

GRADUATION – SEPTEMBER 2010

Presentation speech for Dr Julian Barbour for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science of the University *honoris causa*

Chancellor, the American thinker Henry David Thoreau once formulated what he obviously thought an absurd proposition: 'As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.' It has been the life work of our honorand today (if there is such a thing as today) to take up this challenge.

Perhaps the most important of his books and papers is *The End of Time* – the main ideas of which are explained in non-technical terms in the appropriately entitled TV film '*Killing Time*'. Julian Barbour believes that the apparent passage of time is an illusion. If we could stand outside the universe and 'see it as it is', it would appear to be static. At present, perhaps the greatest challenge facing cosmologists is to reconcile two radically different notions of time inherent in the general theory of relativity and in quantum mechanics. The way forward may be to abolish time altogether and to move to a timeless quantum theory of the universe.

By any standards, these are weighty matters. They also transcend the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines; questions of physics, mathematics, cosmology, philosophy - perhaps even theology – come together. Time can certainly play strange tricks. Anyone who has given a lecture or listened to one, taken an examination or invigilated one, appreciates that time *must* be relative rather than absolute. I like to think that discussions about time need not be the preserve of scientists and philosophers; my own discipline of History can surely make a contribution too. At first sight, Historians – perhaps more than the practitioners of any other academic discipline – appear to be the complete prisoners of linear time. I venture to suggest, however, that this is not the case. Historians defy time by bringing the past to life again. They also know that History is not just about the past – it is a dialogue between the past and the present. They appreciate that the beginning and end times of their books and articles are essentially arbitrary – and that slightly different beginnings and endings can result in very different accounts. Historians too are constantly struck by the fact that periods far apart in time exhibit striking similarities – for example I think the first half of the 20th century was much more like the first half of the 17th century than it was like the second half of the 19th century. Of course, humble

historians cannot emulate the scientists who can Kill Time but at least we can escape from it a little.

But Chancellor, what are the practical implications of all of this? If there is a serious possibility that Time does not exist, surely we should not allow it – or its allies – to dominate our lives too much. It may seem strange to talk of Time having an ally but I think it does – and a very important and rather dangerous one too. I believe that Time's chief ally is the state. It is not surprising really; in their modern senses, both are products of the 16th and 17th centuries. Medieval people did not think of either Time or the State in the way most of us do. How does the alliance work? It is the state that tells us how many years we should spend at school, how many hours we should work, when we should retire, how long a degree course should take.

Chancellor, we all know that this University was founded to be independent of the state. This has all sorts of consequences – mostly beneficial – but perhaps the most important is that it has allowed us to be a little independent of time too. Was not our most important decision to offer a three-year degree in two years? If that is not defying time I don't know what is.

Chancellor, you were, I believe, party to that decision. I am not, I think, a naturally vain man, but I admit to a little vanity on behalf of the University. I wonder if the 'three years in two' idea might have contributed to your own interest in time. Your present campaign – to free this country from the absurd tyranny of Greenwich Mean Time – is entirely consistent both with the theoretical position of our Honorand and with one of this University's most distinctive features.

It is therefore especially fitting that, with the enthusiastic endorsement of the University, you have chosen Julian Barbour to be a 'Chancellor's Honorand'. He has provided the theory and you and the University have provided the practice.

Chancellor, I call upon you to confer upon Julian Barbour the degree of Doctor of Science, Honoris Causa.

Professor John Clarke, MA, DPhil
4 September 2010