



Isolarion: A Different Oxford Journey

James Attlee

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Through the centuries, people from all walks of life have heard the siren call of a pilgrimage, the lure to journey away from the familiar in search of understanding. But is a pilgrimage even possible these days for city-dwellers enmeshed in the pressures of work and family life? Or is there a way to be a pilgrim without leaving one's life behind? James Attlee answers these questions with *Isolarion*, a thoughtful, streetwise, and personal account of his pilgrimage to a place he thought he already knew—the Cowley Road in Oxford, right outside his door.

Isolarion takes its title from a type of fifteenth-century map that isolates an area in order to present it in detail, and that's what Attlee, sharp-eyed and armed with tape recorder and notebook, provides for Cowley Road. The former site of a leper hospital, a workhouse, and a medieval well said to have miraculous healing powers, Cowley Road has little to do with the dreaming spires of the tourist's or student's Oxford. What Attlee presents instead is a thoroughly modern, impressively cosmopolitan, and utterly organic collection of shops, restaurants, pubs, and religious establishments teeming with life and reflecting the multicultural makeup of the surrounding neighborhood.

From a sojourn in a sensory-deprivation tank to a furtive visit to an unmarked pornography emporium, Attlee investigates every aspect of the Cowley Road's appealingly eclectic culture, where halal shops jostle with craft jewelers and reggae clubs pulsate alongside quiet churchyards. But the very diversity that is, for Attlee, the essence of Cowley Road's appeal is under attack from well-meaning city planners and predatory developers. His pilgrimage is thus invested with melancholy: will the messy glories of the Cowley Road be lost to creeping homogenization?

Drawing inspiration from sources ranging from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to contemporary art, Attlee is a charming and companionable guide who revels in the extraordinary embedded in the everyday. *Isolarion* is at once a road movie, a quixotic stand against uniformity, and a rousing hymn in praise of the complex, invigorating nature of the twenty-first-century city.

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