

INTRODUCTION

Allen Leeper, an undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford, wrote regularly to his family in Australia from March 1908, when he first took ship for Europe, until the end of his university career in 1912. His letters, giving a detailed account of everything he had done and seen, were intended to take the place of a diary, which he had insufficient leisure to compile. Some of his contemporaries would be among the fallen in the First World War while others survived to enjoy illustrious careers. In addition to accounts of university life Allen recorded his extensive travels, during the journey from Australia to England and then during university vacations, which he spent studying on the continent or visiting relations in England and Ireland. He was a tireless sightseer, investigating churches, monuments, museums, and art galleries with Baedeker in hand, the kind of behaviour that H.G. Wells's Mr Polly termed 'cultured rapacity'.¹ A keen sportsman, Allen played lawn tennis to a high standard, and enjoyed watching other sports, especially cricket. He was also an inveterate theatre- and concert-goer, and in 1910 attended the decennial performance of the passion play at Oberammergau, boarding with the family of one of the actors. Among other notable experiences, he stood in the street to watch the funeral of King Edward VII and the coronation of George V, attended tennis championships at Wimbledon and in Paris, sat with the Australian tour manager during the First Test in the Ashes series of 1909, heard Paderewski give a piano recital and saw Vaughan Williams conduct the newly written *Sea Symphony*, and witnessed the ageing Sarah Bernhardt perform on stage. As befitted the scion of a dynasty of ecclesiastics, he also attended divine service regularly, and reported his observations – of the clergy and their preaching, the quality of the liturgy, and the behaviour of the congregation. Although brought up in an austere Low Church tradition, he was attracted to 'smells and bells'. An occasional worshipper at the Oxford headquarters of the Anglo-Catholic Cowley

¹ H.G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* (1920), 54.

Fathers, he made a point on his continental travels of visiting churches belonging to the Old Catholics in Germany, and the Jansenists in Holland.

Allen's letters offer a vivid picture of Britain, Ireland, and Europe on the eve of the Great War. As the official history of Oxford University makes clear, this should not be characterized as the swansong of an aristocratic *ancien régime*. The social composition of the university was more diverse than a generation earlier, with the boarding public schools accounting for only a little more than half the annual intake, a strong leavening of 'colonials' like Leeper, and an influx of other overseas students, especially Indians.² Balliol in particular took large numbers of 'colonials' and Indians, to the extent that it became known to some undergraduates outside the college as 'Basutoland'.³ The atmosphere was also more serious. In Compton Mackenzie's coming-of-age novel, *Sinister Street*, set a few years earlier, Oxford was still 'the apotheosis of the amateur', but even then the idea of 'social service' was being 'encouraged by fashion'.⁴ While Leeper enjoyed his share of college balls and country-house tennis parties, his letters also testify to a world made deeply uncomfortable by political crisis and social change. He reflected on the parliamentary conflicts arising from Lloyd George's 'People's Budget', the mounting tension in Ireland over Home Rule, the agitation over women's suffrage, and above all the looming likelihood of war with Germany. His letters also contain glimpses of emerging modernity: air-displays by aviation pioneers, which he greeted with youthful enthusiasm, and innovative movements in painting, of which he was more doubtful. They bring out the complexities as well as the colour of a critical period in British and world history.

1

Alexander Wigram Allen Leeper – Allen to family and friends – was born on 4 January 1887, the third child – and first son – of Alexander Leeper (1848–1934), founding warden of Trinity, an Anglican college of the University of Melbourne, and Alexander's first wife, Adeline, daughter of Sir Wigram Allen, Speaker of the lower house of the Australian parliament.⁵ Allen already had two

² *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, 783, 803–804.

³ *Ibid.* VII, 800.

⁴ Compton Mackenzie, *Sinister Street* (London, 1913; citations from 1949 edn), 542, 583.

⁵ The history of the Leeper family has been taken principally from Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, supplemented by Marion Poynter, *Nobody's Valentine: Letters in the Life of Valentine Alexa Leeper, 1900–1921* (Melbourne, 2008), and Shelley Richardson, *Family Experiments:*

sisters, the elder named after her mother but always called Kitty, and Katharine, known to her siblings as ‘Katha’ or ‘Wib’. After giving birth to another boy, Reginald (‘Rex’), Adeline died of cancer in 1893, and four years later Alexander remarried. Allen’s stepmother, whom he affectionately called ‘Madre’, was Mary Moule, the daughter of a Melbourne solicitor. Between 1900 and 1903 she produced a further three children (two girls, Valentine and Molly and a boy, Geoffrey).

Allen’s father was a new Australian. By background and upbringing Alexander Leeper was an Irish Protestant, and his immediate family, on both sides, was solidly anchored in the Dublin professional class. Allen’s paternal grandfather, a canon of St Patrick’s Cathedral, married the daughter of a Dublin surgeon, and fathered eight children, of whom Alexander was the third. Alexander’s parents sent him to Kingstown Grammar School – in what is today Dún Laoghaire – intending him to be prepared for the examination for the Indian Civil Service, but he showed such brilliance in his studies that was elected to a sizarship in Trinity College, Dublin, where he excelled as a classicist. After graduation he took a temporary job as tutor to Sir Wigram Allen’s sons, which brought him to Melbourne. There he fell in love with Adeline, and, having failed in a bold attempt to stay in Australia by applying for the chair in classics at Melbourne University, returned to home shores, or rather to England. He obtained an exhibition at St John’s College, Oxford, and began a second bachelor’s degree, in ‘Greats’ (*Literae Humaniores*), the Oxford course that combined a study of the classics with modern philosophy and still enjoyed an unrivalled prestige.⁶

The charms of Miss Allen prevailed, however, and Alexander returned to Australia without an Oxford degree. He had originally hoped for a First, an ambition he subsequently wished upon his eldest son. Life in Australia began promisingly for him as senior classics master at Melbourne Grammar School, but his courtship of Adeline fell foul of her father’s disapproval. Not even Alexander’s ordination and appointment as warden of the newly established Trinity College in Melbourne University were enough for Sir Wigram, until Adeline’s determination overcame his prejudice and the marriage took place.

Alexander was a strong character, who combined an indulgent disposition with a tendency to flare up if crossed. He could be difficult in personal relations, and bore grudges, which ensured that his time as

Middle-Class, Professional Families in Australia and New Zealand c.1880–1920 (Canberra, 2016), 259–274.

⁶ W.H. Walsh, ‘The zenith of Greats’ in *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, 311–326.

warden of Trinity was marked by quarrels and crises. In politics he clung to family traditions, believing fervently in the Union and the Empire, which made him a conservative rather than a liberal, though he disagreed profoundly with the British Conservative Party's support for Tariff Reform. Unbending unionism translated into bitter opposition to Home Rule and to Irish nationalism in all its forms. Intensely hostile to the political ambitions of Irish Catholicism, Alexander became suspicious of the Catholic church and in some contexts found himself keeping company with ultra-Protestant evangelicals. He was also a resolute opponent of women's suffrage, resting his case on the popular 'physical force' argument, that women were too weak to enforce or resist laws, or to defend the state. Yet he was no bigot. He welcomed to Trinity members of all religious groups, including Catholics; and for all his hostility to female suffrage, was not opposed to the social advancement of women. Trinity was the first college in the university to permit women to attend lectures, and Alexander established a hostel for female students, even though this had to be situated outside the college grounds.

Domestically, Alexander pressed his political views on his children, providing them with unionist literature to bolster their views on 'the great issue' of Home Rule. As a parent he could be difficult, and Allen's letters hint at discussions on controversial subjects which became a little too fractious. Nevertheless Alexander's forthrightness did not alienate his children, since ultimately he was prepared to let them do as they wished. He encouraged his daughters' education, although insisting that all the children begin their university studies in Australia, rather than Dublin, or Oxford, on which Kitty had set her heart. As a concession, the two eldest girls were allowed to spend time with relations in England between school and university. Neither brothers nor sisters chafed at their upbringing, since the Leeper household was a nourishing environment that enabled them to develop according to their own lights.

Allen was in many respects a model son. Like his father he excelled at school, in his case Melbourne (Church of England) Grammar School, where he was head boy, and then at university, in his father's college. Alexander had retained a passion for the classics, publishing *A Guide to Classical Reading Intended for the Use of Australian Students* (1880) as well as a respectable translation of Juvenal's *Satires* (1882), and Allen dutifully followed in his footsteps. He took a First in classics at Melbourne in 1907, where he contributed extensively to the Trinity College magazine, the *Fleur de Lys*. He was able to make friends easily and showed a particular talent for games, especially tennis. He also inherited his mother's love of music, though unlike his sister Katharine, no great talent. The one cloud over him was

his health. While an undergraduate he was suspected of having contracted tuberculosis, and spent six months in a sanatorium. While he remained a keen tennis-player, more physically demanding sports would be beyond him. When he came to England he saw a chest specialist frequently, and his letters are full of attempts to reassure his parents that he was not putting his health at risk. The fact that his younger brother Rex had been diagnosed with a curvature of the spine increased paternal anxiety, especially after Rex followed Allen to Oxford, in his case to New College, placing both boys beyond Alexander's direct supervision.

Despite concerns about the children's well-being, Alexander allowed them considerable latitude. After graduation Allen's sisters Kitty and Katha returned to Britain, where Adeline Allen's barrister brother Boyce had already relocated with his family, having bought a house in Oxfordshire. Adeline's mother, Marian Allen, and unmarried sister Ida were also living in London, in a flat near Westminster Cathedral, which became a base for family members passing through. Kitty pursued literary interests in London; Katha decamped to Berlin to study the piano. Just as remarkable was the fact that Rex was permitted to take up a scholarship in Japan, in order to learn Japanese, with the long-term objective of qualifying for the diplomatic service. As for Allen, he was to complete what his father had started, and take a degree in Oxford, in Greats. Rex would join him a year later to read Modern History.

Before the end of 1907, the year in which Allen sat his finals in Melbourne, Alexander was nominated as diocesan representative to the Pan-Anglican Congress which would take place in London in June 1908. This afforded the prospect not merely of seeing his daughters and his first wife's family, and travelling to Ireland to visit the Leeper clan, but also of securing Allen a place in Oxford. Alexander, Mary, and Allen embarked on the steamer SS *Bremen* in March 1908, and, after calling in at Adelaide, Fremantle, and Colombo, reached the Suez Canal in a little under a month. Following a brief stopover in Cairo – too brief to afford a view the Pyramids – the *Bremen* entered the Mediterranean, and disembarked its passengers at Naples. There was no way that Alexander would let slip this opportunity to view the major sites of Roman and Greek civilization, and he organized a tour of the eastern Mediterranean before the family travelled on to London. After exploring Naples, the party travelled to Athens, through the Greek islands to Constantinople, and eventually, by train to Ostend, via Budapest, Vienna, and Cologne, arriving not long before the congress was due to begin. Allen described their meandering, and relentlessly educational, journeyings in letters to Rex, who had by this time returned to Melbourne from Japan.

The summer of 1908 was spent at the flat in London, punctuated by outings to visit aunts and cousins further afield. Allen attended as much of the congress as he could, and enjoyed some of it, though he accidentally missed his father's major contribution. He also paid an extended visit to Berlin to see Katharine, and was enraptured with the city. There he met her American friend, Miss Mack, and Miss Mack's fiancé, a fellow American called Henry Kaspar, also a pianist. In England the Leepers made a dutiful pilgrimage to Brighton, where Alexander's sister Ellen lived with her ponderous clergyman husband Thomas Peacey. More successful was the first of what would be several holidays with Allen's Aunt Ethel, another of his mother's sisters, who had married a retired naval commander, Everard Maxwell, and lived in a former rectory at Houghton in Huntingdonshire. The household there was livelier than in Brighton, and there were opportunities for afternoon tennis tournaments with the neighbours in which Allen could show off. He and his father also went to Dublin, where they stayed with Alexander's sister Cecilia ('Aunt Cissy') and her husband, the barrister Rowan Raphael, in Ballsbridge. Allen was introduced to various family members, including 'Uncle Charlie', Alexander's closest brother, a lawyer who lived close to St Stephen's Green; and 'Aunt Kate', who had married another successful barrister, Garrett Walker, and resided beyond the city to the north, in a house which had the additional charm for Allen of possessing tennis courts. They also visited Trinity College, which stirred happy memories for Alexander, even if it was not the destination intended for his eldest son.

One of the first things that Alexander did after his arrival in London was to take Allen to Oxford, where they made a brief tour of the city and two colleges – St John's and Balliol. They were able to meet 'Uncle Boyce', an old Balliol man, who would in due course take Allen under his wing. Rather than his father's college, Allen chose Balliol, then at the height of its reputation as the intellectual power house of the university. His application progressed satisfactorily, and early in July he was invited to lunch with the master, the Scottish classicist J.L. Strachan-Davidson. Also present on that occasion was another candidate for admission, a Galician Jew named Ludwik Bernstein, who was seeking to transfer from the London School of Economics. In later years, when Bernstein had become a naturalized British citizen and changed his name to Lewis Namier, he and Allen would be close colleagues in the Foreign Office.

Once the prime objectives of the journey to England had been accomplished, Alexander and his wife returned to Australia. From this point on, Allen's letters were directed not to Rex, but to

Father and ‘Madre’. Sadness at their departure was soon alleviated by the excitements consequent on becoming a ‘Varsity’ man. With the help of the Maxwells at Houghton, and Boyce Allen, who had moved his family into a house in Oxford, at 175 Woodstock Road, he set about equipping himself with an appropriate wardrobe, and other necessaries. He seems to have sensed that the trajectory of his life had shifted decisively.

2

According to the American Whitney Shepardson, who came to the college as a Rhodes Scholar in 1910, Balliol’s attractions were wholly intellectual: ‘its buildings are by no means attractive, and its gardens are only moderately beautiful’, but ‘its record in scholarship and athletics is very high indeed’. ‘Personally, I would not exchange my residence in Balliol for residence in any other college of the university.’⁷ In a famous phrase, H.H. Asquith had talked of the ‘tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority’ marking out Balliol men.⁸ It was a sense that Allen soon came to share. When he had firmly settled in he was able to tell his father that

There are some very able men up – Balliol gets fully half of them it seems to me but perhaps I’m biased. Certainly we are easily first in self-conceit. Even New College we look down on with benevolent interest and places like Jaggers or Pemmer or Wuggins or B.N.C. merely provoke a sympathetic smile.⁹

For all that Allen considered the university to be essentially ‘aristocratic’ in character, the Oxford that Allen entered in the Michaelmas Term of 1908 was a long way from the satirical picture purveyed by Max Beerbohm’s comic novel *Zuleika Dobson*, published in 1911, or the more authentic but still heavily class-conscious college life depicted in *Sinister Street*.¹⁰ Although in 1900 Balliol’s students had been ‘a select society [...] eighty per cent [of whom] were English, and one in four [...] an Etonian’, by 1908 the social profile was

⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial Library, Hyde Park, NY, Shepardson papers: printed address [c.1914]. For the college at this time, see in general Jones, *Balliol*, ch. 16; and for the university as a whole, the relevant chapters in *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, esp. M.G. Brock, ‘The Oxford of Raymond Asquith and Willie Elmhirst’ (pp. 781–819).

⁸ At a dinner in the House of Commons in 1908 (reported in *The Times*, 23 July 1908).

⁹ Letter 54. The supposedly inferior colleges listed were, in order, Jesus, Pembroke, Worcester, and Brasenose.

¹⁰ Charles Lister thought the book ‘very true to life, especially the Magdalen life, which I saw a good deal of’ (*Lister*, 135).

changing significantly.¹¹ Allen reported to his parents that of the sixty or so men who matriculated alongside him only one was a British peer, a younger son of the duke of Sutherland – who left to join the army before completing his degree.¹² There were also ‘two German Grafen’ – one of whom may actually have been Belgian.¹³ The following year’s intake would include a member of the ruling house of the kingdom of Siam. But Allen’s friends and acquaintances were solidly middle-class, sons of businessmen and manufacturers, lawyers, doctors, and men of the cloth, including one minister of the Free Church of Scotland. There were even a few from poorer backgrounds, including some ‘colonials’ into whose company Allen was thrown, such as the New Zealander Diamond Jenness, whose father was a clock- and watchmaker, albeit a prosperous one. It was also an overwhelmingly male environment. Women’s halls had been established, but women were not permitted to graduate, and the letters reveal very little interaction between ‘Varsity men’ and female undergraduates, whom Allen, following the terminology used by his class-mates in Melbourne, referred to as ‘the hostiles’. His visits to his hockey-playing cousin Dorothy Leeper, at Lady Margaret Hall, display an attitude of polite curiosity towards these exotic creatures, whom he does not seem to have taken very seriously.

Of course the ‘bloods’ in Balliol made the most noise, literally and metaphorically.¹⁴ There was a distinct social set, centred around a coterie of Old Etonians, slightly older than Allen. They included Edward Horner, whose sister married Asquith’s son Raymond, the Grenfell brothers, Julian and Billy, sons of Lord Desborough, and Charles Lister, a younger son of Lord Ribblesdale.¹⁵ The leading lights were two young men of much-trumpeted brilliance, Ronald Knox, whose father was bishop of Manchester, and Patrick Shaw Stewart, from a military family. As they had come up to Balliol together, Knox recalled, ‘naturally there was something of a clique’.¹⁶ They set the fashion for undergraduate behaviour, which often consisted of drunken ‘rags’, resulting in disciplinary proceedings and

¹¹ Jones, *Balliol*, 229.

¹² In addition the freshmen of 1908 included the Hon. Edward James Kay-Shuttleworth (son of the 1st Lord Shuttleworth), and several sons of baronets.

¹³ See below, Appendix.

¹⁴ *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, 793–794.

¹⁵ For this group, see Jeanne Mackenzie, *The Children of the Souls: A Tragedy of the First World War* (1986), esp. 52–65. Two of the individuals concerned have modern biographies: Nicholas Mosley, *Julian Grenfell: His Life and the Times of his Death, 1888–1915* (1999), and Miles Jebb, *Patrick Shaw Stewart: An Edwardian Meteor* (Wimborne Minster, 2010).

¹⁶ *Lister*, 241; Jones, *Edwardian Youth*, 11, 14; *Brandt*, 36–37.

eventually some rustications.¹⁷ Lister was sent down in his second year,¹⁸ a punishment marked by a mock funeral.¹⁹ Julian Grenfell managed to avoid this indignity, despite having on one occasion ‘chivvied a pig into a don’s room’, but his brother Billy did finally provoke the college authorities beyond endurance.²⁰ One particular dining-club, the Annandale, became notorious. But among other undergraduates the social exclusivity of the ‘Anna table’ was thought to be ‘contrary to all that Balliol stands for – a united and friendly society of men from every class as well as from all parts of Empire’. It was a source of persistent disruption to college life, rowdy scenes in the Quad late at night, and – the final straw for some – a drunken interruption to one of the more serious debating societies, which did result in an attempt to rein in the worst excesses of the Annandale’s members.²¹

Although the social prestige of ‘the bloods’ and the attractions of their racketsy lifestyle drew disciples and imitators, more generally in the college a different ethos prevailed. There were many dons and undergraduates with a strong social conscience and political beliefs that were firmly left of centre. Prominent Balliol Fellows like A.L. Smith and A.D. (‘Sandie’) Lindsay (both future masters) shared a Christian Socialist outlook; they were supporters of education for working men, and brought Workers’ Educational Association classes into Balliol in the vacations. Undergraduates like the rugby international Ronald Poulton, who had taken particular exception to the antics of the Annandale, established a Balliol Boys’ Club for poor children in the city, which Leeper visited.²² The several college debating societies, though principally providing exhibitionist undergraduates with an opportunity to show off, nonetheless tackled contemporary social and political issues like unemployment. The Fabian Society was also a powerful force.²³ Two of Leeper’s fellow freshmen, Douglas Cole and Kingsley Griffith, published a magazine called *The Oxford Socialist*, which attracted notice in the national press. Of course, a social conscience and left-wing political views were not incompatible with the more boisterous aspects of university life.

¹⁷ *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, 790–791, 793–794; Mackenzie, *Children of the Souls*, 82–85. The undergraduate diaries of Arnold Lunn (Georgetown UL, Lunn papers, box 10, folder 2) provide ample evidence of this kind of activity, as do the disciplinary records of the college (Balliol Archives, ‘English register’, 1908–1924).

¹⁸ Jones, *Balliol*, 231.

¹⁹ Georgetown UL, Arnold Lunn’s diary; *Lascelles*, 45–46.

²⁰ Georgetown UL, Arnold Lunn’s diary; *Lascelles*, 39; Mosley, *Julian Grenfell*, 299–300.

²¹ *Lister*, 247; *Brandt*, xv; *Poulton*, 140–142; *Lascelles*, 25–26; Jones, *Balliol*, 229–230.

²² *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, 786–787, 793–794; *Poulton*, 150–163; Jones, *Balliol*, 232.

²³ Jones, *Balliol*, 231.

Charles Lister, the archetypal ‘blood’, had been a committed socialist since his Eton schooldays.²⁴ However, in this he was, to say the least, unusual. Perhaps more revealing of the coexistence of high-mindedness and youthful exuberance is an incident recorded in the diary of Leonard Stein, a stalwart of the Fabians. One evening Stein and a group of friends, including Kingsley Griffith, indulged in a ‘rag’ at the Union – ‘the Ugger’ – which resulted in a debagging, and the calling of the ‘bullers’ – bulldogs, the university policemen – to put a stop to the noise. The culprits then raced back to Balliol in high spirits, debagged their friend Philip Guedalla, and were only silenced by the arrival of an irate don.²⁵

This kind of behaviour does not seem to have held any attractions for Allen. At least, if he did indulge in horseplay, disturb the peace or drink too much, he was careful not to include details in his letters. On the contrary, he complained of being kept awake by late-night revellers. He did admit to drinking wine, though not to excess, but was insistent that he did not keep bottles in his rooms, declaring that the only alcoholic refreshment ever served to visitors was ‘Bass’s ale’. Similarly, although refusing his father’s injunction to give up smoking cigarettes, he explained that he only smoked in term-time in order to be sociable, and in any case his weekly consumption of cigarettes was innocuously low. There is nothing in his letters of ‘rags’ or run-ins with the bulldogs. Only one mildly discreditable incident is recorded, and even then Allen appears as entirely innocent, hauled up before the university’s disciplinary authorities by mistake and sent away without charge.

The social occasions which Allen reported were for the most part church services, sporting fixtures – mainly tennis matches – concerts, meetings of college debating societies or the Colonial Club, the activities of the Officer Training Corps, and evenings at the Oxford Union. By his own account he was neither a confident nor a particularly fluent public speaker, but did manage to break his duck eventually in a Union debate and was moderately pleased with the result. Within the college his closest social circle was composed of undergraduates with a strong commitment to their work. Twelve of them established a group which met regularly to discuss subjects of intellectual interest. They included Cole and Griffith, and academic high-fliers like ‘James’ Clark – as Sir George, a future Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge – and ‘Hamish’ Paton, later to be White’s Professor of Moral Theology at Oxford.

²⁴ *Lascelles*, 25.

²⁵ Southampton UL, Leonard Stein papers, MS 170/A7244/DIO, 54: Stein’s diary, 28 February 1910.

Pen-portraits of friends and acquaintances were candid. Clark was ‘very clever, but knows it’, while Roland Bryce, son of a Liberal MP and nephew of Britain’s ambassador in Washington, was a pleasant fellow but emphatically not of a high intellectual calibre. A few individuals, however, Allen admired without reserve, especially the American Rhodes Scholar Rhys Carpenter, probably his best friend in college, with whom he spent holidays.

He was happy to tell his parents about these close male friendships, but wrote little or nothing in his letters about female acquaintances. Except for young ladies encountered on his travels, especially the daughters of the Longo family, in whose house in Nice he and Rex spent Christmas 1911, most of the women with whom he socialized were cousins, or friends of cousins. Descriptions were brief and anodyne. Partly this may have been the effect of discretion. The little he said about his brother Rex and young Primrose Allen – Uncle Boyce’s elder daughter – was insufficient to alert Alexander to the possibility of a romance between the cousins, which Uncle Boyce had already observed disapprovingly. More significantly, Allen’s account of his sister Katharine’s developing friendship with Henry Kaspar was oblique enough to make the sudden announcement of the couple’s wedding a nasty shock to the family in Melbourne.

Comparisons between university life in Oxford and Melbourne formed another significant feature, since they would pique Alexander’s interest. The letters are full of his studies, his lectures and tutorials, and his reading. There are also detailed accounts of examinations – the content of the papers and the way he tried to answer them – and a blow-by-blow narrative of the viva from which he eventually emerged triumphant. He characterized the teaching as far less formal and systematic than at Melbourne – or indeed in Australian universities in general – with undergraduates encouraged to develop their own ideas. But for all his admiration for individual tutors and their capacity to stimulate independent thinking, Allen was critical of the general standard of classical scholarship that he encountered at Oxford. Subjects like ‘Greats’ and Modern History – which he began to study in 1911 after taking his BA – were still in essence a preparation for public service, at home or in the Empire. Few of the dons whose lectures he attended could rival the research achievements of German classicists: ‘love of learning in the sense that the French and Germans feel it is non-existent’ (Letter 134).

Nevertheless, Allen found the independence of Oxford life and thought an exhilarating change from the narrower society he had experienced in Australia. Oxford men were less inclined to the deadly seriousness which imbued Australian undergraduates.

Sporting competition was much less intense, and more likely to be enjoyed for its own sake than for the pleasure of winning:²⁶ he thought crowds at Test matches in England more generous than those at home. In other respects, too, the typical Oxford man showed a degree of nonchalance, even flippancy, in worldly matters. Speeches at the Union were prized for wit rather than sense – an ‘epigrammatic style’ meant everything – and the tone of conversation was allusive and amusing rather than earnest. This attitude had its limitations, and Allen was sometimes frustrated at what he felt was a tendency to shy away from important issues. He was also ambivalent about the ‘undemocratic nature’ of Oxford:

I think it is quite true that there is less camaraderie in an Oxford college than in a Melbourne one [...] I’m very glad to have seen something of both systems and think that they are each suitable in their place. In England, which is socially the very reverse of democratic, such fellowship is very hard to realise (even though Oxford men are – from the very nature of the work and expenses of the university – much more of one class than in Melbourne): in democratic Australia snobbishness would be so unmeaning that it could only be ridiculous.²⁷

Snobbery, however, was something that Allen absorbed along with an Oxford accent, Oxford fashions, Oxford manners, and Oxford slang. Every so often it surfaces in the letters. The two Australian students who matriculated alongside him were ‘pretty so-so socially’ (Letter 54), and he was particularly scornful of the unmodulated Australian twang of Stanley Castlehow, a Methodist minister’s son from Queensland. As for the New Zealander Jenness – ‘the photos of his family are startlers!’ But he was quick to add that Jenness was ‘a nice chap and I like him’.²⁸ A difference in social class did not stop Allen from being friends with both Castlehow and Jenness; he took Castlehow and two other Australians to Switzerland with him in his last summer at Oxford and was

²⁶ Another Balliol undergraduate, Lawrence Jones, remembered the college as having been ‘free from any taint of athlete-worship’ (Jones, *Edwardian Youth*, 13). This may, however, have been peculiar to Balliol. Alan Lascelles at Trinity thought the idea of college loyalty was ‘pushed to the most absurd limits, and the ideas about games are very little better than those of a public school’ (*Lascelles*, 43).

²⁷ Letter 102.

²⁸ Letter 54. Jenness’s social origins were not as lowly as Leeper assumed. His father’s business was highly successful and, when Jenness was a child, the family had moved into a large house in a comfortable suburb of Wellington: Diamond Jenness and Stuart E. Jenness, *Through Darkening Spectacles: Memoirs of Diamond Jenness* (Gatineau, QC, 2008), 1, 3.

particularly close to Jenness, with whom he went on a cycling tour of the west country.

In a similar way Leeper shared the prevalent anti-Semitism which imbued undergraduate life without allowing it to determine his personal relationships. There were a number of Jewish students in Balliol, mostly from prosperous families and educated at schools like Rugby and St Paul's. Several came from families prominent in British public life, and were themselves admitted to exclusive clubs or elected to office in the Union. Even so, there was always an undercurrent of superciliousness and suspicion in the way they were regarded. This was most pronounced among the 'bloods'; none more so than Patrick Shaw Stewart, who recognized the extreme nature of his own hatred for the Jews, and may indeed have exaggerated it for bravado.²⁹ But even the otherwise enlightened A.L. Smith could state in a reference for his star pupil, Ludwik Bernstein, that 'I started on him with the usual prejudice against Jews'.³⁰ Allen's early letters express this popular prejudice. He wrote that he disliked Bernstein's 'strong Semitic characteristics' (Letter 35), and made a tasteless joke about Rufus Isaacs, another Balliol undergraduate, speaking at the Union 'for the Noes' (Letter 33). Yet in due course, Bernstein became a firm friend, as did Leonard Montefiore, the son of Claude Montefiore, the founder of Liberal Judaism in England. Early on Allen wrote that he had been impressed by Montefiore *despite* the fact that he was a Jew – even if not 'too Jewish'. Later this qualification was forgotten.

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Enthralled as Allen was with life in Oxford, his horizons were broader. He was able to keep up with Australian politics by means of Australian newspapers which were taken in the Union. He also maintained contact with friends from school and university who had come to England, such as Mervyn Higgins, a close companion at Melbourne University, who had preceded him to Balliol,³¹ and

²⁹ The pejorative references to Jews in *Brandt* (50), *Lascelles* (27), and *Grenfell Letters* (5, 76, 83, 123, 141, 145) seem casual in comparison with the vehement anti-Semitism in Shaw Stewart's letters (e.g. BL, Add. MS 70715, fos 33, 35). But Shaw Stewart's overpowering personality was sometimes too much even for his friends. Julian Grenfell noted, half-jokingly, that 'Animals always edged away from him [Shaw Stewart], and the more intelligent they were the more they edged' (*Grenfell Letters*, 83–84). Cf. *Hist. Oxf. Univ.*, VII, 802.

³⁰ D.W. Hayton, *Conservative Revolutionary: The Lives of Lewis Namier* (Manchester, 2019), 31.

³¹ Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, 323, 334.

the cricket blue Philip Le Conteur, a Rhodes Scholar at University College. 'Le Conteur is a nice fellow', Allen wrote, although 'very palpably below par socially'. 'However he is a good chap and a splendid athlete.' (Letter 29) It was natural that Allen should gravitate to the society of 'colonials', Canadians, New Zealanders and South Africans as well as Australians. He joined the university's Colonial Club, and spoke in debates there, once on Cecil Rhodes and 'pan-Teutonism', the recent decision to open up the Rhodes Scholarships to Americans and Germans, based on the supposed racial affinity of English-speaking Anglo-Saxondom and Germany.

Like his father, Allen was a staunch believer in the historic mission of the British Empire, though during the First World War he came to question the validity of other European empires, especially the Austro-Hungarian, and espoused the right of subject nationalities to self-determination, perhaps influenced by his friend Bernstein, a pan-Slavist with a pronounced antipathy to the Habsburg state. But for all Bernstein's detestation of the Habsburgs he too idealized the British Empire and its civilizing mission.³² This was, after all, a common assumption in British political discourse. Where differences existed over colonial policy, they concerned means rather than ends. Allen differed from Afrikaner acquaintances in supporting the unification of British territories in South Africa into a single dominion, and even the extension of the franchise beyond the white minority. Otherwise, his outlook on imperial matters was predictably uncritical.

The frankly racist language employed in the letters appals modern sensitivities. African natives were 'niggers', and he was perfectly open about disliking the Indians he met on racial grounds, arguing that it would be better if they did not come to Oxford since the experience made them 'archseditionists' at home – though, as with Jews, this antipathy to Indians *en masse* did not prevent him from befriending individuals. But belief in race as a determinant of human behaviour was so pervasive that Allen's willingness to make sweeping generalizations on this basis was not at all unusual. Some were positive: the Danes were 'a fine race and the nearest and most friendly to the English of any'; the Swedes were 'like the Danes a fine race but slower, sleepier, and drunkener' (Letter 56); while Americans were 'an interesting race though very different from us' (Letter 55). On the other hand a brief glimpse of Armenians was enough for him to offer the opinion that 'they are an interesting, but I imagine, a pre-eminently worthless race' (Letter 95). For Germans, whom he got to know well, he made an interesting distinction: 'a loathsome race but a great nation' (Letter 57).

³² Hayton, *Conservative Revolutionary*, 37–38.

Allen's response to lengthy periods spent with Katharine in Berlin, and with Rex in Bavaria during the long vacation of 1910, was as complex as this statement suggests. Travelling in the country and attempting to learn the language was *de rigueur* for some undergraduates, especially those preparing for a diplomatic career, like Rex, or reading Greats.³³ Allen regarded German classical scholarship as so far ahead that it was necessary to read the latest work in the original. He found German much easier to learn than French, possibly because of his background in Latin and Greek, and called it 'the language of languages' (Letter 108). He also greatly enjoyed himself at concerts, plays, and operatic performances, was charmed by the architecture of medieval German towns and considered Munich the ideal European city in which to live, after Florence. Individual Germans he found perfectly congenial: he knew several at Oxford – a son of the chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, was in his year at Balliol³⁴ – and got on well with them. But at the same time he could not but be aware of the mounting tension between Germany and Britain, and was convinced that the German people, as well as the Kaiser's government, considered war not only inevitable, but imminent. Prussian militarism repelled him – he liked Bavarians much better – and at first oppressed him with fears of an impending armed conflict, though on his last visit in 1911 he showed a greater appreciation of the good qualities of ordinary Germans, and even some sympathy for Germany's imperial ambitions.

Once he had settled himself in Oxford, Allen's continental travels focused on Germany, France, and Italy, though he ventured further north with Katharine and Henry Kaspar, into Denmark and Sweden, and paid more than one visit to Vienna. Left to his own devices, he would probably have confined himself to northern and central Europe, but Rex, whose ambitions were focused on the Foreign Office, needed to develop his competence in Italian and French. So in the final year of Allen's Greats degree the brothers took their vacations first in Montpellier, and then in Paris, and they spent the following Christmas in Nice. As usual, Allen's parents were regaled with accounts of museums and art-galleries, together with an assessment of their contents, and a report-card of churches visited.

It would be churlish to doubt the sincerity of Allen's religious impulses, and to speculate whether the record of services attended was merely designed to please. The letters are frank in admitting that neither Katharine nor Rex were as conscientious as Allen

³³ Robert Brandt and Charles Lister, for example (*Brandt*, 63–73; *Lister*, 23–25).

³⁴ He was killed in action in 1915 (Jones, *Balliol*, 247).

himself. His own devotion to college chapel, even though he disliked the chaplain and the general atmosphere, was unusually assiduous among the undergraduate population. Alexander should have had nothing to concern himself about on that score. The cumulative effect of Allen's letters, however, may have prompted concerns about the type of Protestant Christianity to which he was drawn. Frequenting the church of the Cowley Fathers in Oxford would have been one indication. An interest in investigating continental manifestations of the same tradition would have been another. His increasing preference for a form of High Churchmanship was also visible in comments made about individual clergymen: praise for Anglo-Catholics; a more critical attitude towards evangelicals; and outright contempt for the extreme Protestants whose agitation intimidated government into forbidding a public procession in Westminster on the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress of 1908. He was also perhaps a little too obvious in his distaste for Nonconformity, as in his description of the Liberal politician Augustine Birrell, chief secretary for Ireland, as 'the tiresome bourgeois Nonconformist type which I don't find at all attractive' (Letter 129). Kitty and Katharine had already been moving away from their father's brand of Low Churchmanship towards sympathy for Anglo-Catholicism, and it should not have been hard for Alexander to detect that his eldest son was heading in the same direction.

Allen's political views were also shifting away from the rigid conservatism and unionism inherited from his father. He was following a well-worn path connecting Anglo-Catholicism with an intense social concern, and left-wing politics. There was also the powerful example of his Oxford friends, almost all of whom were liberal or socialist in their inclinations. On the Irish question in particular he may have been influenced by his uncle by marriage, Boyle Somerville, an Anglo-Irish naval officer who was a strong Home Ruler and later became an enthusiast for the Irish language.³⁵

To explain the departure from family tradition required caution and tact. For some time Allen insisted that he remained true to his father's principles, while admitting that it was increasingly difficult for him to identify with the British Conservative Party, and not only because the Conservatives' policies included tariff reform, to which Alexander himself was opposed. In an observation that echoed W.S. Gilbert,³⁶ Allen explained that English political life was

³⁵ *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn, 9 vols (Cambridge, 2009), VIII, 1074–1076.

³⁶ In Private Willis's song in Act II of *Iolanthe*: 'I often think it's comical | That nature always does contrive | That every boy and every gal | That's born into the world alive | Is either a little Liberal | Or else a little Conservative.'

completely polarized, especially during the parliamentary crisis ignited by the Lords' rejection of Lloyd George's budget. Everyone in Oxford was – unthinkingly – either a Liberal or a Conservative. This binary left Allen (and Rex) in a perplexing difficulty. Loyalty to upbringing and family connections still exerted a gravitational force, but Allen found himself increasingly averse to the Conservatives. 'I'm Unionist in everything except when they champion the useless capitalist (I don't mean all capital, merely the lazy and selfish portion of the big landholders) and the brewery interest.' (Letter 60.) Gradually a tendency towards trimming between the two parties was replaced by a clear commitment to the Liberal cause, signalled by a report on a family conversation at Boyce Allen's, in which Katharine, who was visiting, declared herself 'a good Liberal' and Allen and Rex, though unwilling to go as far, were still prepared to differentiate themselves from the Conservative majority in Uncle Boyce's sitting-room:

Let us be called Moderate Liberals. One cannot follow wholeheartedly a party who could try to introduce single-chamber government or make rash bargains with the Welsh and Irish Nationalists, but undoubtedly they are in the main right and conscientious men, while it seems to me impossible to remain attached to a party like the present Unionist one.³⁷

Worse was to follow for Alexander. After hawing over women's suffrage – being impressed by Millicent Fawcett's performance at the Union but still voting against her – Allen suddenly changed sides on that issue. At the end of a letter which explained his support for reform of the House of Lords as 'out of date, selfish, and out of touch with modern social movements', he stated that he was scheduled to open a debate at the Colonial Club on women's suffrage, speaking in favour.³⁸ Finally, in March 1911, he took the plunge over the most important political issue of all, reporting that the Union had debated Home Rule, and 'the motion was carried, Rex and I assisting'. Naturally, Alexander was deeply upset. Allen's comment that 'practically every historian up here [...] is a Home Ruler – and all the rising generation', did not help (Letter 129). Alexander did what he could, sending Allen a stiff letter about Home Rule, combined with a diatribe against cigarette-smoking, as a deplorable habit and particularly dangerous for Allen on account of his medical history.³⁹ It was all to no avail. From his vacation lodgings in Paris

³⁷ Letter 121.

³⁸ Letter 79.

³⁹ Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, 339–340.

Allen wrote an exceptionally long reply, composed late at night and in a state of some agitation, which explained in detail, first why he would not stop smoking, and second, why he had changed his mind over Home Rule. There was in this political commentary a whiff of Anglo-Catholic disdain for the Protestants of Ulster, who in his view were putting self-interest in the way of a political solution that would benefit Ireland, Britain, and the Empire. But as presented, his arguments were based on a careful assessment of risks and probabilities. The effect on Alexander was devastating. He tried once more to convince his son, and then gave up. On 21 June he 'wrote Allen my momentous letter asking not to speak again of Home Rule'.⁴⁰

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After repeatedly telling his parents that he stood no chance of a First in Greats, Allen achieved just that. Although, as a graduate already, he had been granted 'senior standing', which would have enabled him to take his degree in two years, he had opted to study for the full three, on the grounds that his course included a very great deal of material that was new to him. Now he had to decide what to do next. He elected to stay in Oxford, bolstered by a gift of £100 from his godfather, his father's old friend and fellow transplanted Irishman, the newspaper proprietor and politician Sir Winthrop Hackett, who had promised to take financial responsibility for Allen's education.⁴¹ The intention was to read for a second bachelor's degree, in Modern History, but during the year Allen received the offer of an appointment in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum. It was a chance he could not pass up. In the final year of his Greats degree he had written that working at the Museum would be his ideal occupation but he had been frustrated by the absence of a suitable opportunity. The Assyrian collections in particular, were, he thought, incomparable. The influential Balliol history tutor A.L. Smith, who had previously advised Allen to stay on for a further year, recommended that he accept the post of Assistant Keeper, unless he felt a vocation for teaching – as a schoolmaster, or a lecturer in some colonial university – which he did not. The decision proved a happy one: 'I rather like the Museum', Allen told his friend Roland Bryce,

⁴⁰ Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, 339–340.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 261, 342.

'fossilization is a painless and agreeable sensation'.⁴² His work, transcribing cuneiform texts from the Museum's collections, was halted by the outbreak of war and eventually completed and published by others when his own interests had moved elsewhere.⁴³

His siblings were not so fortunate. Rex chose to take his finals in his second year and was awarded a second. He was at a loss as to what to do, and was also being obstructed in his courtship of his cousin Primrose. Having failed in an application to the British Museum, he succumbed to the self-serving advice of Boyce Allen and took a post in business, at first in Manchester, where he seemed to enjoy himself, and then in India, a country he came to dislike. Both Allen's elder sisters acquired husbands. In 1911 Kitty married, in Australia, her cousin Pat Maxwell, a naval officer like his father. They had two children and she went on to enjoy modest success as a writer. Such good fortune eluded Katharine. In August 1909 she wed Henry Kaspar without telling her family. The marriage, although happy, was financially disastrous. Katharine gave up her own musical career to nurture her husband's, but unfortunately he was too 'nervy', and perhaps too enthusiastic for 'the new movement in music', to prosper as virtuoso or teacher. Early in 1912, almost destitute, having one daughter already and Katharine pregnant for the second time, the couple came to Houghton, where Katherine's health deteriorated. Allen visited her whenever he could, and sent bulletins to his parents which varied from the mildly hopeful to the ominous. The problem was a chronic disease of the lungs. Tragedy soon overtook the little family: their first child succumbed to meningitis, and although a second daughter was born and survived, Katharine herself died in August 1913, after which Henry took the child back to his parents in Washington DC.

The First World War wreaked havoc among Allen's Balliol contemporaries. The leading figures among the 'bloods' – Patrick Shaw Stewart, the Grenfell brothers, Charles Lister, and Edward Horner – all died in arms, leaving the legend of a lost 'golden generation'. A great many others, too, were among the dead: no fewer than eleven of the Balliol undergraduates mentioned in Allen's letters perished in battle or succumbed to wounds, while 'James' Clark and John Black, two members of the circle of twelve, spent time as prisoners of war. The dead ranged from the dashing rugby footballer Ronald Poulton to Edward Ashton, the son of a Lancashire

⁴² Quoted in Harold Nicolson, 'Allen Leeper', in *The Nineteenth Century*, October 1935, 476–477.

⁴³ *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets, &c., in the British Museum: Part XXXV* (London, 1920).

mill-owner, whom Allen had once dismissed as ‘a silly little Balliol idiot’ (Letter 40).

On the outbreak of war Allen had attempted to enlist, but was rejected on medical grounds. Instead, he found a place in the War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House, where he was reunited with two Balliol friends, Bernstein (now naturalized as Lewis Namier), and Arnold Toynbee, who had been a year ahead of them in college. All three moved in 1916 to the Intelligence Bureau of the Department of Information, where they were joined by Rex, who had obtained a commission in the Indian Territorial Force but had been invalided out.⁴⁴ In February 1918 the Intelligence Bureau was transferred, lock, stock, and barrel, to the Foreign Office, to form the Political Intelligence Department (PID). Each member of staff had his own field of interest: Namier looked after Poland; Toynbee the Middle East; and Rex assumed prime responsibility for Russia. Allen developed a particular interest in south-eastern Europe and the Balkans. Like his friends, he had fallen under the influence of their colleague R.W. Seton-Watson, a leading advocate for the independence of the Slavic nations of eastern Europe, whose books (presumably recommended by Namier) Allen had been anxious to read as early as 1911. During the war ‘Seton’ had founded the periodical *New Europe* to argue for the reconstruction of central and eastern Europe on the basis of nationality after the expected downfall of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. He continued as editor while working in the PID (contrary to official guidelines), and brought in colleagues, including the Leepers, to contribute articles under noms de plume (Allen chose ‘Belisarius’, after the Byzantine general). Having enthusiastically adopted the cause of Romanian nationalism, Allen was one of the founders of the Anglo-Roumanian society and in 1917 published a pamphlet entitled *The Justice of Rumania’s Cause*.⁴⁵

The end of the war did not mean the end of the PID, and both Allen and Rex stayed on. Allen was in attendance at the peace conference in Paris from 1918 until 1920, serving on the body which adjudicated Romanian and Yugoslav territorial claims. In many respects Paris must have seemed like a college reunion, given the number of Balliol men present in various capacities (including Roland Bryce, Hamish Paton, and another of Allen’s friends,

⁴⁴ *Oxf. DNB*. s.v. Leeper, Sir Reginald Wildig.

⁴⁵ Hugh Seton-Watson and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R.W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (1981); Alan Sharp, ‘Some relevant historians: The Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office, 1918–1920’, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 34 (1988–1989), 358–368.

Michael Sadler). Even the Siamese prince, Mom Chow Wan Waithayakon, appeared as secretary of his country's legation. In the excitement of such momentous events, Allen seems to have found his true vocation. He stayed on at the Foreign Office after the Treaty of Versailles, becoming assistant private secretary to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, in 1920. Having presumably forgotten the sharp comments in his undergraduate letters about Curzon's performance as chancellor of Oxford University, he and the Foreign Secretary got on very well. Allen and his wife Janet (he had married in 1921) spent the years from 1924 to 1928 in Vienna, where he was first secretary to the British legation. Returning to London he became head of the 'League of Nations and western' department. He fell ill in 1934, and after several unsuccessful operations died in 1935 of a ruptured gall-bladder. Rex also stayed on in the Foreign Office, enjoying a much longer and even more successful career. He is principally remembered as the architect of the British Council.

Shortly after Allen's death, his friend and Foreign Office colleague, Harold Nicolson, wrote an extended obituary in *The Nineteenth Century*, which referred to Allen's 'deep religious faith – essential, constant and absorbing', and his commitment to the Anglo-Catholic ideal.⁴⁶ Nicolson also left a pen-portrait of Allen as a member of the PID which, despite its flowery decoration, is worth quoting, since it explains the affection he inspired among his many friends:

His amazing modesty rendered palatable to the exhausted civil servant the superiority of his knowledge. The gay confidence of his charm, his unerring simplicity, disarmed all jealousy or resentment. The rapidity of his intellect and the soundness of his judgment compelled admiration. The utter outrightness of those level eyes affirmed confidence and enhanced hope [...] His faith in the righteousness of our ultimate purposes remained undimmed. He gave to the dark confusion of those days a sense of aim and justification.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Nicolson, 'Allen Leeper', 481.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 479.