



Photograph: Steve Uzzell, by kind permission of Green Templeton College, Oxford

“I was born at the Radcliffe Infirmary and I’m now at Green Templeton College right next door – I haven’t really made much progress in my life”

The Bourne Trilogy: Physician, Politician, Farmer

Meeting **Dr Peter Bourne** (OD 1953) today you could easily assume he had spent an entire career in academia. He has held a list of illustrious education posts and written numerous articles and books including noted biographies. But there is a great deal more to his professional life than that. Educated as a physician and anthropologist, Dr Bourne is credited with encouraging Jimmy Carter to run for presidential office and he worked closely with him in the White House. Peter led a major campaign to reduce water-borne disease in Third World countries and is still an advisor to government, businesses and non-profits. Now a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at Green Templeton College, Oxford, he continues his work on international health systems. He divides his time between Washington, a farm in Wales (where he raises llamas) and Oxford – where *The OD* magazine caught up with him.

What do you recall of your childhood in Oxford?

I have extraordinary memories of Oxford during wartime. A church on the Woodstock Road was a government feeding centre; food was very scarce but people could get hot meals there. Green Templeton is just opposite it – I walk up the street and remember being a child going to that feeding centre.

I also remember the unbelievably cold winter of 1947; I learned to skate on the Dragon ‘ice rink’. Then there were incredible floods and I remember looking from the war memorial at school over the Cherwell and as far as I could see was water. A master said we would never see floods like it again in our lives. That made a big impression – and was true.

What was the major influence of your Dragon days?

The First World War. The older masters had all fought in or been connected to it – that was their era, their war. They experienced the loss of a generation of young men and felt an obligation to teach and contribute to the youth of the country.

What took you to America?

My father’s job in Atlanta. I wanted to stay but didn’t get a scholarship to Oxford. The move to America shaped my life; I graduated from medical school at 22, which put me on

a good track, and I did various things – I was in the military in Vietnam, I was a hospital intern in Seattle, then I was at Stanford.

How did you get involved in politics?

I wanted to return to Atlanta because of the Civil Rights Movement – California wasn’t where the action was. I saw that the South was going to have to be reincorporated politically with the rest of America. I went back with the desire to get involved. I can’t say that I deliberately sought out somebody I thought could be president, but that’s what happened. I met Carter after he had run for Governor (of the State of Georgia) and lost; I urged him to stand again. Even had he not gone on to the success he did, we would still be good friends. I worked for him in the Governor’s Office, was the deputy campaign manager of his presidential campaign in 1976, then went to the White House with him and we have just stayed close ever since.

What is your greatest professional achievement?

Starting the eradication of Guinea worm – a parasitic disease that has afflicted millions of people through their drinking water. At the UN, I launched a global campaign and steady progress was made but it wasn’t a big priority with poor countries. Then President Carter came to stay with me in Wales and I told him it was my most important work and

that if he got involved it could be eliminated in his lifetime. He got behind it. There were 400,000 cases a year, now we’re down to 400 and it should be gone within five years.

Why llamas?

I spent some time in the Sudan and became very enamoured with camel culture, but I knew I could not have camels in Wales. However, llamas are their close relatives and I had seen them on farms in the US. I was one of the first people to keep llamas in Britain outside a zoo and today, with 80 animals, I have one of the largest herds in the country.

What inspires you to stay in touch with the Dragon?

I was so shaped by the Dragon, I even have difficulty explaining it to my wife. Boarding was so central and the bulk of my life from 8 to 14 was here. It was an all-encompassing environment: Bruno Brown who produced all the plays was big in the Communist Party in Oxford, then there was a man called Dodd who taught French who was head of the League of Empire Loyalists and was about as right wing as you could possibly be. Different backgrounds, political and cultural ones, were accepted in a wonderfully tolerant way, which I do not think you would get at many schools.

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