old, but eternal; and not so much beautiful as Beauty herself, masked as Cybele! And perhaps, oh sweet and wise and solemn mother, thou wilt not hear unkindly thy latest froward courtier, or at least will let him pass unnoticed, since one that speaks of thee,

> “Cannot dispraise without a kind of praise.”

Or will it more delight thee to be praised in a tongue that is out of time, as thou seemest out of space and time?—

> “Vive Midae gazis et Lydo ditior auro
> Troica et Euphratea super diademata felix,
> Quem non ambigui fasces, non mobile vulgus,
> Non leges, non castra tenent, qui pectore magno
> Spemque metumque domas. Nos, vilia turba, caducis
> Deservire bonis semperque optare parati,
> Spargimur in casus. Celsa tu mentis ab arce
> Despicis errantes, humanaque gaudia rides.”
> [Pg 59][Pg 58]

[Pg 60]
[Pg 61]
[Pg 62]

THE STONES OF OXFORD

Table of Contents

TOM TOWER, CHRIST CHURCH COLLEGE

The palisade enclosing the graveyard of St. Aldate’s Church is on the left; some of the buildings of Pembroke College appear to the right.

The gateway in the centre of the picture is the west entrance to Christ Church from St. Aldate’s, and leads into the Fountain Quadrangle. The tower, to the level of the finial of the ogee-headed window, is of the date of Wolsey’s foundation; the remaining part was added by Sir Christopher Wren.

[Pg 65][Pg 64][Pg 63]

CHAPTER II

THE STONES OF OXFORD

Table of Contents

> Quia lapis de pariete clamabit, et lignum,
> quod inter juncturas aedificiorum est,
> respondebit.

STANDING at Carfax, and occasionally moving a step to one side or another, I see with my eyes, indeed, the west front of Christ Church, with Tom Tower; the borders of All Saints' and St. Mary's; and that grim tower of St. Michael's; and the handsome curves of High Street and St. Aldate's, which are part of the mere good fortune of Oxford: but, especially if a dawn light recall the first dim shining, or a sunset recall the grey and golden splendour of its maturity, I may also see the past of the University unrolled again. For at Carfax I am in sight of monuments on which is implied or recorded all its history. On the south, above Folly Bridge, is the gravelly reach that formed the eponymous ford; between that and Christ Church was the old south gate; and, through Wolsey's gateway, lies the Cathedral, speaking of St. Frideswide, the misty, original founder,—King's daughter, virgin, martyr, saint,—and, with its newly revealed Norman crypt, which perhaps[Pg 66] held the University chest in the beginning, representative of Oxford's piety and generosity. On the east, in the High Street, University College and St. Mary's and Brasenose speak clearly, although falsely, of King Alfred. There, by St. Peter's in the East, was the old east gate; and

in sight of these is Merton, the fount of the collegiate idea. On the north, in Cornmarket Street, St. Michael’s marks the place of the north gate, and while it is one of the oldest, is by far the oldest-looking place in Oxford, rising up always to our surprise, like a piece of substantial night left by the dark ages, yet clothed with green in June. On the west, the Castle tower, twin made with St. Michael’s by the first Norman lord of Oxford, lies by the old west gate; and the quiet, monstrous mound beyond recalls the days of King Alfred’s daughter’s supremacy in Mercia. At Carfax itself there is still a St. Martin’s church, a descendant of the one whose bells in the Middle Ages and again in the seventeenth century, called the city to arms against the University, but long ago deprived of its insolent height of tower, because the citizens pelted the scholars therefrom.

Moved by the presence of a city whose strange beauty was partly interpreted from these vigorous hieroglyphics, mediæval and later men, who had the advantage of living before history was invented, framed for it a divine or immensely ancient origin. Even kings, or such as quite certainly existed, were deemed unworthy to be the founders. We believe now that the first mention of Oxford was as an inconsiderable[Pg 68][Pg 67]