

Women in Literature: The *Oxford Round Table*: Spring Session 2010

Greetings from Wadham College in Oxford University! A few months ago I received a letter from the *Oxford Round Table*, inviting me to present a paper at their spring conference on *Women in Literature* to be held at Oxford University from March 14 – March 19, 2010. Fortunately, these dates coincided with spring break at Kean University and William Paterson University and so I was able to attend without missing any classes.

Oxford University is comprised of 38 colleges, including All Souls College, Christ Church, Exeter College, Corpus Christi College, Magdalen College, Pembroke, and Wadham College, which is where I stayed for five days and where the spring session of the *Oxford Round Table* was held this year.



Oxford University (Wadham College): Site of the *Oxford Round Table*, March 14 – 19, 2010

Each participant received a map of the university, a copy of the program and a history of the *Oxford Round Table*, condensed in the paragraphs below.

Oxford Round Table was founded in 1989 and held its first meeting at St. Peter's College (one of the Colleges of Oxford University) in New Inn Hall Street, Oxford, to consider public policy issues bearing on education in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other selected countries. Participants in the foundational meeting included the Master of St. Peter's, the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford, ministers of education from twenty countries, and several legislators from the United States.

Pursuant to the success of that Round Table, additional meetings were deemed desirable and more were held thereafter. Participation was later broadened to include university

presidents and subsequently further expanded to involve scholars from many academic disciplines. The *Oxford Round Table* is an independent, not-for-profit organization that conducts educational forums and seminars under agreements with certain of the Oxford Colleges and has a special relationship with Harris Manchester College.

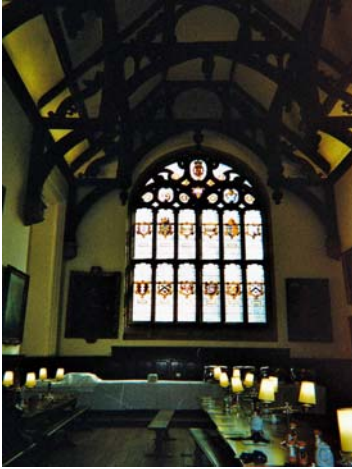
The *Oxford Round Table* is not a degree-granting institution and does not have a formal academic connection with the University of Oxford. Its main purpose is to provide an interdisciplinary forum for the discussion of contemporary issues that affect the public good in all its various forms and ramifications. The public good is expansively interpreted by the *Oxford Round Table* to include all matters that enrich the human experience and enhance the human condition.

Past themes of meetings have included considerations of human rights, social welfare, economics, religion, ethics, morals, law, medicine and the liberal arts and sciences. Each session is designed around a format that enables participants to present papers and to engage in discussions regarding those papers in both formal colloquy and informal dialogue.

Invitees to Round Tables are determined based on several criteria, among which are nominations by earlier attendees, courses that invitees teach, their presentations and writings, and their professional involvement in a relevant area of interest. An attempt is also made to diversify as to the type of institution, public or private, and to involve institutions representing different levels of education, i.e., schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, graduate and research universities.

Over the years, Round Tables have been located at a number of Oxford's colleges including St. Peter's College, St. Anne's College, St. Antony's College, Lady Margaret Hall, Harris Manchester College, Pembroke College, Lincoln College and Somerville College. The Round Table has a particularly close working relationship with Harris Manchester College where it maintains an office.

The spring session of the *Oxford Round Table* (held at Wadham College, Oxford), consisted of forty professors presenting papers on the theme of *Women in Literature*, ranging from Desdemona in *Othello*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; Asian American Women Writers; the elements of existentialism in Emily Dickinson's poetry; and the creative soul of Emily Brontë, to name just a few. My own paper focused on the role of women and art in *Aurora Leigh* (a novel in verse form by Elizabeth Barrett Browning), and *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James.



Dining Hall, Wadham College, one of 38 colleges at Oxford University



Corpus Christi College, Front Quad: 1517 Column with pelican. The pelican comes from Bishop Richard Fox's coat of arms; it is a symbol of the body of Christ and gives the college its name.

During my experience at the *Oxford Round Table*, I made some new and wonderful friendships, including Professor Janet Crosier of Springfield, Massachusetts, Dr. William Brugger of Brigham Young University in Idaho, Dr. Debra Ryals (a J.R.R. Tolkien scholar); and a young woman from China, Dr. Lingyan Yang of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, whose specialization is Asian American Women's Studies and with whom I formed an instant and "kindred" bond of the spirit.



Sister Margaret McCann with Professor Janet Crosier, Victorian Scholar, at the Oxford Round Table, March 14-19, 2010



Wadham College at Oxford University: Students playing a game of croquet on March 15, 2010 that lasted all afternoon

In retrospect, I was greatly edified and enriched by my experience at the *Oxford Round Table* and by the beauty and splendor of Oxford University itself, including a two-hour visit to the oldest and most famous bookshop in England: *Blackwells* Publishing in Broad Street and to the *Bodleian Library* in Radcliffe Square, the world's largest academic library featuring six million books and one million maps.



**Bodleian Library – Oxford University – 1598 –
in Radcliffe Square: World’s largest academic
library with 6 million books and 1 million maps**

In addition, I happened upon a famous pub called *The Eagle and Child*, located at 49 St. Giles in Oxford, where a group of Oxford writers known as “The Inklings” often met in the 1940s and 50s to discuss literature, religion, and life in general. The first record of the pub’s name dates back to 1684 and census records from 1830 show it to be used as a beerhouse to the present day. Locals insist that this is where C.S. Lewis, a fellow of Magdalen College and J. R.R. Tolkien, Professor of Anglo-Saxon literature, used to meet every Tuesday and where Tolkien converted C.S. Lewis from atheism to Christianity.



***The Eagle and Child*, (a.k.a. *The Bird and the Baby*)
where C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and The Inklings
used to meet in the 1940s and 50s to discuss literature**

While in London, I especially enjoyed taking what's called *The Original Tour*, one of London's most popular sightseeing adventures. This tour conducted me to the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and the spectacular St. Paul's Cathedral, where John Donne delivered many of his sermons and where he is buried, alongside of Sir Philip Sidney.



St. Paul's Cathedral, central London, where John Donne and Sir Philip Sidney are buried



Big Ben, a famous chiming clock located at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London

In addition, I embarked on a riverboat cruise of the Thames at which point I "took in" Buckingham Palace, Shakespeare's Globe Theater, the Tower Bridge, Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, and the *London Eye*, which is the world's largest observation wheel.



Traitors' Gate, Tower of London, landing Place for prisoners who had been tried at Westminster, including Sir Thomas More, Anne Boleyn, Cromwell and Lady Jane Grey



Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Elizabeth I, who entered Traitors' Gate on March 17, 1554 and stood trial for treason at Westminster. Queen Elizabeth I spent two months here. This photo is a present-day re-enactment.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Sister Maureen Shaughnessy and the Council for their endorsement of this academic and cultural whirlwind, as well as Sister Mary Ellen Gleason and all of the sisters on the Education Board for their generous support of this beautiful experience. -- Respectfully submitted by Sister Margaret ("Meg") McCann