

June 26, 2006

Dr. Gordon Johnson welcomed us to Wolfson College, Cambridge. He said Cambridge is nearing its 800th anniversary (in 2009) and yet it was fully part of the 21st century. He asked us to advise our students of this fact. He then introduced Sir David Williams (see below for a brief bio), who shared with us some “Transatlantic Reflections.”

In 1956, Sir David visited America as a Harkness Fellow, coming to UC-Berkeley and Harvard University. When he first arrived in the US, he visited New York, where he enjoyed a Broadway production of *My Fair Lady*, which opened March 15th of that year and ran for 2717 performances. He remembered being especially delighted by the many colors of automobiles in NY, such as taxi cabs, because almost all the cars he’d seen in England during the dark postwar days had been black. He then traveled to Berkeley, CA where he spent the first portion of his time as fellow before returning to the East (to Harvard). He mused on the significance of having an international postgraduate education, and said that because changes to programs occur so rapidly, we advisors must take a serious and active approach to helping our students find opportunities for postgraduate study abroad.

I noted that Sir David told the following joke, but how he introduced it I don’t recall. Perhaps he was saying that it wasn’t enough to tell students to go online to learn about postgraduate opportunities at Cambridge, given the way information changes more rapidly than websites are updated. Or maybe he was saying that today it’s easier to go online to learn about these opportunities, whereas in the mid-1950s, we didn’t have that luxury.

Women claim that computers should be referred to in the masculine gender because:

1. In order to get their attention, you have to turn them on.
2. They have a lot of data, but are still clueless.
3. They are supposed to help you solve problems, but half the time they are the problem.
4. As soon as you commit to one, you realize that, if you had waited a little longer you could have had a better model.

Men concluded that computers should be referred to in the feminine gender because:

1. Only the Creator understands their internal logic.
2. The native language they use to communicate with other computers is incomprehensible to everyone else.
3. Even your smallest mistakes are stored in long-term memory for retrieval.
4. As soon as you make a commitment to one, you spend half your paycheck on accessories for it.

Sir David returned to the more serious message he was hoping to convey, which was that he and many others were conscious of the debt that the UK owes to the US for their help during and after WWII. When the war broke out in 1939, he was nine years old. He said he remembers very clearly the arrival of American troops and the feeling everyone experienced upon seeing them. If one word could sum up his impressions of America and Americans in the postwar period, he said, it would be “vitality.” He recalled attending a 1994 English ceremony celebrating US veterans of WWII which brought to mind American vitality all over again.

Higher education in America is vital, Sir David said, because programs are enormously varied, and of good quality. His experiences at Berkeley, Harvard, and at University of Texas attest to this.

American culture is vital, he said, recalling reading the works of James Thurber and Damon Runyan, seeing the films of the 1930s and '40s—Hollywood's Golden Age—and orchestral concerts in Boston during his stay there.

Law plays a vital role in America. Sir David said he became especially conscious of the US Supreme Court's impact on American life when he followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 and after. He has had opportunities to dine with some of the justices, including the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg. He noted that Britain will have adopted a supreme court modeled somewhat on the US Supreme Court by 2010 or 2011.

American history is vital; American public life features notable figures such as Harry S. Truman; Sir David particularly admired Truman's adage, "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." This sentiment is very important to his generation, he said, and should be to those in the field of education.

Traveling has deepened Sir David's sense of America's vitality. He has enjoyed visiting the amazing natural features of the American landscape such as the Grand Canyon, as well as cities that are remarkable for their architecture, history, and most importantly their energy; these include San Francisco, CA; Charleston, SC; and Carmel, CA. He also enjoyed visiting the LBJ ranch in Texas hill country.

Sir David concluded his reflections by thanking Dr. Gordon Johnson for his excellent work with the Gates Cambridge scheme—not least because he has been a leader in keeping up the vitality of exchange between the US and UK in the modern era (of which Cambridge is fully taking part). He also recommended to us Dr. Johnson's edition of the *Microcosmographia Academia*, entitled *University Politics: F. M. Cornford's Cambridge and his Advice to the Young Academic Politician*, which surveys university politics and the controversies leading up to the radical social and academic changes Cambridge University underwent in the 19th century.

Sir David Williams, Q.C., D.L.

Sir David Williams was Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge from 1989 to 1996, and from October 1996 he has been a Professor of Law at the University. He is a graduate of Cambridge (in History and Law), he is a barrister (and Honorary Bencher at Lincoln's Inn), he was a Commonwealth Fund (Harkness) Fellow at Berkeley and Harvard 1956-1958, he taught for five years at Nottingham University, for four years at Oxford University (he is an Honorary Fellow of Keble College) and he has been back at Cambridge since 1967. He was Senior Tutor of Emmanuel College for nearly seven years in the 1970s, he was President of Wolfson College 1980-1992 and from 1983 to 1992 he was Rouse Ball Professor of English Law. During his career, Professor Williams has served on a number of official bodies including the Council on Tribunals, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, the Commission on Energy and the Environment, and the Clean Air Council. He loves books and has a personal collection of about 8,000 volumes.