

CHUMS

ALSO BY SIMON KUPER

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# CHUMS

HOW A TINY CASTE OF  
OXFORD TORIES TOOK OVER THE UK

SIMON KUPER

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*To understand the man you have to know what was  
happening in the world when he was twenty.*

Attributed to Napoleon (probably apocryphal)

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## INTRODUCTION

# OXOCRACY

*The keener observers of British public life will have noticed  
a particular breed of Establishment men and women.  
They're over forty, smugly successful and successfully  
smug. Chances are they were also educated at Oxford.*

The Oxford student newspaper *Cherwell*, 24 February 1989

You turn the pages of yellowing student newspapers from the 1980s, and there they are, recognisably the same faces that dominate today's British news: Boris Johnson getting elected president of the Oxford Union debating society; a cheekily grinning Michael Gove among the 'Union hacks in five in a bed romp shocker';<sup>1</sup> and the pair of them being sold alongside Simon Stevens, future chief executive of the NHS, in a 'Union slave auction'.<sup>2</sup>

When I arrived at Oxford aged eighteen in 1988 to study history and German, it was still a very British and quite amateurish university, shot through with sexual harassment, dilettantism and sherry. Gove, Johnson, and the much less prominent David Cameron had graduated just before I arrived, but from my messy desk at the student newspaper *Cherwell*, I covered a new generation of future

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politicians. You couldn't miss Jacob Rees-Mogg, the only undergraduate who went around in a double-breasted suit, or Dan Hannan, who founded a popular Eurosceptic movement called the Oxford Campaign for an Independent Britain. *Cherwell* was inaccurate, gnostic, a poor imitation of *Private Eye*, badly written in the trademark Oxford tone of relentless irony, with jokes incomprehensible to outsiders, but it turns out with hindsight that we weren't just lampooning inconsequential teenage blowhards. Though we didn't realise it, we were witnessing British power in the making.

I didn't know any of the future powerbrokers personally, because we were separated by the great Oxford class divide: I was middle class, from a London comprehensive (after many years abroad) and they were mostly public schoolboys. I was an outsider who happened to be looking in through the window. Today I am more of an inside-outsider: after a few post-university years living in the UK, I emigrated to Paris in 2002 and have made my life there, but through my column in the *Financial Times*, I have become a kind of corresponding member of the British establishment.

The Oxford Tories – and especially the Etonians among them – were made by many forces besides Oxford. They had been groomed for power since childhood. One classics tutor at Oxford compares Johnson to the ghastly upper-class Athenians in Plato's *Dialogues*: they had been corrupted long before they came to study with Socrates.

But Oxford matters too, as an independent variable. Evidence of this is that it's possible to tell the story of British politics in the last twenty-five years almost without

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reference to any other university. I will argue in this book that if Johnson, Gove, Hannan, Dominic Cummings and Rees-Mogg had received rejection letters from Oxford aged seventeen, we would probably never have had Brexit.

On 24 June 2016, the early morning after the referendum, as I watched the leading Leavers and Remainers traipse across my TV screen, almost all, except Nigel Farage, Oxford types of my generation, I realised: Brexit and today's British ruling class were rooted in the university I had known. Only about 3,000 undergraduates a year attend Oxford, or less than 0.5 per cent of each British age cohort,<sup>3</sup> yet the UK is an Oxocracy. It has been for a while. Of fifteen prime ministers since the war, eleven went to Oxford. (Churchill, James Callaghan and John Major didn't go to university, and Gordon Brown was at Edinburgh.) Three consecutive Oxford Tory prime ministers have ruled the UK since 2010. So how has Oxford captured the British machine? And with what consequences?

In trying to answer those questions, I have always kept in mind that there are many different Oxfords. Lots of students never give a moment's thought to politics. Even among the politically minded, the Oxford of state-school pupils like Harold Wilson, Edward Heath or Margaret Thatcher wasn't the Oxford of Etonians like Harold Macmillan, Cameron or Johnson.

And there are important differences as well as similarities between say, Macmillan and Johnson. The Tory public schoolboy returns in every generation, but each time in altered form. I've tried to understand how the Oxocracy has changed over time, as well as the ways in which it has stayed the same.

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A few quick words about what this book is not. It's not my personal revenge on Oxford: I was very happy at university, and learned a fair bit. Having grown up outside Britain, I was enchanted by the banter of Brits who had been trained since infancy to speak well. I also felt blessedly free of the class anxieties that most of the natives seemed to carry around with them. I mooched around Magdalen Deer Park, fell hopelessly in love and made life-long friendships while playing bad cricket or dissecting indie songs at 5 a.m.

Nor is this book my name-dropping memoir, a jolly boys' story about the japes we all had at university, or my claim to be an outrider of some exclusive power club. It's not an attempt to relitigate the Brexit referendum, or to unearth all the reasons why 17 million people voted Leave. It's not a twee Oxford tale of witticisms exchanged by long-dead dons. It's not a book about today's somewhat different Oxford. It's not another biography of Boris Johnson.

Rather, it's an attempt to write a group portrait of a set of Tory Brexiteers – overwhelmingly men – from the traditional ruling caste who took an ancient route through Oxford to power. This caste is just a small subset of Oxford. But it matters because it's omnipresent in modern British political history.

These men were atypical in their beliefs: most Oxford graduates surely voted Remain in 2016. The Tory Brexiteers were a minority even among Oxford politicians in the 1980s. Their fellow students included most of the clique that would surround Cameron's premiership and his Remain campaign, as well as several future senior Labour figures.

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Johnson and the graduate law student Keir Starmer left Oxford in the same summer of 1987; Cameron graduated a year later.

Much of the media elite of the 2020s was there, too. In 1988/89, two third-year students named Emma Tucker and Zanny Minton Beddoes shared a dingy flat by the canal near the train station. By 2022, Tucker was editing the *Sunday Times*, and Minton Beddoes the *Economist*. The editors of the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* in 2022 had also passed through 1980s Oxford. Nick Robinson, presenter of the BBC's *Today* programme, was a Union star of Johnson's era.

But the Tory Brexiteer subgroup dominates this story, because it won. It has ended up making Brexit and remaking the UK. To understand power in today's Britain requires travelling back in time to the streets of Oxford, somewhere between 1983 and 1993.

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*Oxford is, without a doubt, one of the cities in the world where least work gets done.*

Javier Marías, *All Souls* (1992)

Good A-levels weren't enough. To get into Oxford you had to succeed in a peculiarly British ritual, the entrance interview. In 1987, when I went through it, it worked like this: you are seventeen years old. You are wearing a new suit. You travel to Oxford. Eventually you find the tutor's rooms. Perhaps you're served sherry, which you've never seen before. Then you talk.

The tutors, sprawled on settees, drawl questions about whatever is keeping them awake. I know an applicant who was asked, 'Don't you think the Piazzetta San Marco in Venice looks like a branch of Barclay's bank?' The Oxford interview tested your ability to speak while uninformed – to say more than you knew. Many dons of the time were looking for what they would call 'Renaissance men' (or even women) who might be fun to teach. They were free to apply their personal discretion: one tutor I knew unapologetically favoured tall, blond public school boys

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and girls. If you had good school results and could write and talk, you were handed your entry ticket to the British establishment.

Getting in wasn't particularly difficult for white men from the upper middle or upper class – a category that in those days made up the bulk of the intake. Men's colleges had only started to admit women in 1974, to the dismay of many dons,<sup>1</sup> and by the mid 1980s women still only accounted for about 30 per cent of students.<sup>2</sup> (The story told in this book is dominated by men, but that's because the caste I am describing is, too.)

There was little competition for Oxford places from the country's other ranks. In 1980, only 13 per cent of young Britons went into full-time higher education at all.<sup>3</sup> Oxford in 1981 admitted two applicants out of five.<sup>4</sup>

The twenty-year-old Michael Gove summed it up fairly accurately in 1988, when he was president of the Oxford Union: 'Oxford changed only in its admittance of the daughters as well as the sons of the well-heeled middle class.' ('Well-heeled middle class' was a euphemism.) Gove complained that Oxford was 'not truly elitist', meaning not academically excellent.

It would be a better place if it was ... If we perceived Oxford as the place where our future leaders were educated rather than where our present leaders sent their children to be finished then we might have a healthier society.<sup>5</sup>

Oxbridge in the 1980s still allowed the 'seventh term', the tradition of pupils at private schools staying on after

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A-levels for an extra term during which they were coached specifically for Oxbridge entry,<sup>6</sup> complete with practice interviews. When I asked about preparation for the Oxford exam at my comparatively well-favoured comprehensive school, there wasn't any. The head of sixth form told me he didn't want me to go to Oxford anyway, as he didn't believe in selective education.

My school was a former grammar that had gone comprehensive in the early 1980s. The grammars had long been the public schools' main competitors, and their closing by both Labour and Conservative governments (for good and bad reasons) had skewed the field even further in favour of the upper classes.<sup>7</sup> By 1991/92, my last year at Oxford, 49 per cent of incoming students were from British independent schools and just 43 per cent from state schools. (The balance came from overseas.)<sup>8</sup>

If you were from public school and got rejected by Oxford, you might still get in, because it was your school's job to know which tutor to ring to lobby on your behalf. 'One or two telephone calls are still necessary to find places for the borderlines,' noted Westminster's headmaster John Rae in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Some lavish dinners for dons may have gone into preparing for those calls.<sup>10</sup>

The future journalist Toby Young, rejected after failing to get the two Bs and a C at A-level that Brasenose College had required of him, was lucky enough to have a father well positioned to phone the admissions tutor himself.<sup>11</sup> Warts and all, Young is a bright man who cannot simply be written off as a member of the undeserving rich. But he got into Oxford only because his father was Michael Young, Baron Young of Dartington, author of the 1945

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Labour manifesto, founder of the Open University and inventor of the term 'meritocracy'.

The few outsiders who dared apply to Oxford generally sensed on arrival that they were out of place. A postman's son I know was so scared of meeting people in the days around his entrance interview that, he says, 'I sat in my room in my underpants eating Maltesers'. He ended up becoming an Oxford don himself.

Another Oxford tutor of humble origins recalls, in the 1990s, interviewing state-school kids who would sit perched terrified at the front of their chair. He learned to tell them, 'It's okay, you can relax,' whereupon the pupil would move back two inches. By contrast, one applicant he interviewed – the son and grandson of Oxford men, who had the surname of a past prime minister – leaned back in his chair 'as if he owned the place'. This ex-tutor reports having let in mostly private-school applicants over the years ('we got a bit depressed sometimes'), simply because not many state-school pupils applied.

Fiona Hill, a miner's daughter at a comprehensive school in the north-eastern town of Bishop Auckland, had predictably failed the Oxford entrance exam, which she took without any preparation. The question about Schopenhauer's theory of the will floored her because she didn't know who Schopenhauer was. Hertford, the Oxford college most favourable to state-school pupils, invited her for interview anyway. She arrived there in 1983 in an inappropriate outfit sewn by her mother. While waiting to go into the interview, she spoke to another girl, who, recoiling at her accent, said, 'I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you just said.' When Hill got up to walk into the

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interview room, a girl tripped her, possibly accidentally, and she fell against a door frame and had to start the interview with a bleeding nose. The kindly don who interviewed her suggested she apply to St Andrews instead. She did, and went there.<sup>12</sup>

Looking back, Hill compared her Oxford experience to ‘a scene from *Billy Elliot*: people were making fun of me for my accent and the way I was dressed. It was the most embarrassing, awful experience I had ever had.’ She said this in a discussion at a *Guardian* newspaper’s members’ event, in which she was identified simply as ‘Fiona Hill, 50’.<sup>13</sup> By then she had moved to the US, where nobody could place her north-eastern English accent and where she became an academic expert on Russia, a senior White House official, and later a star witness against Donald Trump in his first impeachment trial. Her talents were lost to the UK.

Oxford’s detractors and defenders both favour the same term: ‘elitist’. But they mean two different things by it. For detractors, ‘elitist’ refers to the hereditary elite; for defenders, it means the meritocratic elite. In truth, almost everyone who gets into Oxford is a mixture of privilege and merit in varying proportions.

That’s true even of Etonians. Eton’s mission isn’t simply to produce posh gentlemen. It’s to produce the ruling class. In the 1920s, an Etonian like Alec Douglas-Home could be admitted to Oxford practically as his birthright, get a third-class degree and still go on to become prime minister, the third consecutive Etonian in the job.<sup>14</sup> From 1900 to 1979, nearly a quarter of all cabinet ministers had been to Eton.<sup>15</sup>

But when the rules changed, and the ruling class

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needed to be meritocratic swots who could pass exams, Eton began producing meritocratic swots. Anthony Sampson wrote in his updated *Anatomy of Britain* in 1982 that whereas Etonians had previously been considered ‘confident, stupid and out of touch’, by the 1980s they were considered ‘confident, clever, but still out of touch’. Andrew Adonis explains that Eton was transformed from ‘essentially a comprehensive school for the aristocracy ... into an oligarchical grammar school’, albeit still filled with mostly ‘the same sort of boys’.<sup>16</sup> Their privilege remained intact. Yet by the Thatcher years, many were confident enough to claim that they had risen on merit alone.

Once you arrived at 1980s Oxford, workaholic study was not encouraged. This was an old tradition. Graham Greene reminisced late in life: ‘For nearly one term I went to bed drunk every night and began drinking immediately I awoke ... I only had to be sober once a week when I read an essay to my tutor.’<sup>17</sup> Stephen Hawking, who had ‘come up’ in 1959, found

the prevailing attitude ... very anti-work. You were supposed either to be brilliant without effort or to accept your limitations and get a fourth-class degree. To work hard to get a better class of degree was regarded as the mark of a grey man, the worst epithet in the Oxford vocabulary.<sup>18</sup>

Writing in the 1970s, Jan Morris praised Oxford’s fetish of ‘effortless superiority’: ‘The former women’s colleges pride themselves on their high proportion of first-class degrees; but their emphasis on brains, on work and on

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examination results is out of Oxford's character.' Morris complained that 'the new Oxford standards, so ably supported by the women ... prize a first-class mediocrity above an idle genius'.<sup>19</sup>

Ross McInnes, an Australian Frenchman who came to Oxford in the 1970s from a Parisian lycée, and in later life became chairman of the French aerospace group Safran, remarked: 'What struck me about Oxford was the ease with which you could manage academic life and social life and political life. That's very different from France: here, if you go to a [selective] *grande école*, all you do is work, and your academic performance determines the rest of your career.'

In Britain, where university meant living in residence almost unsupervised from the age of eighteen, the principal aim of most students was to have fun and forge lifelong friendships (which would double as career networks). Boris Johnson's page in Eton's Leave Book of 1983 featured a photograph of himself adorned with two scarves and a machine gun, and an inscription pledging to register 'more notches on my phallocratic phallus'.<sup>20</sup>

Safe in the knowledge that you could put Oxford on your CV for ever, you had three years to enjoy this magical place. Most students I knew devoted their energies to trying to grow up, make friends, drink beer, play sport and find love. A survey in my time showed that the average undergraduate worked twenty hours a week during term time – which meant just twenty-four weeks a year. An arts student could get by on four hours' work a week, wrote Allegra Mostyn-Owen, Johnson's college girlfriend and first wife, though she was probably exaggerating for effect.<sup>21</sup>

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The American graduate student Rosa Ehrenreich arrived at Oxford from Harvard in 1991. ‘The overall ethos of the university,’ she wrote later, ‘was sufficiently anti-intellectual, laddish, and alcoholic that the best and most interesting undergraduates either voted with their feet by retreating to the privacy of their rooms or, in self-defence, censored their real thoughts and pretended to be as boorish as their peers.’<sup>22</sup> Oxford and Cambridge, she pointed out, had little incentive to raise academic standards because they had a near monopoly on the most highly qualified British students.<sup>23</sup>

Oxford’s customer base certainly wasn’t very demanding. British undergraduates in the 1980s were studying for free, and had already obtained life membership of the establishment, regardless of how little they actually learned at university. For the rest of their lives they would have a vested interest in perpetuating popular awe of Oxford, so they were unlikely to start doing down the place. Frank Luntz, the American Republican pollster, had a miserable time as a doctoral student at Oxford in the 1980s, but he says: ‘When I graduated from there and started to complain about it, I was told by my fellow Oxfordians: “Be quiet. This place is magic, it’s going to take you to a lot of places, so don’t diss it.”’

You were welcome to work hard at Oxford if you wanted. Many students chose to, some to the point of workaholism. But in the 1980s and 1990s, this wasn’t obligatory. There were classicists who used their four years at Oxford to read all of Homer and Virgil. Others didn’t.

Arts students in the 1980s rarely attended seminars. Lectures were considered an entertainment option, like going

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to see a film, so only a few famed performers drew an audience. A common student workload was one or perhaps two tutorials a week, for each of which you had to write a shortish essay without footnotes. A common working method was the ‘essay crisis’: an all-nighter, fuelled by black coffee or ‘speed’ tablets, followed by a shaky tutorial and then recovery in the college bar.

Essays weren’t expected to feature original research. You just had to read bits of a few books, or at least bits of a couple of books (or, if you were really pressed, one book), and then ideally lay out a bold, counterintuitive argument showing that the conventional wisdom about the topic was all wrong.

For your Finals exams, you wrote multiple such papers in three hours while dressed in the dark formal outfit known as ‘subfusc’. Men in black ties and women in short black skirts as if they were cocktail waitresses, many tranquillised to the gills, would file into Schools past the university’s ‘subfusc checkers’.

The provocative essay style tended to come more naturally to men than to women. Elegant writers able to produce in a hurry, and to argue cases they didn’t necessarily believe, often did better than serious scholars who had read all the set texts and cared about nuanced complexity. The essay style I absorbed at Oxford turned out to be ideal preparation for a career as a newspaper columnist. Reading the *Economist*, something of a weekly collection of provocative short essays, I see I’m not alone. To my dismay, I recognise a lot of myself in the Oxford Tories: I too learned at Oxford how to write and speak for a living without much knowledge.

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Scientists and engineers generally worked harder, with laboratory sessions and essential lectures. But they were a minority: about two-thirds of Oxford undergraduates in the early 1980s studied arts subjects.<sup>24</sup>

At its best, the tutorial system worked beautifully: an hour alone with a brilliant thinker who spent an hour exercising your mind with Socratic questions. One classics tutor at Oxford told me that he saw it as his job to free students from the 'straitjacket' of family and school that had shaped their minds – to help them think for themselves. Sometimes that happened. I still remember the time I was wittering on blithely about Louis XIV imposing some new tax on seventeenth-century France, when the tutor asked, 'So how exactly do you think he did that?' Suddenly I glimpsed the practical issues of trying to govern a territory for most of history. Louis had probably sent out messengers on horseback, and local powerbrokers had either ignored his edict, if it ever reached them, or executed only bits of it.

A clever, self-motivated student could get a lot out of Oxford. A tutor of Ed Balls, the future Labour politician, recalled: 'He understood the subject matter but also thought how you would turn it into policy. One sometimes felt after a tutorial that all your ideas had been sucked out of you. Not only did he want to know about theory X, he also wanted to know what you thought about it and how it could be applied.'<sup>25</sup>

Robin Lane Fox, who tutored Dominic Cummings in ancient history, recalls him as a brilliant, hard-working student fascinated by the great decision-makers from Alexander the Great to Lenin. 'He got a very good First in both

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parts in three years,' said Lane Fox, adding that Cummings was 'a whole class better intellectually and in Finals' than Johnson. Cummings did not spend his Oxford years polishing his rhetoric. 'I'm not articulate,' he has claimed, in what seems to be a jibe at his political peers with their 'moronic' debates.<sup>26</sup>

But academically speaking, most of us got rather less out of Oxford. When I reread my essays while revising for Finals, they were so pathetic that I felt like writing to my tutors to apologise. Very often a tutorial would go like this: aged eighteen, hungover and distracted by a thousand other things, you'd read out your pitiful but elegant essay, which you'd finished at 5 a.m. The tutor would point out the gaps in your knowledge. For an hour, you'd try to talk your way around those gaps.

One tutor pointed out a flaw in my argument by quoting something that the French thinker Roland Barthes had said about reality being a construct. I replied, 'Barthes thought reality was a construct, but then he was run over by a laundry van,' which was about the only thing I knew about him. I thought I'd made a hilarious joke. 'He was,' agreed the tutor, and he allowed me to move on. He was a fellow at another college to which I'd been farmed out, and improving my mind wasn't his priority. It wasn't mine either.

Bluffing your way through tutorials was considered an art. *Cherwell* once praised Simon Stevens (who went on to run the NHS from 2013 to 2021) as 'Oxford's most talented off-the-cuff tutorial faker': 'Recently Simes read out almost half of an essay to his tutor before his partner revealed that he was "reading" from a blank piece of paper.'<sup>27</sup>

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Of course, tutors generally knew what tutorial fakers were up to, but as one tutor later told me: ‘You can tell whether a student is bluffing. The question is whether you can be bothered. Tutors have seen so many people like you. There’s just a bulk of really rather dull students who are quite forgettable.’

If a student wanted to waste his three years drinking beer, many tutors in the 1980s felt that that was his affair. Younger tutors tended to be more invested in their own research. Some older tutors had got their jobs in bygone amateur days, didn’t have PhDs, might make it to retirement without ever publishing an academic paper, and lived off sherry. Alcohol – abundant and free at High Table – was an institutionalised element of the Oxbridge don’s life in the 1980s. Margaret Grieco, of the Institute of Transport Studies, said that in her husband’s first three months as fellow of a Cambridge college at the time, he went from being a ‘very moderate drinker’ to existing in an almost continuous drunken state.<sup>28</sup>

In short, a lot of 1980s tutors couldn’t care less if the student hadn’t written the essay or was talking without knowledge. And in any case, as I have since discovered, talking without knowledge is useful preparation for professional life – more useful than, say, an understanding of Roland Barthes. You could leave Oxford in my day transformed by the world’s best staff-to-student ratio, or having learned nothing except how to bluff your way in a plausible accent. Even Roy Jenkins, the university’s chancellor from 1987 to 2003, admitted that Oxford at its worst was ‘glib and flippant’.<sup>29</sup>

Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Oxford professor of international

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relations, now on leave at the European University Institute in Florence, says:

If a student is capable of producing two well-written essays a week, with well-structured arguments, they can kind of get away with not knowing much about the subjects. This may sound superficial, but communicating is useful in life. Sometimes you need to convince people succinctly, especially if you go into politics. Oxford will reward it.

But, she adds,

[I]t's not what Oxford is about. Why would I want to be a professor at this university if this is what it's about? If you ask the faculty, we would say, 'No, our dream and our commitment is to convey knowledge as deeply as possible.' Whether as a student you want to take advantage of this is up to you.

One-on-one tutorials allowed dons great discretion, especially those who taught in the 'college rooms' where they lived. A tutor at my college was known for exposing himself to students, and also for trying to recruit some of them into the intelligence services. Like most things in 1980s Oxford, his habits were treated as a bit of a laugh. Another don I knew was such a serial harasser of his female tutees that finally the college cracked down: he was banned from tutoring women one-on-one.

Political correctness was not rampant at the time. In 1985, most colleges had either one or zero female fellows.<sup>30</sup>

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A female contemporary of mine who studied philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) emailed me: ‘We didn’t study a single twentieth-century philosopher, not a single woman anywhere in sight – in the set texts, on the teaching staff or mentioned in any way at all the course of three years of study of humanities!’ She recalls one tutor lamenting to her and her tutorial partner that they weren’t little boys. She says: ‘I think the point was to unnerve us and intimidate us – and it did.’

The colleges in the 1980s could still appear like ‘men’s clubs with ladies’ wings’.<sup>31</sup> In my time, some male undergraduates who had sexually assaulted a woman in their college’s ‘Front Quad’ were eventually suspended, for one term. At meetings of my college’s junior common room, if a woman tried to speak, it was customary for men to chant: ‘Get your tits out for the lads!’ A Sikh student elicited the cry (which nobody challenged): ‘They’re letting in towelheads now!’ Homophobia was taken for granted. Any complaints about these traditions were treated as evidence of humourlessness.