

Presentation speech for Professor David Starkey for the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*

We learn from *Microcosmographia Academica*:

The Principle of Sound Learning is that the noise of vulgar fame should never trouble the cloistered calm of academic existence. Hence, learning is called sound when no one has ever heard of it, and 'sound scholar' is a term of praise applied to one another by learned men who have no reputation outside the University and a rather queer one inside it.

I understand, Chancellor, that the *Microcosmographia* – published in Cambridge in 1908 – is David Starkey's favourite book. It has to be said, however, that he has not always followed its precepts and recommendations to the letter. He is a sound scholar yet he is famous and has a formidable reputation both inside and outside the University.

In these troubled and perplexing times it is more important than ever that the public should have a strong sense of history. Despite the deplorable state of the subject in many schools, I believe that to be the case. In the past decade, sales of history books have almost doubled – bucking publishing industry trends – to 5.4 million copies a year. A sizeable chunk of these sales have been made by those whose faces are familiar not from peer-reviewed journals with a circulation of hundreds, from the small screen – that is from people like David Starkey.

Although wide ranging in his historical interests, Starkey's speciality is the Tudors. In his Cambridge doctoral thesis Professor Starkey made the important discovery of the crucial role of the Privy Chamber in Herician government. He has also challenged the once dominant theories of Geoffrey Elton and brought about a revival of interest in the study of the Court, playing a leading role in the formation of the Society for Court Studies.

Notable television documentaries include *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Elizabeth I*, *Henry: Mind of a Tyrant* and *Reformation: Europe's Holy War*. He says of the Tudor dynasty:

It is a most glorious and wonderful soap opera. It makes the House of Windsor look like a dolls house tea party, it really does. And so these huge personalities, you know, the whole future of countries turn on what one man feels like when he gets out of bed in the morning – just a wonderful, wonderful personalisation of politics.

He is also famous for controversial remarks. When the government said that the core British values were 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs', Starkey suggested a different agenda of 'queuing, drunkenness, nostalgia, loving pets, self-loathing, wit and eccentricity.' He added – in case there should be any doubt – 'I hate niceness.'

But what makes for a successful TV historian? Exactly the same qualities as those required in a successful university lecturer in history: an ability to connect with an audience, to convey both knowledge and passion for the subject and an engaging or at least striking personality. Unfortunately, too many academics make history so dry and dull for their students. This is the problem not the subject itself. When imaginatively presented, History can draw people in by the coach-load. We are fascinated with the past. The challenge is to harness it and that is the challenge that our honorand has risen to so splendidly.