

AN ADDRESS GIVEN BY
SIMON GREEN
AT THE FUNERAL OF
JOHN HORSLEY RUSSELL DAVIS

9 September 1938 – 15 January 2017

ALL SOULS COLLEGE CHAPEL

Wednesday, 25 January at 1 o'clock

Professor Simon Green

‘Good afternoon, my dears.’

Most of you will have realised that I am merely quoting. Many among you will also have been the grateful recipients of those greetings, anyway at some point in your lives. The delivery was sometimes ironically inflected. But the sentiments were invariably genuine. For John Davis revelled in his friends. Indeed, this enjoyment of others may have represented the most important aspect of the man, at least as he presented himself to us. There lay a paradox. John scarcely lacked for personal distinction. He sometimes seemed a one-off. But he was far from self-sufficient. To the contrary, he was possessed by a genuine, and endearing, need for friendship. The trusted company of others brought an otherwise surprisingly shy sensibility out of its shell and furnished an oddly insecure intellect with the reassurance it required.

That necessity, perhaps ‘longing’ might be a better word, may have been rooted in the mildly eccentric circumstances of his early life. John was an only child, the product of what would then have been called a failed marriage. He was not particularly close to his stepfather and rarely spoke of aunts and uncles (anyway, of *real* aunts and uncles). He married late and spent much of the last fifteen years of his life single. Family – by which I mean his own family – did eventually come to mean a great deal to him. But even then, one could not help observing how latterly he turned his sons into friends. That they, in the moment of extremis, treated his friends almost as their own family afforded those so privileged a blessing for which they will ever be grateful.

I suspect that John never really conceived of friendship in its purest terms, after the manner of Montaigne. *His* friends had to be exceptional. Many of them were. His first serious lover was Bertrand Russell’s third wife (Conrad’s mother), twice his age. At Oxford, he moved amongst what eventually became the *Private Eye* crowd. He remained close to Paul Foot for many years afterwards. He was part of the circle of Peter

Jay and Margaret Callaghan. Casual conversation subsequently established that John's ideal soul mate would probably have been: Continental, female, beautiful, clever, sophisticated, and amusing; preferably rich in general and affording frequent access to a villa in or around the Bay of Naples in particular. Few of us met these criteria. But he was generous to those who could pass muster in even one. The most obvious result was that he had many friends. The more subtle consequence was that he kept on making friends throughout his life, routinely adding to, rather than subtracting from, their number.

If his friends had to be worthy of him, their value was never judged by narrow social criteria. They may not have come from every walk of life. But they were truly varied: of both sexes, from multiple nationalities, and most notably drawn out of every age group. John liked the young – but not as a matter of principle. He happened to like a lot of people who were young. Ditto, the old, and probably the middle-aged too. For most of us here today, this trait first became apparent after his election to the Chair of Social Anthropology at Oxford. Some will perhaps only remember him as Warden Davis. But looking around, I can see a few who went back further, and those who do not would do well to remember that John was fully 52 before he ever set foot in this College. Indeed, much of his personal magnetism (I do not deploy that last word lightly) lay precisely in the fact that he appeared, in Oxford, as such a refreshingly un-Oxford, figure. He had obviously lived a bit, been to a few interesting places and learned some difficult languages.

John wanted those he loved to do well in life. This is a rarer ambition than generally acknowledged. Gore Vidal once famously observed that 'when one of my friends succeeds, a little bit of me dies'. He probably spoke for most of us in our more disreputable moments. I do not think John ever felt that way. I do not mean to cast him as a secular saint. His goodwill exacted a price. He made his disappointment known to friends who failed to fulfil their promise. Lesser transgressions sometimes remained unforgiven. And, as one his firmest friends once observed, 'when John was displeased, the effect could be felt in the next county'.

Fortunately, he was more usually satisfied. However, this was more often true of others than with himself. John enjoyed himself a lot, anyway quite frequently. But he was not an especially happy man. Certainly, his life was not without unfortunate incident. Much as he loved All Souls, the College was not exactly blameless in some of his later trials. Perhaps in consequence, he very much wanted his friends to be happy. Indeed, if they were young and single, he often appeared intent on pairing them off. He was less interested in the conventional forms of well-being. Outside the narrowest confines, he practised little academic patronage. And he was well aware of the potentially deleterious consequences of preferential treatment. To be in his favour usually meant no more (nor less) than guaranteed access to his magnificent hospitality.

It is only fair to observe that during the years of Wardenship this became legendary. To some, it seemed positively Bacchanalian. By no means everyone entirely approved. Yet it was anything but thoughtlessly hedonistic. To understand why, it is important to appreciate that John took everything he did seriously. What made him so strikingly different amongst Englishmen of his generation was his determination to be as serious about leisure as labour, of pleasure as pain, even concerning the proper interpretation of jokes as analysis of the substantive content of propositions. Above all, it meant taking food seriously.

There remains a strain in the Anglo-Saxon soul that balks at the moral implications of this demand. John had no patience with that attitude. He condemned ethereal superiority in matters of cuisine, deeming it the product of self-deceiving puritanism at best, and unreflective superabundance at worst. It may be that his anthropological training reinforced those convictions concerning the absolute centrality of food – its production, preparation and consumption – in human civilisation. It surely did not originate there. John was fascinated by every means through which food was made, served and enjoyed. Nor was he a mere consumer, still less a simple spectator, in these matters. Few activities

gave him greater satisfaction than baking bread. No gift provoked more gratitude than a good cookbook. He was perhaps never more content than when planning, executing and sharing a meal, conceived for his friends, made with the help, especially of Michael, also Henry and Peter.

John gave formal dinners, but he preferred informal lunches. That gave him the whole day to play with. The result was both an end and a means. To ensure the first, the fare was sometimes unusual, even challenging. Free-flowing drink helped with the second. The point was to encourage that kind of conviviality which led to conversation and from there to the right kind of seriousness: that is, seriousness without solemnity- about everything and anything. Possibly nothing pleased him more than the thought that some of his guests had become serious, un-solemn, friends at his dining table.

This aspiration extended far beyond the groves of academe. Let me try to illustrate. One summer, John telephoned me from Positano. He was on holiday. Some unidentified crisis had ensued. Could we join him? Urgently? Tomorrow? Only on our arrival in Naples did we realise that we had been summoned to play a role not unlike that of Charles Ryder during his first visit to Brideshead. Priggishly, we attempted rebellion. John had hitherto been satisfied with the beaches and bars of Sorrento. We insisted on improving visits to the ancient sites. Initially, he appeared to acquiesce. Day 1: Pompeii. Those who know modern Pompeii will recall that it boasts, in addition to priceless historical treasures, a truly excellent restaurant. Most of the afternoon was spent there, consuming a four-course lunch. Day 2: Paestum. Those who know modern Paestum, will recall that, for all its architectural wonders, it offers hungry visitors little more than a gelato bar. Or so it might seem to the untrained eye. Come lunchtime, John insisted on making for this unprepossessing place. Undaunted by its apparently unambitious menu, he quietly engaged the owner in agreeable conversation. Only later did we realise that this was careful negotiation. John first suggested the possibility of a few additions to the card, some more imaginative ways

to prepare the dishes, and the delightful results that might flow from the addition of more refined liquid refreshment.

I very much doubt whether the owner of that café had ever served a four-course luncheon, with appropriate wines, to any of his customers before. But he did for the three of us that day. So far from being offended by the culinary modifications recommended by *Il Professore*, the proprietor seemed inspired. As newly accomplished chef and grateful guest passed seamlessly from acquaintance to confidence, so first one, and then both, of the owner's daughters were summoned to partake in the happy occasion. It may, or may not, have been the case that offers of marriage were made. It is certainly true that the final parting was reluctant – all round. Food had done its magic, once again.

Revealed religion suggests the possibility of an afterlife. Within minutes of John's death, Mike Davis expressed the hope that, in this instance, it was already being enjoyed sharing a drink and a gossip with Ernest Gellner. More prosaic convention demands that the living should remember the dead. Amongst the multitude of gifts that John Davis bestowed among his many friends, not the least was – is – the certainty that this obligation will prove so easy to fulfil.