

Reflections On Legal Education: The Oxonian Experience

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In 2004, I was fortunate to be awarded a scholarship to read for a DPhil in law at the University of Oxford. This is a brief account of my academic (and not so academic) experiences of my time in the city of dreaming spires.

Student life in Oxford centres around one of the many colleges which make up the university. I am a member of Magdalen College, which was founded in 1448 by William of Waynflete.¹ Waynflete believed in the new educational ideas of the Renaissance era and as his ambitions grew he managed to acquire a large tract of land beyond the city walls to build an entirely new college, dedicated to St. Mary Magdalen.

Magdalen is one of the most beautiful colleges in Oxford and contains hundreds of acres of woodlands, riverside walks, and lawns (among which the most famous is the Deer Park). Unfortunately we are not allowed to go into the deer park, but the deer seem to come to the gates with cute and innocent looks on their faces wanting us to feed them the fruit which falls from the nearby trees. It's not a bad way to start the morning. The college also contains one of the best walks in Oxford, Addison's Walk; a mile in length and named after James Addison, the great essayist of the 18th century and father of English journalism. Other famous graduates include authors C S Lewis (the film *Shadowlands* was partly filmed at Magdalen), Oscar Wilde and numerous famous judges such as Lord Denning, Lord Brown Wilkinson and two of the nine judges of the Supreme Court of the United States, Justices Souter and Breyer.

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¹ Was Bishop of Winchester and had already assisted in establishing other famous schools such as Eton.

Magdalen's Hall is reminiscent of something out of *Harry Potter* (even though that was filmed at Christ Church College) and has large paintings and sculptures of its most famous members. The infinite wisdom of the interior decorator put Oscar Wilde opposite to Lord Denning, something which prompted the President of the college to remark that 'the college's most famous graduate is opposite its most famous villain'.

The first thing that everyone seems to learn about Oxford is that the place is all about 'tradition'. Just about everything can be explained by the phrase 'it's tradition and how we have always done it'. Indeed, despite its academic and intellectual 'tradition', Oxford is often not the most forward thinking of places. There are forms for everything and it takes some time for the wheels of bureaucracy to swing into motion. For instance, to be able to send an email, it was necessary to find a computer that didn't require passwords, request an email account, apply for Ethernet connections, wait for the forms to arrive, fill them out and then wait, wait and wait some more until they were acted on. It was times like this that I realise just how much we rely on computer technology and how much I have been spoiled by the Helpdesk at my old firm in Sydney.

The second thing that everyone seems to learn in Oxford is that your first few weeks is spent doing everything except your academic work. Moving to a different country means a significant number of administrative chores need to be completed before you are fully 'functional'. These include opening bank accounts, swapping mobile phone SIM cards, finding ways avoid the queues and empty shelves at the local supermarkets, finding where to buy important household items such as coat hangers (it was almost a disaster when the only shop that sold them sold out in Freshers Week); and finding a decent coffee shop which doesn't involve a major detour on the way to the law faculty. The other reason why not much work is done in the first few weeks is due to the sheer number of 'getting to know you' functions. The most popular of these are 'bops' which are like themed parties/discos. My first encounter with the bop phenomenon had an 80's theme (think lots of denim, Pat Cash headbands, big hair, cheesy glitter and all that daggy synthesiser music). At these events, one is able to meet a large number of students from different countries, studying in different disciplines. I know that some of the friendships I have made here will last a lifetime.

The third thing that everyone seems to learn about Oxford concerns the mysterious vans which appear on just about every main corner or thoroughfare just after dusk. This phenomenon is known as the 'Kebab Van'. Although generally to be avoided during sensible hours, the humble Kebab Van takes on a mythical significance similar to the Holy Grail when all the cafes and supermarkets have closed. It is the place that every student can rely on to find the soggy chips with sauce or greasy hamburgers that they so desperately crave at 2am whilst trying

to madly complete the tutorial paper that is due the next morning. So ingrained in Oxford is the concept of the Kebab Van, that it even makes its way in to fire safety videos (as an alternative to trying to cook after a big night out).

The major Oxonian right of passage is Matriculation into the university which is held early in first term. Even though it was disappointing to have the ceremony in the Examination Schools and not in the traditional venue of the Sheldonian Theatre, matriculating at Oxford was special. Basically this involves all new students dressing up in sub fusc (black suit, white shirt and academic gown), attending a ceremony in Latin and generally running amok in the many pubs around the town afterwards. Naturally the sight of several thousand students all dolled up in academic dress was a sheer delight to the tourists, who did not hold back in taking lots photos of us doing mundane activities such as crossing at the traffic lights, standing on footpaths, and trying to hide from tourists taking our photos. It is really amusing how boring things become so much more interesting when done whilst wearing the Oxford gown! After a champagne brunch at college for new graduates, we made our way to the Turf Pub. This is the pub where Bob Hawke allegedly sculled a yard glass of beer in 11 seconds when he was a student. It was also here that we were introduced to the lethal Saving Queen Elizabeth drinking game. At its simplest, if someone drops a penny in your glass, you have to drink the remaining contents otherwise Queen Elizabeth will drown in the beer. As you can predict, it is easy to play and gets your friends really tipsy and annoyed very quickly...

Sport is such an important part of the life at Oxford (as the name sporting 'blue' suggests). As you would expect, there are sporting clubs for just about every sporting activity you could imagine. Rumour even has it that there is a Tiddlywinks Club out there somewhere. For my part, I joined the Magdalen women's rowing team. Naturally, I am not a fan of the early morning starts, but it was definitely worth it to witness such a beautiful sunrise whilst paddling about on the river. In the beginning simple things such as going in a straight line proved somewhat problematic.² Indeed, it was rather amusing to have caused such river chaos as other more experienced crews from other colleges had to dodge us while we violated every kind of rowing etiquette. Although I am yet to see any acts of row boat rage, it was probably because they could not physically get near us without going in the water first. I am proud to say that my team made it to the last 16 of 75 boats at the Christ Church novice regatta in first term. In that sense, I did one better than Oscar Wilde who reportedly gave up rowing in his first term.³ I still look forward to my

² For example, all the stronger rowers have somehow ended up on the same side of the boat and therefore we go sideways.

³ 'I don't see the use of going down backwards to Iffley every evening', he is said to have remarked.

involvement in the women's team, not only for the exercise, friendship and rowing in such beautiful surroundings, but also because it provides a very nice (and often well earned) break from reading legal cases and commentary.

From the academic point of view, Oxford is everything that one could hope for. There are many libraries which contain an infinite supply of books on every topic imaginable. The centrepiece of the library system is the Bodleian Library, founded by Sir Thomas Bodley. It is a requirement of British law that one copy of every book published in the United Kingdom is deposited at the Bodleian Library (or the 'Bod' as it is known to students). Luckily, this provides the research student with a constant supply of materials to be included in a thesis. It also provides an inspirational outlook in which to do one's study. It is truly magical to sit in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian Library looking out on the top spire of the Radcliff Camera as the sunshine streams in through the large glass windows.

One of the academic highlights of the year has been meeting Ronald Dworkin. I had studied many of his works in Jurisprudence, so it was with great awe that I (and most others in the room) attended a guest lecture by him. The mood was somewhat tense before Dworkin entered the crowded room, but was quickly alleviated when his first question to the audience was what we thought of the cover of his latest book *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. What followed was a very interesting discussion on the nature of rights, morality and philosophy with reference to abortion and euthanasia. Just as memorable will be the interruption half way through the lecture by a man stating that the room was a fire hazard because so many people were crammed in. Although some students had to leave, most nonetheless were satisfied that they had the experience of hearing Dworkin speak on such controversial topics.

Oxford is a magical place and I hope that this brief account provides an insight into academic and non academic experiences one can encounter at this university.