

## Graduation 2006

### Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Professor Simon Schama CBE

Thank you so much Professor Brogan and Chancellor. I'm particularly moved by Professor Brogan's remarks because he's somebody who is a colleague and friend but, as a colleague in Cambridge, I've learnt so much, especially about American history over the years. Often journalists come up to me and say, "Tell me Simon, why's History so hot?" Now I can tell them at last, actually, it's certainly hot in Essex! It was never like this at Leigh-on-Sea when I was growing up in the 1950s, I have to say. We did think, of course, it was balmy and tropical in sort of decadent places like Torquay and down there, on the Devonian Riviera. Although when I finally got to Torquay, the vaunted palm trees were really sort of miserable little things, which were not growing dates or figs but chilblains on the whole really, so we thought that was nonsensical as well. That was before the golden age of Fawley Towers.

I want to add my congratulations, if I can be so presumptuous, as although I am now as a Hon Grad, a member of your community and University, I will be presumptuous enough to congratulate the graduates and undergraduates receiving their degrees this afternoon, and the faculty that have taught them with intelligent passion, I know. I also want to add my congratulations to families and friends, without whom those undergraduates and graduates would not have got to the place they have. I particularly want to congratulate Mr and Mrs Kraze, and Mr and Mrs Houston, who had the courage to call their children respectively Scott and Donna, without necessarily assuming they were going grow up to be rock stars. Or but maybe they are, for which history is yet another civic training.

I want to congratulate the prize winners in particular and the young lady, I think it was actually, who received her degree for work on a dissertation called Constructing Risky Foods. I do congratulate you but I will not be coming to dinner! Well, I'm thrilled and honoured to be your Honorary Grad, indeed because I have enormously fond memories of growing up in Essex, as the Orator correctly pointed out. And also because I've been to Essex University before, on a job interview, about 30 years ago. A job which I did not get! However, if I'd been on the appointments committee, I wouldn't have given me a job either, actually at that particular point. I was a very dodgy prospect I have to say! There was not much to me apart from the qualities which the orator very kindly alluded to, of a certain kind of rhetorical overdose, which I was always as capable then, as now, of turning on. But there was no PhD yet, there was no big book. In fact, I, along with my, sadly posthumous, colleague Roy Porter, were pointed out in Cambridge University as the two young dons who are almost certain never to write a book. I suppose we've been making up for that again. But actually, in some sense, I think, the problem with Schama, when he came for his job interview at Essex was that he was dodgy for a particular reason that there was a sense, precisely for the reason for which I've been almost unseemly and charmingly flattered by the orator, that there was a sense then in which I did feel that history belonged both to the public realm, as well as to scholars and the two kinds of history-making weren't in some competition with each other. I always held honourably E.M. Forster's paraphrase of Kipling, when Forster wrote in a wonderful essay about doing history, "What do they of history know, who know only other historians?" So, at the time, I was indeed moonlighting for Harry Evans on The Sunday Times, I was doing some journalism. I always felt that history was, in some sense, a craft of a kind of civic companionship and it was your duty, in some sense, to inherit the mantle of that kind of public teaching, certainly not public preaching that began all those centuries ago in ancient Greece. But I also think that Essex has something to do with it, I did indeed grow up, I was, indeed it was, its true, it was in Essex that I really first fed the flame of historical enthusiasm. My dad, I remember, telling me (my father was a great storyteller, better than I, I think actually) and I remember he set me alight by talking about the moment when the Roman temple in Colchester was in flames under the threat of the Boudicca insurrection. I remember that very well and I did indeed have this kind of romance of

history, of an Essex kind. I did think about the Earl of Essex, of course he probably didn't spend much time in Essex, but I imagined him a sort of Trevor Bailey in tights or something, a sort of cricketer, and only the old, my contemporaries, will know what I'm talking about there! But I hope this sense in which Essex belonged both to the grandeur and the romance and the beauty of Constable country, the Stour valley, of sempiternal England, or perpetual England renewing itself in the countryside. But it was also gritty Essex really, it was the Essex of the estuary boys like me. Names when I went on the train from Southend, to Fenchurch St, when I went with my dad. There were certain names that were incredibly romantic to me, like Dagenham and Chigwell. I had an Uncle Harry at Chigwell actually who I loved because I was told he was a bookmaker and I thought that meant he was a writer or that he did fine tooled bindings. I wasn't quite sure what fine tooled bindings were but I knew they had to be good. I didn't know what a bookmaker was so I liked to stop off at Chigwell. Ilford, that was another, I thought. So I had this sort of sense, already, that history was compounded of the past and the present, of the damage that time and war could make, and also of the way in which parts of the British countryside, and in particular the British country could, could resist it so it did indeed give me an appetite for history.

I especially want not come back to this list of congratulations but I do especially want to congratulate all of you graduates, undergraduates, who have graduated in history and I want to reassure all those parents saying, "All very nice but what can they do with it?" They can do anything in the world with it and that history, I hope some of you will go onto academia, but history is at the point now with the digital archive, with the kind of larks I get up to in television, with historical journalism, with the huge explosion of popular publication of popular history, its becoming, wonderfully, a kind of renaissance of expansion of knowledge. Ultimately we need history more than ever, I think, actually, precisely because, I think, of one of Cicero's dictums which might be applied to many of our current predicaments in this time of increasing war and misery and terror. Cicero said, "Those without history remain in the condition of small children who know not whence they came and know not whither they go." And, my God, I think, there's any time we need history for that, we need it now!

History, ultimately, is about freedom, its very moving for this to be a kind of united nations of universities, probably a more effective united nations than the real thing, actually. Because, actually, I also think that history is necessarily pluralist and cosmopolitan. When you do history, its never an exercise, or ought never to be an exercise, in narcissistic self congratulation. Its about discovering the passions and the convictions and the cultural identities of other people, other people who've lived in different and distant times, and in distant countries, and in that sense, we are freed from the tyranny of our myths. If there was ever a time when we needed history to teach us about the condition of the other, it's now.

God, its much too hot to be giving a sermon isn't it? So, I am, I think, going to stop at that point actually. But I would just say, again at the risk of a presumptuously avuncular kind of ending, that all the mums and dad, and brothers and sisters, and friends out there who have their graduands in history and politics and government here, be, I know you are, very proud of them but be fantastically proud of them. And you lot, be very proud of yourselves because, as the Chancellor said, the future of guaranteeing that freedom of knowledge is in your hands. Scary isn't it? But also, terrific! Thank you.