

# Farewell to the Warden



THE WARDEN WITH SIR HOWARD STRINGER AND JENNIFER PATTERSON

It is a great honour, and an even greater pleasure, for me to write about Jessica's many achievements as Warden of Merton over the past 16 years. It gives me the opportunity to speak about someone I enormously respect as a scholar and colleague, but also value highly as a personal friend. All Merton's Wardens are part of its history but Jessica, I suspect, will be part of its legend. By which I mean that stories will be told around the fireside for generations to come.

I have served during Jessica's Wardenship as Principal of Postmasters, Steward of the Common Room and Sub-Warden, so we have had plenty of opportunities to cooperate, conspire, support one another, and to disagree profoundly about so many things that I have completely lost track. Our friendship is based on dissimilarity.

We generally take a different view of life. What Jessica calls 'global warming', for example, I call 'summer', and while she fears rising sea levels, I look forward to setting up my deckchair on the bastion and watching the canons of Christ Church float into the sunset.

But, having said that, we have made significant contributions to one another's life. I want to give you just one vignette from our working relationship. Some years ago a senior Chinese scholar who had been attending one of my lecture series gave me a box of biscuits and, realising the great significance of gift-giving in the Orient, I was in a quandary as to how best to respond. So I asked Jessica what I should do. I remember it was a particularly stressful Michaelmas Term with all sorts of Admissions problems and a very harassed

Jessica said, "Richard, eat the biscuits." That is surely what interdisciplinary means if it means anything. I ate those biscuits and Anglo-Chinese relations were never better. I am convinced that had she given the same advice to her friend Chris Patten we would still own Hong Kong.

Jessica came to Merton in 1994 but it scarcely seems like 16 years ago, and that is because, as a direct result of her coming, we have *all* been so very busy. Vijay Joshi captured this aspect of Jessica brilliantly by invoking the Heisenberg uncertainty principle: you can never know this lady's location and velocity simultaneously. In some ways that says all you need to know, but it does need some explanation.

Jessica herself, in her speeches over the years, has drawn upon certain key fictions to describe her activities – as *Alice in*

*Wonderland's* Red Queen, for example. You will recall her habit during Warden's collections of crying "Off with their heads! Off with their heads!" – and invariably with reference to the tutors.

But it seems to me that quite another fiction explains Jessica, and I only came to realise this quite recently when I had the pleasure of staying with her at her home on Coniston Water in the Lake District, where she grew up. When I saw her in that context everything suddenly fell into place: the key text is Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* which was inspired by Coniston Water. As we sat together by the shore, I imagined the young Jessica paddling furiously, like Peggy, into the lake to storm the island and take the Swallows' camp. And when I remembered Peggy's determination to fight eventually even if she had to 'parley' first, I thought of seeing Jessica on so many occasions striding vigorously out of College to take on the pirates of Wellington Square.

And there were challenges aplenty in the early years. One of the defining moments of Jessica's Wardenship was when she stood up in Congregation to remind the University of the undertaking it had given to the College about the green space on Mansfield Road on which it was proposed to locate the Business School. She spoke, as I remember it, with remarkable eloquence and to great effect about the importance in a collegiate university of keeping one's word, identifying that as the bedrock of all relationships between colleges, and between the colleges and the University. That took an immense amount of courage. Those of you who were not at Merton at the time may be unaware how much pressure was placed on Jessica and how much unfair

criticism was spread about the University. But she chose rather to be unpopular than wrong and secured the proper outcome not just for Merton but for the wider Oxford community.

And she was scarcely done with that problem when another group of people, for reasons best known to themselves, decided to build a massive ziggurat at the end of Philip Waller's garden. It was a considerable shock to the College at large and not especially good for Philip in particular. Jessica had to start paddling again. This time criticism came not only from within the University but even from the heir to the throne: we can only surmise that his architectural admiration for the great old ziggurats of Georgian England led him to espouse this one. But the Warden held firm and the College's long-term interests were protected.

But Jessica will be remembered, of course, more for the projects she advanced

than those she opposed. She has certainly left an enduring mark on the fabric of the College and its environs. Remembering what Merton was like in 1994, I would ask you to take a brief tour with me of the College as it today. We start in Postmaster's Yard with the superb new Finlay Building; we pass the wholly refurbished Postmaster's Hall with its house and flat for the VRFs; we enter the College through the new lodge which has so improved the Porters' working conditions; we continue to the completely refurbished kitchen and NCR; and then we move on the Old Library which has also been refurbished and fitted with a splendid new lighting system; and when we cross Mob Quad to the Chapel we find the same level and quality of renovation. Throughout the rest of the College we find over 90 rooms newly en suite, and we pass finally to Rose Lane to find the T S Eliot Theatre which is rapidly becoming the envy of Oxford. Just consider what an achievement that is for 16 years.

There is one further structure I have not yet mentioned and it provides the best possible illustration of Jessica's foresight. Having assiduously built up the Fellowship over the past ten years she has also provided in the Fitness Room the perfect means to reduce it over the next ten in accordance with government targets. The venue is perfectly appointed to inspire the middle-aged with delusions of regaining their youth. I predict that visitors to the College in, say, 2020, will find more memorial plaques in the Fitness Room than in the Chapel. In fact, we have already pre-commissioned Karl Gerth's!

A college is more than just the fabric. What really matters is community. And if I had to identify Jessica's greatest contribution



THE WARDEN AT HER FAREWELL GARDEN PARTY EARLIER THIS YEAR

it would be here. Everything has been done in the past 16 years to strengthen Merton's communal life, to increase collegiality. The matter of dining is a case in point: those wonderful evenings characterised by Michael Bowler as occasions when the sociable invited the garrulous to the detriment of the serious – he has given me enough material even for Sir Martin Taylor's farewell let alone Jessica's! But beyond that think of the new welfare arrangements for graduates and undergraduates, the MCR/SCR talks and the joint-dining of the two parlours during the long-vacation; the establishment of active Research Clusters in the Life Sciences, Global Directions and the History of the Book.

The College is more cohesive as a result and its academic success is not, I believe, unrelated to this. Jessica suggested at her Farewell Garden Party that none of the College's academic success in the Norrington Table could be attributed to her, but that is simply not true. She has done more than anyone to cultivate the intellectual environment from which our results spring. Under her Wardenship the Tutorial System has been immensely strengthened by the appointment of new tutors and Fitzjames Fellows, and its future has been protected by the endowment of several Tutorial Fellowships. And those fellowships have been endowed by alumni who regard themselves, now more than ever thanks to Jessica's work, as Mertonians for life not just till graduation. Most recently the Choral Foundation has created new opportunities for gifted musicians as well as immensely enriching the cultural life of the College.

What I have described is an extraordinary record by any standards, as the person is



THE WARDEN WITH HIH THE CROWN PRINCE OF JAPAN

extraordinary by any standards, and all the more when you remember that she has also been engaged in cutting-edge research in Sinology during the entire period of her tenure. Indeed the only thing that slowed her down in 16 years of frenetic activity at Merton was a volcano, and that not for long. The World Cup would have gone very differently if Jessica were the England manager – a job, I would suggest to you, that she could easily combine with the Slade Professorship of Art.

The consequence of Jessica's record, I believe, will be that when they come to write the history of the College in our time, she will be remembered not as the first female Warden but much more properly and appropriately as one of the great Wardens.

*Professor Richard McCabe,  
Sub-Warden, Professor of English  
Language and Literature*

*(Adapted from a speech given at the Warden's  
Farewell Dinner in Hall, 21st July 2010)*

In 1994, the year Jessica Rawson became Warden, today's undergraduates were either toddlers or else signing on at nursery. In one respect things were little different then. England's performance in the World Cup was woeful: the team failed even to qualify. But at 10 Downing Street, John Major was in occupation, having risen without trace; and Bill Clinton was at the White House. Clinton, who had left Oxford without taking a degree, was now awarded a DCL by the University, almost ten years after Margaret Thatcher, who had taken a degree, was refused one. His helicopter having landed on Christ Church school field, the scandal-prone President strolled along Dead Man's Walk and entered the University through Merton's Watergate, names which strangely troubled the secret service when preparing his route. The death toll this year indeed included the Watergate President, Richard Nixon, together with a particularly fine specimen of the deranged dictator species, Kim Il-sung of North Korea. Mourned more were the cricket commentator Brian Johnston

and the Manchester United manager Matt Busby, who had brought joy to millions (except Liverpool fans); the Nobel scientists Dorothy Hodgkin and Linus Pauling; the film directors Lindsay Anderson and Derek Jarman, and film actors Burt Lancaster and Melina Mercouri; as always, a young pop star, this time Kurt Cobain of Nirvana; a brace of once-great-novel writers Ralph Ellison and Elias Canetti, and a company of playwrights Eugène Ionesco, Dennis Potter, and John Osborne. The last was no doubt most cross about it. The leader of the Labour Party, John Smith died also, to be succeeded by a rictal grin called Tony Blair. Genocidal conflicts in the Balkans and in Rwanda were reminders of the fragility of civilisation; but the ending of apartheid and inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first black President of South Africa gave cause for optimism. Communications too were taking on dramatic new forms, with



**THE WARDEN AND PETER COOKE  
(1952) AT HER ADMISSION CEREMONY,  
NOVEMBER 1994**

the opening of the Channel Tunnel and advances of the World Wide Web. In the Church of England the first female clergy were ordained, and in Oxford the first female heads of former men's colleges assumed office. News of those colleges' intent to elect had been greeted the previous November with characteristic primitivism by the *Daily Telegraph's* Peterborough columnist. His headline proclaimed, "Oxford late score: Women 3, Men glum." This was nonsense: the Fellowships, overwhelmingly male in composition, were proud to have made a revolution.

As a matter of timing, Jessica's success came third, a few weeks after Marilyn Butler's at Exeter and Averil Cameron's at Keble; but hers was the most significant because not only was Merton the oldest Oxford college – we dismiss the claims of Univ and Balliol as trifling – it was already the highest-performing college, as ranked by Norrington Table. Being Merton, continuity and change were conjoined: with sweet symmetry, Jessica Mary Rawson bore the same initials as her predecessor John Morris Roberts. She was formally admitted as 49th Warden on 26th October 1994, and the menu at the celebratory luncheon that day did not lack impish humour: a starter of Duck Terrine, followed by Consommé Grande Duchesse, Lobster Thermidor, and Raspberry Fool. It was a light introduction to a darkening scene; but as public money for numerous college purposes shrank during the next 16 years, the Warden responded with admirable courage, and her inspirational fundraising made possible huge investments in buildings, academic posts, and student scholarships and welfare. As a consequence, the union of Mertonians across the globe has been strengthened.

It is an imperishable triumph to enter the historical record as the first woman Warden of Merton, but Jessica has never been content to settle for that alone. During her Wardenship, the number of Fellows would grow by a third, amplified primarily by distinguished research scholars, of which she herself is a personification; yet, the tutorial role remained valued, and the College would go on to win the Norrington Table many more times, so often that it may now be sensible to give us the flipping table and begin again with a different piece of furniture. But that, as Kipling liked to say, is another story.

*Philip Waller,  
Emeritus Fellow, and former Senior Tutor,  
Sub-Warden and Acting Warden*

I doubt whether anyone – not even Inspector Morse – has done so much to foster an awareness of Merton, or of Merton's academic excellence, as Jessica has. Quite apart from Merton's astounding record, year after year, even before Jessica's Wardenship, at or near the top of the Norrington Table, there must be few people now in this country who can hear the sound of the Chapel clock without recognising Merton.

The skills in which Jessica excels are phenomenal. She has mastered – if political correctness allows me to use that word for a Dame – the arcane science of the financial relationship between Oxford colleges and the University, probably better than anyone else in Oxford. The Warden is of course a renowned Chinese scholar. She is the author of many scholarly publications on Chinese decorative arts and antiquities, including bronzes, jades and porcelain.

It is difficult to pick out any one area for which Jessica's performance as Warden



THE T S ELIOT THEATRE

of Merton for 16 years most deserves our thanks. I am sure that you all know the Memorial to Sir Christopher Wren in St Paul's Cathedral which, for the non-classicists here, I will translate as "If you are looking for a Memorial, look around you". Well, you have only to look around the Merton estate, such as the Lodge and Postmaster's Hall and the T S Eliot Theatre and the other developments at Rose Lane, to see the extent to which the Warden has ruled over a fantastic expansion and refurbishment of the College's accommodation and facilities. And something which I know to be particularly close to her heart, you have only to hear the Merton Chapel Choir to realise the extent to which the standard of singing in Chapel has been transformed under her watch.

I believe that Merton now leads the field in giving bursaries for less privileged candidates. The fact that we can claim to be the most meritocratic of all Oxford colleges, owes much to Jessica's drive, determination, enthusiasm and social conscience. The marked increase in the postgraduate element at Merton during her Wardenship has been

astonishing. Perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that the near-parity of numbers between undergraduates and postgraduates has not been at the expense of either. On the contrary, the Warden's firm commitment to the Tutorial System led to the appointment of four Fitzjames Fellows to strengthen tutorial teaching at Merton.

So I conclude with our sincere thanks to her, for everything she has done to sustain the high reputation and prosperity of this College; for her enthusiasm, her compassion, her friendship and her sheer hard work.

*Lord Wright of Richmond (1951),  
Former President of the Merton Society*

The Warden has touched many lives but perhaps the biggest single group she has reached out to are the 5,000 or so old Mertonians around the world. Through her efforts, many of them, and their spouses and partners, have come to feel part of today's Merton community.

She communicated with them electronically and postally; and as chairman

of the Merton Society for most of her tenure I witnessed her many 'live' performances at our events. She faithfully attended virtually all of them (including a couple of golf society dinners, which even golfers can sometimes find a bit taxing). So ubiquitous was she that I sometimes wondered whether she employed look-alike stuntwardens as stand-ins. In the mingling moments she was equally at ease with small talk (well, perhaps not football) and large talk, but the highlights for event attendees were always her updating speeches on College.

These were far more than merely factual, including as they did beguiling underclairs about her power as Warden (little influence on Norrington success, not allowed to express her views, there merely to do the bidding of the Governing Body, etc.) and insights into her proudest achievements (seeing off formidable opposition in the Centre for Islamic Studies building dispute, expansion of the graduate body, the creation of the Choral Foundation). She also had an uncanny ability to make two completely different speeches about Merton on the same day, without repetition or hesitation.

As well as our talking guide to Merton she was also occasionally our walking guide through Chinese collections at museums home and abroad. Our last official glimpse of Jessica was in the role of beaming grandmother at the Merton Society's farewell lunch to her. She seemed very happy, as are we to have known her.

*Adrian Vickers (1958)*

A beloved warden is almost an Oxford oxymoron, but when it comes to a star-studded academic and management career, there is nothing like a dame.

Jessica's brilliant career at the British

Museum is well documented. She was an assistant keeper, a deputy keeper and keeper of the department of oriental antiques. She was in other words for 20 years a keeper. Great training for persuading dons to stay in the corner of their cages, without a whip. When dons have tenure, it is very hard to tame them, but tame them she did. Through it all, the College sustained its unblemished record of academic excellence despite the efforts of many of its alumni, myself included.

The College is her shining achievement. She has earned her Oscar for best director and producer. Under her guidance, the graduate population has more than doubled, fellowships have expanded, senior research fellowships have been revitalised. The number of Junior Research Fellows has multiplied.

The Merton family is more diverse and active than ever, with as many as 30 events a year to cement the relationship. With a little help from her friends she is constantly upgrading the College, adding 100 rooms and driving development and fundraising enthusiastically.

The Warden is unique; really one of a kind, an academic treasure. And above all she is a beloved friend to us all.

*Sir Howard Stringer (1961)*

For the Merton alumni the Warden has been a wonderfully forthright leader, who has made great efforts to keep in touch with Mertonians far and wide. She has always been fun to be with. Engaging and controversial; she was very open about the challenges facing the College and what was in her way the best way to solve them, to preserve and grow our College in its finest traditions.

Needless to say, her direct approach wasn't always the flavour for all, but personally I think the College benefitted tremendously from her determination to fight her corner for what she believed was best for Merton.

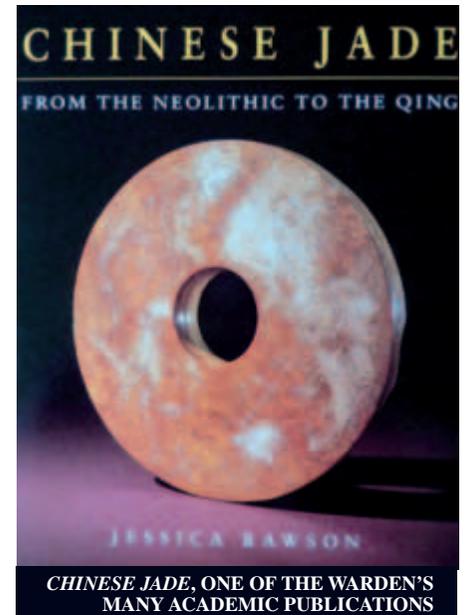
I personally will never forget a late shuffle of places at a dinner placing me next to the Warden. Within five minutes I had paid for a seminar room in our lovely new Lecture Theatre. Bravo to the Warden and good luck in your ongoing studies.

*Ian Taylor (1975)*

After 25 years of very little contact with Merton, I was invited to one of the Warden's Strategy sessions, enticed by having heard her speak in London at The First Emperor Exhibition at the British Museum and The Three Emperors at the Royal Academy.

As an undergraduate in the 70s, I had enjoyed maintenance grants and the benefits of the College endowment in a blissful and unaware sense of entitlement. It was a pleasure to understand how, under Jessica's leadership, Merton has enhanced its position at the very peak of academic excellence, responded to the challenges of the times by not only supporting and maintaining the traditional subjects, but also by electing Research and Tutorial Fellows in new subjects, and significantly improving its buildings. It was also something of a shock to listen to the Warden explain the strange and troubling nature of the University and College finances.

So I felt reconnected both by the College but as importantly by Jessica's passion for excellence and the unique qualities of Merton which she personifies: slight self-deprecation, humour, academic excellence in her field with broad ranging topics of conversation, leaving you feeling mentally



challenged and refreshed. Her notable personal success as a fundraiser will also be the foundation of the 750th Campaign and has spectacular early evidence in the T S Eliot Theatre.

*Charles Manby (1976)*

More than 13 years have gone by and I can still recall the first time I sat in Professor Rawson's office as the first Ian Taylor Scholar from China to study PPE at Merton. Not patronising in the least, she threw some pretty tough questions at me such as "What are probable reasons behind China's demise in the 19th century despite its earlier glories?"

I attempted to answer along the lines that China's talent selection method back then, the KeJu system, did little to foster the development of science and technology,

which were instrumental for the Industrial Revolution in the West. I soon realised that with a keen interest in and profound understanding of the Chinese history and culture, the Warden was using this question to challenge me to search deeper behind the “first-degree” explanations. She seemed to be more excited than me at the prospect of having a Chinese student pursuing a liberal arts degree, suggesting that a re-examination of societies aided by the Western philosophical and analytical framework could benefit the outlook of an individual as well as that of an ancient Orient nation.

On a personal level, I can testify that my Oxford education was an awakening and stimulating experience. That discussion not only prepared me for it but also has remained with me till this day.

I am thankful that our exchanges continued after I left Merton and started a career in the financial industry in Hong Kong. Often I was challenged by her insightful and uncompromising comments about China, as it strives to balance fast economic growth with sustainability and stability. Through her academic research, Professor Dame Jessica Rawson has clearly done much to promote the understanding of Chinese art and history in the West. I believe that in her regular contacts with alumni, researchers and government officials in Asia and especially China, she has also affected the minds of many, inviting us to analyse and see unbiased both the merits and deficiencies in our cultures, without taking established thinking or practices for granted. This, though undocumented, is a truly remarkable achievement with lasting impacts.

*Shengyan Fan (1997)*



**REX RICHARDS, JESSICA RAWSON & JOHN ROBERTS**

In January 2003, I migrated from another college to Merton to accept the position of Welfare Dean, which administers to the pastoral and general welfare needs of all students. Prior to my move I was gently reminded by some non-Mertonians that the college was ‘very academic’, and that Dame Jessica runs ‘an exquisitely tight ship’. These Oxonians suggested that, during undergraduate collections in particular, I should cancel all meetings, lectures and holiday plans, as they predicted there would be ‘a phalanx of teary students’ marching directly from the Warden’s office to that of the Welfare Dean. It was not long after my arrival that collections did indeed occur, and I dutifully cleared my calendar in anticipation of a deluge of distraught undergraduates. But no one knocked on my door.

To be sure, I encountered a dizzying array of welfare issues while at Merton, ranging from the weighty (death of a loved one, depression, disability provision, substance

abuse) to the wacky (creative uses of fire extinguishers in Fellows’ Quad, student tensions resulting from romantic triangles – and even quadrangles – and my personal favourite: a 2 am call from a first year who had super-glued his hand to his computer mouse).

Some might contend that academic pressure was so rarely an issue because Mertonians are a self-selecting lot of highly-motivated students who put more pressure on themselves than could any don or college administrator. There may well be truth to this, but it still represents only part of the story. A college culture that successfully (and consistently) nurtures excellence must emanate from the top; yet it cannot be imposed by fiat. It requires a gentle but strong hand that guides faculty and students to realise the potential that resides within. Having witnessed first-hand Jessica’s management talents (skills that will be rightly analysed and appreciated for decades given their truly remarkable results)

there is no question that she possessed the exceedingly rare ability to transform what is excellent into the extraordinary. I believe that the students who were fortunate to study under Jessica's leadership instinctively recognised and respected this firm and fair stewardship that helped them to achieve their very best, not only in College, but in the years to follow.

*Dr Cory Way (2001),  
Former Welfare Dean*

There is nothing like a dame. Or so said one of the regular headlines in the student rag, *The Merton News*, about one of Jessica's latest exploits. Giving a perspective of the Warden's 16 years, when as an undergraduate I was only there for three, means I can offer only a narrow view. However, many stories about the Warden passed into folklore, transcending the relatively short college life of a student.

My favourite tale demonstrated Jessica's hands on approach to College management. It was rumoured that a just-matriculated male undergraduate got locked into a bathroom in Merton Street. His friend, following the



**THE WARDEN, SUB-WARDEN & SENIOR FELLOWS (PROF MICHAEL BAKER & JOHN BARTON)**



**ROWING ON LAKE CONISTON**

advice of the College Handbook, dashed to the Lodge asking for help. The porter, who I will leave anonymous, suggested the fresher seek assistance from the Warden. So he rang her door bell, explained the dilemma, and stood back. Legend has it that Jessica marched in, kicked down the door and marched out again without a word being said.

The Warden's concern and support for students extended beyond rescue missions. She has had a passion for the Tutorial System and used her talents for fundraising to ensure its survival. She has worked hard to ensure that Merton provided the best educational experience at the University. In return she expected academic focus and excellence.

Jessica did, though, see student life as more than study. She believed College offered a unique opportunity to meet and learn from exciting individuals from around the world. Foremost among her favourite social opportunities were not bops, but Formal Hall. More than one JCR President was summoned to discuss its varying attendance, a subject which caused her great concern. Her portrait, complete with beloved Chinese pots, will forever watch over future dinners. Unlike Charles I's

portrait though, Jessica will be a difficult character for Merton to replace.

*James Lamming (2004),  
Former JCR President*

I will always remember my first encounter with Dame Jessica Rawson. There I was, as nervous as any JCR President would be before going in to meet a Head of House for the first time, but before I could say a word the Warden was straight in asking after those students who were currently suffering from swine flu. There was that immediate concern for student welfare which has stayed with me since.

In all of my dealings with Jessica Rawson, I have been struck by her passion for maintaining a warm environment here at Merton. We are lucky to live and study in the friendliest college in Oxford and that's down to the work of fantastic college staff under the guidance of a dedicated Warden. We fully recognise in the JCR what the Warden has done for us over the past 16 years, we thank her for all of her time and efforts behind the scenes and wish her all the best in her future endeavours.

*James Nation (2008),  
Former JCR President*