

**Reminiscences about Wystan Auden at Christ Church:  
a Research Lecturer's Anecdotes from the Years 1972 and 1973**

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### 1. Introduction

W. H. Auden, whose one hundredth anniversary of birth fell on 21 February, 2007, arrived at Christ Church, Oxford for his third and last residence there in Michaelmas Term, 1972. He came at the invitation of the Governing Body, in which his principal sponsor was the Official Student in German, the late Dr. F. D. ('David') Luke.<sup>1</sup> Auden was supposed to be living in a delightful sixteenth-century dwelling called the Brewhouse — these days invariably referred to as 'Auden Cottage' — situated in the garden of the Canon's Residence at the south-west corner of Tom Quad. However, this accommodation was not at that stage ready for occupation and so, in the meantime, Auden lodged temporarily at All Souls College. Even though, as a result of this arrangement, he was 'living out' of College,<sup>2</sup> Auden did, nevertheless, as an Honorary Student of Christ Church,<sup>3</sup> still have his High-Table dining-rights and his membership of the Christ Church Senior Common Room. I myself enjoyed similar privileges in the period 1971–1976 as a 'Research Lecturer of the House' — a (then) five-year research-post that is these days dubbed a 'Junior Research Fellowship'<sup>4</sup> — and it was thus at the High Table and in the Senior Common Room that I used to meet Wystan Auden. These encounters were only occasional during most of Michaelmas Term, 1972 but when, by November that year, and throughout Hilary Term, 1973, he was at last fully established in 'the cottage', they were *daily*. After that latter term, he migrated back to Austria for his customary annual sojourn at the house that he shared at Kirchstetten with — as he would now be called — his partner, Chester Kallman, and he died, suddenly and unexpectedly, that September, in Vienna, when he was on the very point of returning to Oxford. It will be apparent from this sequence of events that Auden's physical residence within the precincts of Christ Church during his last period there was effectively limited to little more than one complete term, Hilary Term, 1973. It is largely about that term — and, to a lesser extent, the previous one — that I shall be reminiscing here.

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<sup>1</sup> David Luke, like Wystan Auden, was himself (in the Christ Church jargon) a 'Gremial of the House' — that is, he had formerly been an undergraduate at Christ Church.

<sup>2</sup> Auden was, indeed, on a technicality, also still 'living out' even when he was eventually installed in the Brewhouse, for that building, being situated, as it is, in a Canon's garden, is, thereby, according to the Christ Church conventions, 'Cathedral' territory, and *not* 'College'.

<sup>3</sup> An 'Honorary Student' is what other Oxford colleges would call an 'Honorary Fellow'.

<sup>4</sup> This is a perplexing name-change to have occurred, for, unlike other Oxford colleges that have adopted the designation 'Junior Research Fellow', Christ Church does not have 'Fellows' of any *other* type.

Over the course of the intervening 35 years, I have, from time to time, recounted privately the ‘Auden anecdotes’ that I am about to retail here. Furthermore, when he was researching material for his book *Auden*,<sup>5</sup> the author Richard Davenport-Hines interviewed me at some length, subsequently using some, but by no means all, of what I told him, for *Auden*.<sup>5</sup> Finally, after attending the Auden Centenary Commemoration at Christ Church on the weekend of June 23/24, 2007, I began to realize that what I could say about W. H. Auden in the last couple of terms that he spent in Christ Church — from the point of view of an avowedly non-literary scientific researcher<sup>6</sup> in his twenties — might, after all, have some appeal to a wider audience. This, therefore, is why I have decided to record these stories, after waiting all these years. I must emphasize immediately that the reader will not find here anything scandalous or sensational. Indeed, I shall generally be somewhat more enthusiastic and positive than were previous (and more senior) Christ Church contemporaries who long ago recorded their accounts of Auden’s last terms in Oxford. I hope, though, that what I have to say will give further insight into the character, humour and *modus vivendi* of the man. At the very least, the recollections recounted here might possibly be of some minor archival interest and could perhaps be material to a more accurate assessment of the elusive personality possessed by this most complex and intriguing of twentieth-century authors.

## 2. Arrival: Michaelmas Term, 1972

When Wystan Auden came to Christ Church in Michaelmas Term, 1972, even though he was there with the collective blessing of the Governing Body, his arrival was hardly to universal acclaim from the entire Common Room. Some of the more senior, ‘establishment’ members viewed with considerable concern — lest it adversely affect the College’s reputation — what they would have regarded as his somewhat louche life-style, centred, as it was, around homosexuality. Furthermore, his move to New York in 1939 was also a cause for comment. This emigration was interpreted in some circles as being tantamount to an act of cowardice, notwithstanding the fact that Auden had deliberately put himself in harm’s way when reporting the wars in Spain and in China during the 1930s, had subsequently offered himself to the US Army (but was in fact turned down), and did eventually see service — albeit *after* 1945 — in the post-war administration of Germany. What has to be borne in mind, however, in deference to the Common Room ‘Old Guard’, is that theirs was the generation that had been on active service in the Second World War — indeed, several of the Common Room’s ‘elder statesmen’ had served bravely and with distinction, though, being modest and reserved as was characteristic of men of that era (with almost everything being understated), they seldom talked about it. Furthermore, it should be recalled that, in 1972, the end of hostilities (1945) was then considerably less distant in the past than the period under

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, Heinemann, London, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> As a young Research Lecturer, although I did also teach undergraduates, my primary obligation, so far as the Governing Body was concerned, was to undertake research. I was, therefore, one of what another Christ Church literary colleague, the late Dr. J. I. M. Stewart (a distinguished Hardy scholar, a.k.a. the author ‘Michael Innes’), used to dub ‘the investigating classes’. In fact, J. I. M. Stewart/Michael Innes once told me that he based a fictional character on me when, in one of his books, he needed a representative of the said ‘investigating classes’. Unfortunately, I do not now recall in which book this was. . . It is also worth noting here that, according to Davenport-Hines<sup>5</sup> (p. 338), J. I. M. Stewart was a senior don with whom Wystan Auden established a cordial *rapprochement*.

consideration (the early 1970s) is as I write now, in 2007. Furthermore, when Auden composed his celebrated poem *September 1, 1939*,<sup>7</sup> the time of his writing it was, by Michaelmas Term, 1972, about as far in the past as that term is now. With regard to the matter of homosexuality in the United Kingdom, change, in 1972, had been even more recent; the law legalizing the practice in England and Wales had then been in force for a mere five years. Analogous laws allowing homosexual acts in Scotland and in Northern Ireland were still in the distant future, not having been introduced until 1980 and 1982, respectively — the latter being a decade *after* the period 1972–1973 that is under review here. When looked at in the light of all these observations, therefore, the attitude of some of the more-established element of the Christ Church Senior Common Room thirty-five years ago can surely be understood, if not necessarily actually condoned from a modern point of view. Be that as it may, we in the Research Lecturership body had little or no direct experience of either of these matters, and I for one simply thought that it was a huge privilege routinely and continually to be meeting, over meals and just informally around the Common Room, this world-famous author who — I resort to a *cliché* but it is appropriate and true — was ‘a legend in his own life-time’.

Not long before Christmas, 1972, Wystan had published his latest anthology, *Epistle to a Godson*.<sup>8</sup> Now, my sister-in-law, Pearl, who has knowledge and appreciation of Auden’s work, was in awe of my situation and could scarcely believe that I was meeting this man daily at meals. I therefore reasoned that I would be in Pearl’s ‘good books’ for life if I could only arrange for her Christmas present that year to be a signed Auden first-edition. For this reason, one evening before the end of Term, I had secreted about my person a couple of copies of *Epistle* as we gathered in the Common Room before going up to Dinner in Hall. With some trepidation (for I had already found that he could, on occasions, be a bit grumpy about such an intrusion), I approached Wystan explaining that my sister-in-law is an enthusiast for his work, and asking if he would autograph a book for her. He beamed a smile and said: ‘With pleasure’, and, adding ‘I don’t know your sister-in-law, so I’ll just sign it’, he duly endorsed it ‘W. H. Auden’ (with the letters ‘W’ and ‘H’ joined together), in the process also striking through, with a single horizontal line, the printed ‘W. H. Auden’ on the title page. He then said: ‘There’s a mistake on page 17’ and, with that, he went straight to the page and, without appearing to look at all closely at it, he ‘dive-bombed’ the book with the tip of my pen — to my considerable consternation, lest the nib become crossed. Later I observed that all he had done was simply to insert a *comma* — but it was placed precisely in the right spot. (It was between the words ‘Farewell’ and ‘and’ in line 14 of page 17 of the first edition, cited in Note 8, below)<sup>9</sup>. Emboldened by this favourable response to my initial request, I then plucked up the courage to produce the second copy of *Epistle to a Godson* that I had with me and asked if he would also sign it — this time, for *me*. He did so again, willingly and graciously, once more striking out the printed ‘W. H. Auden’ on the title page and inserting the typographical corrections, but on this occasion inscribing

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<sup>7</sup> The title of course denotes the date on which Germany invaded Poland, two days before Britain’s disregarded ultimatum concerning this violation brought the United Kingdom into World War II on 3 September.

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Auden, *Epistle to a Godson*, Faber & Faber, London, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> I have been told by Mr. Anthony Thwaite (personal letter to the author, 21 August 2007) that *his* copy of *Epistle to a Godson*,<sup>8</sup> which Wystan inscribed for Mr. Thwaite at the Cheltenham Festival in 1972, has an Auden correction on page 70 — stanza 3, line 2, Auden’s added comma replacing a full stop after the word ‘too’. On examining my own copy, I find that that correction is there, also. . .

it: ‘To Roger Mallion with best wishes from Wystan Auden’. At the time, I felt mildly short-changed that Pearl had got the universally identifiable ‘W. H. Auden’ whereas ‘all’ I had was ‘Wystan Auden’, which — I naïvely reckoned at the time — hardly anyone outside the circles of the *literati* would recognize. Now, of course, 35 years on, I know better. . .

Later, Wystan recommended to me his ‘commonplace book’, *A Certain World*,<sup>10</sup> and said: ‘I’ll get my publisher to send you one.’ This did in fact arrive, through the post, directly from the publisher — but, it was, of course, entirely untouched by the Auden hand and, regrettably, I never did get round to asking him to sign it, because it seemed that he was always there, and it looked as though he always *would* be there. I somehow took his presence for granted, and fondly thought that I could ask him at any time. . .

That incident of the ‘inserted comma’ well illustrates Wystan Auden’s extremely accurate memory for his own works. This attribute extended to his anecdotes and whenever he repeated a story — which he often did, to the well-documented annoyance of the some of the senior, ‘establishment’ members of the Common Room but endearingly to some indulgent others — it was invariably in exactly the same words as he had used the previous time. I can be certain of this because, although I have a notoriously bad memory for faces, I do have an extremely accurate recall of the spoken word and I have an especially reliable memory for a ‘good line’. I do therefore concede that he certainly did often repeat stories, as has frequently been claimed, and this has led to the popular belief that, in his last period at Christ Church, Auden was boringly repetitious. However, even when he *was* somewhat inclined to ‘recycle’, I simply took the line that old people frequently *are* repetitious anyway, and generally regarded these iterations simply as a small cost for the privilege of hearing at first hand someone whom I recognised as a distinguished and valued senior member of the Common Room.

### **3. *About the House in Hilary Term, 1973: Routine, Work Habits, Punctuality***

Anyone who has read the major biographies of Wystan Auden<sup>5,11,12</sup> will know of his obsession about punctuality. He was always on time at meals (1.00 p.m. for lunch in the Lee Building, 7.15 p.m. [Christ Church Time<sup>13</sup>] for dinner in Hall) and he was witheringly critical of anyone who was not punctual. I well recall that he often used to berate — albeit gently and tongue-in-cheek — his friend and supporter David Luke, who not infrequently arrived for dinner at the last minute. Wystan belonged to the era and the social class in which people had nannies, and he would chastize David in a somewhat hectoring, rather patronizing, mock-‘nanny-ish’ sort of voice, saying “You’re *late!*”

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<sup>10</sup> W. H. Auden, *A Certain World. A Commonplace Book*, Faber & Faber, London, 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden. The Life of a Poet*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden. A Biography*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Christ Church has the peculiarity that its official (Cathedral and College) functions, such as Dinner in Hall, operate ‘by the Cathedral Clock’. Because Oxford is five minutes of longitude to the west of the Greenwich Meridian, ‘Christ Church Time’ is five minutes behind British Standard Time. As a result of this, Dinner — officially at 7.15 p.m. ‘by the Cathedral Clock’ — is actually at what the wide world outside would regard as 7.20 p.m.

*Mustn't* be late!" And he even sometimes actually added: "Nanny says that you *mustn't* be late!" Another invariable ritual was the 'cocktail hour' which, for Auden, was always at 5.50 p.m. This self-imposed regularity extended even to bed-times and getting-up times. Wystan had somehow convinced himself that he needed twelve hours' sleep and so his routine was to go to bed at 8.45 p.m. and to rise at 8.45 a.m. In between, he worked regular 'office-hours' on his various writings. Thinking (naïvely) that poets operated on flashes of inspiration, I once asked him whether he kept a pad and pencil by his bedside in case he dreamt up a brilliant idea or phrase during the night. He replied in an emphatic, and somewhat grumpy, irritated way: "Oh no, no! Certainly not! Certainly not! No! No, I *never* work after dinner, *never* after dinner." And then his face suddenly wreathed into a gentle smile as he added. "After all, at dinner, I've been *drinking!*" I do confess to being a little disillusioned that this legendary literary figure essentially just worked 'nine-till-five'. That did dash somewhat my romantic and fondly held illusions about how poets create their masterpieces.

This early bed-time did put constraints on other activities. For example, Wystan perennially — and, to the rest of us, inexplicably — was constantly worried about *money*; he seemed always to fear that he would not have enough of it to survive. Because of this, he undertook various activities that he did not really want to do, and freely admitted that he was doing them purely for the money. These included appearing on television 'chat' shows such as *Parkinson*. On one occasion, I recall that Wystan took part in an edition of Michael Parkinson's programme together with his Oxford contemporary — and, according to Osborne (page 39)<sup>10</sup> and Carpenter (page 78),<sup>11</sup> at one time very intimate friend — the late Richard Crossman, a member of New College and a former minister in the then recently defeated Labour Government.<sup>14</sup> Now, programmes such as *Parkinson* were not broadcast 'live' but were filmed in advance for later transmission. What therefore amused us about this situation was that such programmes were normally broadcast in the later part of the evening — of course, in those days, domestic video-recorders were almost a decade in the future — and so Wystan himself never saw his own television programmes, because of his 8.45 p.m. bed-time.

A feature of Wystan Auden that it was difficult to be unaware of for anyone who shared any space with him was his chain-smoking and his conspicuous consumption of alcohol. I do not know how many cigarettes he smoked per day but I can say that whenever I think of the man I always mentally picture him with a cigarette. As for alcohol, in addition to his pre-dinner cocktails (presumably taken in the privacy of the Brewhouse and/or sometimes in the Common Room), which were usually followed by a couple of glasses of wine at dinner, he invariably consumed a post-prandial brandy or two in the Common Room. These brandies were the subject of a little good-natured jocularly on the part of the scientific Research Lecturers. The system for purchasing drinks that operated in the Senior Common Room was that a member helped himself and then stated his purchase and signed his initials on a white card (with a Christ Church crest at the top), a new one of which was placed on the drinks table for this purpose, each evening, by the late Mr. Cyril Little, the Common Room Butler. For example, I like port, and so, on taking a glass, I would write 'R.B.M. 1 port'. Wystan liked brandy, so he would likewise sign 'W.H.A. 1 brandy'. The joke among the young

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<sup>14</sup> I believe that the film of this particular *Parkinson* programme still exists in the television archives, for I have since seen a broadcast of it.

scientific ‘set’ in the Common Room was that Wystan’s idea of what ‘one brandy’ constituted was such an outrageous overestimate that we used to jest that a *normal*-sized brandy would be about what, with mock scientific solemnity, we dubbed ‘300,000 micro-Audens’.<sup>15</sup> There was a rumour that, although he had by this stage of the evening usually retired back to his pantry, wily Mr. Little was well aware of all of this and that when, later, in the course of doing his accounts, he saw ‘W.H.A. 1 brandy’ on the card, he recorded on Wystan’s ‘battels’ (that is, his Common Room/College bill) that *three* brandies had been consumed.

On one occasion, I did have a serious and frank discussion with Wystan about the dangers of heavy smoking and drinking. He freely acknowledged that a life-style such as his involved risks. However, he concluded our deliberations with the incontrovertible (but prophetic) words: “Anyway, at my age, why should I worry?” He was right, of course, but, looking at him, I found it extremely hard to credit that, with his uniquely distinguishing ‘trade-mark’ complexion that was like the surface of a crocodile-skin hand-bag,<sup>16</sup> his actual chronological age (as distinct from his ostensible age) was only sixty-six. Laughing at himself somewhat — and, at the same time, exhibiting a commendable *joie de vivre* in his attitude to aging — Wystan frequently used to joke that, in any gathering of people in his presence, he had in the past always automatically assumed that he was amongst the youngest people in the assembly. Until not long before the period 1972/1973 about which I am reminiscing here, Wystan apparently still tended to make this assumption, but, latterly, he had finally come to realize that, in such a grouping, he was in fact usually the *oldest* person present.

Thus it was that, during the course of Hilary Term, 1973, the younger members<sup>17</sup> of the Common Room, especially, became used to the regular rhythm of life of their somewhat pedantic and fairly truculent — yet somehow gentle — senior colleague with, it has to be admitted, a dishevelled and rather unhygienic overall appearance. These attributes notwithstanding, Wystan endeared himself to me because he generally treated the Research Lecturership body with courtesy and kindness and — what I especially appreciated — he had *time* for them.

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<sup>15</sup> *Explanation:* An ‘Auden’ — in the tongue-in-cheek jargon, of the Common Room’s young scientific fraternity — was a *unit of capacity* defined to be a volume equal in size to one of Wystan’s brandies. As the name implies, a ‘micro-Auden’ was one-millionth of an Auden; 300,000 micro-Audens was, accordingly, 0.3 of an Auden. Put another way, we estimated that a normal brandy was about 30% of the volume of one of Wystan’s brandies!

<sup>16</sup> My friend and contemporary Dr. Michael Glasby has observed of Auden that ‘. . . his face was like a relief map of the Alps.’

<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps of interest to emphasize that the younger element was the largest sub-set of the Common Room that Wystan routinely interacted with *en bloc*. This is because they, in the main, were, like him, single and ‘lived in’. Emoluments for Research Lecturers in those days were modest — £960 was the stipend in my first year (1971–1972) which, even when one considers the greater buying power of money in the early 1970s, was, on the face of it, a fairly frugal remuneration. The rooms in College and the High-Table dining-rights (‘free of rent, rates and taxes’, as the Christ Church By-Laws quaintly stipulated) that were part-and-parcel of a Research Lecturership were, accordingly, a vital component of a Research Lecturer’s income which — for economic reasons even if for no other — he simply had to take up. In practice, of course, dining at High Table was not just an economic necessity: it was a very agreeable privilege and, as a result, the actual, *de facto* life-style of a Research Lecturer was out of all proportion to his notional income of less than one thousand pounds per year.

#### 4. The Common Room and the High Table

Certain vestiges of Christ Church's long history manifest themselves in the hierarchies that exist in the Christ Church of today. Thus, Dinner in Hall is a College (Foundation) affair presided over by individuals in the order of their precedence in the Foundation as a whole and so includes the Chapter of the Cathedral as well as the body of Students (what other colleges call Fellows). The Senior Common Room, however, is the province of the Students who appoint their own Common Room Officers. The Common Room president is called the Curator.

Occasionally neither Chapter nor Students are dining and so a member of the Lecturership presides, chosen, not according to seniority, but strictly alphabetically. When, however, after Dinner in Hall, the diners move down the spiral staircase to the Common Room the precedence changes so that a Research Lecturer *'trumps'* (a) The Dean, (b) any member of the Chapter, and (c) any *Honorary* Student (the last of these categories, of course, being that of W. H. Auden).

At the time when Wystan Auden came back for his third and final period at Christ Church, the Common Room had moved on from the days of the 1950s, when Auden was Professor of Poetry (1956–1961). Then, I understand, formal Common Room Dessert was laid out almost every night for a variety of 'living-in' dons who were still talked about in my day — such as Robin ('D') Dundas (1884 – 1960) and Sir Roy Harrod (1900 – 1978). By the early 1970s, though, the ritual of formal Dessert, complete with plates, cutlery, fruit, port, madeira, sauternes, coffee, *etc.* — was regularly taken only once per week, on Tuesdays. On the other nights, unless any member had an invited guest, there was usually no formal Dessert. Colleagues simply had a quick after-dinner coffee in the Common Room (more often than not just *standing* to drink it) and then hurried off to their evening's engagements or work. Under these circumstances, Wystan would usually have an 'Auden'<sup>14</sup> or two — alone, if necessary — and then himself shuffle off to bed by 8.45 p.m. It was quite evident that this state of affairs was a considerable disappointment to Wystan and I consider it to be a major contributing factor to why, during the period 1972–1973, Auden *was*, as has often been claimed,<sup>10,11,5,18,19,20</sup> in a somewhat lonely predicament. He certainly noticed when the company was sparse. I recall, for example, that when — as frequently happened in the early 1970s, but not, I believe, in the late 1950s — only half a dozen or so people were present at the High Table, he would often look around and comment, audibly and emphatically: 'We *are* very few tonight, *aren't we?*'

Wystan was sometimes wont rather mischevously to try to *shock* other members' guests seated next to him at table — normally by asking them point blank whether they

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<sup>18</sup> David Luke, 'W. H. Auden and the House', in: *Christ Church, Oxford, a Portrait of the House*, edited by Christopher Butler, Third Millennium Publishing, London, 2006, pp 167–169.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Walker, 'A memory of Auden', in: *Christ Church, Oxford, a Portrait of the House*, edited by Christopher Butler, Third Millennium Publishing, London, 2006, pp 170–171.

<sup>20</sup> P. K. Walker, 'Auden thoughts', *Theology*, 1977, LXXX (No. 678), pp 428–438.

performed their natural functions in unusual, unlikely (and, invariably, insanitary) places! I found by experience that the only effective defence against this wicked habit of Wystan's was to warn my guests in advance of the likely questions — and even to encourage them, within reason, to 'give as good as they got'. When his tactics were, thereby, frequently thwarted by this priming, and he thus failed to shock as he had hoped, Wystan was endearingly, naïvely and *genuinely* puzzled that the guest 'victim' just took the questions in his stride.

Neither did Wystan always have the last word at Common Room Dessert. I recall one occasion when Canon Peter Walker was present. Peter Walker, then Suffragan Bishop of Dorchester and later the Bishop of Ely, is a gentle and kindly man who, realizing, I suspect, Wystan's fundamental loneliness, was especially friendly and generally 'pastoral' towards him; he was indeed, I believe, Wystan's highest-level *confidant* among the Christ Church 'great and the good',<sup>18,21,22</sup> and probably, after David Luke, his closest one. He was also knowledgeable about, and an enthusiast for, Auden's poetry. On the occasion in question someone had routinely offered Wystan some fruit from the bowl. Instead of simply saying 'No, thank you', he made a great song-and-dance about it. He expostulated — noisily and at length: 'No, no, thank you. No, no, I *never* take fruit. No, no, *never* have fruit.' When Wystan's bluster eventually subsided, the soft, quiet and calm voice of Peter Walker was heard, saying: 'Oh, so you mean that you would have been perfectly safe in the Garden of Eden?'

I can remember bringing two guests to Dinner and Common Room Dessert on the same evening in two successive weeks during Hilary Term, 1973. On Friday, 26 January my guest was Dr. Brian O'Leary and, later, I invited Mr. John Morrison. Both were friends from Jesus College (where I had been stationed, as a Supernumerary Member of the Graduate Common Room, in the period 1969–1971). At High Table on the evening when Brian O'Leary was the guest Wystan sat — facing down the Hall — at the end of the table, in the seat nearest to the exit that gives access to the spiral staircase leading down to the Common Room. Brian sat next to him and I was seated on the other side of Brian. During the meal, I could not hear much of Brian and Wystan's conversation, but Brian told me afterwards that Wystan had disclosed that John Betjeman and he had recently had great fun inventing a new game, which they called *Snobs*; mysteriously, it '... ended at Buckingham Palace' — though, unfortunately, Brian did not question Wystan further on this intriguing tit-bit of information. When the meal was over, we all rose, as usual, and the Dean (the late The Very Reverend Dr. Henry Chadwick), who was presiding, uttered the brief post-prandial grace, '*Benedicto Benedicatur*', after which the entire table would normally have stood aside and waited — as is the custom when the Dean presides — to allow the Dean to walk from his presiding position at the centre of the table and then be the first to make his exit down the spiral staircase (the rest then following, in no particular order). However, this time,

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Walker had the distinction of being the only Canon of Christ Church for several hundred years to get married whilst in office. His wife, Jean, was also very welcoming and gracious to me and to the other Research Lecturers.

<sup>22</sup> Davenport-Hines<sup>5</sup> (p. 338) has recorded a '...new but not intimate friendship. . .' with Canon Peter Walker and, according to Carpenter<sup>11</sup> (p. 446), Wystan '... said to David Luke that the friendship with [Peter] Walker was one of the things that had made his coming to Oxford worthwhile.' In a letter to the author of 23 August 2007, The Rt. Reverend Peter Walker, having read a draft of this memoir, wrote: 'I don't think I was so close [a] confidant of W. H. A. as your words would imply but David Luke did tell me that W. H. A. had made such a remark to him on the morning he left Oxford.'

as soon as the Dean had pronounced the grace, Wystan, from his vantage-point end-position on the high table, fled immediately down the stairs to the Common Room, *ahead of* the Dean. Brian O’Leary — who was well aware of the Christ Church conventions on these matters — said to me in astonishment and disbelief: ‘Auden’s gone out before the Dean!’ It is possible that, on this occasion, Wystan might have been sulking somewhat because, during dinner, he had tried the aforementioned ‘shock-tactics’ on Brian who, however, was able confidently and unflinchingly to deflect the ‘natural-functions’ question, giving it a riposte that left poor Wystan totally non-plussed.

After dinner, because of the presence of a guest, a small Common Room Dessert was laid on. The only people present at this dessert were myself, Brian, the Archdeacon of Oxford (the late The Venerable Carl Witton-Davies who was, of course, a member of the Chapter) and Wystan (who, as already noted, was an *Honorary Student*). According to the rules, therefore, I was the one who should have presided at Common Room Dessert that evening. However, as the four of us approached the table, Wystan abruptly took the presiding chair and sat down. Of course, I well knew the rules but, on the other hand, who was I, as a 28-year-old junior in the presence of a legendary figure who entered the College nearly 20 years before I was born, to create an embarrassing scene and usurp from him his ‘moment of glory’? (Besides, having preceded the Dean out of formal Hall, Wystan was clearly in no mood that evening to let a mere Research Lecturer stand in the way of his presiding in the Senior Common Room!) I therefore, naturally, let the matter go, and the dessert proceeded. However, this sequence of events did not go unnoticed by Mr. Little who, I was only too aware, was quietly smouldering in the corner throughout the entire course of this little *débâcle*. Mr. Little’s remit from the Curator was to run the Common Room in gentle, seamless compliance with its conventions, and, because of this, he himself was more offended than anyone if the Common Room’s rules were broken. The following week, therefore, when I was bringing my second guest, John Morrison, Mr. Little approached me in the Common Room earlier in the day, and he said, with quiet but emphatic and steely determination: ‘It’s just yourself, your guest, the Archdeacon and Dr.<sup>23</sup> Auden in Dessert tonight, sir — and *you* will be presiding.’ He called me ‘sir’, but it was unambiguously clear who was in charge, here! Consequently, as the dessert party convened in the Common Room after dinner that evening, I made a determined — though, I hope, not too obvious — dash for the head of the table, and confidently occupied it. Wystan looked a bit disgruntled but had to accept, for the moment, this *fait accompli* and he just quietly and compliantly took his place (at right angles to my direction) on my left. On my right (also at right angles to my direction) was John Morrison — the guest customarily sat in the supposedly honoured place on the right-hand of the person presiding. On John’s right sat the Archdeacon. I then duly performed the Common Room ritual of giving my guest a ‘back-hander’ by filling his port glass from the decanter, filling my own, and then passing the decanter to my left,<sup>24</sup> to be received by Wystan. After filling his glass, he

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<sup>23</sup> Wystan’s Honorary Oxford D. Litt. was awarded at a ceremony in 1971 at which the late (ex) Professor (ex) Sir Anthony Blunt — subsequently infamous as a spy, his several honours being revoked by Her Majesty The Queen — was similarly fêted; (for a photograph of the two on that occasion, please see Davenport-Hines’s *Auden*,<sup>5</sup> in the photographic section between pp 310 and 311); although his degree was honorary, the college administration generally accorded Auden the title ‘Doctor’, as a courtesy.

<sup>24</sup> In the course of which, according to the Christ Church tradition, the decanter was *not* lifted physically off the table, but its contact with the table was always assiduously and continuously maintained during this process of ‘passing the port’.

slid the decanter to the Archdeacon, on *his* left, and then, eventually, *via* John, the decanter came back to me. According to the rules, there it should have sat until I, as the chairman, decided that it was time to send the port round for its second (and final<sup>25</sup>) circuit of the table. However, as I was half-turned, talking to John on my right, I became aware, out of the corner of my left eye, of a craggy, claw-like hand reaching across and dropping onto the port decanter in front of me and *dragging* it away. This hand did, of course, belong to Wystan, impatient for his second glass. So, although, in this hierarchical jousting-match, I had had the moral victory of securing the presiding chair, Wystan essentially made his point and had the ‘last laugh’, in the end. ‘*Touché!*’, I thought (but dared not articulate. . .)

### 5. The Visit of Chester Kallman

The late Chester Kallman, Auden’s friend and partner for some 34 years, visited Christ Church during Hilary Term, 1973, and Wystan brought him to Dinner in Hall. When we gathered in the Common Room beforehand, Wystan introduced me to Kallman and then went off leaving the two of us to make pre-dinner small-talk together. It was immediately clear to me that Kallman was desperate for a cigarette. He asked me if I had a match; being a non-smoker, I did not. A quick scan of immediately adjacent colleagues revealed none whom I knew to be a smoker. Then I remembered that there was usually a large box of matches on the Common Room writing desk — but not on *that* evening. Then I realised that, of course, Wystan, being a smoker, would have matches on him, and he was just over at the other side of the room; so, I said to Chester Kallman, ‘Of course — Wystan! *He* smokes; *he*’ll have a match!’ At this suggestion, Kallman went coy and diffident<sup>5</sup> on me and, somewhat sheepishly, replied, ‘No, I don’t want to ask Wystan — he’d say I ought to have my own’. Soon after that, dinner was announced and, as far as I could tell, on this occasion, Kallman ascended the spiral staircase into the Hall with his nicotine craving still unsatisfied. Sadly, Chester Kallman was to die less than two years later (and little more than 15 months after Wystan Auden himself), on 18 January 1975, at the young age of only 54.

### 6. Ladies’ Guest Night: an Invitation to the Brewhouse

In the early 1970s, Christ Church was an all-male institution.<sup>26</sup> Even bringing a female guest to a normal High-Table dinner was not possible under the rules that were then in force. In a modest attempt to ameliorate this deficiency in the College’s social arrangements, Ladies’ Guest Nights were held on Saturdays a couple of times



<sup>25</sup> The convention was that the port circulated only *twice*. After that, if members or their guests wanted more to drink, they had to sign for it on the card, as described earlier (in §3).

<sup>26</sup> The first female member was not admitted until after my 1976 departure from Christ Church. This was Dr. Penelope Chaloner who, like me, was a Research Lecturer of the House.

per term. To this event, as the name implies, a member could bring a female guest — though, explicitly, *not* his wife.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes I used to attend these events with a guest and, on other occasions, I went alone — free, thereby, to enjoy the company of, and conversation with, colleagues' guests. This latter was the situation at one of the Ladies' Guest Nights in Hilary Term, 1973. On that particular occasion, the similarly 'guestless' Wystan Auden was likewise destined to be a lone 'bookend' on the High Table. Motivated by the agreeable symmetry of this situation, Wystan invited me to the Brewhouse for pre-dinner drinks. This was the first (and only) time that I was invited there, and it was thus with some interest and curiosity that, precisely at the appointed time, I climbed the metal staircase leading to Wystan's quarters. When I arrived, he was almost ready; though still, as yet, jacketless, he was wearing evening-dress trousers (with braces), a white shirt and a black bow tie. He ushered me into the sitting room where, on the table, stood bottles of vodka and Martini. He pushed the two, and a glass, towards me, saying 'You mix it yourself — you know how you like it.' In fact, I did *not* know how I liked it, for vodka and Martini was not, in my sheltered existence, a drink that I had knowingly ever had before. Somewhat nervously, I carefully poured some of the vodka into the glass provided and then, equally gently, I added some Martini, on top. To my consternation and embarrassment, the two ingredients just sat there in the glass like two immiscible liquids, with an all-too-visible boundary between the two layers. Saying, 'You need to stir it!', Wystan drew a particularly greasy and unhygienic-looking biro-pen out of the inside pocket of his jacket — lying on a nearby chair — and proceeded to stir my cocktail with it. To a hypochondriac such as I am this sight was a *horribile visu* moment, but I tried to reassure myself with the thought: 'Alcohol *does* kill germs, doesn't it?'

## 7. Auden and Science

As is well-known,<sup>5,10,11</sup> when Wystan Auden entered Christ Church as an undergraduate in 1925 his initial intention was to study Zoology. He frequently related the story of his interview in which, at one stage, he was asked to identify some specimen of bone. When telling this story, Wystan always concluded it by saying (with a smile) 'I told them I thought it was the jawbone of an *ass!*' — and the word 'ass' was invariably rendered emphatically, with his idiosyncratic mid-Atlantic burr, as if it were spelt 'airse'. (Wystan was, incidentally, wrong, in his attribution — though I do not now recall what he said the bone that he was asked to identify actually was). He very soon changed Faculty to study English, but, towards the end of his life, he often drew attention — and always with pride — to the fact that although he no longer subscribed to any literary journals, he did still subscribe to a scientific one: *Scientific American*.

In the December 1972 issue of that journal, a certain G. S. Stent published an article,<sup>28</sup> entitled 'Prematurity and uniqueness in scientific discovery', which, Wystan Auden claimed,<sup>29</sup> demonstrated '... so convincingly that scientific research and artistic

<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the *Common Room* held occasional — I think, annual — Guest Nights at which a member's guest explicitly *had* to be his wife — or, at least, a woman whom he had very serious intentions of marrying.

<sup>28</sup> G. S. Stent, 'Prematurity and uniqueness in scientific discovery', *Scientific American* **1972**, 227, (12) pp 84–93.

<sup>29</sup> W. H. Auden, Letter to the Editor, *Scientific American* **1973**, 228, (3) p. 8.

fabrication have more in common than most people suppose.<sup>29</sup> Having digested Stent's paper, Wystan decided that he was going to contribute to the subsequent correspondence about it, and, one day, in the Common Room, telling me that he intended to write a Letter to *Scientific American*, he asked me if there were such a thing as 'bad science'. He said, 'I know what bad art is, but is there such a thing as bad science?' I gave the matter a little thought and offered him two (probably apocryphal) quotations from no less a scientific authority than Lord Rutherford. One form of 'bad science' that Rutherford was apparently very concerned about was the pointless gathering of experimental results for no particular immediate purpose; this practice he witheringly described as 'stamp collecting'. On another occasion, when asked to appraise some work of this type, Lord Rutherford reportedly made the damning comment: 'It isn't even *wrong!*' Having passed on these little gems to Wystan, I ventured to think to myself: 'If I play my cards correctly, here, I can get a joint publication with Auden. That would certainly look good on the 'C. V.' — even for a scientist!' However, all my hopes were dashed when, a few days later, during lunch — when I was sitting near to Wystan — he leaned across the intervening person, as we were starting the meal, and said to me, in a confidential tone, 'I've sent off that Letter — OM!' Now colleagues in the Common Room well knew from this mannerism that when Wystan cleared his throat and said 'OM' after a statement, this signalled 'End of Conversation' on the matter, as far as *he* was concerned. I knew immediately, therefore, that my cause to be the proud possessor of what a mathematician would call 'an Auden-Number of 1' (that is, to be an Auden co-author) was irretrievably lost. Wystan's Letter to the Editor was eventually published in the March, 1973 issue of *Scientific American*.<sup>29</sup> I regret to report that even a casual perusal of its content<sup>29,30</sup> shows that, unfortunately, my 'Lord Rutherford' input had evidently made very little impact on Wystan. . .

## 8. Epilogue

Late on the morning of Saturday, 29 September 1973, I was returning to college from the Theoretical Chemistry Department in order to have lunch when, on passing through Tom Quad, I noticed that the Christ Church flag was flying at half mast. Knowing that this custom was practised only on the death of a resident senior member or a current junior member, I was sufficiently concerned to make a detour to the Porters' Lodge at Tom Gate to enquire of the reason. The porter informed me: 'Dr. Auden has died'. Now I had, from time to time, thought that Wystan's return was about due<sup>31</sup> and I had generally been looking forward to it. I therefore received this news with sadness — though, in retrospect, not, perhaps, with surprise, in view of Wystan's manifestly unhealthy appearance and way of life.

On my arrival at the Lee Building, I told nearby colleagues during lunch about the way in which I had just learned of Wystan's demise. Sitting exactly opposite me

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<sup>30</sup> I am very grateful to Mr. Richard Davenport-Hines<sup>5</sup> for helpfully providing the citation reference<sup>29</sup> to this paper (R. Davenport-Hines, personal letter to the author, 9 March 1995), and to Professor José Ferreira Gomes (*Universidade do Porto*) for kindly providing me with a copy of it.

<sup>31</sup> As Davenport-Hines<sup>5</sup> (page 341) has noted, Wystan's decease occurred during the night after the very day on which he and Chester Kallman had closed the Kirchstetten house for the winter, and on the eve of the first anniversary of his move from New York; according to Osborne<sup>10</sup> (page 306), Wystan was due to fly to the United Kingdom, from Vienna, on 2 October.

was the late A. J. (Alban) Krailsheimer, Tutor in French and well-known in the Common Room for his rather cutting and somewhat acerbic wit. When I told him my story Alban put down his knife and fork, and — intently, leaning forward — asked me, smilingly and with wonderfully donnish black-humour: ‘Now tell me, Roger: when you saw the flag, whom did you *hope* it was?!’ I was so taken aback by this that I did not at the time respond with what I later thought of as the ideal riposte to this provocation — namely, ‘*You!*’ (And I know that, far from being offended, had I been able to think of this reply at the time, Alban himself — always appreciative of a ‘good line’ from others, and even if at his own expense — would have much appreciated the entertaining put-down. . . )

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The funeral of Wystan Hugh Auden (21 February 1907 – 29 September 1973) took place in Kirchstetten, Austria, on 4 October 1973. His Memorial Service (which I attended) was held in Christ Church Cathedral on 27 October 1973 and, just less than a year later, on 2 October 1974, his memorial in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey was unveiled and dedicated. I consider it a privilege to have impinged on a small part of this life and I hope that the anecdotes recorded here will add, albeit if only a little, to the public’s knowledge of this fascinating and complex personality.

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**R. B. Mallion,**  
*Research Lecturer of the House, 1971–1976*

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*Canterbury,*  
September, 2009

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