THE THOURON AWARD

Last year's newsletter featured "Writers in the Family" and attempted to give a brief synopsis of Thouron Alumni who have made writing their principal profession. Fearful that I might miss someone on the list, I asked alumni who felt that I had overlooked their accomplishments as a writer to step forward to let me know of their work. Michael Levin, American, 1964, responded to my invitation to self-identity. Scroll down below Michael's note to me to see his musings about his two years at Oxford as a a Thouron Fellow, and another article of his, also written for the *Pennyslvania Gazette*, about his reunion at Oxford 21 years later . — Rachel

From Michael:

"I hesitate to call myself an "author" any more than a "poet" or "playwright," though "writer" looks to fit. I've been writing professionally most of my adult life while disguised as a lawyer, renewable-energy financier and solar energy developer. My credits run the gamut from lit-crit articles; op-eds; cover, feature & other pieces in the Pennsylvania Gazette, Harvard Magazine or other periodicals (including "Tiger and Sam," a tribute in a previous Newsletter); through many law and environmental-policy articles; to credits (as production secretary and shadow dramaturg) for the stage and screen versions of Doctor Faustus starring Richard Burton & Elizabeth Taylor and published poems beginning in 1976. These have received several freelance journalism and poetry awards. My debut poetry collection, Watered Colors (Poetica) was released earlier this year to kind reviews. My muse (Nora Jean Levin, CW '65, GA '66) and I are near the finish line of a long nonfiction book based on personally-collected oral histories spanning 1900-1940 in Poland, Germany, Bessarabia and Mandate Palestine, which started as a novel and became something quite different. (See "Work in Progress" in the Sept/Oct '14 Gazette.) We're working with an L.A. playwright to turn some of that into plays."

You can find more at www.michaellevinpoetry.com.

Paradise grasped

By Michael H. Levin

A former Thouron Fellow's musings about his stay in Oxford years ago, as it was and as he remembers it

THE twentieth anniversary of the Thouron Awards did not begin well for a black-tie affair. Strong winds whipped up sheets of rain as we forded Walnut Street toward the Faculty Club, trying to look elegant despite the squooshings in our dress shoes. Going up the stairs, I saw some people wearing ties with Thouron insignia and others wearing floor-length Thouron skirts. When I went to Oxford in 1964 as one of five American fellows, there was scarcely a Thouron organization. Now, on the dinner program, the directory of 400 former fellows, the matchbooks punctuating each banquet table, bloomed a coat of arms with lion rampant, splayed eagle, and vaguely British coastlines framing a big blue T. The evening was beginning to assume the porcelain formality of a Saturday-afternoon dance class, or a fraternity reunion whose participants have rummaged up their lapel pins but can't quite connect after the handshakes. What was I doing here? What past do you return to, when you do go home again?

Then I saw Bill Hamilton across the reception room. As Proust knew, certain sounds or sights can become poles of buried experience, which wheels into view when they're met again. Though our contacts have been erratic, Bill seems to be that kind of trigger tonight. We've worked together briefly by phone, but I haven't seen him since that wet April day in 1966 at the House of Commons, when he gave up his seat in the Visitors Gallery and went elsewhere with his new wife so I could stay with my new wife to see a debate. The wives we're with now are still the same wives, and he's a professor of management and technology in the Wharton and engineering schools. There's a lot to catch up on, and catching up carries us to our places for the first course.

Moving to our table, I can still smell the damp wool and leather of that vanished afternoon in Parliament. That was when the pound was worth nearly three dollars and the British had half-crowns and shillings, when England was neither a suburb of Kuwait nor Milton Friedman's last best hope. It was when we were going to win Nobels by the time we reached 30.

Suddenly, I am not listening to the speeches. I am considering that person who disembarked at Southampton and confidently boarded the boat-train for Oxford (falling out of the taxi because the tip of his new umbrella had gotten caught in his pants cuff). He is still inside me, strange but familiar. I inspect him as Veronica Lake inspected the reporter who discovered her waitressing in the Catskills and asked what she thought when she saw her old movies on TV. She tossed back the famous dip that hung over one eye and stared at him. The silence grew. "I think," she said softly, "I think, how could anyone have been so young?"

In the Beginning

"Look to your right, sir," grinned the train conductor. "You'll see spires any minute now." He had bright furry eyes and a pocket watch like a March Hare out of Alice in Wonderland. The train was an hour late. No one complained. It would have been bad form. In England, you don't ask why the train's late. You say it's only an hour behind schedule. In England, an hour behind schedule is doing fine. "Look," said the March Hare. "You'll see spires any minute now. You'd not expect there'd be anything. And all of a sudden you're there."

There is never any beginning to Oxford. It has suburbs, department stores, developments, and 120,000 people. It is the headquarters of the MG car company and the site of the palace in which Richard *Coeur-de-Lion* and King John were born. But you never see these sides of Oxford unless you look for them. All you see are colleges. Each college is self-contained and independent; each has its own dining hall, bedrooms, sports grounds, library. When you start living in college, the town outside starts ceasing to exist. There is never any beginning to Oxford if you come to study here. You cross Reading and the flat farm country from London and the spires are all around you, Gothic and reaching. The spires are all around you, and they're all you ever see.

Streets in Oxford are often called "the." You stop a student in the Broad. He wears pimply hair, black leather jacket, tight blue jeans, heavy leather boots. He might be a delinquent; he looks like he could grow up to engineer a minor Brinks job. But you know he's a student because he's wearing the short black academic over-gown that undergraduates have been required to wear since the days when you had to be in holy orders to take a degree. You ask the way to the market. He tells you. *"Capito?"* He's not Italian. In fact, he's from Nottingham. He speaks Italian to make you think he's continental. You thank him and go on.

Oxford's cold is not like Philadelphia's; it's alive. No matter how warmly you're dressed, you feel it creeping up your trousers and over the collar of your shirt.

continued

Michael Levin, '64 C (J.D., Harvard '69; B.Litt., Oxon '70) heads the regulatory reform staff of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, lives in Washington, D.C., with Jean Bieler Levin, '65 CW, '66 G, Jeremy ('92 C) and Daniel ('95 C), and says he tries to balance parenting, writing, and several other -ings. This, he also says, is his "personal thank-you to the Thourons and Penn." The Thouron Awards, a British-American student exchange program, were established at Penn in 1960 by Sir John and Lady Thouron.

There is no central heating. The English don't believe in it. They say it dries out your skin. So you huddle over your electric fire and think of the story about the monks coming to Oxford to found a university because they could study here and mortify their flesh at the same time. You laugh. Then you shiver. Then you go down to the Junior Common Room—a sort of student union—to try to get warm.

Sometimes it's warm and sunny, and the light turns the spires golden and bounces between them like a ping-pong ball in a fast match. But usually it's cold, and usually it rains, and the cold whips through the cracks around the windows above your desk and chaps the backs of your hands when you try to work. There are no storm windows. The English don't believe in them. So you rub vaseline on the chapped spots to keep the cracks from working down to blood. The English don't use vaseline. The English keep their hands in their pockets and say it isn't cold.

Before you came to England, you thought the English would be quiet and reserved. Then you thought you'd never met such friendly people. It took a while to realize that you might reach a certain point of friendship the first five minutes you met. To get past that point would take the rest of your life.

There is a long tradition of apparent dislike between townspeople and students in Oxford. This is the original "town and gown" and dates from the fourteenth century, when the townsmen, angry at students' affairs with town girls, did regular pitched battle with the scholars in the High. The feeling seems to remain. The town matrons sniff and say the students aren't gentlemen anymore. The shop girls say they wouldn't be caught dead with one of the creeps. But the matrons still call the students "sir" and "young gentleman," and the shop girls are seen going out with the creeps all the time.

Always, there is the stone. University College, chartered 1249. Merton College, 1264. Oriel College, 1326. New College, Magdalen, Christ Church, Balliol, Trinity, Exeter, St. John's. There are 26 men's colleges in Oxford. With the five women's colleges, they form the university of 10,000 people. Univ. is officially oldest because it was chartered first. But Merton was built before Univ., and New had the first college quadrangle. All of them claim they're the oldest, of course. Tourists argue about this, depending on which oldest college they were brainwashed in first. It doesn't matter. The important thing is that the colleges are there.

Each college is surrounded by a high stone wall usually topped with broken glass. This was originally for keeping townsmen out in case of siege. Now it's for keeping students in; you pay a gate fine when you don't get back before curfew. The walls don't work, of course. Ways of climbing them to avoid gate fines are passed down through generations of undergraduates. But they make the colleges comfortably uniform and medieval, and every college built since the Renaissance has retained them. Except St. Catherine's, which is Eero Saarinen modern and has a moat.

Each male college has several quadrangles, and rooms for its first-year men and most of its second-year men. A normal undergraduate degree takes three years to complete, so last-year men live in flats or bed-sitting rooms called "digs" and come in to the college each day to work. Each college has gardens, lecture rooms, a chapel, a beer cellar, a Junior Common Room for undergraduates, a Middle Common Room for graduates, and a Senior Common Room for tutors, fellows, and God—if He should be invited. Each has a playing field. Most have squash courts. All have a dining hall in which their students eat. In the dining hall is the high table.

Oxford's American colony has a standard joke which goes, "What's a high table? Well, you've heard of a

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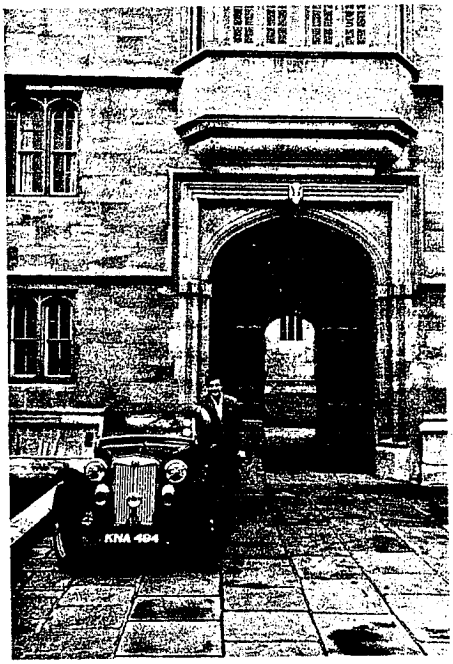
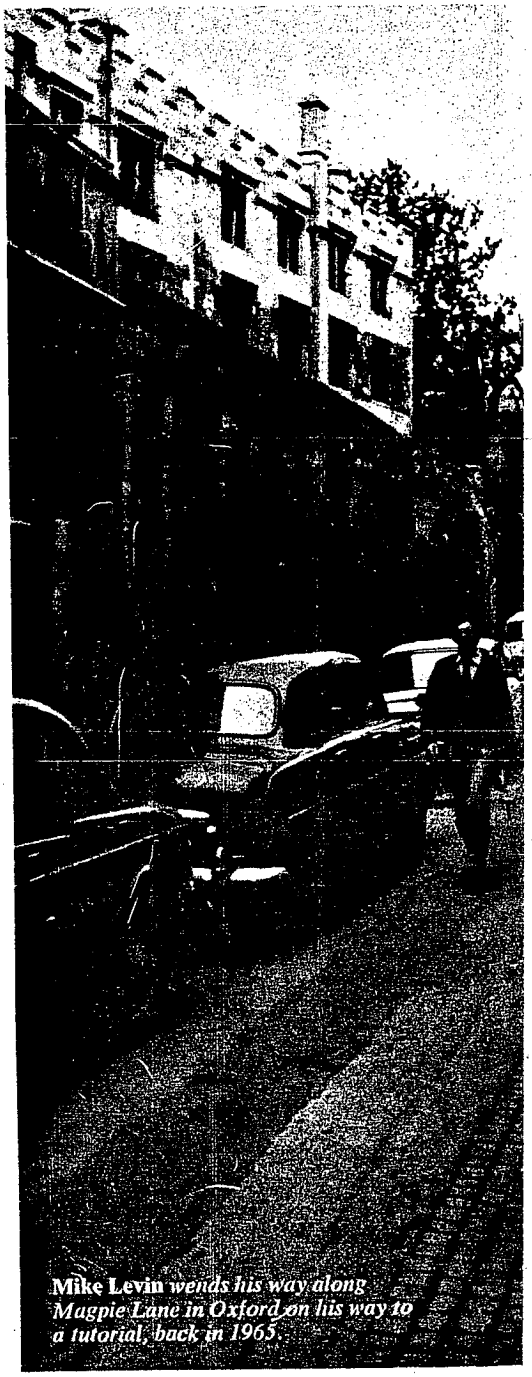


At the main gate *of Wadham College*

In the well-manicured *Quad at Wadham*



Mike Levin *wends his way along Magpie Lane in Oxford on his way to a tutorial, back in 1965.*

highchair . . . ." This is misleading. A high table is nothing like a highchair. It is a raised table in the dining hall at which the fellows of the college and their invited guests dine. When you are invited to eat there, you go past the undergraduates to the head of the hall. You wear your gown—not only because it's required, but because it's good protection: waiters in hall often mistake the back of your neck for a soup plate. When this happens, you smile politely and wait to be sponged off. You never squirm. That would be bad form.

When Grace is finished, the fellows sit down. You sit down with them. Then the undergraduates sit down. The butler brings wine to high table with each course. There are seven courses. You eat them in the light from a sixteenth-century silver candelabrum. As the meal proceeds, you think you're beginning to know what Oxford's all about. You look toward the undergraduates below you: they are eating floury soup, boiled potatoes, watered peas, limp pork. British institutional food can be said to lack a certain imagination. There is a strong desire to sneer as you finish your *sole meuniere*. You don't sneer, though. No one does. That would be bad form.

A Pub for All Seasons

"See here, Yank," said the man in the pub through the foam on his moustache. He wore checkered shirt, striped tie, button-up cardigan under tweed jacket—normal country afternoon dress. "The only good thing you ever sent us was Glenn Miller's dance band." You looked at him and grinned. "Well, sure. That's why we took it back so fast." He laughed and bought you a beer.

There are no pubs in the States. There are neighborhood bars where you sometimes meet your friends, but usually don't. There are university bars where students drink, theater bars where actors drink, agency bars where admen drink. There are bars for doing business in, for finding women (or men) in, for relaxing-before-catching-the-train-home in. But there are few bars where you can be sure you'll meet people you've been drinking with all your life. There are few bars which feature the same faces every night, from the town beggar through the town mayor. There are few bars where you can hear a university professor, an insurance executive, and a socialist waiter having a quiet conversation behind you. There are many bars in the States. There are few you go to to talk. There are many bars in Philadelphia. They are rarely second homes. That is the main difference between bars and pubs.

Thanks to the licensing laws, there are no all-night pubs in England. There aren't even any all-day pubs. Hours vary from town to town, but most pubs open three hours for lunch and four or five hours until 10:30 in the evening. This is all right once you get used to it. In the beginning, though, it's upsetting that everything closes down before 11:00. The reason the English are happy with early closings, says the National Ministry of Health, is that they don't really go to pubs to drink. They go there, says the Ministry, to talk. It's true. By 10:30, they're so tired from talking that all they can do is stumble past the pink elephants and weave their way home to bed.

The King's Arms Tavern stands in the center of Oxford, next to Wadham College off the Broad. It's been here since the early 1800s. Once, it was a genuine inn. Then Wadham bought it to use its bedrooms for tutors and undergraduates. Its ground floor is still a pub. Behind its bar is Pepe, in gray hair and a white jacket. Pepe is stocky and Greek Cypriot and speaks seven languages badly. He looks like an educated pirate. No one knows his last name; there's a rumor it's Le Moko and he's the original hero of *The Casbah*. This is hearsay. He looks at you behind half-rimmed spectacles.

"Hello, Pep."

" 'Lo. What you want?"

"Lunch, Pep."

He snarls. His eyes light up happily. "What you mean, lunch?"

Pepe likes to play tough. If you come in to order, he growls. Then he insults you for being American. Then he insults you for being in Oxford. Then he insults you for bothering him. All the time, his eyes light up happily. All the time, he scares away tourists who fail to translate the eyes. But the management thinks he's worth it.

"What you mean, lunch?"

"Lunch. You know. Food. Eat." You point to your mouth and make starving noises. "You put on plate. I put in stomach. I pay you. Everybody happy."

"Lunch? This time of day?" It is one o'clock in the afternoon. He smothers a grin. If you're a regular, the rules are different. Then you are tacitly permitted to play tough to Pepe on alternate days. In between, he plays tough to you. Today, it's a draw. "Okay. All Yanks crazy. What you have?"

"See here," said the man in the pub. "The only good thing you sent us was Glenn Miller's band." His face went distant. "But I suppose you're not old enough to remember that." He paused. His eyes went blank. "My first wife was killed in the Blitz." You stirred uncomfortably. There was nothing to say. He had no right bringing it up in the middle of a casual conversation. Then he was happy and it wasn't 1942 and London anymore. "God bless you, Yank," he said. "You did some good things for us. Have a pint of mild."

A Knowledge of Something in the End

Oxford is three things when you are a student there. Stone, weather, people. Always it is stone, tall above you in towers and gargoyles and crenelated battlements, more a part of the fog than the fog is. Always it is weather, wet and chill. Always, it is people. It is mostly people in the end.

continued

The canon of Christ Church College was showing you around. He was thin and gray-haired and very English. He wore a clerical collar and a braided fellow's gown over a Savile Row suit. He was the most English person you had ever seen. He stopped at the great front quadrangle built by Wolsey before the Dissolution. It stretched away bigger than two football fields. Continuous arches ran the walls. Your eyes followed them automatically till they merged with the stone on the far side of the quad. In the center was a statue of Mercury in a fountain. The whole quad was covered like a putting green with manicured bent grass. Compared to the cut-up spaces of other colleges, it looked like Piccadilly Circus under grass.

The canon turned. He looked more English than ever. He was very dignified. Then his eyes twinkled. "It ain't much," he said in his best Brooklyn accent. "But any place yez hangs yer hat is home."

Other towns have rich and poor people; Oxford has rich colleges and poor colleges and not-poor colleges

Other towns have rich people and poor people. Oxford has rich colleges and poor colleges. It also has colleges which describe themselves as not poor. This is called tact. Wadham is a not-poor college. It is not as rich as St. John's, which is reputed to own the Bristol docks and half the financial section of London. It is not as rich as Christ Church, which has public-school boys, a genuine cathedral, a dozen former Prime Ministers and Jack Profumo among its graduates. It is not as rich as Magdalen, which has public-school boys, a deer park, a tradition of genteel decadence, and Oscar Wilde among its graduates. But it is not a poor college, and it has Sir Maurice Bowra as its warden, which more than makes up for what it may lack.

You met him one night before first term when the college had closed early. There was the hell of a racket coming from the main gate through the gloom. Someone was cursing and trying to kick it down. He was short and chunky and wore a Draculan cape and florid face. You went up to him helpfully between sections of fog. "It's locked. They can't hear you. You have to ring."

"I know it's locked. Don't tell me what they can't do," roared Sir Maurice Bowra, K.B.E. "Don't just stand there—kick it down, kick it down!"

He is almost as broad as he is short, with a heavy head and drooping jowls and piercing gray eyes that make you forget everything else about him. He looks like an intelligent gray gnome. Once, he was a famous figure on the literary tea circuit, a friend of the Bloomsbury Group and Eliot and Yeats. Then he became warden of Wadham at 35, which is like being president of Yale at 20. Now he does nothing but fracture undergraduates with his annual Christmas sermon and publish a book every nine months. He has written books about Shakespeare, philosophy, religion, education, French literature, Australian aborigine folk songs, Chinese art, the Romans, the Greeks. No one can quite believe he knows enough about all these subjects to write a book on each. No one can quite believe anything about him. After 40 eccentric years in Oxford, he is too legendary. Anecdotes collect around his figure like filings on the ends of a magnet.

When Adolf Hitler wanted to see a real Oxford don, the Chamberlain Government packed Bowra off to the Reichschancellery by way of appeasement. At the main entrance, two towering S.S. guards barked "Heil Hitler!" Bowra peered up at them and walked on. At a large door, two towering S.S. guards barked "Heil Hitler!" Bowra peered up at them and walked on. Bowra walked down a corridor. Finally, Bowra was ushered into a huge room. Hitler was at the other end of the room, on a dais, behind a desk. Bowra peered up at him and walked on. Hitler greeted him with the Nazi salute: "Heil Hitler—Heil Hitler!" Bowra raised one eyebrow a fraction of an inch. "Heil Bowra," he said.

The story is almost certainly not true. But knowing Sir Maurice, you are never completely sure.

Wadham is a direct-grant college. This means that most of its students come to Oxford on scholarships from local education councils, from all over England and all kinds of economic levels in every kind of town. They like girls; they dance well; they know the difference between a cross-cut and a rip-cut. They can balance the carbs on a sports car. They are poker fiends. They play guitars, or mandolins, or a hot alto sax. They wear what they damn well please. They are very bright. They are also very young.

Stewart knocks on your door. Stewart is only one of his first names. He has three others. He also has long fair hair in bangs on his forehead and lives in the room above you. He's from the roughest section of Newcastle, a rough town, and likes to pretend he's a junior-type Capone. He's not very good at it, though. He gives you his tough-guy smile, feet wide apart and rocking. "'Ey—found a party. Come." Five years ago, you would have, but you're not 17 any more. You would be bored at his parties. He would be bored at yours. He knows this. He asks you to come to show you he likes you. He can't say he likes you; that wouldn't be tough. You grin at him. "No, thanks. Bring me some back to remember you by." He unhooks his fingers from his jeans and smiles. It is not a tough smile any more. He clatters down the stairs.

There are no classes or courses at Oxford. Instead, there are tutorials. A tutorial is a weekly meeting with a personal tutor in your major subject. Each college has tutors for every major subject; you choose your major and are assigned a tutor before you arrive for your freshman year. If you are an undergraduate, you are required to prepare a short essay on a selected topic each week and discuss it with your tutor. This is almost all you are required to do. There are no midterm exams. There are no term papers. There are no term finals or grades. There are university lectures, which are like American lecture courses, but few students go to them, unless a star like Isaiah Berlin is speaking. It is part of the Oxford tradition not to.

Early one morning, at 4:00, your roommate was climbing into college over the garden wall. He slipped and fell 12 feet into a bramble bush. A window opened in the warden's lodgings above him. "Christ," he muttered, plucking brambles from his hands and face. "No—Bowra," came a Biblical voice from the window. Your roommate tried to hide under the bramble bush. "Are you badly damaged?" asked the voice worriedly. "No," he said, rubbing a sprained left wrist. "I'm not damaged. I'm kilt." "Good." The voice chuckled happily. "That's the way we like it. Not enough to destroy them, just enough to let them know it's dangerous to try." The window rattled shut. Your roommate limped up the stairs and bandaged his wounds and wrote till dawn. He had a tutorial that day at 10:00.

There are three terms a year at Oxford: Michaelmas, Hilary, and Trinity. They are each eight weeks long. What the tutorial system means is that no one works very hard the first term if he is an undergraduate. He just reads the prescribed books and writes his essays. Then he goes home or to the Costa del Sol for the six-week Christmas vacation. He works harder second term. He works very hard third term, for at the end of third term are year-end exams. For first-year students,

these cover the work of the entire first year. For third-year students, they cover everything since you've been at Oxford. These are called Final Schools papers. They last five to nine days at three to six hours a day. There is a great deal of tension over them.

Because Schools come in the spring, undergraduates do silly things to relieve the tension, like climbing college buildings at night or swamping punts on the Cherwell. How you do in Schools decides what level of degree you get, and what level of degree you get still decides in England what you'll be doing for the rest of your life. There are nervous breakdowns over Schools. There are also suicides. It is bad form to talk about them.

It is a windy night two weeks before Schools and there are three of them. They want to climb Tom Tower. Tom Tower is the gate tower of Christ Church College. It is 70 feet high and surrounded by concrete. If you fall off, you break all your bones and your head. It is too windy for such nonsense. Besides, you have no exams.

The next morning, you hear that they were severely reprimanded by the university proctors for conduct unbecoming young gentlemen. They had climbed Tom and passed three hours bombarding the public-school boys with tomatoes and rotten eggs. Like any university, Oxford produces children as well as adults. The children often have more fun.

If you take a graduate degree at Oxford, you have no tutors, essays, or Schools. You have five or so hours of lectures a week, for one or two terms. You have a supervisor in your field of study who oversees your thesis and attempts to stop you from making an idiot of yourself in print. Your supervisor is not usually attached to your college; he can be anyone in the university—or outside it, provided the university approves. You see him once every two or three weeks. He asks you over for sherry or tea. He doesn't ask about your work. He figures when you're ready, you'll show it to him. Your time is your own. You're treated like a responsible adult. You try to act like one because they trust you. And in two or three years, you take your degree.

They came into the Junior Common Room while you were reading the movie guide. One was tallish. The other was blond and short and broad. The short one was Junior Common Room president. He was doing English in between politicking and wanted to know if you were researching O'Casey. You told him O'Neill. "Aha," he said to the other one. "I told you. You owe me two quid." "It's all right," you chuckled. "These O guys—O'Casey, O'Neill, O. Henry, O'Dickens,

S. DELANEY/EPA

Mike Levin: *three degrees and two kids later*

O'No. They're all the same." They laughed and went out into the wet. And you went with them.

On a rare sunny afternoon, you walk through the town. The stone is golden in the unhabitual light. The spires vault skyward. People pass smiling in cobbled streets.

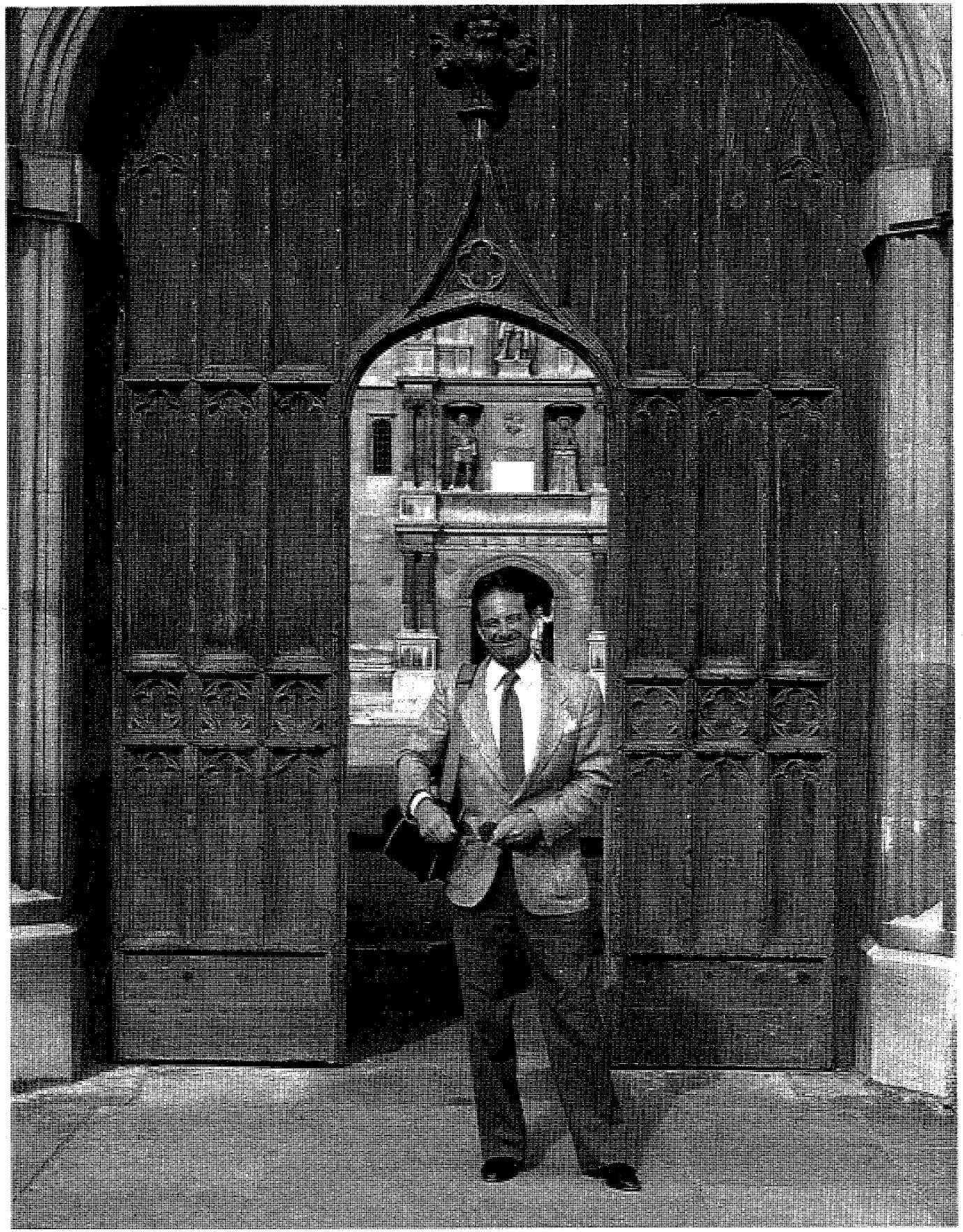
When you're in love, Oxford is as young as Brasilia. When you're depressed, it's as old as depression. In the sunlight, you think it's just like any other town. But it's impossible to explain it to anyone. It is not different. It's just strange. It's not the tradition; you get used to that in a week. It's not the gowns, or the cobbles, or the high tables. You get used to them, too. But Oxford has a kind of mystery, as though passing generations of monks and kings left something which hovers over buildings and breathes out of the stone into the fog. You never feel quite at home in Oxford. You are dispossessed by history.

But the cold air stings in your nostrils. The frost crunches underfoot. You breathe deeply. You are working hard and well. And Oxford is a good place to be.

I haven't been back to England since 1970, when I returned for oral exams. I'm no longer sure I want to go back. That trip was a celebration, a triumphant parade past grass tennis courts and favorite places in the warm June English light. When we walked unannounced into the Elizabeth Restaurant after an absence of four years, Julio, the huge headwaiter, seized me in a bear hug of instant happy recognition. The daffodils were up all over Oxford, flowering Judas trailed purple blossoms, the hundred-foot copper beech still flourished in Wadham's garden, Pepe was still king of the King's Arms. Nevill Coghill (who returned from the trenches with Tolkien, Graves, and Auden to translate Chaucer, start the Oxford University Dramatic Society, and train Richard Burton, among other exploits) was still my supervisor, and his idea of exam preparation was a four-course butlered lunch in his sunny rooms overlooking Merton back quad: white asparagus vinaigrette with Chablis, cold poached Severn salmon with Moselle, strawberries and Devon cream with champagne. When I staggered off to Schools, I could barely remember my name, let alone my thesis. I certainly don't remember the examination. It was the most relaxed test I've ever taken in my life.

Now I hear England has turned snarly and service is better in New York. Oxford's American colony is leading a drive to coeducate the colleges; cries of elitism have replaced tranquility. Yet the sense of my Oxford has grown stronger for me, distilled by years and selective memory. It is the sense (as Archibald MacLeish once said of his class at Harvard) of having been part of a wave that rose and broke and is now receding. Already the drops in that wave have scattered. Bowra and Coghill, both dead and unreplaceable. Jimmy Adler (Thouron '65), who surfaced briefly in my law school class but disappeared from there, and the face of my earth, before finals. D. T. Sanders (Thouron '66) who started life as a Psi U from Darien, astonishingly went to Bristol Drama School and also disappeared. John Wideman (Thouron '63), friend and witness, self-exiled to Wyoming by affirmative action and service on too many academic committees.

There are no Nobels in the wind now and the real prizes have been my children. The course is longer than we thought, and like the new England, I've turned inward, trimming my sails. That other England remains though, composed of love of conversation and excitement over ideas, reedy afternoons on the Cherwell, the luxury of small responsibility, good talk and good food: a bright snapshot pulled from time, serene and golden, quintessentially un-American. It is a measure behind events, paradise grasped, a thousand years of felt civilization, retreating as the current pulls us on. It is resonant as the last scene of *2001* when, after the long gauntlet of inhuman technology, skinless space suits and plastic food tubes, the battle with the computer, the hero streaks through his time warp to a resurrection defined by china, crystal, and the strains of Bach. It opened the world for me, and my world has never been the same. The test for that, at least, is easy: I left Philadelphia for Oxford almost 17 years ago. In every real sense, I've not been back since.



Mike Levin pauses in front of the main gate of Wadham College, where he spent two years as a Thouron Fellow more than two decades ago.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NORA JEAN LEVIN

MAGIC TIME

Responding to a summons from the hallowed halls of Wadham College, an American 'Old Member' returns to Oxford.

By Michael Levin

YOU CAN'T go home again, Thomas Wolfe said: even if the place and its people don't change, time's impact on the voyager is enough to make origins alien. But reunions can be happy exceptions to that rule—a chance to connect with witnesses who knew you before the masks were put on, the elaborate defenses constructed. That's especially true for reunions at Oxford, which (after 700 years) is not supposed to change, whose spires and traditions tend to become fixed in the mind.

Perhaps it's a phase of life that now, into my forties, these associations matter, that strolls along Locust Walk evoke pangs of nostalgia, or that I find myself collecting school ties once thought too obvious and overpriced. But I'd recently attended a high-school reunion at which the past became present—had seen that long-gone cafeteria recreated by men cracking the same poker jokes, who could still recite all the old P.T.C. routes because bus rides out of their neighborhood represented dreams of escape. Had discovered those years were like welds in metal, the strongest part of me, and stayed till four in the morning, reluctant to stop memory's flow.

So when an invitation came for the first reunion of American graduates of Wadham College at Oxford University—which I attended as a Thouron Fellow in 1964–66 and last saw 17 years ago—my response was foregone. Never mind that the terms of this invitation emerged in fits and starts, with the bumbling charm characteristic of Oxford approaching the topic of m-o-n-e-y. Or that I received three identical letters the same week from Sir Claus Moser, the new warden (president) of Wadham, successively addressed "Dear Levin," "Dear Michael," and "Dear Old Member"—all wanting "to know whether you might like to come; and in any case [urging me to] note the dates in your diaries." Jean and I were due in Europe anyway. Besides, we had been married in Oxford, and friends from Penn would be there on sabbatical. Our bags were packed before the final invitation arrived.

Herewith, then, is an account of our three hectic days in Oxford and some steps that surrounded them—an in-gathering that became a reunion in spades.

Wednesday, 3:00 p.m. We're finally on the road to Oxford, already behind schedule and running hard. Part of the reason we're late is that we've brought our teen-age son Jeremy, who's still limp as a noodle with jet lag. We've pressed on anyway, hauling him behind us like a sea-anchor. In 24 hours, we've done Kamikaze London—walked through Westminster Abbey, taken the boat from the Tower, dashed through the British Museum to see treasures he's read about. Within 48 hours, we've waltzed into Wimbledon on $6 general admission to see hours of tennis, topped by the Connors-Pernfors match, emerging sunburnt and stuffed with strawberries. And lunched in Pall Mall with Peter Williams, an old Wadham friend who was once a professional jockey and still looks a Welsh imp, all curly hair, dark eyes, and flashing teeth. "Hmm," said Jeremy between leonine yawns, already half-Anglicized, "Think I'll try the cold poached salmon . . . again."

Now we've gotten our rental Ford and put what we'd been told was the coldest, rainiest fortnight in English history behind us, sweaters and mackintoshes safely stowed. The sky is cerulean, the air cool and crystalline. But though I lived here two years, it still takes 15 minutes to remember right-hand drive and roaring down the

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'I spent my Oxford years with my head down, studying. I could have had its fields every morning, gone punting each week.'

opposite side of the road. In that slim quarter-hour, I whip round Cadogan Square against the current, into the fast heavy traffic of the Brompton Road. The pressure in our car shoots through the ceiling. "Go to the left! Go *left*!" shrieks Jean, covering her eyes. "Am!" I snap, sweating. "No, no!" she howls over the grind and clank of traffic, waving her map. "Center lane, center lane!" We rocket along between lorries and delivery vans, dodging potholes, trying to read postcard-size signs through billows of dust. From the back seat comes high-pitched laughter from a son bemused by the follies of his parents. "Hee-hee," it goes. "Hee-hee." Jeremy is the proud possessor of a new driver's license, and he is fully awake for the first time and unable to believe all these cars with no one in the driver's seat, all going the wrong way. "Here's a joke," he says gleefully: "How many people does it take to drive to Oxford? Three—two to yell, and one to giggle."

Wednesday, 5:00 p.m. Oxford was a Roman fort before it was a royal keep and university town, and its roads still follow the old curved paths. This used to be no problem, but half the streets are now closed to vehicles; and though we're here in one piece, rolling in stately fashion up the High Street, we're not quite there yet. I know a dozen ways to Wadham; I can't use any, it seems. Can't turn down Catte Street or Turl Street or get to the warren of lanes behind them. Can't go right on Cornmarket either, or reach the Broad Street which Wadham adjoins. I make a hurried U-turn, swing back, unaware this route has been closed to all but buses until three red double-deckers charge like rhinos behind me, honking and flashing their lights. We take evasive action, screech past the Martyrs' Memorial where Bloody Mary burned bishops as heretics, pull up before Wadham, and leap out, panting.

And suddenly, on foot, haste evaporates, a peace descends. It is not that cars contradict Oxford: the MG company started here, and its founder, Billy Morris, endowed a college, which bears his name. It is that some vital part of the place does not acknowledge their existence, moves in a time that has little to do with speed or short attention-spans. On foot in Oxford, you walk Albion rather than England, the realm of Blake and Spenser, Narnia and Taliesin, site of the convocation that led to Magna Charta, midwife of literature, Greece to our Renaissance. It is this side of Oxford that caused Sam Goldwyn to discard his prepared speech at Balliol College and declare that "For years, I've been known for saying 'Include me out'; but today, I am giving it up forever."

And today, this side of Oxford seems much more Keats's "finest city in the world" than Queen Victoria's "Old monkish place I have a horror of." The Sheldonian Theatre down the way gleams with refurbished glory, Saxon heads on its columns reflecting the level afternoon light. Delphinia and gladioli paint the quads the colors of English history, blood and gold. Wadham's Cotswold-stone façade glows with that inner warmth also seen in the building-blocks of Jerusalem.

In seconds, we're checked in at the lodge beneath the main gate, our bags whisked away by Willy the Porter, still pink-cheeked but balding and portly, remembering in me, as I recall in him, the young men we were. He asks what year I came up, to confirm that recollection. Whether you come from the north or the south, from Hong Kong or California, when you enter Oxford you "go up," just as graduates "go down." The ascent to Oxford is a state of mind.

As are the messages on the board that held Jean's telegrams before we married. One is from a Canadian professor who went down in the Fifties, was largely the reason I came to Wadham, and asserts he's passing through by chance. The other asks us to call Bettina Yaffe Hoerlin, former assistant vice president for health affairs at Penn, who's in Oxford as a visiting scholar at Green College but has achieved new personal triumphs rowing crew for the first time. She appears in minutes to take Jeremy for a bicycle tour with her own kids, who've known him since they were tots. "When's salmon?" he asks, as they depart. And we follow our bags to our room.

Our rooms, directly beneath my old one on the corner staircase in the original quad, alleged to have housed the architect Christopher Wren, whose monument is Restoration London. The stone sill is deeply bowed, worn as by water from centuries of passing feet. A large dim space lit by a single bulb, gray as a battleship, wainscots thickly painted, with a rug that seems woven from rats' fur, small bay windows, and two monastic bedrooms opposite the entryway. I have forgotten how the night chill gathers in this masonry to discharge itself before dawn, leaving you rigid beneath every blanket you can find. "Hideous, of course," I say later when asked how our rooms are, not realizing until the remark is out that this is what I have always thought. But at the moment, there is a bouquet of hand-picked wildflowers and a basket of fruit with a welcome note on the center desk, in a pool of Vermeer sun streaming from the west. The rooms look beautiful beyond compare.

It's less than 10 minutes since we arrived; and a good thing, too, since we're already late for the dinner with Princess Margaret that's the centerpiece of this affair. But not to worry: we jump into our formal duds, scrabbling for misplaced cufflinks—Oxford peace does not reach so far as the bottom of a suitcase—and sprint to the Warden's Garden, where festivities are set to begin.

Wednesday, 7:00 p.m. The College has had at least two great wardens since its founding in 1610 by Nicholas and Dorothy Wadham, a childless Somerset couple who sought a different posterity and hit the mark better than they knew. One was John Wilkes (warden, 1648–59), who formed a "philosophical clubbe" that became the Royal Society, wrote works on space travel, married Cromwell's sister, and made Wadham a sanctuary in an age of sectarian violence. The other was Maurice Bowra (warden, 1938–70), whose early, self-aggrandizing Oxford years furnished the model for disagreeable Master Samgrass in *Brideshead Revisited*. Bowra made Wadham famous by sheer force of wit, personality, and scholarship—and by gargantuan appetites that ranged from boys and girls to T'ang art and Sophoclean criticism. It is part of the Bowra legacy that a local limerick still rhymes "Wadham" with "Sodom," that he ended a wedding speech by remarking in that *basso profundo*, "Lovely couple. *I* know; I've slept with them both." Oxford being what it is, these details have burnished the legend, not diminished it.

An arresting new sculpture of Bowra sits in the leafy back quad. It catches the fire-hydrant physique, the fierce energy and intelligence of the man, shoulders hunched, head thrust forward. But the muscular torso has no legs or feet; it dwindles at the waist into the chair legs themselves, suggesting birth defects, amputations, a wheelchair without wheels. It is a brilliant, unsettling evocation of the power inner deformities can produce.

Now hopes are high Claus Moser may be the next great warden. For one thing, he looks and acts the part, a budding pianist who fled Nazi Germany to become statistician laureate, coauthor of British demo-

graphics and of the Robbins Report that opened up English higher education—a droll, rumpled, unflappable man, both shiny-domed and long-haired, fond of explaining he does not head a penal institution and of quoting Beerbohm to the effect that "I was a modest, good-humored boy—it was Oxford made me insufferable." For another, he has the passion and the persona: instantly accessible, able to put anyone at ease, his whole career staked on a vision of upward mobility threatened by Thatcher education cuts, on the belief that talent should be maximized, not efficiency. He is plainly not the kind of statistician who uses numbers the way a drunk uses lampposts, for support rather than illumination. Instead, he has used them as flamethrowers, to light decisions while clearing a path. Most important, he's also a businessman who raised 10 million pounds to revamp Covent Garden as head of the Royal Opera Society. For, at 800 students, Wadham has grown over the last 10 years from a small Oxford college to one of the largest (with, all the while, no increase in facilities or endowment) and desperately needs such skills. It's because of his work with her at the Royal Opera that Her Highness Margaret Rose, Countess of Snowden, is present tonight.

Sir Claus swings round to greet us, against shimmering grass and a crowd of black-robed Old Members straight from Seurat. In one corner of the garden are the actors Jeremy Irons and Susan Hampshire, chatting with the former British Ambassador to Japan. In the other are a gaggle of M.P.s and judges discussing fly fishing with the Ambassador to Norway, bemoaning the spread of catch-and-release. If Sir Thomas Beecham, another Old Member, were not interred, he'd doubtless be here, too. The place drips more names than a Nieman-Marcus catalogue.

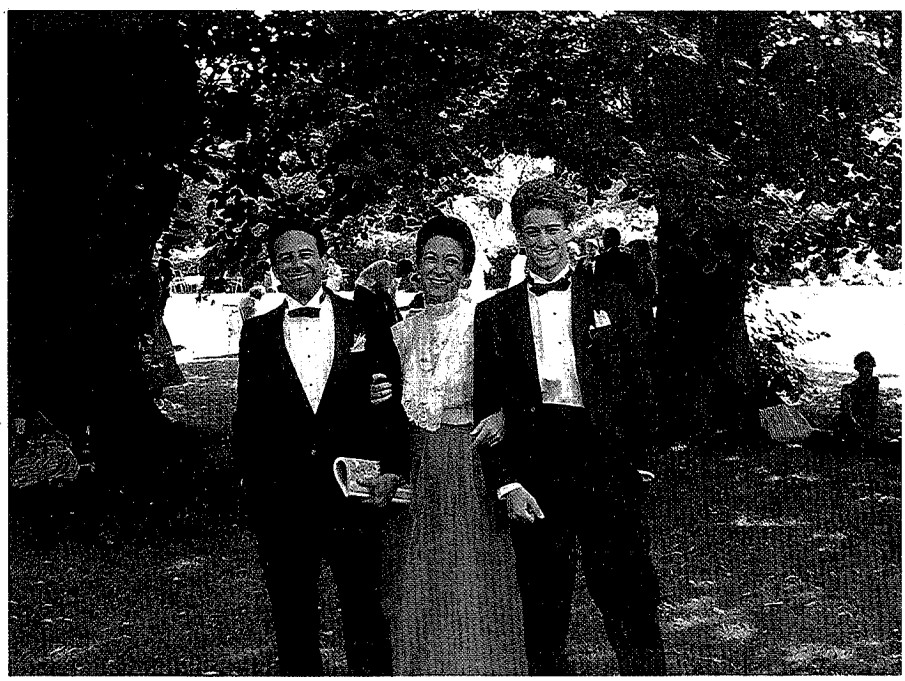
But here also is ex-roommate Ronnie Stewart, witness at my English civil marriage to Jean in 1966, who's given up British criminal law to found an enormously successful prep school in Manhattan and is wondering what to do with the rest of his life. Here is Bill Nitze, usher at our religious marriage in Philadelphia—the one to show parents we were not living in sin—who was our first dinner guest as a married couple in England, accompanied me to Harvard Law School before working for Mobil Oil around the world, and is bound for a new career in Washington. And though we're all on the cusp and life is changing for each of us, somehow nothing has changed. We resume conversations interrupted years ago; the links feel and look the same.

Without warning, we're cheek by jowl with Princess Margaret, being introduced. An American diplomatic reception would leave nothing to chance, providing detailed instructions on where to walk, stand, sit, blow your nose. Here it's assumed you can improvise all that. Do I bow? Nod? Salute? Does Jean shake hands, or curtsy? I emit what I hope is a friendly grunt, half-bending from the waist. But Her Royal Highness has the politician's talent for erasing barriers. Tiny and immaculate in rose-petal skin and a zillion dollars in diamonds, only a shadow of toughness at the corners of her mouth suggesting the private consolations a fishbowl existence has left her, she takes my hand, smiles up with huge blue eyes that are not the least vague or bored. "You don't seem such an Old Boy," she murmurs. We haven't been called Old Boys since the college was coeducated in the early Seventies. I know what she means, though. I laugh, giving the stock answer: "All my decay's on the inside." And we troop off to dinner in the Great Hall, which has just been repainted for the first time since it was built. The seventeenth-century tennis balls found wedged in its hammerbeams are now on display at the City Museum.

The last time I ate in hall, Wadham's bursar owned a Brussels-sprout farm, and a truckload of the little green critters was unloaded into a six-foot cauldron in the college kitchen each Monday morning. By Monday lunch, the cauldron was boiling. It boiled all week, with what floated to the top scooped off for meals until it was gone. But this evening, no sprouts are in sight, only smoked salmon (what else?), Coronation chicken, and four wines from the college cellars (another Bowra legacy), overseen by portraits of admirals, chancellors, and parliamentary speakers who've gone down to perpetuate Wadham on the playing fields of life.

A hundred Old Members, guests, and college dons chat amiably at three long refectory tables beneath the High Table, emperor penguins on a comfortable floe. At my end of one table are a svelte blonde filmmaker shooting a TV retrospective on the Munich Crisis; Pat Thompson, retiring Senior Fellow, convivial host to graduate students over weekly sherry during my stay here; and a Kensington Palace bodyguard. The talk is lively, ranging over race and class in Britain and America, Pat's wartime paratroop adventures, the uses of history in fiction, how the Princess is guarded. (Yes, they're with her wherever. No, she can't shake them. In crowds, they look for people patting or touching themselves—the sign of concealed weapons.) Conversation focuses on Munich, which Englishmen recall the way Americans remember Pearl Harbor: "even when they were five years old, they know exactly where they were, the tensions ran so high, they thought it was the end of the world, that things were ending forever." A furled umbrella meant hope rather than appeasement then.

Talk gets livelier still as we adjourn to a choirboy recital in the eighteenth-century music room, then for brandy in the old library, where I wrote bad short stories in a nook choked with first editions of Bunyan and Swift. Now, the room is cleared of



NORA JEAN LEVIN

In the Warden's Garden, Mike Levin, his wife Jean, and their son Jeremy attend a reception for Old Members.

shelves and dust; its shape unfolds clean as a psalm. Pat Thompson stoops lankily over Jean before a crowd milling about the entrance, wisps of gray hair about his ears; hitches his academic robes, deploying that donnish love of profanity with relish: "F__ it, my dear, let's go in." Ronnie delivers an abstract soliloquy on Apollo and Mammon, addressing life choices as obliquely as he always did. Bill reminds us how I stumbled through the east quad one night after too many half-and-halfs, apostrophizing the stars as "little ice cubes in the sky." The Princess, who was expected to depart after *Greensleves*, stays on, sipping Glenlivet, smoking cigarettes in a long onyx holder. I groan up Staircase VI to bed at two.

Thursday, 7:00 a.m. Before this summer is over, I will have completed luxuriant solitary runs along the Moskva, the Neva, the Thames Embankment, the Charles in Boston, Lucy Vincent Beach on Martha's Vineyard. None is as beautiful as this cool sunrise jog on the Isis before even the shopgirls are up, through fields of wildflowers haloed with mist, down still canals where bright-painted houseboats doze. In the midst of pure pleasure, I'm stabbed with regret. I spent those Oxford years with my head down, studying, scribbling, trying to master an impossible dissertation on Eugene O'Neill, trying to write before I'd lived. I could have owned these fields every morning, gone punting each week, passed that time *al fresco*, in the sun, on the grass. I can no longer remember why I drove myself so hard; there were all these other Oxfords, lost and unrecoverable.

Yet one is retrievable, at least. My return leg leads past Merton College, and suddenly I am ambushed. Every crack in these walls is familiar as ever, and I'm heading once more, as I did for two years, to my weekly tutorial with Nevill Coghill, playwright, Shakespearean, translator of Chaucer, Richard Burton's first drama coach, founder of the Inklings with C.S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers. Hearing his stage Cockney at our first meeting again: "Naow, Michael me lad, th' first bit o' doin' this job, is to figger aout *'ow* we'll do th' job." Reliving those explorations. Walking beside him, that great gaunt gray wolf's head nearly seven feet in the air, the lurching stride like a wall falling down, big hands in leather driving gauntlets beneath his cardigans and capes and Sherlock Holmes hats as we roamed winter countrysides, lunching with Tolkien (whose trilogy he called "hobbit-forming"), analyzing medieval visions in parish churches' stained glass. How he tucked his handkerchief in his jacket sleeves like a Cavalier courtier, or shyly pushed across the table two heirloom candlesticks as a wedding gift, or encouraged me to audition for his student production of *Doctor Faustus* with Burton and Elizabeth Taylor despite my Philadelphia accent, making me production secretary out of the goodness of his heart instead of yanking me off the boards. Sitting on the lawn of his house in Gloucester, discussing the *Zeitgeist* while salmon leapt the Severn below. His exuberant letter when, after the long voyage home, after law school and our move to Washington, my thesis was finally accepted: "Rejoicings and love to you both, and here is the confidential Examiners' Report. I am not sure this is correct procedure on my part, but I never was good at correctitude. Treat it as confidential!" The string of congratulations marking our later milestones, often scratched in books he'd just published: "For your fine new poem." "In honour and joy over Jeremy!"

I trot into Merton, ablaze with exertion and memory, ignoring the stares of the assistant day porter—a new one—on the gate: some lost American tourist, surely. Staircase I on the back quad remains identical, its view across Dead Man's Walk to the banks of the Cherwell unaltered by a delphinium. I am seized by the conviction that if I go up those stairs, I will find him at work in the long sunny room with its ten thousand books, its red silk wallpaper and Récamier couch. I hear at my shoulder the surprise in his voice when I noted the absence of other graduate papers: "Why, there are no others, of course. You're my last student." He will rise from behind his desk in sections, like a camel, and flash that snaggle-toothed grin and invite me once more to solve problems that are slightly beyond me. "Ah, just the person I was thinking of. I can't get this quite right. . . . Now, tell me: exactly what is it Lear curses during the storm?"

I don't ascend, though. I just halt there, trotting in place. Then I turn back to Wadham, signing the visitors' book on the way out. Nevill H. K. A. Coghill, Merton Professor of Literature Emeritus, died of a stroke nearly 10 years ago. Quickly, I hope; I never knew. I do not want to break the spell.

Thursday, 3:00 p.m. We've finally connected with Bettina and her husband, Gino Segrè, and been punting with them on the River Cherwell through reeds and magpies, and had strawberries with raspberry chaser, dragooning Jeremy for lunch at Wadham in between. ("Wot?" he said, inspecting the buffet, "no salmon?") Bettina was conceived in Munich, born in Binghamton, and raised at Los Alamos when the Bomb was our greatest achievement, daughter of an emigré atomic physicist. A double-diamond skier with philosophy degrees and a health-policy doctorate, she taught survival techniques to the Peace Corps and was deputy health commissioner of the City of Philadelphia five years. Gino, new chair of Penn's physics department, has been at Wadham six months as visiting professor, pursuing theories that may unify the three families of quarks—the Top and the Bottom, the Up and the Down, and (my favorites) the Charmed and the Strange. Born in Italy before Mussolini's Nuremberg laws, he left soon thereafter, then returned to Florence after World War II for an education that led through Har-

WADHAM COLLEGE

Princess Margaret chats with Dietrich von Bothmer (right) and Sir Claus Moser, warden of Wadham (far right).

'Whatever else it leaves you, Oxford's special gift is a sort of magic time in which your senses open, like pores in a sauna.'

vard and M.I.T., but he remains the ultimate Italian—tall, soft-voiced, elegiac, as angular and elegant as a Modigliani. He has never quite got used to the fact that disclosing what he does stops conversation at parties. His sentences are punctuated by little sighs, by the loneliness of existence at that border where matter becomes light and even most physicists do not go.

These people are not sentimental. He became a physicist though his uncle won a Nobel Prize at it. She has fought for women's health programs, health care for the poor, and AIDS education. They wrote last spring that "The Visiting Scholar and the Visiting Professor would be delighted to join the Visiting Thourons for dinner [post-]Princess. Last time we dined at Wadham, we sat with Lady Moser and Sir Claus; do you think you could arrange a [whole] Jewish refugee table?" But though they've already begun packing to return to the States, all they can talk about is the secret civility of this place—its hushed calms at twilight, the covered market and impromptu musicales, how you're seen as peculiar if you *don't* break for tea at four. Oxford time has eaten a hole in the fabric of their advancement. "You know," Gino marvels, "when I went to buy salmon, the counterman said, 'You won't be disappointed, sir.' He was right." Months later, in another country, the physicist remarks, "You won't be disappointed, sir," and we smile at each other, aware of the world behind that joke.

Thursday, 5:30 p.m. Jean and I are late for the first session of the Wadham North America Committee, bursting into a circle of suits and ties like misplaced gondoliers in our boating shorts and striped socks. Previous briefings have laid out the problem. Wadham was always a free-and-easy place with bunches of Aussies and Scots reading Persian or other arcane subjects. But the tutorial system requires a minimum number of students to support each Persian tutor, and without new residence quads, the college can't keep these students or stabilize its growth. Wadham must build or shrink, and build fast, before the endowment's in hand, when every other Oxford college has belatedly discovered fundraising, too. How are the funds to be raised? What should the strategy be? Should it aim for giving first, or to strengthen the sense of a Wadham community first? Annual gifts, or big hits? No, all Americans are not millionaires. No, if British alumni have no tradition of giving, the college must create one. It must make it easy for them to say yes. What are the income patterns? What about the Pakistanis? the Canandians? What do Harvard or Yale do? The Americans jump up and down with ideas, counter-suggestions. The English committee members take notes. "Thank you for this," Sir Claus says at last. He has dark pouches under his eyes from constant interaction since yesterday morning. "We need all the help you can give. . . . There's just time to change for dinner." Jean and I sprint for our room, pull formal clothes over the residue of our punting expedition.

Thursday, 9:00 p.m. The second dinner is looser, released from the restraints of royal protocol, business complete. It certainly starts the right way. An English industrialist who read Chinese here meets Jean at the door, kisses her hand, declares, "Madam, you are simply gorgeous," and sweeps her through the entrance. We find ourselves at High Table with knights and ladies to our right and left, auld acquaintance close by. Wine flows, trivia fly, even the paintings on the walls above—which I used to see as the grim family portraits in *Mourning Becomes Electra*—seem to smile. Until Dietrich von Bothmer rises to deliver the Response to the Toast, begins to describe how, as the last German Rhodes Scholar, he was due here to study classics "because of Bowra, of course," but couldn't get out of Germany because Munich erupted. And paced the streets of Bremen until his boat was allowed to depart, caught at the edge, knowing he would never go back. And after arriving here was ultimately sent on by Bowra to New York, where he began a career that left him director of classical antiquities at the Metropolitan Museum. "And zo," he concludes in tones husky with love and more indecipherable feelings, his spectacles and white hair shining, the sweep of his arm taking in the mahogany panels, the stained glass windows and painted crests, and everything beyond. "Zo, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Wadham—my first free home."

For an instant, the term "ivory tower" acquires its original meaning; the hall fills with a sense of Oxford as fortress and refuge, a candle against the dark, against Levellers and Inquisitors and Roundheads, as well as Nazis and the thousand other troubles that stormed through the past. The rest of the evening is an anti-climax after that.

Friday, 6:00 p.m. We've had our last meal in hall and reached the terminal stage of reunions: dispersal. Like characters at the close of an old Hopalong Cassidy serial, we're bound for different parts, "Till We Meet Again" on zither in the background—Bettina's family to the Lake District, Bill's to Bath and Vienna, Ronnie's to Ireland, ours south to Kent for the weekend, then on. We've shown Jeremy our former flat in the Banbury Road, toured our first married home in a former rural slum near Blenheim Palace, ground through four hours of construction delays on the new ring-road around London. In five days, we've eaten a life's quota of salmon and strawberries, and traveled by every conceivable form of transportation: plane, train, punt, car, river launch, bicycle, taxi, and traffic jam. But not until we're at ease watching sheep graze beneath a sun declining over Hever Castle (where Anne Boleyn was born and the Dissolution may be said to have started) do I realize the distance I've come.

Whatever else it leaves you, Oxford's special gift is a sort of magic time in which your senses open like pores in a sauna, recording a series of small, clear pictures you never knew you snapped. It is a peak of life, no question; but one from which students look backward more clearly than ahead, composed more of early promise than performance, of intellect more than character, of straight lines rather than hard choices or necessary risks.

There are other peaks, and the path was more winding than we thought. Jean and I first came to Oxford as a novice political scientist and an apprentice playwright. Since then, I've left the theater, been a labor lawyer and environmental bureaucrat, dabbled in poetry and journalism, begun a novel set in Russia between 1900 and 1919. She's taught and been a Nader's Raider, run and sold a business, and written several books, including *How to Care for Your Parents* (Storm King/Random House), due out this fall.

Nevill Coghill once wrote of his generation's return to Oxford from the Great War that "we seemed to be experiencing what happened to Odin and his fellow-gods when they returned after their long twilight: finding their golden chessmen where they had left them in the grass, they sat down and continued the game." The pieces are a bit tarnished, the grass more ragged, the rules harsher now. Yet, a return to Oxford still holds the same magic: the game we played there goes on. END