

1 Conferment of Honorary Degrees

The annual Encaenia celebrations, due to take place on Wednesday, 24 June, were cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who were due to receive honorary degrees in 2020 (see Gazette No 5266, 13 February 2020, p248) will instead be honoured in June 2021.

2 Encaenia

Encaenia also commemorates the benefactors of the University through the Creweian Oration. The text of this year’s Oration by the Public Orator, although not delivered live in the Sheldonian, is given below:

Harum memoria et recordatio in maximis nostris gravissimis curis iucunda sane fuit. In this 351st year of the Sheldonian Theatre, and something like that of the Creweian Oration itself, ceremonies have been mothballed, the orator unable to stand above those strange fasces in the Proctor’s Box to pose the risky request: Honoratissime Domine Cancellarie, licetne Anglice loqui?
Always a tense moment, this, at which a more conservative Chancellor could one day decide, and require his orator, to inflict a long Latin lesson on those assembled, as was once customary. Hence the precaution of introductory Latin words borrowed (and feminised) from Cicero, for we have also been deprived of the company of our eight distinguished honorandae – happily we plan to welcome them properly in 2021–2022. Meanwhile monuments and artefacts keep us in mind of human history. Our museums have kept faith and ‘virtual’ contact with us, while inside them civilisations reside, subject to occasional new arrivals and therewith to enhancement of their deeply pluralist communities. This year the Sarikhans, a family we know well and greatly esteem as patrons of the Ashmolean, have through a significant donation made possible a re-display of the Ancient Near East collection. Using a ‘research-led approach’ (what else?) the museum now plans, in its own words, to make the collection more accessible and relevant to a broader audience.

Three years ago we welcomed the Ashmolean’s acquisition, through a vigorous campaign and donations from local people, visitors and friends of the museum, of an 1810 oil painting by Turner which had been there only on loan for many years. ‘One of the most beautiful streets in Europe’, said the Ashmolean, with justifiable pride. There were naturally no buses in this most serene of townscapes, no bars to traffic, for there was no traffic, not even bicycles. But Turner did add, ‘for colour’ we were told, some gowned members of the University offset by townspeople and clergy. It was hardly imaginable that anything comparable would ever be observable these two hundred and more years later, at least during waking daylight hours, but for weeks on end we have experienced an unearthly, to most of us unsettling, serenity in that same street – hardly a don or clergyman or towns-person in sight, and certainly no gowns. The photographer’s delight, maybe – camera in hand one morning in April I met the then outgoing Senior Proctor, also camera in hand – but in the end surely too much of a good thing, and whatever of Cecil Rhodes’s actions and achievements may be lauded or deplored, we must acknowledge his function in ‘re-enlivening the High Street’, and his ongoing obligation to focus our minds on improving both our knowledge of history and our record of equal opportunities for all. That will be a legacy ‘more enduring than bronze’, one that ‘will not wholly die’.

This must be the moment, then, to thank Mother Nature respectfully for the lives and achievements of so many of our friends and colleagues who passed away over the last twelve months. I call to mind John Gardner, Sir Michael Howard, Stephen Cretney and Myles Burnyeat, former Fellows of All Souls; Wilfred Beckerman, Jasper Griffin and Stefano Zechetti of Balliol; Sir Roger Scruton of Blackfriars; Peter Sinclair and Sir Fergus Millar of Brasenose; Peter Warner of Exeter.
Sir John Houghton of Jesus; Keble’s former Warden George Richardson and Fellows Steve Rayner, Jim Griffin and Bryan Magee; Cathy Oakes, Fellow of Kellogg; Margery Ord of Lady Margaret Hall; Linacre’s Rom Harré, Fellow, and Peter Savill, Emeritus Fellow; Lincoln’s former Rector Sir Eric Anderson and Fellows Elman Poole, Kenneth Seward-Shaw, Audrey Tucker and Sir Rex Richards, sometime our Vice-Chancellor; Sir Jack Baldwin of Magdalen; Peter Dickens of New College; Vernon Butt and John Platt of Pembroke; Brian McGuinness and Michael Gautrey of The Queen’s College; St Antony’s Fellows Derek Hopwood and Anthony Nicholls; from St Catherine’s Nelson French, Sir James Gowans and Michael Shotton; Lesley Forbes of St Cross; Margaret Rayner of St Hilda’s; Donald Russell of St John’s; Patrick Fitzgerald and Canon Trevor Williams of Trinity; University College’s Brian Loughman and Roy Park; Wadham’s Richard Sharpe; Nick Allen and Philip Lewis of Wolfson; and Norman Stone of Worcester. The list is distinguished but sadly long, and yet there will be omissions of names that have not come to my attention, but I thank our Heads of Houses for their warm commendations of the names I do have. Non omnes morientur. I owe my own special words of affection in remembering Donald Russell, one of the world’s leading classical scholars, whose kindly humanity and honest criticism were invaluable to me and others in our composing of Latin orations. Even in my quite senior years I felt a schoolboy’s pride when he told me he had found no errors – ‘and believe me, I was looking for them!’ – and then of course proceeded to make ‘one or two tentative suggestions’...

We have been to an unusual degree ‘at the mercy of the sky’s caprices’, as Camus describes the embattled population of Oran, and flora and fauna have flourished over this strange period of uneasy calm. Not so long ago we were able to confer a Master of Arts degree on the retiring, but still highly active, curator of our parks and gardens. With his and his successors’ stewardship, Mother Nature, apparently so uneven in Her dealings with mankind this year, has chosen to smile on our environment, while we left it more alone, as if almost to exclude us from her earthly paradise.

As Orator I was asked a little while ago to help name, or at least Latinise, a new baby, that is to say what we thought for a time was to be called Parks College. It was a fine opportunity to signal the way, both alongside and towards, ‘paradise’ (this being the beautiful ancient word for a ‘park’) among all the other things that have excited much debate and comment around the University; let it stand on record that for a brief time we had an embryonic Collegium in Via Paradisi.

Names are often impermanent, but there are continuities, and life goes on. The baby is Reuben (רֵעְבֶן), ‘Behold, a boy’, and the college is now, consequent upon the magnificent core endowment from the Reuben Family and Foundation, to be so named, no doubt in a happy alliance of Latin and Hebrew. Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Environmental Change and Cellular Life will be the beneficiaries, not to mention graduate scholars and new colleagues in the college’s fellowship, new close neighbours – nay, even cohabitant partners – to the Radcliffe Science Library. We needed good news, and here, says the Vice-Chancellor, is a ‘powerful vote of confidence in the power of research to solve societal problems, and above all, a powerful vote of confidence in the future’.

Lest we be too deficient in registering this vote, we may log in and hear the inaugural lecture of our new Alfred Landecker Professor of Values and Public Policy at the Blavatnik School of Government. And as an overture, listen to the Head of that School remind us of its stated mission. ‘What the school has been built to do’, she says, ‘is quite simply to improve government, which of course is not simple at all. What we’re seeking to do is to find, to educate, to support a new and better kind of leadership in politics around the world...and at the same time to engage people in a world where young and old seem to want to scream at each other more than to sit and listen, and to engage people in actually working with people that they disagree with, to work on making government work better and making our society work better, at what for many people is a pretty difficult moment.’

In the words of Professor Wolff, for whose arrival with us we may thank the Alfred Landecker Foundation and its endowment of both the chair and an extended programme of research, ‘There never has been a more urgent time to understand the persecution of minorities and articulate and reaffirm the values underlying open, liberal, democracy.’ That was a memorial day some months ago, 27 January, but the ‘time is ever more with us. The professor drew material from the 1930s to encourage some reflection on what we are doing with the 2020s, or rather perhaps what the 2020s are doing to us. At times of uncertainty and anxiety it is important to see some of the calls for ‘strong leadership’ for what they are, and to remember that in the past the democratic process has been an available, and then by and by a dispensable, path towards dictatorship and oppression.

It was a danger my father, himself a refugee from tyranny, wanted me to be particularly aware of during his later days, and my earlier days, in England, a country which he had seen as a political haven, perhaps even a paradise, when he first came here in 1935. He was a biophysicist, and he impressed on his students (and his sons) the importance of those scientists who applied the most rigorous methods of mathematics and physics in the fields of biology and medicine. I naturally take great personal interest and pleasure in noting the establishment of a new chair in this subject, namely the Alexander Mosley Professorship endowed by the Trust of that name, already a generous friend to the University distinguished by gifts including support of the Physics Clarendon Laboratory and of St Peter’s College and Lady Margaret Hall.

One of our honorands, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, came to England with her family in somewhat similar conditions, and has written much to warn us of the kinds of things we heard about in that Blavatnik School lecture. We may hope that by the time we receive her in Oxford next June we will have seen more clearly that Hell is only one of our possible destinations, at the end of a path not taken. The former senator has shown herself one among eloquent recent authorities on ‘special places’ there, and she will note with pleasure that we have strengthened our interest in women’s studies; through the imagination and generous gifts of friends and donors, among whom I must mention particularly Ms Ann Drake, we are to have an endowed senior post, the Hillary Rodham Clinton Chair in Women’s History, to secure the study of women’s history and encourage more young scholars to pursue doctorates in related subjects.

There are several advantages in switching from Latin to English. Students of Latin composition – I know this so well – are sometimes in difficulty when they search for a Latin word to translate ‘pride’ that carries no collateral suggestion of arrogance or vainglory. We have felt perhaps more cautious English emotions, but I think some justified pride, this year as Oxford scientists and other experts were heard far and wide in struggling, and gaining some signal success, against formidable foes. Teaching and lecturing was, if I may put it in British English, not entirely unsuccessful, and more effective than many of us had foreseen; but
much of our ‘lockdown’ was that of long-
serving, tireless investigation and industry
in our studies and laboratories, while many
of those high achievers somehow also
found the time to keep us informed and
briefed, sometimes even encouraged with
a little optimism. It is, as always, pleasant
to remind ourselves and others how many
of our colleagues have been honoured
nationally and internationally; six current
Oxford academics are among this year’s
new Fellows of the Royal Society, seven
of the British Academy, and Professor
(now Sir) Peter Donnelly, a former Rhodes
Scholar who has been a pioneer in bringing
statistical methods to genetic science, is
among those recognised in the Queen’s New
Year and Birthday Honours lists.
Expertise is, it seems, back on the agenda.
I suppose as a University we are entitled
to say we can never have enough of it.
Socrates, if I correctly understand him
through his most gifted student, was
suspicous of democracy largely because he
felt expertise took second place to mob rule
which might easily result in those clamours
dictatorship alluded to above. In our
own republic of letters we should respect
both our tested due process and the use of
evidence and argument. And where human
frailty might let us down we look forward
to ever more productive collaboration
between man and machine. What, then, is
not to be praised in a munificent donation
from Amazon Web Services to support
research projects in the Oxford Robotics
Institute, the Cyber Physical Systems Group
and the Human Centred Computing Group?
A particular further beneficiary will be
the new Lighthouse Doctoral Scholarship
Programme, which will provide funding to
25 students applying for doctoral training
in ‘autonomous intelligent machines
and systems’ and in the human-machine
collaboration.
Those of us with more literary interests
will appreciate the value and quality of
metaphors, and it is comforting to think of
knocking a virus on the head (whichever
deepth of a sphere that may be, but the
metaphorist is a clever chap) and coming out
of hibernation in July, in keeping with those
capricious British skies. But great crises
need expertly guided action. Our leaders
select, and of course follow, scientific advice,
Delphic though this may sometimes appear
when presented to us of the governed
classes through the words of the governors.
The application of ‘world-leading’ measures
and devices can be called both ‘essential’
and ‘icing on the cake’, depending who asks
what and when. I grant it is true that icing
is essential to some cakes.
But we need further precision, and that
is what our scientists will always aim for,
greatly assisted by those who effectively
trust their research and are in a position
to support it. We remain wary of claiming
international preeminence in any field,
even when league tables might lend us
some heartwarming statistics. Looking
beyond the University, some of this year’s
statistics have been less heartwarming. But
we have in Oxford a fine cross-disciplinary
Centre for Device-Mediated Immuno-
Therapies, bringing together researchers
in electrical and mechanical engineering,
chemistry, biochemistry, pharmacology
and clinical medicine and surgery. We thank
Mr Donald Porteous for generously helping
this important collaborative work in our
Institute of Biomedical Engineering; his
donation will be specifically directed at work
in oncology drug delivery.
We move on, in what appears to be a
transition from fossil fuels and perhaps
outmoded economies. Global problems,
and some global leaders, focus our minds
on what is now rather generally called
‘sustainable development’. In Oxford we are
to host and support five more postgraduate
scholars each year from member countries
of the Islamic Development Bank. I commend
for attention two pages on the
internet – first, the list (www.isdb.org/isdb-
member-countries) of these 57 countries,
with helpful further information on the
state of their populations and economies,
and secondly our Development Office’s
announcement, with statefully
documentary photograph, of the deal being
signed by the Vice-Chancellor and the
President of the IDB. The graduate scholars
will be studying ‘science, technology and
innovation’ to the betterment, let us hope,
of both their own countries and ours.
If people struggle to recognise what is true
and what isn’t, the only people to benefit
are liars, crooks, and tyrants. If you have
no agreed facts to work on, then nothing
in a good society works. ‘These salutary
words come from the chairman of our
Reuters Institute steering group. But ‘facts’,
for all the brandishing of statistics and
more or less expert opinions, have been
elusive over these last months. Last week
the Institute hosted a lecture on public
sector broadcasting and trust in dangerous
times. I believe an hour can be profitably,
if uncomfortably (and therefore all the
more profitably), spent in listening to this
examination of how far journalism in our
countries helped or hindered us through
this phase of a crisis. Further than this, here
was a self-critical confession that journalism
could have mobilised itself more effectively,
for instance allowing us to hear more from
specialists in science and medicine and less
from political editors who lacked relevant
knowledge and critical strategies. The
lecture is well in tune, I think, with the aims
of the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s latest
of many thoughtful and effective Oxford
interventions, namely a large grant to the
Reuters Institute to explore and promote
the future of journalism through debate,
engagement and research.
A Balliol alumnus, himself a former
journalist and less of a scientist, is on
record, as I have previously remarked, for
sometimes favouring the Greek over the
Roman side of his educational heritage. He
has, somewhat inauspiciously, invoked the
Greek leader Pericles and that paragon’s
eloquent leadership in the midst of great
anxieties. I wonder if what he had in mind
was the funeral oration delivered by the
Athenian a little while before the outbreak of
an epidemic plague (and Pericles’ own
decidedly final downfall). In the translation
by one of our eminent Wadham-trained
classicists, we read: ‘Let me say that our
system of government does not copy the
institutions of our neighbours. It is more
the case of our being a model to others, than
of our imitating anyone else.’ A pleasant
fantasy, but verging on the hybristic; I
rather think it may be the other way round.
Still, there was a time when our leader saw
himself more as the Roman Cincinnatus
reduc. We’ll spare a thought for the
legends of early Rome. Lucius Quinctius
Cincinnatus, we remember, was recalled
from obscurity at a moment of crisis to don
once more the senatorial toga and step into
the breach as dictator. We remember also
that the same Cincinnatus showed unique
and fabulous discernment in relinquishing
power at the right moment.
The word politics, sir, ‘ said Samuel Pickwick
to Count Smol’tor, ‘comprises, in itself,
a difficult study of no inconsiderable
magnitude.’ We rejoice in the complexity
of words and their meanings. Some of
my colleagues have recently enriched
the everyday Oxford lexicon with the
formerly underused ‘ventriloquise’. Their
observation was a reproof, but statues
themselves might on some occasions be
useful speaking authorities. Some years
ago a new Fellow of All Souls had, at the
anxious moment of his formal admission,
inaudibly declared that he would obey
the college statutes, rather than statutes.
A promise is a promise, but my late friend
Martin West, true to his problem-solving
talents, had the idea of fitting the statue with
a tape recording of the college statutes, and
then all would be well.
Some have written in praise of forgetting, but I prefer to think we start well by remembering. When offering the sad but (healthily) proud In Memoriam for our departed colleagues I am normally unable to go through the extraordinary list of our recently departed Honorary Fellows. It is not that I am unaware of their number, or of their eminence and their outstanding contributions to, and outside, our University. I have read their obituaries, and have stood in awe. This year I call one to mind who died in March at the age of 95, namely Professor Eldred Jones, graduate and Honorary Fellow of Corpus Christi College, later principal and pro-vice-chancellor of Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the oldest university institution in sub-Saharan Africa. Please read the moving short obituary notice on the Corpus website. His ‘life under two flags’ may be studied in a 2012 book by James Currey, but I can recommend a primary source, Othello’s Countrymen (OUP, 1963), at the end of which Jones concludes that ‘by the oblique route of a study of the use made of Africa by Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, the triumphant genius of Shakespeare can once more be demonstrated.’

‘Be prepared!’ said Peter Piot of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in a 2018 lecture (please listen to it) on the subject of pandemics. I recognise the idea, and its expression, as a former boy scout, admittedly a rather bolshy one though I remember standing to attention and thinking we meant what we said every Friday night, in one part of the ‘law’, that a scout ‘is a friend to all, and a brother to every other Scout, no matter to what country, class or creed the other may belong.’ I believe the ‘law’ has since changed to something more inclusive, and I see with interest that some veterans have moved in to stand guard by their founder’s statue in Poole. ‘Prepared for what?’ Baden-Powell was once asked. ‘Why, for any old thing,’ he replied. As has been so clear this year, we have many friends and supporters, we have fine colleagues, and we have students of excellent calibre to help us face, and engage with, whatever old thing may come, but let us also learn, pace Pericles, from our neighbours. We know who they are. And may all ‘special advisers’ know, whether or not they recall their ancient history, that imperare sibi maximum imperium est (Seneca: ‘the greatest power of ruling consists in controlling oneself’).