

Memories of New College 1950–1954

I gathered that Sub-Warden Ruth Harris, after the Gaude of 2011, was interested in how, if it did, the war influenced the lives of the over-eighties before and during our time in New College. I was nearly ten when war broke out. I remember living in London in the Blitz of 1940 (both parents in medicine, so could not move and they were against evacuation). My sister and I slept in Notting Hill Gate tube station at the height of the bombing. To a ten-year-old it all seemed rather fun and I do not remember being frightened. But in 1945, when I had more sense, I found the V1s and V2s terrifying. Schoolwork was not really affected until 1942 when my father, who had fought in world war one, was called up at age 43 and went to run a military hospital in India. He did not return until 1946, so I did not see him between the ages of twelve and sixteen-seventeen. Perhaps his absence when I was at Rugby was one reason why I became disaffected, did little work there and concentrated on sport. After passing school certificate in 1945, the minimal matriculation requirements for Oxford were behind me. Uncertain of what I wanted to do, I remained in the 'A' block and for the next two years—such work as I did was in Latin (verses etc.), Greek (Homer, Euripides, Sophocles etc.), and Divinity. I was then thinking about a career in journalism, but havoring about medicine as an alternative. Astonishingly now, I think I never doubted I would be able to go up to Oxford—after all I had an uncle, killed in world war one, who had had a scholarship to Christ Church, two aunts who had read English at Somerville, and another uncle who had been at New College in 1933. It shouldn't be too difficult, I then thought. What a different world it was.

I first saw New College in December 1947, coming to sit the entry examination in the middle of the coldest winter I can remember. Oxford station, the city, and New College were cold, dirty and unwelcoming. I entered the College by the New College Lane lodge, to be greeted by an unfriendly porter who looked at my name on the list of candidates and said 'you are in 4NB8', or something like that. He was so dismissive and apparently bored that, rather than ask him what on earth he meant, I wandered lonely around the front quad hoping someone would guide me. No one appeared and so I returned to the lodge in some trepidation to clarify that I was to be in staircase four, room eight of the new buildings. The front quad was largely occupied by a huge water tank and there were ugly pre-fab huts between the old city wall and the 1879 new buildings. It was pretty unappealing and the room, when I found it, was 'heated' (actually not heated) by a gas fire which lacked most of its mantles. The dirty windows rattled in the wind. The room itself was cheerless and spare, as its owner had removed all his possessions for the Michaelmas vac. Then it was time for dinner. I did find Hall, but on sitting down after grace a college servant greeted me, by asking where were my bread, butter, margarine, sugar and jam rations? I could not be served without them and should have picked these up in the undercroft before coming in. No one had told me and I had to ask where was the undercroft. Not a good start!

The exam was held in Hall the next morning. I can only remember writing an essay on what was the best form of government. I went through Athenian democracy, democracy in general, oligarchy, dictatorship, and even anarchy. I concluded none of these was satisfactory and suggested that we should be governed by people who did not wish to govern, but were elected to a form of national service whereby they did a five-year stint by popular vote whether they wanted to or not—a duty therefore. I added that anyone known to be interested in joining government should be debarred as unsuitable and probably self-seeking. I suggested Jacob Bronowski as Prime Minister.

That evening (or was it the one before?) there was a note in my pigeon-hole at the foot of the stairs inviting me to sherry with Warden Smith. I assumed we were all to be there, but I was alone when I arrived at the lodgings. Over sherry the Warden said how sorry he was that my grandfather (J. L. Garvin of the *Observer*) had died (in January 1947),

and if I was coming up, what might I read! Family history and perhaps that essay gained me entrance to the College. Returning home though, I said I doubted that I really wanted to come up to such a cold, unwelcoming and forbidding place anyway.

Then came national service. It was so good for us public school boys. In my hut in the 17th training regiment of the Royal Artillery at Oswestry only two of some twenty or thirty had pyjamas and a number could neither read nor write. My immediate neighbours were two members of a Glasgow razor gang who spent spare time sharpening bicycle chains to be used as weapons if necessary. Pyjamas were hurriedly hidden under mattresses. NCOs were crude and aggressive. The tests to determine whether or not one was ‘officer-like material’ came after some six to eight weeks. After passing that, the next step was attendance at a War Office Selection Board (WOSBY). I was sent to Catterick for a weekend of testing in the field, in interview, in discussion and with a psychiatrist (or psychologist?). It was all rather like the take-off of this sort of personal assessment in A. P. Herbert’s *Number Nine*. Having passed that hurdle, on to Mons Officer Cadet School in Aldershot for sixteen weeks. That was really tough. Having been selected as one of two ‘Stick Orderlies’ I was drilled personally by the legendary Sgt. Major Brittain for slow marching in front of the inspecting general in passing out parades. At our first session he bellowed ‘Cadet Lednam—that’s not slow marchin—that’s **** riggid walkin’.

Once commissioned in the Royal Artillery and after a short period in Dover I was lucky enough to be sent to Hong Kong when the communists, having reached Canton, were thought likely to attack HK imminently. It was indeed a serious threat for a month or two before we returned to ‘peace-time soldiering’. That allowed me all the time in the world, living in a tent in the New Territories, to think about the future. I decided to study medicine rather than Greats if possible, and bought science textbooks to read in idle moments (Stead’s *Electricity and Magnetism*, and Grove & Newell’s *Biology*). There was also time to read most of the novels of Anthony Trollope.

On demobilisation in April 1950 (missing the Korean War in which my regiment fought only a month or two later) I visited Warden Smith to ask if I might read medicine, rather than Greats. He was shocked that anyone should make such an intellectually unappealing request. ‘Did you do any science at school’, he asked, and when I answered no, he said something like ‘medical students are not very intelligent—you should have no trouble—but you will have to pass the preliminary examinations in the natural sciences by next March. Please go to visit Dr. Creed in staircase one—he will advise you on the use of what I believe are called cram-schools—there is a good one in Eccleston Square behind Victoria station’. Dr. Creed confirmed that advice, and from April to October 1950 I spent every waking hour at the cram school as well as during the Michaelmas vacation. Prelims having been negotiated I began first BM in Trinity term 1951.

Oxford was a revelation and I felt inspired by it all. My tutor, R. S. Creed, would in these days of assessment exercises never have survived. He had last published in 1934, was a dull lecturer, and not unfond of alcohol. Yet his advice and approach to learning were a revelation. He made one really think for oneself and the standard answer from a book was never enough. Dogma was to be challenged. Lectures, he said, went out with the printing press—read and think for yourself, and come to me if in difficulty. No one could do useful academic work for more than four or five hours a day—no need therefore ever to work after lunch. There was, after all so much else to do in Oxford. He chain-smoked (Churchman No 1) throughout tutorials, which were always interrupted by paroxysmal coughing fits in which he turned red, then purple, then almost black. It was difficult then to decide when to resume reading one’s essay. My fellow medical student Bent Juel-Jensen asked me one day whether I had ever thought Creed would die in the course of a tutorial. I had, and we both went to first aid lectures in the city!

Creed's advice concerning FHS in Animal Physiology was remarkable. He told me that if I read all I could in the latest journals of physiology and biochemistry and could quote from them and the best textbooks, the examiners would be able to assess my industry and memory, but not my intelligence. That might get a second, but you need to show originality and a bit more to get a first. 'Know the basics', he said 'and challenge accepted dogma with your own criticisms and suggestions'. About three weeks before schools he barred me from the College library and the Radcliffe Science Library.

Earlier in the year both he and Dr. Carter (tutor in biochemistry at the Queen's College) were keen to see that I achieved a hockey blue, reminding me that there was no need to work after lunch. Both suggested that a blue would be of as great or greater value to me later than a first class degree. In my later career as a junior doctor I found they were right. A Vincent's club tie was a huge asset at interviews.

I have not said anything about day-to-day life in New College. I was entranced by the singing of the choir in chapel under Dr. Andrewes and attended evensong most evenings. That gave just enough time for a glass of sherry with the Pre-prandial Club before Hall. The Pre-P flourished in my day—does it exist now? I remember that we appointed George Younger (later a minister in the Thatcher government) as Hon Sec as he seemed to be too quiet and unassuming to fill the role of President!

Because of post-war numbers, we could not dine in hall for one year of the three. When allowed to dine in college we all did so, and I remember a group of us who were always together on the same table (bottom left). The group comprised three reading Greats, one English, one History, one Modern Languages and two Medicine/Physiology. Sconcing was still an occasional event—the sins being talking of religion, talking shop, mentioning women by name and talking about pictures in Hall. My memory is that the undergraduate accuser had to send a note in Latin to whomever was presiding at High table giving detail of the sin. The accused could then defend himself also in Latin or submit to the sconce. The silver sconce pot took a formidable volume of beer to be drunk by the accused within a specified time (can't remember how much or how long) or if he failed, he had stand all on his table to some beer—I think a pint per head. I suffered once only, unable to remember my Latin well enough to defend myself. The beer incidentally was New College Ale, brewed, I think especially in Birmingham. We drank port in the JCR after dinner on Sundays and could get from Parker's pantry one bottle at 7/6p at the end of each term.

In this food rationing period food in New College was famously awful. We often ate in the British Restaurant on the Plain, or at 'The Tackley' or 'Town and Gown' in the High—cost usually not more than 3/6, but on occasion the 'Cafe de Paris' at five shillings. Best was the Stowaway for an omelette and a pint of bitter. But often one was hungry.

I should say a little about Warden Smith, whom we all revered, not least for his shabby appearance and devotion to his rather scruffy dog (name? . . . I've forgotten). He was reputed to be thought the college gardener by visitors and sometimes tipped as such. Such was his dress that this seemed more than likely. When we lunched with him (usually in pairs) we would hear his passion for and ideas about the college buildings. If in the always cold lodgings it was necessary to wear pyjamas under one's suit to keep warm. In chequer it was a little warmer, but not much.

The best route to use for climbing into college after the gates were closed at 10.30 pm was via a pile of dustbins at the back of the Turf, over the spikes (did they rotate? I'm not sure) to end up behind the library. Occasionally one could encounter the Dean there, on patrol. Alan Bullock was a benign Dean though, and even ran a drinking club—'Bullock's First Regiment of Foot'—of which I was never a member. Of course the closure of gates at 10.30 was bizarre, given very few undergraduates were aged less than twenty-one and many were rather older.

My scout . . . was he Mark Lyne? . . . had all those 180+ steps to climb when bringing the jug of hot water and bowl each morning for shaving when I had rooms at the top of the Robinson tower. Astonishing to think that to seek a bath one had all those stairs to cope with and the trip to the Long Room for any other water, hot or cold! If that was so different from today, what of the difference between the early 1950s and the 1930s? My uncle Oliver Woods (New Coll. 1933 and on the same staircase as Herbert Nicholas) once visited me and could not believe that we lunched in Hall rather than in our rooms with parties supported by shopping and service at the table by one's scout on the day. Was that true, I wonder? Oliver had the splendid job of dining in Oxbridge colleges with senior tutors to seek the best to recruit for *The Times* and had lived for a number of years in the privileged rooms in the Albany.

Because of my original lack of science I spent four very happy years at New College, but was then impatient to get to the real world of sick people at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School in London. Very few of us stayed at the Radcliffe Infirmary in those days. We all went to London to return to Oxford only to sit final examinations. That too had its bizarre side—the dressing in sub-fuse with gown and hood even when examining patients on the wards of the old RI.

A meandering account—I wonder how it compares with others. Memories after so long are a little rusty.

John Ledingham, MA DM Oxf, FRCP
Honorary Fellow, New College