

November 1, 1989 (Vol. 4, no. 5)

Dear Colleague:

When a middle-class child feels frustrated at school he turns on the TV to be consoled by the violence shown there. When I feel a little discouraged by teflon society I turn to history books. The past always succeeds in cheering me up by making the present look better. Mentally, I try to see what Madison might be like if it were a European city around 1800. Pillory and stocks take the place of the fountain on Library Square. Students on their way to school will carelessly throw a turnip or a head of spoiled cabbage at the bobbing heads of prisoners, their lips bleeding and eyes swollen under the impact. Where the clock tower now stands, there is a gibbet with two corpses on display in iron cages. A blast of wind down Bascom Hill makes them swing and clang against each other. Leaflets are handed out on State Street, announcing the forthcoming execution of a notorious highwayman. An impressive gallows rise on Capitol Square. Barricades are set up on the converging streets in anticipation of a large crowd. In the meantime, business goes on as usual. A butcher emerges from the corner where an Oven of Brittany now stands. He wrestles a steer to the ground, plunges his knife into its belly and slits it open. Steamy entrails and a stream of blood pour out to join the parade of filth that follows the central gutter on State Street. Citizens walk on wooden clogs, elevated on circlets of iron, to negotiate the street's squelchy, slithery, pungent surface. From Langdon Street come loud, drunken shouts. The students are engaged in their annual high jinks. They are trying to catch a greased pig that squeals in terror as it rushes past the Armoury. One muscle-bound fellow makes a flying leap, lands on the pig, but cannot hold on to his slippery catch. Another does better. He gets hold of the pig's tail, which comes off as the maddened animal surges violently toward the steps of Science Hall, where anatomy students wait for it with their knives. Their collective plunge creates a fountain of blood. One last loud squeal and the animal expires. Its carcass, hardly recognizable after the amateurish butchering, is licked over by stray dogs.

Well, the last scene is twentieth century. That particular student practice was discontinued just about the time I became an undergraduate at Oxford.

Best wishes,

