What and when did you study at Cambridge?

What was your background before studying at Cambridge?
I was an undergraduate at Harvard University, where I took the AB degree in History and Science, and prepared for entry to Harvard Medical School in 1963. My main interests at the time were in the biomedical sciences, and I planned to enter medical research. However, on graduation, I received a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge, where I found myself spending more time with the History and Philosophy of Science, and took a doctorate in History instead.

What did you do after graduating and how did this lead into your career?
In 1966, I became the first Junior Research Fellow in History at Churchill College, a step that greatly expanded my horizons. In 1967, Churchill generously gave me a leave of absence for a year to help set up the Science Policy Research Unit at the new University of Sussex where, in 1970, I was appointed to a Readership. Those were exciting days!

In the course of establishing a new transdisciplinary field, the social studies of science, I found myself teaching in Amsterdam, Paris, and Bologna, and in Germany where many new universities were being set up, as in Britain and Australia. In 1977, I went to the Foundation Chair of Science Education at the Institute for Education of the University of London, where I helped introduce graduate degrees in health education, women’s studies, environmental education, and computer studies for schools. My liberal education at Harvard and my research training at Cambridge have both served me well.

What advice do you have for current students or recent graduates?
My Cambridge life was so long ago that I don’t think any advice I might offer would be at all relevant to the current generation! But this I would say: don’t waste a minute of your years in Cambridge. Soak up as much of the place and the people as you possibly can. Once you leave, and start to burrow into your own specialty, you simply won’t have time. Go to the Fitzwilliam. Go to the Arch and Anth Museum. Go to the Arts Theatre and to lectures in far-away subjects you may know nothing about. Not doing enough of this is something I shall always regret. Nowadays, I try to go back to Cambridge every year, to catch up with ideas and people, and of course to use the University Library. I wish I could return more often!

What are you currently working on?
I’m now an Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney, where I still have an office and see students. I’m currently writing on the history of science in Western society, and am working at Sydney’s Nano Institute, to which I’m trying to add a range of social science perspectives. This new
Institute is focused on the development of applications arising from the nanosciences. I find especially fascinating the nanocharacterisation of biological nanomaterials, and their interactions with bacteria, cells and tissues. I am hopeful that work in this area, now gathering momentum across the world, will lead to fresh breakthroughs in the study of disease, and thereby hasten, in Francis Bacon’s timeless phrase, the ‘relief of man’s estate’.

University of Cambridge
Global Alumni Network