

CITATION FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LETTERS
AWARDED TO PROFESSOR KEITH WRIGHTSON

Mr Chancellor,

As a young man, the jazz musician Miles Davis learned to play effectively within his range (which was in some ways limited - he apparently wasn't a great technician compared to some of his contemporaries) but he took what he had and tried to build on it. Later on, he used to tell the younger musicians in his band: 'Play what you know and then play above that'. Keith Wrightson, whom we are honouring today, is a devotee not only of English social history, but of the world of jazz. 'Play what you know and then play above that', he considers great advice, and a pretty good description of what historians do too.

Keith Wrightson is arguably the world's leading early modern British historian. Currently the Randolph J. Townsend Jnr. Professor of History at Yale University, he was formerly Professor of Social History at Cambridge. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and in 1996 was made a Fellow of the British Academy. Among his various accolades, he has been invited to contribute to the prestigious Ford lecture series at Oxford; he is an Honorary Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge; he has been a Visiting Professor at Brown University, and he holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Durham. We are proud that he is a Visiting Professor in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology here at Newcastle University.

In a career spanning four decades, Keith Wrightson has transformed the study of early modern social and economic history with major publications that are compulsory reading for any student of the subject. He has close personal and



professional ties with Newcastle and our wider region. A native of Co. Durham who was educated at Dame Allan's School, he has used the case study of North-East England to chart the transformation of Britain from a proto-industrial economy to a modern industrial society. His work has brought global attention to the significance of our region in making Britain the world's first industrial nation. He has also helped generations of scholars, students and general readers on both sides of the Atlantic understand the complex relationship between economic forces and the dynamics of social and cultural change.

Quoting his Cambridge PhD supervisor Peter Laslett, Keith says that his mission has always been to 'understand ourselves in time'. Many of the History students graduating today will be familiar with his book *English Society, 1580-1680*, a landmark volume that has been in continuous print since 1982, and is now a classic work on the subject. Among other things, it has caused the present speaker to jump up and down in lectures and insist that students speak about the 'language of sorts' rather than the language of class before the nineteenth century.

Keith Wrightson's work taught us to become attuned to the nuances and sensibilities of our early modern ancestors. His first book, which he co-authored with David Levine, was on the village of Terling in Essex. *Poverty and Piety in an English Village* (1979) kick-started a new 'microhistorical' approach to English local history which previously had been adopted mostly by historians of Continental Europe, which has been imitated but not bettered since. Another seminal book, on the parish of Whickham, Co. Durham *The Making of an Industrial the Society* (1991), also co-authored with Levine, brought the history of the early development of the North-East coal trade to international

attention and has also had lasting scholarly impact. Wrightson's masterly work *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* was widely commended; it won the John Ben Snow Prize at the North American Conference on British Studies (2001). His most recent book, *Ralph Taylor's Summer* (2011) charts the history of the devastating plague outbreak in Newcastle in the year 1636 from the unique perspective of a scrivener who was responsible for writing down the wills and inventories of his dying fellow citizens. Typically, Keith's quest for Ralph Taylor started while he was looking for something else – distracted by an intriguing and unusual signature on a long-forgotten archival document. With great sensitivity, Keith mapped the history 'from below' of Newcastle in a period of great crisis, 'the attitudes and values of its people, their material culture, and the social and institutional bonds that shaped their world'. Elsewhere, he has been credited with writing economic history as poetry – his work has a lyricism not easily achieved when writing about demography and per capita outputs. His passionate explorations in history are the legacies of a man who has found a congenial path in life, a vocation within which he has flourished, both personally and professionally. His long and happy marriage to Eva, he would acknowledge, has been the sure foundation of his life, and he takes great pride in his two children Nicholas and Eliška.

But his mentoring is not confined to kin. He is famed among early modernists for having supervised c. 30 PhD students during his time at St. Andrew's, Cambridge and Yale, many of whom have gone on to forge successful careers of their own as academic historians. A symposium was held just a few weeks ago at the Newcastle Mining Institute to celebrate Keith's career so far, and to present him with a *festschrift* – a volume of essays in his honour – by a group of now middle-aged professors, who came from across the UK and as far afield

as California, Iowa and Nova Scotia to recall with fondness their days of being his graduate students. Among the many anecdotes recounted that day, we recalled nervously presenting him with drafts of our work. In response, he would always write copious and detailed handwritten notes, and if he liked a particular passage, he would write a single word in the margins, a word much beloved of jazz connoisseurs– ‘Nice!’

The world of jazz is almost as bewildering and complex as the world of early modern social history. Like a seventeenth-century migrant arriving in London desperately needing advice, how does a novice even begin to understand jazz? Keith once told me to listen out for ‘swing’ – that undefinable ‘something’ that you recognise when you hear it - a totally absorbing quality that contracts the passage of time into an unforgettable moment when you know you are in the presence of great art. It is the quality of greatness, and it is something that it has been my great privilege to have experienced first-hand in knowing Keith Wrightson. He has swing. In fact, as the jazz legends themselves might have said, he’s *hep*.

Mr Chancellor, for his major contribution to English social history, I present as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa* Prof. Keith Wrightson.

Helen Berry, 10 July 2013