

Penry Williams, an introduction by the Warden of New College, Sir Curtis Price

On behalf of the Scholars and Fellows of New College, could I welcome everyone to this memorial service for Penry Williams. I would like to express my special thanks to those who have travelled great distances to be here today, and we are also pleased to welcome back Warden McGregor. When we gathered here in early May on the very sad occasion of Penry's funeral, we found consolation in the wonderful music which Sylvia had selected and which the choir and Edward Higginbottom performed from the heart. We are also blessed with music and poetry today, now in celebration more than mourning. In particular, we celebrate Penry's scholarship, for the College and University have lost a most distinguished and much-admired historian, an exceptionally good person, whose generosity of spirit and fundamental kindness come through in every page of his writing and have left a deep imprint on all his students.

I first got to know Penry through the good offices of our colleague Ruth Harris, who invited Rhian and me to dinner in St. John Street with the Christiansens. It was a memorable evening, as Eric and Penry, each in their own way, attempted to enlighten us about how Oxford works. How wonderfully these two great historians complemented each other; completely different, they were nevertheless the epitome of collegiality, a spirit which happily has been passed on to the current generation of New College historians. And no one, outside Penry's family, could have been more affected by his death, so our condolences should extend to Eric, to Ruth, David and Christopher.

Penry was a tutorial fellow here for nearly 30 years, not merely teaching, writing and lecturing, but taking a central role in the life of the college, benignly guiding its direction all the while. He held various offices over the years with grace and distinction. And not many people know that, long before such a thing was common in Oxford, Penry was Development Fellow and, as I have discovered in the correspondence files, his fund-raising efforts continue to bear fruit to the present day.

Part of the job of warden involves traveling round the country indeed the world talking to former students and re-establishing connections. I have to say that no fellow of his generation is remembered with more affection and respect than Penry. Many Old Members ask about him, recalling how much he influenced their lives and careers, and helped shape their characters. Could there ever have been a better moral tutor?

In the days and weeks following his death, we received several letters and emails enquiring whether the College was planning to commemorate him in some permanent way. I am pleased to announce that an appeal has begun to establish the Penry Williams Fellowship in History at New College and am delighted to say, on this day when we celebrate his life, that several major contributions have already been received or pledged. We are determined that there will be a Penry Williams fellowship at this college in perpetuity.

Of course, Penry will also be long remembered through his writing which, as we will hear later, is read, referred to and admired almost as much today as it was when first published. But what cannot, alas, be perpetuated is Penry himself. We miss him at lunch and at dinner in the SRC; we miss him strolling in the front quad, stopping to chat about one of his many passions; and we miss his attendance in chapel, which he loved and supported, making this the perfect place in which to say farewell to an esteemed colleague and to dedicate ourselves to honoring his memory.