

CIRCUS CIRCUS

James Attlee ruminates on Oxford and its environs

REBECCA MEAD

ISOLARION: A DIFFERENT OXFORD JOURNEY BY JAMES ATTLEE CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 256 PAGES. \$23.

A few weeks ago, the *New York Times* Travel section ran an article about how best to spend a day out in Oxford, England. The author advised readers down which streets they should wander and into which sequestered quads they should peep, from Worcester College, with its sunken lawn in the west, along the cobblestones of Brasenose Lane, past the eighteenth-century shops of Broad Street, as far as Magdalen College's picturesque deer park in the east.

This is an itinerary that would delight James Attlee, a resident of East Oxford, the section of the city that lies beyond Magdalen, over the Cherwell River and out of the enchanted academic sphere. East Oxford's Main Street is the Cowley Road, a busy commercial thoroughfare that is the heart of the city's East Asian community, as well as being home, as Attlee catalogues, to businesses as varied as a Ghanaian fishmonger, a Russian supermarket, a Chinese herbalist, and a place called the Hi-Lo Jamaican Eating House ("From a Penny to a Thousand Pounds"). The Cowley Road—or, more properly, one of its quieter residential offshoots—is also home to Attlee, and it is the governing conceit of *Isolarion: A Different Oxford Journey* that an intellectually curious and personally inquisitive voyager might travel through his own neighborhood in a manner as revelatory as that of any pilgrim to foreign lands. The fish-out-of-water travelogue is a staple of the bookstore, but Attlee, a father of young children, with a job in London to which he commutes daily, has set himself a different task: to be the fish, and to give a detailed description of the properties of the water.

This he does, in part, quite literally—one of his first stops on the Cowley Road is the Eau-de-Vie Flotation Centre, at which he undergoes a supposedly restorative soak in water saturated with Epsom salts, a New Age sound track the sole distraction. (Later, he visits a *mikvah*, the ritual bath in which Orthodox women immerse themselves after menstruation; this one he does not experience firsthand.) But more typically, Attlee undertakes a purposeful wandering, often with tape recorder in hand, to uncover the natural history of a street that, he writes, follows the medieval path leading from the walled city to the leper colony at Bartlemas and to the village of Cowley beyond. (This village, now subsumed into the city of Oxford proper, gives the Cowley Road its definite article: The road's name is a salutary reminder that before streets started being named for the species of tree that was chopped down to make way for them, they might simply and functionally be named for the places to which they led.)

This quest takes Attlee from the Private Shop ("a selection of dildos . . . are racked at one end of the room, like Kalashnikovs for sale on an Afghan market stall"), to an encounter with an Albanian asylum seeker who lives in Blackbird Leys, the mis-

leadingly bucolic name of a bleak housing estate situated at the Cowley Road's terminus ("Asylum seekers are just like other people," the young man tells him. "We are just less lucky"), to a day out at the Cowley Road Carnival, instituted in 2000 at the behest of the area's Jamaican residents but bearing, in its organization, the unmistakable fingerprints of liberal interventionists. "Stalls that were licensed to set up in the park at Manzil Way, instead of catering to the hunger and thirst of the revellers, were all earnestly soliciting donations to various charities," he writes. "This misunderstanding of the spirit of Carnival was somehow typical of the neighbourhood."



The Jaipur Kawa Brass Band marching in the Cowley Road Carnival parade, Oxford, 2005.

A public debate over who gets to define the spirit of the neighborhood—the area's Pakistani businessmen? the longtime residents who remember a time when there were not fruit boxes blocking the sidewalks? the traffic-control consultants who want to impose speed restrictions on vehicles?—provides Attlee with a secondary discursive theme. Called on to participate in a planning process that seeks to "rebrand" the Cowley Road as a vibrant, multicultural destination as deserving of a visitor's attention as is Christ Church Cathedral, Attlee finds himself a vehement opponent of any effort to package his neighborhood's exoticism. When a local bigwig notes that in Arthurian times a dragon was supposed to have lived under one stretch of the road ("Why do alarm bells always ring when somebody uses the phrase 'Arthurian times?'" Attlee wonders) and goes on to suggest that the beast be commemorated with dragon-shaped trash cans, Attlee is apoplectic: "What next, a statue of Gandalf?"

These sections read like pages from a fictional comedy of town-planning manners, but in *Isolarion*—the book's uninviting title refers to a kind of fifteenth-century

map that showed a small area in great detail—Attlee aspires to tell a more elevated story than one of small-town civic squabbles. He takes as his touchstone Robert Burton's seventeenth-century work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which the author writes of the salve that travel can provide to the troubled soul, and makes a rather mannered attempt to discover whether Burton's words might equally apply today. Yes, is the conclusion he makes after reaching journey's end: the Cowley car factory, where the Mini was invented. Attlee's range of literary-critical reference is sometimes predictable: Foucault is cited; also Lévi-Strauss, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and

an eleventh-century astrolabe in the city's Museum of the History of Science made by one Muhammad ibn Sa'id as-Sabban, and a reference, in a volume composed in 1886, to Spain's illumination and then eclipse as a seat of intellectual life, infused with Arabic learning. From here, Attlee notes the evidence of twenty-first-century Orientalist fascination on the Cowley Road, in the shape of the Kazbar restaurant with its aquamarine tiles and menu of tapas; considers the present-day circus offerings available in Oxford, now set up "on the bleak expanse of grass behind the ice rink"; and then recollects his own one-day stint as a circus employee as a teenager,

other authors routinely studied by those temporary Oxonians on the city side of the Cherwell River. (I was among their number in the late 1980s and spent two of my three years in Oxford living on or just off the Cowley Road; I was surprised, on reading this book, not just by how much has changed since I lived there—there's a new mosque steps from my old home—but how much I missed while whistling down the street on my bike on my way to the library.) But Attlee's reading, unlike that of a student cramming to prepare this week's essay, is deep and wide and engagingly circuitous, and this book frequently provides the delights of discovery that make any adventure worth undertaking.

In one exemplary digression, Attlee muses on the origins of the name of Circus Street, one of the Cowley Road's tributaries: Before the street was built in the early 1860s, he writes, it was the occasional site of a traveling show with a fashionably Moorish-sounding name, Newsome's Alhambra Circus. Attlee takes this as an opportunity to delve into the Islamic history of Spain and into university Oxford's Victorian appreciation of same, finding

during which he was assigned to clean the animals' pens.

"The thing that struck me most was the size of the elephant droppings, their perfect spherical shape, and the ease with which they could be flicked across the ground with a broom," he writes, before turning to the contemporary artist Chris Ofili's use of elephant dung in his paintings and to the call by former mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani for a show at the Brooklyn Museum in which Ofili's dung-accented portrait of the Virgin Mary was displayed to be banned. "Successful politicians need enemies; perhaps Giuliani was still searching for a suitably challenging foe, unaware that one was waiting in the wings, only too eager to enter battle on religious principles," Attlee concludes, and this deft circling back on his theme—which is, after all, hardly a provincial one, but rather the consuming one of the beginning of the twenty-first century—reveals how a book about a road can end up being a book about everything else as well. □

Rebecca Mead is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. Her book, *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding*, appears this May from Penguin.