

Oxford

I did the hardest intellectual work of my life at Oxford, but not studying Eng Lit – it was all to do with trying to become a completely different person to the one I grew up as. The Simon debacle had dealt a huge blow to my confidence. I had felt I knew everything and now realised I knew nothing. More importantly, everything I had learned or assimilated from my parents I now regarded as unreliable, and needing to be rethought from scratch. In fact, I probably went further – I felt that *everything* my parents believed was by definition wrong, and that if I ever found myself in agreement with my parents I should immediately recant. Everything from my father’s ‘Neither a borrower nor a lender be’ to my mother’s ‘Blue and green should never be seen’ needed to be jettisoned. But in a way what they said wasn’t the problem: what I was more worried about was the attitudes, prejudices, beliefs I might have picked up from them subconsciously or before I was old enough even to know what I was learning. Effectively, I had to question everything I believed, and never accept my own instincts. It required constant vigilance; it was intellectually exhausting.

My parents never explicitly articulated their belief systems (and my mother’s was not quite the same as my father’s) but common to both and therefore the view I

grew up with was that work was good, pleasure was bad; self-denial was good, self-indulgence was bad; saving money was good, spending it was bad; gambling was unthinkable; fecklessness spelled ruin. People who ignored these rules came to sticky ends. Briefly, I suppose, it was a typical English lower-middle-class puritanism with a strong emphasis on caution, isolationism, ‘not interfering’, thrift, prudery, moral condemnation and deep fear of the unknown, which included everything from foreigners to unfamiliar vegetables.

On top of this, my mother gave me the weird advice, drummed into me for years, that I must never make friends with ‘obvious’ people, which meant anyone pretty or popular or even likable; that I must seek out girls with acne or dandruff, with horrible whiney voices and miserable attitudes, because only among them, she said, could I find ‘real friends’. The others, the popular and pretty ones, she told me, would betray me. And although I had never particularly – thank God – acted on this advice, it was always somehow there in the back of my mind, making me distrustful of attractive or popular people. And yet if I’d thought about it, even for a minute, I would have seen that my mother was a poor teacher of friendship because she had so few friends herself.

Anyway, it meant that I arrived at Oxford absolutely determined to learn – not Eng Lit, obviously, but how to have fun. The rule from now on would be that I would go to every party I was invited to, flirt with every man I ever met, drink every drink, smoke every joint,

never sacrifice a lunch for a lecture, or a party for a tutorial. The gift for fierce concentration that had got me top marks in A-levels would take me through Oxford and out into the world as a fully qualified hedonist and femme fatale. I would study the beautiful people and join their ranks, or at least hang on their coat-tails. Give me public-school captains of cricket, give me dazzling daughters of duchesses, not acne'd cleverclogs from northern grammar schools. I was going to be a good-time-girl, dammit. I was going to work really hard at this pleasure lark. And I would study men, men, men, because I knew I was woefully ignorant in this field. The only two men I'd known so far were Simon and my father and they were both, in their different ways, hopelessly wrong.

And Oxford was the ideal place to study men because in those days there were seven male undergraduates for every one female, and if you were reasonably pretty, as I was, you really had to beat them off like flies. Moreover, most of them were rich or at least had daddies rich enough to send them to public schools – shocking in retrospect, I know, but at the time I was simply happy that there were so many men eager to buy me dinner. I particularly liked the ones with sports cars who could whisk me off to country restaurants like the Rose Revived, or the ones who brought champagne and Fortnum's hampers to take me punting. There was never any question of going Dutch. Presumably there were some poor grammar school boys skulking around the pubs somewhere but I never met them.

I was lucky in that on my very first day at St Anne's I was befriended by a fellow fresher called Maria Aitken, the tall, witty, beautiful daughter of an MP who lived in a moated grange in Suffolk. She was a good mentor for my new life of hedonism. No sooner had I met her than I received an invitation from her brother, Jonathan Aitken, to a meeting of 'The James Bond Society' at the Union. I asked Maria what this meant and she laughed and said, 'Just one of Jonathan's bright ideas' – what it actually meant was Jonathan Aitken in a dinner jacket and about a dozen pretty freshwomen in their best frocks, with waiters serving vodka martinis shaken not stirred. Wotta pillock, I thought. But there were plenty of other invitations from non-pillocks – every day there would be a satisfying little stack of envelopes in my pigeonhole, inviting me to tea, to drinks, to punting picnics, *fêtes champêtres*, cocktail parties. At first I found some of them puzzling – I remember asking Maria why does it say 'At home' when the party is at Magdalen? Maria guided me through these early minefields, and taught me that if an invitation said 'Drinks 6–8' I didn't actually have to arrive on the dot at six and drink solidly till eight – I was meant to arrive about seven and stay no more than an hour. By my second term, I thought I was familiar with all possible party permutations but was baffled by an invitation to a reading party in Devon at Easter. 'What do you do at a reading party?' I asked, puzzled. 'Mm, you stay in a rented cottage and read books.' That was one of the few party invitations I refused.

I wasn't particularly alarmed when I received my first invitation to a dinner party because I assumed it just meant dinner at a restaurant – which I was used to from Simon – but with more people. But this one was at the Bear in Woodstock and incredibly grand, with about sixteen guests all in black tie, and place cards round the table. I was invited by Charles Vyvyan, a Balliol man who asked me out occasionally – I never knew why because he never seemed remotely interested in me – and I was wearing my usual tarty-party dress which was far too short and low-cut for this company. I didn't know anyone else there and to my dismay was placed far away from Charles, between two very grand dons. One of them was Maurice Keen, who was later rumoured to have been Oxford's main conduit for recruiting spies, though of course I didn't know that then. Having to talk to a don was frightening enough, but then he persisted in asking me ludicrous questions like did I prefer Elizabeth I or Mary, Queen of Scots? I wouldn't know, I told him, I was reading English, not history. Oh. He fell silent for a while and then came back with which character in Dickens would I most like to be? I haven't done Dickens yet, I told him. Oh. Despairingly, he made his third attempt: 'How are you getting on with Lady Ogilvie?' Who is Lady Ogilvie? I asked. Oh, I thought you said you were at St. Anne's? I am. Well I think you'll find that Lady Ogilvie is the Principal of your college. The horror, the horror.

Another horror that first term was finding there were people my own age cleverer than me! This had never

happened at Lady Eleanor Holles. There were rumours at school of two science swots and a new girl who was supposed to be a ‘genius’ at mathematics, but they didn’t count. I was Lady Eleanor Holles’s undisputed English star and it never occurred to me that every other school in the country would have its own English star and that I would encounter many of them at Oxford. But for my very first tutorial I was assigned a partner, Charlotte B, who I realised within minutes was twice as intelligent as me. The subject was Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and I thought it was pretty heroic of me just to have read a few cantos of the fusty nonsense, but she had evidently read the whole thing and – incredibly – enjoyed it. She and our tutor, Miss Morrison, spent the whole hour enthusiastically exchanging Spenser quotes, while I sulked and panicked.

There was to be a lot of panicking and sulking that first term, especially when it was revealed that we were meant to *teach ourselves* Anglo-Saxon. We were given a grammar book and dictionary and told to just get on with it till we were ready to translate *Beowulf*. I knew I would never be ready to translate *Beowulf* and panicked so hard I actually developed shingles and was sent home with an aegrotat. It meant I avoided the end-of-term exams, and never really learned Anglo-Saxon. That long Christmas at Twickenham gave me time to digest the fact that, by Oxford standards, I was intellectually second-rate. Up till then, I’d always thought I was brilliant – if I ever failed to excel, it was simply because I hadn’t done enough work. But tutorials with Charlotte

taught me that some people actually had better *brains* than mine and that no amount of swotting would enable me to compete. It was a blow to my pride but not to my hopes – I had never particularly set my heart on getting a first.

But it made for yet another shift from my parents. Cleverness, and academic attainment, were almost the only values they had taught me to aspire to and, as far as they were concerned, I had ticked all the boxes by getting into Oxford. But once I got to Oxford I realised that cleverness was not all it was cracked up to be – that there were other qualities, like sensitivity, like kindness, like charm, like tact, that I had never given a moment's thought to, but that were actually far more important. I didn't quite swing round to Charles Kingsley's view – 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever' – but I was beginning to think I should pay less attention to being clever and more to being good.

On top of that, the Simon debacle left me with a strong distrust of book learning, which I still to some extent retain. My feeling was: I've read all these books, I'm supposed to be so clever, and yet I couldn't even spot the most obvious con trick in the world. I felt that what I urgently needed to understand was Real Life and that Milton and Spenser were of no possible help. This was a poor attitude for embarking on three years study of English Literature. It meant that I read the classics impatiently, instead of luxuriating in them as I had at school, because I was dying to learn about the present day. I think it was this attitude that propelled me towards

journalism – I still have a somewhat exaggerated hatred of anything to do with the past. I must have done *some* work because I got a perfectly respectable upper second degree but essentially the Eng Lit course was wasted on me.

On the other hand, I was very diligent in pursuing my self-set course: the study of men. I went out with as many of them as possible – it was quite normal for me to have lunch with one, tea with another, dinner with a third and then pop into a party to pick up new supplies for the following week. My diary was so crowded with men there was no time for lectures and the only chance of writing essays was when I was locked into my room at night. But often, instead of writing essays, I wrote notes on everything I was discovering about men. I studied them exactly as if they were a new species – notes on appearance, habits, habitat, on the strength of which I would make staggering generalisations. ‘Men like to talk about their dogs, but not about their sisters.’ ‘They all seem to gamble.’ ‘They like to tell you about the games they played at school and their old school-teachers.’ Such was my insatiable curiosity I spent whole evenings asking men about themselves and never resented their failure to ask me any questions back. And I learned never, ever to talk about work. The worst thing I could possibly say was that I enjoyed writing essays. It was important to appear stupid – which was beginning to come quite naturally. At school, I’d loved showing off my intellectual superiority; at Oxford I learned never to attempt it.

My college, St Anne's, tried to cramp my style by putting me in a residential hall called Springfield St Mary run by nuns. Worse still, they gave me the smallest room in the entire college where there was literally no space to swing a cat, let alone a boy, so I spent all my time in the men's colleges. That first year I mainly lived in Merton because I had a boyfriend there called Dick. I met him in an odd way – I was picked up in the street by a tall, handsome Classics postgraduate called Jo who announced that he was taking me to see his younger brother Dick in Merton. Dick, he explained as we loped along, had just arrived at Oxford like me, but was rather shy and still upset about the recent death of their father, so what he needed was a nice girlfriend. Jo explained that he'd reconnoitred all the first-year undergraduates and decided I was the one. I was somewhat bemused by this approach – not least because I fancied Jo – but as soon as I met Dick I was content. He was tall, handsome, witty, charming, and, although he had rather rubbery thick lips, Jo reassured me by saying that he looked exactly like Jean-Paul Belmondo. Within a day or two, we were officially a couple (though not yet lovers) and walking round Oxford hand in hand.

Dick had only one drawback: he wanted to be an actor (he still is an actor, but under a different name). He had played Henry V at Haileybury and everyone agreed it was the best performance they had ever seen, so he was determined to act in OUDS at Oxford and then conquer the London stage. But it meant that, because we couldn't bear to be parted, I had to go to all

these acting auditions where he would be cast as, say, Hamlet and I would be cast as, say, Second Serving Wench. I thought after all my years of elocution lessons and appearing in my mother's am-dram productions I would easily walk into starring roles, but unfortunately at Oxford I was up against actresses who had real talent – Diana Quick for one, Tamara Ustinov for another. Early in my first year, Tamara and I were cast as sisters in a Restoration comedy and I remember looking across the stage and seeing her reacting to what someone was saying and thinking, 'God, she looks as if she's really concentrating but she doesn't have a line for *ages*.' Whereas I would stand on the stage and look out for friends in the audience and give them little waves till it was time for my line – a habit that did not endear me to directors. So going to rehearsals with Dick got less and less fun as his parts got bigger, and mine got smaller. The crunch came in the summer vacation when we did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at a hotel outside Stratford. Dick was cast as Demetrius, and I as Hippolyta. Hippolyta has precisely one scene at the beginning of the play and puts in an appearance at the end. And for this we had to live in a caravan in a wet field for six weeks.

Inevitably, we drifted apart, though I always thought of Dick – still think of him – as my first boyfriend, conveniently obliterating Simon. He was certainly my first *love* and I was devastated when, soon afterwards, he started going out with Maria Aitken. But of course there were plenty of other boys for consolation, and in my second year, no longer attached to Dick, I seemed to go

out with an awful lot of them. ‘Go out with’ is a bit of euphemism; I mean I slept with them; I was *wildly* promiscuous. I was still pining for Dick and wanting to find another boyfriend quickly so I thought cut to the chase – rather than waste endless evenings going on dates with men, why not go to bed with them *first* and see if I fancy them? This was quite an unusual attitude at Oxford at the time and one that gave me a well-earned reputation as an easy lay – I probably slept with about fifty men in my second year. My fantasy in those days was to meet a stranger, exchange almost no words, jump into bed, and then talk afterwards. But often there was no afterwards, either because the sex was a disaster, or because my pretence of sexual confidence scared them off. I did great, noisy, pretend orgasms with lots of ‘Yes! Yes! More! More!’ but I still hadn’t experienced the real thing. (In retrospect it is really odd that I persisted with sex as long as I did. Normally I’m so terrified of being bored I’ll go to the ballet once and say, ‘Right, that’s it, I tried the ballet and it was boring, won’t do *that* again.’ But somehow, with sex, I knew it would come right in the end and eventually it did.)

One of the few good men I found in my promiscuous phase was Howard Marks, the Balliol physics student who later became famous as Mr Nice the drugs dealer. He had the same easy attitude to jumping into bed as I did and awarded me the accolade of Great Shag. He stood out at Oxford in those days, not as a jailbird and drugs dealer, but because he was, or claimed to be, a Welsh miner’s son who grew up in a pit village where

they all spoke Welsh and kept coal in the bath. Later I learned that both his parents were teachers, but he rightly thought that a miner's son sounded more glamorous. He wore blue suede shoes, did brilliant Elvis impressions, and claimed to have lost his virginity to an aunt when he was eight. He was certainly a very experienced and generous lover, probably the first proper Don Juan I ever met, and I was grateful for the sex education he gave me. I never particularly associated him with drugs, though I suppose he smoked pot all the time. But then everyone did. Or actually I didn't, but I pretended I did. I would always take a joint if offered, but I never bought pot myself and didn't miss it in the holidays when I went home to Twickenham. I always preferred cigarettes.

When, if ever, did I do any academic work? I must have done some, to get a second, but I don't remember ever going to lectures. I'm not sure I even knew where they were given, and I certainly never set foot in the Bodleian library. I quite enjoyed studying the history of grammar and etymology; I could write plausible essays on Shakespeare because I'd done him thoroughly at school; I looked for the poets with the shortest canons – the Metaphysicals, Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins – and avoided those like Tennyson and Spenser who wrote for miles. Ditto novelists – Austen was 'better' than Dickens simply because there was less of her, and I worshipped Fanny Burney because she wrote only one novel. I still haven't read all of Dickens to this day. But I had the advantage of being a quick learner and exams

suiting me fine – I would bone up the week before, regurgitate it on the day, and then forget it. I totally agree with those who say that coursework is the only proper way to judge academic attainment – while thanking my lucky stars that it didn't exist in my day.

My whole three years at Oxford was a schizophrenic switch between endless parties during term time and then grindingly dull work in the vacations. Not academic work, obviously, but temporary office work. My parents had made me do a secretarial course before I went to Oxford ('something to fall back on') and I had a certificate saying I could do shorthand at 100 wpm and typing at 40 wpm, though I doubt I ever could. But it meant I could sign on with an office temp agency every vacation and work for a few weeks at shipping firms and insurance offices until I had accumulated enough money to pay for my next term's clothes and taxis. Many of the offices were so Dickensian I find it hard to believe they still existed in the 1960s. There were rows of men called 'juniors' in one room and rows of typists called 'girls' (even though many of them were middle-aged) in another, and we would be summoned by successive juniors who would say 'Take a letter, Miss Barber', and start dictating. They spoke so slowly, and so predictably, I never needed to take shorthand – I could have carved the words in granite while they were droning on. The letters were always on the lines of, 'Dear Sir, This to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 29th ult [ult was just a mystifying way of saying last month]. We are investigating the matters raised in your letter and will

vouchsafe our conclusions at a future date.’ In other words, piss off. This useless letter would always have to have three copies (which entailed using carbon paper and getting ink all over your fingers), which then had to be put in files and stored in metal cabinets. If you made a mistake in the typing, you would simply start all over again – most offices frowned on Tippex. By the end of the day, my wastepaper bin would always be full of discarded paper and carbon, and on at least three occasions I emptied my ashtray into the bin (of course you could smoke in offices in those days – there was *that*) and started a satisfying bonfire. My normal rate of productivity was about five letters a day – and I was considered an exceptionally efficient worker, highly praised and recommended by my agency. People would work in these offices – the same offices, with the same spider plants – *all their lives* and I believe it was seeing these offices that gave me what little ambition I have. Just as my father was driven by fear of the workhouse that he remembered looming over Bolton in his childhood, I always had this memory of the copy-typing room at the Prudential insurance office, High Holborn, to act as my spur. I panicked as the end of Oxford approached, thinking that I would be swallowed by the Prudential and never seen again. Luckily I met my husband just in time.