

## Oxford in the Vacation

Charles Lamb

Lamb, writing under the pen name Elia, states that the reader finding the name Elia at the bottom of this essay must be interested in knowing something about him. In the previous essay of his he had tried to amuse the reader with an account of some whimsical clerks working in the south sea house. The reader therefore must be thinking that Elia is one of the clerks in that concern and that he must be earning his livelihood with the help of his pen. Lamb confesses that it is really so. Everyday from morning till evening he is busy in the office wrestling with accounts concerning commodities such as cotton and Indigo. But, after his work is over he goes home with a very keen appetite for literature. His pen then glides over the page with pleasant liberty. So, in spite of his despicable profession as a clerk he manages to maintain his literary dignity. Lamb regrets that the number of holidays he used to get at Christ's hospital as a student was much greater than he gets at the south sea house. Back then he was very fond of holidays and used to look forward to them. He knew well in advance which holiday was to fall on which day. He used to feel sorry when the holiday fell on a Sunday or two holidays fell on the same day. He desires the civil authority to consider the point of recommending more holidays for clerks like him. He himself cannot do anything in the matter as he is plain Elia with no authority whatsoever.

At this time he is whiling away a few ideal weeks in the academic atmosphere of Oxford. For a man like him who could not receive university education such a change is welcome. He feels now that he is a student there and has attained so many imaginary degrees without taking any examinations. Many short sighted menials have often mistook him for a senior scholar. Lamb roams about freely everywhere in the campus. The various halls, groves and gardens even the kitchens of the university attract him on the account of their antiquity. The servant in the kitchen is hallowed for him by the imaginary associations of Chaucer's who is supposed to have been a student at Oxford. Antiquity has a very special charm of its own for Lamb. It glorifies a thing however dull and colorless it might be in itself. For instance, the dark ages have an attractive dimness of their own. What Lamb likes particularly in Oxford are its old libraries. He feels as if he were inhaling learning while in them. He looks up on the ancient books with great reverence. Lamb holds the ancient manuscripts in great awe and does not have the courage to touch them. At oriel he sees his friend George Dyer spending his time over the books. Dyer was so busy with an ancient manuscripts that he himself looked like an old book badly in need of a new cover. Next Lamb sets about giving a brief character sketch of his scholastic friend George Dyer who often visited the Oxford and Cambridge universities. He spent quite a lot of Money on his journeys to these places from his residence Clifford's inn which is inhabited mostly by dishonest people connected with the law. However at a place like Clifford's inn everyone respected him. Lamb says that recently Dyer has been researching on the past histories of the two universities. He has dug out some ancient charts and manuscripts to help him in deciding some important points related to his research. He has a selfless love of knowledge and does not decide to grow rich by it, as it is the common attitude among easy going scholars. When Lamb met Dyer the latter was startled and shocked for he was completely lost in his own thoughts as usual. Lamb calls Dyer an absent minded fellow and gives a funny anecdote. Dyer once made a call at a friend's house and was informed that he was away to the country for a few days.

However he forgot about it and went to pay a visit to his friend. At this he signed the book in the hall meant for those who visited the place in the absence of the master of the house. He wandered in the house of his friend a little and again forgot that he had already signed the visitors book for he went to

sign the book once again. However when he saw that he had already signed it a little while before ,he was determined not to make such mistakes in future. Dyer is always lost in speculation about the one thing or the other. That is why he always feel so startled on being stopped by a friend. After his study at Immanuel college, Cambridge, Dyer started life as an assistant to school master who did not pay much of the salary due to him and whenever Dyer hinted at arrears, master would come out with stories about the sin of being greedy. Poor Dyer then would keep quiet for some more days. At this time Dyer earned paltry sums of money by working for publishers. He has also written some poems which have not cut any figure in the market as they are simple and unexciting. Nevertheless he is a great serious scholar. The essay Oxford in Vacation describes Lamb's experience in Oxford during vacation. It is also memorable for the character sketch of his whimsical friend John Dyer whose absent mindedness, innocence and selfless enthusiasm for learning is vividly portrayed by Lamb. The essay also shows Lamb's love for antiquity which at times poses some difficulty for the modern day reader.