

## **Arrival at Oxford**

*by Anne Emerson*

When I first started at Oxford, in the autumn of 1974, for my University education in “Oriental Studies - Arabic,” I was invited to a party for all members of the Oriental Institute. I believe it was in a room at St. John’s College. Anyhow, it was a large and beautiful grand old room with mullioned windows, late afternoon sun slanting across a floor graced with one or more huge reddish, faded oriental carpets. Sherry and hors d’oeuvres were served – delicious and plentiful. The room was full of elegant and sophisticated people of all ages and nationalities, having earnest, charming, and intelligent conversations. I thought I had “arrived.”

I met a young man who had caught my eye in Arabic class. He was older than I, and his peer group soon was separated from mine, probably because the class was unusually large, there being more demand for Arabic since the OPEC-dictated increase in oil prices of 1973. He approached me and introduced himself. I said, “Hello,” and, after a pause, he said kindly, “And what’s your name?” That is how little I knew about social interaction.

(I would have said that he and I walked out of the party together by accident. He expressed a wish to leave. I responded, “If you can go, I can go,” and, somehow, we reached the door at the same time, having gone our separate ways within the room, temporarily. With hindsight, I wonder about that coincidence. He and I developed a casual friendship, since our paths crossed from time to time, and I learned that he liked to orchestrate social situations; probably business ones too.)

My ignorance of the social graces had not seemed to interfere with my friendships in junior school and High School. In those places, friendships were perhaps more about proximity than they were about being good company. I soon learned that it was different at Oxford. I said something foolish to an Old Etonian, and he behaved as though he thought I was a fool. I said something complimentary about a play to one of my professors, because I thought it was polite to be nice about people’s efforts; he responded with a critical appraisal of the performance, and I felt like a fool. I suggested to one of my fellow students, who lived in the same college (residence hall) as I, that we study together. She had other things to do, and other friends already.

Thus, I learned very quickly that to be in a room full of sophisticated people is not quite the same as belonging among them; that there were rules in Oxford, as there are anywhere else; and that those rules were different from the rules of my childhood.

## **The Oxford University (O.U.) Bridge Club, and the Oxford University Go Club**

*by Anne Emerson*

In my first week at Oxford, I was looking for a club to join. A new friend and I went along to the O.U. Bridge Club. She and I walked into a very large room; it might have served as a very grand ballroom in other circumstances. I recall that we were elevated above the floor; there must have been stairs down into the pit, quite possibly on all sides of said pit. The floor was garnished with lots of bridge tables; my imagination guesses there were 100 or more, placed very close together; and at each one were seated four very serious-looking people in the middle of a very serious-looking bridge game. My friend and I surveyed the scene, then turned to face one another, shook our heads at one another, and walked out. (My twin had a different experience with the Cambridge University Bridge Club. Her partner was a young man, and he insisted she go.)

I also went along to the O.U. Go Club. I barely knew the rules, but I was interested to learn. I was welcomed in, and played a couple of friendly, instructional games. Had there been even one other female there, I believe I would have continued to attend. They were pleasant to me. I met an Old Etonian there, who invited me to play Diplomacy with his friends in the corridors of Christchurch College – probably the next weekend. But, after one evening, I realized that Diplomacy was a game in which international deception played a large part, and I lost interest. In later years, I wonder whether I saw some of those faces again in the movies. Did I have dinner with Tybalt, of Romeo and Juliet? Did I play Diplomacy with Lord Lindsay of Chariots of Fire? Or, perhaps just look-alikes. Some of them did appear to enjoy drawing attention to themselves, as noted in the next essay.

## **A Beacon in the Oxford Union Society**

*by Anne Emerson*

When I was nineteen years old, I took my middle-class English village-girl heart to one of the premier intellectual training grounds for the global elite – the University of Oxford, to which I had somehow managed to gain admission with the financial assistance of an enlightened modern government. In my first week or so there, I decided to check out the Oxford Union Society. The Oxford Union is the debating club in which many English politicians learn the art of intellectual sparring. They subsequently take seats in parliament, where they engage in sharp-witted verbal jousting.

So, I found my way through an archway into a stone courtyard. It was early evening, still light. Walking toward me was a vision of beauty such as I had never seen before, with a crowd of admirers in tow. She was young and slim, dressed in a simple long green evening gown. Her skin was coffee-colored and her hair shoulder-length and black, spangled with silver glitter. She must have just emerged from a party, and I fancy that all the other attendees had followed her out. That she was Somebody was obvious, not only because of her entourage, but also by the way she carried herself.

I stopped and stared. Quite possibly, my jaw dropped. She saw me, smiled, and gave me a very pleasant, inclusive, friendly “Hello.” It was as though she anticipated that I would become one of her followers. I doubt that I replied. I was not used to being noticed by anyone important, let alone treated as though my admiration for her might be of interest to her.

In the days following this incident, I asked around whether anyone knew who she was. They had no trouble identifying her. There was only one coffee-skinned woman who was Somebody in the Oxford Union Society. As I recall this and consider sharing the memory, I am unspeakably sad. She became a public figure – a political leader – and was assassinated. I will tease my readers a little (if there are any), and let you guess her identity.

(After I had gone inside and checked it out, I decided the Oxford Union was not for me – my erstwhile friends, the potential Bridge partner and some of the Diplomacy players, who were showing off in a balcony, were also present but no longer interested in me – and I did not see Ms. Somebody in person again. Photos of her in newspapers did not convey her impact. For Annie’s website, I will name her – Benazir Bhutto. All of her sophistication, beauty, parentage; even her marriage; her ambition, and probably her hope to build a better Pakistan; none of them saved her from an assassin’s handiwork.)

## **Cuppers**

*by Anne Emerson*

The only club I eventually joined was Cuppers – amateur dramatics for first-year students (freshers). My attempts to offer an opinion regarding what play we might perform took second place to the opinions of

students from the English department. They seemed to be a clique already. If I remember correctly, we performed "The Women's Room," a feminist bathroom play. I had a small part. I was supposed to go into a bathroom stall, draw red ink on my wrists, come out waving my hands above my head so everyone could see the blood on my slit wrists, cry out, "Desmond!" and fall over dead. Rehearsals were scheduled at times not very convenient to me. (Story of my life! I fit around everyone else...)

However, it was not all bad. I was introduced to a delicious tea, when we all gathered in the rooms of the one who seemed to be their leader. I asked her what it was. "Earl Grey," she replied. The flavor was more subtle and elegant than what I drank at home, and I still enjoy it today.