

## Graduation 2007

### Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Richard Mabey

Chancellor and Jules, thank you so much for those words. I am so proud to have got this honour from the University, not so much for myself but as a kind of recognition for the world I work in. As Jules so flatteringly outlined, I am not a biologist, I'm a nature writer, which I suppose crudely means I try to explore the relationships between the natural world and the human imagination rather than trying to examine it as a scientist.

This had a long tradition in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries with people like Gilbert White and Richard Jefferies but fell virtually into oblivion during the scientifically, and particularly technologically, tinted world of the inter-war years and the post-war years. It's now thank goodness enjoying a timely renaissance because we need to learn how to engage with the natural world, not just to measure it and hope we can manage it in some way.

But I am especially glad that this honour has come from this University in Essex, part of East Anglia, an area which those of us who live in it, regard with great regional pride. The four counties of Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex are a very odd and very fluent area, always slightly quirky, sticking as we do geographically like a heel out into the North Sea. East Anglia has always been at the nub of our changing relationships with the natural world. Most often it's been crushed underfoot in the process. East Anglia, particularly Norfolk, and parts of West Suffolk were the first areas to be drained in the 16th and 17th centuries. Central East Anglia had the full might of the agricultural revolution stretching from let's say, the late 18th century up into very middle of the 20th century, a process which reduced much of the central part of the area, particularly in Norfolk and Suffolk to an ecological and a social desert. But it was in East Anglia, and actually in Essex that the revival began.

Only about 2 years after Rachel Carson published her famous and still pertinent book *Silent Spring* about the effects of pesticides on the natural world and eventually upon humans, a man working in Chelmsford, living very close to this University called J A Baker wrote a book that is generally regarded as being the most extraordinary and original and moving book about the natural world in the whole of the 20th century, possibly in the English language. It was *The Peregrine* and this man, J A Baker, who worked for the Automobile Association and had such bad short sight that he had to wear pebble glasses – that's Essex for you, a birdwatcher with pebble glasses – prowled about the estuary of the Blackwater river, just a couple of miles south of where we are sitting at the moment, searching for the last Peregrine Falcons of eastern England, which had been at the end of the food chain, decimated by DDT. His astonishing book, which as I say, reinvented the English language virtually, was as responsible, just as responsible, as the scientific work identifying the persistence of DDT in leading to its outlawing and in gradually leading to the return of the Peregrine Falcon so that it is now at the highest population it's ever been in its history.

Two years after that, in 1969, another Essex man started a series of books. He was called Ronald Blythe, he lives in Colchester, not a few miles from here and I am very proud to have him as my friend, and we should all be very proud that he is also an honorary graduate of this University. With Akenfield, Ronald Blythe started a series of books exploring the human side of dwelling in the countryside just as Baker had explored what it meant to have a wild falcon flying in this terminal landscape. Those two, very firmly located in this part of the world, started the first glimmers of a revolution in re-imagining the natural world that has, I think, now begun to have a true renaissance. And if I am part of that renaissance then I am very happy about that as well. But it is not just a renaissance in language and writing and the imagination, though I think that has to precede anything that we do in the real world, it's also happening in East Anglia in the land itself.

Right up from the north west fens in Norfolk down to the seawalls of Essex, just again a few miles from here, there are fantastically exciting experiments going on to reclaim industrial agricultural land back for ecologically rich land in which humans can also have a part. I was at a conference three weeks ago in Cambridge; one of the East Anglia's four counties, which I think will turn out to have been a major changing point in the whole sweep of this changing relationship. It was called Passionate Natures – Ecology and the Imagination and the University of Essex, I am happy to report, was extremely well represented there. Professor Jules Pretty and Professor Marina Warner were outstanding keynote speakers. And this conference, which was also attended by practitioners on the land, attempted that great link that we are all working towards – a rebuilding of a despoiled landscape and an alienated people back into a whole ecosystem in which humans and our other fellow beings on the earth can actually share living space. So, those of you who are in Essex and staying there, you are where the action is happening. Those of you who are going away now, farewell, good luck, but watch this space!

Thank you.