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The Junior Members

When St Antony’s opened its doors in October 1950 it had seven graduate students. They lived in a cosy community, with cell-like rooms in the former nunnery. It was from the window of one such room that John Bayley, later a tutor at New College, was first smitten by his future bride, Iris Murdoch, as she cycled up the Woodstock Road. The rooms had character but were poky and rather cold. One student living there in the early 1950s recalled how he was crouched over his gas fire wearing an anorak, when there was a loud knock on the door and it was flung open by Bill Deakin. Beside him stood a figure recognizable even to the student as Evelyn Waugh. ‘This’, said the Warden, ‘is a typical student in a typical student’s room.’ ‘How absolutely ghastly’, boomed Waugh, and they both disappeared.1

In fact this monastic life had its compensations. The food was considerably better than most undergraduates could expect, and the small numbers of students and fellows meant that everybody quickly got to know everybody else. Generally speaking, fellows were found to be more approachable than in conventional colleges, and this was particularly noted of James Joll and David Footman. Students also respected Deakin, whose war record and academic status was perceived as giving the college a cachet which its embryonic character might otherwise have denied it. The Bursar, Peter Hailey, was a somewhat more forbidding figure, referred to as he always was as ‘Major Hailey’, but students often realized that his rather gruff exterior was only skin deep.2

For many students the college was a fascinating mixture of cosmopolitanism and 1950s Britishness. British students, in particular, were struck by the number of foreigners, especially Frenchmen. In 1953 seven students were French and seven British; together they
comprised half the college's resident student body. Of the others three each came from Belgium, Israel, Germany and the United States; while Canada, Czechoslovakia, Iraq, Italy and South Africa were all represented by one student. There was a considerable age difference between the British students and most of the foreigners, since the British, despite one and a half or two years' national service, were still only about twenty-three when they graduated, whereas many of the foreigners were in their late twenties or older. They included veterans of the Arab–Israeli war like Yigal Allon or ex-officers in the USAF like Carl Rosberg. For conventionally trained British undergraduates some of these students' ideas on subjects ranging from co-education to British colonialism were startling and unconventional. For the foreigners, the strict segregation of the sexes in Oxford was something of a shock. Like other Oxford colleges at that time St Antony's was a single-sex institution, and women could not participate in its activities. This applied even – or perhaps particularly – to the wives of married students. Apart from an occasional ladies' dinner, the hall and other social areas were barred to women.

This did not mean that the students were condemned to celibacy. There were several marriages between members of the college staff and students during the college's first two decades. Women who played an important part in students' lives were also the college secretary, Dorothy Greenland, Pussy Deakin, who was hospitable and sympathetic to students' domestic problems and Madame Hilda Besse. The untimely death of Antonin Besse in 1951 meant that few students ever had the chance to see him, but his widow took her commitment to the college very seriously and made regular visitations, at which she was introduced to each of the students and, as we saw in Chapter 2, her gift of a boules set was much appreciated. It was, indeed, through the particularly British medium of sport, especially cricket and tennis, that hierarchical and gender barriers were overcome. The cricket outings to picturesque villages, or the grounds of manor houses such as Wheeler-Bennett's home in Garsington, formed an attractive backdrop to what became in effect a college picnic, to which fellows' and students' wives – and their children – could contribute.³

Although the number of students rose over the first two years, after October 1953 they steadied in the mid-thirties until the end of the decade, when they rose again. The influence of the 1954 Rockefeller and 1959 Ford grants could be seen affecting the student intake.⁴ A further change was that students of natural science dropped in numbers after Halban's departure, and by the 1960s students of British