

## Filtered Nostalgia of the 1920s: Representations of the British University Ideal

Andrew Mason and Richard Gehrman, University of Southern Queensland<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Universities may be a place of personal development where intellectual, social and spiritual growth can occur in an environment that offers social mobility, but they are also the site of idealised fictions of nostalgia. There is a practice of reinterpreting nostalgia of the British (and in particular the English) university world for a modern audience and this fictionalised English university ideal provides an instantly recognised model. Our paper will interrogate sources of this manufactured image, beginning with that defining representation of the English university of the 1920s which appears in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. The original 1945 book (which can also be viewed as a treatise on Catholicism or the country house) was given new life with the 1981 television version, a popular 'bromance' that drew on the popular Merchant Ivory nostalgia of the period. University life in Evelyn Waugh's classic account is contrasted with that provided by his brother Alec in *The Fatal Gift* which looks back to an idealised and ultimately unfulfilled individual brilliance at university. This paper concludes with a contrast with the more prosaic account of 1920s student life at the University of Reading in Elspeth Huxley's *Love Among the Daughters*.

### Visions of education

The great experience of my Oxford years was discovering northern Italy...<sup>2</sup>

I was spending every hour on drama and none on academic work. Cambridge was very relaxed about that kind of thing. ... The chances of failing a degree were fabulously remote. It was perhaps part of the institution's arrogance that it believed anyone it selected for entrance was necessarily incapable of failure.<sup>3</sup>

My visions of dreaming spires and ancient cloisters were shattered by the bare walls and formed concrete of St Catherine's, constructed circa 1962. My unhappiness was accentuated when, looking for somewhere to eat, I managed to get hopelessly lost in the pouring rain while walking back with my take-away pizza. Things had to get better!<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Email: [masona@usq.edu.au](mailto:masona@usq.edu.au); [gehrmann@usq.edu.au](mailto:gehrmann@usq.edu.au). The authors wish to thank Professor Sybil M. Jack (University of Sydney) and Professor Peter Goodall (USQ) for their helpful comments regarding an earlier version of this paper, and Dr Brian Musgrove and Dr Robert Mason (USQ) for sharing their reflective insights on their own experiences of Cambridge and Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> James Fairfax, *My Regards to Broadway: A Memoir* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991), p.50.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Fry, *The Fry Chronicles: An Autobiography* (Michael Joseph, London, 2010), p.107.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Williams, *In Touch: Rugby: Life Worth Living* (London: Kingswood Press, 1991), pp.88 – 121.

Universities might be full of hard working students but they also are thought of as places of repose, pleasure and beauty. Our perceptions of places are often based on texts that represent an imagined reality deeply rooted in a past golden age. There are many texts that evoke nostalgia for a 1920s and 1930s ideal of a mythic England of country villages and cathedral towns, in a time when Britain was still great.<sup>5</sup> Viewing these accounts today, of course represents nostalgia from our current 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, yet nostalgia is not new and ironically many of the texts that our culture returns to were a form of nostalgia even when they were created, decades after the event that inspired them. Yet we continue the practice of reinterpreting nostalgia of the British (and in particular the English) university world for a modern audience, and the fictional English university ideal<sup>6</sup> provides an instantly recognised model of these sites of idealised narratives of nostalgia.

### Oxbridge

This university image is based on the older English universities of Oxford and Cambridge,<sup>7</sup> or Oxbridge in its composite form.<sup>8</sup> The stylised Oxbridge of fiction<sup>9</sup> may be attractive, but overly strong identification with this may invite censure in today's egalitarian world. Recent British Conservative leaders were criticised as elitist for their private school and Oxbridge backgrounds, a background enhanced by membership of exclusive and archaic university clubs.<sup>10</sup> Having been to Oxbridge itself is not the problem; it is looking and acting in a manner that consciously invites identification with the Oxbridge of our imagination that causes offence.

---

<sup>5</sup> Su describes the popularity of this literary nostalgia as 'a national longing in post imperial Great Britain'. John Su, 'Refiguring National Character: The Remains of the British Estate Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, 3 (2002), p.554.

<sup>6</sup> While the examples used here are of two fictional accounts of university life, other Oxbridge autobiographies of this era reflect similar portraits of a happy and idyllic Oxbridge life. See for example William Buchan, *Rags of Time: A Fragment of Autobiography* (Ashford: Buchan and Enright, 1990) and Michael Astor, *Tribal Feeling* (London: John Murray, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Scotland which had five universities, Oxford and Cambridge were the only universities in England until universities were established in London (1836) and Durham (1832). The antiquity and wealth of Oxbridge preserved their dominance of British higher education, and this has never been successfully threatened by their successors whether redbrick, plate-glass or former polytechnics.

<sup>8</sup> The nomenclature Oxbridge has endured, despite attempts to replace this with other terms such as 'ancient universities'; see for example Albert Halsey and Martin Trow, *The British Academics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p.102. For an explanation of the Oxbridge construct and its dominance in England and Great Britain, see Peter Sager, *Oxford and Cambridge: An Uncommon History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp.11-18.

<sup>9</sup> There is of course an extensive range of once best selling fictional depictions of the Oxbridge student experience ranging from Max Beerbohm's 1911 *Zuleika Dobson* to Tom Sharpe's 1974 *Porterhouse Blue*.

<sup>10</sup> Prime Minister David Cameron, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne and even eccentric populist London Mayor Boris Johnson have been tagged as epitomising Oxbridge toffs out of touch with contemporary society. One assessment indicates that Oxbridge MPs in the current House of Commons was as follows: 32% of Conservative MPs, 17% Labour; and 26% Liberal Democrat. Paul Hackett and Paul Hunter 2010, *Who Governs Britain? A Profile of MPs in the New Parliament*, (London: The Smith Institute, 2010), p.3. <http://www.smith-institute.org.uk/file/Who-Governs-Britain.pdf>

This paper interrogates sources of this 1920s university ideal, beginning with that defining image of the English university which appears in what James describes as the ‘Arcadian Oxford days’<sup>11</sup> of Evelyn Waugh’s 1945 *Brideshead Revisited*. University life in Evelyn Waugh’s classic account is complemented with that provided by his brother Alec in *The Fatal Gift* which chronicles a life of individual brilliance that initially develops at university but which is ultimately unfulfilled. When looking at these fictional accounts with their depictions of a sometimes idyllic university life, it is critical to recognise that even when they were written, they were nostalgic reflections on an imagined golden age. Finally, these fictions are contrasted with a more prosaic account of 1920s student life at the University of Reading in Elspeth Huxley’s 1968 autobiography *Love Among the Daughters*.

### Nostalgia and the Oxbridge ideal

Despite the common association of nostalgia with ideas of literature, films, culture and history, the term originally had a medical usage. It was based on the work of Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer who had treated Swiss mercenaries in the 17th century, and further developed as a construct during later wars when surgeons observed the alienation and displacement of soldiers away from home.<sup>12</sup>

Nostalgia was a curable disease, dangerous but not always lethal. Leeches, warm hypnotic emulsions, opium and ...[p]urging of the stomach was also recommended, but nothing compared with the return to the motherland believed to be the best remedy for the nostalgia.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, nostalgia was believed to have made its victims dissociate from the present and patients exhibited ‘indifference towards everything’ and confused the past, present, real and imaginary.<sup>14</sup>

Nostalgia permeates our society, and Australian television remains attracted to the 1920s and 30s. The Australian-based *Miss Fisher Mysteries* seems inspired by the works of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, television adaptations of Christie’s own works proliferate, while the success of the Edwardian *Downton Abbey* certainly lies in nostalgic aristophilia. All provide evidence of the popularity of nostalgia at odds with 21st-century

---

<sup>11</sup> While the reference to Catholicism and the country house nostalgia are both important themes of the novel, these are placed in their respective contexts by reference to the ‘cloudless days’ of youth. See David James, *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.26-7.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa O’Sullivan, ‘The time and place of Nostalgia: Resituating a French Disease’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 67, 3, (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York Basic Books/Perseus Books, 2001), p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.3.

Australia. More contemporary English programs also thrive on nostalgia. One death is never enough in the perennially beautiful English county of Midsomer, where a contemporary yet timeless fictionalised English landscape is regularly filled with several bodies per episode, in a world of an English imaginary of gentility and stereotypes that were outdated 50 years ago.<sup>15</sup> This imagined England also lives on in the Oxbridge of fantasy.

British universities have long provided a model for cultural emulation offshore in Australia, viewed as sites that provided authority for Antipodeans. While the nineteenth-century Australian universities founded in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Tasmania represent the same chronological era as the city-based utilitarian redbrick British institutions and like their British counterparts were located in metropolitan centres rather than country towns, the vision of Oxford and Cambridge remained enduringly attractive.<sup>16</sup> Many Australians returned to the mother country to study at an idealised Oxbridge whose characteristics have taken on an iconic and legendary dimension. Cambridge produced both former Prime Minister S.M Bruce and writer Germaine Greer, while Rhodes scholars as diverse as Howard Florey, Zelman Cowan, Bob Hawke<sup>17</sup> and Tony Abbott have taken up a place at Oxford. Opportunities continually open up, as the Charlie Perkins Scholarships now offer indigenous Australians the chance to graduate from Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>18</sup>

Three-year undergraduate degrees are not the only way one can experience the Oxford idyll and achieve the gold standard of an Oxbridge education.<sup>19</sup> In tapping this nostalgia as a commodity, both universities have long offered one year coursework Masters degrees that attract busy professionals<sup>20</sup> who had been unable to spend time in the hallowed halls during their late teens.<sup>21</sup> They also offer short summer courses where both the young

---

<sup>15</sup> *Midsomer Murders* is based on a stereotypical genre of the imagined England, where the level of crime succeeds as a device because this is a reversal of the ideal and picturesque facade. See Ian March and Gaynor Melville, 'The media, criminals and "criminal communities"', *Criminal Justice Matters* 79, 1 (2010), p.9.

<sup>16</sup> This model (including residential education, tutorials, campus landscape and quadrangles) was emulated by the American university system. See John Thelin, *Higher Education and its Useful Past: Applied History in Research and Planning* (Cambridge Mass: Schenkman, 1982), pp.45-65.

<sup>17</sup> Hawke notes 'In August, I arrived in Oxford and for the first time experience loneliness. I had been a big man on campus in Perth; here I was just another bloody colonial. The University itself was somewhat forbidding; it struck me as ancient and aloof but also a place of profound sanity.' Bob Hawke, *The Hawke Memoirs* (Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1994), p.23.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Lauren Wilson, 'Scholars Carry Charlie Perkins Banner', *The Australian*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/indigenous/scholars-carry-charlie-perkins-banner/story-fn9hm1pm-1226375610376>

<sup>19</sup> On a recent international ranking Cambridge is currently listed as the best university in the world, with Oxford ranked fifth, although both consistently appear in the top five. While Harvard and MIT might be ranked second and third best in the world, these universities do not attract the same international mystique. See Jeevan Vasagar, 'Cambridge tops league table of world's best universities', *The Guardian*, September 5, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/sep/05/cambridge-tops-league-table-universities>

<sup>20</sup> For example, Susan Kiefel, who subsequently became a Justice of the High Court of Australia.

<sup>21</sup> For one example of this see David Gevisser, *The Unlikely Forester: A Memoir* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2006).

(and young at heart) can experience Oxbridge life, with edifying teaching during the day, tours of the historic countryside in the sunny afternoons, followed by Shakespearean productions at night.<sup>22</sup> Such an offering of Oxbridge in condensed form over the summer draws its appeal from a nostalgic understanding of what Oxbridge is as a dominant signifier of English university culture. The image that we recognise is not based on the real Oxford and Cambridge, but rather a mediated form which underpins our desire to visit a place in a time that has been created, idealised and mythologised.

Texts shape communities and transmit experience across continents as well as across time, and the interwar Oxbridge fantasy travelled to Australia. After 1985 the University of Queensland Student Union has run a Great Court Race recreated from *Chariots of Fire* in subtropical Queensland, an act of antipodean mimicry unselfconsciously adopted by a sandstone University just past its seventy-fifth birthday.<sup>23</sup> The copying of the Great Court Race was followed by many Australian universities, including at the University of Southern Queensland. Some individuals took their aping of the fictional Oxbridge too far, and lived to regret this when they achieved maturity – in 2010 then Queensland conservative opposition leader John-Paul Langbroek was the subject to damaging ridicule in State Parliament when it was revealed that as an undergraduate in the 1980s he had emulated Sebastian Flyte and carried his own teddy bear around the local campus.<sup>24</sup>

It has been argued that the university experience may be divided into the formal learning, assessment and attaining of prescribed skills and knowledges, and the broader social experience.<sup>25</sup> This broader social experience is encapsulated in a range of functions where personal and intellectual growth can influence students in an environment that is also characterised for its primary function of providing social mobility upon graduation. To explore the nostalgic popular representation of the university experience, this paper will now examine opinion-shaping popular culture texts signifying the dominant discourses on this model of the idealised university. The depiction of the university in these accounts focuses almost exclusively on the lived social experience of university, rather than the formal learning prized by the institution in its own self-representation.

---

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/summerschools/index.php>

<sup>23</sup> This 27 year old race is described as one of the University's proudest traditions. [http://www.uq.edu.au/events/event\\_view.php?event\\_id=7359](http://www.uq.edu.au/events/event_view.php?event_id=7359)

<sup>24</sup> David Penberthy, 'Teddy-hugging Liberal toffs have no place in Queensland', *The Punch*, September 18 2009, <http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/teddy-hugging-liberal-toffs-have-no-place-in-queensland/>

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Mason and Richard Gehrmann, 'No Brideshead Revisited, No Summer of Love in the Empty Quadrangle', *A Scholarly Affair: Proceedings of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia 2010 National Conference*, Lismore Southern Cross University, (2011), [http://epubs.scu.edu.au/sass\\_pubs/715/](http://epubs.scu.edu.au/sass_pubs/715/)

### *Brideshead Revisited*

A classic image of the university is articulated in the early chapters of Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*.<sup>26</sup> *Brideshead Revisited* depicts a university experience that allows the student to enjoy the life that represent the wider world beyond the confines of school; neither Charles Ryder or Sebastian Flyte are particularly concerned with academic issues, and actively try to avoid unnecessary scholarly commitments. As Chevalier notes, Charles as narrator is experiencing Arcadia at Oxford.<sup>27</sup>

Charles begins his university career in a scholarly and sober state, associating with like-minded serious students of a somewhat pretensions disposition who gather to debate solemn issues of great importance, drinking mulled claret and discussing metaphysics. He was headed down a path where his ideal university vacation was travelling to Italy to study early Byzantine mosaic at Ravenna, but all this changed when a drunken yet charming Sebastian vomits into his rooms through the ground floor window. Charles should have avoided Sebastian and his circle, yet was attracted to their hedonism.<sup>28</sup> He had been warned how to behave at university by his priggish and studious cousin Jasper;

“You're reading history? A perfectly respectable school. The very worst is English literature and the next worst is Modern Greats. You want either a first or fourth. There is no value in anything between. Time spent on a good second is time thrown away. You should go to the best lectures... irrespective of whether they are in your school or not... Clothes. Dress as you do in a country house. Never wear a tweed coat and flannel trousers – always a suit ... You'll find you spend half your second year shaking off the undesirable friends you made in your first... Beware of the Anglo-Catholics – they're all sodomites with unpleasant accents. In fact, steer clear of all religious groups: they do nothing but harm...”<sup>29</sup>

Once Charles moved into Sebastian's circle, university is transformed it into an elegant world of epicurean lunches of plovers eggs, lobster Newberg and Cointreau that last until four o'clock in the afternoon, followed by nothing more intellectually strenuous than a walk to the University Botanic Gardens to look at a particularly nice ivy-covered arch.

---

<sup>26</sup> While other authors have focused on the strong interpretations such as religion or the country house, this paper considers the nostalgia and idealised image of the university experience that situates such interpretations. For examples of this see Su, 'Refiguring National Character', pp.552-80 and James Carens, *The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1966), pp.98-110.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Louis Chevalier, 'Arcadian Minutiae: Notes on *Brideshead Revisited*', in *Evelyn Waugh: New Directions*, ed. Alain Blayac (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp.38-39.

<sup>28</sup> Student society at this time was often characterised by the division between aesthetes (intellectuals) and hearties (sportsmen), although it was possible to identify with both; an example of this can be found in the memoir of Valentine Lawford, *Bound for Diplomacy* (London: John Murray, 1963), pp.107 – 08.

<sup>29</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (Penguin: London, 1982), p.35.

Cousin Jasper tries to remonstrate with Charles who is wasting money on frivolous and eccentric furnishings, consorting with those whom Jasper regards as moral degenerates, not attending study, failing to write for any university magazines and not even participating in any university clubs. Furthermore, he is concerned about Charles's drinking.

“And drink – no one minds a man getting tight once or twice a term. In fact, he ought to, on certain occasions. But I hear you're constantly seen drunk in the middle of the afternoon”...  
 “I'm sorry, Jasper” ... “I know it must be embarrassing for you, but I happen to *like* this bad set. I *like* getting drunk at luncheon, and though I haven't yet spent quite double my allowance, I undoubtedly shall before the end of term. I usually have a glass of champagne about this time. Would you join me?”<sup>30</sup>

Charles ultimately settles down to cram for his examinations, but for Sebastian, academic staff are figures of fun to be avoided and whose ludicrous attempts to enforce study routines are nothing but comical. The oily and egregious academic Samgrass is a man who has produced numerous scholarly works, but is not a figure that invites the reader's respect.<sup>31</sup>

Evelyn Waugh's depiction of the university was outdated and obsolete even when it was first created during the Second World War, about 20 years after the events that are described. However, despite its age this mythic discourse has been strangely enduring. *Brideshead Revisited* retained its popularity, and reached a new audience among the young with the 1981 television version. This faithfully adapted 'bromance' highlighting the good looks of Anthony Andrews and Jeremy Irons appealed to many, and the representation of an idyllic university life set among ancient quadrangles matched the Merchant Ivory nostalgia of the time.<sup>32</sup> The Julian Jarrold film in 2008 did not attract the same popular or critical acclaim, but despite this the Brideshead image had attracted a new generation.<sup>33</sup>

So what did Evelyn Waugh experience in his real or lived time at the university? He publicised an image of hedonism, and as one biographer explains, Waugh's university days were 'a continuous round of roistering drunkenness, vomiting, homosexual encounters', but this was a far too simplistic picture of the reckless undergraduate opposed to authority.<sup>34</sup> His own university career was in fact more sedate than that depicted in his writings,<sup>35</sup> and it

<sup>30</sup> Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, p.54.

<sup>31</sup> This is widely believed to be linked to Waugh's obsession with Crutwell, the Dean of his college.

<sup>32</sup> Other films such as *Jewel in the Crown*, *A Passage to India*, and *Chariots of Fire* helped popularise this era.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Hal Colebatch, 'Waugh Turned Upside-Down: The New Movie of Brideshead Revisited', *Quadrant* 52, 12 (2008), pp.100-01.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903 to 39* (London: JM Dent & Sons, 1986), pp.6-7. See also Anthony Powell, *Infants of the Spring* (London: William Heinemann, 1976), pp.166-7 and Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> This is supported by the recollections of his contemporaries. See Peter Quennell, 'A kingdom of Cokayne' in *Evelyn Waugh and His World* (ed. David Pryce-Jones), (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), pp.24-38.

is probable that like many, he reified ideal high points of remembered life and experience. As Littlewood notes ‘Waugh’s years at Oxford acquired in memory a golden haze which ... defies any attempt to relate it to verifiable circumstances’.<sup>36</sup> The exact role nostalgia has at the time of the original release of the novel can be debated, but it is nevertheless appropriate to acknowledge that nostalgia is a central conceit of Waugh’s novel, and this is made no less clear than in the title. It is not simply the stately home that Waugh revisits, it is university life spent at a crucial time in one’s youthful development, made especially poignant by an author disillusioned with the new Britain of the Second World War.

### *The Fatal Gift*

Evelyn Waugh’s well known and enduring tale is complemented by a semi-autobiographical account that covers the 1920s and 30s, written by his now lesser-known brother Alec. They came from a literary family of some significance – their father had been a noted author and publisher,<sup>37</sup> and the success of each brother led them to be recognised and complimented for each other’s work on more than one occasion during their heyday in the interwar era. Alec had achieved initial fame in 1917 for his controversial critique of British public school life, *The Loom of Youth*. This was an unrevised 115,000 words, written in 6 weeks by the 17 ½ - year-old undergoing his final military training before departing for probable death on the Western Front. While on the surface he may have intended this book to be an attack on the deadening effects of athleticism and classics in schools,<sup>38</sup> the revelations about homosexual practices in elite schools brought it instant notoriety, causing his old school to inflict on him the punishment of having his name removed from the list of former scholars, a bizarre form of retrospective denunciation. On a more utilitarian level, this made Alec an established author who subsequently published a series of successful works throughout the 1920s and 1930s, although the sales figures and popular acclaim he reached with *The Loom of Youth* would not be achieved again until publication of *Island in the Sun* the 1950s.<sup>39</sup>

As with many writers, Alec Waugh became more reflective in his old age, and towards the end of his life wrote a novel spanning the 1920s to the 1960s. *The Fatal Gift* is redolent with nostalgia natural in the reflections of the elderly, and it is claimed to be a work of fiction with only minor elements dramatising a few events. Given that in this fictive work key figures are Alec Waugh and his brother Evelyn and many of their contemporaries

<sup>36</sup> Ian Littlewood, *The Writings of Evelyn Waugh* (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1983), p.190.

<sup>37</sup> Alec Waugh, *The Best Wine Last: An Autobiography Through the Years 1932 – 1969* (London: WH Allen, 1978), pp.2 – 3.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Gaythorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 1977), p.332.

<sup>39</sup> *Island in the Sun* achieved runaway success as a novel, was a Hollywood blockbuster and was further popularised through the eponymous song popularised by Harry Belafonte.

who are named in what is essentially a Who's Who of the upper-middle class English literary and cultural scene,<sup>40</sup> and that frequent references are made to books published by each of the brothers as well as actual events from their lives, this becomes a literary device that leads the reader to view the claim of fiction as merely that convenient catchall to protect an author from libel. Alec Waugh would have been well aware of the dangers of libel in his account which includes what would today be regarded as predatory paedophilia and bondage encounters between a 14-year-old under aged nephew and his aunt, exploitative lesbian relationships, some group sex, and grooming and concubinage of a schoolgirl by the elderly key protagonist. There was also extensive reference to interracial relationships, a long-term theme of Alec Waugh's work and a topic which for his generation would be likely to cause distress, even if not considered actionable.

The central theme of *The Fatal Gift* is of individual brilliance from university never reaching fruition, and while attendance in university clearly constitutes only a minor part of a book about the protagonist Raymond Peronne's lifetime, the early flowering of talent and genius by the university student who never achieves his potential clearly makes the university experience a crucial component of the text. It presents an idealised university life, where the brilliant and wealthy student is hardly taxed by the study material put before him, and a world where interaction with the other bright young individuals of the age helps define our sense of who the student is and where he fits in this golden era of the imagined English university. University life at Oxford is a world of parties and entertainments, of good-looking young men maintaining a conspiracy of silence about their school-boy homosexual phase. Anachronistic and archaic university rules are designed to be challenged and broken, with a central component of the early part of the novel being the illicit entry of a girl dressed as a man to a men's only event.

She was appalling. She looked barely human... An untidy, improbable composition, but what made it grotesque was the unhealthiness of a face washed clean of make-up. I have heard people described as 'the kind of thing you find under a stone'. This is exactly how she looked. She filled me with nausea. I could barely look at her.<sup>41</sup>

Even Raymond's friends find Judy dressed as a man to be an extraordinary individual, but once she is passed off as a jockey whom he is sponsoring, this seems to answer all questions about her presence at the party or possible gender. When the event is raided by the

---

<sup>40</sup> Including writer Harold Acton, biographer Peter Quennell, playwright Robin Maugham, poet and journalist Brian Howard, travel writer Robert Byron, author and politician Christopher Hollis, film maker Anthony Bushell, historian Richard Pares and author Terence Greenidge.

<sup>41</sup> Alec Waugh, *The Fatal Gift* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1971), p.9.

university authorities, Alec Waugh notes they accepted Judy as a male student which, as he notes 'I felt that it implied some criticism of the contemporary mores that so repellent an object could pass as a man'.<sup>42</sup>

Students might do badly at their exams and have their scholarship taken away, or might be expelled (sent down) from the University for going to London and being caught in illegal clubs during a vice squad raid, but the associations and friendships made at university overcomes such inconveniences as the gilded youth move forward to take their place in the world. The experience of life at Oxbridge confirms that the hero is on track to continue a life where he can be successful at anything, can attempt anything, and indeed the challenge in life is because he is so talented and that there are so many opportunities open to him it will be a really difficult decision for him to decide which of a range of possible leadership roles he will actually choose.

For the male student, the University is a base from which to explore the pleasures of the world after the constraints of school, and rather than being an institution of learning is more of a country club or a holiday resort with some arcane rules. For example, in one instance Raymond spends a night in London, takes a girlfriend out to dinner, has a twinge of conscience about seducing her so does the next natural thing; says good night to her before heading off to an illegal nightclub cum brothel to pick up a hostess. He then changes his mind and goes back to the girlfriend and decides to sleep with her anyway. University is a place to have fun and is a base from which to enjoy life if you are wealthy or talented enough, but it is not essential to graduate; just to have attended. For the average student 'His after-life is determined by what he does at Oxford. He wants to make a mark for himself. And his Oxford career is his jumping off point.'<sup>43</sup> But being wealthy, this is not essential for Raymond. When he is suspended from university, he decides that completing a novel would be more profitable for his yet undecided brilliant career as well is being more emotionally and intellectually satisfying than returning to complete a degree. Rather than live free at his father's extensive country house, he gets an advance from a publisher to live in a local inn for three months while he completes his great work.

His nascent novel (150 pages completed before he even gets the advance) is seen as something that will be widely read as an account that represents the feelings of young Oxford to an enthusiastic early 1920s readership, and his brilliance will catapult him into the class of Michael Arlen, Compton Mackenzie, Aldous Huxley and D.H. Lawrence. He never finishes or publishes the novel, as after the 1926 general strike and the advent of the

---

<sup>42</sup> Waugh, *Fatal Gift*, p.11.

<sup>43</sup> Waugh, *Fatal Gift*, p.27.

'bright young people' epitomised by *Vile Bodies*, not to mention the *oeuvre* of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Raymond's ideas have become dated. His life's course of persistent non-achievement of his once great potential is thus set in motion. Oxford subsequently gets rejected by Raymond's son, who on being expelled from school for homosexual activities is happy enough to skip Oxford for business administration at Harvard, which he sees as being far more relevant for a wealthy Englishman in the 1950s. For the forward looking English elite, Oxbridge had become archaic. Yet for us such datedness is an essential element of nostalgia, for it is impossible to feel nostalgic for the contemporary or cutting edge.

Ironically, Alec Waugh never attended university, and his evocative depiction of university life is based on visits, friendships and second-hand accounts. He had missed the Oxbridge experience because of the inconvenience of having to fight in the First World War, becoming a prisoner of war, and a premature marriage. After the war he had to make up for lost time, and he entered the workforce as a publisher and then author.<sup>44</sup> His nostalgic depiction of the freedom of university idyll conflates with his world of summer cricket matches in country villages, and rugby games against university students on cold winter days.

### ***Love Among the Daughters***

The university ideal of an imagined Oxbridge was not something experienced by Elspeth Huxley at Reading University, but it was something that had shaped her consciousness before she went there.

I had not expected dreaming spires exactly, or ancient quads, or even venerable dons sunk in meditation and gay young bloods breakfasting at noon off game pie and brandy; nevertheless so deeply was the Oxford image implanted on the mind, especially upon that of a colonial, that I looked at least for an architectural heart, for halls of dignity, an aroma of learning.<sup>45</sup>

She was to be quickly disillusioned of any hopes that the proximity of Reading University to Oxford would make it Oxford-like. Instead, she found squashed together buildings of utilitarian structure that looked temporary and lacked any coherence and style. Huxley was studying at a redbrick university that was far removed from the idealised world of Oxbridge, and furthermore was studying agriculture, a functional subject. Ironically, in an England of complex and arcane levels of snobbery, to study agriculture at this university was in fact

<sup>44</sup> Alec Waugh, *My Place at the Bazaar* (London: Cassell, 1961), p.1 – 2.

<sup>45</sup> Elspeth Huxley, *Love Among the Daughters* (London: Quality Book Club, 1968), p.47.

highly prestigious while scientists, historians and classicists were in the middle, with future teachers at the bottom.

The university experience at Reading is decidedly unglamorous; almost all students are perpetually broke, wear second-hand clothes that are repeatedly mended, and rarely smoke unless offered a cigarette by someone else. Despite the proximity to the Thames, there are no idyllic memories of punting on the river, and the only advantage of being a female student is that due to the gender ratios, invitations to the student union dance are more likely.

Having grown up in East Africa, Elspeth Huxley was already an outsider in an England characterised by many unfamiliar customs and values. Her choice to study at Reading University was based on a desire to actually study a specific course and to learn, rather than just to fill in time after school. During an era when most young women did not attend university, she really appreciated the chance to study and her approach to the university experience was far different to that of Sebastian Flyte, Charles Ryder or Raymond Peronne. But she still thought of university in terms of the ideal and the imagined university experience based on a mythical Oxbridge, an experience which she only approached when she subsequently attended Cornell University in New York.

In *Red Brick University*, his 1943 seminal account of England's post-medieval educational establishments Edgar Peers (writing under his pseudonym Bruce Truscott) considered how the experience of attending university differed between those who enjoyed the enriched Oxbridge experience and those who endured the more utilitarian redbrick regional universities.<sup>46</sup> Of course, the vast majority of interwar students in England did not study at Oxbridge and while Peers lamented the less fulfilling experience at redbrick universities, he championed the redbrick model and was one of only a small number of defenders of what was widely regarded to be a second-rate option. Alec Waugh's dismissive comments epitomise the feeling of many – 'she had taken a degree in history at a provincial university, Reading or Bristol, I cannot remember which'.<sup>47</sup>

### **The enduring strength of the nostalgic myth**

There is an enduring strength in the nostalgic myth of an idyllic university experience. Of course, the real experience of university students either at Oxbridge or in any university is that at some stage they have to study hard to pass, and if they do not they fail. To real students this means that accounts of idyllic student life may be implausible and do not

---

<sup>46</sup> Bruce Truscott, *Red Brick University* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943).

<sup>47</sup> Waugh, *Fatal Gift*, p.7.

represent their own experience, but the versions described above are the portrayals of a fictional place. This is a fantasy that does not equate to reality, and does not attempt to do so. Oxford University is still where Hugh Trevor-Roper researched history, Cambridge University is still where Crick and Watson discovered DNA, but they are also a place of fantasy in our imagination, a place of punts and bicycles and handsome youth. For Evelyn Waugh the experiences of the Second World War heightened his nostalgia for a youthful time far removed from a world sundered by conflict. This is a fictional place that differs from reality - these are of course myths, as they always were, and they remain enduringly attractive because of this.