

# Honoris Causa

*Blaise Cronin*

Dame Edith Sitwell was unequivocal. “Fools,” she once wrote to John Gielgud, “are made doctors by other fools in other universities, but no fool has ever been given an Hon. D.Litt. by Oxford.” No fool she; her oxonian gong was awarded in 1951, an occasion which she proclaimed to be “the proudest and happiest moment of my life.” Oxford has been conferring honorary doctorates for more than 500 years, the first having been granted in either 1478 or 1479, and one cannot but marvel at Dame Edith’s unshakable trust in the ancient university’s quality control mechanisms over the centuries. Parenthetically, one wonders what the vice chancellors of Leeds and Durham universities, the first to honor Sitwell in this fashion, would have felt had they been privy to her correspondence with the distinguished thespian.

The poet John Skelton was granted his honorific by Cambridge in 1493, the first on record for the upstart in the Fens. Since then, many distinguished names have wended their way to the twin pinnacles of British higher education to receive what Mark Twain, himself honored by Oxford with a Doctor of Letters, called these “unearned finds”—of which, by the way, he had a respectable clutch. Twain, like Sitwell, took the invitation from the city of dreaming spires most seriously, inconveniently crossing the Atlantic to receive his D.Litt. in person. Perhaps Dr. Sitwell, as she very much liked to be addressed, according to Victoria Glendinning in her biography, *Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn Among Lions*, was not so far off the mark.

Commencement and other academic rituals were exported from the Old Country to the Colonies, and Harvard was the first college to award an honorary doctorate; to its then president, Increase Mather, who received a S.T.D. (Doctor of Sacred Theology) in 1692. Today, the S.T.D. is something of a collector’s item, with the L.L.D. (Doctor of Laws) and Litt.D. (Doctor of Letters) being among the more commonly awarded honorifics. By 1775, Harvard had awarded only five honorary doctorates, all, it must be said, to Harvard graduates, gentlemen *d’un certain âge*. In the years ahead, the pace would quicken, but, astonishingly, it was not until 1955 that the institution

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conferred an honorary doctorate on a woman. Helen Keller may hold the distinction of being Harvard's first female honorand, but she was by no means the first woman to be so honored by an Ivy League institution. Mary Emma Woolley, in the vanguard of Brown's female graduates, retired from the presidency of Mount Holyoke College in 1937 having amassed no fewer than twenty honorary degrees from institutions nationwide, including an honorary doctorate from her *alma mater*. In the main, though, women were overlooked.

Yale conferred its first honorary doctorate, an M.D. (Doctor of Medicine), in 1723. Later New Haven notables included John F. Kennedy, who remarked famously: "Now I have the best of all possible worlds, a Yale degree and a Harvard education." Princeton's first was a Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) in 1769, while Dartmouth went with a Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) in 1773. In the City of Brotherly Love, Penn awarded its first honorary doctorate in 1782, and a year later conferred an LL.D. on none other than George Washington. The practice of granting honorary doctorates to the great and the good (G&G) is not universal; some notable institutions, among them, I believe, Cornell, M.I.T., Rice, Stanford, Vassar, and Virginia, have pretty much managed to resist the temptation, while others, Princeton, Harvard and Yale, to name but three, have each awarded several thousand over the years. The onetime record, though, may have been set by Columbia, which awarded 134 in 1929 alone: this *annus mirabilis* happened to be Columbia's 175th anniversary.

Thanks to one Stephen Edward Epler (*Honorary Degrees: A Survey of Their Use and Abuse*), we know a quite a bit about the social history of the honorary doctorate in the United States. His book provides a painstaking and statistically-informed account of American honorifics from the earliest days to 1938. It is a little gem, dated to be sure, but packed with fact, anecdote and insight. As far as I can ascertain, this is the only scholarly monograph devoted to a subject that is otherwise superficially, if frequently, treated in newspaper and magazine stories, as an hour or two searching on *LexisNexis* will reveal. One may also stumble across the occasional opinion piece or chapter on the subject of honorary degrees, but the challenging task of updating Epler's pioneer survey has yet to be undertaken.

Given the remarkable growth in higher education post World War II, it is a safe bet that the trend lines described by Epler have swept upwards in the intervening decades. Unfortunately, there are no reliable figures on the number of honorary doctorates awarded annually in the United States; apparently, the American Council on Education ceased counting in 1973, and no one has assumed responsibility since then, but a guesstimate of 10,000 per year is probably in the ballpark. That is an awful lot of greatness and goodness to be recognized, except, of course, that it is no longer the case—as if, indeed, it ever were—that these awards are reserved for members of the G&G club. It also means, according to my conservative back-of-the-envelope

lope calculations, that at any given moment there are in the region of 150,000 honorary doctors in circulation in the United States alone, which scarcely suggests selectivity. Compare this with the number of Nobel laureates alive at any given moment. In short, the honorary doctorate has fallen victim to academic hyperinflation. On both sides of the Atlantic there is ample evidence, historically and currently, of how prone to abuse this venerable system of academic preferment has become.

"If," as Epler notes in his conclusions, "honorary degrees had been given only to Newtons, Darwins, and Einsteins, the prestige of the honorary degree system at the present time would be unquestioned." He might have added "and if they are conferred by the Harvards and Princetons of this world." However, if doctorates are being doled out in their thousands every year, not all can be going to paragons of science, scholarship, and statecraft. For every Newton and Darwin on the roll call of honor, there's a pride of lesser souls—pop stars, sporting heroes, CEOs, politicians. These "muttonheads in mortarboards," to quote a nameless New York editor, populate commencement platforms, displacing deserving dons and progressively devaluing the degree—Gresham's law in the groves of academe. And for every Ivy there is a slew of minor colleges keen to get in on the act, which merely underscores the importance of securing one's gong from a blue chip institution. Breeding is branding in this game. Nothing new in all of this, of course; Abraham Lincoln was granted an honorary doctorate in 1860 by Knox College, "a young institution just struggling for reputation," in the words of Orville Brown, a trustee and longtime friend of the honoree who wrote telling Lincoln of the good news. Still, Abe accepted.

Whilst the rot may have set in, we have not quite reached the point where either Princeton or Cambridge is likely to wrap Brittany Spears in scarlet robes any day soon. Cambridge's criteria include "conspicuous merit," or "distinction" in the case of foreigners. Also admissible are members of the royal family, though, given the public antics of ERII's progeny of late, this policy may warrant review. Princeton, no mean school, has granted Bob Dylan a Doctor of Music (D.Mus.) degree, one up, in every sense, from Billy Joel's Southampton College award. Even St. Andrews, one of the world's oldest universities, could not resist the temptation to grant honorary doctorates to two golfers, Colin Montgomerie and Seve Ballesteros, a couple of years ago, when the Open championship came to town. Par for the course, these days. Dame Edith, methinks, may just be starting to turn in her grave.

Come Trinity term, kings and commoners, not to mention a growing caravan of ex-presidents, from Clinton to Gorbachev, converge on our nation's campuses. Resplendent in their medieval attire, they process gravely through quadrangles, neo-gothic and neon-lit, before finally moving center stage for their sub-Warholian moment of unearned academic glory. Brief citations are read—in Latin, if you are very lucky. Most often the honorand is silent, an

immobile peacock, whose sole requirement is to doff his cap, don his hood and clasp the parchment before withdrawing to make room for the next in line. Nobility is always a safe bet at such occasions, whether it be King Harald of Norway or the Prince of Wales (with, at last count, fifteen to his credit). Icons such as Nelson Mandela will be surefire successes, though the competition to attract top-of-the-line luminaries can be fierce. The Great Man disappointed the two universities in Leeds by declining their joint offer of an honorary degree. The University of Leeds was particularly galled since it had previously named a newly discovered fragment of matter the Mandela Particle. [The discovery was later found to be a mistake caused by faulty equipment.] To rub salt into Yorkshire wounds, Mandela subsequently accepted an honorary Doctor of Laws degree jointly from the University of Sydney and the University of Technology Sydney, adding to his impressive career tally of more than forty. During 1996 he had a stellar streak, bagging a novena from British universities, which, naturally, included a brace from Oxbridge.

But the A list is short; for every Mandela there is a dozen Don (“American pie”) McLeans, Nicolas Cages, or Wayne Gretzkys only too willing to be hooded. In recent years, my own institution has awarded honorary doctorates to, among others, Jane Pauley, a television news anchor, and John Mellencamp, a determinedly mediocre pop singer. Does anyone seriously imagine that either of these individuals, or individuals of comparable stature, would have been honored in like fashion by either Harvard or Oxford? Bottom feeding seems to be the order of the day, but this will not come as a complete surprise to those who recall that Kermit The Frog delivered the 1996 commencement address at Southampton College. Doubtless this wheeze attracted media attention, but what kind of PR fillip was Southampton seeking?

Honorary doctorates are typically awarded to a small number of individuals at the same time, which creates opportunities for artful combinations, rather like arranging place settings for dinner guests. Yale, for instance, recently awarded doctorates to Julie Andrews and Alan Greenspan, an inspired juxtaposing of songstress and sphinx. The “his” and “hers” approach also has its attractions. Ryerson University, Toronto, cleverly awarded honorary doctorates to both Nelson Mandela and his wife, Graca Machel, while, south of the border, Ted Turner and (estranged) wife Jane Fonda picked up their degrees *à deux* from Emerson College in Boston. [They were not estranged when they accepted the invitations.] Even if you are six feet under, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility to nab an honorary doctorate, a case in point being the degree awarded posthumously to General Murtala Muhammad by the Bayero University, Kano—twenty-five years after his death. In a break with tradition, the University of East Anglia in the UK gave an honorary doctorate to the charity Comic Relief in recognition of its fund-raising activities. One may sympathize with the symbolism of the gesture, but the idea of corporate honorifics within this particular scheme of things makes little sense.

There are many other awards which would be more fitting for purposes such as this. The same holds for what might be termed human interest cases, such as that of Doris Haddock, a nonagenarian, who walked from California to Washington, D.C. to promote campaign finance reform. This sterling effort was deemed worthy of an honorary doctorate by Emerson.

There are no reliable data on the distribution of honorary doctorates by class of recipient, though of late it does seem that scholars may have become a minority, with donors (established and prospective), politicians, and that truly protean category, celebrities, accounting for the bulk of the awards. Epler's figures for the United States from the seventeenth century to 1928, show that law, business and the military combined accounted for a mere 10 percent of all degrees conferred, with the category "academic and professional" garnering almost 50 percent of the awards. These days, corporate leaders are routinely recipients of honorary doctorates; the disgraced cosmopolite, Robert Maxwell, harvested his internationally—from Aberdeen, Moscow, and New York.

Of course, corporations are also frequent donors, and successful CEOs are not bashful about paying through the nose to have their names affixed to chairs, professorships, buildings, and facilities of every variety. The Regius professorship of History at Oxford has a certain ring to it, but I am not altogether sure that the same can be said of the Taco Bell Distinguished Professor of Hotel and Restaurant Administration at Washington State University, to say nothing of the Enron Chair in Risk Management in the Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Management at Rice University. *Autres temps, autres moeurs.* The Kelley School of Business at Indiana University got its name (and some \$20 million for student scholarships) from the philanthropic founder of the "Steak and Shake" beef burger chain. Gifts of this magnitude are now staggeringly commonplace. Without such largesse, the history of higher education in this United States would have been quite a different story. But some donors have expectations, and one way of satisfying their appetite for academic recognition is to confer an honorary doctorate.

Until recently it was a fairly easy matter tracking the arrival of plutocrats and *parvenus* at High Table; the names appeared week-in, week-out in the "Glittering prizes" section of the *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)*. That the University of Westminster should have awarded Peter Boiszot, founder and chairman of Pizza Express, an honorary doctorate would merely be depressingly commonplace for devotees of the *THES*. The new wave of honorands brings new values and behaviors to the fore. Some insist on being addressed as "doctor," blind to, or casually dismissive of, convention in this regard. They would do well to heed Dr. Samuel C. Gipp, Th.D. (*sic*): "Academically, an honorary doctorate is like an 'honorary black belt' in karate. Wear it around the house, but don't try to use it or you'll get killed!" Others, like David Hockey and Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, bring a dash of ec-

centricity to the proceedings; the popular painter accepted his Leeds doctorate wearing a pair of red corduroy slippers, while the “Red Bishop” celebrated his Oxford prize with a clenched-fist salute.

Do Sheryl Crow (successful recording artist), J. K. Rowling (best-selling author), Tiger Woods (golfing maestro), and George Best (legendary soccer player) really need honorary doctorates? In their respective worlds they are high-profile successes, and their enormous public acclaim has been matched by pecuniary gain. They have garnered plaudits, prizes, medals, and sundry other tributes in the course of their careers, so why should it be necessary to acknowledge their resolutely non-academic achievements with an academic honor? As has been pointed out on more than a few occasions by dyspeptic observers of current trends, we give musicians Grammys and film actors Oscars, but we certainly would not expect Stephen Hawking’s or Edward Said’s scholarship to result in either a Grammy or an Oscar nomination. Why not, as was suggested in a *Daily Mail* article some years ago, simply award athletes and others of that ilk an honorary “blue,” the traditional signifier of sporting distinction within (British) university life? By granting honorary doctorates willy-nilly, universities have made a monumental error of judgment. The resultant lampoonery is both self-inflicted and entirely justified.

Despite the inflationary spiral, some genuinely distinguished professors can still be spotted at the podium when the goodies are being dished out. Catherine Stimpson of New York University has already collected a dozen honorary doctorates in the course of her career, while Noam Chomsky, one of the most highly cited scholars of all time, and also one of the most visible and vociferous public intellectuals in the United States, in the space of about a week received an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge for his foundational work in linguistics and another from Amherst College for his political activism.

We tend not to be surprised that honorary doctorates, like Nobel laureates, are typically awarded to graying eminences. These garlands are typically reserved for capstone achievements and outstanding lifetime accomplishments. They are not the preserve of young turks. Of course, exceptions to the rule can be found. In 1784, Harvard conferred a doctorate on the twenty-seven-year-old General Lafayette, while in 1928 Wisconsin awarded an LL.D. to the high-flying Charles Lindbergh, aged twenty-six. As far as I can tell, Lindbergh, along with the classical pianist, André Watts, is the youngest recipient of an honorary doctorate on record. Another youthful phenomenon is Linus Torvalds, creator of the Linux open-source operating system, who was similarly honored in 1999 by Stockholm University, at age twenty-nine. However, honorary doctorates are not (yet) a topic entry in the *Guinness Books of Records*, so my data should be treated with caution.

The rarified world of the honorary doctorate provides a telling illustration of the Matthew Effect: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he

shall have abundance.” The Dalai Lama can muster a credible number (eight plus a First Prize for Humanity from the Sartorius Foundation, which must be worth something). Prince Charles may have a tidy score, but in his case it is effectively a birthright. In the early part of the twentieth century, General John Pershing received a dozen honorary doctorates in a three-year period from both British and American universities, a particular fecund spell by any standard, and all the more impressive when one considers that the conferring institutions included Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale. Not just quantity, but quality. To date, the playwrighting Czech president, Václav Havel, has accumulated almost forty, an eye-catching achievement. The late Barbara Jordan, an African-American politician and educator, managed a lifetime score of thirty. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Herbert Hoover had more than seventy and eighty, respectively, for the moment putting their South African counterpart, Nelson Mandela, in the shade. But even Hoover with his eighty-four or eighty-five cannot claim top dog spot. That honor goes to the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, whose web page proudly notes “his 147 (as of 6-8-01) honorary degrees.” It is not clear whether all of these are doctorates, but it would be unseemly to nitpick. Father Hesburgh is in a class apart, and has set an intimidating, maybe unsurpassable, benchmark for all would-be collectors of honorifics. Most of us in academe will never be honored thus; a few will receive the call but once, and only an infinitesimally tiny number will hit double digits. This is what statisticians mean by a power law of cumulative advantage.

At what point do the G&G become blasé: a baker’s dozen, a score, more. . . ? On the other hand, perhaps one becomes addicted, fearful that the flow of public encomia might dry up. And who knows whether within this super-elite keeping up with the Joneses has not been redefined in terms of symbolic capital formation. Not everyone, though, is bowled over by the prospect of a glittering prize from the world of learning. Among those who have turned down honorary doctorates are former Presidents Cleveland and McKinley and the philosopher Herbert Spencer. The reasons vary. If you have already got one from, say, Berkeley or Edinburgh, you may not want to devalue it by taking another from (perish the thought) a minor state college or, in the UK, a former polytechnic. Who, in their right mind, would want to accept an honorary doctorate from BoJo—the Bob Jones University? To which the retort is “someone like the Rev. Ian Paisley.” In academia, as in life generally, the company you keep matters. Sometimes, a polite refusal may be the best course of action, where there is a risk you might find yourself seated on a dais with a hyperventilating frog or caterwauling clergyman.

Unsurprisingly, there seems to be an inverse relationship between an institution’s prestige in the academic firmament and its enthusiasm for dispensing honorary doctorates. A quick perusal of the “Glittering prizes” column over the past couple of years is enough to demonstrate the cavalier

commitment of Britain's "new universities" to honoring individuals of resolute ordinariness, such that the University of Idaho's awarding of an LL.D. to a restaurateur who featured "the genuine Idaho baked potato" seems almost laudable. Illustrative of the trend, though not an especially egregious example, was the University of Salford's granting of an honorary doctorate to Leonard Steinberg. Apparently Steinberg has helped make "gambling popular and respectable," thereby allowing the university to develop a reputation as a national center for the training of graduates for the gambling industry. A textbook instance of public-private sector interaction, or an example of moneylenders in the Temple of Learning, depending on your point of view. What, pray, would Cardinal John Henry Newman make of all of this?

Let us assume that not all honorary degrees are awarded with a view to achieving trans-sectoral synergies of the Salfordian variety. And let us further assume that they are not always a *quid pro quo*; for a seven-figure gift, or prospect thereof. In some cases the motivation may be disinterested, nothing more or less than a genuine expression of esteem from one's academic peers, as, for instance, when the University of Nottingham awarded an honorary doctorate, *in absentia*, to the sociologist Harold Garfinkel. This is an instance of gift-giving without the expectation of reciprocation, which is not the same as saying that high-mindedness precludes the possibility of some benefit accruing to the awarding institution at some point in the future. But for every selfless award there is, assuredly, one that is manifestly self-serving, whether the institutional aim is to curry political favor, attract donations, or bask in reflected glory when a star-turned-President, pundit, or pop star rolls into town. Despite administrators' protestations, it is obvious that honorary doctorates, like indulgences in times bygone, can be bought, though not always cheaply—a view, by the way, which pops up with some frequency in the Australian press. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the University of Sydney is doing the right thing by tightening its honorary degree system and setting a proper example for the rest of the pack. "No more trophy patrons" seems to be the mantra *du jour* down under, but will it last in the face of progressive cutbacks in public funding for higher education?

This is not to say that all university presidents are guilty of traducing a time-honored practice; some institutions have rigorous nomination and evaluation criteria—Harvard being a case in point—and will doughtily resist external pressures to grant so-and-so the desired honor. Which, of course, brings us to Margaret Thatcher and the rebuke conferred on her by her old university. Such was the antipathy of Oxford's dons, scientists in particular, to the then prime minister's higher education policies, that they did the unthinkable: they broke with tradition by refusing to grant her the honorary doctorate that was hers by virtue of the office she held—*trahison des clercs*, was how *The Economist* framed the story. In an historic vote, 738-319, Mrs. Thatcher's nomination for an honorary doctorate was rejected, and one cannot but specu-

late, as Anthony Kenny does in his autobiography, *A Life in Oxford*, what effect this very public and considered slight had on the evolution of higher education policy in the United Kingdom.

The Oxford brouhaha is an illustration of how politics and academe can collide, but it is hardly unique. There was opposition to President Charles Taylor of Liberia being granted an honorary degree by Morehouse College, while a campaign was launched against the conferment of an honorary doctorate on Lee Kuan Yew, the Singaporean Senior Minister, by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Back in the United States, six protesters were arrested at the University of Florida for protesting against General Norman Schwarzkopf's honorary doctorate in public service. Even President George Bush's honorary degree from his *alma mater*, Yale, generated hostility in some quarters.

Evidently, and hearteningly, not everyone feels that the significance of an honorary doctorate has been irredeemably devalued, or that the situation is beyond redemption. It is also good to know that some recipients are possessed of sufficient social conscience to return theirs when the awarding institution fails to live up to expectations.

It is abundantly clear that not all recipients of honorary doctorates are alike, or singled out for similar reasons. On the one hand we have scholars of distinction, statesmen, and grandees from the fine and performing arts worlds (think Noam Chomsky, Nelson Mandela, Leonard Bernstein, Robert Motherwell), and on the other we have a motley and more populist crew drawn from the worlds of mass media, sport, local politics and the enterprise culture (think Jane Pauley, Wayne Gretzky, Governor Whoever, and Ted Turner). This is a crass simplification, but you get my drift. Let our universities continue to bestow the traditional honorary degrees (Litt.D, Sc.D., D.Mus., etc.) on the A list as appropriate, but—and this is not an original suggestion—for the others it is time to institute a new breed of honorary doctorate (D.Hon., has been proposed), or even a university fellowship or medal, which is reserved for those categories of accomplishment which have no scholastic component to them. The pop stars, dot.com millionaires, and sporting gods will still have their day in the sun, but the integrity of the traditional degrees will not have been compromised.