

80'th Birthday Speech, Hugh Osborn

When I couldn't sleep at nights then, apart from choosing my records for desert island discs, I used to compose 80th birthday speeches. I never thought that either would be necessary but inevitably time creeps up and here I am. When others spoke on a similar occasions in the past they often described their lives up to the point when they arrived at Trinity. In my case I intend to do pretty much the opposite.

My parents were both born during the battle of the Somme. Perforce, despite both being intelligent, they had to leave school at 14, and of course were both were caught up in the cataclysm of the second world war. My father was in the RAF and rose to the exalted rank of corporal. I was born in Oxford during the battle of Stalingrad. For someone of my generation I followed the uneventful path of someone living in a small country town in the 40's and 50's. From primary school with 40 pupils in a class I passed the 11+ and went to the local grammar school. I did pretty well but was never top of the year. There was every expectation that you would have to do national service but fortunately this was abolished, doubtless because the government decided it was cheaper to move to a defence policy based on nuclear weapons. In those days if you wanted to apply to Oxford or Cambridge you had to stay on for an extra term beyond A level in order to take the entrance exam and following interview in December. In consequence I went to UCL where I stayed for six years. I was in London during the swinging sixties though they mostly passed me by. I did go and see the Beatles perform live, but you could hear almost nothing because of the screaming.

My first connection with Trinity was, after I had been appointed to an assistant lectureship in DAMTP, when I received a letter from Jeffrey Goldstone suggesting I might join the mathematical teaching staff. Jeffrey could, and in my view should, have received a Nobel prize though he does have the distinction, shared just with Peter Higgs, of having a particle named after him, there can be many Goldstone boson but only one Higgs boson. Apart from the various virtues that Jeffrey said Trinity possessed he also suggested I would be guaranteed to live to 80. In that respect he proved to be right. Before arriving I had an interview with Dennis Marian the then senior tutor, and tutor to Prince Charles when he was at Trinity. I was never sure what the point of this was but much later I was able to read the letter of reference sent to the college before I was appointed. This said I was rather uncouth and socially inept. However by the time I saw this I knew this was to be expected of mathematicians, at least in Trinity.

I became part of a teaching staff of six. Besides Jeffrey there was Keith Moffat, Alan Baker, who was awarded a Fields Medal in 1970 but didn't become a professor until 1974 when he could give up supervising, Andrew Casson, who failing to get a permanent job here went to Texas in 1981 and became an FRS in 1998, and Bela Bollobas. Jeffrey went to MIT in 1977, a sad loss. He often came to talk to me about some problem. I was never able to help but he usually found the solution while talking. Jeffrey is an honorary fellow

and is now 91, it would be nice if he were to be invited back sometime soon. Everyone of the six became a FRS although in my case much much later. Coming from a physics background I was woefully ignorant of much of the mathematical tripos. In my first term I was asked to supervise Lee Hsien Loong the son of Lee Kwan Yew, the founder of Singapore as an independent country. He was a very able mathematician and could well have done research but had to return home. He became prime minister of Singapore for 20 years from 2004.

When I arrived at Trinity Rab Butler was the master. Rab was the epitome of magisterial and I am sure that Trinity was very small beer for him. He was the prime author of the 1944 education act, which governed post war education, and nearly became prime minister twice. The one time I met him he thought I was an undergraduate and I didn't feel able to disabuse him. The masters lodge then had a large collection of impressionist paintings which I think belonged to his wife Molly who came from the Courtauld family. What I soon realised was that the college was essentially run by John Bradfield who was senior bursar from 1956 to 1992, the last to come from an academic background. He developed the Trinity land at Felixstowe and also was the instigator of the Science Park. John devoted his life to Trinity and died in Great Court in 2014 as was in some way fitting. He was remarkably persuasive. I was on the garden committee at one time and there was a discussion about what to plant in some border. Most of the committee favoured one thing, John something else. In the end we followed Johns recommendation. His influence was not always benign, in 1987 he was instrumental in stopping Benjamin Zephaniah becoming a visiting fellow commoner. This made to national news and upset many younger fellows, not our finest hour. Still we did appoint Ben Okri in 1991.

When I joined Trinity it was a rather different place from now, all male of course. Burrells Field and Blue Boar hadn't been built. The College is now quite a bit larger, in size and numbers of fellows though the hall has got smaller. The Great Court Run took place in an unorganised fashion at midnight, people were free to wander through the College most of the time. Students were not burdened by debt as now and occasionally revolted, perhaps the two were connected. The more senior fellows were to my mind very grand and had totally different life experiences because of the world wars. Their memories stretched back to many of the grand figures of intellectual life from the first half of the 20th century. The senior fellow Tresillian Nicholas was involved in the first world war, at the Dardanelles and the Western Front. He knew TE Lawrence. He became senior bursar in the 1930s and bought the farm land at Felixstowe which we later developed. He gave a wonderful speech on the occasion of his 100th birthday in 1987.

I would like to mention a few of the fellows who were part of Trinity when I came in 1971 and have faded perhaps from living memory. Although I cannot claim to know each of them very well they had an impact on me because of their experiences in the first half on the 20th century. Jack Gallagher was Vice Master when I arrived. An eminent historian, he was very kind and encouraging to me when I initially felt very out of place. John Littlewood was with GH Hardy the preminent mathematicians in Britain for very

many years. They together brought Ramanujan to Cambridge in 1914. In the films about Ramanujan the actors playing Littlewood looked nothing like I remember him. He wrote a memoir *A Mathematical Miscellany* which contains a mixture of mathematics and Trinity anecdotes. Bela who knew him much better than I got it republished and Gaby made a bust which is in the combination room. I hope Bela will talk a little about him in the future. When I was on the Council Bela brought it to our attention that his widow, who he married when she was 12 (very unlike the film) was still alive. I am happy to say we granted her a pension. Also someone one could meet at lunch at that time was Otto Frisch who was I think the first to interpret experiments as showing nuclear fission and with Rudolf Peierls later showed that nuclear weapons were feasible. Not a legacy any of us are likely to repeat.

Others I would like to recall are a few fellows who were outside the standard academic mould but were passionate about Trinity and to each of which I felt I gained from knowing. Ralph Leigh a distinguished expert on Rousseau. He could be rather irascible. Tony Weir was a remarkable legal scholar who made brilliant speeches at College meetings. I was the honest man when he interviewed people for Holland Fund bursaries in his room. Mostly the interviews involved me just sitting there with his cat on my lap. Robert Neild, economist and advisor to Harold Wilson in the 60's, was an expert on oysters. He never followed the mainstream, he gave an impressive speech for his 90'th birthday and I was sometimes invited for oyster tastings. I would also like to mention Eric Griffiths. He was very much a controversialist, a charismatic teacher of English though not all students loved him. He never interacted much with the fellowship but I crossed swords with him a few times. He got into trouble for what he said to a girl from Essex at an admissions interview. This made the national news but lots of his former pupils wrote to support the son of a Liverpool docker. I very much admired Peter Laslett who moved from the Fleet Air Arm to the BBC and then academia. He helped instigate the founding of both the Open University and the University of the Third Age. He was a social historian and helped discover the nature of ordinary people's lives from an examination of parish records.

Of course Trinity is about teaching and research. I guess whilst I have here there have been some 2000 mathmos, quite a few I can remember. We taught two future fields medallists though since they were pure I didn't have much contact with them. A high proportion of those in other university maths departments were taught at Trinity. Not all became high powered mathematicians. I remember one mathmo Zoe who was very much a party girl but later offered to come back and give motivational talks about the need to work hard. I became a tutor in 1988, but only for four years as I was promoted to reader though I did stand in a few times later on. I do feel it was very rewarding to meet students over all subjects. There were quite a few eccentrics. One got very upset in that he filled his room with daffodils who he wanted live with until they completely collapsed. Sadly, for him, the bedder took them away when they first began to wilt.

There are not many times when one does anything which is in some way unique. In my case I feel that being senior treasurer of First and Third Trinity Boat Club May Ball

for more than 30 years is unlikely to be repeated even if the Ball lasts that long. I feel the Ball is like a butterfly which lies dormant for much of the year, while the chrysalis is making preparations for its sudden emergence into a thing of beauty. The Ball last for just one night though I know that people do remember the occasion many years later. Many things have changed over time. At one ball we had girls on roller skates giving out Marlborough cigarettes. Unimaginable now, though we did offer cigarettes, though not cigars, which were reserved for fellows, at the graduation dinner. Inevitably I remember the things that went wrong. At the beginning people applied for tickets on application forms with cheques which then had to be entered into a database. One year the relevant committee member, who is now a significant donor to the college, disappeared to the US at the end of the Lent term leaving them all randomly piled up in his room. We had to rescue them and Joan processed them. A time consuming exercise which she repeated for many subsequent years.

In 2002 the main band was aptly named the Fun Luvin Criminals. They stayed at the Hilton and managed to get so high they were unable to perform. After a lengthy delay the entertainments officer on the committee bravely got on the main stage to say they were not coming. Obviously despite this being beyond our control guests were not happy and later some committee members were pushed in the river. The following year the committee wanted to ban people who they felt were involved. One of these was Eddie Redmayne and he came to see me. Of course he was very charming but I felt I had to support the committee.

Most years the Ball manages to succeed, not without any hitches, but without anything significantly untoward. This is a tribute to the hard work of the committee and it is a genuine team effort. For myself I have always felt a moment of perhaps relief when the dawn starts to appear around 3am. At that point after 6 hours the Ball is mostly running on autopilot. Of course for me the next few days and weeks are taking up with paying people or sometimes trying to reclaim money who did not fulfil their contract. The turnover is now well over half a million. When I started it was no more than 100k. Apart from the many committees which change from year to year I would like to thank the college staff who nearly all, though there have been exceptions, who have helped us each year.

The Ball is just a tiny interlude in the academic year. Teaching and research is our *raison d'être*. My research interests changed over time but they tended to involve a lot of collaboration with research students. Although there were quite a few altogether I would like to mention three who I had a particularly close interaction with both before and after their PhD's. All three were attached to Trinity. Ian Jack became my student in the late 1970's. Together I was able to learn how to do calculations in quantum field theory. Ian became a professor at the University of Liverpool and I am pleased to say he is here this evening. We have written a paper together in the last year. Johanna Erdmenger came to Trinity in 1994, funded by her parents, and together we managed to understand many aspects of conformal field theories. This was pretty unfashionable at that time but has become very dominant in the last several years. Johanna is now a full professor at the

university of Wurzburg, which given the way the German academic system works is a very non trivial accomplishment. I remember Chris Morley saying that at a meeting of Trinity graduate students she was the only one to say positive things about Trinity. She would have come this evening but is giving a talk in Princeton.

I would like to pay particular tribute to one of my last PhD students, Francis Dolan. Francis came from Donegal, in the top left hand corner of Ireland. His family had a small holding and neither his parents or his brothers and sisters had any academic pretensions whatsoever. He went to the University of Galway, he came to Trinity in 1998 and became my PhD student a year later. For reasons I don't comprehend we hit it off so our mutual research became very productive. Francis was elected to a title A fellowship in 2003 and stayed in Trinity for the next four years. He would not have been elected nowadays but in terms of his contributions I have no doubt that he achieved as much as most of the others elected then or since. It is not a good idea for research supervisors to stay working with their research students after their PhD. However despite saying we wouldn't do it we continued to write papers together, 11 in total which judging by their citations all of which had a significant impact. After Trinity Francis went to Dublin, Southampton, Amsterdam and Crete. Francis was very troubled. He was gay, though it took me a while to realise this. Apart from depression he became paranoid and committed suicide by walking into the sea in Bournemouth, a week or so after we finished out last paper together (which now has some 400 citations). Of course this was devastating, for his family who were strong catholics, as well as his partner Christopher and others left behind. I arranged a memorial meeting in Cambridge and it was surprising how many people came. I was elected to be a fellow of the Royal Society when I was 77. In large part this must have been a consequence of my work with Francis.

Life goes on. Trinity has now gone beyond Dunbar's number of 150 which is meant to be the number one can maintain a stable social relationship with. Still this is only an average and other estimates are higher. I have heard quite a few 80'th birthday speeches over the years and it has always been incredibly illuminating to hear their different perspectives on how they arrived at Trinity especially for those who were caught up in the second world war. If I live to 90 or so I hope I will hear the first such speech by a female fellow. I trust the tradition will survive until then. I am very grateful for the support Trinity has shown me for more than 50 years. I would especially also to thank all the college staff who have helped me over the years and the catering staff for the meal tonight especially Cornelius and Junko.

Hugh Osborn
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