



Citation for Professor Peter Brown

4th July 1996

Lord Visitor to the College, it is my pleasure to present to you Professor Peter Brown.

Professor Brown is the leading historian in the world today of the transition from the late Roman world to the high Middle Ages. You will note, Lord Visitor, that he dares to traverse that period of history so magnificently embraced by that prince among historians, Edward Gibbon. I can assure you that he is most worthy to keep such company.

Peter Brown was born in Dublin in 1935. His early years were spent in the Sudan where his father was an engineer working for the Sudan railways. He was sent to school first in Bray, County Dublin, and then to Shrewsbury, a famous nursery of eminent historians. From Shrewsbury he went to New College, Oxford. In 1956 he became a Fellow of All Souls. In 1972 he was appointed University Reader in Late Roman and Byzantine Studies. In 1975 he came to Royal Holloway as Professor of Modern History and Head of Department. In 1978 he was appointed Professor of History and Classics at the University of California, Berkeley, and since 1986 he has been Rollins Professor of History at Princeton. He comes to us loaded with honours. Currently his fellowships of great academies of learning, honorary degrees and other notable distinctions number twenty-five.

Peter Brown's academic articles are legion; his books number ten. I shall refer to four landmarks. The first in his biography, *St Augustine of Hippo*, published in 1967, which has been described as the finest historical biography produced in this century. This extraordinary evocation both of the world of late antiquity, and the many transformations in the life of this central figure in the development of Christianity, won Peter Brown the Arts Council Prize in 1968 and a Fellowship of the British Academy at the unusual age of 36. The second landmark is *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, published in 1982. In this work Peter Brown explores the emergence of the cult of saints in late antiquity. He shows that far from being a pagan survival wrapped up in acceptable Christian form, it was the way in which some of the finest minds of the age negotiated their path through the declining Roman Empire. The third landmark is *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, published in 1988. In this monumental book Peter Brown studies the practice of permanent sexual renunciation, that is lifelong virginity. This developed amongst men and women in Christian circles from the time of St. Paul in the first century AD to that of St. Augustine in the fifth. He uses the theme of sexual renunciation as the means to explore early Christian ideas of the person and of society.

The final landmark is *The Rise of Western Christendom*, published this year. Here he develops the grand theme of how by the year 1,000 Christianity had come to be the dominant factor in political power and cultural life across Europe.

All scholars have many intellectual ancestors. I am proud to say that two of Peter Brown's significant forebears were members of this university, Norman Baynes and Arnaldo Momigliano, both of University College, who pioneered the study of society, culture and the thought world of the late antiquity. The importance of Peter Brown, however, lies in the great edifice of achievement he has built on the foundations laid by scholars such as these. To this work he has brought notable qualities. He has, first of all, great learning. This learning is assisted by a remarkable command of languages: he is acquainted with most of the languages of Western and Eastern Europe, but he is also able to use sources in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Persian, Arabic and Hebrew. This learning is, moreover, leavened by a vaunting historical imagination, at one moment enabling us to share the physical unease of a fourth-century Milanese bishop at the heaving powers of the flesh, and at the next to take us for an airy, sunlit walk along the marine esplanade of fourth-century Carthage. In whatever Peter Brown writes there is regard for the fine grain of detail and sensitivity to subtle transformations combined with large-scale argument and concern to address the big questions of history. But most important there is respect for the people of the past. It is this, more than anything else, which enables him to perform that most important of historian's tasks: he makes us understand what it was to be human at another time and in another place.

Great powers of scholarship are of little value if the results are not communicated. Peter Brown is an outstanding communicator. As a teacher he has enormous enthusiasm. He is an enabler and encourager of those who wish to share his world, sharpening appetites with unusual metaphors and fixing important ideas with telling historical facts. Wherever he goes, enthusiastic bands of students gather round him. As a writer Peter Brown has been described as a poet amongst historians. His prose is evocative, arresting and well-contrived to make abstruse scholarship accessible to the general reader.

At the beginning of this citation I placed Peter Brown in the company of Edward Gibbon. I must make it clear that the outcome of his researches differs greatly from that of the master. Gibbon saw in the fall of the Roman Empire the triumphs of barbarism and Christianity, both of which he deplored. Brown, on the other hand, depicts the slow and subtle transformations of the late Roman world into a new civilization in which the traditions of the classical world came to be reinterpreted to meet new needs and to support new groups. He has brought light to the dark ages. He has achieved major new understanding of the past, and done so with great humanity.

In recognition of his services to scholarship, may I invite you, Lord Visitor, to induct as an Honorary Fellow of the College, Professor Peter Brown.

Professor Francis Robinson
4th July 1996