



## **Speech at the Official Opening of Wolfson College, Oxford**

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# Speech at the Official Opening of Wolfson College, Oxford

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*With Isaac Wolfson and Harold Macmillan after the speech, 12 November 1974*

CHANCELLOR, Members of the College, Members of the University, honoured guests:

We are here not to mark the birth of the newest of Oxford colleges, but to dedicate the building in which it is to live. I have no doubt that buildings have a profound effect upon those who live within them; that those who have spent their lives, for example, in Balliol see a world very different from those who have done so in New College; that those who see the world through a window in Jesus probably see it very differently from those who see it through a window in Exeter. I will not come to newer colleges; it is a dangerous path to tread, and I shall therefore not further develop these remarks. But it's clear that the creation of a new building is a central and crucial moment in the life of this college; the culmination of a long and, at times, very difficult endeavour; a unique moment

of triumph never to be repeated in the history of the College, no matter how long its life will be – we hope for many centuries.

When the Fellows of Iffley, from which we spring, came together in 1965, it became quite clear that it was a college that they deeply and unanimously wanted; not a hall of residence, not a faculty club, not an institute; what they wanted was a college. This was not, and is not still, altogether uncontroversial. In these days of centralisation, of calculation, of cost-effectiveness, of optimisation, was this not perhaps a little nostalgic, was it not too old-world, not to say obsolete? Was it simply a matter of pathetic longing for the last enchantments of the Middle Ages? Wasn't it anyway frightfully wasteful? Doesn't the future lie in rationalisation? Ever since the Franks Commission, and indeed before that, the whole college system seemed – and I suppose still seems – to be on trial: was it really right to waste resources on all these separate dining halls, common rooms, libraries, porter's lodges, private rooms? Mightn't it be better to have one enormous restaurant, uniform dormitories, vast edifices for culture and rest, under one firmly and properly organised bureaucracy? Wouldn't this meet the needs of the time much better and cost much less?

Yet the Fellows of Iffley, and indeed the University also, preferred a college, quite consciously and quite deliberately. We have known, at least since the days of Aristotle, that [4] man is not infinitely malleable, that rationality is a great deal, but not everything. Love is not rational, the family is not rational, differences of language and culture are not rational; yet men seem unable to live without them. Bigness and sameness dehumanise. Personal relations may not be everything, but they are a very, very great deal. We have been recently reminded by a report on a troubled university that personal contacts between teachers and students can achieve far more than the most beautifully contrived institutional mechanisms. Even academics have turned out to have human needs; efficiency is not enough. Of course there are things that may be wrong and inefficient and wasteful, even in Oxford – it is blind conservatism to resist change, sometimes even quite radical change. But one of the great sources of vitality, both human and intellectual, is the variety of our communities – the very differences in college traditions, the peculiarities of their personalities from one generation to another, which give each college its own special flavour, its own physiognomy. Oxford has grown through the

centuries as a plural society, at once harmonious and critical; indeed our sharp awareness of one another's oddities and shortcomings is a source of great innocent pleasure to us all, to this day. Colleges are of a human size: to call them communities is not a cant phrase – many universities are not.

In any case, we didn't begin in a vacuum: we were shaped by this great historical institution, many of us. We liked it and wished to be part of it. But of course there is a sense in which we *were* in a vacuum: our resources were small, starting from almost zero. In a way this is much the happiest time: when there is nothing, one can afford idle dreams, one isn't trammelled by horrid facts. The imagination floats freely, the world is altogether open. We asked ourselves: supposing – however improbably – that we got the resources for a brand-new college; everybody told us this was a mere utopian dream, but supposing we did, what would we want?

We found that we knew this: we had two goals – a community for graduates, and a foundation for the sciences. These two goals were connected. British greatness has lain largely in its contribution to literature, to the art of government, and to the sciences. Our liberties and civilised ways of life depend on our ability to keep afloat and progress. Our need for imports forces this country to live by its wits. Others may live on self-sufficient resources; we cannot. Intellectual advance is, to us, crucial. The Franks Report was quite clear on this point: specialisation had come to stay. Graduate studies were of course new to Oxford, relatively speaking. Some of us probably still look on them as something of an intrusion. Yet without such training, without adequate provision for what has (to utter a truism) transformed this century beyond any other, the revolution in science, in technology – without that there is a danger that even so splendid an institution as Oxford will slowly and inexorably decline to the status of those universities in Mediterranean countries which were great in the Middle Ages and now live largely on their memories. This idea inspired us at Iffley. As St Antony's is to modern political studies, as Nuffield to the social sciences, so must we be to the natural sciences. But, on the other hand, to coop up scientists, to insulate them from the humanities, seemed wrong. They didn't want it themselves. Academic variety alone keeps us from the excesses of inbreeding, from tedium, from the sense of isolation that this often causes. A community must on no account be too monochrome; this can be a very suffocating

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atmosphere. Our graduates, like our Fellows, must be drawn from both the arts and the sciences.

That was all very well, but we had no resources. These were all pipe dreams – colleges in the past had been founded by men of great resources and vision, who only then looked for scholars to give flesh to their ideas: authors in search of characters for their imagined worlds. We were in exactly the opposite situation; we were thirty-six characters in search of an author to give us life.

Then there was a miracle. We put our ideas to one or two foundations – no response. Then, greatly daring, we went to one which we thought both rich enough and enlightened enough to grasp our needs: we went to the Ford Foundation in New York. Its new President, Mr McGeorge Bundy, thought in large imaginative world terms. He thought that the great brain drain which was then going on, of British scientists to North America, was not a healthy process. He thought that to help science in a place that had the plant, the prestige, the importance of Oxford, would do something to stop the denudation of British scientific talent. He sized us up: if we could get support in Britain, he and his colleagues were inclined to help us; if nobody in Britain took an interest, did Britain, did Oxford, deserve to be helped entirely from another country, however friendly? It was he, as much as we at Iffley, who put our ideas forward to the great Wolfson Foundation in England, which alone seemed capable of matching what the Ford Foundation might do.

I don't know how to begin to convey to you what we felt when the Wolfson Foundation, after much deliberation, agreed to take the plunge, to support our plan. 'Generosity', 'munificence' are words which it is natural to use in this connection, and I do. Even more than this, the sheer confidence which was placed in us by these two great foundations was an act of enormous courage on their part for which we cannot be too grateful. After all, who were we? A group of unknown men and women, certainly little known outside Oxford. There was, of course, plenty of criticism, even adverse advice, that both these foundations duly received – particularly the Wolfson Foundation. If they entertained grave doubts, we couldn't blame them for this. Some people told them that other institutions were far more deserving of help than Oxford, not only from the state but even from private benefactions; some doubted the ability of a chance collection of visionaries, as we were thought to be, to deliver

the goods at all; some didn't care for the goods themselves – didn't care for the sciences, or graduates, or Oxford.

All this plunged us into that well-known agony of hope [5] and fear that always takes place when the goal is just visible, but may never be within one's reach. Then the Wolfson Foundation decided in our favour. The story of Cinderella is one of the oldest of human myths, but whenever it happens, it shows that good things can occur, that cynicism and scepticism and pessimism can be overcome, that miracles do occur; but perhaps, as somebody said, only if one works for them very hard indeed.

Our debt to both these great foundations is equal; but so far as the buildings were concerned, we did, of course, work much more closely with the Wolfson Foundation. So may I say here and now, to Sir Isaac and Lady Wolfson, the Founders of the Foundation, that we feel undying gratitude, all of us, not only for their own generosity and that of their Foundation, but for the manner in which it was extended; nothing could have been done more handsomely, more open-handedly, with greater courtesy, with more good feeling. And may I say to Mr Leonard Wolfson, who succeeded his father as the chairman of the Foundation, that we are profoundly grateful to him for his continuous and imaginative personal understanding of our goals and needs and difficulties; he and the officials of the Foundation, particularly those three magnificent soldiers who have directed its affairs, General Redman, General Monckton and General Leakey, helped us over many a stile and across many a hidden ditch. For all this we are profoundly grateful. I only hope that they are satisfied by the results that they see about them today.

And we had other friends. It's a rare pleasure, if I may say so, to be able to pay a really sincere, deeply felt tribute to those whom one knows to deserve it – it's a very enjoyable thing to do, and with your permission I should like to add a few words to my tribute to the great Foundations, already spoken. The University of Oxford gave us our marvellous site, which had belonged to the famous Haldane family. The Vice Chancellor of that time, our honorary Fellow now, Sir Kenneth Wheare, was our friend in all weathers. Ancient organisms are not always happy with new grafts, whose behaviour is sometimes rather difficult to predict – we had some extremely anxious moments, not, indeed, from the Hebdomadal Council, whose behaviour, I am happy to say, was impeccable throughout, but in other contexts. Sir Kenneth steered our ramshackle craft with

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marvellous skill and kindness, and with his own exquisite brand of irresistible humour – many of you will know what I mean – this disarmed many a formidable, beetle-browed critic in the University. He really was a tremendous force for sanity and reason; so was Sir Folllott Sandford, also now a Fellow of this College, who did a great deal for us too. So, above all, did Lord Franks. The report of his Commission had a decisive effect on our fortunes, and he gave us his personal help at critical moments; at least once he turned the scales for us. And he is the wise and just and majestic chairman, deeply respected by us all, of the Wolfson College Trust at this moment; we are most grateful to him for that too. We are grateful also to Sir Arthur Norrington and to Lord Redcliffe-Maud and to Lord Annan for their most timely support. To Mr Halsey and Mr Pickstock, who, unbriefed, spoke the truth when it was needed; and to Mrs Shirley Williams and Sir Claus Moser, who did this also, not wholly unbriefed. And there are others – if I forget to mention their names I hope that both you and they will forgive me.

There were some marvellous unexpected bedfellows among our benefactors. I doubt, for example, if there is much about which, let us say, Lord Robbins and Lord Balogh could possibly be in agreement; yet they agreed about us. There is a distinct difference between the political opinions of, let us say, Dr Goodhart and the present Warden of Wadham; yet they were as one in their attitude to us. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *New Statesman* seldom see eye to eye; yet they both came to our aid in our hour of need. One day all this must be faithfully recorded – there are many exceedingly entertaining and bizarre aspects of our prehistory. Wild horses would not drag them from me now, and I shall bury them very, very deep indeed in some very safe place before they can be revealed to the eyes and ears of men.

I must record a debt of gratitude also to professors and heads of departments in the natural sciences who encouraged us in the belief, in the true belief I hope, that this foundation will materially help Oxford science. And not least to our neighbours in Linton Road, in Chadlington Road and all the streets that abut upon us, who suffered the noise and the dirt and the disturbance of the building process, and generously accepted an institution full of not always very quiet neighbours: they behaved with courtesy and kindness and toleration. I must single out Sir Harold Thompson, our nearest

neighbour, who, with Lady Thompson, behaved with very great beauty of character.

I come to the architects. I've often been asked how we came to choose Messrs Powell & Moya. With so many famous and gifted architects in what is, after all, a very great age of architects, the short list was really quite long. When asked this by other architects, I say, 'Well, in despair at having to make a choice between so many wonderfully talented and experienced practitioners, we didn't know what to do, so in the end we simply threw lots, and they fell upon Powell & Moya.' And then I add under my breath, 'Anyone who believes that is capable of believing anything.' Of course we chose them because they seemed to us not only the most gifted of all the architects we interviewed, but also to understand the genius of this place in the most sensitive fashion: anybody who has walked around this building today will surely agree that they responded with the greatest sensibility to the trees, the water, the green grass of our environment, and didn't violate them, as some might have [6] done, to bend and subdue nature to the demands of their own titanic egos.

Someone once said of a very beautiful piece of landscape gardening, 'This is what Nature might have made if she had had the resources of the Wolfson Foundation behind her.' Powell & Moya were sensitive not only to nature but also to us. Dons are extremely touchy; so are architects; yet we didn't have those tremendous collisions which clients and architects, particularly committees, are so often reported to have. And they gave us what we asked for: they gave us a true Oxford college. We thank them and their colleagues from the bottom of our hearts for what they have done for us: they can justly be proud of their work, and we happy to inhabit it. We must also thank the contractors – the Shepherd Construction Company – who were beset with the most terrible difficulties, the result in part of human foibles, in part of *force majeure*. Oxford is a terrible place to which to bring building workers: there is nowhere for them to live, they pine and they scatter. Yet in the end it was all completed; inevitably, in the circumstances, under the motto 'Better late than never'; not least owing to the services of our really superb clerk of the works, Mr Tooze. Our thanks are also due to all the specialist consultants, Messrs Charles Weiss, Mr Kut, Mr Jay and many, many others – too many to enumerate. The result, after all these ups and downs, seems to me to justify them all.



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And we were fortunate in the Wolfson College Trust. Lord Florey was the first chairman, and he helped us immensely: he was not only a man of genius, but practical and kind, and did a great deal for us in every way. We mourn his death, as we mourn that of Sir Patrick Linstead, and the passing of Lord Florey's successor, Mr Sylvester Gates, the most civilised, fastidious and sensitive of men, an eminent lawyer, banker and scholar – a combination of qualities which, I am glad to report, has found a new home in my distinguished successor as President, Sir Harry Fisher, whom, with Lady Fisher, we are very glad to see here today. We remember the dead and we thank the living: Dame Janet Vaughan, Sir John Foster, Sir Peter Medawar, and, of course, Sir Alan Bullock, our chairman for a while, and, as Vice Chancellor, just and kind and effective, as he always is. We are most grateful to him for many acts, public and private. And also to the secretary of the Rhodes Trust, Sir Edgar Williams, Bill to his friends, to whom, as Council Trustee, we also owe a great deal.

So many cooks. Yet the dish, I hope you will agree, has come off not too badly. But I mustn't go on while so many people are standing, and waiting for far wiser words than mine; but I can't omit, for example, the hawk-eyed Building Committee – Mr Parry, Dr Joan Mott, Major Mills, Mr Mynett and, above all, Miss Goldfinger, who advised us on our furniture, and Mrs Dick, to whom the College owes a great deal. The Domestic Bursar, Mrs Dick, as the College knows, has preserved its human texture more than anyone. And there is Mr Boddington, the Buildings Officer, a broad back on which so many burdens have fallen and who has borne them so well. But, of course, the person to whom the college owes everything, as is well known to it, is none other than the Vice President, Mr Michael Brock. The word 'integrity' might have been invented for him. His natural goodness – he must forgive me if I bring blushes to his cheeks – his goodness and his gaiety and his devotion and his efficiency are perhaps the greatest single asset that this college possesses at this moment: certainly the greatest human asset, moral, intellectual and practical. No man can ever have done more for an institution than Michael Brock for Wolfson. More of my glaring shortcomings have been concealed by his loyalty and skill than any man deserves to have concealed. My personal gratitude to him is for that reason alone beyond bounds.

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Finally, I'd like to say a word about the particular attributes of this College. We are, I suppose, unusually democratic: our General Meetings are a free forum for all of us in the College; the Governing Body has never yet found itself obliged to oppose its wishes. We have a single common room for senior and junior members. We have no High Table. This is not the product of a conscious Jacobin ideology. It's due partly to a genuine consensus, spread very wide over all the generations, partly to circumstances. In our old, cramped conditions in those Victorian villas in the Banbury Road, we couldn't possibly have preserved traditional hierarchical divisions, even if we had wanted to. But in fact we found that we didn't at all hanker after them; from the very beginning we preferred our unified organisation. Our unity was forged by the Long March to Linton Road, during which we all, our graduates particularly, showed heroic qualities. Institutions grow partly from conscious and unconscious convictions, partly as a result of the pressure of circumstances. Our brother and sister colleges may, some of them, look askance at our free arrangements. Let me reassure them at once: we are not anxious to proselytise. We are as we are. Whether we inspire them or deter them, we shall go on being ourselves, with our own structure, our own physiognomy, our own quirks; and so, of course, will they, as all real human communities do, from colleges to nations. Oxford has so far managed to absorb a great many heterogeneous bodies and has not grown the poorer for it. So, surely, it will be here.

Here, then, we all are in this new building, which I shall presently invite you, Mr Chancellor, to declare open. Before that, however, I should like to call upon the Chairman of the Wolfson Foundation to tell us what he, and his parents, to whom it's all due, and the Foundation itself, think of this their child. I have told you how the Foundation helped; its advisers and experts were always at our disposal; our finances were repeatedly saved, in these terrible times, by Mr Leonard Wolfson's own splendid efforts; he has fought our battles with devotion and skill and insight and success. Above all, members of his family have the rarest gift of any founders – of letting us go our own way as an academic institution. There was none of what has been called, in the case of some founders, 'the whim of iron': for this, too, we are deeply grateful. The fact that our relations have been intimate and happy is largely due to the fact that

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we dealt not with an impersonal board of names, but with a warm-hearted family.<sup>1</sup>

May I now call upon Mr Leonard Wolfson to tell us what he thinks of us all.

*[Here followed speeches by Leonard Wolfson and Harold Macmillan]*

I should like to thank Mr Leonard Wolfson and the Chancellor for their very kind, very eloquent speeches. Speaking for myself, I can say only that the Chancellor has given me far more than my due, but on the other hand, in spite of what he said about being praised to one's face, it's much nicer to receive much more than one's due than one's due. For that I thank him most deeply.

These celebrations must now come to an end. Before that, I ought to say how grateful we are to the administrative staff for the enormous burden they've taken on, to the domestic staff for what they have done for us, and to the graduates for their most selfless services to us on this day. Anyone who wishes to do so, and I hope you all will, after this meeting may wander about the College wherever you wish to go, and there are guides with flowers in their buttonholes to guide you should you need it, or find you if you are lost, or fish you out of the lake should you fall into it. And we hope as few people as possible will do that.

One more thing I must beg you to do before I leave. First I must thank everyone for coming, and in particular apologise to those who very selflessly have stood throughout what the Chancellor has called this feast of eloquence. I thank the young, but particularly I thank those who are no longer quite so young, that is to say, those who are what I might call my age, which means anything between eighty and thirty. These I thank most particularly for their extreme patience in standing for so long. And now their patience must be abused no further. One more thing I must ask you, and that is to allow the official procession to emerge first: the last shall be first on this occasion. Thank you very much.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Lycidas* the text ends here.