Mother Goes to Cambridge: A Modern Lament

Suzzanne Bigelow

I SAT THERE ON THE BENCH IN LECTURE BLOCK C at Cambridge University with a very real ache in my brain where my classical education should have been. It was a rare warm day in the summer of '85, and since we seven, housewives and mothers with the University of Utah Study Abroad Program for six weeks in England, had either talked or read most of the night, I was appalled to find myself drifting off under the august nose of Professor Allen. Surely I had not journeyed this far to sleep through my twentieth century poetry class on the very day we were discussing *The Waste Land.* Just being here amid the venerable colleges beside the River Cam, not to mention actually taking classwork, was a life-time ambition realized.

Professor Allen was masterful as he unraveled the first part of "The Burial of the Dead," reading Eliot's profundities in an arresting voice. "April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land . . ." (1963, 63). High British that voice, that accent. No matter how well educated, an American never sounds like that. The poem positively rang with clarity, and my mind throbbed with white-hot flashes of understanding. I'd be willing to bet that every female within the sound of Professor Allen's voice had fantasized over the chance possibility of being stranded with him in some pleached bower.

Professor Allen's sonorous voice rolled on in cadence slow, and I thought to myself, Suzzanne, you're pathetic. A sometime-English graduate student and mother of seven, several of whom are graduate students themselves, why are you such a push-over for that English accent? Whatever happened to objective criticism? My eagerness scarcely befit a woman of extensive travels and experience.

What I had seen and felt at Cambridge, free of husband at home and children no doubt overjoyed at being largely on their own for six summer

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weeks, was something unique. It was a rare return to the possibilities of youth combined with the middle-aged knowledge of which possibilities to value. Inner doors of awareness opened, defining and expanding a different me. Glimpses of intuitive light came from being here, with the surety Alexander Pope was talking about when he said, "All are but parts of one stupendous whole" (1962, 769). It was positively exhilarating to be part of the Cambridge stupendous whole.

From other trips abroad and from reading, I had known the British to be smug on occasion, too comfortable, even stuffy at times — a nation of imperialists looking for a way back to the glory days. However, most of the English I have encountered are friendly, quiet folk, detached, often witty, disenchanted with their government, just as some of us are with our own, and immersed in hopeless contradictions represented by their history and faded greatness. It is sobering to find them complacent and accepting of their fallen world position, they, the heirs of Churchill, seemingly apathetic, clinging to vestiges of a way of life that is no more and ineffectively dealing with the ambiguities of the present. Would Churchill, that aggressive, gutsy, spirited bulldog of a man, have liked the way today's Englishman is content to move over and let the Americans carry the greater load for the free world?

But Cambridge itself is a different matter. Her ancient cobblestones and blackened walls whispered her spell to me, and I fell smack in love with the history and traditions, the great men, the architecture, the woods and meadows and gardens, the endless green fields, the cooling mists, the strawberry teas, the death-defying bicycles that took us everywere, the English style of speaking, and most especially with the great bastian of higher learning itself, the university.

I joined with Wordsworth in *The Prelude* when he went up to Cambridge for the first time as a school boy:

> I could not print
> Ground where the grass had yielded to the steps
> Of generations of illustrious men,
> Unmoved. I could not always lightly pass
> Through the same gateways, sleep where they had slept,
> Wake where they waked, range that inclosure old,
> That garden of great intellects, undisturbed.
> Place also by the side of this dark sense
> Of nobler feeling, that those spiritual men,
> Even the great Newton's own ethereal self,
> Seemed humbled in these precincts, thence to be
> The more endeared . . . (1965, 223)

I was in awe not only of those who had studied here — Newton, Darwin, Milton, Byron, Spenser, Marlowe, Thomas Gray, William Harvey, not to mention Francis Bacon, Tennyson, Thackeray, Dryden, and Coleridge and so many more — but also of the method of study. Weekly essays are prepared for each tutorial session with one-on-one critiques and guidance; individualized learn-

ing and progress are emphasized throughout an intense three-year period. No part-time employment is allowed for undergraduates. The bachelor's degree is equivalent to a master's degree from any other institution, with the possible exception of "the other place" (Oxford), the mother school from which scholars repaired after disturbances between the university and townspeople broke out back in 1209 and whose name Cambridge people eschew.

I was reflecting on all this and admiring the thick blonde braid snaking down the back of the girl in front of me, when Professor Allen secured my attention with these lines from *The Waste Land*:

> That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> Has it begun to sprout?
> Will it bloom this year? (1963, 65)

I had begun to sprout. Enough to respond to how he maximized each word. Dr. Allen was not only an artful teacher, he was a consummate performer. I'm sure he knew it too, but then, why shouldn't he? I would have given up my electrical adapter, my clotted cream, and my McVitties Tea Bisquits rather than miss one of his morning lectures. And here he was, doing it again.

"You probably don't know this either," he said, referring to a famous line from *The Aeneid.* I did know it and resented his patronizing preface aimed at the non-Europeans in the class. This had happened before. He often implied that we Americans were poorly prepared, explaining the most obvious literary terms or introducing Thomas Hardy's poetry as though we had never heard of anything but his prose. Probably true in some cases, but who needed to hear it? I had learned the classical subjects that are considered basic knowledge for every civilized person — poetry, art, philosophy, and languages — reading away the hours after school while my mother worked. The demands at Cambridge weighed this prior education of mine in the balance, and like God appraising Belshazzar, found it wanting.

Cambridge has made me realize that my education lacks historic perspective. I suffer from great disjointed islands of learning punctuated by spots of little or nothing. I feel no unseen umbilical cord tying me to the treasures of a poetic, literary, or artistic heritage. The English in the nineteenth century, after most of the great poets had died, had already an existing poetic vocabulary that had evolved for hundreds of years. Poetry reading was part of the national culture, a popular pastime for thousands of people. The poets of the twentieth century took this for granted and built upon it.

Professor Allen wasn't about to leave out any historical background. "In the Golden Age Pericles actually changed the way men thought about themselves." The ancient Greeks and their works have dominated every age of man since the fourth century B.C. Well, I knew that, Professor Allen. The inspiration of those old Greeks had reached all the way to Utah. He went on to say that being able to read the ancient languages, not having to depend on a translation, was the mark of a truly educated person. "T.S. Eliot was a brilliant student, not only of history and philosophy but also languages," Professor

Allen said. Standing before us on the lecture stage in his finely tailored camel's hair jacket (definitely his best color), he eloquently described what man can do when he believed in his world and himself as did those amazing Greeks. "Great souls sired by Homer," was the lovely way he put it, his small blue eyes boring a place in our minds.

I liked the way he used language. Having come forth from the womb with a love of words, believing that human language dignifies and magnifies us, puts a shape on things, I have ears receptive to a nicely turned phrase or an unusual expression. So I listened around town to the spirited speech of the English. "Randy after antique" instead of simply lusting after the old was said about visitors to Knebworth who loved the atmosphere of that ancient country manor. I remembered a woman in the pastry shop in Bath ordering up a "lardy slice," which to us would have been a sweet roll. And what American would ever call a friend a "smashing chap," even if he thought it? There is a gentle good-naturedness among the English. With typical understatement, a fight is either a "spot of a skirmish" or a "punch up." An Englishman can be as "drunk as a sack," "have quite a good read," or buy something "a bit pricey." You can take a "march about," drive across a "fly-over" which is an over-pass, or "mind the gap," a warning issued by a sepulchral voice at the tube station. Healthy people go to the pub and eat cheese baps, tasty sandwiches with cheese and cress on a coarse whole-wheat bun. And you can be "keen mad" or "not give a toss," depending on your mood.

The English have contributed to the continuity of the written word far beyond their numbers. Their poets, or "makers" as Chaucer preferred calling himself, are the heirs of all times and all places. That great store of historic and literary allusion of which metaphor is made seems somehow more accessible coming to us as it has through great English writers.

Professor Allen moved down from the stage and leaned against the first row of benches, moving the discussion back to World War I and the influence of Ezra Pound who had inspired a generation of writers, both English and American. "Young men in their twenties were slaughtered like animals, and for what?" Professor Allen asked. "Uncle Ezra expressed the futility of the men in the trenches, their outrage, all of the stupidity of it, when he bitterly described the culture of Europe as some old books and an ancient bitch gone in the teeth." As direct as a Bruce Springsteen lyric.

I had not heard of Gallipoli, the particular battle mentioned in the poem Professor Allen started to read, until the film *Gallipoli* came out a few years ago and broke my heart. Had I studied more history, I would have been prepared for the war poems of Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas. I would have understood better the tenacity of Winston Churchill in World War II had I known more about World War I. But in high school I had not been required to take one class in world history. The sign I had seen posted in Churchill's war rooms at Whitehall had originally come from Queen Victoria, but it made the point: "*PLEASE UNDERSTAND THERE IS NO DEPRESSION IN THIS HOUSE AND WE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN THE POSSIBILITIES OF DEFEAT. THEY DO NOT EXIST.*"

Sounds like the British stiff upper lip and all that. I think that ability to endure has something to do with being packed off to boarding school at a young age. This system permits parents to remember their child fondly as a human being rather than a teenager. Schoolmasters bear the burden. English children learn to take it early on and keep their feelings to themselves. Churchill quite possibly developed some of his strength in adversity having survived this system. He suffered immensely as a lad at school but, in the end, came out all right. He not only retained respect and love for his socially prominent parents who neglected him shamefully but managed to remain fiercely loyal and came close to idolizing both of them. I like the English national inclination to do things the hard way.

Professor Allen was explaining how great poets allow the language to speak through them — a process that the English language was created for. And then he started reading some Yeats, "Down by the Salley Gardens," (1979, 20) to be exact, and pointing out that Yeats was just such a poet. When compared to the wild beauty of that poem, and "The Stolen Child" which he read next, Eliot and *The Waste Land* seemed mechanical. Or was it Professor Allen's wonderfully expressive voice?

While he talked about Yeat's aspirations for Ireland, moments came to mind of the past several weeks when I had felt as though my whole soul was being activated in some grand way. Being older than a school girl had a lot to do with it. I had sat in King's College Chapel while the organ raged, surveying a ceiling that couldn't possibly have been carved by human hands, no matter what they say, and had actually taken the time to worship. I had sat overwhelmed and humbled while the light streaming through stained glass windows washed me in holiness. And as if that weren't enough to wring prayers from a stone, a most ineffably exquisite painting by Rubens of Mary and the baby Jesus, all rosy and luminous, shone from the altar.

I thought of being behind King's College on the Backs, a spacious meadow edged by oak trees right in the heart of town. I like the great white cows, sociable creatures that could have ambled out of a Constable painting. They crowded close, seemingly eager to exchange pleasantries with us two-legged beasts, chewing serenely over their good fortune at being in such a rarified spot. Witness the chorus line of twenty or more black and white Guernseys wedged against the fence when our group visited Denny Abbey, an ancient building standing not far from Cambridge. So happy were those cows to see us that their mooings and bawlings completely drowned out Mac Dowdy, our great country homes expert, a most entertaining lecturer and raconteur, resembling an aging Errol Flynn. I found my senses heightened, realizing where I was and the company I was in. Cows seemed particularly lovely because they were a natural part of the scene, creatures of the earth, not unlike myself, expressed in differing form.

"Of course you should have read all of Shakespeare, both the plays and the sonnets, as well as *The Iliad*, *Paradise Lost*, and the *Bible*, in order to study English literature seriously. And *The Book of Common Prayer*. Have you all read them?" Professor Allen asked. I thought back. So little had been re-

quired of me. No planned course of study designed to enlarge and expand the mind. I was blessed with a mother who urged me to read, but my education had really just happened without any particular continuity. As a school girl I had never been encouraged to dive into myself and confront what was there. Nothing had equipped me to cherish my humanity while making my way in an awesome world.

Too often we rush "distracted from distractions by distraction," as Eliot said (1943, 192), earphones insulating us against the sounds of our natural world. No bird sings, only a cassette. We arrive at the threshhold of our universities scarcely literate, having watched an average of fifty-four hours of television per week, having read few books, not knowing how to concentrate, nervous strangers in our own environment, and ignorant of the lessons to be learned from the past.

Professor Allen was saying it. "We need more things that move the spirit. That inspiration that causes the heart to leap up at sight of the daffodils. We need to roam over open fields and beside lakes with a volume of Wordsworth . . . no, Yeats would do better these days." He sighed, perhaps a bit too dramatically. I wondered how he would like to come back to Salt Lake City with us and do his thing on PBS Friday nights opposite "Dallas."

Professor Allen had built up to Keats and what he had done for English poetry in his short life. "Go out to his house at Hampstead Heath. He died there, and you'll be able to read his letters which are almost as fine as his poems. And while you are considering Keats, don't dismiss Shelley. He had one of the most creative and original minds of his time." I had no intention of dismissing Shelley if for no other reason than Keats loved him and I loved Keats. It was Shelley who had been called "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain" (Arnold 1927, 225). What other nation had produced such a wealth of literary giants, poets of purer insight or more absolute imaginative sense?

I like the tradition of literary excellence at Cambridge. I don't remember being taught to love the language when I went to school. I find myself making little effort to be precise. I know young people who cannot utter a sentence without the word "cool" being somewhere present. And there is "bad" which translates "very good" and "gnarley" which is even better. But adults are as lax. Where can you go in the United States today and not run into the ubiquitous "you know"? It has insinuated its meaningless way into the beginning, middle, or end of the most simple sentence. If you are not convinced, listen to a television talk show.

Professor Allen graced us with one of his proper chuckles. "Did you know that Britain was once a nation of poets and is now a nation of shopkeepers, and a nation fast becoming the world's largest living museum? But then," he was proud in spite of himself, "have you ever seen anything to compare with Blenheim Palace, or Chatsworth?" There is nothing like those grand piles in our country — Wimpole Hall, Harlaxton, Belvoir, or Hatfield House, to name a few that we toured near Cambridge. It was at Hatfield House, the historic seat of the powerful Cecil family, where Elizabeth I was reared with her

brother Edward (not at her own choosing, of course) while she waited to learn which way the winds of intrigue would blow her fortunes. These magnificent homes are an incredible statement of the aristocracy of a rather small and rainy island unique in world history.

Professor Allen had moved on to a few anecdotes about his days at St. Catharine's College. Actually I was disappointed — I had figured him for a Trinity man. But I wasn't really listening. I was thinking of T. S. Eliot's words in *The Waste Land* about the giving, the surrendering, and never being the same. Implicit in the surrendering of ourselves is the recovering of yet a different self. This had happened to me at Cambridge, and I had seized the day. *Carpe diem.* Yes, I know the Latin, Professor Allen, in spite of my spotty high-school education.

I had also felt my own inadequacies and mourned, but not too long. I didn't want to miss anything. I was having fun making my own decisions outside of my domestic slot — no one's wife or mother, a unique suspension of one reality for six irreplaceable weeks. I had come as a pilgrim to an academic mecca and feasted. Much of the joy was in the freedom, to be sure. No cleaning house or worrying about what was growing in the refrigerator, no fixing dinner. Not a word of complaint from me about the dullness of English cuisine; it was enough not to have to be cooking it. I wanted to tell all the University of Utah students we were with to be sure and appreciate what was happening to them, just in case their youth got in the way.

During our time in England we ignored Wordsworth's sonnet and did our share of "getting and spending," and we grew close to each other. The seven women in the Utah group who were my friends and neighbors at the outset became in that rarified clime dearest companions, grappled to my soul "with hoops of steel," as Shakespeare put it (in Wright 1936, 739), he knowing full well how Cambridge would work on us. Cambridge was our mid-life awakening, a recognition of the primacy of the spiritual and the intellectual life that at home may have passed us by.

And it was fun. Once, running up to the roof of Cripps in our nighties on the first night of the Cambridge Festival, we watched fireworks ablaze in the sky. It wasn't easy to figure out the best place for a panoramic view. After seeing to the fire door so that we wouldn't be locked out, running back for sweaters against the chill starless night, and finally arranging tenuous seats on the air vents, we settled back and stopped talking long enough to discover the show was over.

And the talks, past midnight — time to get down to what really mattered. Glimpses into another heart never to be forgotten or betrayed. The growth at Cambridge had been part of the examined life Socrates had urged, and the adventure had been full of that passion for living reminiscent of the Romantics. Not on their grand scale, perhaps, but passion nonetheless. I thought of Byron sitting in stony splendor on his pedestal in the Wren Library at Trinity. Was he contemplating eternity and lost chances?

Professor Allen noticed the time and put down his book. "Jolly difficult ending this, but you'll have plenty of time for a good read back home," he said,

smiling in his most charming Mr. Chips manner. Right you are, Professor Allen. What remains of a lifetime.

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