

GRADUATION – SEPTEMBER 2010

Presentation speech for Professor Alexander McCall Smith for the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, In many ways, this University is rather like you – what better qualification for a Chancellor! Although located in southern England, we have many links with other parts of the world and with other parts of Britain. Our links with Scotland are especially strong. Apart from yourself, I think of colleagues such as Alan Brooke, Douglas Bridges and Geoffrey Wood and of one of our greatest Vice Chancellors, Professor Alan Peacocke. Intellectually, perhaps our greatest debt is to another Scotsman, to Adam Smith. I don't think we have ever considered the award of a posthumous Honorary Degree, but if we ever did so, Smith would be my first candidate. Today we strengthen our ties with Scotland – and indeed with Africa – when honouring Alexander McCall Smith.

Chancellor, when you nominated McCall Smith, you noted – and I quote – 'He also appears to understand the philosophy of the late Hugh Macdiarmid – our local poet of the muckle toon, which is a rare gift. It must indeed be a rare gift. I spent sometime trying to understand this philosophy myself, though I confess with little success. I did discover, however that MacDiarmid was one of the founders of the National Party of Scotland and also a member of the Communist Party. He was however, expelled from the National Party for being a communist and from the Communist Party for being a Nationalist. He sounds the sort of man who would have gone down well in Buckingham.

Chancellor, our honorand really has a double existence. He is Professor of Medical Law but also an author who has now written over fifty books on a wide range of subjects. These range from specialist titles such as 'Forensic Aspects of Sleep' (the only book on the subject) to 'The Criminal Law of Botswana' (also the only book on the subject) and from the widely translated 'The Perfect Hamburger' (a children's novel) to 'Portuguese Irregular Verbs' (a collection of stories about eccentric German professors). McCall Smith's works have been translated into over forty languages and

his best know work *The No 1 Ladies Detective Agency series* has sold over twenty million copies. One of his most recent books (and it is hard to keep track) is *Corduroy Mansions*. A reviewer has noted ‘The great strength of *Corduroy Mansions* is the brilliant interplay of a diverse cast of fully integrated characters. Alexander McCall Smith has affirmed that what interests him as a writer is ‘what makes the characters tick’ All of the many decent, fragile, well-intentioned folks who inhabit Corduroy Mansions’ flats and surrounding environs and believable, thinking, breathing individuals.

But what makes our Honorand tick? Well the admitted addiction to tea may help but I think there is more. Chancellor, this University has already honoured a distinguished author of crime fiction – Baroness James – who subsequently gave us a splendid lecture on the genre. She argued that crime writing is ultimately a morality tale – after many tribulations truth is established and good triumphs over evil. Yet, Chancellor, there seems to be an especially close link between crime writing and Edinburgh and especially with Edinburgh medicine. After all, Arthur Conan Doyle himself studied there. I am not sure about the nature of the link but I suspect there are three distinct elements: the Edinburgh sense of rectitude, the slightly sinister feeling of the Old Town and – of course – the ghosts of Burke and Hare.

Chancellor, our honorand’s interests fit closely with those of this university. Many of our students come from Africa and we have flourishing schools or departments of Law, Medicine and Literature. Chancellor, I call upon you to confer upon Alexander McCall Smith the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *Honoris Causa*

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil
4 September 2010