

Molly Wood's Honorary Degree Presentation

**Dr Stuart Goldsmith's (BA 1966, Hon LLD 2007), Chairman of Convocation
Wills Memorial Building Saturday 4 July 2009**

Madame Chancellor, may I ask you, and all our guests present on this very special occasion, to imagine your way back 100 years. In 1909, two wonderful things happened. Both were births.

One, which we celebrate today, was the birth of this extraordinary University. How amazing it must have felt, to have been one of the founders of the University of Bristol. It must have been rather like entering parenthood. It is telling that one's university is known as one's *Alma Mater* – literally, 'nourishing mother'.

What excitement the founders must have shared. What a tremendous sense of possibility. Surely, they dreamed of a university which contributes to the greater good of mankind; of a university which fosters new knowledge; and of a university which imparts the sheer sense of joy to learning.

Imagine what those founders might have dreamed about the lives and careers of their new university's graduates. Nobel prize-winners? Great artists? World leaders? Commercial and educational pioneers? All these have indeed been fostered here at Bristol.

Madame Chancellor, I think Bristol's founders would have hoped particularly for qualities that encapsulate the Bristol University spirit. They may have imagined an ideal Bristol graduate as someone who leads an exemplary life. Who makes the very best of the chances they are given. Someone who enriches every community they join, and does so with style, grace and good humour.

1909 also saw the birth of our Honorary Graduand, Lady Isobel Wood – known to her friends and family as 'Molly'. While Molly was young her family lived first in Devon and then in Canada, before returning to England to settle in Cornwall when she was ten. She was educated at St. Austell County School, from which very few students attended university at the time.

Yet Molly applied to Bristol University, thanks to the urging of her teacher Miss Rich, herself a graduate of University College Bristol, the forerunner of the University proper.

Once here, Molly flourished. In addition to taking an Honours degree in English and a teaching certificate, Molly was an active member of the University Choir, Captain of the Netball team, a participant in dramatic productions and was the reviver and subsequent President of the Literary Society – to which she once persuaded Walter de la Mare to speak. Molly was also Head Student at Royal Park House, a former Hall of Residence. Last but not least, Molly was Lady Chairman of the Guild, which came before today's Student Union.

Clearly Molly was an unusually dynamic leader, who achieved true distinction while young. In this she was not unlike the University itself, which at the same time was establishing a department of preventative medicine, producing Nobel prize-winner Paul Dirac, installing Winston Churchill as Chancellor, and constructing many of the tremendous buildings we cherish today. What great achievements, in the flush of youth, for Bristol University.

Molly continued her own successes too, and her life after graduating from Bristol in 1930 may resonate with many of our fellow alumni. She taught English for six years before meeting and marrying Harry Wood. Harry was a Physics teacher who became Principal of Jordanhill College of Education, and was later knighted for his contribution to education. Molly gave up work to undertake the busy life of looking after three children – daughters Hilary and Alison, who are both here today, and her son Richard, who sadly died several years ago, but whose widow Christine is here. Three children, and a busy and successful husband, might have slowed many people down.

Not Molly! She founded a Wives' Club at her husband's College. She raised substantial funds for local charities. She was a member of the Glasgow University Settlement Council, ran a Mothers' Club, and worked in a charity thrift shop. And during the 1960s Molly set up a course in the use of English for

Speech Therapy students, long before communication became a part of most college courses!

Even in retirement as she helped to look after six grandchildren, Molly took up reading for the blind. This was at the age of 87, in the same year as her beloved husband died. Molly became a great-grandmother in 2001. She now lives on her own in Glasgow and continues an active social life.

Madame Chancellor, to return briefly to the first birth we are celebrating today: in its first centenary, our University has achieved admirably against the criteria which its founders might have set. We can point to many thousands of graduates who are pioneers in their fields, and to research breakthroughs which are changing our understanding of the world. Bristol University makes significant contributions to mankind's greater good every day.

Similarly, Molly Wood has surely accomplished all that her own parents – and her *Alma Mater* – could have hoped for. She has contributed energy and insight to every community she has joined. She is a beloved member of a close-knit family. And she brings to everything in her life that sense of adventure, joy and good humour which I have found to be a recurring character trait in many Bristol alumni. How very appropriate, and how wonderful it is that Molly Wood and the University of Bristol should both celebrate their 100th birthdays this year.

Like her own university, Molly is a great citizen of the world. I believe all of us can share in the pride which Molly, and her family, must feel at the award of this degree.

Madame Chancellor, before closing, I must advise you that you will be presenting Molly with her second honorary degree from Bristol. I have here Molly's first such degree awarded by her fellow students at Royal Park House in 1930, who wrote: 'The candidate whose praises here should be sung is too well-known to need advertisement', and presented Molly as 'eminently worthy of the Degree of Mistress of the Revels of Royal Park House, *honoris causa*'.

Just as was true 79 years ago, Madame Chancellor, Molly is a Bristol graduate whose praises should be sung. She is an alumna whose life encapsulates all of the qualities which the University of Bristol holds dear. So it is with delight that I present to you, Isobel Mary Wood, Lady Wood, as eminently worthy of the degree of Master of Arts, *honoris causa*.