

An American Walk Round Oxford

“... the world, surely, has not another place like Oxford : it is a despair to see such a place and ever to leave it.” Nathaniel Hawthorne 1856

Mind you, Hawthorne possibly hadn't yet been to Cambridge. But, just a year later, Herman Melville was similarly moved – “Most interesting spot I have seen in England ... here I first confessed with gratitude my mother land and hailed her with pride ... Lands for centuries never molested by labour ... sacred to beauty and tranquility ... The picturesque never goes beyond this – I know nothing more fitted by mild and beautiful rebuke to chastise the presumptuous ranting of Yankees.”

This walk tries to illuminate just a few of the many strands of historical linkage between Oxford and America.

Pembroke College is an appropriate starting point as at least four of its alumni score highly on any scale of Anglo-American interaction.

George Whitefield (also Whitfield, which is how his name was pronounced) (1714–1770) was perhaps the most charismatic preacher of his century. Whitefield worked his way through college as a ‘servitor’, cleaning up after and also coaching his less gifted but richer fellow undergraduates. The most important influence on him was, however, joining the ‘Holy Club’ established at Christ Church by Charles and John Wesley (we’ll come to that in due course).

In 1738 Whitefield joined the Wesley brothers in the new colony of Georgia, where he became convinced that it badly needed an orphanage. The eventual outcome was the Bethesda Orphanage (now Academy), claimed to be the oldest extant charity in North America. Back in England three churches were established in his name, each being known as ‘Whitefield’s Tabernacle’. Here he exploited an early talent for acting to illustrate his fiery sermons with Bible stories. Returning to America, he journeyed on horseback from New York City to Charleston, preaching along the way to spark off a religious revival known as the First Great Awakening. Space precludes a longer account of Whitefield’s extraordinary life. Suffice to say that his passion denied him many regular pulpits so he took to preaching outdoors. Benjamin Franklin, sceptical of pint-sized Whitefield’s capacity to be heard by large crowds, conceded after actually hearing him that he could successfully engage an open air congregation of 30,000.

In an age when every crossing of the Atlantic was a perilous adventure, Whitefield did so seven times. In the course of his lifetime he is computed to have preached 18,000 sermons, heard by 10,000,000 people, making him probably the first person to become a celebrity on both sides of the Atlantic. Whitefield’s portrait in the National Portrait Gallery shows him famously and quite clearly cross-eyed, meaning that when he thundered out ‘You, miserable sinner “ nobody was sure he wasn’t specifically singling out them.

I leave it to you to investigate Whitefield’s conflicted views on slavery and the bitter, near-lethal attacks (verbal, printed and physical) that he provoked from opponents but would point out that Phyllis Wheatley (?1753–1784), the first African-American author of a published (in London) book of poetry, composed a poem in his praise when he died and she was still a slave.

Sir William Blackstone (1723–80) is the founding father of legal studies as a university discipline and, in effect, a founding father of the Founding Fathers. His four volume Commentaries on the Laws of

England became the source-book for the drafting of the constitution of the infant United States. Jefferson once complained rather testily that, forty years after independence, American lawyers were still turning to Blackstone as the ultimate legal authority. Rather remarkably Pembroke still has copies of Blackstone's undergraduate essays, which reveal his wide-ranging interests in Shakespeare, architecture and poetry. He also strolled through studying law, rescued the finances of All Souls College and gave Oxford University Press a much-needed kick in the pants. In acknowledgment of Blackstone's significance for America's legal heritage his statue in the Royal Courts of Justice in London was the gift of the American Bar Association.

"The best blood of England flows in my veins ... I am related to kings; but this avails me not. My name shall live in the memory of man when the titles of the Northumberlands and Percys are extinct and forgotten." Quite right, too. You have heard of the Smithsonian; those are the words of its founder, James Smithson (1765-1829) who, being born illegitimate, enrolled at Pembroke as a 'gentleman commoner' under the maiden name of his mother, Macie, rather than that of his father, Hugh Smithson Percy, the future Duke of Northumberland. Macie changed his name to Smithson after his mother's death. A talented chemist and mineralogist, Smithson was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society at the astonishingly early age of 22, becoming its youngest member. Zinc Carbonate (calamine) was named Smithsonite in his honour.

A compulsive gambler, Smithson's fortunes were rescued by an inheritance from a half-brother. Despite his acceptance in scientific circles, Smithson seems to have felt that he had been shunned by England and after the ending of the war against France lived most of the rest of his life in Paris, but dying in Italy. By a curious combination of family circumstances, which I leave it to you to discover on the Smithsonian website (www.si.edu), Smithson's fortune (\$500,000) went to the USA "to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men". Congress initially moved to reject the gift! Then dithered for eight years while debating how to use it. The Smithsonian, finally established in 1846, is now the world's largest museum and research complex. In 1865 a fire destroyed almost all Smith's personal archive and his collection of 10,000 mineral specimens.

James William Fulbright (1905-1995) was a Rhodes Scholar who became a lifelong Anglophile and internationalist. As a Senator he became the longest serving member of the Foreign Relations Committee. The international scholarship program he established in 1946 has benefited almost 300,000 'Fulbrighters' from more than 150 countries.

Time to leave Pembroke. Exit and turn right down St. Aldate's then left into the grounds of Christ Church. The philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) was a pioneer of the contract theory of governance which underpins the U.S. constitution; he also drafted the first actual constitution for the original colony of Carolina. In his Two Treatises of Government Locke defends the English colonisation of America and uses his reading about Native American societies to elaborate a colonialist theory of civilizational progress, asserting that "in the beginning all the world was America." Although he was sacked from the College as a subversive on the direct orders of Charles II, it later (1757) commissioned a full-length statue of him, now to be seen in the Library.

Charles Dodgson (1832-1898), better known by his pen name of Lewis Carroll, author of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and its sequel Through the Looking Glass, taught mathematics at Christ Church for the whole of his life. The books were written as an amusement for Alice Liddell, the daughter of the Dean. Apart from the books he is known to have written more than 100,000 letters and composed over two hundred pamphlets, including one on how to write letters. In 1932 Columbia University conferred an honorary degree on eighty year old Alice.

Turn left off the Broad Walk around the rear of Christ Church then head north to reach Corpus Christi College, which was attended by the future General James Oglethorpe (1696-1785). He founded the new colony of Georgia, to give beggars, petty criminals and minor debtors the chance to start over in a new land of opportunity. Oglethorpe was instrumental in the start up years, defeating an attempted Spanish invasion from Florida and banning both slavery and alcohol – bans which were undermined after he returned to England to resume his careers as a Member of Parliament and a soldier.

Philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) was educated and taught at Harvard, where his pupils included the poets T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost. In 1912 he astonished his colleagues by resigning his enviable position to spend the rest of his life in Europe, living in Oxford during the First World War. When President Wilson proclaimed that it was a war to end all wars, Santayana famously riposted that “only the dead have seen the end of war.” Nevertheless while at Oxford he wrote *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916) which made clear his firm support for the Allied cause. He also composed a number of essays about the English character and countryside. Although he lived a secluded life in lodgings he must have made a decided impression on the people he did meet because at the end of the war Corpus Christi offered to make him a life Fellow. Santayana turned the offer down – and turned down Cambridge as well. Harvard were likewise unable to lure him back as he opted to settle in Rome. A poet, novelist and essayist, Spanish-born Santayana defined his life’s objective as “to say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible.”

Continue along Magpie Lane to meet the High Street and turn right to pass University College. President Bill Clinton (1946-) studied here as Rhodes Scholar, specialising in politics but without taking a degree. Clinton’s daughter, Chelsea (1980-) also studied at ‘Univ’ where she earned a master’s degree and then a doctorate in international relations.

Further along the High Street. At No. 65 is the headquarters of the Stanford Program in Oxford, which is quite separate from the University of Oxford.

Cross the road to Magdalen College, where American divinity student J. Brett Langstaff (1889-1985) was welcomed in at the outbreak of World War One. Initially he shared lodgings with George Santayana. Langstaff’s research focused on the development of the Anglican communion service. Having graduated from a seminary where the teaching was strictly organised, he initially found himself floundering when left to guide himself. In time he found his colleagues extremely helpful but came to value working at his own pace and with the priorities he set for himself. His dissertation was eventually judged good enough to be published as a book. Langstaff later enlisted as a chaplain with the Artists’ Rifles but was soon invalided out. Half a century later he recycled his letters home as a book – Oxford 1914.

In 1904 William Alexander Fleet (1883-1918) became the first ever Rhodes Scholar at Magdalen, returning home in 1907 to become an instructor in Classics at Princeton. In 1916 he came back to England to enlist as a Second Lieutenant in the prestigious Grenadier Guards and was killed in May 1918. A Fleet Visiting Fellowship program now allows a student from Magdalen to study at Princeton for a year in a graduate school.

Howard Florey (1898-1968) an Australian Rhodes Scholar who studied here and in the USA in the 1920s, then returned in the 1930s as a Professor. It was at Oxford in 1941 that Florey and his collaborators developed Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin into a practical medicine, treating a local policeman who had developed a facial infection so severe he had to have an eye removed. Knowing the patient was near death Florey administered an experimental dose of penicillin and began to see a dramatic improvement within a day. Unfortunately the researchers ran

out of their new ‘magic bullet’ and were unable to save the man from dying. It is at this point that the American angle comes in. Realising that penicillin, the world’s first antibiotic, really was a ‘magic bullet’ that could cure sepsis in soldiers wounded by real bullets, Florey and his team also realised that the British pharmaceutical industry, already stretched to the limit by the demands of war, would be quite unable to produce penicillin in the literally industrial quantities required to treat potentially tens of thousands of battle casualties. So Florey and his team crossed the Atlantic to share their discovery and, thanks to the combined efforts of the US Department of Agriculture and the Du Pont chemical company, a method was developed to do just that – just in time for the Allied invasion of Europe. In 1948, jointly with his chief collaborator, Ernst Chain, and Alexander Fleming, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Florey ended his academic career as Principal of Queen’s College, just along the High Street. He was also created a Baron and admitted to the Order of Merit. Florey’s achievement inspired a 2009 historical drama, *Breaking the Mould*. Sir Robert Menzies, Australia’s longest-serving Prime Minister declared that “in terms of world well-being, Florey was the most important man ever born in Australia.” His achievement is reckoned to have saved 200,000,000 lives.

Cross the road to the Botanic Garden. Between Danby Arch and the High Street is a stone memorial in the Rose Garden which, together with the memorial, honours Florey and his team. (For further information see www.phc.ox.ac.uk).

Turn back westwards along the High Street to pass Queen’s College, All Souls and the University church of St. Mary the Virgin and Brasenose College and turn right into Turl Street to reach Lincoln College. The College lovingly preserves a ‘Wesley Room’ in honour of John Wesley (1703-1791) who was elected a Fellow in 1726 – despite the fact that his actual room was probably on staircase five. It was, moreover, at Christ Church that John’s brother Charles Wesley (1707-1788) started a ‘Holy Club’ when they were both undergraduates. George Whitefield was another member. This group met to perfect the Christian life through prayer, study of the Bible and practical acts of charity, such as visiting prisoners in Oxford’s gaol. The regularity and system they brought to these activities led fellow undergraduates to mock them as ‘Methodists’. Later the brothers would be recruited by Oglethorpe to serve as pastors in Georgia. It did not go well and they returned somewhat chastened by their failure. John had, however, been deeply impressed by the Moravian worship he had encountered there and on returning to England sought out a Moravian congregation in London which moved him to a renewed conviction of Christian principle and set him on a life of open air preaching to reach the poor and outcast and anyone who thought themselves too shabby or sinful to enter a church. In the course of a long life Wesley is estimated to have ridden 250,000 miles, preached 40,000 sermons and given away £30,000. Charles contented himself with writing 6,500 hymns. John Wesley by the way had no intention of ‘founding Methodism’ but wanted to re-energise the Church of England. He finally broke away when the Bishop of London, whose authority technically stretched to the colonies, ordered him not to ordain pastors – for America.

Pass through Turl Street and turn right to reach the Sheldonian Theatre, which is not a theatre but used for degree ceremonies. It was here in 1907 that Mark Twain (1835-1910) received an honorary doctorate, alongside his friend and fellow author Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), who that year also became the first English language writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, General Booth (1829-1912), the founder of the Salvation Army, the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and a further raft of politicians, professors and bishops. Cheering for Mark Twain went on for a quarter of an hour.

The organiser of this incredibly successful PR stunt was Lord Curzon (1859-1925) a former Balliol man who had served as Viceroy of India (where he saved the Taj Mahal from ruin) and had recently been elected Chancellor of the University. Eager to head off criticism from the government and

newspapers, Curzon used the Sheldonian celebrations to kick off a long-needed program of reform throughout the university. Perhaps the achievement was all the more remarkable in that Curzon had just lost his beloved wife, Mary, who had died in his arms in 1906 at the age of thirty-six. The daughter of an American millionaire, Mary's maiden name was Leiter - which is why James Bond's CIA contact is Felix Leiter. (Ian Fleming was a crashing snob who thought all spies should come from a posh family so the Leiter name fitted the bill.)

In 1919 honorary degree ceremonies, still under Curzon's stewardship, included honours for American general John J. 'Black Jack' Pershing (1860-1948), commander of the American Expeditionary Forces on the Western Front in 1917-1918. Another recipient was future President Herbert Hoover (1874-1964). A London-based mining expert, Hoover had brilliantly improvised a scheme for repatriating tens of thousands of his fellow Americans stranded in Europe by the outbreak of World War One. During the war he had administered a program to ensure food supplies in Belgium when it was largely occupied by German troops and at the end of the war he organised food relief for starving millions across Europe, earning the title of 'The Great Humanitarian'.

Turn back along Broad Street to reach Trinity College, opposite. Here James Bryce (1838-1922) was an "awful Scotch fellow" (actually he was Irish) who won all the prizes (Greek prose, Latin essay, historical essay plus two scholarships), took First Class Honours in Classics, Law and History and became President of the Union. Bryce went on to become a barrister, Member of Parliament, Professor of Civil Law and President of the Board of Trade. Ultimately a Viscount and member of the Order of Merit, Bryce was such a success as Britain's ambassador in Washington that he was assigned to Lincoln's former pew in the Old Presbyterian Church. He was also President of the Alpine Club, having climbed peaks from Basutoland to Hawaii and Japan - as well as the last 5,000 feet of Mount Ararat alone. His in-depth analysis of US politics, *The American Commonwealth*, was regarded in the States as a masterpiece. Fifteen American universities awarded him honorary degrees - out of a total haul of thirty-one. Canada named a mountain after him.

Continue west to adjacent Balliol College where controversial economist W.W. Rostow (1916-2003) was a Rhodes Scholar. During World War Two he was recruited to select bombing targets in Germany, for which he was awarded the Order of the British Empire. In 1946 he returned to Oxford as Professor of American History, then became involved in the administration of the Marshall Plan. Rostow later became an adviser to Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson and penned a landmark study of British industrialisation *The Stages of Economic Growth*.

Turn right to reach St.Giles and cross westwards to reach the Priory of the Holy Spirit a.k.a. Blackfriars, a 1929 reincarnation of the medieval house of the Dominican friars, now the House of a Studies for the English Province of the Order of Preachers. The refoundation was largely funded by an American widow, Mrs. Charlotte Jefferson Tytus (1850-1936) who had converted to Catholicism in England. Apparently the founder, Father Bede Jarrett, planned to lure young men in to the intriguingly picturesque premises and then when they were "least attentive" baptise them with tea "so weak as to be valid matter for Baptism" (I am not making this up.)

I suggest we end here, but if you are still keen to walk on northwards just under a half mile you will come to Green Templeton College, whose attractive campus is built around the eighteenth-century Radcliffe Observatory. Green College was founded in 1979 thanks to the generosity of Dr. Cecil Green (1900-2003) who was born in Lancashire but moved, via Canada, to Texas, where he created Texas Instruments. Green also founded a Green College at his alma mater, the University of British Columbia. He also generously donated to Stanford, MIT and the University of Texas at Dallas, giving away some \$200,000,000.

The College also owns the rather palatial 13 Norham Gardens, where open house was kept for North American students by Canadian Sir William Osler (1849-1919) who was one of the four founding professors of Johns Hopkins Hospital and its School of Medicine. He pioneered bedside teaching, taking his students on his ward rounds to hone their skills of diagnosis, a practice then widely imitated to revolutionise medical education. Osler's textbook *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* continued to be republished until 2001. He was headhunted by Oxford to revive its program of medical training and research and doubtless enjoyed his stay by adding copiously to his massive collection of books; altogether a most impressive man.

Finally I want to mention Samuel Eliot Morison (1887-1976) who in 1922 was appointed to Oxford's first Professorship in American History, founded by the newspaper tycoon, Lord Harmsworth. I assume he had a college affiliation but have not been able to trace it. During his three years in post Morison came to grasp that the fiendishly complex, interlocking network of collegiate, faculty and university committees which constituted Oxford's system of Governance as a wonderful instrument for diverting busybodies and bores leaving others to get on with research and teaching unhindered. He also rejoiced in the tolerance given to any political view and the indifference of the British media to what went on at universities. Morison thought Oxford dons were underpaid but certainly not overworked. Research he judged to be shambolic, with no seminars or training in methods. The dozens of libraries were quite uncoordinated, leading to needless duplication and inefficiency.

Morison used his time to write *The Oxford History of the American People*, which remained in print for half a century and won Pulitzer Prizes for biographies of Columbus and John Paul Jones. He also co-authored a classic textbook *The Growth of the American Republic* and chronicled the history of US naval operations in World War Two in fifteen volumes! During the war he was to serve on everything from patrol boats to heavy cruisers, so he wrote with the knowledge of an eyewitness as well as a scholar of the first rank, finishing a ten-year naval career as a rear admiral in the reserve. Of his Oxford experience Morison recorded his pleasure in "the conversation and the company of the most humane and intelligent group of people I have ever known. My days of wine and roses ..."

Which seems a good note to end on. I trust you know Oxford well enough by now to find your way safely back to Pembroke.

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