
The Last M.A.

or, a short work dedicated to those fortunate possessors of the most honourable degree in the English-speaking world, past and present, whose ranks the author has the privilege of augmenting.

“Strictly speaking an Oxford man never takes his M.A., for there is no ceremony of institution; he is ‘licensed’ to take part in a ceremony which has ceased to exist.”¹

Not for me the German degrees,²
or the tawdry *ad vos spectent*;³
but for honourable inception I bent the knee,
for the M.A. (Oxon.) I was supplicant.

A scrap of crimson adorns my back,
My tunic, now green, is not quite *talaris*.⁴
but the mother whose boon I pleased to pack
is swallowed up by avarice.

What of the Regency, the right of the ‘senior degree’?⁵
Where is the duty to examine and determine
the white-clad and eager-eyed, and to decree
the black-robed to preferment?⁶

I rejoice to share a name
with those who these halls once trod,
who have built her far-flung fame,
and have made glad the fair cities of God.⁷

Many have proceeded, uncaring,
many more shall never proceed,
but shall I who was admitted, bible-bearing,⁸
take up this ruinous creed?

Shall I betray this hallowed shrine,
Shall I with the chorus condemn?
Shall I discern for the final time:
Dissolvimus hanc Convocationem?⁹

A thousand years of learning,
a thousand years a guild;¹⁰
what right have I in yearning
to be the last her rights to build?

ALEXANDER YEN

Alexander Yen is a graduate student at Green Templeton College and recently proceeded to his MA. His interests include university ceremonial and traditions.

1. Wells, *The Oxford Degree Ceremony*.
2. The modern research degrees originate in 19th-century Germany, which Oxford was late in adopting.
3. The traditional conclusion to the oath sworn before the Proctors by all candidates for degrees other than the higher doctorates and the M.A.
4. The former statutory length of an academic gown, to the ankle.
5. The M.A. confers seniority at Oxford, and in former times a period of necessary regency began after the degree was taken, when the new graduate took their part in instruction and administration in the university.
6. Nomination of candidates for graces and elections to University offices being contained in the M.A.’s oath, neither of which duties the M.A. now has the exclusive right to perform in virtue of that degree.
7. Psalms 46:4.
8. The Christian formula for admission to the degree, for which there is now a secular alternative, involves the candidate being tapped on the head with a copy of the New Testament.
9. ‘We dissolve this Convocation’, the formula with which the Vice-Chancellor closes the House.
10. On the supposition that the medieval, organised, university was essentially a guild of Masters of Arts.