

John Lonsdale: 80th Birthday speech
22 October 2017

Master, thank you for that kind introduction and for proposing the toast. Friends and Colleagues, thanks for turning out to-night. I must have benefited from the fact that ITV's Sunday night series on Queen Victoria, devised by Daisy Goodwin who was taught more by Boyd Hilton than by me, came to an end last week.

Like all of us here I never cease to be thankful for my good fortune in being a member of this college. There can be no more generous patron of research, no better nursery of the youthful talent we are so privileged to receive, no friendlier society of equals, no High Table more open to the world.

Early life:

Although I am scarcely underprivileged, on my father's side I am the first of my family to have come up to a University. My grandfather was at Sandhurst, my father at Dartmouth Naval College. But on my mother's side my uncle Archie Lyall was an Oxford man. He wrote travel books, and gave me an early interest in Africa when I read his account of his visit to Portuguese West Africa in the 1930s. Portuguese colonials, unlike the British, did not frown on intimate relations between the races. So he called his book *Black and White Make Brown*. I'll come back to uncle Archie later.

I never knew his sister, my mother. She died three days after I was born. My father, then in command of a Royal Navy submarine, was often at sea, preparing for war. I was farmed out to a great aunt whose marriage had never happened because of the First World War. The next one duly came, and in May 1940 my father's boat (submarines are never ships) was crippled by a German mine. He and his crew were taken prisoner. My grandparents sent me, the last of the Lonsdales, across the Atlantic before Hitler came. I spent four years in the United States, together with four other naval families, thanks to the hospitality of James Garfield, my Uncle Jim. His father, also James Garfield, was, after Lincoln, the second president to have been assassinated. His farm was next to a maple plantation—which explains one of the items on tonight's menu. We all came back in early 1944, shortly before D-day, on an aircraft carrier commanded by the father of one of our families. In the ship's concert, before docking at Liverpool, with another boy I sang Bing Crosby's 'Pistol Packin' Mama'. That song was soon to become anglicised as 'Shoot that Doodlebug down, boys, shoot that doodlebug down.' Before the end of the year a doodlebug that had not been shot down landed close enough to throw me into a public swimming pool.

I first met my father in May 1945, as the war ended. My grandparents had sent me to a prep-school, a boarding school. One night my dormitory of seven-year olds had a pillow fight. Hearing footsteps in the corridor we piled back to our beds. The school matron opened the door. 'Lonsdale, you're wanted in the headmaster's study.' 'Why only me?' was my obvious reaction. We went downstairs. Next to the headmaster was a man who claimed to be my father. I think we shook hands. He had been liberated the previous day. Three years later, after he had left the navy to become a priest in the Church of England, he took me on my first cross-Channel holiday. We drove across France to Germany. As we crossed the Rhine he said, 'John, you must learn to like these people.' Last year there was no way I could vote other than to 'Remain'.

There's not much to tell of my privately educated boarding-school days, other than to illustrate how times have changed. My prep school had an imaginative headmaster with the unfortunate initials HMWC. He wanted us to have a swimming pool. After the war barrage balloons, those egg-shaped monsters of our wartime skies, were going cheap. So we boys were set to work to dig a hole, half an egg in shape, to be lined with half a balloon. The bathoon, as it was called, was inaugurated with a mass plunge. All, both masters and boys, were naked. I hope the music mistress was looking the other way. But I wonder what criminal charges might be laid today? Child labour? Child abuse? Then, when I went on to Sherborne School I was twice caned for painting in the art school when I should have been on the touch-line, cheering on my house rugby XV. But, as luck would have it, the housemaster who caned me knew John Morrison, trireme builder, then Trinity's senior tutor. I took the entrance scholarship exam in 1955, choosing as my essay subject: 'Who increases knowledge increases sorrow'. I agreed with the title. Perhaps that was why I was judged worthy only of a junior scholarship. I would argue against it today.

In 1953 my father went out to Kenya. The Mau Mau rising there had broken out; thousands of Africans were detained without trial. My father wrote to the local bishop, to volunteer his services. Because he too had been a prisoner, perhaps he could approach these detainees with more sympathy than priests who had never been behind the wire. The bishop replied that the Mau Mau spoke a language too difficult to learn and had disgusting habits. But the white settlers stood in equal need of salvation: could my father come out all the same? So in the summer holiday of 1953 I flew with him to Nairobi. One of his parishioners drove us upcountry to my father's church in the so-called 'White Highlands'. On the way we stayed at a settlement that the Mau Mau had recently raided. The hotel's bedrooms were thatched huts, scattered among thorn trees. On this my first night in the dark continent I didn't sleep a wink. Every rustle in the trees was a terrorist, now called a freedom fighter, intent on hacking me to death. I went out on two further summer holidays from my Dorsetshire public school.

My military interlude:

I was summoned to do my National Service in 1956. After being commissioned into a British regiment, now defunct, I got myself seconded to the King's African Rifles, based in East Africa, another unit that no longer exists. There used to be a cocktail-party joke about its white officers and their black privates. 'How exotic!' it was hoped the ladies would exclaim.

I can't have been a very effective platoon commander. My battalion was sent up to the northern frontier of Kenya, a desert area, to defend Kenyans against Ethiopian cattle rustlers who were also said to raid for testicles: to dangle in front of their intended. You can imagine the dismay of an 18 year-old. On my first patrol I didn't even know the Swahili for "follow me". My wireless operator was Samuel. He discovered that my wireless set, with a designed range of 50 miles, could pick up the BBC World Service after dark. I could lie on my campbed, gazing at all those southern stars, listening to Beethoven or, one night, to Max Beerbohm talking of Oxford before 1914, the Oxford of Zuleika Dobson. My batteries ran out and my company commander, some 50 miles behind me, could no longer give me orders.

What now astounds me is that I did not then think it was at all odd for me, ex-school boy, to be defending this imperial frontier. After all, one of my school friends, later a judge, had landed his tank at Port Said during the Suez fiasco. The experience also informed my later studies of colonial rule. My supposed command of battle-tested Africans—my Company Sergeant-Major, Maingi, had fought the Japanese in 1945—was no more than a conventional piece of imperial theatre, which George Orwell described best in his essay 'On shooting an elephant'. Like him I was coached by my supposed subordinates in how to act out a leading role I was scarcely competent to perform but which they knew how to construct for me. Hierarchical military structure dissolved into a collusive joint enterprise, what my later research supervisor, Ronald Robinson of St John's, came to call 'the politics of collaboration'.

But, to end this inglorious interlude, if I was not much of a soldier the Army was certainly good to me. It gave me two gifts. It bit me with the Africa bug, from which there is no escape. And it introduced me to the light of my life, Moya my general's daughter. Our four children are here to-night, together with their partners in life—all but one, Mizuki our Japanese daughter-in-law, who is detained at home by our two-year old grandson Ernest, apparently the easiest name for his Japanese grandparents to say.

Reading history at Trinity

I came up in 1958. My room was at the top of Angel Court. It was almost heated by a gas fire that kept going out and returning unlit, a dangerous game to

play with the then poisonous town gas supply. Undergraduate life then was indeed tougher than now. But it was also more free. No smartphones, no social media to fear. And what student could now do as I did in my first Long Vac, driving with four friends to Afghanistan and back in a second-hand Land Rover? Should I be ashamed to admit that I have sat on the head of one of the great Buddhas of Bamiyan, years before they were both blown to bits by the Taliban?

History is in fine shape in Trinity today, with an inspiring team of supervisors and directors in Arthur Asseraf newly arrived, Joya Chatterji whom I taught; Peter Sarris, Richard Serjeantson and Tessa Webber my successor generation; Academician Alex Walsham; an amazing crop of Title A's—all under the active gaze of two senior research fellows, Chai Lieven and David Washbrook.

My undergraduate years too were a vintage time for Trinity historians. I can still hear Michael Vyvyan's barks as I read out an essay. Whenever one could find him, Peter Laslett was on his way to stardom as a social historian, soon to publish *The World We Have Lost*; John Elliott, now Sir John, brought early modern Europe to life; Jack Gallagher told fantastic tales about the wider world. But the supervisor who most impressed me was Walter Ullmann, Austrian refugee from Hitler, who taught me medieval history in his room on Laundress Lane, overlooking Scudamore's punts. Later he helped the study of African history in Cambridge, as I'll explain. Bob Robson never taught me but I thought he most aptly personified the College, kindly, calm, and sceptically wise. My tutor was Harry Williams. More than any supervisor, his deeply troubled beliefs made me think more critically. When Trinity gave him a farewell dinner before he retired to a monastery the choir sang an adaptation of the song 'Lily the Pink': 'Let us get drunk, get drunk, with Harry the Monk, the Monk.' There's no call, yet, to think up a rhyme for Bannner but one hopes he gets our alumni to stump up more than a Tanner.

Research student

I both graduated and married in 1961. Moya and I started life together in the top flat of 86 Chesterton Road, owned by a Trinity widow, Mrs G E Moore. I don't think we ever saw her when not in her dressing gown. She was a pipe smoker. Her efforts to find a sufficiently powerful new brand when her favourite tobacco ceased production almost smoked us out, even on the top floor. We escaped for a year to Kenya, where we had met, for me to research into its colonial history, then coming to an end. I lost my supervisor, Jack Gallagher, retired tank crew, to Oxford's Beit professorship and was inherited by Robbie Robinson, retired bomber pilot. Robbie taught me room cricket but saw little of my work. I remember only one comment. I thought he should see the thesis before I submitted it. He gave it back, saying I could tell the examiners it was all my

own work. If that was damnation by faint praise the thesis did nonetheless get me elected Title 'A' Fellow—but not before I had taken up a lectureship in what Tony Weir would have called an unsatisfactory part of the world, at the new University College at Dar es Salaam, capital of Tanzania.

Dar es Salaam

We had two years in Dar, a paranoid city beset by plots and rumours of plots, brilliantly described by one of our new Title 'A's, George Roberts. The first thing we did on arrival was to prepare our 'Mutiny Box' of emergency rations and whatever our first-born, six-month old Penelope, might need. The Tanzanian army had mutinied a few months earlier in its barracks up the road. The University's staff had had to take to the bush. There were also snakes and bugs. Penelope's first connected sentence was 'Might bite you'. But Trinity rapped my knuckles too. After hearing of my election I wrote to Kitson Clark, our leading nineteenth century historian in the days before Boyd Hilton, asking him for a reading list to help me fill our almost empty University Library. 'Dear Dr Kitson Clark', I wrote. His reply was helpful but reproachful: 'Dear Lonsdale, Fellows of Trinity do not address each other by their honorifics.' Ouch! But here's another past that is gone. When did the middle classes cease to address friends by their surnames? But Kitson was always Kitson and never George, which would have seemed an almost indecent intimacy.

I also had to work up a course on the Russian Revolution, for which Michael Vyvyan gave me advice. The purpose was to give the apprentice young African socialists in Julius Nyerere's Tanzania some idea of what a real revolution was like. One of my proudest moments came when a Russian cruise ship called. Tanzania's Russian cultural attaché, who had helped me with films and posters, offered me a couple of historians to talk to my students. They turned out to be party hacks, claiming all credit for the Bolsheviks. My students, ever polite, could scarcely contain their laughter. The nonsense they were hearing made them see the point of what I had told them about the need to question one's sources.

We returned to Cambridge in 1966.

In 1968 I accepted an invitation to join the College's teaching staff, as director of studies in history, in support of Anil Seal. I soon experienced a disconcerting moment as Director of Studies:

This is where my uncle Archie returns. He had been in SOE's Cairo office in the war and in Yugoslavia as the war ended. There he picked up some propaganda posters. One portrayed a partisan, red star in cap, marching arm in arm with his Russian, American and British comrades. I inherited it on Archie's death. In 1969 I was filling in for Anil as director of studies in Part II history.

Prince Charles was one of our students. Russian tanks had crushed Alexander Dubcek's Prague spring a year previously. As a feebly ironic protest, I had pinned this partisan poster to my wall in I.3 Nevile's. One day there was a knock on my door. In came a young man in a sharp suit with a wide tie. Clearly, no undergraduate. 'What does Prince Charles think of your Maoist poster?' he demanded. 'And who are you?' I asked. 'I'm from the *Daily Express*.' I had to disappoint him—but it was with some nervousness that I picked up the *Express* the next morning. It contained no sensational accusation of tutorial treason. I never knew who among my directees had smelled a seemingly priceless scoop.

But then I really did have a mishap. With the official historian of modern Trinity present, who has studied the relevant Council Minutes, I have no option but to own up. As Senior Treasurer of the May Ball I objected to the committee's proposal to charge £25.00 a ticket: nobody, I thought, could possibly afford that. But then I lost £1500 of the May Ball's funds myself, bamboozled as I was by the wines member, a large young man connected to the trade. He offered to buy us wines in bulk, at a cut price, for Trinity and I think two other colleges. After he went down he billed each college and, once we had paid him, got the wine merchants to invoice us for the same sum, too. I never caught up with him. I was consoled by the thought that I was not the only senior treasurer to have been defrauded and, more importantly, was saved by a payment plan devised by the kindly resourceful John Bradfield. Hugh Osborn, I'm sure, has never be so fooled.

Two other early offences were more considered. I refused to admit a young man with generations of Trinity men behind him when he claimed to have read a book that he clearly had not. Rab Butler, then master, when phoned by the boy's father, was not well pleased. He was still lest pleased when I supplied Molly Butler, unparalleled mistress of the Lodge, with a Labour Party sticker for her car that demanded 'No Arms to South Africa'. I gave an evensong talk in Chapel, scarcely a sermon, urging what was then called responsible shareholder action over our investments in South Africa. The Master's stall was empty. John Bradfield finessed my plea in Council by founding a bursary at the best multi-racial school in southern Africa.

Boyd Hilton became my fellow Director of Studies when he arrived from Oxford in the early 1970s. Anil started on his creative career as the University's financial entrepreneur, to become our non-playing captain. Boyd and I shared decisions on admissions. The best answer to the question 'Why do you want to read history' that I remember (I don't know if Boyd would agree) came in 1987 from police constable Nigel McCrery. On duty during the miner's strike, he had been knocked to the ground, unconscious. When he came round he said to himself, 'What am I doing here? I had better read history!' When here at Trinity he organised the Great Court run that raised £30,000 for Great Ormond Street hospital and has been writing history ever since.

I myself am still trying to write African history. Let me allude to a happy event, a beneficial enterprise and a key historical argument before I begin to close:

A happy event: Cambridge accepts African oral history:

I'm privileged to have had a string of talented research students. One of the earliest studied the history of the Maasai people of East Africa, former spearmen, now cricketers. Much of his evidence came from the memory of knowledgeable elders. He wanted to attach transcripts of some of his tape-recorded interviews as an appendix to his dissertation. I applied to the Degree Committee for this to be excluded from the 80,000 word limit. The chairman, Geoffrey Elton, would have none of it: 'How can we know the candidate has not made these interviews up?' Walter Ullmann, my old supervisor, objected: 'What's the problem? There must be rules for testing oral tradition, just like any other evidence. Remember, all my monastic charters were forgeries!' And so the fraudulent monks of medieval Europe led African oral history through the disciplinary gate of Cambridge history. At least, that's how Walter told it.

A beneficial enterprise: Help to African students and scholars

One day, how Anil Seal made it possible for so many students from poorer Commonwealth countries to come to Cambridge will receive its due recognition. As director of the Newton Trust he also helped me inaugurate our African Studies Centre's annual scheme to bring African academics here for six months sabbatical study—an initiative that helps to keep African scholarship from slipping off the international stage. It's wonderful what, after the appropriate paper-work, can be confirmed over a cup of tea in G4 Nevile's.

A key argument: how African historiography has changed in the past 60 years.

In short, African history was far too easy in its early days. It was enough just to show that Africans had *had* a history. No longer. Just one example of change will have to do. I have long studied the Mau Mau forest fighters who so terrified me on my first night in Kenya. Historians used to say they fought for 'Land and Freedom' from white settler landlordism. That seemed to be a programme for a unified nationalism—which leaves us wondering about the bitter divisions in that country today. But what might land and freedom mean if one goes behind the colonial archive and attempts a close reading of the oral vernacular for land and freedom which is *ithaka na wiathi*? And this has a very different meaning: 'Lineage property and the householder's self-mastery'. And if one also knows the anthropology, from reading people like Joel Robbins or Nick Thomas, one realises that barely half the men (and I stress, men) among the Kikuyu ethnic group from which the Mau Mau sprang, were property owners. The remainder

were clients, or wives, who therefore lacked self-mastery and, therefore, civic responsibility. With this new understanding we may no longer be so surprised at contemporary African conflicts over their unequal human rights and different degrees of citizenship. We now know there is much divisive moral and social history to renegotiate—to understand which we have had to become less like Geoffrey Elton and more like Peter Laslett.

Alumni Relations

On my reaching the age of 67 in 2004 the then Master, Martin Rees, got me to start an alumni relations programme with which Trinity could reinforce the University's 800th anniversary appeal. When one sees the tables and figures at the end of Robert Neild's financial history of Trinity, *Riches & Responsibility*, which came out at the right time—thank you, Robert—one cannot doubt the importance of student support as a magnet for our alumni or alumnae donations. Many other Fellows both kindly and expertly contributed to the glossy book, *Trinity a Portrait*, co-edited with my former pupil Edward Stourton. But for members whose Masters had for generations told them the College would never ask for their money, it was a culture shock. Such shocks are hard to bear; they tend to stir up apathy, as that great Trinity man Willie Whitelaw once complained about general elections. Two examples of apathy stirred spring to mind. When I proposed to start a newsletter, *The Fountain*, one colleague dismissed it as a project 'worthy of a second-rate public school.' And when the *Annual Record* became more colourful, my former pupil Charles Moore protested in *The Spectator* with something like anguish: He had loved the old *Annual Record*, with its drab, pale blue, cover, changeless for as long as he could remember. Great institutions, he believed, should not have 'to make themselves interesting.' That his old tutor should bring in what he called a 'user-friendly' cover seemed a betrayal. He was appalled that for thirty years I had (I quote) 'been harbouring projects of restless innovation.' I can't believe that Charles, a trained historian, is one of those who think the College's motto is *Semper Eadem*. But you too might think it was so when I conclude with:-

A memorable High Table conversation:

This comes at Philip Allott's request. One evening in the 1970s Tresillian Nicholas, the first of our senior bursars to make Trinity rich, was sitting opposite me. Littlewood, the distinguished mathematician who so far as I remember never had a first name, was next to me. Both were in their 90s. The talk turned to music and what we liked best. One of us offered Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue*. 'That', said Nicholas, 'reminds me of the summer of 1914'. He had been elected Fellow in 1912. His room was on the north side of Nevile's Court; Littlewood's on the south. He had been taken ill with a summer 'flu. The

summer of 1914 was warm. After Hall he was lying in bed by his open window. From across the court came the strains of Bach's *Toccatà and Fugue*, played by Littlewood's pianola. From beside me, with evidently penitent sincerity, Littlewood leaned over and apologised: 'I do hope it didn't disturb you.'

Conclusion:

Master, I cannot end without repeating my thanks to you, on behalf of my family, for being our host tonight, and to so many Fellows for sharing in this celebration. I also have four women I particularly wish to thank: Jenny Brown, my tutorial secretary on Side J, who died sadly young; Hazel Felton and Sheila Roberts, without whom I could not have handled my year in charge of Side F; and, very far indeed from least, Corinne Lloyd, who was the truly professional begetter of our Alumni Relations and Development programme and for whom, as for my African platoon, I was merely the figurehead. And this evening, especially, I thank the Catering Manager, Mark the Manciple, John Witherley and all their staffs, for a magnificent dinner—to provide which *is* of course their unchanging tradition, *semper eadem*.