
Chapter 1

UNDERGRADUATE

It began with Andrew Lang. From him came the first authentic thrill, the thrill experienced by those who, for better or for worse, derive their principal pleasures from books and bookish men.

Adventures among Books was published in the spring of 1905, just at the time when I had finally decided to range myself on the classical side and to toy no longer with the higher mathematics. In January I had got as far as being a candidate for a mathematical scholarship at Corpus, but one term's concentration on mathematical work had shown very clearly my failure to advance beyond the elementary stages. As my form-master truly said, what I was doing was not mathematics, but just 'algebraical substitution'.

Homer was not the least of the attractions of classical reading and of course we had to learn something about Homeric criticism. In *Adventures among Books* I came upon an essay entitled 'The Paradise of Poets':

At their feet I beheld, in a vast and gloomy hall, many an honest critic, many an erudite commentator, an army of reviewers. Some were condemned to roll logs up insuperable heights, whence they descended thundering to the plain. Others were set to impositions, and I particularly observed that the Homeric commentators were obliged to write out the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in their complete shape and were always driven by fiends to the task when they prayed for the bare charity of being permitted to leave out the 'interpolations'.

As editor of the *Brighton College Magazine*, I had to produce some kind of 'middle' article for the summer term issue and Lang's essay gave me an idea. This I embodied in a short piece to which I gave the title 'Heat and Homer'. The setting was different, but the theme was similar. Drawing a bow at a venture,

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors
 S. C. Roberts
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Undergraduate

I addressed a copy of the *Magazine* to Andrew Lang. I didn't dare to hope for a reply and none came. But towards the end of October I received something more than an acknowledgement:

Thanks for your interesting magazine. . . As to Homer, I do not know whether you possess my 'Homer and the Epic' which is certainly a whole hogger and I shall be pleased to send it if you do not.

The critics, except Monro, are neither sportsmen, nor capable of literature, nor familiar with other early national poetry, nor anthropologists, nor clearly consistent. It is as easy to prove by their discrepancies that there are several distinct Jebbs and Leafs as that there are several Homers.

For me it was tremendous. Here was Andrew Lang, not patronising my crude little schoolboy effort, but writing as one man of letters to another. And the next day he was writing again:

I have asked Messrs Longmans to send you the book on Homer. I gather that your sympathies are not with the disintegrators. Mine never were, since Jowett made me read Wolf, who clearly knew nothing about the early use of writing. I once lectured at Bradfield on Homer and the ground man said freely that he would rather hear my ideas on bowling. If you are going to Oxford, I have still two or three friends there, whose acquaintance I shall be happy to introduce you to, if you care for it.

In reply, I explained that I was destined for Cambridge, but I cannot have written convincingly:

I think Oxford [the next letter began] is the likelier place for you. Literariness goes a long way there. . . I should think my old college, Merton (of which I was a *socius*) is an easy place to get a scholarship at, and a beautiful old place to live in. If you take a shot at it, please let me know. My own college was Balliol and 'exhibitions' were to be got by agreeable journalistic effusions, without much philology. But perhaps now things are different. . .

When I wrote in December to tell him that I had been awarded an exhibition at Pembroke, I received a prompt message of congratulation—and advice:

I am much pleased to hear of your success, and hope it is the first wicket down of a lot. The antique beauties of Merton are its attraction.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors
 S. C. Roberts
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Undergraduate

I hope Pembroke has not been rebuilt by Waterhouse... I have only one word of advice, but that is of gold. Keep all your receipts of tradesmen's bills.

I never met Andrew Lang, but I corresponded with him, at intervals, up to the time of his death in 1912. I always enjoyed his casual commentary on cricket or dons or archaeology or literature in general. When, in my first year, I sent him some trivial verses he wrote: 'Why are all the poets Cambridge men except Shelley and me?' and added in a postscript: 'Cambridge Third Eleven could beat Oxford.'*

The reason for my choice of Pembroke was simple enough. Having no Cambridge connections, I consulted my house-master (a Clare man). He suggested Pembroke as my first choice and I took his advice. Had I known anything about the reputations of Cambridge colleges at that time, I might have demurred. For, to the world outside, Pembroke was primarily famous for its supremacy in games. I was keen enough on games, especially on cricket, but had no talent for playing them and at school I was frequently depressed by my incompetence. At Pembroke any such feeling vanished overnight.

Years later, someone questioned me about my time at Pembroke as an undergraduate. As I was no good at games, I must, he thought, have been very miserable. I assured him that his inference was ridiculous and his sympathy misplaced. No one thought the worse of me because I did not qualify for the Hawks Club. Certainly there were many distinguished athletes in the college and to them came a greater measure of publicity than to the scholars. The Pass Degree was then a substantial fact of academic life and of the eighty-odd freshmen of my year just under half were Pass men. Of the forty-five Honours men, fourteen gained first classes in their triposes.

For myself, I was a very callow and a very happy freshman. I studied *The Fresher's Don't* (a small brochure which explained

* Cambridge won in 1907, but not so easily as Lang expected. Oxford, after leading by 33 runs on the first innings, were beaten by 5 wickets.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors
S. C. Roberts
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Undergraduate

what was and what was not ‘done’ in the University) and I bought my ‘Fresher’s Delights’ (college and university arms) to hang over the mantelpiece. I had a cosy set of attic rooms in Old Court over the front gate of the College. There was no gas or electric light, but an oil lamp, when properly trimmed, served me very well. There were no bathrooms, but under my bed was a saucer bath which my bedmaker obligingly filled with warm water every morning. I shared to the full Samuel Butler’s feeling: ‘How can any boy fail to feel an ecstasy of pleasure on first finding himself in rooms which he knows for the next few years are to be his castle?’ In short, I was quite unashamedly conventional. I knew little about Cambridge and most of what I knew came from books. One that I had recently read was A. C. Benson’s *From a College Window* and one paragraph in it had caught my attention:

I wish that... throngs of young men would feel impelled to come in and talk to me easily and simply... In vain do I purchase choice brands of cigars and cigarettes and load my side-table with the best Scotch whisky. Not even with that solace will the vagrant undergraduate consent to be douched under the stream of my suggestive conversation.

For a moment I wondered whether to submit to the douche myself, but saner counsels prevailed and, instead, I attended a course of four open lectures on ‘The Development of English Prose’ which Benson gave at Magdalene in my first term. It was a series of thumb-nail sketches of prose-writers from Wyclif to the nineteenth century. From my notes I see that in one of his rare asides Benson ventured the remark that ‘the recently inaugurated British Academy studies everything but literature’. But what really pleased me was the *mise en scène*—the candle-lit hall; the massive figure of the lecturer in his high-backed chair; the soft, persuasive, slightly breathless pronouncements on the great figures of English literature. It all accorded with my romantic notions of college life and college dignitaries.

The same was true of the Master of my own college, Arthur

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors

S. C. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Undergraduate*

James Mason. He was a canon of Canterbury and seemed to me to look exactly as a Master ought to look. He was not tall, but he had immense dignity. His courtesy was punctilious and he always raised his hat when you passed him walking through one of the college courts. He gave breakfast parties to undergraduates and the fact that their duration (8.10 to 8.45) was clearly stated on the card of invitation sprang from his belief that every young man should be at work by 9 o'clock. He had married late and his wife (granddaughter of Edward Blore, architect of the Pitt Press) charmed us all. In his earlier days Mason had won a great reputation as scholar and preacher. He had a strong, resonant voice and preserved the short 'a' with tremendous effect. In one of his earliest sermons in chapel he had told his hearers that he desired to be their 'pāstor' rather than their 'mäster' and I well remember that at the end of one Easter Term he adumbrated his notion of the ideal Pembroke man: 'I would not have you, my sons, be mere scholastic pedants, nor yet languid diletanti, nor even burly, but senseless athletes.'

The teaching of classics was almost entirely on a college, or intercollegiate, basis. As freshmen we went to Henry Jackson's introductory course on Greek philosophy and occasionally sat under H. J. Edwards at Peterhouse or W. H. S. Jones at St Catharine's. But it was on our own three classical dons that we relied.

W. S. Hadley, who was Tutor of the college, was a good lecturer. As he went through a play of Euripides, he would interpret certain passages with translations which were as elegant as they were faithful. He entertained parties of undergraduates at most agreeable dinners in his house on the Barton Road and always gave the impression of being at leisure. In fact, he was an extremely hard worker.

J. C. Lawson was a puzzling character. His conversation was completely matter-of-fact and did not tempt one to intimacy. There was little sparkle in his lectures until an opportunity came for him to relate the religious beliefs of ancient Greece to those of

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors
S. C. Roberts
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Undergraduate

the Greek islands of today. Such an occasion arose in my first term when he lectured on the *Eumenides*, the play chosen for performance in that year. Lawson lived for some years in the notoriously haunted Abbey House off the Newmarket Road and could occasionally be induced to talk about it. He would tell you about the ghostly nun who tramped along the passage and through his bedroom as if he were telling you about the man who came to inspect the gas-meter.

Leonard Whibley was my tutor as well as my teacher. At first I was rather afraid of him. He pounced upon my mistakes in syntax and ruthlessly deleted the purple patches in my essays. But, as will appear later, I owe more to him than I can properly express.

To an ingenuous freshman, the senior college servants are, or used to be, at least as impressive as the dons. In my rooms over the front gate I was very near to Stoakley, the head porter, and in my first year was much in awe of him. With his grey side-whiskers and his steely look, he seemed a more formidable arbiter of behaviour than any tutor. He could remember the college as a much smaller society and I suspect that he did not wholly approve of its expansion; but he was, of course, intensely loyal to Pembroke and correspondingly scornful of the habits of neighbouring foundations. He died before I had reached the stage of easy gossip with him, but a story which I heard many years later is a good illustration of his Olympian outlook. Comber, a Fellow of the college of whom I shall have more to say, was chatting to Stoakley on the day following a Foundress' Feast.

'Well,' he said, 'it was nice to see some old friends last night.'

'Yes,' said Stoakley, 'and do you know, sir, that as Mr — [naming an impecunious country vicar] was leaving, he put half-a-crown into my hand. Well, you know, sir, half-a-crown to him is like a sovereign to you or me.'

But there was nothing remote or formidable about the manager of the kitchen and buttery—Arthur Chapman. 'Chappie', as he was known to many generations of Pembroke men, was the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors

S. C. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Undergraduate*

supreme extravert. His father had been college baker and the college was the centre of his life. He had a twinkling eye and a rich ‘Cambridge-Cockney’ accent. From his room in the buttery, he controlled his staff and directed the feeding of the college. At any time he might be interrupted by an old member of the college with whom, over a glass of sherry or a tankard of beer, he would recall incidents and escapades of years ago. In the evening he would don his frock-coat and supervise the service of dinner in hall, ready always to explain college customs to freshmen or to exchange jokes with the seniors. Nothing pleased him better than to help an undergraduate who was planning a little dinner-party:

‘Got ladies comin’? Well, I should start with a white soup.’

‘What sort of soup?’

‘Why not have a crème d’orge à la Frankfort?’

After some explanation of the soup’s constituents, one passed on to later courses—to ‘noisette Monica’, also explained in detail, and to a choice of savouries, on one of which, I remember, ‘you split your olive and have your pimento showin’’. It was all very graphic and instructive.

But to return to academic instruction, the old Classical Tripos, Part I, was a degree course and we had no university examination to face until the end of our third year. In the years between we had intercollegiate examinations (‘Mays’) which had no official significance in the university, but could lead to variations in scholarship awards. There was one institution in Pembroke which made one feel as if one were back at school: every Saturday morning, from 8.30 to 10.0, all classical men were required to do a paper of unseen translation in the Old Library. For many it was followed, rather than preceded, by breakfast.

There were four classical freshmen of my year with whom I gradually became intimate: E. W. Mead, who, after some years spent in the Chinese Consular Service, returned to a Readership in the University of Manchester and died prematurely in 1941; F. A. Wallis (brother of my first wife), who also served as a consul

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors

S. C. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Undergraduate*

in China; P. R. (afterwards Sir Patrick) Laird, who became Secretary of Agriculture for Scotland; and B. C. Roberts, afterwards Bishop of Singapore and general secretary of the S.P.G., who died suddenly in 1957. 'B. C.' was not related to me, but it was natural that each of us should be known by his initials. Until recently, indeed, there were many old friends in Cambridge who were quite ignorant of my Christian names.

Another good friend of my own year at Pembroke was Geoffrey Keynes, son of Dr J. N. Keynes (Registrary of the University) and younger brother of Maynard. One of the earliest Sunday lunches that I remember was at 6 Harvey Road, a house which I was destined to know for nearly fifty years. Unlike me, Geoffrey naturally had a wide knowledge of Cambridge and was in close touch with the intelligentsia of Trinity and King's. I suppose that, if I had known more, I should have joined some university societies—the Union and, perhaps, the A.D.C. As it was, the college sufficed for me, both in work and play. I had barely risen to 2nd XI standards at school, so when the captain of the boat club came up to my rooms and suggested, with some firmness, that I should row, I obediently agreed. Being at that time a light weight, I was made a cox and had a lucky first year, steering the third boat to four bumps in the Lents and the second boat to two bumps in the Mays—not a particularly notable record, but it led to a surprising sequel many years later.

On the first Saturday of the Michaelmas Term all freshmen were invited to attend a meeting of the college debating society (P.C.D.S.). The President, wearing evening dress with a Pembroke ribbon across his shirt-front, was preceded by a mace-bearer, known as the Additional Member, and followed by the other officers of the society. After the reading of the minutes, a senior member called the attention of the President to the presence of strangers in the house. The President thanked him and instructed the Additional Member to eject the said strangers. The Additional Member having encountered some opposition, the President called upon the whole house to assist. After a few

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors

S. C. Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Undergraduate*

minutes of turbulence the last freshman was expelled and the door slammed. Thereupon, having recovered his breath, some old hand proposed that the gentlemen of the first year be elected *en bloc* to the society; the freshmen were recalled by the Additional Member and the senior scholar returned thanks. The senior bachelor in college was J. K. Mozley. He was an ex-President of the Union as well as of the P.C.D.S. and I thought he was the finest speaker I had ever heard. A passionate Liberal, he had a natural gift of rhetoric, but it was not empty rhetoric; the thread of the argument was never broken.

A smaller discussion society in Pembroke was 'The Martlets', to which I was elected in my second term. At the end of the term Hilaire Belloc came to address the 'distinguished stranger's' meeting. I listened intently to his paper entitled 'The Writing of History' or something of the kind; but what I remember most vividly was the generous measure of beer that was brought in for his refreshment.

But not all our evenings were spent in debates and discussions. Early novels about Cambridge life frequently refer to billiard saloons in Chesterton as one of the more sinister influences to which undergraduates were exposed. But we did not have to go so far as Chesterton. In Mill Lane, on part of the site of the present lecture-rooms, John Porter kept two billiard-tables. He was a charming character—very polite, but very firm in his maintenance of good behaviour and decent language. He charged by the hour, but left the time-keeping to his wife. 'Mrs Porter,' he would call out at the end of the game, 'how long have the gentlemen been?' John was a true fenlander. Aeroplanes at that time were, of course, a novelty. 'Ever been up in an aeroplane, John?' asked B. C. Roberts one evening. 'Oh, no, sir. As a matter of fact, if I go up to the top of Madingley Hill, I feel a bit queer, sir.' Mill Lane was temptingly near and we went as much for the fun of gossiping with John as for the pleasure of a hundred up.

At the end of my first year B. C. and I were urged to come up for the Long Vacation and were advised to read with W. T.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13641-9 - Adventures with Authors
S. C. Roberts
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Undergraduate

Lendrum (afterwards Vesey) of Caius. Lendrum was an Irishman, a fine scholar and a notable horseman who hunted with the Cottesmore. His dapper figure was in marked contrast to that of the normal don and he received us with old-fashioned formality. 'What do you wish to read, gentlemen?' he asked. Eventually we decided upon a book of Thucydides, but I think it was his choice rather than ours.

Lendrum's scholarship was exacting and the notes he dictated were detailed and precise. 'Ah, well, take a little note upon it. The Athenians (A, T, H, full stop)... Stop a minute, Mr B. Roberts. Mr S. Roberts hasn't got it down, he hasn't got it down.' Altogether, Mr S. Roberts, whose interests were literary rather than syntactical, did not appear to advantage under Lendrum's instruction.

Cambridge in August can be very sultry and I did not enjoy it, but the one pleasant feature of coming up for the Long was that one got to know some of the senior men in college—Geoffrey Clayton, for instance, who was destined to be archbishop of Cape Town and A. A. Seaton, later a Fellow of the college, who was killed in France in 1915.

In the following year Edgar Mead, 'Pug' Laird, B. C. and I decided to organise our own vacation reading. We found a lonely farm-house south of Bude and contrived to do a good deal of work. One of our few distractions was a meet of the local otter-hounds. We did not see an otter, but every time we emerged from the streams on to the main road, the local brewer, with whom we had made friends, was there with a barrel of beer in his pony-cart. It was a day of blazing sunshine and I don't think I have ever drunk so much beer in a single day.

From my second term onwards I was a fairly regular contributor to *The Granta* (then a kind of undergraduate *Punch*) and a few of my light verses were embalmed in F. A. Rice's *The Book of the Granta* (1924). My first editor was C. E. Raven, whom I afterwards knew well, but I do not think we met as undergraduates. He was succeeded by Raglan Somerset ('the heavy villain