November 2017

Wed 15  Lunch with Tony Klein

Lunch with Tony Klein,
Wednesday 15 November

Eyes of animals: the physics of vision

Over many hundreds of millions of years of evolution, an amazing range of vision systems has emerged, utilising every optical principle in the book. Employed by different organisms, from single cells to the most complex of animals, different aspects of physics have resulted in an astonishing range of organs that may be called eyes. A range of these will be shown in this profusely illustrated talk.

Anthony Klein is an Emeritus Professor at Melbourne University, where he held a Personal Chair in Physics until his retirement in 1998 and served as Head of the School of Physics from 1987 to 1996. Tony is an internationally recognised physicist specialising in optics and a noted teacher and communicator. He was President of the Australian Institute of Physics (1989–91); President of the Australian Optical Society (1985–86) and Chairman of several advisory committees including the Research and Ethics Committees of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital (1991–2010). His significant contributions were recognised with the award of Member of the Order of Australia in 1999.

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@cambridge society.org.au or on 9820 2334 by latest Monday noon, 12th November, 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.

Diary dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 Dec</td>
<td>AGM and Varsity Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Feb</td>
<td>Lunch with Michelle Cooper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Last month

October lunch with Jim McCue

Jim McCue's talk on T. S. Eliot’s writings began and ended with the theme of provocation. It was easy enough to nod approvingly from the audience as we were reminded of Eliot’s demolition of Georgian poetry’s sentimentality and outworn images. By now, just over a hundred years after the publication of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, it is Eliot’s frankness about urban squalor that has become a standard literary topic, and it can be hard to imagine just how shocking Eliot’s images must have been to his early readers:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels...

From Eliot as provocateur and demolisher of poetic norms of his time in Prufrock and The Waste Land, McCue moved on to Eliot’s later writings (which are often dismissed as succumbing to conservative values). He argued for Eliot as continuing to rebuke the certainties of his age and presented what for many is the ultimate demonstration of Eliot’s retreat as yet another provocation for his readers at the time: ‘I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature...
and a royalist in politics.’ Finally, McCue argued
for Eliot as still offering challenges to our
contemporary values and beliefs: this was far from
the usual portrait of Eliot as first founder of a
thrilling new language for poetry, then fossil.

There was just enough time left for him to
answer questions (far too briefly) about his co-
editing of The Poems of T. S. Eliot, the provocative
intent that he detected in some of Eliot’s own
notes for his poetry and the extraordinarily rich
collection of material with which he had to work
(apparently Eliot’s mother saved all his writings
from the age of seven).

- Alice Mills

Light Blues triumph yet again
On Sunday 15 October, in perfect golfing
conditions and under a cloudless sky at Green
Acres G.C. in Kew, the Cambridge team
accumulated 149 stableford points to Oxford’s
144. So the Henry Gordon-Clark Team Trophy
remains in Cambridge hands (for the seventh time
since its inception three years ago). To add to this
triumph the Oxford trophy for best individual
performance was again won by our Magister
Prandii, Peter Baines.

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.

Society member John de Figueiredo (Trinity Hall
1962) has a spare, mint condition copy of
Cambridge Depicted (Engravings, History and People)
by Haroon Ahmed and Philip Denbigh (Third
Millennium, 2013, RRP £35), which he has kindly
donated to the society. If interested parties could
enter bids to treasurer@cambridgesociety.org.au,
the book will go to the highest bidder, with the
proceeds going to Cambridge Australia
Scholarships.

Meanwhile, Richard Ferguson has lost his beige
trench coat and tweed cap on the evening of the
Annual Dinner. It appears that someone took
Richard’s coat (with hat in pocket) from the
Melbourne Club cloakroom, and left behind their
own similar coat – which remains at the Club.
Could gentlemen please check their coat racks,
and if you have the item, please return it to the
club or contact treasurer@cambridgesociety.org.au.

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

Stephen Toope: ‘We know Cambridge is a very
tough academic environment’
We are not alone. Speaking to Professor Stephen
Toope, the new vice-chancellor, I am joined by the
University’s director of communications, Paul
Mylrea, and the remnants of freshers’ flu. I feel a
little outgunned.

Why Mylrea is here, I’m not entirely sure. Perhaps it’s because Louise Richardson – Toope’s
equivalent at Oxford – had a mixed summer,
putting her foot ankle-deep in her own mouth over
some poorly-worded remarks about homophobic
professors. But Stephen Toope is not Louise
Richardson.

That’s not to say comparisons can’t be made. In
one of her many vacation interventions,
Richardson defended her £350,000-a-year salary, in
a climate where vice-chancellor pay is under
intense scrutiny. Last week, Toope had to mount a
similar defence of his own salary: £365,000
excluding pension contributions. The revelation
was inevitable and, perhaps, inevitably
embarrassing.

Toope’s installation and arrival has been a fairly
smooth affair, but now the Latin and gowns are
finished with, he will have to hit the ground
running. After a long period away from Cambridge
since his days as a student here, his immediate
experience will echo that of many the new freshers:
thrust into the middle of debates about access,
divestment and welfare.

The first is a complex and thorny issue, with the
University constantly pulled between the challenge
of marrying expanding participation with main-
taining standards – usually in the form of
demanding top grades from applicants. ‘I am
pleased that over the last number of years
Cambridge has worked really hard generally to
encourage greater access,’ he says.

‘This year, apparently, we have more state-
educated students than we’ve had for 35 years’ –
which is true, if arguably unremarkable – ‘so work
is being done,’ in the words of the vice-chancellor.
‘I want to be really clear that the University is
taking this seriously and is trying to improve the circumstances.’

Grade requirements though, he says, are ‘a challenging one. We know Cambridge is a very tough academic environment. One of the challenges for students coming from backgrounds where they haven’t had the same kind of education opportunities – and therefore attainment – is if you then throw them in an environment where the expectation is that they will perform.’ He stresses the links with government, schools and not-for-profit organisations that Cambridge has to form, saying it has ‘has to do a lot of things at the same time to try to improve this record’.

All very well, I say, but surely sympathy can be drawn somewhere – what about a ‘worst-case-scenario’ applicant, with the biggest possible combination of disadvantages: black, educated at a badly-performing school, raised in an area of low higher education participation in a poor family: wouldn’t it be fair to let a clearly gifted student from that background get in on AAA? ‘There’d be lots of consequences to that, you couldn’t simply have a system that changes overnight to say ‘We’re going to take people with three As’ unless you had a very detailed process in place to actually allow those people to be successful while they’re here. You don’t want to put people in a position where, when they arrive, all of a sudden they’re told: ‘We want you, but we want you only our traditional terms, and now you’re failing’,’ he says.

‘So that would be an unacceptable response. If it were the case that the University wanted to move to any change in the admissions standards, that would have to be matched with very detailed processes to make sure that the people could succeed when here.’

He settles, as he will at several points in our discussion, on the wisdom of consultation: ‘I think it’s something that the colleges and the University would have to discuss in great detail; I’m sure there would be very different opinions on this – I have no doubt.’

Does he think Cambridge students are working in an unusually pressured environment? ‘We admit some of the most gifted students in the world, and certainly from the United Kingdom, and then we do put them into very, very demanding programmes.’ He is keen to stress that he doesn’t believe the University to be unique in that regard, and warns against ‘silver bullet’ solutions like nine-week terms and reading weeks, but acknowledges a better job could be done making students aware of the services available to them.

His apparent faith in the decision-making capabilities of Cambridge’s rarely united institutions is emphasised again when I raise a new topic: the ongoing discussions at Lucy Cavendish and Newnham over whether they should open their doors to transgender students who self-identify as women, even if they do not have legal recognition. ‘I’m confident that they’ve looked carefully at the situation,’ Toope says.

I ask whether he would be disappointed if, when the dust has settled, Newnham were to decide not to change its policies. ‘No, because I like the idea that colleges have an ability to take tailored approaches that seem most appropriate for what they’re trying to achieve. I think it’s very important that self-identified transgender students have access to the University, and now we have a college [Murray Edwards] that is clearly saying they can apply.’

So far, so emollient – if Toope is planning to crack the whip with the colleges, he’s not advertising it. What about divestment, an issue where the decision-making pressure is firmly in the hands of the University Council, which Toope heads? ‘My starting proposition is climate change is an existential threat to the world. I believe that, and think that the University does have an obligation to do everything in its power, through a range of ways, to be addressing that issue.’

Time to pull the plug on Cambridge’s fossil fuel investments, then? ‘Whether or not divestment is in and of itself the right answer is something I’m actually going to wait to hear from the working group,’ he says. ‘I’m genuinely unsure, and the reason I say that is that I’ve heard – it’s not the first time I’ve been through these debates – very interesting argument on both sides. One is, you just have to make the moral statement... the other is if all of the institutions that actually feel strongly about these issues disengage from trying to be actively working with managers and with corporations, then we may actually make the situation worse, by allowing the people who don’t care to be the only people who are making the case about how the corporations should behave.’
His response treads the line between the Zero Carbon society’s all-or-nothing response, and the more subtle, but less unassailably ethical, approach of an organisation like Positive Investment Cambridge. He speaks of a ‘balance’ to be struck between current moral interests, and the long-term financial interests of the institution – students and staff ‘100 or 200 years from now.’

Cambridge thinks in centuries, and in that context the impact of a single vice-chancellor can be limited. Does Toope hope to leave Cambridge as the best university in the world? For a moment, he offers something like ambition: ‘If it were possible to know the answer to that question, I would love to say “yes.”’ Immediately though, he softens: ‘I would love for Cambridge to be widely acknowledged as one of the very small number of top universities in the world’ – but adding that he is ‘not a great believer in league tables.’

Toope’s tenure will involve a unique set of challenges. Beyond ongoing discussions about higher education reform, Brexit looms over many aspects of the University’s activities, particularly amid a flagship long-term funding drive. ‘It’s a tough strategic question for the University,’ he admits. ‘What I would say is that the whole university sector in the UK is globally admired, and I very much hope that the government, as it’s negotiating around Brexit, thinks of the university system as one of the most important assets of the country. I genuinely believe it is.’

He spoke about the ‘halo effect’ of Oxbridge, suggesting the government should share his belief that the strength of the country’s top two universities pulls up the rest of the higher education sector, which he sees as one of Britain’s exceptional strengths. ‘The message that I’ve been trying to send is that I think our interests are very strongly aligned, in many, many ways.’

At the University of British Columbia (UBC), in Canada, where Toope was previously president, he apparently achieved something of a cult status among the students. When he’s not lobbying the government over our exit from the European Union, I ask, will we find him singing alongside student union leaders? ‘The short answer is I do want to be accessible to students.’ What shape will that accessibility take? Toope’s answer: ‘breakfast meetings’ with students, something he tried at UBC. ‘I find it genuinely revealing,’ he says.

‘It is possible, in these kinds of jobs, to become a little isolated, because the pressures of the job are really very extreme, and the demands – always more meetings, always more travel, always more need to be in London to talk with people – so it’s possible to start to think ‘everything’s just fine’. But if you don’t have meetings with students on a regular basis, sometimes you don’t know what’s actually going on.’

Breakfasts, Brexit and brokering deals within a collegiate university that often struggles to put across a united front – Toope has a lot on his plate. More so than most vice-chancellors, he may have an opportunity to significantly shape the University’s direction through a period of political turmoil. Time will tell whether Canadian’s consensus-building approach can carry it safely through.

Zero tolerance campaign around sexual misconduct on campus

The new campaign ‘Breaking the Silence – Cambridge speaks out against sexual misconduct’, will highlight a range of new prevention, support and reporting measures coming into effect.

It launches with a new website and film showing CUSU’s women’s officer Lola Olufemi and senior leaders including Vice-Chancellor Professor Stephen Toope advocating zero tolerance of all forms of harassment.

The website gives contact points for help, advice and support as well as setting out expectations around mutual respect and consideration and the zero tolerance approach to sexual misconduct. Staff and students are also given information about the University, College and external reporting options via the website.

The campaign has been developed by CUSU, the University and Colleges and will be supported on social media using the hashtag #breakingthesilence.

The series of new initiatives to support those who have experienced harassment or sexual misconduct and to raise awareness of consent includes a new online Consent Matters course available through Moodle; an expansion of the Good Lad workshops in sports clubs to promote respect and tolerance; College staff training on handling student disclosures of sexual assault; the appointment of a University Sexual Harassment & Assault Advisor at the University Counselling Service; and training for University staff.