

MATTHEW WHITE RIDLEY DCL

Mr Chancellor,

In 6 years as your Public Orator I have presented all graduands with dispassionate equality. It is more difficult with Matt Ridley because he and I are friends. I know him well enough to know that he does not particularly enjoy being lauded and applauded. He knows me well enough to be further discomfited by the fact that this is my last presentation as Public Orator.

Matt and I were drawn together by a common interest in promoting the public appreciation of science. Along with Alastair Balls and Linda Conlon we became known as the Gang of Four responsible for cajoling an, at times, unenthusiastic city and university to embrace the idea of a Millennium Landmark project devoted to genetics, the Centre for Life. As Chairman, Matt helped to steer our science village beside Central Station into existence and thereby made a major contribution to our scientific success in the fields of genetics and stem cell biology, not to mention the impact on a million paying exhibition visitors since 2000 and approaching 100,000 school children attending practical classes.

Matt's Y chromosome is descended from Matthew Ridley, 18th century Governor of the Newcastle upon Tyne Company of Merchant Adventurers. His son inherited from his mother's

brother, Matthew White, the Northumbrian Baronetcy of Blagdon; that Matthew White Ridley was this Matthew White Ridley's Great Great Great Great Great Grandfather. A striking feature of that family tree is that all the intervening males were also called Matthew White Ridley, the only variation coming when great great grandfather Ridley was made a Viscount. Matt's father was, sir, your predecessor as Chancellor. I still have the note he once sent me complementing me on having given a lecture which kept him awake. Matt and Anya's have one son; I'll leave you all to hazard a guess at his name. At least having their daughter, Iris offered the opportunity for a little variety.

There will be those who are assuming today's award to be a direct result of the large quantity of silver cutlery which must have hampered his breathing as a baby. Nothing could be further from the truth. The primary justification is that Matt is an author of international repute. His books on Science have sold a half million copies worldwide, been translated into 23 languages and short listed for 6 literary prizes. In 2004 he won the US National Academies Book Award.

His life journey is interesting. In traditional style he was sent to boarding school aged 8: 'a little known concentration camp in Northamptonshire' he thought. He and his friends spent their time emulating 'The Great Escape', digging tunnels; his cousin actually made it into the town in his pyjamas.

Letters home reveal narrative skills and natural affinity for academe tempered by enlightened self interest:

10th December 1967

‘In marks this week I got 18 this time, and Mr Porch said if I came top of the school again he would give me a present and that present would be to let me take my Latin grammar home of all things so I have made up my mind not to come top again.’

Nevertheless, his attraction to scientific observation shone through.

25th February 1968

‘I caught another mouse in my locker the night before last and then last night I caught another one to make a grand total of 4 mice in 2 weeks. I will try to see if there is another one tonight.’

He went on to Eton then to Magdalen College, Oxford, to study zoology. He earned a 1st class degree despite on one occasion failing a practical class when he accepted a dare from his group and ate the beetle which was to be the subject of their work.

From his earliest days Matt was an avid birdwatcher and is still given to suddenly stop the car while he identifies a distant bird of prey. This enthusiasm was probably a factor when he decided to continue his studies to PhD level. Imagine the scene:

“So Ridley, you fancy staying to do a PhD. How do you intend to expand the sum of human knowledge?”

“I’d like to write my thesis on the sex life of the pheasant, sir.”

“Splendid. Ridley, have another four years.”

Towards the end of his thesis Matt realised that, unlike his compatriots, he rather enjoyed writing up his results. This took him to becoming a science writer, first voluntarily then for payment as Science Editor of the Economist interrupted by a short period as an observer of US politics, a useful training for marriage to his American wife. He went on to become a science columnist for the Telegraph.

Writing a science book was a natural step and in 1993 his acclaimed book “the Red Queen: sex and the evolution of human nature” appeared. It takes its title from the Lewis Carroll character who ran without going anywhere because the world around moved at the same time. He chose the metaphor to illustrate the concept that a major driver for having different sexes is the ability to shuffle our genes and make us less vulnerable to the pathogens ever ready to exploit any weakness, part of what has been called the evolutionary arms race. The book was a great success, enlivened by Matt’s knowledge, stylish writing and as one critic put it “dazzling wit”.

Subsequent books have explored the relationship between genetic constitution and the essence of our humanity. The next decade saw “Origins of Virtue” “Genome” and “Nature via

Nurture” later retitled “the Agile Gene”. This last book takes a new look at the old battle by exploring how gene expression responds to environment throughout life, an area of great topical interest. Some reviews are critical: he is first to welcome challenge. What shines through is his enthusiasm for the life sciences, his unashamed joy in discovery. How about a book entitled “the Joy of Science” Matt?

Matt’s latest book is a departure; a captivating biography of the late Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the DNA double helix. This brings us full circle as it was Matt who persuaded Crick and Watson, two of the most famous scientists who have ever lived, to attach their name to our Centre for Life as patrons, a unique achievement and testament to Matt’s charisma.

Mr Chancellor, never in my 6 years as your Public Orator have I taken greater pleasure in presenting a candidate to you. For his services to science and our city please bestow on Matt Ridley the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor John Burn