

## Graduation 2007

### Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Professor Hugh Brogan

This is to me a very domestic occasion. You've gathered, from what Professor Smith said, that I've been at Essex a long time. He didn't mention that I was for many years, well it seemed for many years, it was only in fact four, Public Orator for the University and so I've attended occasions of this kind almost as much as anyone in the room, and so I feel quite at home. But it makes it very difficult to know what to say to you. The best honorary doctorate speech I ever heard was when the great historian Richard Cobb got his honorary degree about thirty years ago. It was in the old LTB where many of you will have suffered, and it was very hot. Far hotter than it is today, no air cooling system, it was the end of the day, about this time and Richard just stood before the assembled graduates and said 'well, it's very hot and the pubs are open' and sat down. Well I didn't quite dare to do that, besides it would be plagiarism which is almost a crime. So I've just prepared a few remarks but I swear they won't last long.

And I must begin by thanking the University for conferring a great honour upon me. I am far from sure that I deserve it, in spite of Professor Smith's generous remarks. It never occurred to me the days that I was a public orator that I'd one day be an honorand myself. And when I was boy I was very fond of a story called 'The House of Arden' by Edith Nesbit, in which occurs the country proverb 'praise to the face is open disgrace'. I don't know if the proverb is universally true but I can't get it out of my head, and so, ungratefully perhaps, I don't propose to say anymore about myself, my work, or the compliments that have just been paid me. Deeply though, I value them. Instead I must talk to my fellow graduands about themselves, but what to say? If you were in your first term I'd know exactly what to say, I would insist that the opportunity to study at a good university is one of the best things that can ever come our way. And I would quote Immanuel Kant, as I did in an Enlightenment lecture that some of you, perhaps, may vaguely remember. Sapere audi, I would say, as he did: dare to learn; dare to think; dare to understand; shake off tutelage. But this is no longer news to you. You have long since discovered the true joys of university life and liberty. You have discovered, for example, that the most important thing about a university is not, as you thought at eighteen, how good its bar is, but how good its library is; you have discovered, particularly, the excellence of the Albert Sloman library. You have discovered new friends and new tastes; you have discovered yourselves and also, I hope, a satisfying path, leading from this real world of thought and learning, which you are now leaving, through what, following Plato, I may call the shadow world of money, politics, religious enthusiasm, inefficient bureaucracy, corrupt sports, meretricious art, trashy journalism and 'Disneyfied' entertainment. Those of you who came to Essex as mature students will, I am sure, return to the shadow world strengthened and trained, as you hoped from the first, to deal with it on more equal terms. And all of you have already been told (probably several times) that learning is a lifelong process: you carry the university with you as you leave, only from now on you will have to be your own instructors.

I am not going to give you advice for a future which I will not live to see and might not understand if I did. The future is yours, the future is you. You know already that out there are waiting a great many middle-aged Philistines who think they have all the answers (probably some of them have already offered you jobs). Many of them will be good employers and inspiring leaders, but even they will try to exploit you and boss you about. They will tell you what to do and what not to do; what to think and what to feel. They will plunge you back into tutelage if you let them. They will constantly profess to be thinking about the future, but their real concern is with their present. It is you who must, who will, think about the future. You will shape it. Fortified by your Kantian education, you will know how to choose, how to act, and how to change your mind when you make mistakes; you will live according to your own honest lights, not those thrust on you by the salesmen of banality, whom it would unkind of me to list. Instead, let me repeat: Sapere Audi, and I hope you will never forget how much – perhaps even the future of all civilization – depends on your

generation's courage and free intelligence. The Chancellor in his opening remarks said something like that, and I would like to underline it.

That seems to be advice after all, so I move on hastily to a third maxim, the motto of this University: Thought The Harder, Heart The Keener. I don't think it has been much quoted recently, so there may be some of you who need to be reminded that it was adapted from the Old English poem about the battle of Maldon fought, not twenty miles from here, in the year 991. It was a risky choice for a motto, since the poem describes a lost battle, a major defeat for the English as they resisted a Viking invasion. The words are taken from a speech by one of the losing warriors, which runs in part

Hearts shall be higher, courage keener,  
Spirits be prouder, as our strength shrink.  
Here lies our lord, cut down and killed,  
Grounded for good. Men shall mourn ever  
That now from this sword-play study to swerve.

It shows the confidence of a young university that it took this cry of defiance and made it an affirmation of hope and mission. Thought The Harder, Heart The Keener. What should it mean to you on the verge of the future? I am no scholar of Anglo-Saxon, but I think I have found a fit sense for it on this occasion: Don't let the bastards grind you down.

Thank you for listening.