



University of London Foundation Day 2017 **Vote of thanks given by Professor Sir David Cannadine**

Your Royal Highness and Chancellor:

You may perhaps recall that the only previous occasion on which you and I have appeared together on this platform on Foundation Day was when I delivered the oration in praise and celebration of Lord Rothschild – a task that was enormously congenial to me, and I hope not disagreeable to him, my only difficulty being that there was so much to say about him but so little time in which to say it.

Yet never in my wildest dreams or most extravagant imaginings did I suppose on that occasion that I might one day find myself on the receiving end of a similar sort of speech, as I have been this evening. Indeed, Professor Kain's remarks are not only so generous in their sentiments but so hyperbolic in their account of my career that I am tempted to insist on the right of reply, in the hope (as it were) of manging his encomium down.

But I am not minded to do so, since it is my essential and most agreeable task this evening to return thanks, not just for myself, but on behalf of my fellow honorary graduates, in whose distinguished company I feel very privileged and very flattered to find myself tonight. We are, all of us (if I may quote some words from Robert Grant's great hymn) 'pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise', and that being so, our thanks are indeed deep, grateful, abiding and heartfelt.

We are not only grateful, but I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that we are also genuinely humbled. The University of London has been awarding honorary degrees since 1903, and the roll-call of those who have been thus recognized ranges from Einstein to Franklin Roosevelt, T.S.Eliot to Henry Moore, Mary Douglas to Margot Fonteyn, Amartya Sen to Onora O'Neill. To find ourselves in such illustrious company is surely more than any of us honoured here tonight could ever have dared to hope for, or aspire to belong to.

I am sure it is not accidental that, between us, we cover a broad range of academic subjects, from computer science, via economics, to history – all of them essential to understanding the world in which we live, and all of them essential to understanding the world in which we shall be living. And as the speeches given in our honour make plain, we have all of us sought to involve ourselves in the public issues and pressing affairs of our time, which makes recognition by this, the most urban and engaged of all Britain's universities, all the more appreciated.

As its name suggests, Foundation Day is not only the occasion when the University of London is at its most generous, welcoming and imaginative in awarding honorary degrees, true although that undoubtedly is. For it also marks and celebrates the granting of the first royal charter by King William IV in 1836, which established the University of London, initially consisting of University College and King's College, but subsequently much expanded.

Across the years since then, the University of London has played an extraordinary part – in the life of this great city, as its pre-eminent place of higher learning; in the life of this country, where many fledgling university colleges in England and Wales awarded University of London degrees before receiving their own royal charters; and in the wider world beyond, thanks to the University's long-established capacity to award external degrees, which it continues to do today with its long-distance international programmes.



**UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**

It is, then, right and proper that once a year, we should pause to reflect on and celebrate the great achievements of this University since its first charter was granted one hundred and eighty-one years ago. But Foundation Day is also an occasion to render thanks more generally -- for the academic freedoms that we here take for granted, but which are still denied to too many people in too many other parts of the world: such as the commitment to evidence-based learning, a belief disinterested research, and support for the global trade in ideas, and the international republic of letters.

Your Royal Highness and Chancellor: in twelve months' time, it will be exactly eighty years since your illustrious predecessor, the Earl of Athlone, conferred an honorary degree on Winston Churchill, at Foundation Day in 1948. And on that occasion, it was Churchill himself who returned thanks on behalf of his fellow honorary graduands, and in so doing, he said -- and said better -- almost everything that I myself have tried to say here tonight.

Universities, Churchill observed, might best be described as being the embodiment of 'organized curiosity': the institutionalized expression and the essential guarantor of value-free inquiry, of the right to ask questions, and of the imperative to find things out, to want to know, to want to learn, and to want to teach. But Churchill also insisted that universities were one of the most important means by which we could 'cherish freedom' -- freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and freedom to hope.

That is what universities exist to do, that is why they matter, and that is why, in our era of fake news, of growing hostility to expertise, and of rising populism and xenophobia, they matter more than ever in our vexed and tortured world. And Foundation Day is the occasion when the University of London rightly and publicly proclaims its commitment: to the enduring benefits of higher education; to its own vital metropolitan, national and global missions; and to the life of the mind, and the unfettered pursuit of scholarly inquiry.

There is, then, a great deal to celebrate and render thanks for here, as on all Foundation Days, of which the bestowal of honorary degrees is only part of a wider vision and a larger whole and a bigger picture. All of which is but another way of saying that there are many good reasons why those of us who have been so generously acclaimed and so eloquently saluted this evening, are so proud and so grateful to have been honoured in these ceremonies that we shall always remember, and on an occasion that we shall never forget.