

**David Childs**

**Doctor of Letters**

**Durham Cathedral, 28 June 2018**

Mr Chancellor, today's ceremony reminds us both that graduation means 'stepping-up' before 'stepping-out' for challenging responsibilities and that our honorary graduates bring into Durham's community achievements already marking the world, as with Commander David Childs.

Born in Malta in 1947 to a naval family, David entered Dartmouth, Royal Naval College, aged eighteen. His naval commitments included a social science degree at Leicester University, and service in the Gulf, the Far East, and circumnavigating the globe, always, as he says, following the rising sun. At his best when treating sailors individually rather than as rule-governed personnel, he reckons a happy ship efficient, and not efficient ships as happy. David has found time to write historical, navy-related books *Tudor Sea Power*, *Pirate Nation*, *Invading America*, and *The Warship Mary Rose* which aligns with David's three years developing the 'The Mary Rose' Museum.

Three other years were spent in Turkey as a NATO advisor. There, incidentally, he qualified a Lay Reader in the Anglican Church. During his later naval period he encouraged the Ministry of Defence to involve personnel in disaster relief, something that brought him contact with Leonard Cheshire, Care Home founder who sought to create a World Memorial Fund for Disaster Relief, framing lives lost in twentieth century wars with the motif 'Remember a Life to Save a Life'. Responding to Cheshire's challenge David left the navy for this fund's development but with Leonard Cheshire's death it became unviable. Notwithstanding that, David spearheaded a Leonard Cheshire Chair for Conflict Recovery at University College London. Having assisted work in Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Iraq, its current remit frames the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre

But it is David's autobiography *Growing Remembrance* that best signposts today's considerations. Reflecting that 'Remember a Life' motif, it heralds a feature of Britain's evolving cultural history, one profoundly resonating with current anniversary

reflections on the 1914-18 War, for it describes the strange birth of The National Memorial Arboretum.

When liaising with the USA Navy in 1992, David was in Washington D.C. After having visited both Arlington Military Cemetery and the National Arboretum on the same day, he slept, and awoke with the idea of combining the essence of these places but in a UK location. Then, co-incidentally, when flying home, a copy of *The Daily Telegraph* noted a plan for a National Forest in the Midlands, prompting David to propose to the sponsoring authorities that they include a National Memorial Arboretum: they were enthusiastic, as long as he found the land.

Lacking money and tree-planting experience he scoured the Midlands until offered 150 acres of old gravel-works at Alrewas, Lichfield, by Redland Aggregates. Though not ideal for trees it did benefit from a peppercorn rent of £1 per annum for ninety-nine years, he still carries a pound lest the rent be demanded by surprise! The Millennium Commission also agreed support provided he find matched funding, sufficient money was raised, often in small donations, and planting begun from 1997. Despite enormous difficulties between its initial conception and final 2001 opening, on time and in budget, we now possess an ever enlarging national institution whose first month attracted twelve visitors; last year over 300,000, with numbers on-growing.

Including over two hundred memorials to civil and military organisations the Arboretum's enormously diverse memorials also embrace individual men and women's service to locality, nation and world. Its central mound with Portland Stone walled holds the names of service personnel, large poignant statues and, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of the year shafted sunlight falls on its central memorial stone.

Memorials, animated through numerous ceremonial events and private visits, embrace the complexity of military, civic, and personal emotions and identities. Honour, glory, joy, shame, and grief are all here: the Shot at Dawn memorial marks the 306 youths, doubtless most sick or traumatized yet shot for desertion or cowardice. Its statue modelled on 17 year-old, Northumbrian Fusilier, Private Herbert Burden, scarcely old enough to be the freshman student that many of today's graduates were at their matriculation ceremony in this Cathedral. But fun is here, too, with the Children's Woodland having child-sized figures from *The Wind in the Willows*, and the Fairground Workers' site mirroring the circus. Other personal-social worlds captured in memorials ranging from Stillbirth and Neonatal Deaths to the St

John Ambulance Brigade. We might also find an affinity with the spot named as David Childs' Trees.

Annually, a member of the royal family, senior politicians and service chiefs meet bereaved families, making the Arboretum the nation's year-round place of continuing tribute. While obviously a place of memory David Childs is also adamant in wanting it to be a place of education, learning, and forward looking hope, something enhanced by its impressive Learning Centre informing thousands of all-age visitors. He is also supportive of ongoing related work at Durham University's Centre for Death and Life Studies and its Department of Theology and Religion, in research circling round the idea that to grasp the totality of the Arboretum is to appropriate something of Britain's cultural identity.

Members of congregation, the year work began on the Arboretum, 1997, marked Suzanne Simard and colleagues' research published in, *Nature*, that prestigious scientific source, describing in what came to be called the 'woodwide web' how trees can sustain and communicate with each other through mycorrhizal fungi linking their roots. Such ecological awareness of unseen yet vital networks can, today, also excite our cultural awareness of networked human identities, past, present and future, and of how our naval officer experienced, dreamed and, many difficulties surpassed, launched the National Memorial Arboretum.

Chancellor, to you I present David Childs, Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa.

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