

Mr Chancellor,

Our honorary graduand today, Sir Eric Thomas, is a true son of the North East, a Newcastle alumnus who has achieved great distinction and honours. Born in Hartlepool, he, like his father before him, studied medicine at Newcastle and his heart has always been in ‘wor toon’ in spite of his many notable associations with other regions and cities.

Sir Eric recalled, in communication with our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Chris Brink, that in September 1972 he was one of the first residents of the newly-opened student flats on Richardson Road, which (he noted with regret having read a recent copy of *Alumni News*) are about to be demolished. He recalls fondly the hours he whiled away in the Spital Tongues pub, ‘a very famous hostelry’, which happily is still standing, and where I’m sure the Vice-Chancellor would only be too pleased to buy him a pint in celebration of his honorary degree today. Our Registrar, Dr John Hogan, has also offered to book a room on Richardson Road for Sir Eric if he would like to relive that 1970s student experience – there is still time.

Sir Eric has other fond memories of his time as a medical student: he says, ‘Perhaps my Newcastle life is best exemplified by the Newcastle General Hospital and the surrounding area. That’s where I spent much of my student life, where I met my wife (a student nurse), where I went drinking (in the late lamented Prince of Wales on the West Road), where I consolidated friendships that still exist to this day and it is the hospital where I was a medical student, a junior doctor and finally (and very proudly) a consultant for nearly four years before moving to Southampton.’

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Eric Thomas graduated in Medicine from Newcastle University in 1976 and proceeded in 1987 to obtain his MD by thesis in research into endometriosis. He trained as an Obstetrician and Gynaecologist and worked at both the Universities of Sheffield and Newcastle. In 1991 he was appointed Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Southampton where he became Head of the School of Medicine in 1995 and later Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Biological Sciences. He was a Consultant Gynaecologist from 1987 to 2001.

In August 2011, Professor Thomas became President of Universities UK. A fierce defender of all universities including post-1992 institutions and the widening participation agenda, he mounted a fierce attack on class prejudices surrounding higher education in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 2012. He said: ‘The journey from my *alma mater*, Newcastle University, to the Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Bristol is no less life-transforming than the journey of a student from a house in Redcar where nobody has ever been to university who becomes a family solicitor in Yarm through a law degree at Teesside University. That is what social mobility is all about and we must embrace, respect and celebrate that’. I’m sure we would all wish to echo these sentiments, and it took the insights of someone born and educated in the North East to express them in quite the way that Sir Eric did here. I also suspect that the appearance of both Yarm and Redcar in the same sentence in the *Times Higher* is highly unusual.

Professor Thomas was previously Vice-President of Universities UK, Chair of its England and Northern Ireland Council and Chair of the Research Policy Committee. He is Chair of the Board of Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) Europe, a Member of the Board of CASE, and has been appointed to serve as a Commissioner of the Marshall Aid

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Commemoration Commission. He was Chair of the Worldwide Universities Network from 2003 to 2007, and was also member of the Board of the South-West Regional Development Agency from 2002 to 2008.

Our Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the Faculty of Medical Sciences, Professor Chris Day, has commended Sir Eric's good works in furthering higher education through philanthropic giving. He recalls that, in 2004, Sir Eric chaired the government Taskforce into Increasing Voluntary Giving in Higher Education which reported on the importance of growing philanthropic donations offered by alumni and friends of higher education institutions. Countless students have benefitted directly as a result of his efforts: Sir Eric's lobbying paved the way for a matched funding scheme which has markedly increased the value of philanthropic donations to Newcastle University. He has also been a leading figure in supporting reunion group fundraising at the University, and encouraging fellow medical alumni to join in making donations. His class of '76 has donated over £20,000 to support medical students from disadvantaged backgrounds. He was also instrumental in organising the 90th birthday celebrations for another one of our most eminent alumni – the late Lord Walton.

Professor Sir Eric Thomas is no stranger to ceremonial occasions such as today. He is a Deputy Lieutenant of the City and County of Bristol and was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol between 2001 and 2015, where he presided over many graduation ceremonies. Professor Jimmy Steele, Head of our Dental School and my fellow Public Orator, witnessed his daughter Jenny graduating from the University of Bristol with a First Class degree in French and Spanish in 2015, awarded by Sir Eric at his last ever degree ceremony as Vice-Chancellor. Jimmy recalls that on that occasion Sir Eric presided with great friendliness towards the students, and spoke very fondly

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of Newcastle, which is just as well considering we had our ‘spies’ in place on that memorable day. He is married with two children. We are delighted today to welcome his wife, Narell, and his two sisters, Claire and Margot. His interests include golf and Newcastle United Football Club, another mark of his courage and determination in the face of extreme adversity. He was knighted in the 2013 Birthday Honours for services to higher education. As chance would have it, there are indeed no fewer than three Geordie knights here today, who were all in the same year as Medical students at Newcastle University: two of our other most distinguished graduates Sir John Burn and Sir Doug Turnbull join Sir Eric today on our rostrum. We can perhaps speculate about what the collective noun is for a trio of Geordie knights: our Registrar, Dr John Hogan, suggests ‘a hangover’. You are all very welcome and we are honoured by your presence.

Mr Chancellor, for his achievements as an eminent clinician, and for his services to higher education I present to you one of our most distinguished alumni, Sir Eric Thomas, for the award of a Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Helen Berry, Public Orator

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