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British Studies Celebrates 40th Anniversary

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By Michael Leslie, Professor of English Literature and Dean, British Studies At Oxford

Over the past few weeks students at Rhodes and other colleges and universities, faculty, and alumni have received the announcement of the 2009 Session of British Studies At Oxford, Rhodes's interdisciplinary summer school held annually in Oxford. But this is no ordinary year: the program will be celebrating its 40th successive session. Remarkably, British Studies has flourished for a quarter of the life of Rhodes College itself.

Created in 1970 by Yerger Hunt Clifton, a professor of English, the program was held in University College, Oxford, for its first decade. Professor of History John Henry Davis, one of the most loved figures in the College's history, was the President of the first four sessions; as a Rhodes Scholar, he knew Oxford well. Mary Ross ('Tara') Burkhart, another professor of English, now retired but still a dynamic supporter of Rhodes and British Studies, taught and acted as Clifton's associate dean.

In that first year most of the students were from our College, so the program was called Southwestern—not yet Rhodes—At Oxford. Of the 43 student participants, three remain as key figures within the College: Vice-President J. Allen Boone; John Rone, the Director of College Events; and William Short, Coordinator of Public Services in the Barret Library. Within a few years, however, other colleges and universities joined, recognizing the opportunity the program offered their students and faculty and the academic and cultural strength made possible by a large and diverse student body, with the result that the program's name changed to British Studies At Oxford. Students and faculty from around 350 different colleges and universities have participated over the past four decades.

Almost immediately the program took a shape that remains readily recognizable, guided—governed may not be too strong a word, even from the grave—by the intelligence of Dean Clifton's design and his intransigence with regard to quality. It was that insistence on quality that led to the program's migration from University College to St. John's College in 1980; British Studies has had a happy summer home in St. John's for the past 30 years.

Though there have been changes over the years, the fundamentals of British Studies remain the same; and these are what have made it so successful. Taking place in Oxford, the historic home of collegiate education in the liberal arts and sciences, British Studies is a very small, temporary, intense version of the ideal liberal arts college: students, faculty, and staff live, study, and socialize together within the walls of a beautiful, quiet college, both magnificent and intimate, set at the heart of one of the world's great university cities.

Each year there is a wide range of seminars in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, taught by distinguished British and American faculty; all concentrating on the same general subject, the history and culture of Britain within a broadly defined period. This concentration means that participants are constantly finding connections between their particular studies and those of others around them. The

academic program welcomes a galaxy of major British scholars to lecture, with the explicit aim of finding and illuminating the connections between disciplines. The program takes this further by incorporating numerous study excursions, so that students are continually engaging with the material—places, objects, cultural phenomena—they are studying; and the program is opportunistic in seeking always to add or deepen such connections. Finally, the program creates time for participants to explore independently, even reimbursing out-of-pocket expenses when students find ways of developing their experiences by taking part in additional events.

There are now around 4,000 British Studies alumni. Many remember their time in Oxford as a defining moment of their educational careers, having life-long consequences. Participants have had their eyes opened in those few weeks to a world of opportunities. Some have returned to Oxford as Rhodes Scholars, or to pursue graduate work; some have found that their career ambitions were completely changed by experiences in Oxford and the scholars they met and worked with there. Quite a few marriages have resulted and the program began getting second-generation participants in the 1990s. Former participants and their families, recognizing the transformative effects of the program, have endowed scholarships to enable others to seize the same opportunities.

Rhodes can be proud indeed of a program that has become highly respected and envied both in America and Britain over the forty years of its existence.