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## Gallery



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# OXFORD

M A G A Z I N E

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Or, in the more scrupulous formulation Lord Franks used in facing up to a questioner and to the tricky nature of oral history: 'What do I think I remember?' The historian of the University since 1945 has the privilege, and perhaps problem, of being able to draw on the reminiscences of actors in his story; Brian Harrison has duly asked some of them to dust down their memories at a seminar in Nuffield College.

With impeccable sense of priorities, the first session was devoted to 'Academic breakthroughs'; for without these Oxford might be a residually interesting social institution, but hardly a great university from whose history anything worthwhile can be learned about the sociology of knowledge. Sir Rex Richards and Mr J. O. Urmson told two very different kinds of success-story: the Oxford Enzyme Group, and Oxford Philosophy. Both spent less time on the substantive achievement—the actual chemical discoveries, the establishing of a new philosophy of mind and the practice of linguistic analysis—so as to concentrate on *how* it was achieved (and perhaps only could be achieved in quite this way) in and through the peculiar setting of Oxford. Both were 'social' projects. The chemical group dined together regularly before meetings, developing acquaintance and diffusing tensions; philosophy focused on personalities like Gilbert Ryle and on informal occasions like J. L. Austin's Saturday morning meetings. There were no fixed, certainly no hierarchical team-structures. It was collaboration *inter pares*. The scientists brought with them an intrinsic independence as college fellows; and although the qualification for joining Austin's group was to be 'a philosophy tutor *junior* to Austin', they were still philosophy tutors, their own men in their own colleges. Teaching too fed both projects—unsurprisingly in the case of philosophy, which even in its remotest reaches is still shadowed by Socrates, but equally so for the

## I Remember, I Remember

enzymologists. That, at any rate, is Sir Rex's reading of the evidence. Against the essentially continental opinion of the late Sir Hans Krebs, who thought Oxford scientists were burdened and hindered by their college teaching, he asserted the value to research of the broad range of scientific reading imposed on the college tutor. Then, overarching these and other collegiate advantages, there was the benefit to be drawn from the larger setting: the reputation of the University which gives its members the courage to stick their necks out. The institution strengthens the individual, whose achievements then enhance the institution, and so on, in a wholly virtuous circle.

Which is not to say that there are no vices on show or that the seminar is an exercise in self-congratulation. Lord Franks's memories came with rather different sorts of judgement attached. He sketched Oxford as it was in the sixties, the background and making of the Commission's report, and then offered 'meta-Franks'—a perspective on the adoption or neglect of the Commission's various proposals, with reflections on what the consequences have been for the welfare of colleges and University since. In part this too was a success-story, of a reformed administration replacing the ramshackle arrangements under which the University was run by a few benign hyperactive oligarchs. Clearly delimited functions for, and relations between, Council, Chest, and General Board were adopted instead. Given the immensely greater complexity our affairs have developed since then, reforms came in the nick of time. But (and here a discreet and understandable note of 'I told you so' crept in) the suggested five mega-faculties were never formed, which might have coped more efficiently with the problems of shrinking resources. Perhaps more important still was the failure to set up a Conference of Colleges with full powers to bind and be bound by democratically reached decisions. This has left the colleges

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