

*This Secret Garden: Oxford Revisited* by Justin Cartwright (Bloomsbury) R197.95  
18 May 2008

The distinguished novelist Justin Cartwright went to Oxford from South Africa in 1965. By his own account, he was never the same again: “From the moment I arrived at Trinity College ..., I was in love with Oxford. It plumped up my dry colonial heart ...”

Revisiting Oxford after many years, Cartwright now retraces for our benefit and his pleasure many of his undergraduate haunts, and visits many of Oxford’s sights for the first time. *This Secret Garden*, the latest in the handsomely produced “The Writer and the City” series, thus combines the appeal of nostalgia with the freshness of discovery.

Cartwright knows full well that he may be idealising Oxford: it has “a kind of wildly enhanced significance for me because I was young and almost ecstatically happy here”; and Oxford, as Evelyn Waugh so poignantly suggested in *Brideshead Revisited* (“the greatest Oxford novel ever written”, according to Cartwright) is an enchanting place to be young in. Apart from anything else, Cartwright seems to have indulged in an inordinate number of japes of the kind that his older self indulgently shakes his head at.

On a more serious note, Oxford is to Cartwright near-synonymous with the philosopher and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin, in whom he finds embodied in their finest form the qualities he associates with Oxford: “It stands for something deep in the Anglo-Saxon mind – excellence, a kind of privilege, a charmed life, deep-veined liberalism, a respect for tradition.”

What Cartwright gives us is a beguiling kind of special pleading: Oxford “stands for” certain universal qualities “in the Anglo-Saxon mind” – and yet, on this showing the qualities are largely confined to Oxford and its products (with here and there a grudging concession to Cambridge). The “rancorous, graffiti-disfigured, Red Bull-littered council estate” that Cartwright dismisses for its illiteracy and squalor may stand for something as deep, though less salubrious, in the Anglo-Saxon mind; to see it merely as a sign that “we are still two nations” is altogether too easy.

Old Oxonians will find here a vivid, lively and informative evocation of a much-loved place; South Africans are more likely to pick up a sustained if unacknowledged dialogue with the mother country that Cartwright left behind with few regrets, “happily free from the burden of being a white South African”, a dialogue that he conducted in fictional form in his excellent novel *White Lightning*.

Oddly, more than forty years on, he remains haunted by the country he left behind: “As I walk around the Parks I see, sitting on a bench, a South African novelist who once gave me a terrible review and I quickly detour. Her accent reaches me with all the harshness of a cornrake as I hurry by.” This little incident interestingly encapsulates Cartwright’s trajectory in this book: rediscovering Oxford, he keeps on being detoured by discordant reminders of the unbeloved country.

Participating in a discussion with Gillian Slovo, he contrasts the spirit of the interchange with the intellectual atmosphere of South Africa: “Back in Johannesburg, I had come to see that what was missing in South Africa was ... politics in the sense that Berlin articulates it, the free and open play of ideas in conflict, toleration, free discussion, respect for the opinion of others.”

Some South Africans may raise their eyebrows at this confident diagnosis of South African intellectual life, or lack of it; but to be fair, the context suggests that Cartwright is

here thinking mainly of the “present government of South Africa” -- though one might want to object that perhaps “South Africa” is not, any more than Britain or the US, to be judged by its government. (Elsewhere he informs us that “In South Africa today many whites are clutching at straws” and perhaps my resistance to Cartwright’s generalisation constitutes such a clutching.)

A central thread in *This Secret Garden* is the story of Adam von Trott, a German Rhodes Scholar and friend of Isaiah Berlin’s, who left Oxford in the thirties and joined the Nazi party; he was later hanged for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Von Trott is also the subject of Cartwright’s most recent novel *The Song Before it is Sung*.

It is not surprising that Cartwright should be fascinated by the story of a man who came to Oxford, fell under its spell (“I owe more to Oxford than I can say” said von Trott), and yet returned to his native land to attempt to rid it of what he saw as a monstrous perversion of national ideals, risking the opprobrium of his erstwhile Oxford friends and, in the end, his own life. It is, for better or for worse, the exact contrary of Cartwright’s own career.

*This Secret Garden* is, apart from a vivid appreciation of Oxford, a thoughtful reflection on the intellectual life and its place in the national arena. Its wholesale capitulation to the charm of Oxford will not endear it to post-colonials, nor will its confident belief that Oxford “carries far more weight than Cambridge in the world at large” appeal to Cantabrigians; but ideologies apart, it is an honest, entertaining, crisply written account of a love affair between a highly articulate man and a lovely city.