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## THE FOUNDATION OF WOLFSON COLLEGE, OXFORD

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# The Foundation of Wolfson College, Oxford

*Lycidas* [the magazine of Wolfson College] 1 (1973), 2–4

## I

It is reported that when, sometime in the mid-1930s, the President of Harvard, who was then visiting Oxford, asked the Vice-Chancellor – at that time A. D. Lindsay, Master of Balliol – to explain (if possible in a nutshell) the constitution of his university, he replied that it was somewhat like the kind of constitution the United States might have had if the Southern states had won the Civil War. The University was, in effect, a decentralised federation of powerful, sovereign states which differed in size, population, social structure and wealth, held together by a feeble central authority, each pursuing highly independent policies within a pretty loose framework of general rules and regulations.

This was substantially correct. A great battle between two doctrines had been fought out in the mid-nineteenth century, and they were symbolised respectively by Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol, and Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln. The conflict ended in a victory for Jowett, and ever since then the power of the colleges and what they stood for, versus the University and what it stood for – or Pattison believed should stand for – had been assured. Pattison was a dedicated scholar and believed that the principal function of the university was the promotion of learning, the training of the critical faculty for the purpose of the discovery and dissemination of truth. No less than Thomas Arnold, Jowett believed in education, *Bildung*: the formation of character, the shaping of men to maintain and promote the kind of society that he, and those who thought like him, wished the country and the British Empire to be. The emphasis was on life rather than learning, the training of Platonic Guardians rather than the pursuit of knowledge.

Nowhere was Jowett's victory more evident than in elections to Fellowships. Since (with the exception of Professors) colleges are entirely free to choose their Fellows as they please, the natural tendency was to appoint men, and later women, whose principal task was teaching undergraduates in the more populous schools. Since the natural sciences arrived on the Oxford scene later than

the older humanities, Oxford was traditionally dominated by arts subjects and their practitioners. Each college developed its own unique and peculiar characteristics; nowhere were the principles of self-determination of peoples, as expounded by President Wilson after the First World War, practised more faithfully than in these small but largely independent sovereign academic communities.

There have at all times existed competing claims, not altogether irreconcilable, but liable to pull in different directions: teaching versus research; character building versus pursuit of pure knowledge; the arts versus the sciences; the claims of Church and state and society versus individual self-improvement; demands for a single, systematic, universally applicable set of rules and practices throughout the University – a code designed to eliminate privilege, injustices, differences that were not rationally justifiable – as against the growth of each institution along its own peculiar lines, rules and practices adapted to the traditional peculiarities of each college as it developed historically, imponderable elements, unanalysable patterns which gave its own unique character to each college, all that engaged the affection and loyalty and sense of solidarity of its members past and present – in short, the conflict of values that has been with us for at least two hundred years: Burke versus Bentham, history and impalpable ties and a sense of community versus general principles, rational organisation, central planning, the rule of laws not men.

The consequences of Jowett's victory – that is, the triumph of the college system over the German (and American) university system – led, among other things, to a situation in which a good many teachers in the University, for historical reasons, or because their fields of knowledge attracted few undergraduates, or for even less defensible reasons, found themselves largely excluded from Governing Bodies, with votes in Congregation but not at college meetings. It was in part to cure this anomaly, to which all Burkean hierarchies are liable, and which is a well-known source of discontent, leading to radical reform or even to Jacobin revolutions, that the new foundations of St Cross and Iffley were created by the University in 1965.

The remedy of an injustice is a full and sufficient reason for reform: it justifies as well as explains the creation of these institutions; but it cannot by itself constitute a function and a

purpose, or a form of life designed to promote specific ends. Let us leave the local scene and, for a moment, turn to wider issues.

II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENCE

It would not, I think, be absurd to maintain that every age has its own peculiar shape and dominant characteristics. We tend to think of the seventeenth century as characterised by religious wars and the rise of the sciences, and a flowering of poetic literature in the West; the eighteenth century as dominated by a desire to introduce symmetry and reason and intelligibility into every walk of life, thought and imagination; the nineteenth century as preoccupied by social questions. What are we to say about our own century? How will it look, not to expert historians, but to reasonably civilised persons in, say, the twenty-fifth century, if any human beings are then alive and capable of contemplating the past?

All such conjectures are rash and precarious. Although none of us is likely to be in a position to verify it, my guess, for what it is worth, is that the features of our age which will stand out from the rest will be the Russian Revolution and its worldwide aftermath, and the development of pure and, especially, applied sciences. Both have transformed our lives to a still not completely recognised degree. To continue as if these were not fields of study of major importance is to condemn the University to the status of one of those great medieval foundations which will continue as institutions of higher learning, but are, and are seen to be, hopelessly imprisoned in their past. Salamanca, too, was a great source of light to Europe once; [3] and it took a revolution and Napoleon to transform the Sorbonne.

The role of the sciences in our time, and the fact, at once cause and effect of this development, that exceptionally gifted persons are attracted to the natural sciences; the specialisation which is the natural consequence of progress in a field of knowledge, and the new importance of graduate and postdoctoral studies; the lack of sufficient attention to this in a good many centres of influence at Oxford; the price that the University would inevitably have to pay if conditions were not improved for those engaged in these vast, absorbing, fast-spreading fields of research – all this seemed to point towards the desirability of directing any new institution to an

## THE FOUNDATION OF WOLFSON COLLEGE, OXFORD

interest in the natural sciences in general, and postgraduate specialisation in particular.

These were among the considerations that moved the fellows of the newly created Iffley College, the more naturally since the majority of them were scientists, to seek resources to enable them to perform this particular task. I should like to testify that the fellows of Iffley seemed to me, when I met them in 1965, a genuinely enlightened body, remarkably free from petty preoccupation with the status and claims to consideration of their own particular subject, whether in the sciences or the arts; more so, I felt, than one had any right to expect. It may be that because they had not hitherto been involved in college politics their views were unusually large and rational; there was uncommonly little evidence of the phobias, prejudices and fanaticism which, at times, distort the judgement of even the most eminent academics in some ancient and introverted establishments.

### III

#### CONSERVATIVE FEARS

There was much opposition to the new idea of a graduate college with a fellowship of researchers, founded on a degree of equality between members of the college, 'entitled' fellows,<sup>1</sup> fellows by special election, research fellows, junior research fellows, graduates and other associates, gathered in a single common room, untrammelled by the traditional hierarchy of the older foundations – high tables, gowns: ceremonial that had no roots in their own past.

All this, which had seemed to develop naturally, and which it was resolved to perpetuate, caused a good deal of uneasiness in conservative circles elsewhere in Oxford. Where would it all end? Would other colleges be affected? Would the miasma of social egalitarianism spread, and mark the beginning of the end of the hallowed University structure in which so much emotion had been invested for so long? Moreover, if an adequate financial grant made it possible for a large number of graduates to be admitted, would this not prevent Iffley College from absorbing an indefinite

<sup>1</sup> Under a 1965 Oxford University Statute, University teachers with five years' service were entitled to a college fellowship.

## THE FOUNDATION OF WOLFSON COLLEGE, OXFORD

number of ‘entitled’ persons who otherwise might have to be absorbed by other colleges, none of them too welcoming, and some bitterly hostile to such immigration? Other voices, again, were raised, to all appearances more disinterested, which maintained that if money for academic purposes was to be obtained, there were better causes than natural sciences, under-financed ‘minority’ subjects, homeless dons and graduates in Oxford. Would not the money be better spent on supply badly needed books for, let us say, the University of Hull, or for supporting student hostels in Heriot-Watt? Some went so far as to maintain that Oxford was the graveyard of the natural sciences – that gifted scientists who came from outside were stultified and paralysed by this lotus-eating city: the fact that this contention was totally absurd did not prevent it from being advanced from at least one important (external) scientific quarter.<sup>2</sup>

### IV

#### FRIENDS AND ADVERSARIES

The road to Wolfson College was beset by many obstacles. Opposition in Oxford itself to the actual aims of the college – directly connected, as they were, with the University’s stated policy of developing both graduate studies and fields, especially new fields, in the natural sciences – was confined to the most intransigently conservative fringe. To use Lord Lindsay’s simile again, some of the colleges in the Deep South feared that the new college would not act as an infinitely absorbent sponge designed to mop up a literally unlimited number of non-fellows in search of an academic home. Leading scientists in Oxford, headed by the late Lord Florey, welcomed the idea of the new college – a college and not a faculty Club – unreservedly. The central government of the University, led by the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Kenneth Wheare, then Rector of Exeter, favoured the scheme, and both he and the Registrar, Sir Foliott Sandford, proved stout-hearted and sagacious allies, true friends in hours of need. The sympathy and understanding that we received from the former, when, with

<sup>2</sup> A reference to the opposition of the zoologist Solly Zuckerman, a trustee of the Wolfson Foundation, to the funding by the Foundation of the Wolfson College buildings.

incomparable charm and brilliance, he presided over the Conference of Colleges, saved us from unfavourable winds and uncharted reefs on more than one occasion. So, indeed, did the firm support of the Provost of Worcester, Lord Franks, which turned the scale on at least one memorable occasion.

The full tale of our hopes and fears, the critical turning points, the positions taken by our friends and adversaries, the series of discouragements, the moments of despair, relief from unexpected quarters – all the ups and downs, the dark tunnels and level crossings and rickety bridges that the thirty-six fellows of Iffley and its friends had to negotiate at home and abroad before they reached their final goal – that story still remains to be told, but its place is not here. Suffice it to say, for the present, that the most formidable objections were not administrative, still less intellectual or academic, but, in the literal sense, political. At least one Minister<sup>3</sup> whose advice was sought by some among the potential donors at first reacted unfavourable on the ground that to them that have should surely not be given: not only should State aid be confined to universities poorer and less grand than Oxford or Cambridge, less fashionable than Sussex, but private benefactors should act likewise. It is only fair to add that the individual in question later went back on this view in the light, so it seems, of the convincing argument of the Report of the Franks Commission on how the University could best serve the country as well as its own members. Yet a certain feeling that Oxford and Cambridge had had their day, and should, in the words of a writer of a letter to the *New Statesman*, ‘be allowed to wither on the bough’, lingered in the minds of some of those who, perhaps inspired by a touch of envy rationalised as populism, expressed hatred of centres of excellence as a form of intellectual meritocracy.

So far as the donor foundations themselves are concerned, two arguments, in the end, seem to me to have prevailed. The first, powerfully advanced on [4] our behalf by Lord Florey and Sir Patrick Linstead (then head of Imperial College), was simply that if discovery and invention in the sciences was to be promoted in a country with severely limited resources, better results were likely to be obtained by materially improving facilities where such resources were already concentrated – Oxford, Cambridge, London, where

<sup>3</sup> Antony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science at the time.

both plant and personnel were in richer supply than elsewhere – than by spreading the butter more thinly and seeking to build up institutions the development of which to the required level would call for more funds and experts than were likely to be available in the foreseeable future. The sheer needs of education, indeed, did require greater support for inadequately equipped scientific installations up and down the country: the demands of social justice reinforced this powerfully. These claims meant that the State could not perhaps, be expected to attend to the needs of Oxford, Cambridge and London to the extent justified by the purely scientific merits of their case. But if even private donors were persuaded to set aside the claims of scientific progress, then the cause of expanding knowledge would suffer a serious setback. Nearly every Fellow of the Royal Society with whom I discussed this – particularly those who had come to Oxford from other universities, or alternatively had left Oxford for other institutions – agreed with this. The two who were dubious put social equality above the progress of knowledge; neither of these had for some years been conspicuously active in scientific research.

The second argument which favoured our cause was one that particularly appealed, I believe, to the Ford Foundation: that the mounting ‘brain drain’, then at its height, particularly of scientists, to the Western hemisphere threatened to denude the British Isles of talent; and that the chief reason for this emigration was the lack of adequate recognition of the value of scientific research and researchers in Britain, which took the form both of inadequate facilities and of insufficient status. Anything, therefore, which could retard this process, especially in those centres of academic excellence which, despite all criticisms, Oxford and Cambridge could scarcely be denied to be, would be of help in preserving the intellectual health and intellectual progress of Western Europe, which wars and post-war dislocation had done much to weaken. Oxford was its colleges: if any real corporate spirit was to be developed, it must be in a college, not an institute, or a ‘centre’. This point of view was vigorously supported by leading personalities in the British educational world, and finally found a favouring echo in the highest quarters.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A reference to the approval of the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson.

JUNE 1966

The year 1966 was a worrying and exciting one in the pre-history of the College. The steeplechase continued. Some riders were unhorsed, others cleared their fences, some easily, others by the narrowest of margins. News from the battlefields was carried to the various posts of command in the Clarendon Laboratory, in All Souls, in the dining room of the Oxford Union, but above all in the Department for External Studies in Rewley House – by letter, by telephone, by breathless couriers. Every time there was a setback, dark suspicions developed about its causes and instigators. Unexpected allies appeared, spontaneous support was given by dons and Government advisers and at least one editor of a progressive weekly, who was duly beaten on the head for it by dissident voices from the north-east.<sup>5</sup> We lived from day to day, often in a state of suspended animation, praying that reason and justice would finally prevail. They did.

The die was finally cast in June 1966. The Wolfson Foundation would provide for our building, the Ford Foundation for our maintenance, on a scale which argued real conviction of the validity of our central conception. It was a moment of genuine exaltation: not unmixed (on the part of at least some of us) with terror before the task that we had offered to perform. Neither feeling has faded: both have been our companions, intermittently, ever since.

A press conference held jointly with St Antony's, our fellow Ford Foundation beneficiary (how this came about is yet another not uninteresting story, but wild horses could not drag it from me at present), was held in London by the Vice-Chancellor (our never-to-be-sufficiently-thanked friend in many a dark hour), Sir Kenneth Wheare, flanked by Mr McGeorge Bundy, the head of the Ford Foundation. Blessed by Professor A. L. Goodhart and his successor as Master of University College, Lord Redcliffe-Maud, by Lords Robbins and Annan, by *The Times*, the *New Statesman* and the *Oxford Mail*, we were launched into an unknown future.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Johnson, 'London Diary', *New Statesman*, 1 July 1966, 8. 'Dissident voices' is a reference to David Shapiro of Essex: see B 303–4.

THE FOUNDATION OF WOLFSON COLLEGE, OXFORD

The rest of the story – our ‘years in the galleys’ in the Banbury Road; the early organisation of the College; our happy relations with the Wolfson College trustees and the great Foundations which gave us birth; our fascinating relations with the University; the journeys of a reinforced building committee in a private bus to inspect recent academic architecture in the United Kingdom, our welcome at the hands of hospitable Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Building Officers, the high spirits of the party itself, which seemed to rise in inverse ratio to the quality of the buildings presented to our gaze (many of them dreary beyond description); the steps leading to the final choice of architects, our early months with them, the laying of the foundation stone; our first graduates; our intensive study of graduate tastes and ambitions in Oxford, and the conclusions we drew; the evolution of our own ideals and institutions – all that must wait for another chapter of this history, composed by another, perhaps less obviously committed, historian.

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