

PETER SMEDVIG

Mr Chancellor

Prowess in competitive rowing has long been cherished in these parts. In 1871, a hundred thousand people turned out for the funeral in Gateshead of local lad James Renforth, who died heroically in the USA at 29 years of age while defending the World Championship title won by himself and his three crew-mates in Montreal the previous year. Along with the other great Tyne oarsmen ‘Hadaway Harry’ Clasper and Bob Chambers, Renforth was one of the great North East sporting heroes of his age – a veritable ‘Alan Shearer’ figure, a full decade before Newcastle United Football club was even founded. Today, excellence in competitive rowing ranks amongst the greatest sporting achievements of this University’s student body. This year alone: our first team has won more races than any other team in the British Universities Rowing Regatta, our Freshers team took first prize in the Concept2 Challenge, and Newcastle University provided no fewer than 15 athletes to the Great Britain rowing squad for the European Universities Regatta.

This uplifting litany of triumphs not only reflects the calibre of our student athletes; it is also testament to the inspirational leadership of their Coach, Angelo Savarino. Securing the services of one of the best coaches in the sport was never going to be easy, but the deal was successfully concluded thanks to the generosity of three people: our former Vice-Chancellor Professor Christopher Edwards,

one of our Honorary Fellows, Nick Richardson, and one of our most distinguished international alumni Peter Smedvig.

It is, I imagine, every Vice-Chancellor's dream to meet alumni who are not only able, but also very willing, to contribute substantially to the future development of their alma mater. Thankfully, many of our alumni respond generously to the promptings of Convocation, giving freely of their energy, time and money to ensure that others have as positive an experience of this University as they did in their time. Amongst their ranks Peter Smedvig stands pre-eminent.

Peter graduated in Economics from this University in 1970. At that time, academic links with Scandinavia were enjoying a period of sustained growth, and Newcastle University was noted for its degree programme in Scandinavian Studies, of which the redoubtable BBC foreign correspondent Kate Adie is a famous alumna. Not for the first time, the North East of England was experiencing a wave of fellow-feeling with our neighbours across the North Sea in Norway.

It was not always thus, mind. Early historical encounters between Northumbrians and Norwegians were not characterised by exuberant friendship. It was in AD 793 that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles recorded:

“...dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians: ... immense sheets of light rushing through the air, whirlwinds, and

fiery dragons flying across the firmament. On the sixth day before the ides of January, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy Island, by rapine and slaughter ..."

Back then, Norwegians with a keen interest in rapid rowing were certainly not greeted with a glad cry along the banks of Tyne!

More than a millennium later, the Vikings have been comprehensively rehabilitated as cultural icons in Britain, to the extent that one almost asks: "What's a little rapine and slaughter between friends?" We now appreciate how much Norway and Northumbria have always had in common: a long tradition of seafaring, for instance, expressive and earthy Germanic languages, and a predilection for enlivening the long dark winter nights with bacchanalian celebrations

During the Second World War, unconquered Britain provided a haven for the Norwegian government-in-exile. The bonds of friendship founded in the adversity of those years have never slackened. To this day, it is from the Government of Norway that our city receives the giant Christmas tree which annually graces the lawns in front of Newcastle City Centre. Over the last four decades, the UK and Norway have shared the experience of successfully winning oil and gas from the hostile environment of the North Sea, re-defining the experience of pulling together in the adversity of a cold and unforgiving environment.

It was precisely in the oil sector that Peter Smedvig first made his mark. Right after graduating from Newcastle, he gained his first insights into the hydrocarbons industry through an internship with Petrofina. In 1972, Peter graduated with an MBA from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania. He then returned to the oil and gas industry, working with Elf Aquitaine from 1972 to 1973. A busy decade later, Peter had secured himself an enduring leadership position at the heart of North Sea industry, serving as President of the Norwegian Shipowners' Association in 1986 and 87. Two years later he took up the Chairmanship of the major offshore drilling company which bears his family name, and is now principal owner both of that company and of Scana Industrier ASA, a leading player in the Scandinavian specialty steels industry. More recently, Peter founded Smedvig Capital Limited with John Hewett, and his venture capital activity has now placed his transferable business management skills at the service of Deltex Medical Group plc, for which he serves as a Non-Executive Director.

It would be a thrill for any University simply to be able to point to such an accomplished alumnus. It was an even greater thrill to learn that Peter Smedvig so cherishes what he gained from his student years here that he is committed to ensuring that future generations of his compatriots will be able to similarly benefit for decades to come. With a characteristically enterprising flourish, Peter at once presented this University with both a wonderful gift

and a highly agreeable challenge: to build on his own extremely generous donation to create a permanent endowment, resourced by donations from other Norwegian alumni, to fund annual scholarships for Norwegian students wishing to study at Newcastle for one year of their undergraduate degree programme. This scholarship, entitled “Gateway to Newcastle”, builds on the success of our long-established and highly popular Study Abroad Programme, which enables students from partner institutions across Norway to spend a year studying in Newcastle, whilst gaining credit which counts towards their undergraduate degree programmes at their home institutions. The roll-call of partner institutions reads like the place-name index of the Kearys’ classic book “Heroes of Asgard”: Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø, Agder, Ålesund, Bodø, Gjøvik, Lillehammer, Østfold, Stord, Haugesund and Volda.

Mr Chancellor, Peter Smedvig is to this University a champion worthy of the Ring-Givers of Asgard. In lieu of the largesse of the mighty Thor, I now ask you to bestow upon him an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger