

Academia



I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PLAGUED with a longing for true academia, which for me embraces ivy-covered walls and the study of the humanities rather than the sciences. There is no such background in my long-past academic history and it was with some trepidation that I began the lengthy procedures required for an application to be accepted as a graduate student in the History faculties of either Oxford or Cambridge. I had kept my academic records of my Stellenbosch and Syracuse years, and asked influential friends for references. Kader Asmal, Helen Suzman, David Unterhalter, Shula Marks and Kobus Breed were all most supportive. In the formal application, I made it clear that, at my age, study was for my own pleasure and should not be regarded as a career move; the universities did not need to fear inflicting a tyro forester/historian hybrid on the academic world! I was accepted by St Antony's College, Oxford as a probationer graduate research student reading for the degree of Master of Studies in Historical Research.

A long-held dream suddenly became a reality and I was apprehensive. I was not confident about my ability now to concentrate and study and was concerned about having to integrate with a young student body. Hedda on her own in London for the year was also a concern. I shuddered at the real possibility of ignominious failure. This lovely dream was now an uncomfortable, but exciting, reality.

St Antony's is a relatively new graduate college some twenty minutes walk from the centre of Oxford and the major undergraduate colleges. It was originally a convent and the convent chapel is now the beautiful Gothic library. Other buildings, including the building in which my flat was located, were a mix of old, modern and brutal.

I paid an advance visit in July, to conclude the formalities, and to meet Professor William Beinart and Dr Jane Caplan who were to become my friendly and supportive supervisors. I visited my flat which was utilitarian but comfortable, with a large bedroom, lounge/dining-room, kitchen and bathroom, and with the all-important book-shelves and large desk and working area.

We returned to Johannesburg in August for a frantic round of farewells and preparations for a lengthy absence. My arrival in Oxford was scheduled for late September. Hedda, John and Peter in a two-car convoy moved me, my library and my computer into my flat. Hedda spent the night to see me settled in and returned to London the next day, and I was left to find my bearings both in the College and the History Faculty, and in the, as yet, unfamiliar Oxford.

My first acquaintance was my scout, Morris, a delightful East Ender who was to service my flat and to generally watch over my physical needs. His approach soon became apparent. I mentioned the lack of an easy chair. Early the next morning, Morris was at my door, carrying one. Some days later there was a plaintive message from the Chief Steward. Someone had nicked an arm-chair out of the senior common room! I did not own up.

The first few days were hectic and confusing. I hurried between lectures on the complicated Oxford library system, college rules, and the internal computer system, without a knowledge of which no student or faculty member could operate. Library books can only be ordered through the system and all communications are via computer. I arrived semi-computer-literate but by necessity rapidly became fairly competent. Nevertheless, until the end of my stay, all of my writing of numerous essays and the final dissertation, was in long-hand, transcribed onto the computer by an American/Iranian student, Raha Rafii, who was delighted to be employed on an hourly basis. My domestic arrangements were rounded off by the acquisition of the assistant college housekeeper for my laundry. Meals, excluding breakfast, were in the College dining hall at ridiculously low subsidised prices (approximately £3 for a 3-course meal) but I often ate "pub-grub" or at local restaurants. Although the student body was friendly and helpful, I found it difficult to integrate into the dining-room chatter of a group whose average age was about twenty-five years.

I found, fairly rapidly, that the theory and aura of College and University life were very different from the reality, and that the under-graduate world, that we are inclined to believe is Oxford, is very different to the graduate life at St Antony's. I had recently read *Brideshead Revisited* with the result that today's Oxford came as a considerable shock. My dream of long and fascinating slightly alcoholic evenings debating the world's interests and problems remained a dream. Graduate students work hard, and whilst there was certainly conversation and merry making, the heavy difference in age made true integration all but impossible. This was brought home to me very

strongly one evening when I attended a student belly-dancing evening. I watched for a while, leaning against a wall with my glass of whiskey and suddenly realised that I was a voyeur. I returned to my books! I did however meet two good companions – Chris Clark, a retired banker in his mid-fifties, and Carlos d’Almeida, a Portuguese philosopher of some 35 years. We often ate together, but they were at least as busy as I. In practice, in the graduate student world, there is very little time for pursuits outside the round of seminars, lectures, consultations, and the long hours of library reading and the essential writing. Essays are the life-blood of the graduate!

A disappointment was that traditions have become a memory remembered by the occasional superficial gesture. I wore my academic gown three times during my stay – for the introductory, crowded, meaningless matriculation ceremony, for a formal college dinner, and for my graduation. I was given the rather intimidatory news that I was to be attached not only to my College supervisors, but also to the College chief tutor, to a mentor and to an examiner. The College warden was the court of final appeal in the event of a problem. There were complicated rules laid down for attendance at High Table and much made of the fact that St Antony’s, in addition to the graduate students, had a floating population of some 50 “senior associate members”, all people of high achievement, whose wisdom and experience leavened the student body.

I met the Warden twice – once at a drinks party and then for an obligatory interview which lasted ten minutes. I saw my mentor three times socially. I met Prof Beinart twice for lunch and once at a social evening at his house. I saw my examiner twice – once to introduce myself and then at my final “Viva” examination. I never once ate at high table. All of this is largely illusion and a rapidly fading bid to link today’s Oxford with its all-but vanished past. Finally, there was very little contact with the “senior members”. A Ph.D. was the minimum requirement for integration!

I also acquired – and lost – a final helping hand. The College runs a “buddy system” for new arrivals. My “buddy” was a 23-year old New Zealand girl. We met at a nearby pub. She was visibly surprised and disappointed!

My saviour in the early days of confusion and some despondency was my supervisor, Dr Jane Caplan. She is an eminent historian with much published material to her credit. She took me firmly under her wing in fortnightly sessions that always lasted much longer than the traditionally allocated hour. She led me firmly from an amateur approach in history

to the portals of professionalism. I have recorded this in the foreword to my dissertation (Appendix viii). I still shudder with embarrassment at the quality of the early fortnightly essays, but am pleased with the final result. The gaps between a fifty-year old Masters Degree in Forestry, plus a dilettante's interest in history, and the reality of what is required for an Oxford Master's degree, is enormous. I was with students recently out of their undergraduate years of studying history, and I found that I needed the equivalent of a crash course to catch up. I had to learn a new language, and acquire new knowledge. I could not have done this without Jane Caplan's guiding hand. She should hang my graduation certificate next to hers! It was the most intensive year of my life, with a work-day often starting at 8 am and finishing at 11 pm.

My year's programme, agreed with Jane, consisted of a number of seminars, plus a fortnightly essay. The seminars showed quickly that history at Oxford was not only what I had expected, but was closely linked to the history of intellectual thought and philosophy about which I knew little more than the names of the philosophers. It was daunting to sit in a seminar under a life-size portrait of Isaiah Berlin! A seminar on "Methods" also came as rather a shock, but was essential to the proper understanding and use of historical sources. I am still not sure why it included "The History of the Female Orgasm", but I do know that "Lark Rise to Candleford" gives a very false picture of village life!

These seminars resulted in some correspondence between me and Mark and Antony to whom I had turned for sympathy and help, in itself quite a turnaround! The following exchanges with Mark are worth repeating:

From me to Mark:

How do you like this one which you should perhaps take to heart – Self-knowledge is retrospective. How do you know what you think until you write it and can see what you have thought. If you don't believe me vide Prof Pocock "Virtue Commerce and History". I may be going mad! Dad

From Mark to me:

It's a profound, if radical, concept that I agree with: meaning resides in the retelling, rather than the living, of life. Ergo: you only realised you were going mad once you wrote to me that you were! Until that point you were blissfully ignorant of your confusion!

Mark Gevisser

And from me to Mark:

How do you like this one – the mythology of prolepsis is the conflation of the asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given historical episode and the meaning of that episode itself!!

There was, understandably, no comment from him!

Antony cast a lawyer's eye over my work and supplied a reasoned criticism of some of my doubtful logic.

A final blow was to my ego. A friend, a Professor of History at Yale, had warned me that as a student I would find life very different to the business, social and political worlds in which I had for many years been fairly prominent. Regardless of age and experience, students were common cattle whose opinions and company were rarely of any importance to the faculty. A student is subservient! She was painfully correct. I had imagined that my age, background, origins and experience would be of some interest to fellow students, faculty, to Senior Associate Members. That interest, apart from polite and meaningless enquiries, was zero, other than for Jane Caplan, Clark and d'Almeida. I jolted back to disinterested earth and a new evaluation of myself and my past.

Those were the disappointments that came with my realisation that the romanticised Oxford of which I had dreamt, was indeed a dream. I cleared that from my thoughts and began to enjoy, if not my loneliness which at times was acute, but the joys that Oxford brought to me. There was of course the incomparable beauty of the old town and the University and College buildings, their ambience, courtyards, chapels, dining halls. I visited nearly all of them, and sometimes attended a choral evensong or sung Eucharist. The libraries, however, were my true home. I of course frequented my own College library, and the mighty Bodleian; I visited the Nuffield College library, located in the College Tower; I took my books to the incomparable Codrington Library of All Souls. Apart from the seminars, the search for the necessary books for essays and dissertation, and their reading either in the libraries or in my own work-room, was the heart of my Oxford experience. I spent days paging through newspapers of the pre-war era and a fascinating week in the National Archives at Kew, looking for material in foreign office reports. There is a thrill in holding in your hand an original scrawled note from Anthony Eden to Neville Chamberlain.

The true pleasure however came from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the dawning realisation that the degree, whilst highly desirable for my ego, was not all-important. I could enjoy the search, and

the thrill of finding a reference or a quotation that was pertinent to the quest. I mastered the technique of gutting a book; an instinct develops for honing in on the important passages. I found quickly that there is a world of difference between reading history for pleasure and reading with a definite purpose. Re-reading old favourites in my library showed me what I had missed.

Every student has his own approach to research and writing. I had no experience and had to experiment. I culled names from bibliographies, reports and references; I sought out the books; extracts and ideas were recorded and later transferred into folders reflecting the sections of my papers, all annotated with book and page references; all were reviewed before the writing began.

Writing enveloped me. There is a joy in writing when you know that you are writing well, when the ideas flow almost uncalled for from brain to pen. At times my pen almost seemed to have a life of its own and I had the strange feeling of sitting on my own shoulder and watching interestedly what the next word to be written would be.

One such occasion was the writing of the required extended essay. It was on the historiography of Europe's 1933-39 period. I wrote it happily and well, and was very satisfied with it until an apologetic but stern Jane Caplan had told me that I had mis-read the title. In my ignorance of formal history I had confused "history" with "historiography". I began again and was told that the rewriting of an essay was normal and good for the soul!

Such was my life for the academic year, the loneliness being leavened by overnight week-end visits to London and Hedda when the work-load was not too pressing. The bus service, ending almost at our Ebury Mews door, is superb and the special student/pensioner return fare was £6! We returned to South Africa for two weeks over the Christmas and New Year of 2004/5, despite Jane's disapproval. Holidays were for undergraduates; they were the best time for graduate research! She relented when I said that I would have computer access and would be writing.

The academic year came quickly to an end. My compulsory extended essay and dissertation were completed by early June. The dissertation title was *Reports from New Worlds: An Analysis of Writings by Visitors to Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, 1933-1939*. It enabled me to throw a little new light on a period that appeared to have been overworked by more traditional approaches.

I had a few weeks available to prepare for the final Viva or oral examination in which the candidate is expected to defend his dissertation. I re-read my work, re-checked the references and footnotes, and read widely around the subject and the era. I felt that I was well-prepared, but

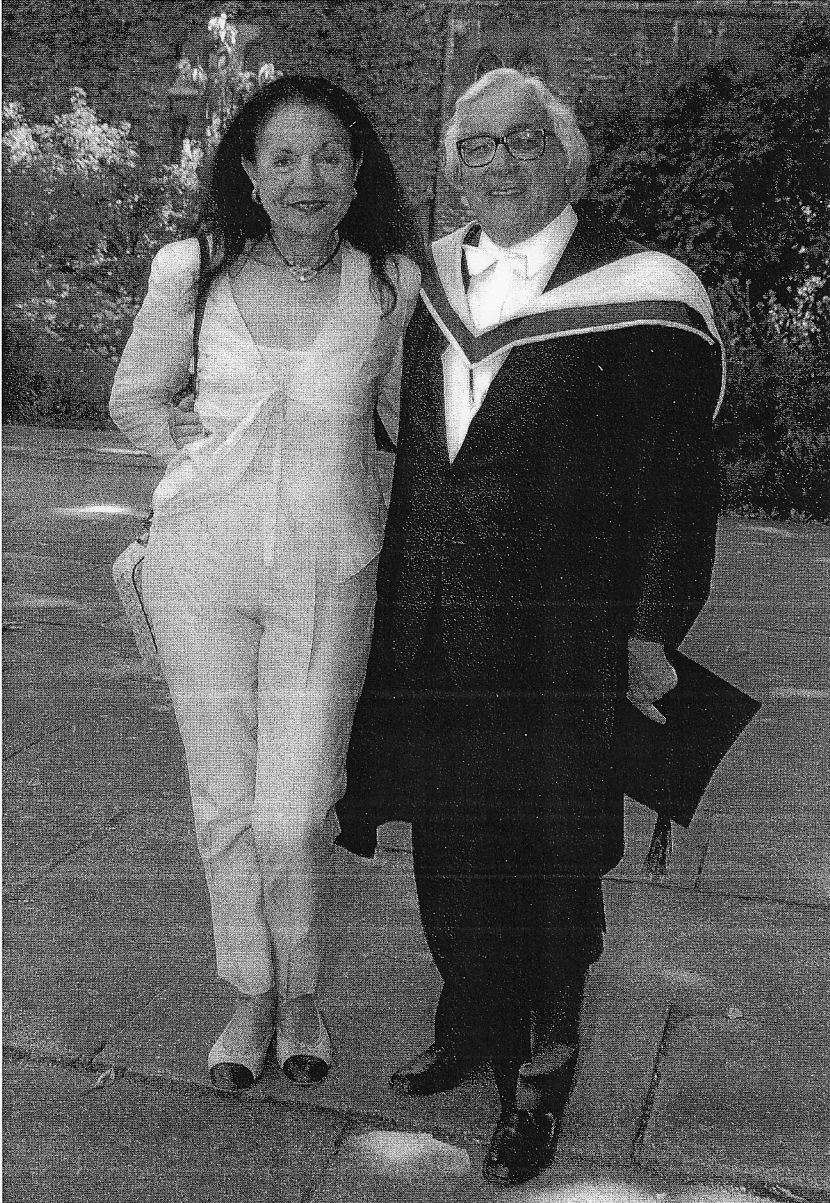
I was anxious. I thought that I had left performance anxiety far behind in my career, but found that I had not. The examining professors would have read both essay and dissertation and reports from fellow students presaged a gruelling hour. The examiners were my own examiner whom I had briefly met, and a stranger. In the event, the hour passed pleasantly, with searching questions being disguised as friendly chat, but at the end I had no idea of success or failure. These two professors were the arbiters. On my way out, I asked, meekly, when I could expect to hear the result. The happy answer was “we have read your work and listened to you, and I don’t believe you have anything to worry about, although the graduate committee has the final word”. I knew that I had succeeded, and that ignominy had been avoided!

Graduation day was 16 July 2005. I rented my heavily braided gown, dressed in *sub-fusc*, and crocodile-filéd with other St Antony graduates to the Sheldonian, the beautiful building used for such occasions. The proceedings are complex and mostly in Latin. One files in, in normal graduate dress, one is introduced in a rapid-fire mumble to the presiding Rector; there is then the rapid change of gown to the graduate gown, and a re-appearance for capping, during which there is ritual bowing and much more Latin. I was delighted that Hedda, Antony and John were in the audience to watch me through the one-and-a half hour ceremony. I emerged with a Master of Studies Degree in Historical Research.

We walked back to College for celebratory champagne and strawberries, and then all drove to Chris and Marina von Christierson’s country house, at Bamton, close to Oxford. They were away, but had made it available for a quiet week-end of celebration with Justine and the children and Francesca. It was a lovely and fitting end to my Oxford year.

That year was at first a mix of early disappointment and loneliness, but that was quickly superceded by the quiet and very personal pleasures of research, discovery, and their recording, in the Oxford atmosphere and ambience, and under the tutelage of gifted mentors. I have no regrets and the questioning and small unhappiness that the loneliness brought with it, proved ephemeral. I soon came to revel in the feeling that I was involved in the equivalent of a temporary, almost monastic, retreat, enveloped in study, away from everyday concerns of the social and business pressures that had always been part of my life. In fact at the end of the Oxford year I felt bereft of an occupation and an interest that had enveloped me. I was proud of what I had achieved, and had developed a strong urge to continue in some way. I shall do that. I have been accepted by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at London University

as a “visiting academic” – a description which leaves me feeling a little uncomfortable. I hope to begin some research there during 2006 on Jewish/Muslim relationships before the advent of Zionism.



Graduation Day. St Antony's College, Oxford, 16 July 2005