Update from and about former H-C scholars

Off the Shelf

Jacqueline Osherow’s Ultimatum from Paradise has been described as a collection of “perfectly formed, musical poems that glide between the worlds of art, architecture, literature, and religion” to “uncover the startling truths of memory and coax our own forgotten moments from the recesses of the mind.” Osherow, the X-Y scholar in 19XX, is a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Utah. She has published six previous books.

Golden Oldie

Jacqueline Osherow

Off the Shelf

If you have news you would like to share, e-mail us at hcscholarships@gmail.com

Harvard-Cambridge Scholarships


Immersion in History…with a Modern Flair

For Eric Cervini, Lionel de Jersey Harvard Scholar, time in the Harvard Room has offered a full immersion in the history of Emmanuel College— with a bit of modern flair. Eric arrived at Cambridge a month before term started with the intention of getting “settled in” and compiling the research he had done for his American history dissertation at the Library of Congress in Washington DC a few weeks before embarking for his year abroad.

Once at Emmanuel, Eric learned that he would be staying in temporary housing until term started. The reason: Old Court was being renovated. Eric soon learned why the Emmanuel administrators seemed so excited by this development, and he soon became rather excited as well: for the first time in 400 years, Old Court—which houses Emmanuel’s celebrated Harvard Suite—would have its own bathrooms! Indeed, the Harvard-Cambridge Committee had warned Eric that the closest bathrooms were in a separate building; for years, students, including Harvard Scholars, could be seen dashing to the adjacent building in their bathrobes.

Three months later, Eric reports that the bathrooms (and kitchen!) in Old Court’s G Entryway are spectacular. While tourists may miss the sight of students running back and forth in various states of undress, he is grateful to enjoy the historic feel of Old Court with the convenience of modern amenities. The new kitchen has allowed him to host his supervisor and a law professor (a former Lowellian) for wine and cheese. It has also been put to good use by the newly formed, semi-satirical Harvard Drinking Society, whose inaugural event—aptly themed “Texas Rodeo”—drew a respectable crowd and painted a fascinating portrait of how British students imagine Texans to dress and live. Meanwhile, the Society’s Halloween event, “The Masquerade of the Undead” was a roaring success. Thankfully, Eric has built a friendly relationship with the porters and they have been exceedingly supportive of these events.

While such exploits might seem to suggest otherwise, Eric reports that his academic pursuits have been progressing “swimmingly.” He has completed most of his research and his dissertation outline is growing more robust by the day. On a more exciting note, Gary Gerstle, the new Mellon Professor of American History at Cambridge, has agreed to serve as Eric’s Ph.D. supervisor if his application to continue is successful. In short, time at Cambridge has already proved fruitful “in every way possible.”

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Excitement and Discovery, of the Expected – and Unexpected – Kind!

When moving into a new place in a new country, John Eliot Scholar Miriam Farkas didn’t particularly want to discover that the previous occupants of her room at Jesus College hadn’t moved out yet. She especially did not want to make this discovery the first weekend because said occupants were bring her at night. And no, Miriam isn’t talking about her H-C predecessor at Jesus College, Charles Gertler – she’s talking about the fleas that apparently moved in over the summer. Dealing with a flea infestation made for an interesting introduction to life in Cambridge, since it meant moving in and out of her room several times during the initial week, lots of vacuuming, and first shopping destinations being pharmacies and a pet store. On the plus side, the flea story has proved to be an excellent way to make friends. And two pest treatments later, Miriam reports that the fleas have been evicted and she’s settled into a still exciting but significantly less itchy routine that includes attending a broad range of classes in the linguistics department and exploring topics that she’d never had a chance to study as an undergraduate (such as the elegant algorithms of computational linguistics and the contradictions of language change models). If Miriam wasn’t sure what her favorite area within the field was before coming to Cambridge, she’s even less able to pinpoint it today.

Another great discovery: all the music on campus. According to Miriam, an obstetrical resident there are as many concerts and public events a week as there are oboists around, and the quality of musicianship is as least as high as that of a good American conservatory. “She has been playing a tremendous amount of the Star-Spangled Banner to a bus full of raucous English women rugby players, among them star international level players from the recent World Cup championships (such as Maggie Alphonsi, for those in the know).”

As a former member of the Harvard Varsity Women’s Rugby team, Shelby Lin, the Governor William Shirley Scholar at Pembroke College, was eager to come to Cambridge to play with some of the best rugby teams in the world. Unfortunately, an early-season knee injury soon sidelined those plans, but not before Shelby had the chance to sing the Star-Spangled Banner to a bus full of raucous English women rugby players, among them star international level players from the recent World Cup championships (such as Maggie Alphonsi, for those in the know).

With rugby on hold, Shelby has been using the extra time to become involved with the Pembroke Choir, take life-drawing lessons, and try blind wine tasting, while also enjoying regular travel and occasional study. In November she tried her hand at NaNoWriMo, an annual worldwide project that challenges participants to write a 50,000-word novel in a single month (no word yet on whether she finished).

To Shelby’s delight, the MPhil in Management Science and Operations has allowed her to take courses in economics-related research and pure mathematics. She’s taking advantage of this flexibility to study optimal incentives and delivery structures for managing healthcare and to explore the mathematics of stochastic traffic networks.

In her busy weekends, Shelby has been to the all-night Oudhiana festival in Brussels, toured Copenhagen, and was planning to meet Harvard friends in Prague before the end of the fall term. Closer to Cambridge, Shelby can be found swimming and cycling with the university’s triathlon club at unnegoable hours of the morning as she prepares for the New York City Triathlon next summer.

For the 2013-14 John Eliot Scholars Gertler, the green laws of Jesus College belong to a world that now seems very far away. That’s because Charles is spending his post-graduation year in Nepal, working with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development to research the impact of black carbon pollution in the Himalaya. Black carbon is the second most important man-made pollutant implicated in global climate change and emissions from factories and power plants in China and India – both major black carbon hot spots – may be having a disproportionate effect on rapid glacial melting in some of the highest and most remote mountains in the world.

Charles arrived in the Himalayas with no mountaineering experience but was soon working at 17,000 feet above sea level on Yala Glacier, a 4-5 day trek from the nearest road in Nepal’s Langtang Valley. Long days hiking the glacier, taking measurements and collecting samples, were followed by nights in a tent camp, trying to stay warm and hoping for some yak meat (nice, though a little gamy) in the evening’s curry. For the winter months, Charles has been grounded in Kathmandu where he’s getting around on a bicycle, eating untold volumes of lentils and rice, and playing squash at the Nepali Olympic training center. As soon as the weather permits, he’ll be back in the mountains and on then to Bhutan to set up another high-altitude observatory at a site called Chele La. In the fall, Charles will return to Cambridge, this side of the pond, to start his doctorate studies in Climate Physics and Chemistry at MIT.

Discovering a New Life – Work Balance

According to Charles Henry Fiske II Scholar Mariel Pettee, “If I didn’t live and work in this large-scale playground every day, I would never believe that graduate school could be this fun.” A few short months at Trinity College have already shown her a completely new way of approaching her work and way of life. Perhaps it’s because time seems to pass differently in Cambridge – one of the first things Mariel noticed was that people aren’t addicted to their cell phones and laptops in the way that most Harvard students are. “There isn’t the same sense of rushing to work through lunch breaks or sprint from place to place.” While it’s been an adjustment, Mariel is encouraged to discover that she can be intellectually engaged without sacrificing her health or time with friends. And the experience has certainly put her insane college sleep schedule into perspective!

In a place “brimming with analytically-minded scholars of the sciences and humanities” Mariel has made friends whose research topics include atomic physics, nanotechnology, topology, and the portrayal of laughter in literature and art. This means she never lacks for willing partners in late night conversations on just about any topic imaginable. But Trinity’s legacy in physics – Mariel’s room is right across from one formerly occupied by Isaac Newton – makes it a special place to pursue her MSt. Besides coursework in particle physics, relativistic astrophysics and cosmology, atomic and optical physics, and quantum field theory, Mariel will be embarking on a long-term research project in a new area of study for her doing hands on work in a lab to create new battery materials out of DNA and gold nanoparticles.

Outside class, Mariel is keeping busy too, having gotten involved with several theater projects, joined a hip-hop dance crew, and stumbled onto the rowing team. But perhaps the most important part of her Cambridge experience so far have been the little things that wouldn’t fit on a resume: stargazing on the balcony, hosting late-night dance parties, picking fresh blackberries on her morning commute, or enjoying long meals with new friends in various corners of the city. Mariel is grateful to the H-C scholarship for allowing her to relish these moments as essential parts of her education right alongside her classes and research.

Postcard from the Top of the World

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As I expected, many things in Cambridge are much the same as in the 1960s. My Cambridge experience, exploring American diplomatic history from a “unique, foreign perspective” and learning about British culture and university life. Dr. Katharine Rietzler of Pembroke College was a dedicated advisor, meeting with Jeffrey weekly to discuss readings and research ideas. With her help and the discovery of a little-known fact of U.S. Chinese relations during World War II, Jeffrey honed and redirected his research interests to develop a paper that he hopes will serve as a foundation for his senior thesis. Other summer takeaways: lifelong friendships and new experiences, from rowing on the Cam to exploring London and Madrid.

Garrett Lam ’16 calls his time at Cambridge “easily the best summer I’ve had, and the one in which I grew most as a person.” Besides the good food, the “gorgeous Grecian Urn,” tucked away in a corner of the Louvre, just days after submitting a paper on French poetry before an academic conference, Lam enjoyed “intellectual freedom” and a chance to focus on philosophy that, as a neurobiologist, he’d “never experienced before.” Lam particularly valued interactions with his supervisor Richard Holton, “a wonderful teacher and a very nice man.” Lam returned to Harvard with new ideas about how to combine his interests in neurobiology and philosophy — for example, by exploring how neuroscientific findings can influence beliefs about free will and ethics.

For Zak Lutz ’16, a summer at Turkish, Spanish, and Italian language skills, the Cambridge experience was a “rare run of sorts” for his planned career path in academia. Fortunately, he found it suited him. After initially focusing on the British public’s response to America’s war for independence, Lutz found his way to the topic that has since become the focus of his thesis project: British and American views on legitimate sovereignty before and during the Revolutionary War period. The summer also helped Lutz grow as an academic: “I learned how to research to an extent far beyond what I’d simply do for a class paper. I really enjoyed engaging deeply with a single subject for extended periods of time.” Lutz says the most important thing for future applicants to be aware of “is the degree of independence we all had.”

Maggie McGovern ’16 came to Cambridge to research medieval French manuscripts. Working with Stella Panayotou at the Fitzwilliam Museum, McGovern learned about the many layers of museum work and gained experience with the academic, financial, and managerial aspects of curating. Her projects included cataloguing and consolidating materials and researching an upcoming exhibition. Other summer activities included running — literally! — around Cambridge and neighboring towns, reading for pleasure, and learning to save independence and occasional solitude. A trip to Wales for the annual celebration was especially memorable, as was getting to know several Trinity students and finding out that “despite our different nationalities and interests, we were all, at heart, just young individuals trying to figure out what we wanted to do and learn in life.” As it turns as sounds, Priyanka Menon ’16 finds it hard to label her H-C summer as anything other than a “once in a lifetime opportunity” to pursue an academic passion outside her main field of study, and explore and utilize treasures of one of the world’s foremost educational institutions; and visit new places (Budapest, Prague, and Vienna). Menon is especially grateful for the guidance and support of her professor from a reading course in Indian intellectual history; and for the chance to explore new topics in mathematics, her chosen concentration. Reading G. H. Hardy’s “A Mathematician’s Apology” at Trinity College, where Hardy lived and lectured nearly a century before, McGovern learned about the “perfect intersection” of Menon’s two academic passions. She reports leaving Cambridge “with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence in my own ability as a student of history.”

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Memories of Cambridge

By Rediet Abebe

I have a very vivid memory of my first impression of Cambridge. I (and my two suitcases full of math notes and college mementos) had flown overnight from the other Cambridge and taken the bus from the airport, which got into town around mid afternoon. During my entire walk from the Parker’s Piece bus stop all the way up to the Pembroke Scholar’s room, I was truly in awe of how grand this place looked: like walking into a movie scene, the view of the inner court and garden from my room looked straight out of a postcard picture, and the porters were eerily friendly. I thought to myself, surely this magical charm is going to fade away once I get settled in (and maybe even once I take my post-travel nap), and certainly once I’m swamped with homework from my infamously hard program.

To my pleasant surprise, the opposite was true. Over the weeks, I got to explore pockets of my college, the university and town and fell in love with everything from the grand tourist attractions like Kings Chapel and Rambouillet Cafe (a gem for vegetarian food lovers) to small details like the prayer pillows in Pembroke chapel that have been carefully used and preserved since the 1600s. I explored the secret gardens of Pembroke, went to more formal dances than I’d like to admit, and made long-lasting friendships from both my college and program.

Pembroke was especially at the center of this almost dream-like year. The more I learned about my college and surrounding, the more mesmerized I was by it. Almost everything had a history or a fun fact: the coffee shop across the street that I went to every morning happened to have also been Stephen Fry’s favorite coffee shop, my college master was head of the M16, the gate I walked through everyday was over 700 years old, and we could have a surprise guest like Stephen Hawking at any random formal. At Cambridge, anything can happen! Despite my constant amazement and fascination, I also found myself feeling more and more integrated into the place. Almost instantly, I was drawn into the chapel community through the Dean of the college, whose heart for community-building and service I admired, and a dear friend I was lucky enough to meet my first week of college as a Chapel Clerk. I had the opportunity to learn about and soon enough care for the chapel, which had such a rich history.

My academic experience was also unlike any other. As an undergraduate, I had always wished to learn more graph theory and extremal combinatorics—a topic that is largely absent in the Harvard-MIT area but for which Cambridge is a hub. To quench my thirst, I would work through various books including Professor Bela Bollobas’ “Modern Graph Theory.” At Cambridge, not only was I able to take a class with him and Professor Imre Leader, I was also personally welcomed into their weekly Ph.D seminars and the community of combinatorialists at the university. Every single student and class I walked into, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for having the opportunity to learn from and with them.

The more I learned about my college and surrounding, the more mesmerized I was by it. I learned directly from academicians I had been admiring from afar for years. In every class and seminar I walked into, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for having the opportunity to learn from and with them. Every single student and class I walked into, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for having the opportunity to learn from and with them. Every single student and class I walked into, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for having the opportunity to learn from and with them. Every single student and class I walked into, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for having the opportunity to learn from and with them. Every single student and class I walked into, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for having the opportunity to learn from and with them.

I also used my “year of grace” to explore various other fields. I was a regular attendee of seminars in economics, statistics, and the Stokes’ society for general science. Some of these dramatically shaped my academic interest, helping me find my calling as a network scientist who connects graph theory, combinatorics, theoretical computer science, and game theory. Others dramatically increased my knowledge of the design and construction of several London Underground lines (Jubilee line, anyone?).

Reflecting on my year in Cambridge, I see that it was in a lot of ways similar to that of other scholars. (Although, to my credit, I never once rowed throughout my entire time there!) Cambridge gives us all the opportunity to do what we would do if there were no expectations, live in a town that manages to preserve its charm (and coffee shops) through the decades, and make long-lasting friendships and experiences that follow us even after this year of grace.