WADHAM COLLEGE  GAUDY - 23 June 2018

‘Warden and Old Friends.

First thank you, Warden, for your excellent speech and reminding us so eloquently of Wadham’s rich legacy; and may I say what an honour it is to say a few words on behalf of - and let’s put aside false modesty - the ‘Golden Generation’ of Wadham students.

But before I go further, I must unburden myself by making a confession, because it seems to have passed unnoticed that my previous attempts at public speaking in this Hall have been unmitigated disasters…

Let me give two examples which spring uncomfortably to mind…

First, the Latin Grace. What we’ve heard so elegantly declaimed this evening, I murdered in Michaelmas term 1968. How the memories flood back. There I was, a callow freshman, standing a few feet away, gowned (we dressed properly for dinner in those days), and quaking in my boots. I faced Sir Maurice Bowra, the foremost classical scholar of his generation, and his guests who must have been extremely distinguished - since they were at least as old as we are. For days I’d been trying to learn the words by heart, but I hadn’t the foggiest idea about how to pronounce them. I assumed that perhaps ‘received BBC’ would be best.

So I cleared my throat, took a deep breath and had a go…I just about survived - until I delivered a uniquely strangulated version of “Salvam fac Elizabetham Re-ginam…” which tumbled out in an ambiguous and potentially treasonous jumble of sounds, whereupon the baying mob took over, bread rolls flew - and mercifully my mind went blank in a storm of derision… I hope I got to the end.

Second, in Trinity term 1970 I spoke at a ‘Bumps Supper.’ My memory is once again a little hazy - since on this occasion I was pretty well oiled by the time the melba toast arrived…But as I somehow meandered into my 12th minute, I recall a glazed look coming over the face of the Dean, George Forrest, then a familiar volley of rolls and finally a tug on my elbow when I was firmly but ever so politely urged by a senior member of College in so many words (and with apologies to a young man at the Defence Ministry called Gavin) to “Go away and shut up…”

So, very first existential question has to be - why on earth am I standing here? Why not one of you?

Which brings me to a second more philosophical question - which is what madness drove me to accept the invitation to speak?
Well, in the best gameshow tradition, I dialled an old Wadham friend, who said that I might have regrets later if I turned the invite down. And it didn't take me long to realise that he was right.

Because this is my one and probably only opportunity to say a big thank you in public to every one of you - and to those who cannot for one reason or another be here this evening - and to Ken Macdonald representing the College for making my time at Wadham so formative, so memorable and (plumbing and college ‘collections’ aside) so happy.

Coming to Wadham was my ‘Epiphany.’ As the first from a long line of Middlesex farmers to go to university and having been raised in the charming medieval time-warp called ‘Pinner Village’ - a place where nothing ever happened and folk breathed a sigh of relief when Alec Douglas Hume was appointed Prime Minister - Wadham changed me - for good.

It was liberal, it was diverse and it was inclusively ‘family’ - oh, and pretty good academically too.

Do I need to say much about Wadham’s liberal credentials? Free thinking, open, and with a left wing edge, Wadham positively breathed the values of the Warden. Many of us will remember the stunned silence in the JCR as Ted Heath’s victory was announced in the General Election of June 1970...and the vigorous discussions over coffee about the Prague Spring, the Greek Colonels and South Africa - and the student sit-ins at the Clarendon Building to protest at the keeping by the Government of dark and sinister political files on students - probably on a good number of you present this evening. All this rubbed off on me - and since Wadham I can confidently say that I have never looked back on Alec Douglas Hume’s premiership with any trace of nostalgia.

Then there was diversity - which is where all you lot come in. What a melting pot Wadham was, and in no small part due to Maurice Bowra! The 1968 intake included to the best of my recollection only about 10% of undergraduates from independent schools, the rest hailing from the state sector. This was Bowra’s ‘Great Meritocracy’ which pulled together students from a huge range of backgrounds, urban, rural and overseas - but sadly no women, outside the hours of darkness. The student vote in favour of co-education had yet to be realised. It was hugely enriching for a sheltered lad from Pinner. So thank you all for opening my eyes to a different world.

And finally Wadham was ‘family’... presided over magisterially by the Warden. He knew every one of us by name, invited us to dinner, encouraged us, boomed at us, amused us, befriended us, occasionally rebuked us, gave us books from his library (often signed first editions), tried to help students who were at risk of going off the tracks, and during Summer Vllls Week bellowed his support from the Wadham
Barge, albeit sometimes to the wrong crew. He cared - and cared deeply - for ‘his Boys’ - and to those who write about how Bowra by the late 1960s had rather “lost it” - I say that his loss was immeasurably our gain because Bowra inspired in me a quiet self-belief which before I entered Wadham I had never known - and for that I am eternally grateful.

‘Family’ embraced everyone - from the oldest fellow, Tom Keeley, to the youngest College servant. There was ‘Gentleman Jack’ in the Porter’s Lodge; our stately Steward, Maurice, holding court in the Buttery; Head Chef, Gilbert, in the kitchens enjoying an occasional tippie - how I remember his signature dishes of Steak Rossini for dinner and devilled kidneys on toast for breakfast; the lovely Scout, Rose, who mothered Staircase 9 (and ironed my shirts); in Hall two great characters, Ernie and Willie; in the Bursary Ben Arber (the Domestic Burser affectionately dubbed “the Domestic Arber”), spread his ex colonial service branches over student needs for accommodation, ably helped by Rosemary who held every student in her thrall and knew each one of us by name; while somewhere in Wadham lurked the mystery don who recruited for MI6 - and not forgetting to mention the College seamstress who in 1969 ran up diaphanous red curtains that did nothing to preserve the modesty of virile young men.

In Wadham we all belonged to Bowra’s liberal, diverse and inclusive ‘family.’ We were all ‘Bowra’s Boys’! And what a joy it is to hear that this tradition continues today under Ken Macdonald - further enriched by the gender diversity which our generation voted for…

Well, I could go on to praise the creativity of our ‘Golden Generation’ - of how one enterprising oarsman devised a fur-lined athletic supporter to mitigate the chill of Torpids, or how a Shropshire lad one day did a ‘Vivienne Westwood’ in the Law Library by modelling a pair of the most shocking canary yellow trousers, creating a sensation in the Library’s suggestions book, but time sadly doesn’t permit...

So, on behalf of everyone gathered in this Hall 50 years on, thank you so much, Ken, for your welcome and for hosting a magnificent Gaudy, and the College staff for laying on such a sumptuous dinner; and so may I ask guests to join me in drinking a bumper toast to the Warden, Fellows and Students of Wadham College, coupled with our Founders, absent friends and the memory of the late, great and simply unforgettable Sir Maurice Bowra…

THE COLLEGE.”