

Anarchist youth

Chapter 3: Christ Church

We sit and wait in silence; then in comes a man wearing an academic gown. He too is silent as he distributes our question papers. He pauses to say: "It is not the custom at the House to invigilate on these occasions. We leave it to" – he looks up and selects, apparently at random, two portraits on the walls above – "John Locke and George Canning to be your invigilators..." and walks out.

We are – about 20 of us – in the Great Hall at Christ Church, Oxford, now familiar to the world through the medium of Harry Potter films, competing for an entrance scholarship in history; the year is 1959; and the speaker is (probably, I can't be sure now) the history don Charles Stuart. As I glance round at my dark-suited rivals, most of whom look as though they come from schools like Eton, Harrow and Ampleforth (at least two of them, it turns out, certainly do because, like me, they win scholarships), everybody starts writing, and so do I – in silence obviously.

I wish I could remember what the questions were and what I wrote in the history papers and the general one on politics and current affairs. But I do remember the rather intimidating interview that followed, which was conducted by about half a dozen dons including Charles Stuart. Among other things I was asked if I had anything to add to my answer on the consequences of the Great Reform Act of 1832. I had to say no, I'm afraid not – and thought afterwards "that didn't go too well".

But why was I applying to Christ Church in the first place? It has always been the grandest and most conservative of the Oxford colleges, containing as it does, instead of a mere chapel, the city's Anglican cathedral – hence its insider's name "the House" (of Christ, in Latin *Aedes Christi*) – and traditionally known for producing Protestant parsons and prime ministers*, almost always Tory ones; even the celebrated Liberal PM William Gladstone started out as a Tory.

*Eton continues to produce prime ministers but the last Houseman was Lord Home, who gave up his title, reverted to Sir Alec Douglas-Home and was defeated by Harold Wilson in 1964. One of my contemporaries, Jonathan Aitken (Eton & Ch Ch), having dated Mrs Thatcher's daughter Carol but failed to become prime minister, eventually settled for a dog collar.

The answer is very simple: the men's colleges, in those sexually segregated days, divided themselves into three groups for their entrance scholarship exams; in the academic year 1959-60 the Christ Church group came first in December; the Balliol and New College groups later on. So if I wanted to have a go early and aim high, the House was the obvious target. As one of the Stonyhurst Jesuits who'd been an undergraduate there pointed out to me, a big college like Christ Church was probably more tolerant of deviance and dissent than the smaller ones; and because of the numbers you were more likely to find like-minded friends there, which I certainly did.

I have never regretted choosing to apply to Christ Church, though one or two of their more traditional dons may have regretted the fact that I was accepted. Apparently I was once proposed for membership of the Pythic or "P" club, a secretive intellectual dining club for junior and senior members of Christ Church, and blackballed by every single don (this according to an ex-junior member).

When the letter came offering me a scholarship, it came via Stonyhurst with Jesuit congratulations: it was a moment to savour. The Christmas holidays were never more enjoyable because there was no school I had to go back to. But now that I was permitted by the family to leave Stonyhurst, what next? There were several options. My uncle Tony, who was based in Switzerland, suggested that I get some work experience at the travel firm that employed him as a courier, accompanying people on rail and channel-ferry journeys from London, then on coach tours of the country. But I chose Paris – a course in French language and a taste of French life.

Looking back, one of the strange things about Stonyhurst – and, I imagine, plenty of other similar institutions – in the 1950s was that our post-O-level schooling was so narrowly academic as opposed to relevant, vocational or practical. We couldn't study French *language* at A level – it had to be French literature to go with English literature and history. So however familiar we became with the tragedies of Racine and the fables of La Fontaine, most of us remained pretty monosyllabic when it came to French conversation.

My much older half-sister Audrey, who had read French literature at Oxford in the 1920s, acted as my mentor and guardian. I moved to her house in Sussex for the equivalent of the Easter term, reading history classics like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Macaulay's *History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, dipping into her eclectic fiction library which ranged from Marcel Proust, in French of course, via Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* to blood-and-thunder merchant Dornford Yates; then she organised my summer term at the Institut Britannique in Paris.

Paris was fun (see Chapter 6) and I did improve my French. On the way I lost my Catholic faith, though not my virginity, and I moved further to the left, from Liberal to left-wing Labour, influenced by the mounting pro-CND campaign leading up to Labour's Scarborough conference in October 1960 which voted to ban the bomb.

I arrived at Christ Church in the same month with longish red hair, the beginnings of a ginger beard and a tremendous appetite for university life, particularly the debating, scribbling and protesting part of it. I did go to some lectures, particularly in the first few weeks. The historian AJP Taylor, for example, started his at the demanding hour of nine in the morning. And I was there in the first week to hear one of Britain's original telly dons, bright and bow-tied, announce to a packed lecture room: "You may wonder why I start my lectures at nine o'clock; let me tell you if it was any later you wouldn't be able to get in." I rose to the challenge and came back a week later but that was as much as I could manage.

I found the atmosphere intoxicating and, as usual, was inclined to show off. "I came to Oxford to make history not to read it" was one of the oh-so-clever remarks I made – I can't remember where, probably in the union bar. But it came back to haunt me, as it was quoted by all and sundry.

Over the next three years I didn't achieve very much in the academic arena. Through indolence and over-confidence I failed my prelims (first-year exams) in history twice, and so after two terms I was rusticated, that is, sent away from the university city of Oxford to the countryside (Notting Hill in London, actually). Then when I finally passed prelims I changed from history to psychology and philosophy (PPP), a brand-new hybrid course bridging the science-arts divide, based in what is now the Oxford Experimental Psychology Department.

My experience of the tutors in the two subjects was mixed. For example, I enjoyed sessions with the bluff, cheerful Michael Argyle who tutored me for social psychology; I didn't get on at all with the don I was assigned to for moral and political philosophy. Jim Griffin, a bright youngish American about to publish a book on Wittgenstein, announced at my first tutorial: "We're going to do moral philosophy this term; you can get political philosophy up on your own." I proceeded to do just that without bothering Jim G any further.

A highlight of the time was a polemical lecture by the (then) Marxist analytic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre entitled "Politics in Eysenck and Freud". Which reminds me: in those less-enlightened times Freud's name was still being bandied about whenever the word psychology cropped up. So if somebody asked "Do you come across Freud on your course?" you could answer: "Not much in psychology since his theories aren't really 'science' – they're inherently untestable – but they're sometimes mentioned in philosophy of mind." The psychology we did was not speculation but science; the method was of testing theory by experiment. One advantage therefore was that we gained an understanding, enhanced by studying the philosophy of knowledge, of how scientists in general go about their work.

The shocking truth is that it was – and is – perfectly possible to progress through Britain's most elite educational pathways, leading to a bachelor's degree at, say, Oxford or Cambridge, having dropped some or all of the following...the science subjects, history, languages, maths... immediately after O level/GCSE and also having never done any philosophy at all. This is because of reliance on the English A-level system which consists of a small number of stand-alone subjects and therefore necessitates premature specialisation. At school we were always told that the top universities favoured this approach because it meant that undergraduates started their courses at a higher level than would otherwise be possible. But surely something like the International Baccalaureate would be a better preparation for a first degree than A levels.

I ended up with a fourth-class honours degree, an embarrassment that I share with all sorts of well-known people such as the novelist Joyce Cary, the art critic John Ruskin, the Russian rugby legend Prince Obolensky, the philologist Henry Sweet, the QC and Lord Chancellor Gerald Gardiner, the maverick Liberal peer Tim Beaumont and the rower/coach Daniel Topolski* whose fourth in geography in 1967 is said to have been the last one Oxford ever awarded. Did I suffer in any practical way for my fourth in later life? Not really since I wasn't destined for a conventional academic career. At interviews for jobs in journalism and publishing you might in those days be asked "Do you have a degree?" (or, even more likely, "You do have a degree, don't you?") but nothing more pressing than that.

*Not to mention the 19th-century Tory prime minister Robert Cecil (later Lord Salisbury); the cricketer (and all-round sportsman) CB Fry; the Rev Colin Semper, head of BBC religious broadcasting; Oxford's first black African student, Christian Cole from Sierra Leone, grandson of a slave; and Colin Cowdrey, another legendary cricketer. In all, the most distinguished company I have ever kept.

Fourths are long gone and so are entrance scholarships, compulsory Latin O levels as a qualification for admission – and single-sex colleges. This has to be the biggest change of all. Oxford in 1960 was male-dominated by a factor of almost six to one because there were so many colleges for men,

including one or two big ones like Christ Church and Balliol, and so few for women. The obvious solution, which took place over time, was for all the colleges to accept both men and women.

Also in 1960 we were witnessing the end of national service with its distorting effect on university entrance: throughout the 1950s most young men spent two years in the armed forces so male university students usually started their courses at 20 rather than 18. As a result Oxford in 1960 still included some third-year undergraduates who were born in 1937, for example the future journalists Paul Foot and Richard Ingrams. From a positive point of view we 18-year-olds had the advantage of mixing with people who'd seen a bit of life – and sometimes, particularly because of national service, death. A curious consequence was that brothers, born several years apart, might rub shoulders at Oxford: for example, Richard Ingrams, one of the founders of *Private Eye*, and his youngest brother Leonard, the financier and opera impresario, born in 1941. Leonard, a brilliant contemporary of mine at Stonyhurst, died of a heart attack in 2005.

In class terms about half of Oxford's undergraduate students were from fee-paying schools and half from state (mostly grammar) schools, though Christ Church stood out as posher than most of the other colleges with more aristocrats, more Etonians and more offspring/descendants of Tory politicians (eg Winston Churchill the younger, grandson of the great man) than anywhere else. I think our public school proportion was as high as 70 per cent.

I once wrote a piece in *Isis* arguing that, however uncomfortable some people from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds and state schools might feel in the alien environment of dining in hall, "scouts" (personal domestic servants), dons' sherry parties and the rest, the mere fact that they were undergraduates at Oxford meant that they were now prospective members of Britain's elite with their futures assured, assuming they exerted themselves. I got some stick over this particularly from two chippy ex-grammar school northerners – angry young men, you might say – but they both went on to become highly successful journalists, thus proving my point. Edward Pearce (1939-2018) was a *Daily Telegraph* leader writer, biographer and choleric controversialist (who notoriously came unstuck when he attacked Liverpool football supporters after the Hillsborough disaster), and John Heilpern (1942-2021) was a celebrated theatre reviewer for the *Observer* and the biographer of John Osborne.

When a student representative council (SRC) was set up in Oxford the junior common room (JCR) of every college had to decide whether or not to affiliate. At Christ Church this was not really an issue: there was apathy rather than controversy. But in our JCR the proposition was formally opposed by Christopher Lennox-Boyd and John Walker-Smith, two old Etonians whose fathers were both members of Harold Macmillan's Conservative government. Their opposition wasn't intended to be taken seriously, of course: it was what an anthropologist or sociologist might call an assertion of tribal identity in a rapidly changing world. The motion to affiliate to the SRC in one of Oxford's biggest colleges was passed by just 13 of our votes to their two – which illustrates the apathy.

I was once in a spontaneous gathering of Housemen (somewhere between 15 and 20 of us, I didn't count) which had no particular point – it was just people talking, chatting, gossiping – and afterwards one of them said to me: "Do you realise you and I were the only people in that room who *didn't* go to Eton?"

I should also mention the pubs and the parties or I might be accused of a whitewash. There was a lot of serious drinking by male undergraduates, not just the posh boys, whereas it's worth emphasising that in those pre-feminist, unwoke days almost all the women, if they drank alcohol at all, drank "moderately". In Oxford at that time you hardly ever saw a woman student who was actually drunk.

And drinking was so easy and accessible, assuming you could afford it, which because of universal grants (for those who weren't rich), most people could. There was a college bar; there was the Oxford Union bar; there were numerous local pubs; and of course there were parties – sherry parties given by dons, cocktail parties given by affluent undergraduates, bottle parties organised collectively by the rest of us. One Sunday I was invited to a midday drinks party by Charles Fletcher, the half-brother of Susannah York, actress and film star (and much more than that: she was a supporter of Mordechai Vanunu, the dissident who revealed Israel's nuclear weapons programme, and once she boldly dedicated a performance in Israel to him). After half a dozen whisky cocktails on an empty stomach, I woke up at about five o'clock in the afternoon, feeling distinctly unwell, and suddenly remembered that I'd asked half of Charles's guests including Susannah to more drinks at six o'clock. I don't think I was able to drink much that evening and I didn't drink whisky again for at least three months.

My left-wing Liberal friend John Davies was an entertainer, a legendary drinker and the source of innumerable stories. Once, invited for drinks by an opponent before a union debate, he took full advantage and drank the best part of a bottle of whisky. So when he got up to speak he could no longer articulate clearly: Saudi Arabia became "Shaudy Rabya" – and bang went any ideas John might have had about a political or administrative career in the Middle East.

John's host on this occasion was the colourful, notorious (though later reformed) Jonathan Aitken, great-nephew of Lord Beaverbrook, old Etonian and after Oxford a journalist, a Tory politician and proven public liar, a prison inmate and prison reformer, an Anglican clergyman and prison chaplain; also the elder brother of Maria Aitken, the actress and theatre director. Once, encouraged by Maria, Jonathan invited me to rural Suffolk for the weekend; we went for an early evening walk, carrying between us a single firearm. As a guest I had the use of it when a solitary hare appeared: bang, bang – the hare went to the kitchen to be hung and the anecdote back to Oxford to appear in *Cherwell*.

John and I were once invited to speak at a local village debating society on some cultural topic or other after we'd been fed and watered. As the taxi brought us closer to the venue I asked him what he was going to say. "I'll think of something," he said. And he did. His speech began: "To begin at the beginning: it is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent..." It was the first five minutes of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* recited verbatim (as far as I could tell). He sat down to delighted applause. So he got up again and provided another two and a half minutes as an encore.

John had a phenomenal memory and when sober, a remarkable fluency off the cuff. Bob Chesshyre, later an *Observer* journalist, shared rooms and tutorials with him and remembered: "He could come into a tutorial with a few notes and construct his essay on the spot, pretending to read it out from a blank sheet of paper. The only problem came when the tutor asked him to go back and reread a point he'd made."

I missed John's most spectacular exploit since I had been rusticated at the time. Bob tells the tale of The Man Who Nearly Burnt Down the College: "I'd been out for the evening and came back to find our rooms on fire with thick, black smoke pouring out and no way of getting in. I rushed to the porter's lodge and after a sceptical look he came out and saw the smoke so gave the alarm. John meanwhile had woken up and managed to struggle out and down to the bathrooms (in the basement), where he passed out again.

"That caused real panic when the fire brigade arrived to put the fire out: no John – where was he? But he was found eventually and taken to hospital where he stayed for several days. So when the college authorities started their investigation I was summoned by the junior censor, responsible for discipline, and invited to explain what had happened.

"Well,' I said, 'John was of course a highly studious person who often worked late into the night and it's true he was a smoker. I had left him buried in *Beowulf*. He must have nodded off while studying – with cigarette in hand.'

"The don reached down beside his desk and came up with an empty whisky bottle. 'D'you think this could have had anything to do with it?' he said. I said nothing. 'I think for insurance purposes I prefer your story,' he said" – and that was that.

John was a fluent speaker and enjoyed debating. As Oxford Union officers*, he and I both qualified to stand for the presidency and we spoke on the same side in favour of the motion "That law and justice are incompatible". We were defeated by Jeffrey Jowell (later Sir Jeffrey, a barrister and academic) both in the vote after the debate and in the presidential election that followed – I think John got more votes than I did but Jeffrey was the clear winner.

*I was elected secretary in my second year and enjoyed taking the piss out of people with long names and titles when I slowly and deliberately read out the minutes of the previous week's debate. For example, for one kilted youngest son of a duke (who became a Tory politician), I intoned: "Lord...James...Alexander...Douglas...Hamilton...Balliol...also spoke."

I wasn't expecting to win but to me that wasn't the main point: this was an opportunity to challenge some fundamental assumptions. I attacked the social contract theory of government – the claim that in a democracy people have voluntarily agreed to surrender some of their natural rights in exchange for protection by the state – by saying that this was a myth to justify state power. Unlike the members of a sports club who really have consented to follow the rules of a particular game, so *have* to accept them, citizens have not *in fact* agreed to surrender their rights. Therefore we are not *in all circumstances* bound by the law: we are logically and morally entitled to break it if there is a good reason to do so. This argument is freely available to the environmental warrior supporters of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil as it was an important one to us in the anti-nuclear Committee of 100.

In the debate I failed to convince the majority of the house but that was hardly surprising. At least I got a fair hearing. And at one point I managed to attract – for just about the only time in my debating life – an ovation. I was interrupted by the secretary (and later president) Garth Pratt who said, to a smattering of polite applause: "How is it, if the speaker claims not to accept the rules and procedures of democracy, that he's standing for election as union president?" To which I replied:

“I’m afraid the honourable secretary is another person who has failed to understand the difference between politics and games.”

On a previous occasion I was defeated for the presidency by Michael Beloff (a leading barrister specialising in sport and for 10 years the president of Trinity College)*. A third candidate then was David Prior-Palmer, who later became an abrasive and highly unpopular “group chief executive” of the *Financial Times* after joining the paper as a trainee in 1964, trendily ditching the “Prior” part of his surname. At one point David was a neighbour of mine in Clapham where he lived in a very grand house, the sale of which, when he moved to Dulwich, was said to have produced the funds that paid the private school fees of his three children.

*The motion was that “the Government should give people what they need rather than what they want”, which I opposed, arguing that it shouldn’t be up to governments to decide anyway.

I can’t claim to have been a brilliant debater: I was always more interested in the issues being discussed than the techniques that speakers used, the rhetorical flourishes, if you like. Above all I wasn’t keen on the *ad hominem*, the kind of argument, if you can call it that, starting “so-and-so is an upper-class parasite/ignorant yob/male chauvinist pig so you can’t take what they say seriously”.

Nowadays, intimidated as so many people are by identity politics and online abuse, it can be difficult to find an actual argument buried in what they say. Then it was instructive to hear politicians with a reputation for eloquence and wit in the House of Commons turn out to be rather slow on their feet and pedestrian when they spoke in the Oxford Union or at meetings of the political clubs. The Tory classicist Enoch Powell (his notorious “rivers of blood” speech was years in the future) was once embarrassed by an interrupter with the erudite Latin quip *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (“after this, therefore because of this”, so signalling a non-sequitur in Powell’s argument). Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader who later tried to have Norman Scott killed (in the event only Scott’s dog died), though sharply suited and quick-witted*, came over as theatrical and a bit pompous. Max Beloff, a right-wing academic and the father of Michael, made a faux pas in a debate when he came up with the coinage *Aldermasturbation*. He was, reasonably enough, hissed for this breach of good manners – and not just by CND supporters. Later I learned from Michael’s autobiography** that Max in his Oxford youth had been one of the tellers for the 1933 motion refusing to fight for king and country. Michael, an urbane and articulate liberal when I knew him, was never as radical in youth as his father – or, in later life, as reactionary.

*he once referred to me as “the Hon Member from Oberammergau”, a quote I never lived down.

***MJBQC: A Life Within and Without the Law*, Bloomsbury, 2022

The best speaker I heard at Oxford was Brian Walden, an ex-president of the union who went on to be a Labour MP and an incisive TV interviewer. He managed to make his speech impediment – an inability to pronounce the letter “R” – a mannerism that forced you to listen to him more attentively. And he was merciless in ridiculing his opponents. Once I can remember squirming as he targeted the peace movement and its various “unilateralist” elements, challenging the audience to disagree with his claims that we contradicted one another. Of course we did: the Communists (whose party line was to oppose the British and American bombs but not the Russian one) opposed the left-wing Labourites (who insisted that we should all vote Labour to get the bomb banned but couldn’t make

up their minds whether that meant we should withdraw from Nato) and they in turn opposed the Trotskyists and anarchists (who were against all bombs and military alliances and in favour of direct action), and the pacifists who were opposed to all use of force.

Of the nine undergraduates elected president of the union in my three years (1960-3) all except one went on to work in journalism or the law; one of the journalists, Phillip Whitehead, was also a Labour MP. The exception was Girish Karnad (1938-2019), an Indian Rhodes scholar who became an actor and playwright. In chronological order they were: Robert Rowland (TV), Phillip Whitehead (TV), Paul Foot (print), Howard Preece (print), Hugh Stephenson (print), John McDonnell (bar), Michael Beloff (bar), Girish Karnad, Jeffrey Jowell (bar). I don't think any of them ever aspired to become prime minister, never mind "world king": you could say that, unlike Boris, they grew up.

Early in my second year the secretary of the Christ Church debating club, the Cardinal Society, asked me to propose: "That this house would rather run with the hare than hunt with the hounds." Opposing the motion would be Jonathan Aitken and Sir George Young, another Old Etonian, a baronet after the death of his father, later leader of the House of Commons, now in the House of Lords*. My seconder was Nicholas Bennett, who'd been at Westminster, which had particularly strong links with Christ Church.

*As Lord Young of Cookham. Poor George: once described in the *Guardian* as "courteous, wry, insightful and very much on the left of his party", he's notorious for the following remark made in a radio interview: "The homeless? Aren't they the people you step over when you come out of the opera?" He was, clearly, intending to ridicule the rich rather than slight the homeless – but that is not how the quote has been understood by most people ever since.

We lost the vote at the end, which was hardly surprising, but Nich (a spelling he perversely preferred to the conventional Nick) turned out to be an original, something of a radical, already practically an anarchist. He'd written most of a book which became *Zigzag to Timbuktu*, describing a haphazard hitch-hiking journey round West Africa, and was working on the final chapter, commenting on the damage done to Africa by Western colonialism. His rooms in college and later his flat in Park End Street near Oxford railway station became a centre for the libertarian and bohemian fringe. Visitors included the guru of non-violent civil disobedience, Gene Sharp, and the American-Liverpudlian Thom Keyes, pot head, gambler, self-styled early friend of the Beatles and author of the pop novel *All Night Stand*.

Nich introduced me to his parents, Margot and Richard Bennett, who'd both been in Spain on the Republican side during the 1936-9 civil war, Margot as an unqualified but dedicated nurse, recruited mainly for her potential as a propagandist, and Richard as a journalist.* Their Hampstead house attracted various musicians, writers and poker players, people like George jazz-singer Melly, Al the poet Alvarez, and Leon *Minder* Griffiths. Margot herself had published some crime fiction as well as journalism but now concentrated on writing scripts for television. Richard, who'd previously edited *Lilliput* magazine, was on the *Sunday Telegraph*, launched in February 1961; he provided Nich with a nice little earner.

*A footnote in *The Spanish Civil War* by Hugh Thomas, referring to the May Days of 1937 when the Communists fought the anarchists in Barcelona, reads: "Richard Bennett (with Barcelona Radio)

described to me how...his door...was opened by two men carrying bombs who bluntly asked him: 'Whose side are you on?' 'Yours,' he wisely replied."

Fleet Street as always was keen on stories with an Oxford angle and the conventional conduit for them was the office of *Cherwell*, the university's weekly tabloid. No national paper's newsdesk could afford to ignore a call that started "*Cherwell* editor here. An undergraduate has been sent down for sex/drugs/blasphemy..." But far better than these random calls was a secret arrangement by father-and-son for exclusive access. Thus for a time the *Telegraphs*, *Sunday* and *Daily*, were the best informed Fleet Street papers of all.

On one occasion a piece sourced by Nicholas and written by Richard on Oxford's cannabis smokers was illustrated by Nich's pic of a group of us puffing a rolled cigarette that looked like a joint, passing it solemnly between us as was *de rigueur* in those days. In spite of the standard black wedges across our eyes I was recognisable and I was duly summoned by the Christ Church don in charge of discipline. "Were you actually smoking cannabis?" I was asked. "Certainly not," I replied. Fortunately I wasn't asked who'd taken the pic and I don't think Nicholas was ever suspected of originating this or any other story.

There were probably a couple of hundred student cannabis smokers in Oxford then, most of them Saturday night casuals rather than regular potheads. They/we were the bohemians – jazz (as well as rock 'n' roll) fans, poets, CND supporters. I was never more than a casual, partly since a joint was usually crumbled cannabis resin mixed with blond tobacco which I found nauseating (I preferred the black tobacco in Gauloises but couldn't really be bothered to roll my own joints). Later in Africa I enjoyed smoking leaf cannabis ready-rolled into joints which you could buy in the markets of Kampala and Mombasa for the same price as a packet of fags. But I was never really tempted by the glamour of "drugs". I remember during one vacation in Chelsea meeting an American action painter who was a heroin user: the needle marks on the underside of his left forearm were a distinct turn-off. And later, after Oxford, the bohemian poet Heathcote Williams once gave me a vivid description of an LSD trip – which sounded pretty scary and saved me the trouble of experimenting for myself.

One light-hearted *Telegraph* piece about St Clare's Hall, described as "a fringe institution" for girls supplying "female companionship for undergraduates", led to a libel action*. The formidable principal of St Clare's, Anne Dreydel, was an enthusiast for litigation: my own first feature article for *Cherwell*, on students' initial impressions of Oxford, quoted a fairly harmless criticism of the teaching by a St Clare's student; she wasn't named but the detail in her quote identified her; she was summoned by Miss Dreydel, interrogated and then given an ultimatum: deny the quote or be sent down – so of course she had to deny/disown it, and of course *Cherwell* had to apologise. And I learnt my first lesson about the law of libel: truth may theoretically be a defence but in reality not everybody can afford to tell it.

*The text of the offending article by Richard Bennett began: "When I was up at Cambridge, I remember there being a melancholy shortage of eligible girls. However, my man in Oxford reports that things are changing and that fringe institutions for girls are booming. More girls are coming to Oxford, and some are paying more to do less than they have ever done before."

"St Clare's Hall leads the field in both distinction and numbers. On the front of its prospectus is a picture of Magdalen College. Social possibilities are presented to the new St Clare's student soon

after she comes up, at the celebrated 'Meat Market'. Guests from a list of eligible undergraduates drawn up by St Clare's are invited to a cocktail party to look over the new intake.

"You are just the sort of man we want our girls to meet. Please move round and make friends' is the greeting from the organisers on arrival. And on departure: 'What? You haven't found anyone to take out to dinner!'"

Heathcote Williams was another posh public school dissident who'd abandoned his rather ordinary and plebeian first name, John, somewhere between Eton and Christ Church. Heathcote, who went on to become a celebrated poet, actor, dramatist and activist, was already a dedicated bohemian working on his first book, *The Speakers*, about the Hyde Park orators. Though he was never active in student politics, he more than made up for it in later life (he's the subject of a planned biography by Andrew Lycett).

Christ Church was full of sons of the famous/notorious who often went on to achieve fame/notoriety in their own right. At least once on the BBC's *Question Time* Max (son of Oswald) Mosley appeared at the right hand of the chairman, David (son of Richard) Dimbleby; in their day as Housemen David presided over the JCR and edited *Isis* and Max was secretary of the union. I knew David slightly and Max quite well.

I met Max in my first term during a debate on the proposal to abolish capital punishment. In the Oxford Union, which is modelled on the House of Commons, you stand up if you want to challenge what somebody is saying and then wait to be noticed. If they're good on their feet, they can give way by sitting down to let you make your point; then they try to rubbish what you say. Interrupting somebody – or dealing with an interruption – is the most gladiatorial part of debating, which is why it always appealed to me.

Anyway, there I was, sitting in the front row, armed with all the arguments and statistics and eager to get into the action. So when a pro-hanging speaker said something particularly inaccurate or stupid I stood up. He went on speaking, refusing to give way, so I reluctantly sat down again. This happened several times. About the third or fourth time I noticed that laughter – well, tittering – started a second or two after I stood up. I turned round to see another tall, red-headed figure who'd also got to his feet a few places behind me. It was Max Mosley, playing jack-in-the-box or follow-my-leader – when I got up, he got up; when I sat down, he sat down.

Max introduced himself afterwards and said he was just having a laugh and he hoped I didn't mind. He was of course opposed to hanging (the debate ended in an overwhelming majority for abolition) and he certainly didn't consider himself particularly right-wing. Later I learnt that he did in fact support his father's politics, for some time at least. A few months after leaving Oxford, he was the election agent for the Union Movement candidate at a by-election and in the following year he was arrested after a punch-up involving his father and an angry mob. The by-election in Manchester Moss Side in November 1961 featured a racist leaflet which Max unconvincingly denied knowledge of when the *Daily Mail* produced it many years later; in the court case he was cleared of threatening behaviour on the grounds that he was protecting his father. But at Oxford emphasising his connection with his father wouldn't have helped him get elected to union office.

After Max was elected secretary of the union, Oswald Mosley came to Oxford several times. He spoke in union debates, where he was heard in relative silence rather than barracked, and once addressed the humanist group. On several occasions Max arranged for a group of politicians to meet his father who said he wanted to know what we thought. The group usually included Robert Skidelsky, a historian and economist who went on to write a sympathetic (and so much-criticised) biography of Mosley, published in 1975.

Bob was right-wing Labour at that time; when the SDP came along he defected to it and was nominated as one of their life peers; then he flirted with the Tories before becoming an independent. He later made sympathetic noises in the direction of Jeremy Corbyn, thus ending up a bit to the left of where he started. His website once reported: "My best friend there [at Oxford] was Max Mosley, and inevitably I met his father, Oswald Mosley, then in the twilight of a notorious career. He rolled his hypnotic eyes at me, and duly cast his spell."

My own memory of Oswald Mosley at one of these meetings is of somebody who was smooth, powerful and intimidating – snakelike and bearlike at the same time, if that's possible to imagine. The Union Movement policy he put forward was pro-United Europe and pro-apartheid. The history of Africa and the United States showed, he said, that the races were best kept apart; blacks and whites alike suffered from racial and cultural mixing. He emphasised that he didn't consider whites superior to blacks, just different – and both would benefit from separation.

Mosley had a pretty good idea of his audience and he had tremendous persuasive powers: he managed to make this obnoxious garbage sound almost convincing. But he also made one big mistake – or rather he had already made it in setting up the meeting. He'd brought with him an Italian fascist (a count, I seem to remember, though I didn't make a note of his name). As we started asking awkward questions, the mood changed. Suddenly in a mixture of broken English and gesticulating Italian the sidekick started ranting about blacks, monkeys and trees.

Of course Mosley now tried to retrieve the situation: yes, some of their people did believe that black people were inferior to whites – but it wasn't necessary to believe it; he personally didn't believe it; there were even some black supporters of their policies. But the damage was done. By asking questions and listening to what was said – rather than shouting abuse – we'd got what we came for: an authentic glimpse of modern fascism. It certainly wasn't what Sir Oswald and Max had in mind when they invited us to the meeting.

Mosley père wasn't the only famous/notorious figure I met at Oxford. As well as my contemporaries (some of them the famous/notorious of the future) there were people like the heavyweight Labour politician Denis Healey and the maverick journalist (& MP) Tom Driberg, speakers I invited when I was chairman of the Labour club. Healey was frank – and by no means apologetic – about his undergraduate membership of the Communist party in the late 1930s. At the time the Labour party seemed to him feeble and inept, unsuited for the struggle against fascism. Then when I asked ex-Houseman Driberg whether at Christ Church in his day they'd returned junk mail to sender, signed Mickey Mouse, as we did, he claimed they'd gone much further. What they did apparently was to attach the blank returnable postage-free cards to heavy objects like bricks before posting them.

For the visit of the prime minister of the time, Harold Macmillan, I sat on the press bench in the union next to the TV-playwright-to-be Dennis Potter, an ex-Oxford student, who was reporting the

event for the *Daily Herald* – and at the same time heckling the speaker. He showed me the written text of Macmillan’s speech which he’d been given as a reporter. It meant that he could prepare and time his interruptions of the speech perfectly. Then when the Catholic student society invited my hero (when I was a Stonyhurst schoolboy), Archbishop Roberts SJ, who had argued that nuclear weapons were immoral, I was privileged to meet him at dinner beforehand. Looking back I see this chance to meet and talk to politicians, journalists and public figures as perhaps the greatest opportunity of being at Oxford.

David Crawford, the undergraduate student who organised the Archbishop Roberts visit, once asked me to write an account of how I’d lost my faith, as the Catholics say, for publication in the Oxford Catholic magazine *The Old Palace*. I wrote the piece but the university chaplain, Fr Michael Hollings, intervened and stopped it appearing.

In the same way some of my left-wing contemporaries weren’t keen on giving comfort to the enemy. The new left, which dominated the Labour club at the time, were adamant that “the mass media” were a big part of the problems created by capitalism: they oversimplified the issues and effectively supported the system. Ergo anyone who worked for them was letting the side down. When the Conservative club invited Richard Crossman to speak, their president invited me to sit next to him at dinner “to make intelligent left-wing conversation”. At the time Crossman wrote regularly for the *New Statesman* and also had a column in the *Daily Mirror*, so I asked him what the difference was between the two jobs. His reply wasn’t what the new left wanted to hear. “When I write for the *Statesman*, I say what’s in my head without really having to reflect,” he said, “but when I write my *Mirror* column I have to think much more carefully about getting my message across and whether it’s really what I think – or whether in fact it has any meaning at all.”

In those days the Christ Church posh boys were known as “bloodies”. They joined clubs like the Bullingdon, notorious for trashing restaurant dining-rooms, followed the Christ Church and New College beagles and supported the college boat club. By tradition success on the river was followed by a celebration dinner – and then mayhem.

There was one such dinner in my time. Curious to see what would happen afterwards I wandered along to Broad Walk next to the Christ Church meadow building, a traditional target. Stones were already whizzing through the air – but falling short or wide of the windows. Presumably they were being thrown by oarsmen rather than cricketers. Suddenly without really thinking I picked up a stone and threw it with (of course) a cricketer’s deadly accuracy; the window I aimed at shattered...and I decided that was enough of that. I went away, thoughtfully, embarrassed at what I had done.

The subsequent damage that night was substantial – enough for everybody in the college to be levied about £5 (£5 then – say, £100 now?) to pay for it. My left-wing friends complained that this was unfair on the non-participants, and obviously it was, but for once in my life I kept very quiet. I’d certainly had my £5 worth. I’d been reminded how easy it is to be caught up in crowd behaviour doing things you wouldn’t dream of doing if you were alone. What is true of aimless vandalism – whether by Christ Church bloodies or football hooligans – is equally true of political demonstrations. Being part of a group has a positive side in that you can gain confidence from those around you and so have the courage to act collectively. But the downside is the risk of being drawn into things like stone-throwing which you wouldn’t otherwise be capable of or even approve of.