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CITY OF MISTS AND FRUITFUL MELLOWNESS

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The dissident students from Oxford, who in the year 1209 settled in Cambridge, are said to have been on their way to the cathedral town of Ely. But they stayed the night in Cambridge, fell under its spell, and never left. A century earlier wool merchants from Yorkshire, travelling to the big fair in Norwich, got caught in a rain storm at the bridge across the Cam, unpacked their merchandise to let it dry, sold the lot, and thereafter made Cambridge's market their journey's end.

Cambridge has that effect on people. It is a town which few people willingly leave. In fact some try it only once and then thankfully abandon the attempt. In the 1950's Mr Kitson-Clark, a noted historian and life-fellow of Trinity, unwisely risked quitting his college rooms to go on a walking tour in France. Before departure he sought the advice of his bed-maker (his college servant) as to where to keep his banknotes for the journey. She advised him to put them in his shoes. A few weeks later he had to be bailed out and sent home by the British consul in Bordeaux - an episode which gave rise to the term "to Kitsonize", "to reduce to pulp".

It is true that not everyone who comes to Cambridge stays indefinitely. Yet even those who, having spent a while here, shift elsewhere are likely to take some part of it along with them. And, if they can do no better, they will take the name: thus creating - as Rupert Brooke so nearly said - some corner of a foreign field that is forever Cambridge. There are eighteen states in America with towns of this name (as the US mail service has cause to rue).

What is it about the place that creates this extraordinary affection? Not the terrain. Though my great-grandmother, F. A. Keynes, begins her book on Cambridge with the claim that, like Rome, it was built on seven hills, the truth is that six of these hills are less than ten feet high, and the seventh a mere mound. Not the weather. Though the sun shines in Cambridge as much as anywhere in England, the river and marshes contribute an air of dampness, and malaria was prevalent in recent history. Not the local cooking. Unless you're unusually lucky, you'll find the food in Cambridge colleges and restaurants as flat as the landscape, and as heavy as the local clay.

No, it must have something to do with the city's personality. Cambridge is humane: good tempered, generous, open to innovation, protective of tradition, ready to celebrate any human-sized achievement - be it as large as the universe which was mapped here or as small as the atom which was split. They are qualities Cambridge, perhaps uniquely, can afford. The

nursery of Newton, Marvell, Darwin, Turing, Milton, Rutherford, not to mention Prince Charles, Jonathan Miller and Germaine Greer, has no need to look to its laurels. A University that can give an honorary doctorate to Derrida, can abjure Kitsonization - even of what passes for intellectual currency in France.

If you come by car to Cambridge, take the back road over the hill from Wimpole. The stately Wimpole Hall, five miles from the city, is worth returning to. It has the biggest bathtub in England, a fine Adam Library and a wonderful mock-Gothic folly. The house is now open to visitors, though my memory as a boy is of being chased away by its owner, Rudyard Kipling's daughter, who spent her days patrolling her estates, waving her stick at all comers - boys, foxes, crows - and crying "Be off, you blighters!"

The hill above Wimpole is a real hill, perhaps 500 ft high, and the lie of the land is such that, to the East, there is no higher ground until the Ural mountains. As you look down from its crest towards Cambridge, the fens are laid like a tablecloth before you, with the city showing itself, coyly at first, half swathed in mist. It lies, as if on its back, face to the sky. Chagall's "Poet Asleep". But its eyes are open, its ears are pricked, its wheels are turning.

At the outskirts you will see the tower of the University Library, built by the architect of the Battersea power station, and the most subtly energizing place I know. Its Kafkaesque corridors and gloomy book-stacks might have confirmed William Blake's grimmest speculations of what Cambridge men were up to. But this is no dark satanic mill, but rather a light angelic one, broadcasting gigawatts of Cambridge's best product - words.

Take yourself on foot along the Backs, beside the river. King's College Chapel is best seen first at this safe distance, across the lawn. Too sudden an exposure to its inner tracery may blow your mind. But take it slowly, and you'll still have the strength (though perhaps not now the will) to pull away.

There are College Gardens along the West side of the river. The most picturesque (but you will need to find a member of Trinity to host you), is the Fellows' Garden of Trinity. Here, in a less-hurried age Richard Jebb, Professor of Greek, built a summer-house in which to propose to his American belle, Cara Reynolds. Later, her Philadelphia-born niece, wrote home from Cambridge: "I am at last at the Utopia of all my fondest dreams." She married one of Darwin's sons, and stayed.

Enter the Great Court of Trinity. Beside the main gate are Newton's rooms. There is the window, where in 1665 Newton conducted his famous "Experiment with Colours", using the prisms he had bought at the town fair. But not all the quarters of the court have been given to such serious uses. In one of the corner towers, Byron kept a tame bear, which he intended, he said, to enter for the fellowship examination.

Across the road in Whewell's court the poet Housman had rooms on a staircase above Wittgenstein. My father, as a student, lodged on the floor between. Housman would use my

father to send regular messages to Wittgenstein, complaining that he could not write while his senses were assailed by the odour of boiling german sausage coming from below. In this battle between verse and wurst, the philosopher, who discounted anyone's ability to speak coherently about private sensations, won.

Visit, because you ought to, the oldest church in Cambridge, the Crusader's Round Church: round in imitation of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. It has been spoiled by renovation and no longer has much magic to it. But if you want to see a Crusader's temple that is unspoiled and almost totally unknown, take the 20-minute train ride to Royston. There, beneath the cross-roads, you will find an extraordinary man-made cave, shaped like a bell, lined with quaint carvings of saints and mysterious symbols. Originally a Roman grain store, the cave was taken over by the Knights Templar in the thirteenth century as a secret meeting place. So secret, that it became lost for six hundred years, and still is not listed in any of the guide-books. (When closed, the keys can be obtained from the town museum).

Carry on down the street to the market place, where local traders still bring produce from the surrounding country. The fish-stall announces "last night's catch of Dover sole", landed at King's Lynn. The cheese-man offers last year's Stilton, made at the town of Stilton fifty miles up the north road. The self-styled "Rock King" (it's sea-side rock, he's king of) sells old-fashioned sweets galore.

Lunch at The Eagle. The ceilings of the bar-room are covered with the names of US airmen who were stationed locally during World War II. But its walls can tell of other battles resolved in the same room. Watson and Crick, arguing the toss about DNA; Stephen Hawking, in his drinking, rowing days, arm-wrestling Fred Hoyle. Stephen, who taught me Highland Dancing in the 1950's, led the dancing in his wheel-chair at his 50th birthday party last year. He will still be encountered on occasion in the streets of Cambridge, bowling gaily along.

Spend the whole afternoon at the Fitzwilliam Museum. If this were anywhere else but Cambridge, it would be the unrivalled glory of the town. And when you have had your fill of Breughel, Canaletto, Murillo or Cézanne, let yourself be captivated by Samuel Palmer's little "Magic Apple Tree". Or sigh at everyone's favourite romantic painting, Ford Maddox Brown's "The Last of England": a family of emigrants, huddled at the bow of the steamer, taking their last look back at their familiar world.

The last of Cambridge? You don't have to leave. Follow Carol Gilligan, the psychologist from Harvard, who came here in October '92 to sojourn for one year. She laid out her wares in seminar rooms across the city and sold the lot (I know, I listened to her). The last I heard, she's not going back.