



CITATION DELIVERED BY PROFESSOR JOHN LAUCLAN CARTER CHIPMAN, MASTER OF ARTS, BACHELOR OF LAWS (MELBOURNE), BACHELOR OF PHILOSOPHY, DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (OXFORD), PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AND MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG, ON THE OCCASION OF THE ADMISSION OF LINDSAY MICHAEL BIRT, COMMANDER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE, BACHELOR OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE, BACHELOR OF SCIENCE, DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (MELBOURNE) AND DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (OXFORD), TO THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LETTERS, HONORIS CAUSA, 8TH MAY, 1981.

Chancellor, I present to you Lindsay Michael Birt.

In 1973, Michael Birt came to Wollongong University College as Vice-Chancellor Designate. Two years later, in 1975, he became the foundation Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wollongong and three months hence, in early August, 1981, he will leave the Wollongong campus and go north to the University of New South Wales as its new Vice-Chancellor.

At their first meeting, Michael Birt would have found Wollongong a young institution unsure of its future and unhappy with its present. A recurring theme in College and University papers written in those early years was "the need to establish an identity". An expert on the metamorphoses of organisms, Professor Birt has guided this University through its own metamorphosis into a recognised and energetic member of Australia's university community. In the six years since 1975, the University's Vice-Chancellor has himself changed to become an even finer and more canny practitioner in university administration at its highest level.

This University soon recognised in Michael Birt's attention to detail, logical approach and careful analysis; in his clarity of expression and dislike of dogma, the marks of a man of science well acquainted with the scientific method. These qualities developed during an academic career that began with degrees of Bachelor of Agricultural Science, Bachelor of Science and Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Melbourne, in the 1950's. From Melbourne, Michael Birt went to Oxford, and, in 1959, he was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree by that great University. After lectureships at the University of Melbourne and at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, he was appointed foundation professor and head of the Department of Biochemistry in the School of General Studies at the Australian National University. That University honoured him for six years of service when it conferred on him the title of Emeritus Professor in 1974.

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Professor Birt has championed the need for those in universities to have the freedom and opportunity to pry and to question in their courses of teaching and study and, particularly, in their research programmes. As Chairman of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's Inter-University Committee on Research, he has been a committed advocate of the need for basic university research in all disciplines, including the Humanities. He sees basic research as the highest sphere of enquiry where old facts are challenged and new ideas formed and without which there is no raw material to be refined for application. For this reason, Professor Birt has taken a critical interest in the research activities of this University and has campaigned on wider fronts for the proper support of postgraduate students.

His resistance to those who wish to emasculate university education has been combined with an unwillingness to become a mere victim of change. He rejects a passive role for he believes universities to have the capacity to initiate and anticipate change. Hearing the straining of economic ropes and the hammering of governments, he has faced university colleagues here and elsewhere who wished to shut their ears to the ominous sounds. Whilst encouraging them to hold fast to the basic aims of a university, he has reminded them that a university is a place of tolerance, understanding and, above all, the generation of different and new approaches.

As he came to know the Wollongong region, Michael Birt gave leadership in a move to redefine the University's relationship with the people and concerns of the Illawarra. In this, he recalled the tradition of the great European universities which were established and supported by their cities. The College and then the University had tended sometimes to forget that their own beginnings were very deeply rooted in the aspirations of this city and region. Professor Birt helped the University to stir out of its complacency and to give full support to departments who had perceived the needs and potential of the University's social and physical surroundings. He encouraged an exchange of ideas, skills and talents between the University and its community and became an advocate of Wollongong, the place, as well as Wollongong, the University.

Professor Birt has always been an enthusiastic participant in the city's cultural life. His interest stems partly from his own love and knowledge of the arts, especially music, and partly from the belief, which he shares with the present Lord Mayor, that Wollongong has for too long been expected to live down to a reputation which others have built from fragments of old and faulty information.

Michael Birt is foundation member of the Wollongong Gallery Society and was a member of the Lord Mayor's Gallery Appeal Committee and the Wollongong Art Purchase Committee. He was Chairman and is now Patron of the Musica Viva Society in Wollongong; he is a member of the city's ABC Concert Committee and patron of both The Illawarra Music Club and the Wollongong Eisteddford Society. He has promoted the development of drama in the region as patron of The Little Theatre of Port Kembla and the Wollongong Workshop Theatre and he has fully supported the new professional company, Theatre South, which is based at the University.

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At the end of those years of intensive study, teaching and research, Professor Birt had established a reputation as a scientist in his chosen field - biochemistry. His stature was duly enhanced when he won the great Australian honour of a unique nickname - Blowfly Birt.

Those who have met and worked with Michael Birt at Wollongong have come to realise that he is more than a man of science - he is a man of scientia, a lover of knowledge in all its varied forms. This love would have been given to him by parents who encouraged him to delve into books and prise out their truths and errors. The jottings in the margins of his own books show that Michael Birt learnt not to absorb the written word in a passive way but to wrestle with its forms and meanings. An active, critical approach to the writings and sayings of himself and others was refined during his time at Oxford where he worked with the Nobel Prize winner, Sir Hans Krebs. Sir Hans was a man whose intellect and interests were not confined by any disciplinary boundaries; he also saw knowledge as a dynamic thing which offered a challenge to minds who were able to appreciate that its universe could not be explained in static, superficial ways.

When Professor Birt came to Wollongong in 1973, he brought with him the idea of a university as a place where knowledge could be collected, examined, questioned, and organised for use. He found a compatible and lucid expression of this idea in the writings of that great and controversial figure of the 19th Century - Cardinal John Henry Newman. In Newman's philosophical work, "The Idea of a University", Michael Birt found one simple phrase that stated the great aim of university education for all those staff and students involved in the encounter with knowledge; that aim was "the cultivation of the intellect".

Professor Birt has remained true to his idea of a University, despite the suspicions and opposition of those of lesser vision. His idealism is not of the naive kind for he has developed a keen awareness of the forces against his idea and his philosophy. One of his favourite quotations from Newman is the beautifully phrased warning that you might "quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man".

The passion and the pride of today's denigrators of university education are often fuelled by the drive for power, wealth and easy solutions. Such a drive calls for the answers to temporary demands and the meeting of short-term goals. Michael Birt's attitude to these contemporary pressures may be found in a comments from a book to which he was introduced in childhood and which had more than one influence on his life; that book is called simply: "The Life of the Fly". In his reflections on the natural world, the author, Fabre, writes: "Alone among living creatures, man has the thirst for knowledge; he alone pries into the mysteries of things. The least among us will utter his whys and his wherefores, a fine pain unknown to the brute beast. If these questionings come from us with greater persistence, with a more imperious authority, if they divert us from the quest of lucre, life's only object in the eyes of most men, does it behove us to complain? Let us be careful not to do so, for that would be denying the best of all our gifts."

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In sporting areas, Professor Birt has continued to undertake an almost apostolic mission on behalf of Australian Rules Football in these "uncivilised" lands north of the border: he is patron of the Wollongong University Australian Rules Football Club and the Illawarra Australian Football Association. The other activity in which Professor Birt engages personally, on the occasion of the Town & Gown match, is cricket which he would probably prefer to describe as a ceremonial contest and not merely a sport.

Michael Birt's commitments in the cultural, social and sporting life of the region cannot all be listed in this place and they have changed with the times to include initiatives such as The Gallery Appeal. A large, heartfelt portion of his efforts to bring out a spirit of achievement and fellowship in the region, has been his continuing endeavour to promote understanding and co-operation between the educational institutions that serve the people of the Illawarra. In the tertiary area particularly, he has worked with his colleagues in Technical and Further Education and at the Wollongong Institute of Education to arrange for a sharing of human and physical resources. His perception of the need to present that most rewarding educational experience to students and to fend off those seeking to dismantle what has been carefully developed at the tertiary level in Wollongong, has led Professor Birt to commit himself to achieving a form of association between the Institute and the University. If this closer relationship becomes a happy and acceptable reality, it will be an enduring reminder of the Vice-Chancellor's contribution to tertiary education in this region and it will also be a tribute to him as a person of stamina and patience and a spokesman of some genius.

The hours of hard work have already had their reward for Professor Birt. Amongst his peers, the Vice-Chancellors of other universities, he is immensely respected and well liked. He has carried this University's name with honour into various external arenas. He is a member of the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee and its Executive and has been a member of its Planning Advisory Committee. He also plays a very significant role as Chairman of the A.V.C.C. Inter-University Committee on Research. From 1975 to 1977, he chaired the N.S.W. Vice-Chancellors' Conference and remains one of its most creative members.

Professor Birt has also taken a major role on bodies whose concerns are closely interlinked with university activities - those bodies are the New South Wales Science and Technology Council; the C.S.I.R.O. Advisory Council and the New South Wales Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee. In 1979, his knowledge of and insight into the workings of universities received further recognition on the national scene when the Government of Western Australia asked him to be chairman of a Committee of Inquiry into the Future of Murdoch University. He was honoured for all these services to tertiary education and the community of universities when he received the award of Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's New Year Honours List in 1980. In 1980 also, he took on an active role in the affairs of the wider university community when he became Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the Commonwealth Universities Congress which will be held in Australia in 1988.

Within this University, Michael Birt has continually supported the academic departments in a pursuit of excellence in their research, scholarship, teaching and other creative work. He has recognised the need to give our graduates the ability not merely to respond to but, more importantly, to direct the forces of social and technological change in the coming decades. In encouraging better co-operation between departments and the lowering of disciplinary barriers, he has constantly sought to provide for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and the expansion of knowledge and skills. In the University's administration, he has promoted greater efficiency and effectiveness and yet encouraged, by the example of his own style, the personal approach that prevents an administration from becoming a bureaucracy. He is also a foundation member of The Friends of the University, an organisation which seeks to foster the potential of the University to develop mutually helpful and creative relationships with many segments of society.

Under Professor Birt's leadership, this University has grown from a place that lacked confidence in itself to a very healthy institution. The University looks to the future with courage and commitment and is able, unlike many of its fellows, to attract growing numbers of students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In this last year, some have been chanting loudly that universities would finally succumb to economic pressures and see their potential students turning away to look for financial security and promises of ready employment elsewhere. It is a testament to Michael Birt's faith both in university education and in this University that, in 1981, the University of Wollongong saw its enrolment numbers surpass previous records. At the same time, the Graduate Careers Council of Australia was completing its report for 1980 and the published figures show that, for the second consecutive year, the University of Wollongong has recorded the highest rate for the employment of graduates amongst all seven universities in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. It has the third best graduate employment rate of Australia's nineteen universities.

The University has now ceased speaking about a quest for identity and has affirmed its major role and functions. The statement of that role reads, in part: "The University has a primary responsibility for the cultivation of the intellect through scholarship, teaching and research, as part of the international community of scholars and universities". In that statement are enshrined the ideas and philosophy of the foundation Vice-Chancellor.

The University is honouring today Michael Birt's contribution to this University through his leadership, keen intelligence, initiative, tolerance and hard work. We honour him for his unrelenting faith in an idea of university education and for the propagation of that faith in so many areas. We are grateful for his eloquence and persistence as an advocate of the University of Wollongong. We acclaim him as a man of scientia whose thoughts and ideas have found expression in written and spoken words of great clarity and strength.

When John Henry Newman summed up the strenuous demands placed upon the leader of a university community, he remarked: "I ought, above all to be twenty years younger and take it up as the work of my life". We are thankful that Michael Birt was twenty years younger and is able to take up the cause of university education as the work of his life.

Chancellor, it is with pleasure and gratitude that I present to you, on behalf of the University, Lindsay Michael Birt, a man who has given great service to this University as its foundation Vice-Chancellor and who has articulated and supported the cause of university education in Australia, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa.