



Faithful Remembering

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Just over a century ago, in 1913, the poet Rupert Brooke took a trip to North America to get over a love affair, and wrote there an essay about the Canadian Rockies. It is, he says, an empty land:

A European can find nothing to satisfy the hunger of his heart ... There walk, as yet, no ghosts of lovers in Canadian country lanes. This is the essence of the grey freshness and brisk melancholy of this land. And for all the charm of those qualities, it is also the secret of the European's discontent. For it is possible, at a pinch, to do without gods. But one misses the dead.

The whole essay breathes that combination of imagination, lyricism and sentiment which is Brooke's trademark (and we may wonder why it did not strike him that the Rockies might have plenty of native American ghosts). But it captures something that many of us share: a sense that our landscapes are the richer for our ghosts – for our memories and stories of all the people who have lived and worked where we live and work today.

It is a sense which it is hard not to have in a Cambridge or Oxford college. It is one of the fine things about colleges that we do remember those who lived and worked here in the past, or made it possible for others to do so. St. John's remembers those who made our life and work possible with every post-prandial grace: 'Pour your grace, Lord God, into our hearts, that we may use these gifts, given by Margaret our foundress and other benefactors, to your glory....'

Above all, we remember them today: a great cloud of witnesses to the glory of God and education, which stretches back half a millennium to Lady Margaret Beaufort and her advisor, Bishop John Fisher. Who founded St. John's College to be a house of renaissance learning, broadly conceived, in which Fellows and scholars would read grammar, and mathematics and philosophy in preparation for the study of theology or medicine.

Their vision was twofold: the worship of God and the service of society. They wanted people to stay and study – and leave, and teach, and heal. In other ways too, their vision was close to that of the modern college. They wanted to improve access and outreach, so poorer candidates for admission had preference over richer ones. Half the scholars were to come from the north of England, where there were no universities.

In other ways again, no doubt, the shape, size and activities of the modern college would astonish John and Margaret. Women students, and Fellows! Engineers and economists! And, though the first hints of the Protestant Reformation were already rumbling round Europe, Margaret cannot have dreamed of the day when her grandson would repudiate the authority of the Pope, and Fisher would go to the scaffold for his faith, and services in chapel would follow the Reformed rite.

When, though, we remember our benefactors – all of them, through time – we celebrate the fact that for all the changes that have intervened, we are still intimately connected: by the buildings we live and work in; by the books in the library; by our stories and rituals. Above all, we are linked by our unbroken commitment to education, learning and research.

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Today we celebrate the fact that as a college, we are one body; one community through time, as well as at every moment in time.

Having said that, as a historian, I can't help thinking of all the people who have not been – have not been able to be – members of this community through time. 'Let us now praise famous men,' says Ben Sira, and, apart from Margaret, most of people we remember today are men. I look forward to the day when we have more women to celebrate!

(I half wish Margaret and John had had vision out of all proportion to their time and founded a women's college too, but one can't blame them for not thinking what was unthinkable in 1511.)

Of course, it is not only women who have only lately been able to join this community. Until recently, most men – however clever or curious about the world – did not learn to read and write, let alone to dream of Cambridge. On this day of commemoration, they too deserve to be remembered. And, in 2014, there is another group whom we can't help remembering. They are those who won a place here, or came up briefly between 1914 and 1918, or during other wars, but then joined up, and did not come back, and are commemorated on our war memorials.

I think a good deal about those young men (and women), now I'm a Fellow of a college and a supervisor myself. I try to imagine what it would be like to send my students – my clever, funny, disorganized, delightful students – away to a monstrous war that would destroy them and millions like them. It is more horrible than I can say.

But I believe that remembering all those who were members of the college all too briefly, or who would have been members if they had lived, or who could not even have dreamed of being members, is also part of what we do today. Because benefactions come in many forms.

Some of those we praise, as Ben Sira reminds us, were renowned for their power and wealth. Some were known for their 'learning meet for the people'. Others 'found out musical tunes', or 'recited verses'. Others were among the merciful and righteous. Beyond these, everyone who has ever been part of this college has passed on something; added something to who we are and what St. John's means in the world. Even those who were never here, or in their lifetime could not have dreamed of being here – they too have given us something. They remind us that half the reason why we look back to our benefactors, is to look forward. To ask ourselves whether we, as current members and friends of St. John's College, are doing everything we can to fulfil our benefactors' vision for the future.

Are we doing everything we can to widen access to Margaret's foundation, which gives its beneficiaries such life-changing opportunities? Are we serving the needs of our society for teaching and healing, as Margaret wanted Johnians to serve, by what we learn, teach, and research, and go out into the world to do?

In a perfect world, those are questions we would all ask ourselves every day. In the complex materiality of a modern university, where we're working out how to respond to the latest government initiative, or how to get the edge on our competitors; trying to frame our research so it fits this year's fashions in funding; persuading students that they are not consumers, in much the same way as a university is not a sweet shop – in the midst of all this, it is not always easy to get round to thinking about whether we are doing everything we can to fulfil our benefactors' vision.



Today, however, offers us one day, one moment in the year, to stop and think. To reflect that we are not only beneficiaries of this foundation, but that we can and should be benefactors ourselves. In 2014, we are Margaret's executors: her hands and feet. And the time and energy that each of us invests in this college, will shape it for years to come.

In the process, it will cost us something too: a portion – for some of us, the greatest portion – of our lives.

As we look back, therefore, and celebrate the gifts of all kinds that others have given to this college, we may also reflect on the gifts that we are making today, and pray that future generations will have reason to thank us as heartily as we thank our benefactors. Which takes us back to Margaret and John, and their remarkable initiative.

In some ways, the most remarkable thing about it is what an act of faith it was. Margaret gave great gifts, and John drew up three sets of statutes. Then they entrusted the college to the future, leaving it to develop organically: to reimagine itself in every generation, in ways that would often be new and unpredictable, but would always, they hoped, be connected with their original vision.

That was a great act of faith, and hope, and love: the kind of practical, community-forming love which was at the heart of both John's and Margaret's life. And that is no accident, since as people of faith both Margaret and John were living in conscious imitation of Jesus Christ. To whom any act of remembrance in a chapel, on the third Sunday of Easter, must finally return.

In this Resurrection season, we celebrate the gift that Christ gave to the world: the gift of his own life, which he gave hoping and trusting that the God of love would bring a future out of it that would transform the world. And we celebrate the inspiration that created this college as part of the abundance of life that grew out of the self-giving of Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate, we remember that the God who raised Jesus to new life is also the God who remembers. God is the God in whom nothing and no-one is lost or forgotten, but everyone is remembered and held in love. In whom there is hope for everyone of new and more abundant life.

To whom, with Margaret and John and all our benefactors, we join in humble thanks for all the blessings of this life; and ask for grace to show forth his praise not only with our lips, but in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end.

Amen