

Honorary Degree in Absentia for Prof. (Emeritus) J. G. A. Pocock

Queen Mary University of London

20 July 2016

Address by Richard Bourke:

I am truly delighted that J. G. A. Pocock is being awarded an honorary doctorate of letters by Queen Mary University of London today.

I take great pleasure in this conferment for two reasons. First of all, personally – because, since I first came to know Professor Pocock’s work as a young scholar in the 1980s, the importance for my own research of his extraordinary contributions to the history of ideas has steadily grown. But, secondly, I am particularly pleased on this occasion because Professor Pocock has a strong intellectual connection to Queen Mary more generally as a result of his having been a major presence in the academic lives of a number of colleagues, especially (though not exclusively) in the School of History, and above all among its distinguished cast of intellectual historians. Queen Mary boasts great academic strengths in the field of intellectual history, especially in the history of political thought, as indicated by our undergraduate and graduate offerings in the area, and by the activities of the Centre for the Study of the History of Political Thought, founded in 2007. For my immediate colleagues at the Centre – Quentin Skinner, Gareth Stedman Jones, Georgios Varouxakis, Maurizio Isabella, as well as for myself – Pocock stands out as an example of scholarly devotion and intellectual command.

It is commonly said that the modern study of the history of political thought began in earnest with, and has been sustained by, two figures in particular, J. G. A. Pocock on the one hand and our own Quentin Skinner on the other. On this occasion it seems fitting to recall that Pocock’s first book had already been published before Skinner had yet been enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge. There is thus a sense in which all the historians of political ideas at Queen Mary can look upon Pocock as an original patron. I believe that I am speaking for all of us when I say that he remains a presiding genius to this day.

Pocock is not merely one of the leading figures of his generation in intellectual history; he is also by common consent one of the great historians since the Second World War. His achievements in the fields of political ideas, the history of historiography, the study of enlightenment, and the meaning of British history, are not simply outstanding; they were all path breaking.

Professor Pocock came to Queen Mary University of London in 2010 to deliver the third annual Nicolai Rubinstein Lecture in the History of Political Thought and Intellectual History – a memorable event, recorded for posterity on the Queen Mary website. Professor Pocock is now aged 92, and for medical reasons unable to travel to be with us in person today. But he has sent a message for me to read on this occasion. This statement is intended to express his gratitude to Queen Mary for honoring him, but it is also designed to single out the intellectual community –

the “fellowship”, as he calls it – that enabled him to develop and prosper as an academic. Let me now read Professor Pocock’s statement:

Richard Bourke

Message from J. G. A. Pocock, On Receiving an Honorary Doctorate of Letters at Queen Mary University of London:

I have to thank Queen Mary first for the honor you are doing me; second for your generous forbearance in allowing me to accept it in absentia; and thirdly, for all you are doing as a center of learning to maintain and keep active an intellectual discipline in which I and others, including members of your most distinguished faculty, have been engaged for many years. In accepting this degree, I am conscious of speaking as a member of a company, some no longer with us, others present today, and others I am sure active in joining us, making up a continuum it is an honor to represent on this occasion. It has been, and still is, an active fellowship, and my memories of it go back nearly seventy years, to universities I should name on this occasion— Canterbury, Cambridge, Washington in St. Louis, Johns Hopkins, to name only those with which I had the privilege of association; the list could be indefinitely prolonged and has not done growing.

The fellowship’s activity has been the study of politics, or rather the study of the study of politics: politics as lived in, thought about, written about and imagined; a study going on in history, having and writing a history of its own, and doing much to create both the history we are, and the history we think we are, living in. That we happen to be meeting today at a particularly discouraging moment in history in most of these senses is a reason for enlarging the activity and criticizing its foundations but not a reason for giving it up. That in the seventy years I am able to recall, this study has focused mainly on the early modern periods and on the civilization we call western is true but no matter for apology; we are beginning to study what went on in other civilizations and to ask the intellects of those civilizations to challenge and instruct us, and if we find that the parameters of political thought have been geographically and historically finite, that will be what we have found out.

In accepting this doctorate, I must name others, living and dead, without whose work I should not be here, even in absentia today, and should never have done anything deserving your attention. Here at Queen Mary you have Quentin Skinner, who laid foundations in 1969 and is building on them still. You have Richard Bourke, whose monumental work on his great namesake studies Burke’s writings in their order and shows how they built the life of a mind in politics. When I permit my memory to look back, I see a legion of faces, and know that I could have called up many others, composing in several countries the fellowship of which I have spoken: Herbert Butterfield, Peter Laslett, Jack Hexter, Donald Kelley, Thomas Kuhn, Michael Oakeshott, Hans Baron, Caroline Robbins, John Wallace, William Lamont, Franco Venturi, Felix Gilbert, Nicholas Phillipson, Richard Sher, Istvan Hont, John Burrow. I give you these names in no particular order, and could have gone on adding to them until your patience ran out. Such is the richness of the field in which I have spent my life. Permit me to add two societies and

a couple of names with them: the Conference for the Study of Political Thought, co-founded with Melvin Richter in the 1960s, and the Folger Institute Center for the History of British Political Thought, co-founded in the 1980s with Gordon Schochet, Lena Cowan Orlin and Lois Greene Schwoerer. These names may be transient in your memory today, but you are honoring them as well as me, for which I thank you.

J. G. A. Pocock