

The
OXFORD
DEGREE
CEREMONY



[For the information of candidates]

THE OXFORD DEGREE CEREMONY

THE OXFORD DEGREE CEREMONY is not, like some modern ceremonies, a piece of pageantry produced to order; it is something that has grown up in the course of centuries, and reflects the history of the University in several ways. (1) The medieval University was from one point of view a kind of guild or trades union of Masters; and it was by the Degree Ceremony that the candidate, who had, so to speak, completed his years of apprenticeship, was admitted into the guild. The Bachelor's Degree represents the first stage towards admission; the Master's or Doctor's Degree represents full admission into the guild. (2) From another point of view the medieval University was regarded as a part, and a very important part, of the Church; hence it was a necessary feature of the Degree Ceremony that the Chancellor (or the Vice-Chancellor in his absence), as representing the authority of the local Bishop (the Bishop of Lincoln), should grant the candidate a licence to teach. (3) Since the close of the Middle Ages the Colleges have come to play an increasingly important part in the University; hence graduates in Arts have to be presented by their Colleges.

In the Middle Ages the Degree Ceremony was performed in St. Mary's Church. At the present time it takes place either in the Divinity School or in the Sheldonian Theatre. Both these buildings are architectural masterpieces. The Divinity School was built between 1430 and 1485 to house theological disputations and lectures: it was the first important building that the University ever undertook. The vault is covered with the arms and monograms of those who helped with the building of it, a kind of subscription list in stone. The Sheldonian Theatre was built c. 1663-9; it is one of Sir Christopher Wren's earliest works. It represents a very skilful adaptation of the classical theatre plan.

(1) *Opening of Congregation.*

The Vice-Chancellor and Proctors enter, and the Vice-Chancellor opens Congregation with the following words:

Causa huius Congregationis est ut Gratiae concedantur, ut gradus conferantur, necnon ut alia peragantur quae ad hanc Venerabilem Domum spectant.

The reason for this Congregation is that Graces be granted and Degrees be conferred, and that other business which concerns this Venerable House be transacted.

Note that the conferment of Degrees takes place in one of the regular assemblies of the University. Since the earliest times there have been two such assemblies: (1) the *Congregation* of Regent Masters and Doctors (Regents being originally those who were actively engaged in lecturing, or 'ruling the Schools', *regentes scholas*); and (2) the *Convocation*, a fuller meeting of both Regent and non-Regent Masters and Doctors. Their composition and functions have been altered a good deal in modern times, but the original, unaltered *Congregation*, the *Ancient House of Congregation*, as it is called, still meets for the purpose of giving Degrees: this is the assembly in which you are now present. The Vice-Chancellor (representing the absent Chancellor) and the Proctors (representing the Masters of Arts) preside over the meeting and take the leading part, but the actual granting of the Degrees is in fact the responsibility of the whole body of assembled Masters; without a sufficient quorum of these, the ceremony cannot take place. The four Bedels, representing the Faculties of Divinity, Law, Medicine, and Arts, are present, and assist in marshalling candidates and calling out names.

(2) *Testimony of the Registrar.*

The Registrar next reads out the following statement:

Ego Registrarius testor omnibus candidatis, quorum nomina Venerabili Domui a Procuratoribus statim submittentur, Gratias a Collegiis vel Societatibus suis pro Gradibus quaesitis concessas fuisse, eosdem mihi satisfecisse.

I, the Registrar, certify that all the Candidates, whose names will be immediately submitted to the Venerable House by the Proctors, have been granted Graces by their Colleges or Societies for the Degree asked, and that they have satisfied me.

Every candidate has to receive a 'Grace', or permission, from his College, in order to take a Degree. This was not

part of the primitive constitution of the University; it illustrates the way in which, since the later Middle Ages, the Colleges have come to take a predominant part in the management of the University. In former times (for instance in the early sixteenth century) the Colleges sometimes imposed conditions when granting these Graces, e.g. that the candidates should give a course of lectures in College.

(3) *The Supplicats, the Proctors' Walk, and the granting of the Graces.*

Next, the different Degrees are dealt with in order, beginning with the D.D.s and ending with the B.A.s. First one of the Proctors reads out the *Supplicat*, a list of those asking for the Degree in question; the following, for instance, is the form used for B.A.s:

Supplicant venerabili Congregationi Doctorum et Magistrorum regentium A, B, C, D, e Collegio E, qui compleverunt omnia quae per statuta requiruntur (nisi quatenus cum eis dispensatum fuerit), ut haec sufficient, quoadmittantur ad Gradum Baccalaurei in Artibus.

A, B, C, D, of E College, who have completed all that is required by the statutes, except in so far as dispensation has been granted, ask the Venerable Congregation of Doctors and Regent Masters that these things may suffice for admission to the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Then the two Proctors walk down the House and back, and finally the Proctor who has read out the *Supplicat* says:

Hae Gratiae concessae sunt et sic pronuntiamus concessas.

These Graces have been granted and we so pronounce them granted.

Note that it is the House, i.e. the assembled Masters, who are asked to grant the Degree, and this is the reason why the Proctors walk up and down; originally they took the votes of those present. The picturesque theory that a dissatisfied tradesman has the right to 'pluck' the Proctor's gown has no historical justification.

The granting of a Degree is called a 'Grace' or favour (not to be confused with the College 'Grace' mentioned above); perhaps this is because in medieval times a candidate would often be let off some part of the full statutory requirements of residence and academic exercises, which were long and onerous (e.g. it took about 17 years to become a D.D.). Thus a candidate would supplicate that so many terms

residence and so many exercises might suffice for admission to the Degree; and the Grace would often be granted on condition that the candidate performed some further requirement, such as preaching a sermon, saying Mass for the good estate of the Regents, composing a hundred verses in honour of the University, or repairing the windows of the Congregation house.

(4) *Presentation of the Candidates.*

The candidates for Degrees are next presented to the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors, either by the Dean of their College (in the case of the M.A., B.A., B.Litt., D.Phil., B.Phil., B.Sc., and B.Mus. Degrees), or by a Professor (in the case of other Degrees); the formula used varies slightly according to the Degree, the following being used for B.A.s:

Insignissime Vice-Cancellarie, vosque egregii Procuratores, praesento vobis hos meos scholares in facultate Artium, ut admittantur ad Gradum Baccalaurei in Artibus.

Most Distinguished Vice-Chancellor, and you, most excellent Proctors, I present to you these my scholars in the faculty of Arts, that they may be admitted to the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

In medieval times the candidates for Degrees were introduced with a commendatory speech, which often included facetious and ribald remarks about their personal history and habits. Later on, right down to the eighteenth century, these ribaldries were carried to extraordinary lengths in the speeches made at the annual 'Act', by the person known as *Terrae Filius*: this was one of the reasons why the ceremony was transferred from St. Mary's to the Sheldonian Theatre. In modern times Honorary graduates are introduced by the Public Orator, with a commendatory speech of a more dignified kind.

(5) *Proctorial Charges and the Oath.*

Candidates for the M.A. Degree and certain Doctorates stand before the Junior Proctor, who administers the Charge in the following words:

Domini Doctores [Magistri vel Domini], vos dabit is fidem ad observandum statuta, privilegia, consuetudines et libertates istius Univer-

Doctors [Masters, or Sirs], you shall swear to observe the statutes, privileges, customs and liberties of this University. Also when you shall

sitatis. Item quod quum admissi fueritis in domum Congregationis et in domum Convocationis, in iisdem bene et fideliter, ad honorem et profectum Universitatis, vos geretis. Et specialiter quod in negotiis quae ad Gratias et Gradus spectant, non impedietis dignos, nec indignos promotebitis. Item quod in electionibus habendis unum tantum semel et non amplius in singulis scrutiniis scribetis et nominabitis; et quod neminem nominabitis nisi quem habilem et idoneum certo sciveritis vel firmiter credideritis.

have been admitted to the House of Congregation and to the House of Convocation, you shall bear yourselves in them well and faithfully to the honour and profit of the University. And especially in those matters which concern Degrees and Graces you shall not impede the worthy nor put forward the unworthy. Also at elections you shall record and nominate one only at any one time and no more in each scrutiny, and nominate no one unless you know of a certainty or firmly believe that he is fit and proper.

The candidates reply: *Do fidem* (I swear).

Oath-taking played a large part in medieval life; thus the King took the Coronation Oath, a tenant swore fealty to his overlord, a Bishop took an oath at his consecration, a monk took vows at his profession, jurymen, witnesses, and tax-collectors had oaths to take. It was therefore natural for a graduate to take oaths on being admitted to the Masters' guild. In the course of centuries a curious collection of oaths accumulated, some of them remaining in use long after becoming obsolete: thus, until the nineteenth century, graduates had to swear never to re-admit Henry, son of Simeon (an opponent of the University who had died in the thirteenth century), nor to give lectures at Stamford (because there had been an illicit migration there in the fourteenth century). Nevertheless, the underlying principle, that of demanding a promise of loyalty, and responsible behaviour towards the University, is an elementary and valid one, and still finds expression in the Degree ceremony. The Proctors, in an emergency, had the right to demand the assistance and obedience of any M.A., with the formula: *Siste per fidem* (Stand, by virtue of your oath).

(6) *Admission by the Vice-Chancellor.*

(a) Masters of Arts and Doctors of Divinity, Medicine, and Law, stand before the Vice-Chancellor, who admits them with the following formula, touching their heads with the

Book; the candidates kneel at the words marked with an asterisk:

Ad honorem Domini nostri Jesu Christi, et ad profectum Sacrosanctae Matris Ecclesiae et studii, ego auctoritate mea et totius Universitatis do vobis licentiam incipiendi in facultate Artium (vel facultate Chirurgiae, Medicinae, Juris, S. Theologiae) legendi, disputandi, et caetera omnia faciendi, quae ad statum Magistri (vel Doctoris) in eadem facultate pertinent, cum ea completa sint quae per statuta requiruntur;* in nomine Domini, Patris, Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.

To the honour of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the profit of holy Mother Church and of learning, I by my authority, and that of the whole University, give you licence to incept in the faculty of Arts (or faculty of Surgery, Medicine, Law, or Theology), to lecture, to dispute and to do all the other things that pertain to the rank of Master (or Doctor) in the same faculty, when those things are completed which the Statutes require;* in the name of the Lord, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

This is the culminating and most solemn part of the ceremony. The religious phrases of the formula remind us that the University was originally regarded as part of the Church, as has been mentioned above.

Note that licence is given to incept and to perform certain scholastic acts. A man taking the Master's or Doctor's Degree was said to 'incept', i.e. to 'begin' to teach: every newly made Master or Doctor had to lecture for one or two years after taking the Degree. This was called 'necessary regency', and was at first the principal means by which teaching was provided in the University, before the foundation of endowed Chairs or the provision of College tuition. The Degree ceremony was formerly followed by the 'Act', a ceremony in which the candidate took part in solemn disputations and received the insignia of his Degree: he was seated in the chair, and given a book, a cap, a ring, and a kiss of fellowship. He also had to provide a Feast, and presents of robes, to the other Masters or Doctors. The expense of these entertainments was so great that Pope Clement V, in the early fourteenth century, had to forbid any inceptor spending more than £3,000 (of Tours, at least £10,000 of modern money).

The 'Act' has disappeared since the eighteenth century, or is only represented by the 'Encaenia' in the summer, when honorary Degrees are given. Hence the curious

anomaly, that the modern 'inceptor' is licenced to perform an act which he never has the opportunity of doing.

(b) Bachelors of Arts are admitted by the Vice-Chancellor with a simpler formula:

Domini, ego admitto vos ad Gradum Baccalaurei in Artibus; insuper auctoritate mea et totius Universitatis, do vobis potestatem legendi, et reliqua omnia faciendi, quae ad eundem Gradum spectant.

Sirs, I admit you to the Degree of Bachelor in Arts; further, by my authority and that of the whole University, I give you the power of lecturing, and of doing all the other things which concern the said Degree.

Note that the admission of the B.A. (as with the M.A.) presupposes certain 'scholastic acts' to follow.

(7) Masters and Doctors, after putting on their robes, return and bow (women curtsy) to the Vice-Chancellor, who, in the case of Doctors, shakes them by the hand. The Doctors then take their place in the Doctors' seats. These formalities no doubt represent the last surviving remnants of the more elaborate ceremonies of the 'act', described above.

A fuller account of the Degree Ceremony and its history will be found in *The Oxford Degree Ceremony*, by J. Wells (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1906) and in *Oxford University Ceremonies*, by L. H. Dudley Buxton and Strickland Gibson (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935) (both now out of print).

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Candidates taking the Degrees of D.D., D.C.L., D.M., M.Ch., and M.A.

After the candidates have been presented to the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors they stand in front of the Junior Proctor and the following charge is read to them:—

‘Domini Doctores, Magistri (or Domini), vos dabit is fidem ad observandum statuta, privilegia, consuetudines, et libertates istius Universitatis.

‘Item quod quum admissi fueritis in domum Congregationis et in domum Convocationis, in iisdem bene et fideliter, ad honorem et profectum Universitatis, vos geretis. Et specialiter quod in negotiis quæ ad gratias et gradus spectant non impeditis dignos, nec indignos promovebitis.

‘Item quod in electionibus habendis unum tantum semel et non amplius in singulis scrutiniis scribetis et nominabitis; et quod neminem nominabitis nisi quem habilem et idoneum certo sciveritis vel firmiter credideritis.’

After the charge has been read they reply:—

‘Do fidem.’

Candidates taking other Degrees

The following is the charge read by the Junior Proctor:—

‘Vos tenemini ad observandum omnia statuta, privilegia, consuetudines, et libertates istius Universitatis, quatenus ad vos spectent.’

In this case there is no response from the candidate.

INCORPORATION

Candidates for degrees by incorporation, other than B.A.

The following is the charge read by the Junior Proctor:—

‘Magister (or Domine or Domine Doctor), tu dabis fidem ad observandum statuta privilegia consuetudines et libertates istius Universitatis.’

After the charge has been read they reply:—

‘Do fidem.’

Candidates for the Degree of B.A. by incorporation

There is no charge.

DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

1. After the *supplicat*, i.e. the list of candidates, has been read by the Senior Proctor candidates should be ready to file out quietly from their seats when the name of their society is announced by the bedel, and stand on the right of their college dean or presenter, if necessary in more than one row.

2. When presented to the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors candidates should bow to the Vice-Chancellor, to the Senior Proctor on the Vice-Chancellor's right, and to the Junior Proctor on his left.

3. After presentation, candidates receive the charge from the Junior Proctor in groups of about 30. Those who have to wait before being charged until candidates from other colleges have been presented will move back, after presentation, towards the main door of the building (leaving room for others to pass) until candidates from the last college of their group have been presented. They are then required to come forward to the Junior Proctor to hear the charge. When this has been delivered the candidates answer '*Do fidem*'.

The deans have been requested to communicate to their candidates the names of the colleges in their group.

4. After taking the oath, candidates must arrange themselves quietly before the Vice-Chancellor in groups of four. To make this possible those in the rear should move back a short distance after the charge. The Vice-Chancellor will then admit the candidates, who must kneel in groups of four when instructed by the bedels.

5. Members of each group, after admission, pass through the East door, i.e. the small door on their right, don their M.A. gowns and hoods, and re-assemble at the South door. They then come back, again in groups of four, with the bedel leading the procession. On being stopped by the bedel the front four will bow (women curtsy) to the Vice-Chancellor only, and retire once more through the East door. The second group will at once move into the place of the first group, bow and retire, and so on.

6. If they desire to return to watch the remainder of the ceremony they should re-enter by the West door.

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

1. After the *supplicat*, i.e. the list of candidates, has been read by the Junior Proctor candidates should be ready to file out quietly from their seats when the name of their society is announced by the bedel, and stand on the right of their college dean or presenter, if necessary in more than one row.

2. When presented to the Vice-Chancellor and Proctors candidates should bow to the Vice-Chancellor, to the Senior Proctor on the Vice-Chancellor's right, and to the Junior Proctor on his left.

3. After presentation, candidates receive the charge from the Junior Proctor, and are admitted by the Vice-Chancellor, in groups of about 40. Those who have to wait before being charged and admitted until candidates from other colleges have been presented will move back, after presentation, towards the main door of the building (leaving room for others to pass) until candidates from the last college of their group have been presented. They are then required to come forward to the Junior Proctor to hear the charge. When this has been delivered they must turn towards the Vice-Chancellor, who formally admits them to the degree.

The deans have been requested to communicate to their candidates the names of the colleges in their group.

4. The newly admitted Bachelors of Arts then retire from the Sheldonian Theatre through the East door, i.e. the small door on their right.

[SEE OVER

DRESS

When being presented for a degree a candidate wears full academic dress with *subfusc* clothing, i.e.

Men. A dark suit and socks, black boots or shoes, a white bow tie, white collar, and white shirt.

Women. A dark skirt, a white blouse, black tie, black shoes and stockings, and, if desired, a dark coat.

Candidates serving in H.M. Forces are permitted to wear uniform together with a gown. (The uniform cap is worn in the street and carried when indoors.)

STATUTORY FEES FOR CERTIFICATES

Certificates may be obtained from

THE HEAD REGISTRY CLERK
UNIVERSITY REGISTRY (ANNEX)
74 HIGH STREET
OXFORD, OXI 4BG

on payment of the following fees:

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| 1. Certificate attesting matriculation or the passing of any examination | 10p |
| 2. Certificate of a degree | 25p |
| 3. Certificate of the B.A. degree and a Final Honour School | 35p |
| 4. Statement showing complete academic record (for members of the university who have been admitted to a degree) | 50p |

*** Cheques should be made payable to 'The University of Oxford'