

GAZETTE

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Address by the incoming Vice-Chancellor

Chancellor, Members of Congregation, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends and Guests,

I stand before you in a wonderfully confused state, not I suspect for the last time in Oxford; a confused state of excitement, trepidation and gratitude. Excitement at the years ahead and the ups and downs that we will go through together as we move this great collegiate University forward. Trepidation at all that Oxford represents as a pinnacle of scholarship and teaching worldwide. And gratitude to all of you; to the Chancellor, and the Selection Committee, to Congregation and to everyone else in the University who has placed their confidence in me. Thank you too for the warm welcome you have given to both my wife and me in the short time we have been in Oxford. I particularly want to direct my gratitude towards the person who has just addressed us in typically comprehensive terms, the outgoing Vice-Chancellor, John Hood. The measure of a great university administrator is whether they leave their institution stronger than when they found it. Oxford is much stronger because of John Hood. The great improvements that he has overseen in infrastructure, fundraising, research income and, most importantly, people, leave us all in a stronger position to deal with the unknown challenges, and they will be substantial, of the coming years. I thank him for that, for his hospitality and help in the transition and wish him well in his new job in the most exciting city on earth. I also want to express my thanks and love to those who keep me grounded in this sometimes topsy-turvy world, my wife and three children, and today especially my 95-year-old mother who has been taken into hospital and cannot be here. I will give her, and the other old ladies in her ward, a repeat performance of this oration, later on ... I am sure it will help them to sleep!

Now, most of you know that, despite my accent (not, I hope you will agree, a trans-Atlantic twang—as was reported in the media last week), I come to Oxford after many years at one of its great sister institutions in the United States, Yale University. This path from New Haven to Oxford is a well-trodden one. Not just by the multitude of Yale's finest students, who over the years have made the pilgrimage to study here, but also by some of Yale's great leaders, from the legendary Yale President Kingman Brewster, who moved here in 1981 to become Master of University College, to the current Yale President Rick Levin who studied at Merton. This flow across the Atlantic is by no means all one way. Over the past year I have enjoyed the vivid, and occasionally lurid, accounts that Oxford students studying at Yale have given me of life at this great institution. As Provost at Yale I benefited enormously from the wisdom and scholarship of professors

from Oxford who had themselves made the trek to New Haven. And looking back to the Second World War and those darkest of times of the Blitz, it was to the families of Yale professors that many Oxford academics sent their families for safe-keeping. The bond between these two great universities is deep and long-standing, if not always without tension. Yale was founded, as many of you know, in the early eighteenth century by a benefaction worth the equivalent of 560 pounds sterling, from the former Governor of Madras, Elihu Yale (the cheapest naming opportunity, I might add, in the history of philanthropy). However, that was not the college to which the gift was originally intended. In 1711 a letter written by one Jeremiah Dummer (another donor to the fledgling college) related that a former Governor in the Indies, and I quote, 'intended to bestow a charity on some college in Oxford ... but', Dummer added, 'I think he should ... do it to your college'¹ ... in Connecticut.

So, dear colleagues, Yale's founding gift was originally intended for Oxford but was purloined. On reflection, I think I may have found a way for us to meet some of the financial challenges that lie ahead of us: we should demand our money back, with interest, at Yale's recent rate of return—by which I mean the rate up to rather than since last year.

As I pondered this short speech, a simple question kept confronting me: What is it that has drawn me here? What is it about Oxford that has bewitched and beguiled me (and beguiled me it has) to leave a settled existence in the US and come back to Britain? I had no prior emotional ties to Oxford—my first degree is from the West Country, my master's from Western Canada and my Ph.D is not from Oxford, but that wet and windy place in East Anglia—so what has brought me here to the banks of the Cherwell? I sought some insight into this question during my months of preparation for Oxford, among the soaring peaks of the Canadian Rockies, in British Columbia, full of wild flowers and bears. Oxford immediately came into my thoughts when I was reminded of the story about two colleagues who, while hiking in the Rockies, were charged by a grizzly bear and, of course, immediately started running away. But as they were trying to make their escape one of them stopped, opened his backpack and pulled on a pair of running shoes. 'What are you doing?' said his friend—'bears can run at thirty miles an hour—you will never outrun it'. To which our newly shod hiker replied 'I don't have to outrun the bear ... I just have to outrun you!' To me this story suggested some key components of Oxford ... creative

¹ See *Yale: A Celebration* (Brody, A.E., and Brody, J.K., eds.), Old Ivy Press, 2001, p. 20.

thinking, coupled with the expert use of modern technology, to achieve a competitive advantage.

British Columbia is also one of the great experimental field sites in the study of evolution, a breakthrough in human understanding that we celebrate this year with the bicentenary of Darwin's birth. It is from high up on Mount Burgess and the remarkable 550-million-year-old fossils found among the Burgess Shale that the world of science has learned much and debated intensely about the natural forces that affect and select the structural and mechanical forms of life. But, of course, it was particularly in Oxford back in 1860, following the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and continuing today, that the ideas and the implications of evolutionary theory were expressed, debated and disseminated, to such far-reaching and revolutionary effect. This openness of enquiry and robustness of debate is at the heart of all that Oxford does, whether in science or the humanities, theory or practice. Different ideas, like competing life-forms in a process of evolution, benefit from being put under pressure, of being tested for fitness and selected for purpose.

So the answer to the question 'What has drawn me here?' has become clearer. I am here because Oxford over many centuries has committed itself to the development of ideas at the forefront of knowledge and then to the testing of those ideas through analysis, debate and experimentation. I am here because Oxford is committed to excellence in all of these undertakings. Excellence in the standards it sets for scholarship. Excellence in its academic staff, in the lecturers, tutors, and researchers, who are crucial to its success. Excellence in the students it chooses for admission. Excellence in the quality it expects of its administration. And excellence in those twin Oxford jewels, the collegiate structure and the tutorial system. But that commitment to excellence comes at a price. It is expensive. It demands high standards and constant attention. It is not always popular and has to be defended against political opportunism and crude social engineering.

I come to Oxford after nearly thirty years of teaching undergraduate and graduate students the delights of organic chemistry both in the classroom and the laboratory. I come after even more years dedicated to the cause of outstanding research and scholarship. While I am a newcomer to the collegiate University, I am not a newcomer to the core principles of excellence in teaching and research that it embodies. Over the years I have had several teachers and mentors from Oxford who by their words and actions

have exemplified all that is good about this place. None did this better for me than someone known to many of you, Professor Jeremy Knowles. Jeremy was Oxford from birth. Magdalen College School, an undergraduate at Balliol, fellow at Wadham, and many years in the Chemistry Department, carrying out exquisite investigations into the chemical complexities of life, a field close to my own academic love. He moved to Harvard where, for more than a decade and until his untimely death a year ago, he held one of the most influential positions in American higher education, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. Jeremy personified that wonderful mixture of joy, rigour and combativeness that is Oxford scholarship. At his memorial Neil Rudenstine (a graduate of New College and former President of Harvard) said this of Jeremy: 'Above all, he understood the nature of a university and what it meant to search for knowledge, or discover even a single truth. The standard could never be too high. Many other things mattered, of course. But if learning, teaching, and research were not the heart of the matter, why were we here?'²

I am here to commit myself, with all of you, to the maintenance of these principles ... to focus on the three core pillars that define the overarching mission of the great universities of the world:

–The creation of knowledge ... in our laboratories, our research centres and our academic departments;

–The dissemination of knowledge ... in our lecture and seminar rooms, our colleges and tutorials, online and in print;

and finally,

–The preservation of knowledge ... in our libraries, our museums, our collections, and our digital repositories.

The years ahead will not be easy for Oxford. They will likely require an intense debate on the role of the University, its financial underpinnings and its relationship to the rest of the national and international world. But I am confident that if we can keep before us the reasons why we are here—in Oxford in the first place—we will not only survive the years ahead but we will find that the greatest university in the world will both prosper and grow stronger far into the future.

Thank you.

ANDREW HAMILTON
6 October 2009

² Quoted in 'Jeremy R. Knowles (1935–2008)', Corey, E.J., and Rudenstine, N.L., *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.* **2008**, *47*, 8772–8773.