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Rhodekill: She tried to put Oxford behind her...to no avail

Carellin Brooks

I first heard about the Rhodes Scholarship when a woman in one of my undergraduate classes in Canada was introduced to us all as having won one. She smiled modestly; she was a quiet-looking person overall, devoid of makeup and the opposite of flashy. I am embarrassed to admit I looked her over and thought, “Well, if she can do it, so can I.”

I was a brash young thing in those days, all attitude and platinum hair cut to an inch. I had grown up in the foster-care system and was a pet of the agency back in my hometown which bankrolled my studies. The director of the agency took a personal interest in my application and woke me at seven one morning with a phone call.

“Fencing.”

“Wha...?”

“Fencing. I’ve been thinking it over. You need a sport.” Aside from aerobics in high school, my athletic experience consisted of breaking my glasses on fly balls, being chosen last for elementary-school teams and, in confirmation of the wisdom of this, scoring goals for the opposing team. “Fencing’s really esoteric,” he continued, “so it won’t stick out that you’re not very athletic.” It was a good idea but in the end my athletic credentials consisted of my hour-long daily walk to school.

My middle-class girlfriend and I were big lesbians on campus at our home university, McGill in Montreal, one of the closest things Canada has to a venerable Oxbridge college. Truth be told, I didn’t know what to do with myself on graduation. Applying for the Rhodes seemed like a way to postpone the inevitable, and a long shot. I hadn’t even figured out whether I wanted to go to

graduate school, but I suspected not. Anyway, despite my bravado, it seemed like a moot point, since I figured I wouldn't get the scholarship anyway.

McGill operated a prescreening process and once they'd recommended me I was taken out to lunch at the faculty club by a law professor on the university's committee. Despite my feminism, I had nothing against the privilege implied by either the club or this gentleman; I found them both, in fact, rather thrilling. The professor suggested, just between us, that I drop one of the extracurricular activities from the list the scholarship committee would receive. To be specific, why didn't I ignore the fact that I'd been a co-host on a university radio show called, memorably, *Dykes on Mikes*?

There was nothing homophobic in the way the professor said this; he carried it off with great *savoir-faire*. I was thankful in my turn that someone had directly made the proposal to me, because I could as directly reject it. I pointed out that the scholarship was partially based on one's community involvement, and that neglecting to include such a stint would impoverish my list. This was the practical reason; the real one, which I knew enough not to mention, was more of an argument. This was 1993. Homophobia was dead, wasn't it?

The night the chair of the committee called to tell me I had won, I thanked him profusely for not disqualifying me based on sexual orientation. There was a stiff silence. "It had nothing to do with that," he said, finally. I later found out I'd passed muster by a single vote.

Then McGill's publicity department forwarded the press release announcing my win. Curious thing, though: my time at the babysitting co-op and the McGill Women's Union was described, but *Dykes on Mikes* had vanished. The revised press release brought a torrent of publicity. I was on the cover of major dailies across Canada with my pixie cut and *de rigueur* black leather biker jacket. The National Film Board gave me a camera so I could record a video diary. Heady stuff.

The weekend I arrived in Oxford, a handwritten note on my door directed me to a rendezvous point for a surreal, lengthy ride in a subcompact car with strangers. We zipped in silence along unfamiliar country lanes, winding up finally at a table where I was welcomed by the previous year's lesbian Rhodes Scholar. There were plenty of us, it turned out, at least compared to the

almost complete absence of gay men (now there's a study just begging to be undertaken). That year I threw myself into Oxford's minute gay scene, namely one Saturday-night disco in the town hall, thankful that, unlike my straight peers, I was perforce seeing plenty of town as well as gown. I turned down a plea to be on the ice hockey team – apparently, as a Canadian, I prequalified. I did attend the Queer Caucus, socialize with the American Scholars and show up for my memorably inept first and last game of college rugby. I acquired a “Women's Studies – Oxford's Cheapest Faculty” pin. (There wasn't one). And I learned that a university that has existed since the 1300s isn't likely to be changed, or even dented, by one upstart colonial. I hadn't, fortunately, had any illusions about this, unlike the National Film Board. It wasn't homophobia or sexism; instead, it was a superbly honed class consciousness best exemplified by Oxford's Favourite Insult. When I complained about some administrative horror, I'd be told,

“I'm sure they do things differently in America.”

“I'm not American!”

“Oh.” *Same difference.*

My studies weren't going very well, either. My idea for a D.Phil. on the phallic woman was rejected by the English Department three times running. After the second failure, I sought explanation from my supervisor, who claimed to have already told me that my work wasn't academically up to snuff. I forbore to point out that this conversation must have happened in my absence. See? I was learning something.

The Rhodes Trust didn't renew my funding for an optional third year, since, by all accounts but my own, I was no scholar. I went off to London, found a job working under the table in a gay leather bar in Shoreditch (yes, really), and finished my dissertation to my own satisfaction, if nobody else's. When I arrived back in Canada, where my friends enjoyed introducing me as a Rhodes Scholar, I encountered a filmmaker who looked me up and down before pronouncing sentence. “Oh, my brother got one of those,” she said. “It ruined his life.”

The curse rang in my ears as I applied for jobs. Just as the last of my cash ran out, I landed a position on the night shift at a chat line. At my next cattle call, for market research work, the woman next to me was bitter because, as she explained, she had a master's degree in urban planning and had sunk to this. I said nothing.

Oxford, from these colonial shores, was a bad dream. I'd think occasionally of taking up the D.Phil. once more – Sir Anthony Kenny had told me I could reapply for my third year's funding if I ever did – only to be woken by nightmares in which I wandered around St Giles without a place to lay my head. Waking up, I'd resolve only to put the idea of an Oxford degree to rest.

Like the undead, though, it was always rising anew. I found another supervisor, switched departments, and revised the D.Phil. yet again. Had I paid all my fees, he wanted to know. Of course, I said. Then, on the brink of submitting, my college weighed in: what did I plan to do about my third year's tuition, the bill for which was approximately \$22,000 CND? It seems they'd refunded it to the Trust when I hadn't finished out the year.

I applied to the Rhodes Trust. In my letters I depicted myself as shivering in a garret, writing by the light of a single candle. The only reason my baby wasn't starving (did I mention that I was a brave, downtrodden single mother?) was that I was still breastfeeding. Um, could I have some cash?

They turned me down. Not once, not twice, but every time I wrote and through a succession of Wardens. So did funding agencies here in Canada, pointing out that by my own admission my work was basically done. (If only!) In the end I scraped up the cash myself, cursing all the while, sent it in, and last week, a decade and a half later, I submitted the darn thing yet again. I've written books, including one based on the original D.Phil., taught courses, and otherwise, as they say, moved beyond; but Oxford remains, the mountain.

Having a Rhodes Scholarship certainly wasn't all bad. The beautiful William Morris tapestry in Rhodes House, the guest quarters for Scholars' relatives where my grandmother was able to stay before she died, and the pleasure of coming back to Oxford as an alumnae, showing my then-fiancée around the college quads and letting my toddler gum digestive biscuits in the Bodleian

forecourt, were all pleasures I wouldn't have experienced otherwise. The generous leaves allowed me to spend Christmas in Paris, which turned out to be a bad idea, and a summer teaching English in Japan, among other travels. And the Oxford Tube, a bus service that ran between London and its namesake every hour on the hour all night long? I confess I got to know it extremely well.

Ah, but then there was the awfulness of Oxford food, to take just one example – the way a jacket potato was considered edible, what disturbing toppings they put on it, the exorbitant amounts you were charged for this horror, and finally why, without a hope of finding anything else to eat at 3 am, you suffered the final indignity of being grateful to choke it down. I was introduced to salad cream in the course of my first meal at the King's Head, and I don't think I've recovered yet. Like the lady in the joke who complains that the food is terrible and the portions are too small, I consistently found myself decrying what I was given while wanting for more, a paradox which could no doubt describe my time at Oxford overall.

I have mixed feelings, as you might guess, about having received a Scholarship. The intermingling of rank privilege and basic deprivations endemic to life in Oxford, while a mirror of larger conditions in Britain, reduced me to a childish rage. As when I was a child, at the mercy of adults' whims, I felt entirely powerless, but at the same time I knew my stipend, enormous by British standards, and the opportunity to be in this age-hallowed setting were benefits beyond measure. This many years later, I still feel the same curdled resentment and gratitude I did then. I suspect these feelings will remain with me for a lifetime.

It would make sense for me to have turned my back on the Rhodes Scholarship and everything it represents, but I'm nothing if not inconsistent.

In fact, a few years ago I joined the local Oxford and Cambridge Society, whose membership of dinner-jacketed older gentlemen with polished accents affords me the vague, quaint sense of comfort Oxford never did. Three years ago, at the Society's annual dinner, a man at the end of my table failed to notice I was with a date, tracked me down, and convinced me to go out with him. We're still together, now with a baby and a series of world travels between us. The best part? He hated Cambridge just as much as I did Oxford.