



University of London Foundation Day 2017

Oration given by Professor Roger Kain for Professor Sir David Cannadine

Chancellor, in accordance with the Charter, Statutes and Ordinances of the University, I present to you this person on whom we wish you to confer the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *Honoris Causa*.

Professor Sir David Cannadine

I begin in 1998. In that year one of the key tasks of Professor Graham Zellick, recently installed as Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, was to identify a new director for the University's Institute of Historical Research. He backed his judgement and took what in some eyes was a big risk: he appointed David Cannadine then Professor of History at Columbia University, New York to the post which Lord Asa Briggs once referred to as 'the best job in Britain any historian could ever want or have'.

So why was it so audacious? Undoubtedly David was already a distinguished historian. His book 'The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy' had cemented his reputation as a writer who takes on the big issues, who writes on broad canvasses. Cannadine is no tunnel vision historian, not a man writing more and more about less and less. As Daniel Burnham the United States city planner said, 'make no little plans, they have no power to stir men's blood'. Likewise, David Cannadine writes no little books. 'Decline and Fall' was revisionist, stressing change over continuity and recounting powerful class divisions in British society.

So, it was a well-established and respected historian who presented himself to the IHR appointments panel. He was also much in demand by the international press as a book reviewer. These reviews are always witty and occasionally withering. Commenting once on an author's claim that her book takes an unblinking look at her subject, he remarks that this might mean that her eyes are permanently open – or permanently closed!

This all sounds so very good so what was the risk to the IHR of appointing David Cannadine as director? Well, he had little experience of actually running anything. As he acknowledged in his own farewell lecture delivered after five years as Director, he had served barely a term as Acting Chairman of his Department and 'had not raised a penny for anything, let alone history'. And yes, he did give both an inaugural and a valedictory lecture in the University – the latter a brave, publicly delivered, and then published self-assessment of his achievements at the IHR. It was by all accounts a glittering occasion with David Cannadine at the podium resplendent in a coral pink silk gown courtesy of one of the universities that had already honoured him.

The IHR needed to change when he arrived. He said it had to change. And it did change. He left it with enhanced academic capacity and reputation, better equipped and better accommodated. So what was his secret in addition to his towering intellect? It was to bring the United States culture of fund-raising to the UK – David Cannadine was a pathfinder in this part of the University, setting the example for other SAS institutes by raising close to £15m in his five years as director – a transformational sum. The key to this? He took to heart the wise advice of people who really knew about philanthropy – the likes of Claus Moser, Jacob Rothschild and David Rockefeller. In essence they advocated the need of a clear and commanding vision of where you want your organisation to get to and the ability to communicate that convincingly. To which David added that 'a thick skin helps, while a very strong liver is essential'!



I think it is indicative of the importance of the IHR in David's professional life that two of his personal guests tonight, Elaine Walters and Peter Marshall, did so much in their different ways to support him in his role of transformative Director. In those heady days of David Cannadine's directorship, the IHR regularly saw Simon Schama, David Starkey, Antonia Fraser, Melvyn Bragg, Kate Adie, Tristram Hunt – indeed anyone who was anyone among the great and good of history coming through its doors, day-by-day, week-by-week. And they came not only for arcane academic discussion. David Cannadine was then, and still is now, a passionate advocate of public history, of bringing history to the public, of making it accessible.

His directorship of the IHR was bookended by earlier days building his reputation at Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton and Columbia, and subsequently by an appointment which I believe gave him huge pleasure – this was, Your Royal Highness and Chancellor, to hold a chair in this University bearing the name of your grandmother. After demitting office from the IHR he was appointed Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Professor of British History in the University of London and he is now Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University.

After the IHR there were more and more achievements as summarised in Who's Who. Now most Who's Who entries can be measured by the inch; Sir David's comes in by the foot. To capture the scale of all that I turn to the parsimony of the natural sciences and their metrics. I give you David Cannadine by numbers:

Sixteen visiting appointments; 20 editorial boards including as Editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography; 17 academic advisory councils, including for five of the other SAS institutes; 43 public appointments, including chair of the National Portrait Gallery; 51 named lectures; 35 honours and prizes – six honorary degrees and, in 2008, Knight Bachelor; 33 books; 87 chapters and papers ...Enough!

Numbers, numbers, numbers – very big numbers.

Quantitative indicators are part and parcel of the world of Higher Education today. But Sir David is much more than his numbers. There is a trite assertion that an academic is only as good as his or her last book. If that is to be believed, Sir David's 'Victorious Century, the United Kingdom 1800-1906' published this year, elevates him to a quite magnificent place. In her review of 'Victorious Century', Jane Ridley speaks of it as a spellbinding account of Britain's rise and fall as a great power and that, extraordinarily for a history book, it has no footnotes. In her words: 'Only a historian at the very top of his game can do that and get away with it, and Cannadine succeeds triumphantly'.

Sir David worked tirelessly as an advocate of the Institute of Historical Research to keep history and the historical profession in the public eye. What the Humanities more broadly also need today are people to make the case for these subjects, to go out on the stump and give lectures, to take up the microphone for radio broadcasts, and to scrub up for TV. In short, we need our public intellectuals and in Sir David Cannadine we have a superlative example, whether providing informative, thought-provoking and riveting listens on Radio 4's 'A Point of View' to his evocative series on British prime ministers. Our universities need people to go out and make the case – Sir David would not put it so instrumentally but it is what he does and it makes him.

Chancellor, I am confident that when I stop speaking, there will be rapturous applause in the Beveridge Hall this evening – not of course for my words but for Sir David Cannadine – the first person in his family to go to university, now President of the British Academy, and between times Director of our Institute of Historical Research, and firmly established as one of our country's finest historians and most effective public intellectuals.



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So Chancellor it is with great pleasure that I ask you to confer the degree of Doctor of Letters, *Honoris Causa* on Professor Sir David Cannadine.

Roger Kain
15 November 2017