

John Annette

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming John Annette as a Fellow of Birkbeck. For all of his adult life, John Annette has been working for those values that Birkbeck has always held dear.

Indeed, I want to start this oration by suggesting that John Annette walks in the footsteps of one of the men most responsible for the success of Birkbeck: Henry Brougham. Brougham was the most prominent orator in nineteenth-century Britain. He was also Chief Adviser to Queen Caroline, founder of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and Lord Chancellor of Great Britain. Crucially, though, his 1825 book on workers' education (entitled Practical Observations Upon the Education of the People and dedicated to George Birkbeck) became the "Bible" for everyone involved in workers' education.

One cold and wet Tuesday on 29 January 1928, Brougham made one of the most cited speeches in early nineteenth century Parliamentary history. The occasion was the Duke of Wellington (the Tory Arthur Wellesley) becoming Prime Minister. Wellesley had made his name as the Commander-in-Chief who had helped defeat Napoleon at Waterloo. Brougham disapproved of Wellesley's appointment as PM on constitutional grounds but he said that he did not fear that Wellesley's military background would cause violence to be "directed against the liberties of the country". After all, there had been times when the British public "heard with dismay" that "the soldier was abroad" (meaning, dominating politics and society). Brougham argued that this was

not the case now. Let the soldier be ever so much abroad, in the present age he could do nothing..... The schoolmaster was abroad [cheers!] and he trusted more to the schoolmaster, armed with his primer, than he did to the

soldier in full military array, for upholding and extending the liberties of the country.

The phrase – “the schoolmaster is abroad” – was to become the catchphrase of the workers’ educational movement everywhere.

This phrase “the schoolmaster is abroad”, meaning therefore that the liberties of the people would be upheld and extended, neatly summarizes the mission of the man you see before you today. For his entire career, John Annette has been a leading philosopher of lifelong learning. He is its foremost promoter.

He has always thought deeply about the civic and public engagement of higher education institutions, both nationally and internationally. He believes passionately in the importance of cultivating civic virtue through political participation. Like Brougham in the nineteenth century, he is always reminding people that citizenship education and civil republicanism are central to civil renewal: they involve the promotion of social and moral responsibility, political literacy, and community involvement.

His list of achievements are too many to encompass in this short oration, but of particular note is his work with the Home Office, Sir Bernard Crick, and David Blunkett promoting “active learning for active citizenship”. He leads: on the 1994 Group of Universities ‘Strategy and Resources’ Senior Management Group, for example, and the Academic Board of the University of London’s “International Academy”. He has given wise advice to the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s “Beacons for Public Engagement in Higher Education”, and the Higher Education Academy UK. He worked with the Commission on the Future of Volunteering, the Institute for Volunteer Research, and the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Civic Engagement based in the USA.

For us here today, however, what is most important is the time he spent at Birkbeck –

that is, from April 2004 to July 2011. These were years that saw dramatic changes in our institution and, crucially, in the extension of our mission.

John Annette came to the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at a time when there was pressure on “completion” rate data. At that time, however, a lot of students in the Faculty did not do the assessments, and this was seriously affecting our funding. John Annette did the near-impossible: he affected a culture shift, which was to have an immensely beneficial effect for the College in the longer term. As one senior member of Birkbeck admitted, “when John arrived there was a lot of conservatism in the College, the idea being ‘we are okay’. John said ‘no, this is just not good enough’ before rattling off a list of improvements”.

John Annette is a visionary, sensing changes to the educational climate, which led him to support the introduction of professional courses. He got people “on board” because it was clear that he cared for his students and staff, and he became renowned for celebrating their achievements, whether at award ceremonies or at specially inaugurated parties for Teaching and Scholarship staff.

In 2009, when he was Pro-Vice Master for Widening Participation and Community Partnerships, John Annette became the Chairman of the Steering Group of the Linking London Lifelong Learning Network. This HEFCE-funded (until 2011) network is a partnership between 14 higher education institutions and 13 further education colleges. Its key aim is to allow smooth movement between the different institutions as students wish to study at different levels or in different formats such as full time, part time evening or part time day release. Clearly, this could not be achieved without appropriate systems of credit transfer between institutions. John Annette was “the man” who made this possible.

His support and enthusiasm for the Stratford Campus was also essential. He got the Faculty involved. He set up the Centre for Transformative Practice in Learning and Teaching, which develops academic staff, teaching and scholarship staff, and study skills for students. As he has reiterated time and again, recruiting students from different cultural backgrounds is only the first step, we also need to ensure that we support students throughout their journey at Birkbeck.

There is no way I can list his many awards and achievements, but I will just mention that he has won the T.H.E. award for “Higher Education and Community Engagement” as well as the T.H.E. award for “Higher Education Widening Participation”.

Alas, in 2011, he left us to become the 8th president of Richmond American International University in London, a private, non-profit, American liberal arts and business studies university teaching students from over 100 countries.

But these achievements fail to grasp the truly extraordinary personal history and personality of “the man”. Who is John Annette? He was born in Queens, New York, to a French (but New York City born) father named Baptiste John Annette and Galway-born mother, Mary Kelly. His father was a war veteran who worked in a bakery while his mother worked in a department store. He was the youngest of two and grew up in a tenement building in a poor neighbourhood with other immigrant families from Poland, Italy, France, and Puerto Rica. From a young age, he was involved in politics.

He was present when the Reverend Martin Luther King gave his famous “I have a dream” speech on 28 August 1963. This fostered in him a keen awareness of racism, of anti-Catholic sentiment, anti-Semitism, and, more recently, Islamophobia.

Eventually, the family moved to Long Island where his father became a primary school caretaker. This was where John Annette developed his great love of music, of the New York Times, drama, and the New York Yankees baseball. His musical talents – on the trumpet – earned him a scholarship at the prestigious Juilliard School of Music in the Upper West side of Manhattan. And you can actually hear him play: he is the musician playing the only trumpet solo in the Fifth Dimension’s “Up Up and Away”. He also stood in for a band member one night at the Apollo in Harlem (wearing gold Lame!). And, one very late night, when playing in a jazz club in the Lower West Side was joined by Miles Davis.

After transferring from Juilliard to Fordham University, the Jesuit University in the Bronx,

he became actively political. On his first day there, he was tear-gassed in an Anti-Vietnam War demonstration: he knew then that he was in the right place! For 18 months, he was a member of the activist group, “Students for a Democratic Society” – which included a stint discussing tactics in John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s apartment.

As this all suggests, he was hardly a typical student, even for those turbulent times. He worked in the Bronx with disadvantaged children, was tipped by a Mafia boss while working in a restaurant, drove a yellow taxi, and served as an intern in Bobby Kennedy’s New York Senate Office.

He left the US for the UK because of his academic passions for History and Philosophy, which led him to the London School of Economics, to study under Michael Oakeshott, the famous British Idealist philosopher. I like to imagine that this was where John Annette got the idea of education as “the conversation of mankind”, as Oateshott put it. Education is how we learn to be human.

From there, it was a job at Middlesex University, Middlesex Polytechnic as it was, and then Birkbeck, where he found a natural home. When talking to his former colleagues, various stock phrases came up time and again: he is approachable; he has a great sense of humour; he is a feminist with an overwhelming commitment to equality. He is described as “utterly charming” with a “lovely patient manner” and “social skills in buckets”.

Finally, he is a devoted husband to the most outstanding feminist publisher in Britain, Lennie Goodings, and is a devoted father to Amy and Zak. You can see them all driving around Richmond in his beloved old Volkswagen Beetle Convertible.

Like Henry Brougham, he is larger than life, and believes that when “the schoolmaster is abroad” the liberties of the country will be upheld and extended. Put simply, John Annette is possibly the Miles Davis of the Lifelong Learning World.

We are incredibly proud to welcome Professor John Annette as a Fellow of Birkbeck.