

Oxford

I attended University College, Oxford, between 1968 and 1970.

Oxford is, of course, a Famous University. When I tell people that I went there I do so with a certain tone of voice, signalling a rarely disappointed expectation that I will receive something other than a non-committal response. Oxford has been written about, pictured, and spoken about since the 11th Century. John Dougill's "*Oxford in English Literature: the Making, and Undoing, of 'The English Athens'*" provides an elegant and perceptive account of what has been written about Oxford by English writers. Google books contains [substantial extracts](#). The main themes are as expected: dreaming spires, lost causes, social exclusiveness and openness to talent, town and gown, academic mediocrity and excellence, male sequestration and the belated admission of women.

Dougill reminds us of the characteristic form of the Oxford Novel: a [bildungsroman](#) in which the hero leaves home, finds a mentor, goes through trials, makes mistakes, suffers and learns, looks back usually with nostalgia. My experience and my memory of Oxford have both been influenced by this aspect of its literary image. But Dougill also gives Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* its appropriate centrality in any account of writing about Oxford. Hardy's dark tale of disappointment and exclusion exposes the sentimentality and self-indulgence of the Oxford bildungsroman and the Oxford mythos of which it is a part. I have tried to keep it in mind in writing my own account.

University College had an elaborate latin grace, performed jointly by a scholar in the body of the hall and one of the dons at high table. [Here](#) is a link to a page on the college web site which gives the latin text, an english translation, and a sound file of the latin version. The scholar in the sound file sounds a bit older than most scholars were in my time, and perhaps a bit more fluent in latin. Perhaps a classics don or tutor, filling in. I am not sure how often my turn came around to participate in saying the grace, or whether I had it memorised.

Winning a scholarship or an exhibition to Oxford was the assigned task in my last year at school. These awards provided prestige and an amount of money that was anything but trivial. Mr Hook, the English teacher, advised me on which college to try for. I believe he must have had some connection with University College. I think there was an exam, which required the writing of essays with set topics more general in nature than I was used to from my A levels, and an interview at the college, which probably depended on doing well enough in the exam. I remember arriving in Oxford by train, and walking from the station to the college where I was to stay overnight. It must have been in one of the vacations because there were only a few students. I remember enjoying the food and the ambiance. The interview itself, with a line of dons behind a wooden table, I remember as less alarming than it might have been. It wasn't that I was indifferent or that I didn't expect to succeed, but somehow I had let go of the outcome and was simply doing what I could. I don't remember when or where I found out that I had been successful and there is no mention of it in any of the surviving

letters to my parents.

My rooms were at the top of a flight of stairs close to the main gate of the college. This picture(tbi) suggests that they were on the third floor. The stairs were wooden and very worn. On returning to the college years later, I looked at them from the bottom, but obeyed the rules in not climbing them. They still looked wooden and worn. Usually I was able to ascend and descend them in good order but I do remember crawling up them a few times. There were half a dozen or so other students with rooms on the same staircase, whose names one might know, and with whom their might be tension arising out of differing tastes in music played late at night. However the buildings were old and solid and the walls relatively sound-proof, so I remember nothing of that kind of friction.

Scouts were college servants, men generally of middle age who cooked and cleaned and looked after college room. "Scout" is the word used at oxford - at Cambridge it is "gyp", and at Dublin "skip". Students spoke of "my" scout, somewhat as in an earlier age they would have spoken of "my" valet or "my" butler. The relationship was less personal than that as scouts had charge of more than one room, or perhaps more than one staircase, but its nature would have to be understood in the context of the English class system and history of domestic service, and of the particular form these took in the ancient universities, were traditionally "town" was at the service of "gown", people like the scouts dependant on people like the students. Were they more or less happy with the situation? Some of them, certainly, but not all, as certainly.

I am not sure what the scout actually did in one's room. I don't believe he cleaned it as the maid cleans a hotel room – or perhaps he did. There was tension in one's relationship with one's scout, with various sources: financial, as tipping them was somewhere between a possibility and an expectation, and also arising from the scout's dual relationship with the student and the college. For those of us who used drugs in our rooms, and regarded the college as protected space from the threat of the police, the scout was a threat, as he might report the presence of funny cigarettes or what is now described as "drug paraphernalia" to the college authorities (I wonder when that phrase first arose – probably in a court room or police report).

The overnight presence of women was also proscribed, so that a visit by a scout early in the morning could be embarrassing. Risks that might have been mitigated by generous tipping, never my practice. I have the impression some scouts were more friendly than others, and that students had some degree of control over access to their rooms. Also that the college wasn't really interested either in drugs or in women: that in both cases, it preferred not to know, within limits. Failure to turn up to my weekly tutorial, ready to read an essay, would have been a much quicker trigger for remedial action than private misbehaviour, and I almost always got my essays written on time.

Overnight women were infrequent in my room, but not unknown, and I don't remember any difficulties. Drug use was also relatively unusual as I usually went to other people's rooms to smoke or trip.

What about my relationship with “my” scout? As best I remember, it was neither close nor hostile. I certainly had a sense that he didn't regard me as highly as I would have wished. I probably had some theoretical/political disquiet about the structural relationship between us, but I wouldn't have examined it, as I preferred not to think about issues like that. John Dougill summarises a literary account of the relationship between students and scouts that does not ring true as an account of my relationship with my scout but that I would not dismiss out of hand either: I suspect I might have had a sense of failing to play my part in such an idealised relationship.

*“The bond between student and servant was strengthened following the introduction of the scout, for the daily contact and difference in class and age led in some instances to a father-substitute relationship not unlike that of Jeeves and Wooster...Student outrages are treated with benevolent understanding, especially if tips are generous, and the scouts serve their class superiors with unflinching loyalty. Working class conservatism meant that it was often the college servants who were the most concerned with maintaining traditions and standards; in *Brideshead Revisited* it is Ryder's scout who is the most upset by the intrusion in Eights Week of women into the college”*

When I arrived at the college for my first term I attended the usual welcoming functions for new students which were organised both on a university and on a college basis. I seem to remember the American term “freshman” as having been in use at the time to describe a first year student, although I also wonder if it could have been, and I am confident that we did not use “sophomore” and “senior” for second and third year students. I remember establishing a bank account, banks in those days being keen to establish relationships with students, and I remember signing up for an account at Blackwell's Bookshop, a facility I later abused. I probably still have some of the books I bought then, although I can't be sure as I have only rarely identified the circumstances in which I acquired books on their flyleaf. Candidates emerging from a quick look over the shelves include a two volume shorter OED, and an edition of the complete poems of Edmund Spenser, the specialty of my tutor, Peter Bayley (of whom more later).

Substances

The welcome I most clearly remember receiving when I arrived at the University took the form of free beer in the college bar. At the end of it I vomited, and (before and after vomiting) I crawled up the two flights of stairs leading to my room. It was a cellar bar, down a stairway from one of the college courtyards, which I visited only occasionally in my three years at Oxford. And although I would hesitate to say I was never again drunk, I can say with confidence that I wasn't often drunk. I smoked marijuana instead (and took LSD occasionally and amphetamine very occasionally) about which more later. This, in Britain at the time, was a political and ideological choice rather than just a matter of taste. Stoners (to use an anachronistic term which seems to have first been used in the 90s) regarded alcohol as an inferior drug, associated with conservatism, violence, their parents. When I arrived at the Australian

National University in Australia in the mid seventies I soon noticed that this was not the case, that marijuana smokers had no compunction about also using alcohol and I adjusted my own behaviour accordingly. At Oxford in the previous decade I might have had the occasional beer, but rarely if ever wine and never spirits.

At Oxford we generally smoked hashish rather than marijuana. Wikipedia defines hashish as follows:

***Hashish** (pronounced /hæˈfiːʃ/ or /ˈhæfiːʃ/) (from *Arabic*: حشيش *hashīsh*, lit. "grass", from *hashsha* "to become dry"; also *hash*) is a preparation of *annabis* composed of the compressed stalked resin glands called *trichomes*, collected from the *cannabis* plant. It contains the same active ingredients but in higher concentrations than other parts of the plant such as the buds or the leaves. Psychoactive effects are the same as those of other *cannabis* preparations such as marijuana. It is sometimes believed that the effects are different,^[*citation needed*] but those differences usually stem from variations between regionally different *Cannabis* specimens, that are more traditionally processed into hashish.*

Marijuana, which I have smoked since arriving in Australia, in the mid seventies, is the term I and others use to describe the dried leaves and flowers of the marijuana plant. The Wikipedia article is tagged as being considered by some to be unbalanced, as it may well be, but it is certainly also informative. The best writing about marijuana I have read is the chapter about it in Dale Pendell's "Pharmacopoeia", a book which many would also describe as unbalanced, meaning insufficiently condemnatory. Dale has also written about the Burning Man Festival and about Norman O'Brown. In the three volumes of *Pharmacopoeia* he writes about almost all the mind-altering drugs and places them in a wide range of contexts, including the botanical, pharmacological, medical, historical, cultural, anthropological and literary. He refers to the dangers of drug use and acknowledges its casualties, but his viewpoint is that of an intelligent user, a seeker, a traveller on what he calls the medicine way.

That was how we thought of our own drug use at the time. It was about understanding rather than forgetting. It made the things more interesting and provided energy to support close examination and wide-ranging speculation. What things in particular did it make more interesting? The obvious ones, listening to music, reading, talking, sex, eating; and for each of us probably some personal pleasures: in my case walking, punting on the rivers, writing critical essays to read to my tutor. I found that it worked well to embark on essays and do solid writing while stoned but that it was essential to leave time to edit and restructure and moderate after I had come down.

LSD was harder to come by than marijuana. We knew it was more powerful and more dangerous. I remember little orange pills, and drops of liquid on small squares of blotting paper. We understood that it was important to have a home base, a place you felt safe, where you might remain for the whole trip, or from which you might go out to see wonderful sights and encounter strange creatures. I used to enjoy going out while tripping. Appropriate music was important as music structured your perceptions and could calm you down if things became difficult. Mozart was helpful, and women's

voices. Music was essential in the “coming down” phase where you were sometimes vulnerable to paranoia. We tried to make sure there was someone around who wasn't tripping but had done so in the past, so they could provide support based on understanding if things went wrong.

LSD provided hallucinations. The visual field would writhe or vibrate, anything seen or heard would become intensely interesting, absorption and delight would seem the mind's natural state. These experiences arose through alteration in my normal structures of perception. It became clear that those structures of perception are contingent and that the world perceived through them is a construct, that there are other ways of seeing and other seen worlds. This was useful and I still believe it, and have other, perhaps better, reasons for believing it. Buddhist practice also dethrones the habitual world, more laboriously but more thoroughly. I still use drugs which probably indicates only a limited commitment to buddhist practice. “Zazen is Zazen, Sake is Sake”, some drunken Roshi is supposed to have said, but that is Zen: the Vipassana tradition which I follow does not allow such notions. [Here](#) is a link to a splendid Zen teaching in which, some way down the page, you will find a reference to a Zen teacher who knows good Sake. But there is no suggestion that he abuses it.

Hashish was easy to come by in Oxford in the late sixties, usually from or through another student dealing in a very small way, buying for himself and a few friends, sometimes collecting money to make a joint purchase. My friend Phillip Cherrill was one such. The dealers they bought from came from London and seemed exotic and a little bit dangerous. Hashish didn't seem cheap, but its price was not high enough to significantly constrain our usage. I haven't put my hands on any hashish for thirty years. I remember it as dark and sticky, leaving its scent on your fingers. It usually came wrapped in plastic or aluminium foil. You smoked it crumbled into tobacco in a joint, or on its own in a pipe. I smoked cigarettes in those days, most of us did, so tobacco was always on hand. I had a fine pipe with a silver bowl and mouthpiece joined by a wooden handle whose loss, years later in Australia, I still have not wholly accepted – I sustain a faint hope that it might turn up again, at the bottom of some cardboard box or suitcase.

Of course, drugs could bring delusions of hell as well as heaven. But in my case, that also had its value. I took two or three little orange tabs just before boarding a train to go visit a friend in another city, possibly Bath. This was an overdose, and taking it in those circumstances – away from home base, and without support – showed hubris, for which I was punished. When I arrived at my friend's address he wasn't home and his girlfriend proved less than delighted to find a stranger at the door who was sounding strange, behaving strangely, and expecting admission. In the end she let me in but remained understandably unhappy with the situation, which provided the worst possible environment for the “bad trip” that followed. It wasn't a matter of vulgar nightmares – I was visited by an absolute conviction that I was going to die and in consequence, by deep sadness linked with a frustrated need to say my last goodbyes to everyone I loved. At some level I did know this state of mind would pass, but that knowledge did nothing to diminish the intensity of the feeling and belief. “Timor

mortis conturbat me” in the phrase from the Office of the Dead that is used by a number of medieval English poets, most notably [William Dunbar](#) at the end of the Fifteenth Century. The flesh is bruckle, the feynd is slee.

Eventually my friend came home and took care of me, putting me on a train back home after the chemicals wore off. It turned out that his girlfriend didn't know a lot about his drug habits and disapproved of what she suspected. The bad trip, like the good ones, made it clear that the structures of perception are contingent. I did take that from the experience but not, unfortunately, any deep understanding that I was in fact about to die – eventually. I am still struggling to achieve that understanding now, forty years on.

The Legendary Sixties?

I was at university at the end of the sixties, a decade which, these days, some people remember with nostalgia and others with dismissive contempt. Those in the first group were (necessarily) alive at the time, those in the second apparently often not. What was happening, politically and culturally, in those years, and how much of it did I notice?

The least parochially north american history timeline I found on a quick web search is [here](#). It reminds one that for much of the world the sixties were reaching a climax only in a technical sense, requiring no inverted commas. Yasser Arafat becoming leader of the PLO, the completion of the Aswan High Dam, Colonel Quaddafi leading a coup in Libya, the deaths of Nasser and De Gaulle were all had nothing to do with “the sixties”.

However, I certainly saw myself then and remember myself now as an inhabitant of and a participant in “the sixties”. In his book on the decade Arthur Marwick writes:

...If asked to explain the fuss, both survivors of the decade and observers of the repeated attempts subsequently to conjure it up again could probably manage to put together a list of its most striking features, which might look something like this: black civil rights; youth culture and trend-setting by young people; idealism, protest and rebellion; the triumph of popular music based on Afro-American models and the emergence of this music as a universal language, with the Beatles as the heroes of the age; the search for inspiration in the religions of the Orient; massive changes in personal relationships and sexual behaviour; a general audacity and frankness in books and in the media, and in ordinary behaviour; relaxation in censorship; the new feminism; gay liberation; the emergence of 'the underground' and 'the counterculture'; optimism and genuine faith in the dawning of a better world.

He also says the period was characterised by what he describes as:

...the great Marxisant fallacy; the belief that the society we inhabit is the bad bourgeois society, but that, fortunately, this society is in a state of crisis, so that the good society which lies just around the corner can be easily attained if only we work systematically to destroy the language, the values, the culture, the

ideology of bourgeois society.

Marwick also notes, without entirely endorsing it, a distinction between cultural and political issues:

...sometimes commentators... make a distinction between the counter-culture and 'the Movement' or 'the New Left'. There is no rigid distinction, but in speaking of counter-culture the emphasis is on dress, general values, lifestyles, leisure activities, while in Speaking of the Movement or the new Left the preoccupation is entirely with those who were genuinely politically active and took part in protests and demonstrations.

If asked at the time, I would have pronounced myself in favour of most of the “striking features” listed in the first quotation from Marwick. However, my faith in the dawning of a better world was hesitant and I was not at all sure the good society lay just around the corner. My fundamental political orientation is now more or less libertarian. Thirty years of working for it as a public servant has lead me to believe that while necessary, the State is also necessarily and not just contingently an evil, and I may have inclined towards this view at the time.

I certainly saw myself as part of the counter-culture and not of the New Left. Although I would have been on the side of the students and workers and not the police if I had been in Paris during “[les Evenements de Mai](#)”, I did not participate in any of the relatively modest British demonstrations that took place in 1968 or 1969. The dimensions of that modesty are well captured in Marwick's citation of a report, based on questionnaires distributed at one of the major demonstrations (Grosvenor Square in March 1968) which concludes that “*there were more spectators than demonstrators*” and that “*the demonstration was characterised by 'non-militancy' and ...the chant of 'ho-ho-ho Chi Minh' was more like a US cheer-leader's chant than a call to revolution*”. Nor was Oxford at the centre of such political (or indeed cultural) militancy as there was in Britain. It does not even rate a mention in Marwick's index, and his 800 page book is nothing if not exhaustive.

I have written about my musical tastes elsewhere. My reading life fell into three parts. The English syllabus at Oxford included English literature from Beowulf to – I am not sure exactly when, perhaps the early twentieth century. I was a lazy student in that I rarely attended lectures, but I conscientiously wrote my weekly, or was it fortnightly, essays, and followed my tutor's advice on background reading. My tutor, Peter Bayley, was a specialist on Milton and Edmund Spenser. His book on Spenser, Edmund Spenser, Prince of Poets is out of print but is widely available on the second hand market. It was published in 1971 while I was studying under its author who I remember as a kind, shrewd man who set a high standard without being aggressive about it. Occasionally the tutorials, at which one read an essay aloud, were one on one but more often there were two or three students. One of my usual companions was Jeremy Treglown who later became editor of the Times Literary Supplement and is now Professor of English at Warwick University.

Outside the ambit of my formal studies (that this was so being characteristic of Oxford at the time) I also read some the writers who were influential in the counterculture. These included some theorists (using the term in a broad sense) like Levi Strauss (*La Pensee Sauvage, Tristes Tropiques*), Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilisation*), Marshall McLuhan (*The Gutenberg Galaxy..., Understanding Media..., The Medium is the Massage...*), R D Laing (*Sanity, Madness and the Family, The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise*), Norman O Brown (*Life against Death..., Love's Body...*), Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*), maybe Chomsky (*American Power and the New Mandarins*).

Some of these books remain in a black tin trunk in my mother's attic in Scotland which holds books from my school and university lives. Over the years I have repatriated some of the contents of this trunk to my home in Australia at the end of successive visits to Scotland, usually by posting them home in brown cardboard boxes, at significant expense. I have never been willing to incur the necessary expense for these texts.

This isn't because I got nothing from them. While collectively they do cluster at the obscure rather than the lucid end of that spectrum, and I sometimes struggled, I still believe, with their authors, that culture is contingent in complex ways, that it presents as constraint as well as opportunity, that it cripples as well as illuminates, that there is work to be done in demolition and reconstruction. It is more, I think, that theory has moved on since then so these texts are mainly of interest to historians of ideas, while the books I have brought back from the back tin trunk have been works of poetry, fiction and creative prose that are not liable to being superseded in the same way.

What have I brought home from the tin trunk? A miscellany, in which it would be hard to find any consistent theme. Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Ken Kesey, some Ginsberg, not much Burroughs, Camus, some Sartre, T E Lawrence, D H Lawrence (collected poems, selected letters), Hardy, Yeats, Wordsworth, Milton, Shakespeare, Joyce (*Ulysses*, I could never make anything of *Finnegan's Wake*). I was going to add Robert Pirsig, but on checking found that *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* wasn't published until 1974. I am reluctant to add *The Little Red Book of Chairman Mao*, but I do have a copy which dates from those days. I must have read it, but don't remember much of it.

Most of the books on my shelves now were acquired since I arrived in Australia. I will write more about my library later. What remains on the shelves is a partial representation of I have read and that this even more true of what remains of my Oxford library. There are two reasons for this. I have always read popular fiction, mostly SF and detective stories, but have kept very little of it . I have also dispensed with quite a few "serious" books, some of them because I knew would never read them again, and others because I doubted I would ever read them a first time. The latter category also covers the current population of my shelves – it includes a number of books I have not read and some which I may never read. I recall, and have tried to track down, a firm defence of the presence of unread books in a library, which I

associated with Alberto Manguel and possibly Borges, but I haven't found it. A useful comparison might be with a (wine) cellar, which contains future pleasures, some of which might be for one's heirs.

Oh yes, the sixties. I was mostly into the drugs. I aspired to the sex. More on that later.

How did I get my news? No internet of course, not much television except when at home on holiday, some radio. I suspect that I read the papers in the student common room and maybe bought one occasionally. I would have been a Guardian reader in those days. There was Private Eye, entertaining but deeply provincial in a very English way. The English version of Oz certainly had a left perspective on things, opposing the Vietnam War and supporting Mao Tse Tung's cultural revolution, but was hardly offered a window on the world, much of it being out of view. I lacked strong opinions and suspected, perhaps resented, perhaps envied those who held them.

Friends

Phillip Cherrill

I don't remember when or where I met Phillip. As he was in another college, possibly Merton, and as neither of us was much given to attending lectures or other public occasions where students mingled, we could easily have spent three years at university without meeting.

The possibility that we met through a drug dealer needs to be mentioned but only to be described as unlikely, for a number of reasons: drug dealers had no waiting rooms and were not in the habit of introducing their clients, and for most of the time I was at Oxford I have the impression Phillip might have been my source of supply: I don't say dealer, because although he probably did deal in a small way, I don't believe he made any profit or took any cut out of the goods he passed on to me. At least early in our acquaintance. Later, as he went in deeper to the drug subculture, using Heroin and Amphetamine rather than LSD and Marijuana, the savage necessity that is inseparable from addiction may have overcome his scruples. There was one occasion, about which more later, when I was ripped off in an attempted large purchase of marijuana from a supplier in London. Phillip had some part in making the arrangements and, it occurs to me now, may have taken a cut. If I had to say, I would say not.

Another way we might have met was through having a common tutor. Like me, Phillip was a student of English Language and Literature and held a scholarship. Colleges were unable to provide tutorial services across the whole range of subjects studied at the university so external tutors were widely used particularly for specialist subjects like Anglo-Saxon grammar and Latin. Phillip and I may have had the same Anglo-Saxon tutor, a brusque sandy-haired young man from St Edmund Hall who was less than happy having to tutor students who wouldn't have dreamed of studying Anglo-Saxon grammar if it hadn't been compulsory.

However we met, I knew Phillip from early days at Oxford. We spent time together in

his room in college rather than in mine. I believe this was the case with all of my male friends. I kept my own room as private space, admitting women now and then and men only in transit. My memories of Phillip's room include at least one of the standard Brideshead revisited elements – toasting crumpets on a gas fire. Sebastian Flyte, on the other hand, did not go in for darkness, or incense or marijuana or LSD, or rock music played on a one-piece portable record player.

Phillip's tastes in music influenced mine. Our playlist included Dylan, the Band, Leonard Cohen, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Simon and Garfunkle, Joni Mitchell, Vashti Bunyan, James Taylor, the Incredible String Band, Fairport Convention, Jefferson Airplane, the Doors, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles. The player and the listeners on the floor – Phillip didn't do chairs.

The Doors for menace and a celebration of Dionysus. The Incredible String Band for whimsy and instrumentation. Leonard Cohen other people's first choice rather than mine in those days, I found him too gloomy, but Phillip played him often. Dylan's lyrics sometimes tugged me into [close reading a la Christopher Ricks](#), but more often I settled for his tone of voice and the assurance of meaning that is provided by metre and rhyme. The Band was a favourite, perhaps prefiguring a later taste for country music. Many readers may not have heard of Vashti Bunyan (bio [here](#) and UTube video [here](#) - the video of Ms Bunyan many years later, but she sounds just the same) Her “Just Another Diamond Day” album was good for “coming down” from an acid trip (Mozart was widely recommended as also being good for this purpose).

I preferred the Stones to the Beatles and never quite bought the post-Beatles John Lennon. A N Wilson in his excellent book about Britain in the sixties and seventies is unkind about the Beatles, preferring the Stones (and suggesting that Mick Jagger is a successor to Lord Byron). I share his preference. He writes of the Beatles:

...They bequeathed to the world the annoying legacy that entertainers, rather than being humble enough to entertain, should inflict their half-baked views of economics, meteorology and politics on those who had been gullible enough to buy their recordings.

and later:

...Jagger's contortions on the stage, his overt sexuality, his exploitations of the bisexual signals which he gave out, both on and off stage, were all reversions to Lord Byron

...My suspicion is that British human beings had no more orgasms in the 1960s than they did in the 1860s or even the 1260s.

Phillip had dark curly hair, an olive skin on a bony face with big freckles, slightly bulging eyes. I remember his appearance vividly and have a sense of him as sometimes intruding into my personal space. He could be quiet, animated, paranoid,

scornful. Like me he held a scholarship in English, but he neglected his studies. Later, after he became a junkie his teeth were yellow and his fingers yellow and black with smoke stains. By then I was married with a child on the way, which made it out of the question for me to accompany him into junkiedom. I am not sure if I would have otherwise. Maybe. In some other universe. Was there a homoerotic element to our friendship, or to my side of it? I had no sense of it at the time. I did attempt to steal his girlfriend when he was away, either temporarily “sent down” (expelled from the University) or in a psychiatric hospital.

Phillip had a difficult relationship with his parents. Some continuing connection with his mother, more or less complete break with his father. I think of his parents as decent and uncomprehending and I probably thought more or less the same then. I was never one for dismissing parents, my own being my friends all the way through, and was inclined to think (but not to say) that parents who were dismissed by their children would have their own side of the story. It certainly wasn't hard to imagine that Phillip might have been a high maintenance child. He was a relatively high maintenance friend, particularly later, generating a sense that one had to choose between him and other people about whom he was paranoid but who might also be one's friends.

I didn't think of myself as a high maintenance child, but have had cause to reconsider after reading some letters kept by my mother. A few more requests for money than I now find it comfortable to remember. Then there was marrying a pregnant girlfriend – not what they hoped for, although I expect they would have agreed with the friend who, in a letter my mother kept with some of mine, remarked that there would have been more to worry about if I hadn't wanted to marry Debbie. More on that later. My university life changed, changed utterly, when I became a married man and a father.

Miranda

Miranda was tall and long-limbed with pale blonde straight shoulder-length hair. I don't remember her face or her surname. I suppose I must have known her surname, but perhaps not. Of the English upper classes, she was rumoured to have been expelled from an expensive girls' school for doing something very inappropriate in chapel (on or near the altar), was attending (occasionally) a secretarial college in Oxford, took drugs without inhibition, was my friend Phillip's girlfriend. She had something of the character of a John Betjeman long-legged hockey playing gel, who had turned to the dark side but might still marry a stockbroker and live in the [home counties](#). I made a move on her when Phillip was away, either because he had been “sent down' (expelled from the University) or because he was in a psychiatric hospital.

Miranda went along with this, perhaps without overwhelming enthusiasm. I took her to the University College May Ball. It was a great occasion, with coloured lights and food in tents in the quadrangle, and dancing. We dressed up appropriately (see [this picture](#)), took little orange tablets of LSD and floated happily through the ball, cocooned in our secret, amazed by everything. I remember speaking to [Lord Redcliff-Maud](#), the formidable Master of the College, at some time in the night. Later, around dawn, we went punting on the river. Miranda and I ended up in bed in my room, for

the first time, after breakfast. Not long after, Phillip came back and she returned to him briefly before leaving Oxford.

James

James was slight and dark and bearded and looked a bit like my idea of Jesus. I think he was studying history. He used Hashish and LSD and occasionally lapsed into mental illness.

He came from Sevenoaks, where we once visited his parents. His father seemed displeased to see James, and was clearly unimpressed by me. His mother was kind and long suffering. One imagined that her husband might beat her. Smoking a joint on the edge of a wood on the outskirts of town, James and I managed to lose control of the small fire we had started near a patch of dry bracken. I am not sure why we started a fire – probably for entertainment rather than warmth or food. The blaze began to spread through the bracken and threatened to set fire to the wood. We broke off branches and began beating it out, dancing and stamping in the sparks and smoke. The task seemed impossible, but we had the energy and focus that Marijuana can sometimes bring, so we succeeded.

James became a friend of my wife after I married and I remember Debbie and I visiting him in a large old psychiatric hospital just before we left Oxford, one of those vast buildings with lawns and gardens that was closed when it was decided that the patients would be better off out in the community (and ended up, often enough, under bridges or in prison). James also came with Debbie and I a group of friends who drove up to Scotland in someone's tiny car in a University Vacation. Here is a picture.



Hester

Hello Hester

I am wondering if we were friends, at Oxford, in the late sixties early seventies. I believe I might have wanted to be more than friends, but that you kindly declined. I was studying English at University College. I don't remember your college (assuming it was/is you). I may have visited you at home in a university vacation, somewhere in the north of England (York?), while hitch hiking from Oxford to my family home in the north of Scotland

The context for this inquiry, which I hope you don't find intrusive, is that, having just turned sixty I am writing a memoir, for my family and friends and for anyone who finds it on the internet, and have reached my time at University, and am trying to make contact with people I knew. I am not sure if we were friends for long, so you may not remember me, but the name Hester Seddon has remained in memory and something about its owner's character which seems consistent with the picture and story on the web site which I found by googling your name. And the dates seem to match.

I am currently writing about my friends at University and have in mind mentioning the person I remember as Hester Seddon, either anonymously or, if you don't mind and this isn't a case of mistaken identity, with [a link to your web site](#).

Hello Ken

Thank you for your message - yes, it is me, and I do remember you from Oxford days. I am still friends with Cathy, who married Sam, another friend of mine, many many years ago. Yes, use my name in your memoirs (and my website if you like) if you wish - though I do wonder what you can be going to say about me, as my impression is that you and I did not know each other very long! Curious to hear from you, as I was thinking only the day before, how you once said I had the eyes of a seer - and at the time I thought to myself, ah, but really it's acute myopia! But now it is true, hat I do do that sort of thing

Hi Hester

Thanks for the reply and the permission to mention you and link to your web site. ... I think you are right that we didn't know each other for long...my life at Oxford changed utterly in my last year, when I was married with a child, and before that I kept my druggy friends and my other friends firmly separated. As I said in my first email, what I mostly remember of you is a quality of character, consistent with the calling portrayed in your web site, and also with the eyes of a seer, which I wish I could remember - or rather, I wonder if the memory is still there and could be recaptured, or if it has gone.

Thanks again

Ken

A Serious Young Woman

Self-contained and determined, she wore her hair short. Her relationship with her mother, who she resembled, was noticeably intense, perhaps based on some shared grief. The mother did not appear to hold me in high esteem.

I believe we did have a relationship, although I don't believe it was a source of joy, romantic or sexual, for either of us. Awkward is the word that comes to mind (for the relationship, and for my own part in it, rather than for hers).

I feel a touch of remorse when I think of her, probably because I was writing to my future wife and planning to visit her in another country at the time of our connection.

A Young Englishman

A beautiful English boy, blonde, fine boned, enviably (and at the time to me inexplicably) attractive to women.

I think that was him, there was certainly someone for whose sexual success I felt a raw envy and incomprehension but I find myself wondering if that characteristic has slipped from one person to another as I associate a certain coarseness with the sexual exploits, and that doesn't seem to fit the English Boy.

In retrospect, I suspect that like me he moved in more than one circle. He and I had Marijuana and LSD in common. His father was a professor of Greek and the family lived in an old house not far from Oxford High Street. There was something fragile about him which leaves me wondering if he lived long.

A Man who wanted to be Jewish

He had been to Israel, perhaps worked on a kibbutz, and found a society and some individuals he felt close to. He studied hard and has since become an lecturer in psychology.

He played the flute, beautifully, at my wedding, and became a friend of my wife. My mother also liked him when he visited in Scotland. I am not sure of the extent of his drug use.

I contacted him a few years ago and received a warm response but haven't maintained the connection.

A Scientist

I didn't know many scientists. They moved in different circles. They had to do laboratory work at times when student of the humanities were able to lie in dark rooms smoking joints and listening to The Doors.

But this scientist also moved in drug-using circles, and not merely as an observer, he had a real appetite for drugs. He was a good man to have around when you were tripping because he could be relied on to look after you if things went wrong.

He got a first class degree and went on to become a Professor. Or rather, he *took* a first class degree. Might as well get the terminology right.

Getting Married

I got married and became a father a bit more than half way through my time at University. My life changed then. A version of part of that story is told below in extracts from letters to my parents which I wrote at the time. I have tidied up the spelling and removed a few of the passages which I now feel offer the reader too much information:

- *Oxford is at the moment very warm – warmest January for 20 years - I am working reasonably, tho' going through a stage of wondering what the hell I am doing here, learning about English Literature in this venerable but diseased institution. Still, this is probably normal about the age of 19. I will*

last at least until the summer, and then see how things go with Debbie.

- *I am somewhere in East London, working as a night guard for Securicorps – all dressed up in uniform, with truncheon, torch, epaulettes, and a guard dog in the room which I am not, thank god, in charge of myself. They are a very inefficient firm, and I have been shunted all over town on various jobs. Still, I should be making over \$20 a week, which is fair money.*
- *On a nice sunny day yesterday I strolled through Regents Park to the zoo and gazed with nostalgia at scorpion fish and geckos and tree frogs and bird eating spiders and other Ceylonese fauna. Have you been to the jungle recently?. Ceylon, like Edinburgh, and school, and everything before about 18 months ago, seems so far away*
- *I have settled in to an odd, slightly paranoid Oxford world, met new people, new ways of thinking and being, fallen twice in and out of love, worked spasmodically hard and often not at all – like Charley Chaplin driving an exploding fantasy of a car everywhere but along the road.*
- *Summer promises – am making a film, and may put on a kind of animated reading of some poems, and will learn to punt, and fish with a float, and walk in the Oxford countryside.*
- *Debbie is trying to get us both a summer job on camp for blind children south of S-Francisco (Malibu). There are problems about visas, and my lack of a US social security number, but something should come though.*
- *I am working at a camp for blind children where I am a fishing specialist, teaching the kids to catch catfish and bluegill on a Tom Sawyer type bamboo fishing pole with mealworms for bait. The camp is in the Malibu mountains, four miles from the sea and about 20 miles north of Los Angeles.*
- *Camp ended August 30th, & we spent the next three weeks travelling around together, hiking, fishing – one beautiful lake at 10,000 feet in the Sierras, full of brook trout – we had fish for dinner every evening – some time in a cabin belonging to a relative of Debbie's – we used her brother's car. We hadn't anticipated marriage until later, but we became more sure of our relationship with time, and now next year seems a good time.*
- *I went to Oxford not because I had decided, after thought, that I wanted to, but because everyone assumed I would...you really must understand that I am trying to become a whole person...I am grateful for all you have done for me, but I have to start doing things for myself now...I am not dropping out, really – I'll have a degree, but in my own time & my own way.*
- *I do not intend to leave Oxford permanently. I do not regard my degree as a piece of paper assuring prosperity...I intend to be a school teacher...I may also do some social work...I want to take advantage of what Oxford has to offer...I feel that if I went back next year, I would be unable to do that because I am not sane enough to cope with what is a very unstable environment.*
- *Well, I decided to come back to Oxford. Am writing now from Florence and David's, where I am recuperating from saying goodbye to Debbie – tomorrow making for Oxford, where I will look for somewhere to live and do some work. I don't know whether I have done the right thing...England seems very strange after a summer in California – small carts, & funny voices, & everything slower and dirtier.*
- *The news is this: Debbie is pregnant, so we have decided to marry now – ie by Christmas at the latest – rather than next year. Financially, the situation will be tight, but we will manage – I can get a married student's grant, and part time work, and Debbie, after she has paid her fare over, will have some money in*

the bank, which we can use on having the baby. So ca va.

- *Deb has arrived and we are at the moment living at 32 Warnborough road and feeling a bit shell shocked. The wedding will be in about two weeks. It will be a Roman Catholic wedding. Debbie wants one, tho she is a somewhat unorthodox catholic, thank heavens.*
- *About your letter – we have, we would agree, been irresponsible – tho we would place the irresponsibility in not taking more care over contraception...we are both a bit shell-shocked by the speed of events...but...relieved at being together again...with this I send a parental consent form, which I would be grateful if you would sign and send back by return.*
- *Mea culpissima about not apologising for the distress this must have caused you. I was too confused and uncertain myself to think of anything but my own affairs. Deb and I anticipated spending much time together – even living together – even before this summer, and the marriage/pregnancy were more or less allowed for, as possibilities, by both of us.*
- *We have moved house – former landlady discovered we were unwed – are now, luckily, in a much nicer place – flat, outside Oxford to the east, very nice and roomy, view of beech trees from the sitting room, now losing their leaves in the gusty, cool autumn wind ...we are really very happy – I mustn't sound too gloomy, as I'm not, just pensive.*
- *The priest who married us was young and nice: the church was old and draughty and most of the people in it before the wedding began left when they heard the music which was pop, played by two friends on guitar and flute. F would have mentioned the best man in a suit of indian pyjamas...kneeling before the priest I began to feel shaky and thought I might faint...however I didn't and the ceremony was pleasing...I was glad to get married in an old and eloquent ritual...thus far married life has been what it might be expected to be.*
- *This term I have been feeling rather depressed about things, but I think I am more together now, and I hope to be seeing a psychiatrist soon. Debbie is well, all things considered: not too much sickness, etc, although inevitably she has mixed feelings about the baby, which she feels guilty about, which makes things worse.*
- *Debbie grows larger, Oxford warmer, people (coming back from the vacation) commoner. My session with the psychiatrist was reasonably useful, and I have another one in a week.*
- *Debbie and I have both been doing temporary clerical work...12/6 an hour...that's over now and I'll have to get back to school work, 17th century and middle english. Thanks a lot for the 35 pounds – it arrived safely – about the Insurance policy Aunt Norah took out for me, I think i'll cash it in.*
- *Time passes so inconspicuously – I have been at Oxford over half my time – I can see finals already - I seem to have achieved so little. I don't know what prompts these gloomy reflections _ I was always somewhat solitary - I never thought of fitting into the fabric of society as citizen, etc – I suppose success in doing so depends on sorting things out in my head.*
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What do I make of all this now? Time has smoothed things out. I remember it all as being less difficult and less life-changing for all of us than the letters show it to have been. But then, on the other hand, we were young, in love and often happy.

