

THE HARVARD CONNECTION

The 'Harvard Scholarship' was established in 1928 in memory of Lionel de Jersey Harvard, a distant relation of John Harvard, who graduated from Harvard University in 1915 and was killed in 1918 while serving with the British army in World War I. One Lionel de Jersey Harvard scholar is elected each year to spend a year at Emmanuel studying whatever he or she chooses. Conversely, the Herchel Smith Scholarships allow Emmanuel College graduates to spend a year at Harvard, also studying anything they like. They were established in 1979 through the generosity of the late Herchel Smith, initially by donations during his lifetime and supplemented by a very substantial legacy. We are now able to elect five or six Herchel Smith Scholars every year. The following pieces reflect this two-way process.

I don't know how it happened. The question throughout my third year was, what to do after finishing Cambridge? Emmanuel gave me the answer on a plate: take the Herchel Smith scholarship over to Cambridge, Massachusetts and try your luck there. Why? The only reason anyone has been able to put to me is that John Harvard once did the same. My task, it seemed, was to go to America and found a new university in my name. Always keen for a challenge, I booked a flight for September.

Getting from Cambridge I to Cambridge II was harder than expected. The two august universities in question acknowledge the other's existence in a general way, but consider direct communication in slightly bad taste. I scuttled between them for a summer, like a child between divorced parents. Still, maybe it would work in my favour. 'But *Daddy* let me skip lectures AND get a degree . . .' I soon realised that being torn in two would be the hallmark of my experience at Harvard. Take my subject: I graduated in English literature, but went to Harvard for East Asian studies. The first week of term typically involved me frantically choosing between Chinese film and Homi Bhabha's international literature class, while getting distracted by *Hip-Hop America: Power, Politics and the Word*, or *Fundamentals of Animation: Introductory Studio Course*. I am a rare two-year Emmanuel scholar, enrolled on one of Harvard's few MA programs; yet while my timetable has more structure than the one-year 'special students', any of these classes are still available to me.

The sense of opportunity is dizzying. At Cambridge, I was told in the nicest possible way that no, I couldn't study Chinese as part of a literature degree, and frankly why would I want to when there were all those lovely European languages on offer? At Harvard, you are much more independent. I use the word 'independent' with great deliberation,

because that's not how it seemed at first. The self-respecting British person is taken aback by the Harvard education system, which uses the terms 'school', 'class' and 'homework' liberally and without irony. I looked in horror at the schedule the university software produced from my course options; it apparently wasn't possible to set aside the usual three hours a day for staring at my own navel. When would I be allowed to do something on my own? It was when one of my papers was returned with a heartbreaking A-, *Interesting* that the revelation came. No longer would my work be receiving the critical attention it enjoyed from the more patient of my Cambridge supervisors: I was on my own already. The help is there, I discovered, but you have to be proactive if you want to take advantage of it. A brutal kind of independence, I complained, that dictates a hefty homework timetable full of short-term goals, then expects you to deal with the long-term ones all by yourself . . . I stopped. Actually, it didn't sound unreasonable when I put it that way. It sounded like real life.

It's not real, of course. Harvard's version of the ivory tower elevates students in more ways than one. As a student there, you're likely to be richer to begin with than you need to be at Cambridge. If you're also conscientious and careful with your course choices, it's possible to do extremely well – 100% – without being a crazy genius. The resultant self-confidence is palpable. While so many at Cambridge struggle with a feeling of inadequacy, Harvard kids want their money's worth from the resources, preferably in résumé-friendly format. Rewarding achievement is one of Harvard's strong points, which may explain why everyone behind a lectern is called 'Professor'. (There is pressure to live up to the label. Teaching staff answer to the CUE guide, which lets students grade their mentors on artistic impression and technical merit and publishes the results termly.) At the student-run Harvard Square homeless shelter, I was no volunteer, but a Resource Advocate. Pretentious? Maybe, but we were doing exactly what it said on the tin and accessing state resources on behalf of guests, not just washing dishes. Of course, everyone gets involved to engage with the wider Boston community, not to garner CV points. But programmes like this, and like the paid internships Harvard funds in non-profit organisations, mean that even ideals can be competitive. Feeling and appearing successful is intoxicating, and it's a small step to acting as though you could take over the world. This ought to make people unbearable; in practice, it makes them like my friend John. John and I often moaned that there wasn't enough funding for students in the East Asian department to go to China, but whereas moaning is my solution for everything, his was to start an educational non-profit organisation to collect sponsorship.

So which is it, people ask me. Which is better, Harvard or Cambridge, which gets your vote? I can only answer like Winnie the Pooh to the question ‘Honey, or condensed milk with your bread?’ Er, both . . . but never mind about the bread please.

Another confusing either/or is my status at Harvard. I live in Eliot House, which has an undergraduate community similar in size to Emma. I love Eliot with the absolute passion of one who will never really belong. I love the undergraduates, who live in close friendship groups of eight, and are consequently difficult to know well unless you actually move in and sleep on their couches. I began to attempt this, in desperation towards the end of the year, and even then I was still the strange English girl who everyone thought was a tutor. The tutors are a group of older graduate students who are employed to live in Eliot and keep an eye on the undergrads. I love the tutors, but I’m fairly sure I’m not one of them either. Having turned 22 less than a month before I arrived, I was the same age as the fourth-year undergrads, and as I was starting a new subject, I attended undergraduate classes as well. Also, everyone recognised the tutors, while no-one knew quite who the Emma scholars were. That was ok, we weren’t too sure either.

As it turned out, I drank with both undergrads and tutors, but was on the email lists for neither. I was told when I tried to connect my phone to the campus service that administratively I didn’t exist. Other grads were bemused – ‘you live *where*?’ They were more respectful when I explained that I had my own bathroom, though after the Old Court experience last year, I think I deserved it. But some mornings, when peering into my bathroom mirror, a luxurious six steps from my bed, I allowed myself the odd moment of crisis. Lit student, or linguist? Undergraduate or graduate? Doughnut or bagel? (The Harvard Dining Services were another great feature of my Eliot experience, but contributed significantly to the list of problematic daily decisions.)

It emerged that if in doubt, I was British. The first week was spent entirely with other British people, all from Cambridge, and all at Harvard on the patronage of someone now deceased. We toasted the various now deceased – thanks Herchel – and barely saw each other for the rest of the year. But escaping the national stereotype was not so easy. I spent many a dining-hall meal struggling to adapt to my new role as ambassador. Or rather, anti-ambassador. Americans, as everyone knows, love Britain, and make strange assumptions about tea, hunting, and hats. Or, ‘The London Underground must be really great’. I explained that just because something was old didn’t mean it was especially efficient or affordable. Then we got on to the Queen.

Of course, on visits home, the reverse happens, because as everyone knows, the English hate America. I tie myself in knots trying to explain why I love the USA. I try to explain that the term 'American' loses its meaning for me when faced with a diversity of states and cultural backgrounds. That I delighted in the sound of local church bells pealing outside my window to support gay marriage legislation, across a campus that has stopped employing masters and masters' wives, and now employs co-masters, including one Mormon and one all-female couple. That my American friends aren't usually fat, but even if they are they're still people I feel privileged to know. That people sing in the street and dance in Harvard Square. This is my impression of America, and there's so much to enjoy. My evening entertainment this year was equally likely to involve salsa, a Bollywood movie, a gospel service, or a show put on with disadvantaged kids from the Boston community. 'It's hardly representative,' the cynics counter. Maybe not – but not everyone in Britain is into Pimms and punting either.

I'm all for disliking the bad, and appreciating the good, on both sides of the Atlantic, and accepting how much of each we have in common. This has always been particularly easy for me: my grandma is American, which means that a quarter of me is as well. It's hard to generalise about another nation if you know you're including your own right arm and half your torso. And besides, isn't that what travelling is all about? You go abroad to find yourself, not in Teva sandals and sarong as the old gap year cliché would have it, but in other people. It's confusing. You alight in a brand new country, and two weeks later discover you're already there, living another life as a Korean-Hawaiian-Bostonian sinologist, or a red-headed mathematician from Illinois. It's enough to shake anyone's sense of identity.

As if negotiating between two continents wasn't enough, let's toss another into the mix: Asia. A fascinating aspect of my experience at Harvard is that I went there to study China. In America, I am at my least foreign when speaking Chinese. This is because you can be any race and speak no English, but chances are you're a US citizen and no one will assume to tell you otherwise; yet I have only to open my mouth in English to give myself away as an alien. My Chinese teacher alone didn't discover that I was English until March. By then I was used to people cooing over me. 'Say something,' she squealed, relishing my accent as I grumpily complied. The only other time I experienced such groundless appreciation – ok, such appreciation – was on my own gap year, spent in Zhejiang province south of Shanghai. There, people were delighted because I was foreign in the first place, and ecstatic when they found out

that I was English. In a noodle bar we were approached by the owner, who called over to his friends, 'It's OK, they're not American!'

Back in Boston's Chinatown, I worked once a week with a group of elderly Chinese people who would soon be Americans themselves. 'Soon' was the operative word: we were helping them through the bureaucratic marathon that is the naturalisation process, and it's uphill all the way. Joe, my partner volunteer, and I quickly found out that since they barely speak English, we would have to help them cheat their way to citizenship. This is quite straightforward. Questions beginning 'Have you ever' (been affiliated with the Nazi party of Germany/been a prostitute, etc etc) require 'No', while the phrase 'Are you willing' (to perform work of national importance under civilian direction should the law require it, or whatever) calls for a resounding 'Yes'. The labour of getting up every Sunday morning to take these classes was repaid by regular stops at China Pearl for dim sum on the way home. Danny, the other Emma scholar, and I went unexpectedly for dim sum with the Boston University Taiwanese Society one day. Obviously un-Taiwanese, we got a few odd looks until I asked the guy on my left to pass the pork buns. 'Oh, you're *British*', the girl opposite exclaimed. 'They're *British*' was whispered round the table with nods and smiles to us, as if that explained everything. Danny and I didn't really understand, but we tucked happily into dumplings and bubble tea anyway.

In short, there has been much this year that I have not understood. In more than one language. For this reason, I will be spending next year in Taiwan, then returning to complete my MA at Harvard the year after. Confused? My travel agent is. 'I'm looking for a city in Taiwan called Cambridge. *Of course* there'll be one . . .' It seems that the process of working out what kind of institution Earp University will be might take a little longer than planned. And until I sort that one out . . . the question is, what to do after finishing Harvard? Answers on a postcard, please.

Madeline Earp (matric. 2000)