

## Graduation 2009 Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate John Toland

When earlier this year I received an invitation from the Vice-Chancellor to be part of today's ceremony it was the second time that a letter from this University took me by surprise. The first was dated 8 Feb 1973 and went as follows:

*"Dear Mr Toland*

*Further to your recent interview at the University I have much pleasure in offering you the post of lecturer in the Department of Mathematics, at a commencing salary of £1,923 per annum .....*

*Yours sincerely*

*Ian T Cook,*

*Dean of the School of Mathematical Studies"*

I had just finished writing my PhD thesis which had yet to be examined and it was a better salary than the £950 pounds per annum that the Atomic Energy Authority had offered me with a Bachelor's degree three years earlier. I was very young, green even, and astonished by my good luck.

The second, about today's ceremony, brought home the passage of time. I foolishly thought that such things did not happen to people as young as me! – and I was truly amazed to discover that the University of Essex remembered me at all, and apparently not for entirely inappropriate reasons.

The university was only 7 years old when I gave my first lecture on complex variable theory and 10 years earlier its Vice-Chancellor Albert Sloman had delivered the 1963 BBC Reith lecture on the making of a university – the reality TV of its day. This was then a very political place. There were protest meetings, a rent strike, a student sit-in at the Vice Chancellor's office, and students and lecturers organised a blockade of deliveries to the university. There were posters for political parties that I had never heard of on every wall, and graffiti all over the place - revolution was in the air. I remember a colleague telling me that someone had stepped on his watch after a lecture – he was still wearing it at the time!

There was also, incidentally, no heating or hot water in the student accommodation in the 6 tower blocks.

The MP for Southend thought that the university should be converted into an agricultural college.

Ye the university authorities treated the protesters with humanity. My boss, Brooke Benjamin, became an instant hero when he went to Colchester police station after a demonstration to distribute cigarettes to students who had been held there overnight

My life-long interest in the water-wave equations began in that atmosphere, in an office overlooking Square 4 where we seemed endlessly to play Frisbees in the lunch times.

They were happy days, indeed! In all respects my debt to Essex University is very great not least for today's invitation.

But today is about a new generation. It is nearly 40 years since I was at my own undergraduate graduation ceremony, the year after men had landed on the moon (tomorrow is the 40<sup>th</sup>).

anniversary of the launch) and the pocket calculator was yet to be invented. I remember well the person who played the role then that I play today, but only because I came to know him later in a professional capacity. But I don't have the faintest idea what he said, and I doubt that any of you graduating today will remember a word I say beyond this moment. In fact this is the good news: you can now begin to forget everything you ever learnt, assuming that you have not done so already.

But what you cannot do, because it is impossible, is discard the benefits of the university education you are today celebrating.

It is St Swithin's day, 15<sup>th</sup> July:  
*St Swithun's day if thou dost rain*  
*For forty days it will remain*  
*St Swithun's day if thou be fair*  
*For forty days 'twill rain na mair*

The weather today is supposed to affect the weather for the next 40 days. More reliably, I predict that what has happened today will affect all of you for the next 40 years. A lot has happened during my lifetime, and I think a great deal more will happen during yours. This is as it should be, and I hope you play your part in it.

But some things do not change: According to Plato, 2,400 years ago Socrates said

*"the unexamined life is not worth living"*

This is still true.

Congratulations to everyone graduating today.