

## Graduation 2007 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduated Professor George Monbiot

Orator: Professor Jules Pretty

**Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred on PROFESSOR GEORGE MONBIOT.**

All indigenous people have strong oral traditions. They tell stories to pass on knowledge from one generation to another, and also to guide behaviour. One group well noted for their stories are the Western Apache (headed up a century or more ago by the likes of Geronimo and Cochise), who were written about beautifully by author Keith Basso. One form of their story telling is the arrow story. The recipient hears the story, and its moral message sticks like an arrow. And they always begin these stories with the words, "it happened at...", and end it in the same way, so that a story and a place name become intimately connected. Places then become associated with wisdom, and attain cultural as well as ecological significance. No one is more aware of the value of story telling than George Monbiot. As one of the country's foremost environmental journalists, as well as author and activist, he has championed many vital causes, often in the face of considerable opposition, and has contributed new ideas that have stuck in the body politic rather like Apache arrows.

George Monbiot was educated at Stowe School, and studied Zoology at Oxford. After graduation, he became a radio producer with the BBC's Natural History Unit, making investigative environmental programmes. He then worked for the World Service as a producer and presenter, before embarking on his freelance career that would take him across the tropics to investigate and write about the lives of people facing the colonising threats of modern economic development.

His first book, *Poisoned Arrows*, was published in 1989, and drew upon a series of extraordinary adventures in Indonesia. There remains something of the order of 600 indigenous peoples across the world, and their cultures and environments are now under threat. Humans were hunter-gatherers for some 300,000 generations, invented agriculture 600 generations ago, and we became industrialised just 6-8 generations ago. If you squeezed human history into one week, the industrialised bit comes just three seconds before midnight on the 7th day – its lately come. Yet in those three seconds, we have invented forms of economic development that have brought great wealth to many people, but have actively harmed many long-standing cultures and environments.

It was this experience in Western Papua, learning from a "delightful and unacquisitive people", as he puts it, that George Monbiot ceased to be just a journalist, and became a campaigner for change. He then spent two more years in the north-east Amazon regions of Brazil, again studying the effect of displacement and land alienation, and then after *Amazon Watershed* was published, continued his travels in East Africa. Again, the focus was on the clash between indigenous nomads and the relentless effects of modern economic development. What is quite clear is that if you write about people and the land across our small blue-green planet, there is simply no substitute for going there, for listening and learning, especially from the right people.

It is though George Monbiot's more recent books on corporate power, global governance and the climate change that have told stories about broader politics. These are full of the gloominess that comes from understanding how we seem to run this world, but also some optimism about what should be done differently. He became involved in the anti-roads movement after being persuaded

to visit Twyford Down, and later set up the organisation, The Land is Ours. He was hospitalised by security guards, and says, “it was a big shock to me that authorities here could act in that way as well (as well as in Amazon or West Papua)” Since 1995, he has written a regular column for the Guardian (weekly since 1998), and he runs a website that contains articles on topics from advertising to climate change, from tourism to war. The website receives some 250,000 hits a month. That’s not bad for a storyteller.

George Monbiot’s 4th book, *Captive State*, exposed the creeping corporate takeover of Britain, arguing that commercial involvement in politics was a threat to democracy. This was almost before it became fashionable and widely accepted. His 2003 book, *The Age of Consent*, was then a positive manifesto for a new world order, suggesting a world parliament, reforms for the UN General Assembly, an international institution to deal with debt, and a new fair trade organisation to regulate world trade to protect poorer countries. His most recent book, *Heat*, focuses on the world’s greatest environmental problem. Oddly, this was his first explicitly environmental book. Humans have always affected their environments, and have been shaped by them in return. In recent times, our impacts have become larger, and some substantial, such as the relentless loss of the rainforests, and the hole in the ozone layer. But it’s climate change that is the sign of the world creaking at the seams. It cannot take much more.

But it will have to, it seems. And it is our consumption patterns that drive climate change, and people’s growing aspirations for an increasingly single type of lifestyle. There are 75 cars for every 100 people in the US, and that includes the elderly and the babies. Increasingly, people’s aspirations in developing countries are to be like those in the industrialised world. Yet if everybody across the whole of the world at the moment consumed at the same levels as North American levels, we would need about eight planets to resource it.

George Monbiot’s *Heat* also shows how we are sleepwalking into a major economic problem – it is not just something abstract that happens out there to environments that we can somehow choose to ignore. It is also not “global warming”, as contrarians persist in calling it, arguing that life would be better if the weather was a bit warmer. We might not agree in this room perhaps later today! And anyway, they say, it is not being caused by humans; they blame sunspots and wobbles in the Earth’s orbit and the like. This is arrant nonsense, and not only does George Monbiot show this, he also sets out another positive agenda – what we can do to reduce carbon emissions by 90% from current levels.

George Monbiot has won many prizes for environmental activities, journalism, screenwriting and radio production. He is often asked for career advice, and says one thing: “be wary of following the career advice from your college”. This is not to be critical of our careers’ service (they paid a few quid for me to put that bit in here!) – but he warns graduates to follow their own grand plans and interests. The Chancellor gave this advice at the beginning as well. You all begin with ideas about changing the world, and all too easily may find yourself giving in, later becoming captive rather than free. “You only have one life”, George Monbiot says, “so why waste it?” And that is one of the things that George has not done. Strangely, though, he is one of the few people to have seen their own obituary. He once picked up a newspaper in Sao Paulo and saw a front-page article about the death of a British journalist in the very region where he was working. “Oh my goodness”, he said on reading further, “it is me!”

**Chancellor, it is my great pleasure to present to you a very living GEORGE MONBIOT.**