March 2017
Thu 9 Social drinks
Wed 15 Lunch with Prof Mark Dawson
Sun 26 Golf at Devil Bend

After work drinks with Oxford, Thursday 9 March
This will be at Trunk restaurant, 275 Exhibition St, CBD, 6–8pm. Drinks at bar prices. No need to book – just turn up.

Lunch with Prof. Mark Dawson, Wednesday 15 March
How a caterpillar becoming a butterfly informs new cancer treatments
Acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) affects more than 900 Australians each year, and 300,000 globally. Current chemotherapies and supportive care still fail to cure the majority of patients with AML, and more than 70 per cent succumb to the heterogeneous disease, which is driven by various acquired mutations in the DNA of blood cells. Researchers at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre have discovered how a form of leukaemia fights back against a ground-breaking treatment, providing vital new leads on how to outwit the deadly disease. AML stem cells are particularly aggressive, insidious and nimble. Knowing how they respond when under attack enables researchers to devise interventions that can neutralise the source of resistance before it develops.

While the topic may seem highly technical, Mark Dawson promises to make his talk understandable to a non-specialist audience.

Prof. Mark Dawson is a Consultant Haematologist. He is internationally recognised as a leading clinician-scientist in the field of epigenetics and haematopoiesis. After completing his clinical training in Melbourne, he was awarded the prestigious General Sir John Monash Fellowship and Cambridge Commonwealth Trust Fellowship, which he used to complete his PhD at Cambridge, at Gonville & Caius. Following his PhD, he was awarded the inaugural Wellcome Trust Beit Prize Fellowship. In 2014 he returned to Australia to as Head of the Haematology Cancer Therapeutics Program at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, and Head of the Cancer Epigenetics Laboratory.

This lunch will take place at the Savage Club in Bank Place at 12 noon for 12.30pm. The Club is at 12 Bank Place (off Collins Street) in the City. Cost is $55 including drinks. All guests are most welcome; the more the better. Would you please advise Peter Baines at lunches@cambridgesociety.org.au or on 9820 2334 by latest Monday noon, 13 March, if you will be coming (and dietary requirements). Those emailing their intention to attend should ring Peter to confirm if they receive no email confirmation from him within 24 hours of booking.

Golf with Oxford at Devil Bend (Mooraduc), Sunday 26 March
Interested in a game on this little-known Peninsula golf course? Always wanted the chance to represent Cambridge at the elite level? Contact Peter Adams to help us beat Oxford again: golf@cambridgesociety.org.au.

Later in the year
Global Cambridge in Melbourne, Tuesday 25 July
For the Global Cambridge series, CUDAR are visiting a selection of cities from around the world to bring together alumni to connect, engage and
Inspire. The series will showcase how Cambridge research is trail-blazing the path to new discoveries, ideas and inventions. In 2017, there will be alumni events in Bristol, Edinburgh, Düsseldorf, Hong Kong, Leeds, Melbourne, Paris and Sydney.

Registration will open in May 2017. This event will be free of charge. Details will follow, but book this date into your diaries now. Expected timing is 5.30–7.30pm.

Annual Dinner, Friday 15 September
We are pleased to announce that the Rev Dr Jeremy Morris, Master of Trinity Hall, will be our guest of honour at this year’s annual dinner, to be held in the usual venue. A reception for Trinity Hall alumni with the Master will precede the dinner. We are indebted to His Honour Justice Tony Pagone and Mr Patrick Moore for offering to host these two events.

Diary dates

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Last month

Lunch with Chris Davey, Wednesday 15 February
A large crowd of fans of both Chris Davey and Agatha Christie attended to hear the former talk about the latter. We were honoured to have amongst our number two British visitors, Malcolm and Jennifer Blackburn, from the Derbyshire Cambridge Society, the first UK Alumni Branch ever founded.

In her early life, Agatha worked in Belgium with a pharmacist, where she acquired an understanding of Belgian gentlemen and chemicals, which stood her in good stead in her writing career. In 1919 she wrote the first of her 76 ‘whodunits’, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, to ‘get a bit of pocket money’. Despite this casual reference to money she was famously economical, and guests at the Christie household talked of not being allowed to use the phone unless they first paid for the cost of the intended call. In 1914 she married Archibald Christie, who served in the Royal Flying Corps during WWI. In 1926 Archie abandoned her for a bimbo, which hurt her badly and she disappeared and laid low, leading to a large police search. Friends suggested to her that she take a trip to Iraq ‘to snap her out of it’. She went to Ur to see Leonard Wooley’s dig in 1929. She went back again in 1930 and met and fell in love with Leonard’s 2iC, Max Mallowan. On their journey back to Basra their car got bogged and Max’s observation of Agatha’s demeanour under adversity led him to think that she was ‘a person one could live with.’ They married secretly and remained happily married until her death in 1976.

They went each year to the Middle East at Nineveh and then, after a dispute with the Iraqi authorities, in Syria until interrupted by WWII. During the war, Agatha wrote ‘Come and tell me how you live’, an excellent description of life on an archaeological dig. After the war, they continued an active archeological life until 1958. The Australian Institute of Archaeology also supported Max Mallowan in his work.

Christie became an expert in photographing finds and conserving them, with occasional use of her knitting needles. Books based on her digging experiences include: Murder on the Orient Express; Murder in Mesopotamia; Death on the Nile; Appointment with Death; Death Comes as the End; and They Came to Baghdad.

Chris has visited many of the sites dug by Agatha and Max and has also resisted the blandishments of many Middle Eastern hotel proprietors offering guests the use of ‘the room where Agatha Christie wrote…’ at exorbitantly inflated rates.

Commercials

If you have an offer, message or request of a personal or not-for-profit nature that you would like us to include in this section, please contact the editor at newsletter@cambridgesociety.org.au.

Snippets

We acknowledge our particular debt to Varsity and to the University News Release Service.

Economics is not a hard science, it’s really more like a form of medieval witchcraft

Does anyone really know what’s going on? Anna Fitzpatrick chats with the Guardian’s Economics Editor.
Larry Elliott recalls going to bed after instructing his news desk not to ring ‘unless something dramatic happens’.

At 5am, he was woken up by a phone call: ‘get into work as soon as you can’.

While he had been asleep, the UK had voted to leave the European Union. This experience leaves Elliott echoing what is, for many, a painful question: ‘why did nobody see it coming?’

Indeed, with the aftermath of Brexit not correlating with the predictions of the Treasury and the Bank of England, I ask Elliott if the claims of economists are given too much legitimacy. ‘Oh, absolutely’ he begins. ‘Economics is not a hard science, it’s really more like a form of medieval witchcraft. It’s all about throwing stuff into a pot and stirring it around to see what comes out. When a physicist or a chemist has a theory and it doesn’t work, then they abandon the theory to try something else. When an economist has a theory, they have to build in lots of often quite ridiculous assumptions. Then, when it doesn’t work they say “let’s carry on anyway”. Or, if you use a different set of assumptions the theory will work.’

He continues: ‘economists profess to have a knowledge of what’s going to happen, which is far in excess of their actual ability to make those sorts of predictions. The post-Brexit scenario is just one example of it.’

I ask Elliott if this uncertainty shapes political outcomes. ‘I think, to an extent, Brexit and Trump reflects the loss of faith in experts’, he tells me. ‘Partly that’s because politicians make promises they don’t keep. In terms of economists, it’s because they make forecasts that don’t come true.’

I ask if these ‘miscalculations’ reflect an abstraction by ‘experts’, from what he refers to in his talk as ‘real life’. ‘We need to stop accusing people who voted for Trump and Brexit of being thick, or stupid or daft’ he responds. ‘We need to try to understand what it is that made them vote that way and do something about it. That means redistribution of opportunity, income and jobs – to those parts of Britain or America which are deeply, deeply hacked off with the way things have been going.’

He continues, highlighting the potential economic reasons for this feeling: ‘What we’ve seen in the last 30–40 years is an incredible concentration of wealth and income among the people at the very top. So, it’s not that surprising that half the country voted for Brexit.’

Elliott is also clear that the populist rhetoric that propelled Brexit and Trump poses a threat to the status quo. ‘Oh god, yeah. A big threat,’ he says. ‘There are people who talk about a return to the 1930s [when] the people in charge just didn’t realise what was happening,’ he tells me. ‘If you say to people for long enough, that life for you is going to be really, really tough and don’t offer them a way out, then eventually they will find somewhere else to go.’

‘That’s the lesson of the 1930s,’ he continues. ‘If you have a political impasse, then that eventually leads to people looking for more radical economic solutions – which is sort of what’s happening. Certainly with Trump. It may well happen in Europe, too,’ he reflects.

I ask him, then, if Trump’s victory marks the end of neo-liberalism. After thinking for a while, Elliott resolves that he ‘wouldn’t go that far yet,’ before adding that Trump is certainly ‘shaking things up’.

‘Three months ago, it was assumed that the global order was pretty settled, that it would be impossible for anybody to come and do anything different. Trump is testing that. It’s early days, but everything else he’s promised to do – he’s pretty much done. So you have to assume, that when it comes to his trade stuff – getting tough with China, branding China a currency manipulator, maybe threatening a 45 per cent tariff on Chinese goods – he will do what he’s said. If you have the world’s biggest economy in the hands of someone who doesn’t play by the accepted rules, then that is going to make a difference.’

Opposition to private universities is a disguised form of elitism

There’s meant to be something seedy about the profit motive. Perhaps this is why, in the case of education, many of us recoil in horror as soon as the prospect is introduced. This is an irrational response, but it’s not entirely unreasonable. Education is something which makes politicians misty-eyed. It makes their voices quaver.

Education has attained a secular saintliness as a result of government sponsorship, which cannot be impugned or deprecated or traduced. Or even, as it turns out, imitated.

When A. C. Grayling, the philosopher, announced the creation of a privately run, for-profit institution of higher education, which later became the New College of the Humanities, he was set upon. Those who leapt down his throat
did so with the full force of dogma and the false fluency of ideology.

Meanwhile, Grayling was, for the most part quietly, getting on with creating his university; the institution has now produced generations of graduates.

A lot of the initial coverage of his experiment suggested that it was intended to be a rival to Oxford and Cambridge, and Grayling’s new college was both attacked and (more tentatively) welcomed on those grounds. But the truth, as I discovered when I visited several years ago (as I have done a few times since), was both more modest and more sincere. The place is small and, despite an impressive rate of growth, looks likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future.

It is not being pitched in direct competition to our ancient public universities. Instead it acts as something of a private-sector supplement, taking aspects of the Oxbridge experience which are not offered at other institutions and making them available, for a fee.

Many of us have had unfortunate supervisions or, at the other place, dodgy tutorials, but we must all recognise the fundamental usefulness and even goodness of the system; otherwise, after all, we would have, in the (slightly amended) words of Alan Bennett’s all-too-frequently quoted play The History Boys, ‘go[ne] to Newcastle and be[en] happy’. But we did not, and here we all are.

It seems perverse to wish to deny this privilege to others. And it’s a little rich for so many journalists and academics, many of them Oxbridge alumni, to share an impulse which tends towards exclusivity.

Another aspect of the same feeling makes a little more sense. It’s built largely on an instinctive, reactive sense of disgust. It is the revulsion many feel when exposed to the slimmer and more reptilian proponents of market capitalism, the sort of people one wouldn’t touch in case they were somehow contagious. And yes, one of them is the president of the United States.

It is true, furthermore, that he did run a fraudulent higher education scheme, in his own name, no less, and that he did do a lot of people – needy, unfortunate people – out of a sizable amount of money. Nevertheless, it would be foolish, indeed naïve, to allow this single, unrepresentative case to sour one’s view of for-profit higher education.

After all, A. C. Grayling is no Donald Trump. The degree ceremonies at Grayling’s college are attended by its master, not overseen by a cardboard cut-out figure representing the gurning billionaire.

One cannot avoid considering the overall effect of such things – whether for-profit education ‘drives up standards’, in that tedious formulation. And the honest answer has to be, well, there’s no way to tell – at least not yet. The New College of the Humanities is hardly huge, hardly market-distorting. It may not make things better, but a little healthy competition can hardly make things worse. It’s pretty clear that taking a few hundred of the most intellectually adventurous out of the public system is hardly going to cripple the sector.

When I visited, there was something exciting about the New College of the Humanities, something genuinely dynamic. Everybody seemed happy to be there. Everyone had made an active choice; they had not been corralled into taking a particular path in higher education by parental expectation or pressure from schools. This seemed profoundly liberating, and the freedom this allowed those who made that choice was palpable.

The number of students attending British universities is at record highs. This represented a radical change and occurred not that long ago. It is now championed by the educational establishment. One would hope that the government and the press could be a little more receptive to change in other aspects of the same sector.

Denying opportunities to those willing to take them seems distinctly perverse. And part of rectifying this moral blind-spot is not allowing ourselves to be swayed by bogus analogies, such as Trump University.

There must be some good in the private system, then, if it is defended against such vulgar fraudulence. Other countries license for-profit higher education not because they are in hock to some dogma, but rather because, at least on some level, the set-up can be seen to work. And that is worth pursuing – and even, perhaps, worth experiencing yourself.