

## Graduation 2007 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand Hugh Brogan  
Orator: Professor Steve Smith

### **Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon HUGH BROGAN**

Hugh Brogan is one of the world's leading historians of the United States. His best selling Longman History of the United States was first published in 1985 and is still in print, albeit now as the Penguin History of the United States. Its seven hundred pages offer an exhilarating panorama of American history from 40,000 BC. to 1990. A history that is astute, cogent, graceful and witty. In addition he is the author of a biography of John F. Kennedy, a book on American presidential families and editor of a volume of documents on the American civil war.

But Hugh Brogan's scholarly interests range far wider than this. For he is the acclaimed biographer of the children's writer Arthur Ransome, author of a book on Rudyard Kipling, and most recently, author of a massive biography of Alexis de Tocqueville – a tearing figure in 19th Century political thought, about whom I shall say more.

Hugh was destined to become an historian, growing up in a brilliant academic family in Cambridge. His father was Sir Dennis Brogan, Professor of Political Science at Cambridge University, and an imminent historian of United States and France. His mother was an archaeologist who went on to become the world's leading authority on Roman Libya Tripolitania. Even the circumstances of Hugh's conception portended his future as an historian. In 1945 his mother was excavating an archaeological site in Gergovia in central France, reportedly the site where Vercingetorix, Chieftain of the Gauls, was defeated by Julius Caesar in 52 BC. She and her husband were camped out on the site in a miserable tent and in the course of the dig she became unwell. A doctor was summoned who examined her in a tiny alcove closed off by a curtain. He soon emerged from behind the curtain to assure her anxious husband that his wife was not ill, but pregnant. Thereupon his father raced around the site and declared to the archaeologists that if his wife should produce a son, he will be called Vercingetorix, in honour of the Gaulish chieftain. No doubt to the relief of the little boy born the following year he was in fact christened Hugh, but Vercingetorix is his middle name.

As Hugh was growing up, the USA loomed large in the Brogan household. During the Second World War his father served in various journalistic and intelligence capacities in the United States, and Americans in the shape of visiting scholars, journalists and graduate students were a constant presence. Hugh recalls the family gathering around the radio to listen to the address of President Harry S. Truman. American magazines, especially Life magazine, American movies and musicals were also creating in Hugh a lifelong love of the culture of the United States.

It may seem odd to dwell on Hugh's childhood, but it is an unusual and intriguing feature of his scholarly career, yet so many of his interests were formed while his was still very young. In 1984, for example, he published the definitive biography of Arthur Ransome, one of his favourite writers as a child and subsequently edited 2 collections of his stories and selection of his letters. In addition he has written a short book on another childhood favourite, Rudyard Kipling, and his influence on the Boy Scout movement. The way he became Ransome's biographer, incidentally, illustrates beautifully the role of chance in life. It happened that one evening, after a somewhat bibulous dinner in his Cambridge college, he retired to the senior common room to read the

newspapers, where he came upon a bad tempered review by film critic Russell Davis of a recent film of Ransome's most famous book 'Swallows and Amazons'. Hugh did not doubt that the book but the film was bad, but took exception to Davis's characterization of Ransome as quote 'a frightful old Tory', a travesty in so far as Ransome had been an admirer of the Russian revolution. And indeed had even married Trotsky's secretary. Hugh fired off an angry letter protesting the slander which somehow fetched up in the hands of Ransome's widow, Trotsky's former secretary. She was so impressed that anyone should feel moved by anger to defend her husband, that she invited Hugh to become Ransome's biographer.

In 1949, aged eleven, Hugh was packed off to Repton School, an experience he greatly enjoyed and currently he is engaged in writing the history of the school. Upon leaving Repton, he served for two years in the Royal Artillery and then in 1956 went off to Cambridge to study History, gaining a first class honours degree three years later. At that stage Hugh did not intend to become a professional historian, and for three years he worked as a journalist on The Economist magazine. In 1962, however, he won a prestigious Harkness fellowship, which allowed him to spend 2 years in the United States. First, at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C, and then at Yale University. It was during this time that he developed the second major interest of his academic career; the life, times and thought of Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who, at the age of 26, had visited America, and three years later in 1835 produced a masterpiece 'Democracy in America' considered by many to be the finest work ever written on the American political system. Hugh, now a fellow of St Johns College, Cambridge, was recruited to the international team tasked with publishing Tocqueville's complete works. The project cannot be considered a great success. Over 40 years after its inception, it's still not complete. There are still 3 volumes to come although, happily, Hugh's own contribution, which he completed in the mid 1960s, finally saw the light of day a quarter of a century later in 1991.

In 1974 Hugh moved to the University of Essex, where he was to teach full time for 24 years before retiring in 1998 to become Research Professor in the history department. In 1987-1990 he served as the department's Chairman and it has been my great privilege to have had Hugh as a colleague for most of that time. He has been a wonderfully humane and enlightening presence, much loved and esteemed by students and colleagues alike. He is an outstanding lecturer, possibly helped by the fact that in his youth he had a passion for acting and hundreds, if not thousands, of students have discovered the joy of history through his teaching. His Penguin history is dedicated, quote 'to all my pupils, past, present and to come'. In the preface he writes 'I have learned a lot from my students, both through discovering what they needed to know and, when they ask me questions I couldn't answer, where my own ignorance lay'.

In 1998, when Hugh retired from full time teaching, he was already an eminent historian. Yet his life's major work was yet to come. Last year after almost 50 years of study he published his magisterial biography of Tocqueville. It's been universally lauded as a masterly achievement. In it Hugh succeeds marvellously in bringing this great political thinker to life, painting a portrait of a man who was complex and fallible, good and bad, in equal measure. He argues that the most important event in Tocqueville's life occurs before he was born, namely the French Revolution. During the reign of terror, ten members of the Tocqueville family were imprisoned and six were executed. He contends that Tocqueville was never able to shake off a certain nostalgia for the aristocratic world into which he was born, but he knew intellectually that that world was gone forever, and he recognized far earlier than most of his contemporaries that something new, and of huge importance for the future, was developing in the provincial outpost of the western world that was then the United States, namely a democratic form of government based on rejection of the class hierarchies of Europe. The biography is incisive in analysing the contradictions in Tocqueville's political thought. It's vivid and perspicacious in recreating the turbulent times in which he lived. Opinionated in the best sense, indeed some of his rather caustic comments on his hero have annoyed critics, but above all it's a biography that is beautifully, elegantly, stylishly written.

And for Hugh, history is a branch of literature and clinging to that belief he has to some extent gone against the grain of academic trends during his lifetime. From the time he became a fellow of St Johns in the mid-1960s, history became more and more specialized as a discipline, increasingly concerned to establish its credentials as a social science, and distance itself from what some saw as the insufficiently rigorous discipline of literature. Hugh has resolutely bucked this trend. For him, history is an all-embracing discipline that educates us, not least through the exercise of the imagination and literary skill. History, he believes, is educational in the very broadest sense of that term. It not only teaches us about the past, it teaches us about what it means to be human. In justifying why he chose to write about Tocqueville in the form of biography, rather than say an analysis of his political thought, Hugh explains that a man like Tocqueville quote 'enlarges our sense of human possibility and of the meaning of human lives in everything he writes' This, I submit, is no less true of Hugh Brogan's own work.

**Chancellor, I present to you HUGH BROGAN.**