ForeWord Reviews

Oxford: A Cultural and Literary Companion
David Horan
Interlink Books
978-1-56656-348-2
(September 1999)

During the first year of every new century, the ritual of the Mallard Hunt takes place in Oxford as a sort of homage to a duck found in an ancient drain in the fifteenth century. The point being, that what stands out most about Oxford is that it is old enough to have rituals that are performed only once a century. In a city that has history dating to the 700s, there is simply time for much to happen, and in 256 pages Moran covers a lot of it in such a way that Oxford never reads like a history text.

Edward Burne-Jones wrote "Oxford is a glorious place; godlike! at night I have walked around the college under the full moon, and thought it would be heaven to live and die here." Jane Austen wrote "I never was but once in Oxford in my life and I am sure I never wish to go there again." As with most great cities, people either love it or hate it. Horan, a writer living in Oxford, obviously loves the city or is at least very taken by its quixotic stories. Oxford is full of anecdotes and oddities. Moran explains, for instance, why Great Tom is rung 101 times every night at 9:05, tells us that if we want to visit St. Giles' Fair we need to mark our calendars for "the first Monday and Tuesday after the first Sunday after St. Giles' Day" and spares prospective visitors the embarrassment of mispronouncing Magdalen College (its Mawd-lin).

Horan describes both "gown" and "town" Oxford, not leaving out its factories and non-university life. He provides brief biographies on some of the many, many Oxford luminaries, quickly making it apparent that Oxford history is British history. Lest anyone think that Oxford is staid and living in its glorious past, Horan reminds readers that Oxford is dynamic and always able to incorporate its past with its future. An example is a twenty-five foot fiberglass shark that pokes through the slate roof of a suburban house, its head apparently in the attic.

Oxford and a separate book Buenos Aires are the first titles in a new series from Interlink called Cities of the Imagination, which attempts to explain what gives certain cities their mystique and imaginative appeal. Reading these guides is the next best thing to actually going there with them in hand.

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