Speech for Ken Macdonald QC, Warden Wadham College
23 July 2021

On behalf of the fellows, I’d like to extend a very warm welcome to all of you; particularly to Ken’s wife Linda and their sons Ed and Theo and to our Foundation Fellows and their partners, Amanda and Warren East, Alasdair and Kathy Locke, and Anthony and Margaret Preston.

Ken started in September 2012, and since his arrival coincided almost exactly with the birth of my daughter, I wasn’t actually around to witness his first year in office. From what I gather, he quickly got to know the fellows, staff, students, and alumni, and got plugged into the college community – not just through committee meetings, dinners, and fundraising events, but in many informal ways, for instance as a regular participant of the Music Exchange and also, I gather, as a member of a rather select group called the ‘Chalfont Road MAMILs’. Linda also got stuck into the Wadham community and produced a much-viewed short film which captures the experience of students and academics, ‘Why Choose Wadham?’.

Ken has forged particularly strong links with the students, both graduates and undergraduates, and has worked very closely with many SU and MCR officers over the years, taking their concerns very seriously. I recently asked my own students about Ken, and they unanimously said how at Warden’s Collections, they never felt that he was just reading their names off a crib sheet (getting muddled if someone unexpectedly dropped out), but that he genuinely knew and engaged with the person he was talking to.

Ken has been a hugely energetic and committed warden, and during his tenure, the College has achieved a huge amount, reflected most impressively in our splendid new buildings: the award-winning Dorothy Wadham Building on Iffley Road, and the even newer William Doo Undergraduate Centre and Dr Lee Shau Kee Building (which houses the Locke Access Centre) here on the main site, which have recently been shortlisted for a prestigious Prix Versailles.

His tenure has also left its mark in the older parts of college. Ken was immediately supportive of the proposal, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of women admitted to Wadham, to commission some new portraits to make our collection more diverse
and representative. In hall, we now have five portraits of women fellows and alumnæ, by photographer Michael Birt, and all around the college there are many more portraits of women and people of colour. The latest addition to our portrait collection here in hall is the beautiful portrait of Ken himself by Richard Twose.

But ultimately, of course, pictures and buildings don’t really matter; what matters are the people who live and work here. Our new buildings embody the college’s commitment to academic excellence, to fair access and widening participation both nationally and globally. These projects were only possible because of the extraordinary generosity of our benefactors, and Ken has been untiring in fostering and deepening the college’s links to our alumni community, together with Julie and her team. The heart of this success story is Wadham’s ‘Access to Excellence’ programme, which he launched in 2016, supported by an unprecedented £42m, which has resulted in one of the most ambitious and effective outreach initiatives within the university.

In short, the college has thrived, grown and evolved under Ken’s wardenship, and while this success is of course a collective achievement, carried by fellows, staff, students, and alumni, it has happened under his leadership. Ken, I would say, has not imprinted any kind of personal ‘vision’ onto the college, but he has, in his no-nonsense style, facilitated these many projects; he’s helped to propel the college forward, enabling us to formulate a vision for the twenty-first century on which we will continue to build.

Ken’s qualities as Warden are, I think, embodied in the speeches he has given during his Wardenship. You might say that speeches are the least important part of being a warden; what matters are not those grand occasion (like tonight), but how a warden gets stuck into the (often tedious) day-to-day life of the college. That said, Ken’s speeches reflect his deep and genuine commitment to the different parts of the college community.

There are for instance the speeches he has given in GB honouring members of staff for their long service to the college, which sometimes extends over many decades. These can be slightly awkward occasions for the member of staff concerned, but Ken has always managed to convey the college’s sincere gratitude by speaking warmly and
personally about the achievements of the colleague concerned. Similarly, though on a less happy note, there are his moving tributes to those members of the college who have died; during his wardenship, we have lost Klaus Moser (Warden), Philip Edwards (former domestic bursar); Ian Moore (Fellow in Biology), Richard Sharpe (Professor of Diplomatic), James Morwood (emeritus fellow in Classics), Charlie Sherwood (carpenter); and, most recently, Sashi Subba, (a Scout), who died from Covid earlier this year.

Ken has also been very eloquent in expressing the college’s gratitude to our donors, who have shown the college such huge generosity over the years, and he has celebrated major achievements, such as Roger Penrose being awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics last year. On all these occasions, Ken has found the right word to convey the college’s pride and joy, as well as the values which unpin our collective endeavours.

But I wanted to single out Ken’s speeches to our students, particularly those he’s given at Freshers’ dinner over the years. Wadham of course doesn’t do formal hall, and has very few grand occasions, but these dinners are the first ‘official’ college occasion for new graduates and undergraduates, and so the warden’s speech has an important function of ‘setting the tone’. In these speeches, Ken has affirmed the college as an academic community, while warning against any sense of a ‘Wadham orthodoxy’, any sense that at Wadham there are fixed views on certain matters, instead stressing the importance of open-mindedness, dialogue, and mutual respect, particularly in these divided times.

On one such occasion, I think in 2018, he spoke very movingly about events in the US, which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. As he commented, acts of violence against people of colour and other minority groups ‘shame us all’; and he paid tribute to Wadham students past and present for their engagement for social justice. Above all, what Ken has conveyed to students over the years is a sense of agency, that they should dare to think big and have bold ambitions, and that, surely, is the most important thing we can give to our students with an Oxford education.

I can’t finish my speech without mentioning the pandemic. This has been a hugely testing time for the college; as I’ve already mentioned, we lost one of our colleagues
to Covid, and in different ways we all bear the scars of the past 16 months. Covid has had a dramatic impact on Wadham, severing those precious personal ties which make the college a community, and putting a huge burden on everyone involved. But it’s also fair to say that Wadham has come really together in this crisis, and has come through the pandemic incredibly well, with very low infection rates and a high degree of compliance with the difficult rules that have had to be imposed. We know from student feedback that they have really appreciated everything the college has done to keep them safe (and here, I’d like to pay tribute to Frances Lloyd and her team, for their untiring, indeed heroic, work throughout the pandemic).

During this time, we’ve felt very lucky to be under Ken’s calm but decisive leadership and his readiness to make, and take responsibility for, some very difficult decisions. They say you only truly know someone once you’ve climbed a high mountain when them, and the same is true for people during the pandemic. Ken has really shown his mettle in these hardest of times, and his outstanding leadership will be remembered by the college with enormous gratitude for many years to come. And so while the end of his wardenship in these times is a bittersweet moment, I’m very glad that we’re able to say farewell and thank you to Ken here tonight, with his family and friends, and I’m sure that he’ll be back to say a proper goodbye to our students and staff once that’s possible again.

Ken – you’re in all of our hearts; you’ve left a lasting legacy here at Wadham, and we’re hugely grateful to you for everything you’ve done. So can I please ask you to stand and raise your glasses for a toast to Ken.

Carolin Duttlinger, Sub-Warden