

## **Vice-Chancellor's Centenary Ceremony Oration**

**Professor Eric Thomas (Hon LLD 2004)**

**Centenary Ceremony, Wills Memorial Building Saturday 4 July 2009**

May I start by welcoming you all here to this unique and very special ceremony. You only get to celebrate your 100<sup>th</sup> birthday once and I feel very privileged to be here with you for this event. This Great Hall is famous for its graduation ceremonies and for Narell and me the most attractive aspect of those ceremonies is seeing all those families who congregate to witness and celebrate their relatives' achievements, full of pride and wreathed in smiles. This is also a graduation ceremony, and a family has congregated here today – it is a different family, it is a family of graduates, of our alumni and also, of course, of our current and past staff. Like those other families you are here to celebrate achievement and to feel proud, except that on this occasion it is not so much about a single person, although we do have an outstanding Honorary Graduate. It is about an institution.

Our forebears were wise enough in the first decade of the last century to recognise that a University for Bristol and the West of England was a very important part of the development of this great city. I don't think they would ever have foreseen just what an impact this University would have not only on the city but also on the nation and the world. And this is no idle boast. We can cite numerous examples in our first 100 years where the graduates we have educated and the knowledge we have generated have, to use the modern vernacular, made a difference – made real and important differences in many ways. Bristol is one of the world's great universities on any objective measure including the careers of our graduates, the impact of our publications, our Nobel prizes, our current popularity and even the dreaded league tables. That we have got to this position in just 100 years is something we should all be proud of.

A great university is primarily a place of education and intellectual enquiry. It must never lose that focus. There are criticisms that universities are now seen in an instrumentalist light – as providers of human skills and knowledge and technology whose sole purpose is to drive the economy. I am delighted, firstly, to reassure

you that I have never met a serious politician who espouses that belief. They are all clear that we keep our universities world-leading by ensuring that they focus on their primary purposes: teaching and research. Secondly, I shall also defend those central purposes not only for ideological reasons but also for the practical outcome that this is how we will sustain Bristol's greatness.

A university is really two things: buildings and people. As you walk around this campus and this city you can see what an impact the buildings of this University have had on the city. This Great Hall is one of the landmarks of Bristol and I have had more praise from Bristolians for cleaning this building than any other action I have taken in my eight years here. However, today I am going to concentrate on the people; on our students, our staff, our leaders and finally on you, our alumni.

We all remember the students we went through university with – their values, their motivations and the events at the time which were shaping them and us. Each generation is different and it is important we see them afresh. Even I, with all my links into Higher Education, still find myself using a medical student in Newcastle-upon-Tyne during the early 1970s – myself – as my model of a student. Our 18-to-20-year olds of today are very different to us; they have different values, different experiences and different skills. But let me reassure you that they are marvellous young people. Our average student, on entry, has three A-grades at A-level – I do not think that I would have made Bristol's entry standards today with my own A-level results, though I am sure all of you in the audience today would have done! Our students are hard-working, thoughtful young people who are eager to make the world a better place. I am constantly amazed and delighted by their ingenuity and creativity. Today's Bristol students will be, I am certain, among the leaders who help our planet take on the great challenges we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and I am very confident to place my future in their hands.

Next we should concentrate on our academic staff. Within 50 years of Bristol's foundation we had received three Nobel prizes. That is an achievement worthy of great recognition. I could stand here all day and still not finish the list of their

current achievements, never mind those of the past. Over each two year period, I try to visit every area of the University, both academic and support. This is always an uplifting experience and it is desperately unfair to focus on one or two such visits only; however, I will, using two events from Thursday of this week. We have just opened a Nanoscience and Quantum Information Building on Tyndall Avenue at a cost of £12.5 million, which is the most vibration-free place in the world at the moment. I went to see the Quantum Information group's work and the experience was breathtaking. They are aiming to base computing on the quantum state of electrons and photons; this will create almost infinitely fast computers with the ability to store vast amounts of information on the head of a pin. I won't try to explain to you the theoretical and practical problems, because I can't; but suffice it to say that I was in the room with 20 young PhD students and post-docs who were quite literally buzzing. You could almost touch the intellectual energy and creativity. This group will deliver; in fact, they already are delivering with frequent ground-breaking publications in the very best journals.

Later that same day, I went to the Faculty of Arts for a leaving party for their Dean of five years, Bob Fowler. The room was packed and the collegiality for their Dean was quite overwhelming. The speeches articulated their love of scholarship in a very typical Arts and Humanities way. They were there to celebrate their purpose, their public duty to teach and to intellectually enquire, and they were there to celebrate the values that they hold dear and the fact that those values were personified in their outgoing Dean. Bob Fowler is an outstanding scholar and has been a superb Dean, leading the Faculty in new directions. He and his colleagues exemplified exactly what is so special about our academic staff. And I want to stress that he is not alone – we have had other recent, excellent Deans and those values I talked about are embraced throughout the University by all our staff. Equally as important as the academic staff are the support staff who make the business of the University run. They are often unheralded, but without them we would go nowhere; and I mean nowhere. We probably wouldn't even get into our buildings at the beginning of the day, we certainly couldn't run our laboratories and I don't even know where we would start with accommodating our students.

The next group of people is you, our alumni. You have a critical role to play in making and maintaining Bristol as one of the great universities of the world. You are the single best advertisement for the quality of a Bristol education and you touch so many other people that you ensure a viral dissemination of our excellence. I could spend hours describing your achievements, they are so numerous; but suffice it to say that Bristol is represented at the very top of every tree from politics and the civil service to commerce to medicine and allied professions to the law and to the voluntary and charitable sector – to name just a few. You exemplify not only the intellectual rigour we respect but also the values we cherish so closely. You are ambassadors, you are exemplars, and you are the individuals who embody a Bristol education. Molly Wood, whose achievements we will celebrate shortly, is an ideal example of the sort of individual Bristol University alumni represent. Collectively, as Bristol's Convocation of alumni, you should be aware of just how tremendous a force you are.

Finally, over the decades, we have had great leaders. Our Chancellors, from Henry Overton Wills through Winston Churchill, Dorothy Hodgkin, Sir Jeremy Morse and now Baroness Hale have always been at the very top of British life – real examples to our students and staff. Over the decades our Chairs of Council, our governing body, have helped to guide the University to greater ambitions none more so than Jim Foulds, our current chair. We stand so successful today because of decades of leadership throughout the University – you don't become a great University because of what has happened in the last ten years alone. Superb academic, intellectual and practical leadership from the very beginning is the hallmark of this success.

There is one other main ingredient to our success – this great city of Bristol. It is one of the most interesting, attractive and creative cities in the land. It has always been a great supporter of the University and is an essential part of the total picture of this University.

So, what about the next 100 years? I have been asked to write a letter which my successor will open in 2109. I have to say that I find thinking what the world will look like then as difficult as someone would have had thinking about 2009 in 1909. However, there is one thing of which I am certain – that I will have a successor. The University of Bristol will still be here. Furthermore, this University will still have the same main aims – to educate, to generate knowledge and insight and to be a focus of social and cultural discourse.

Today is a great day. It is a day when we say ‘Happy Birthday’ to our University, and when we take great pride in its past, its present and its future achievements.

Well done to the University of Bristol, and well done to you.

Thank you.