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Reminiscences: Oxford in 1920, Meeting Tolkien and Becoming an Author at 77

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Reminiscences: Oxford in 1920, Meeting Tolkien and Becoming an Author at 77

Abstract

Reminiscences of Vera Chapman's life, including going up to Oxford just after the First World War (between the time when Tolkien was an undergraduate and his return as a Professor).

Additional Keywords

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I came to Oxford in October 1918, but before that I had seen it as a vision of Quietness – first in a dream, as the quietest town on earth, all cream-coloured classic porticoes, bathed in autumn sunshine – then when I paid a brief visit there in the summer of 1918, and saw it rather as I had dreamt it. I came up (we always speak of “Coming Up”, or “Going Down”, to or from Oxford) to sit for yet another examination, I think to qualify me for entrance, and as an attempt to win a scholarship. I remember sitting for one at least of the papers in the old Divinity School, somewhere in that great complex of buildings between the Sheldonian and the Bodleian – a very ancient place, with a marvellous fan-vaulted ceiling to look at for inspiration. Being successful, I finally “Came Up” at the commencement of the autumn (or Michaelmas) term of 1918. Arrived at the station – in those days we had two railway-stations, to make travelling more difficult – and with another Bournemouth girl, took a *hansom-cab* – there were two still plying, mostly used, I am told, in the mock funeral processions accorded to those who were “Sent Down”, a thing which I am glad to say never occurred in my time. So, marvelling at the continued quietness of Oxford, I came to Lady Margaret Hall in a hansom-cab.

Almost the first experience that met us was the Spanish Flu. We all found ourselves laid in bed with high temperatures, and all the senior members of the college (called Dons) immediately volunteered to act as nurses to us. This was, of course, somewhat embarrassing, when we hardly knew them. But they did indeed nurse us devotedly, forgetting all else. This was no slight influenza-cold. One afternoon I lay in my bed and heard the plaintive sounds, from the chapel immediately below my room, of a memorial service being held for one of us who had succumbed to it. Not a very encouraging beginning to one's Oxford life! But I am glad to say the rest of us survived, and were sent for convalescence in threes and fours for a couple of weeks to Headington and other bracing places, where we ate and smoked a great deal. Then as soon as we settled back in, came the great excitement of *The Armistice* – it felt like the beginning of a new world. No matter if there were still problems – the slaughter had ceased, and the men were coming back. Better still, the women, having kept the

University alive all those four years, were now to be admitted as members of the University – with the titles of B.A. and M.A. and the rest – and with the Cap and Gown.

That Cap and Gown! We were all ceremonially matriculated in 1919, in an impressive gathering in the Sheldonian. Dress was important – that Cap and Gown was to be worn worthily and not disgraced. Conventional coat, skirt and blouse was the usual wear, and this must be “subfusc” in colour, that is, navy-blue, black, dark grey, brown, possibly dark violet, not green, and certainly *not* the deep claret red which my mother had selected for me. No, it would not do, and I must wear my old workaday blue suit. Likewise shoes – I had a good new pair, but alas! being new, they *squeaked* – “No, Miss Fogerty, that won't do. You must go up and change them”, and so there was I hurrying for my life, to put on my old shoes while they all waited for me . . . such was my matriculation into Oxford.

After that excitement not much remained of the first term – I got a very bad report on my work, and I daresay others did the same. However, the world was before us.

We went to lectures in some of the great old colleges, though most of them had been made into hospitals for the war-wounded. But we had to behave ourselves, being marked out by our new Caps and Gowns. Scholarship holders wore well-shaped flowing gowns, but others wore a ridiculous garment over their coats – not long enough to reach half-way down the back, and decorated with rudiments of sleeves – these are still worn, and you may notice them when term starts. The caps were to be worn soberly – not pushed to the back of the head with the point aspiring upward (as often seen now) but straight upon the head, with the point modestly lowered between the eyebrows. Nor must we give any cause for disapproval – we must sit together, apart from the men, and, if we had any acquaintances among them, not greet them or give any sign of recognition – coming out of the lecture we must not converse, or claim any friendship in the street – above all, no *new* friendships were to be formed – that was the very thing that was to be rigidly avoided.

Our colleges were rigidly cloistered. One man, and one man only, stood as guardian at our door – the porter – and he

might admit fathers, or uncles, or brothers, but not, *not* cousins. We were bidden to remember that our small bed-sitters were “technically our bedrooms” (I do not think any of our women’s colleges had suites of rooms, as the men always had). If one of us wished to entertain a young man, to tea, she required first a letter from a parent to the Principal – then a public sitting-room in the college must be booked, and then a senior member (or “Don”) must be engaged to join the party and act as chaperone. For we were still slowly emerging from the “chaperone age”. We might go shopping in the town on our own, with one notable exception: Buol’s in the “High”, the only place where chocolates could be bought (sweet rationing did not come in till the Second World War). The place had a dreadful reputation. Bump Suppers – that is, celebration of victories in the early spring Boat Races – were held there, and were understood to be Shameless Orgies, and young women who were not nice were said to frequent there – so unless you had a bona-fide boy-friend who could go in and buy for you – no chocolates. For the theatre, a chaperone was always necessary, though one for the whole house was enough, only *not* the gallery – but when the d’Oyly Carte Company came to Oxford, and everyone went to the gallery – why, most official eyes were winked, and chaperone or no we were all there!

So passed our three years – our college has a beautiful outlook to the river, and we had our boats. One direction, that is, downstream, we could not follow very far, for there were barriers – so there were if you tried to go upstream from Magdalen Bridge – for between these barriers was “Parson’s Pleasure”, where the men used to dive and swim, in the . . . in the *summer*, of course! I am told that this Garden of Eden is now to be thrown open to all comers as just another nice part of the river!

And, river pleasures apart, you will be asking me: did you encounter any Great Men? Who were your Idols of the time?

Well, some of them have left a name beyond the University walls – there was Gilbert Murray, not only a translator from the Greek but a poet in his own right. He opened to us the romance and tragedy of the Greek playwrights – but, sadly, the sands of his life were already running out and I only remember one lecture of his.

It was our custom for those of us who had been admitted during each year to produce a play to entertain the others – and that produced by my “year” was a modern Greek drama: *Perseus Pertinax*, with lyrics by Gilbert and Murray. The Great Man himself came to a performance of this, and enjoyed the frightful parodies we perpetrated.

Next was Walter Raleigh – at last made *Sir* Walter. He claimed collateral descent from the famous Sir Walter Raleigh – there was one son, who died on one of his father’s expeditions to Virginia, but I understand there must have been siblings, from one of whom he claimed descent. He bore a remarkable (and perhaps cultivated) resemblance to the Great Elizabethan – a pale and well-shaped face, gleaming white hair, neat white “imperial” – A great personality, and a lively guide to the romantic treasures of the past. I remember him remarking that the Wife of Bath was a woman whom any man would be proud to have known

– that stuck in my mind, and grew in later years to my own book.

We had come to Oxford, most of us, to partake of the literary treasures of the past – but the Powers That Were decided to make it less easy for us – English was a language, and we must study Early English or Anglo-Saxon. I don’t know what good this did to our literary style, but we swallowed it with the rest. We studied under Joseph Wright, and that is the nearest that I ever got to Tolkien himself, for Tolkien studied under Joseph Wright. I have my own memory of Joseph Wright (rough old character that he was, raised by his own efforts from the mill-benches of the Midlands) looming over me like a thundercloud: “*Madam* – that was a *Howler!*” I must explain that a “howler” was much worse than a bloomer – it was a mistake so remarkable as to be preserved for posterity. I don’t know what mine was – I never was interested in Anglo-Saxon enough to find out.

For the rest I confess to idolizing Sir Hugh Allen, of the Oxford Bach Choir. To sing under his baton was both a discipline and an experience. We used to practise in a little circular “Theatre” in the Natural History Museum (just across the way from Keble), which I very much suspect of being a surgical and anatomical “theatre” in the bad old days. We were greatly honoured in having Mrs. Farnell, wife of the Vice-Chancellor and a much respected lady, as our practise pianist. Sir Hugh was no respecter of persons. He dropped upon her, hairy and coatless, in a peculiarly difficult part of Holst – “What the devil are you doing?” She looked up at him with a sweet smile, and retorted, “I’m damned if I know.”

But mostly he was on the side of the angels – the powerful ones. On one famous occasion he led us through *The Dream of Gerontius* and also Holst’s strange and mystical *Hymn of Jesus*. Holst himself conducted this, the second time it had ever been produced – it was at that time something of a landmark in modern music. Its strange assonances and rhythms took some getting used to. But *Gerontius* was already a favourite, but had Gervase Elwes, the perfect voice, and the perfect presence for so very spiritual a part. Almost his last performance – for that winter Elwes went on a tour of America, and a stupid accident on a railway platform robbed the world of the one and only Gerontius.

My last term came, with exams and all the excitement – I did the best I could, and passed with Second Class Honours – only one of my year (about one hundred women) secured a First. And so I left Oxford, and went to join my parents and sisters in South Africa, where it was hoped I should become a lecturer. But no lectureships were then vacant, so inevitably I became a teacher – no other of the various careers seemed to be open to me – but I’ll confess now that I was a dismal failure at the job. After two years I married a Clergyman of the Church of England, attached to the missionary Diocese of Lebombo – but as my husband’s health broke down in the tropics, we returned to England, and the next part of my life was in country vicarages. I had always wanted to write, but life was too busy, neither had I any clear idea of what I should write about. I wrote various quite impossible novels, all very naïve, and none of them

acceptable to publishers. Only after the commencement of the Second War, I by then being a widow and pursuing various jobs in London, I recalled the images of romance in the old stories cherished in the classics, and secured a publisher for my dream version of *The Green Knight*; not very long before Tolkien produced his modern version of that ancient romance. I did not copy Tolkien's version, which had not yet appeared. When this book appeared I thought I was an author at last! – and the small firm of Rex Collings brought out two more Arthurian stories of mine (*The King's Damosel* and *King Arthur's Daughter*) and then *The Wife of Bath* (remembering Raleigh's approval of that lady) and *Blaedud the Birdman*, founded on the traditions of the City of Bath – then a story for children about Romans in Britain, called *Judy and Julia*. All these were put on the

market, and mildly commented on – but they did not sell. Rex Collings would accept no more – in spite of an American version of *The Wife of Bath* which was advertised in terms which made it seem positively pornographic – which it isn't, or I might have made more money! I tried another book for children, *Miranty and the Alchemist*, which was published by André Deutsch, but that, again, did not sell. Only one reader did appreciate it and firmly asked for a sequel – that was my great-granddaughter!

So far I cannot claim to have taken my place among writers. I continue to try, and still have an array of manuscripts waiting like unborn children. Who knows? I might yet be lucky.

Meantime I took in hand to found the Tolkien Society – but that is another story.