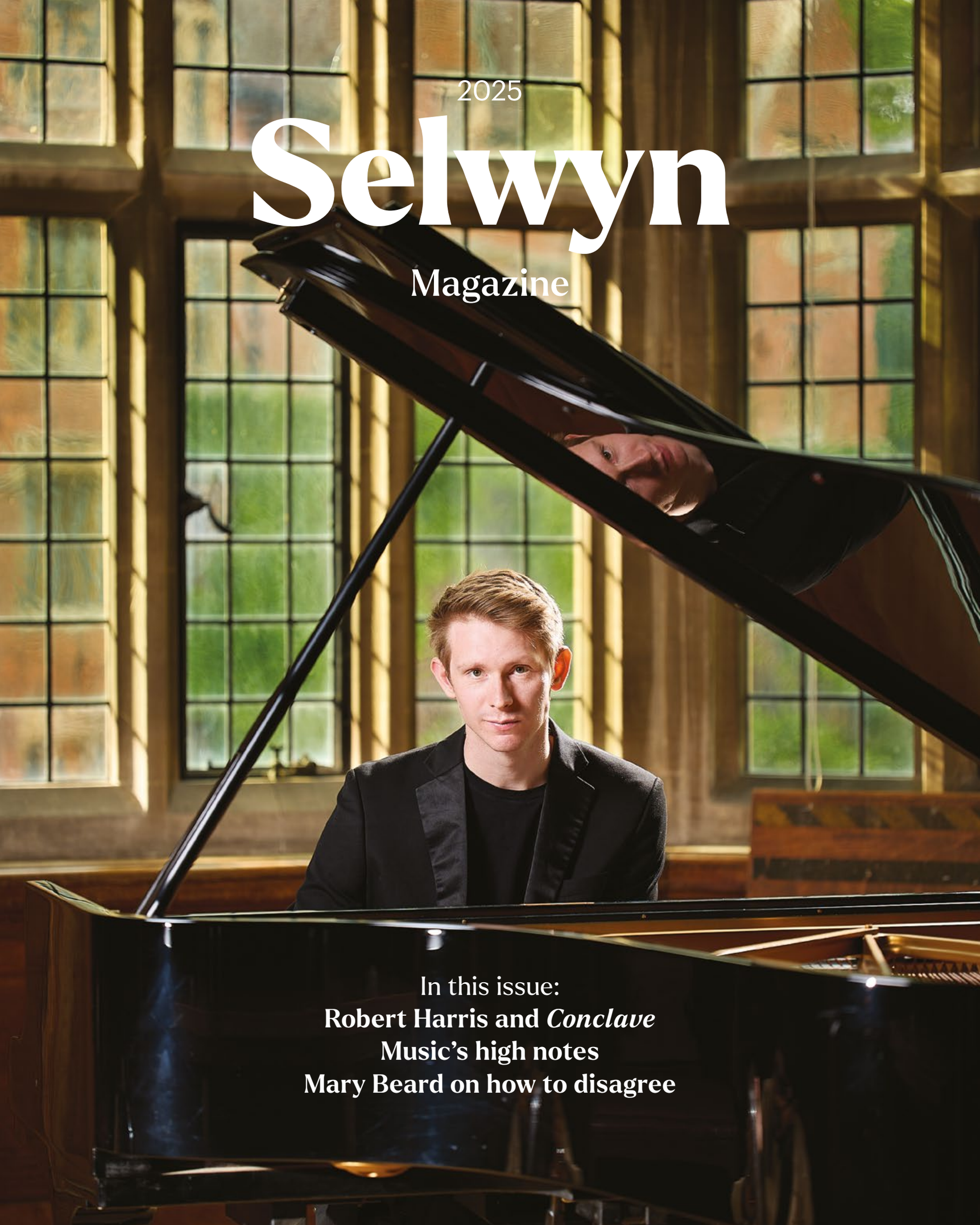
2025

Selwyn

Magazine



In this issue:

Robert Harris and *Conclave*

Music's high notes

Mary Beard on how to disagree

Selwyn Magazine 2025
Contents

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Welcome

This magazine likes to embrace the big issues of our time. The news today is often disturbing, but we believe that the voices of Selwyn people help illuminate the challenges we collectively face — and, whether you agree with our contributors or not, the debate leaves us better informed. Professor Mary Beard talked about the importance of open discussion in a session in the Quarry Whitehouse auditorium earlier this year, and we have shared some of her thoughts in this edition because they underpin what we try to do as a college. She emphasised the importance of being able to disagree: that we ought to be able to critique one another, and reintroduce nuance and respect into public discourse. Happily, nobody in our audience seemed to disagree with that.

But there was more dissent last November when we analysed the results of the American presidential election. Our alumnus Dr Christopher Wadibia explained in a public discussion why he had voted for Donald Trump, and we have invited him to reprise and develop his thoughts for this publication. There is a stereotype of some American voters which is unhelpful in understanding why Trump won, and Christopher takes on the argument with vigour. But other alumni have been caught in the assault on universities by the Trump administration, and they share their stories here too.

On a less contentious note, we celebrate the achievements of another alumnus — and college honorary fellow — Robert Harris, who managed to put himself on the global stage at precisely the right time. The film *Conclave*, based on his best-selling novel, was winning awards just ahead of the actual conclave in the Vatican; and we now know that many of the cardinals in Rome had seen the movie as part of their preparation for the real-life event. Robert also speaks about his own experiences of faith and doubt, and he allows himself a touch of wistfulness about the closing of some of the pathways that he took during his illustrious career.

Also in these pages: we explore the pressing question of whether Artificial Intelligence is capable of developing consciousness, with our award-winning academic Professor Marta Halina. AI is already changing the world about us, but will it take over — or does it know its limits? To illustrate the human dimension of these questions, we hear from alumnus Chris Parker who has had a life of writing for television and film, and now wonders whether AI will be replacing him in putting words into the mouths of characters in *Coronation Street*.

You will find our other regular features, too. We meet three more of our fellows, who happen to have been born in Italy, Malaysia and Iran — and therefore represent the increasingly global nature of our community. Our photograph selection this year focuses on college musicians (hence the cover image), proving that extracurricular activity is thriving — and, brilliant though they are, the choir aren't the only manifestation of musical life in Grange Road. And Roger Mosey contributes his last diary as master, noting that modern Selwyn would surprise its founders — but hoping that they would be pleased, anyway.

We hope you will enjoy what you read.

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News

Porter Helen Arnold bows out

Helen Arnold retired in May 2025 after more than three decades at Selwyn. She first joined the college in 1995 as a bedder, and in 2000 became, so far as we know, the first woman to serve as a porter at Cambridge. Her appointment was featured in the very first edition of this magazine (pictured inset). Over 25 years in the Porters' Lodge, Helen became a much-valued presence for generations of students and staff alike. On her final day, the college marked the occasion with a staff garden party — and Helen had the honour of leading a group of graduands in procession to the Senate House (pictured right).

Images: Getty Images / Alamy / Istockphoto / Philippe Antonello

Watched by the King and the Pope

Photo montage by **Klawe Rzeczy**

The new Pope watched the film *Conclave.* Based on **Robert Harris'** (SE 1975) book, *Conclave* was a guide to the mysterious Vatican processes that elect the global leader of the Catholic Church. Robert, one of Britain's most successful novelists, talks with **Roger Mosey** about the construction of the story, his relationship with faith — and how the transformative power of Cambridge is changing.

Robert Harris didn't go to the Academy Awards ceremony at which *Conclave* won the Oscar for best adapted screenplay. "I wasn't invited, to be honest, but even if I had been invited I wouldn't have gone. That would have been my idea of hell. I'd sooner be in a good Cambridge pub than in Los Angeles."

Robert was briefly seen on stage at the Bafta ceremony in London a few weeks earlier, on a night which marked the scale of success of his novel and the resulting movie. *Conclave* was hailed as the Best Film, as well as being named Outstanding British Film, and winning again in the best adapted screenplay category. But the event still wasn't for him. Talking to me via Zoom from his home in Berkshire, he is emphatic that is where he'd rather be: "I'm a novelist or writer by temperament as well as by profession. I like being alone in my study, working quietly. I don't like all the hullabaloo."

Yet he enjoys the influence that his writing has. The election of a new pope is always a huge global story; and, as Pope Leo XIV emerged as the new leader of the Catholic Church, for millions of people it was the fictional world of Harris' conclave that shaped their understanding of what was going on in the Vatican. And it wasn't just the public: the new pope, and other cardinals, had seen the film too. The pope's brother John Prevost told American television about their family conversation: "I said, 'are you ready for this? Did you watch *Conclave*, so you know how to behave? And he had just finished watching the movie." When Robert received his CBE at Buckingham Palace, the King revealed himself as another *Conclave* viewer.

Harris attributes part of the success to the crafting of the project. "They recreated the Sistine Chapel and completely took you inside it. It just shows what you can do with $20 million and very good actors." It is the process and the interplay between the cardinals that intrigued him. "They're locked away. They have nothing to do but concentrate on the matter at hand. You see the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates, and you coalesce around an agreed individual. And it seems to work pretty well."

There is a timely echo here of the process for electing heads of house in Cambridge colleges, and Harris says he was influenced by the C.P. Snow novel *The Masters*, set in the 1930s. "I always thought it was a very good novel about politics, and a conclave is even more an exercise in politics on a vast scale. But they're both about people locked in, having to reach a conclusion and having to enter a two-thirds majority with endless secret ballots until they get there. It's a perfect dramatic device, like a reading of a will."

At this point, we agree that the electors at Selwyn - many of whom saw the movie during the recent contest for the mastership – were probably allowed into the outside world to have dinner, at least. And certainly to have a break over Christmas. But Robert sees further parallels: "Broadly, every institution – whether a Cambridge college or a political party – is split between progressives and conservatives, and the church is no different."

We must be careful about spoilers here, but *Conclave* has a twist in its outcome which the church and no Cambridge college has yet managed. (So far as we know.) I suggested to Robert that the revelation was easier to deliver in the film, with the help of casting, than it was in the book. "Yes, I conceived the twist from the outset. I hope it played into the themes of the novel, and it wasn't just for the shock value. In preparation for writing the novel, I read the gospels end to end, over the course of a day or so, almost as if they were themselves a novel. And I was bowled over by them: I was struck by the overwhelming force of the message of Christ, and its revolutionary power. About poverty and the disgrace of being rich and welcoming strangers and pacificism. I compared this revolutionary message to the great edifice of the church which seemed to encase it and make it safe.

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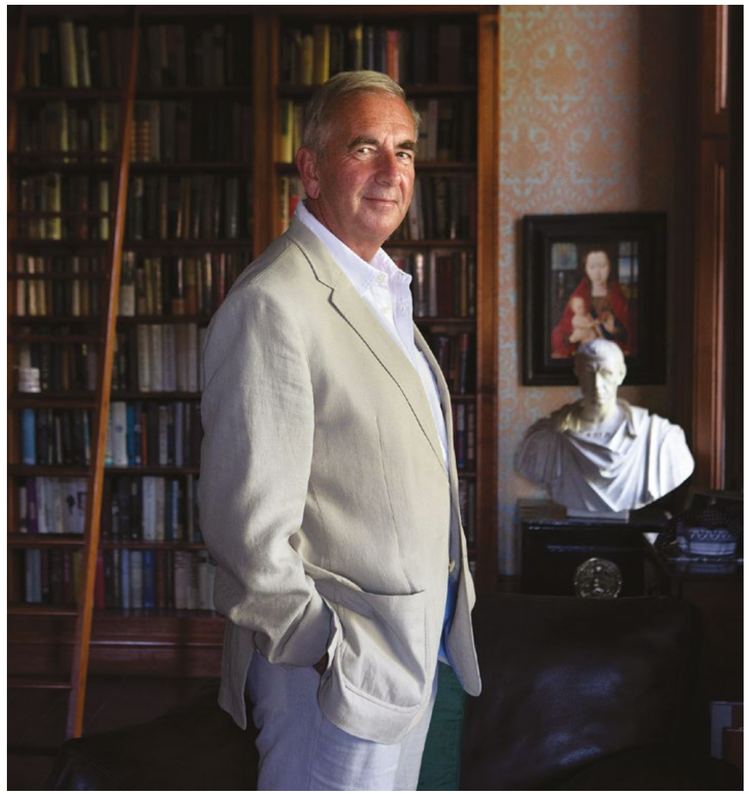
But there is, he concedes, something of himself lurking within *Conclave*. "I am full of doubts. I lack certainty, and I transpose a lot of that, I suppose".



Tom Pilston

I wanted to find some way of suggesting a pope who would subvert all this."

I have interviewed Robert Harris more times than any other guest at our Selwyn events and webinars, and like thousands of alumni I have read most if not all of his books. But in his amiable straightforwardness, it is tricky to work out what he believes personally or which characters win his sympathies. It's all deliberate, he says. "One of the things I love about being a novelist of my particular kind is that I never write about myself. The joy is the imaginative empathy of trying to inhabit a character."

But there is, he concedes, something of himself lurking within *Conclave*. "I am full of doubts. I lack certainty, and I transpose a lot of that. A great mentor of mine was Anthony Howard, who wrote the official biography of Cardinal Basil Hume. At the end of his life, Cardinal Hume had doubts, and I wanted to write about someone hugely senior in the church who nevertheless starts to wonder if God is there. So, in the novel, the dean of the college of cardinals makes a speech about the great enemy of tolerance being certainty, and certainty being the enemy of faith – and that is very much from the heart. One of the things I love about the film is that the whole speech is transposed from the book. It's the nearest I've come to a statement of my own philosophy."

So what next for Harris? "I think I'm going to do another Roman novel," he says, noting that his Cicero trilogy involved an enormous amount of research – "a pleasure for me" – and it is likely to span 30 years and include "quite a lot of military stuff". Which raises the question of how much his time at Selwyn influenced this attitude to research, and how much the college shaped him. "I was no great scholar," he concedes, "but I did spend three years studying English academically and that was incredibly useful. That has made me and the books. They are a reflection of my education." But simply being at Cambridge was transformative. "I came for my interview when I was 17 from a state school. No one had been to university from my family. And I had the most marvellous time: it moulded me and gave me a lot of confidence."

We have discussed over the years our similar experiences, albeit with mine being at Oxford. It leads to a conclusion that he expresses with an uncharacteristic tinge of regret. "Looking back, I'm like you. We're children of a particular post-war inheritance – an establishment, following the path that led from an ordinary home into Oxbridge, into the BBC, and into the cultural establishment, if you want to call it that. I don't know that the path is so clear anymore. I feel very much a product of a world that's gone or going." ■

PROFESSOR JOHN MORRILL
EMERITUS FELLOW

Turning to Catholicism

Being a Catholic used to be incompatible with being a member of Selwyn College. Now, one of our fellows — **John Morrill** — is a Catholic priest; but it wasn't an easy path for him. He tells us about his academic and spiritual journey.

Selwyn was an Anglican foundation, created by the Church of England to maintain its traditions as the university in the late 19th century opened itself to other religions. As recently as the 1950s, it was a requirement of the college for new students to show their baptism certificate as part of matriculation; but the mastership of Owen Chadwick, himself a great churchman, accelerated the transformation to the college of all faiths that we know today. But it was still not an easy road that I travelled.

I joined Selwyn from Oxford via a year at Stirling in Scotland on 1 September 1975. I had been a solid Anglican, as Owen Chadwick knew, but I had had a crisis of faith, which he did not know, and I was an agonised agnostic, being very angry with God for not existing. I had been taken in by 'Death of God Theology' as preached by the deans of Trinity and Emmanuel. I had thrown myself into good works with Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies and as a Probation Volunteer helping long-term offenders adjust to life after prison. With new babies arriving I did not continue with this once in Cambridge, but found solace in college Evensong. Although until not long before 1975 students who converted to popery were quietly given free transfers to other colleges, in 1975 Selwyn elected its first Catholic Fellow, Andrew Jones.

This made things easier when in Holy Week 1977 I had a conversion experience at the Requiem Mass of a Dominican friar I had known well in Oxford. I had shared my angry doubts and felt peace each time I did so. The church at his funeral was full of that peace and in an instant I realised that when I had spoken to him I had spoken to God. I sought out the Catholic chaplain and was received after nine months of instruction. Owen Chadwick asked me to offer my resignation as a Fellow (while saying he would decline to accept it) and I refused. He never held it against me but when I took over David Harrison's Tutorial side in 1979, the theologians were taken away and given to a lapsed Anglican tutor, which stung. Still I was given more and more responsibility in the college and in the parish of Newmarket where I had settled. By the early 1990s, I felt I was being called to witness more fully to my faith. I was constantly talking about ethical issues with tutorial pupils during the AIDS crisis and was also counselling those considering abortion, or experiencing sexual betrayal or bereavement.

But I had to leave God out of these conversations which frustrated me. At the same time, taking holy communion into care homes, and especially a home for those with advanced dementia, had given me a profound sense of sacramental grace. Somehow I felt a deep need to put these together. In trying to make sense of this, one day I blurted out to my then parish priest that would being an ordained deacon be possible? It was. After three years of formation, I was ordained two weeks after my 50th birthday in June 1996.

I wanted to do prison ministry at weekends, but successive bishops wanted me to oversee adult education in the diocese and a weekend a month teaching in a seminary and that proved a satisfying ministry for 27 years. After the death of my wife Frances in 2007, the bishop asked me to consider priesthood and my head told me to consider it. But my heart was cold to it. My daughters, having lost their mother, were opposed; also I could be deacon-professor but not a priest-professor. I still had things to do as an historian. I said no. But at 75 I decided I was jaded and had done all I could. Three things then happened in quick succession that said unequivocally that there was one more job I was called to. I spoke to the bishop and after 18 months of private study I was ordained priest in September 2024. Like coming to Selwyn in 1975, like becoming a Catholic, like becoming deacon, becoming a priest has been coming home to a place I did not know. I am sure it was meant to be. ■

Images: Getty Images / Alamy / istockphoto. Montage by Klawe Rzeczy.

Trump's America

The United States of America have had a vivid and at times a chaotic history, and the second presidency of Donald Trump is unleashing cultural and constitutional battles which will define the country for future generations. **Christopher Wadibia** (SE 2019), took his PhD at Selwyn and went on to a fellowship at Oxford. As an American citizen, he voted for Trump — and he explains why.

On Tuesday 5th November 2024 over 77 million Americans voted Donald J. Trump back into the White House to serve his second presidential term. I was one of these Americans. I voted for Trump for three key reasons. Firstly, Trump consistently mentioned the issues of immigration and the economy, the two issues I understood to be the most significant – and issues that countless polls revealed mattered most to Americans. The evidence was that too many people found Kamala Harris disconcertingly enigmatic on these themes. When asked about her plans to solve the immigration crisis and economic challenges confronting the American people, Harris would routinely redirect attention to irrelevant stories about her middle-class upbringing in a multiracial household. In response to these very same policy-related questions, Trump would frankly explain what I perceived to be morally challenging but pragmatically necessary solutions to these complex policy issues.

Secondly, I voted for Trump because of his willingness to stand up to what I saw as the unforgiving, anti-intellectual, and hyperemotional leftism that destroys the mental health, social joy, and spiritual wellbeing of millions of Americans. Let me be clear: I am against all forms of extremism, liberal or conservative. As a moderate Conservative (in the American political sense) more loyal to my values than any political party, I will happily vote a Democrat or Republican into the White House to serve as the president and commander-in-chief. However, it seemed to millions of voters that the Democratic Party of Kamala Harris was far more preoccupied with advocating for biological men to play in the sports of biological women (a highly emotive issue I felt distracted voters from other more broadly impactful issues like immigration, the economy, or protecting the environment) than with devising responses to more mainstream issues negatively affecting Americans. The poorly ordered values of Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party made voting for Trump, whose policy platform prioritised issues the majority of Americans saw as significant, an easy choice.

I am no Trumpist and I look forward to the post-Trump future of the Republican Party. However, in an American electoral system which often gives voters the option to choose between the lesser of two evils, Trump resonated with the values shaping my vision of what America should be to a much greater extent than did Harris. Here I concede that one of the weaknesses of the American political system is its conduciveness to

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generating messiah-politicians rather than constructing efficient, responsive government institutions. Every presidential election cycle I watch friends and family back in America speak about their preferred candidate in deifying terms suggesting they are more than flesh and bone. Their intoxication with celebrity politicians coaxes them to forget that any candidate is deeply and disappointingly human, capable of stunning successes and frustrating failures.

Thirdly, I voted for Trump because the Republican Party is far more hospitable to people of faith, especially Conservative Christians like myself, than its Democratic counterpart. The Republican embrace of Christianity, especially its Evangelical and Pentecostal forms, is obviously imperfect and fraught with political performativity. However, unlike in the Democratic Party, Christian faith and its ethical stances on policy issues are taken seriously and acknowledged as a core part of the lives of millions of Americans from the cliffs of California to the coasts of Alabama. The Republican Party has crafted for itself a public image of being the political party in America where faith is welcomed. During the 2024 American presidential campaign season, I felt that messaging at Kamala Harris rallies repeatedly mocked Christians for their faith-based political behaviour in ways that pushed them closer into the arms of Republican and MAGA (Make America Great Again) Communities eager to embrace them. The next generation of the Democratic Party would be wise to rebrand itself in ways more accommodating of the religious beliefs of millions of Americans, Christians included.

Since the start of his second term, Trump has repeatedly disappointed me. I loathed his treatment of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his White House visit on February 28th. I am deeply sceptical about Trump's policy of imposing sweeping tariffs on China. I believe major differences exist between running a business and leading a superpower nation-state. The extraordinary economic obstacles America faces, the greatest being its national debt of over $36 trillion, will not be rectified over the course of merely a four year presidential term. The Book of Proverbs in the Bible teaches that "An inheritance hastily gained [by greedy, unjust means] at the beginning will not be blessed in the end." My hope is that under Trump America will finally learn to embrace long-term economic planning in order to expand social mobility and generate greater wealth for current and future generations of Americans. However, I fear America has long since lost the inspiring future-oriented mentality of its founding fathers and will never recover it, whether under Trump or any other leader. ■

PROFESSOR IAN McFARLAND

Alumnus; Professor of Theology at Emory University, Georgia

Trump's impact on US universities

Life within American institutions of higher education is marked by tension, uncertainty and a feeling that the very integrity of these institutions is under threat.

Research universities and liberal arts colleges are the institutions most vulnerable to the proposed changes in federal policy by the Trump administration. It is useful to distinguish between these two institutional contexts: research universities are those that offer both undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, while liberal arts colleges are typically focused solely on undergraduate education, awarding baccalaureate-level degrees.

> **Life within American institutions of higher education is marked by tension, uncertainty and a feeling that the very integrity of these institutions is under threat.**

In the case of research universities, the vulnerabilities result from a number of historical and structural factors. One key reason is the post-war era decision, made at the federal level, to channel large amounts of government-funded research through universities. As a result, institutions like Emory University, where I teach, have become deeply reliant on federal research grants to support their work. Although these research grants are largely concentrated in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, as well as medicine, the size of the funding involved means that their impact extends far beyond those departments. The current administration has proposed cuts to the amount of indirect costs that universities are permitted to reclaim. These costs, which help cover essential infrastructure and administrative support for research, are vital to the functioning of research institutions. If these reductions are upheld – although they are currently being contested in the courts – the consequences would be devastating. Universities would likely be forced to make significant reductions in staffing, which would in turn diminish their research output. In addition, there have been threats to make future research funding contingent on policy changes within universities. The suggested policy changes include eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in hiring, restrictions on the participation of transgender athletes and even limitations on what areas of academic study are permitted.

Similarly, for liberal arts colleges, there is the alarming suggestion that access to student support programmes could in future be linked to compliance with government-mandated policy changes. Liberal arts colleges depend heavily on federally subsidised student loans and the federal Pell Grant programme – the latter designed to support students with exceptional financial need – in order for students to enrol and complete their degrees. This reliance is especially pronounced among the vast majority of liberal arts institutions that lack substantial endowments: they are therefore deeply dependent on tuition income.

One of the justifications offered by the federal government for the interventions on DEI has been the claim that antisemitism is widespread and unchecked on American college campuses. While there is undoubtedly antisemitism in the sector, other forms of discrimination and hate, including racism, sexism, anti-Muslim bigotry and homophobia also affect student wellbeing, yet these have received no comparable concern or action from the administration.

To date, the most significant collective response to this unprecedented level of federal interference in higher education has come in the form of a document titled A Call for Constructive Engagement. Issued by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, it has been signed by the presidents of 650 institutions, including major universities such as Harvard, MIT, Notre Dame and Yale. The statement affirms a willingness to engage with meaningful reform but also sets a clear boundary: "we must oppose undue government intrusion in the lives of those who learn, live, and work on our campuses."

While at one level the response to the document has been heartening, a closer look at the list of signatories reveals something worrying. Virtually none from research universities located in "red" states (especially in the South) have added their names, suggesting that institutions in areas under Republican control feel particularly vulnerable, and are especially wary of drawing attention to themselves, even to the extent of signing what is a fairly anodyne statement of concern. ■

Ian McFarland was the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge and a fellow at Selwyn. Today, he is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of Theology at Emory University's Candler School of Theology.

Images: Getty Images / Alamy / istockphoto / depositphotos / Nicholas Pfosi / Reuters. Montage by Kiawe Rzeczy.

DAVID GAYLE (SE 2020)

Former Master's student at Selwyn; currently a Kennedy Scholar at Harvard

A student's perspective

I learned the news from a WhatsApp group chat on a Greyhound Bus from Boston to New York City: "Trump Administration ends Harvard's ability to enrol international students". I sighed, unsurprised by this latest bout of presidential grandstanding, and chalked its fate up to TACO – Trump Always Chickens Out. The government would surely change its mind once the reality of barring 7000 students from America's richest and oldest university had set in.

But as my bus careered along the I-90, I thought about what it would all mean. I thought of my books, still lying where I left them on my bed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, pages dog-eared for a future that suddenly felt uncertain. I thought of the summer role I'd just accepted in Maryland's state government, and whether I'd make it to Annapolis. Most of all, I thought of my classmates at the Harvard Kennedy School, many of us from abroad, who had crossed oceans believing that the United States protected inquiry, not punished it.

That belief has been steadily eroding since March. It began with Trump's suspension of major federal grants to Harvard – a move which signalled a government driven by ideology over progress. The wrongful detentions of Mahmoud Khalil (Columbia) and Rumeysa Ozturk (Tufts) then confirmed the administration's strict intolerance for dissent. The assault on free expression and the intellectual diversity has now become business as usual.

My status as Trump's bargaining chip feels especially surreal as a Kennedy Memorial Trust Scholar. The Kennedy Scholarship, the 'living memorial' to JFK, was created to honour his legacy and to sustain a lasting bond between the US and the UK through shared openness, diplomacy and education. The dissonance between the meaning of my place at Harvard and the toxic political environment I find myself in is not only bitterly ironic, but tragic.

While the feud between Trump and Harvard may in time be resolved, it's doubtful whether faith can be restored in the US as a reliable destination. Returning for my internship this July, I plan to graduate in-person next May, but many others will be considering deferral or withdrawal from their programs altogether.

The Harvard visa episode has shown how a republic can reject the ideals of openness and exchange in the single stroke of a pen. The message I've received is one of enduring significance: 'you are welcome here until you are not'. ■

Eximina y Sergio

PROFESSOR MARY BEARD

Classic Mary

Mary Beard is one of the great figures amongst Cambridge's distinguished academics, and with an expansive media career too. In May, she enthralled an an audience at Selwyn with an account of her life and how her views have evolved. We collected some of those thoughts from that session.

...on the University of Cambridge

I've had a wonderful time here. I've achieved everything I wanted to, but the best way I can describe it, and I think this is more accurate than the rather overused term "imposter syndrome", is that it's felt like spending 40 years in a very nice hotel. The service has been excellent, the room has been lovely, and over time I've even been upgraded to the penthouse suite. It's been fantastic. But at the end of the day, it's still a hotel. It's not quite where I feel I truly belong.

There's a part of me that feels a little regretful, not because I've lacked support; Cambridge is, in fact, very good at supporting people, but because something about the place still feels a bit apart. And oddly enough, I'm grateful for that. I can't imagine anything worse than a Cambridge in which everyone feels completely at home. That would be a kind of horror.

In a sense, Cambridge University is none of us. I think we're all just passing through. For me, I honestly can't imagine how things could have gone better. When I first came to Cambridge just to see whether I could summon the courage to apply, it was absolutely terrifying. I was the first in my family to go to university, and it was all completely new. But the feeling that stays with me is the realisation that almost everyone else feels that way too. We tend to assume others feel perfectly at home, but they usually don't.

I've said it myself that people come to formal halls and don't know which knife and fork to use, or there are simply too many glasses. I remember once, at high table in another college, I must have been around 40, and my host remarked, after dinner, "You've put your claret in your port glass." And I thought, "Right, now you've revealed yourself – you're the sort of insider I have no wish to be." But the real secret is: you're never the only one who feels unsure. We all do.

...on liberals being 'tone deaf'

One of the worst moments of the previous Trump campaign was when Hillary Clinton, whom I admire despite her faults, referred to Trump supporters as 'deplorables'. That was a real misstep.

It's part of what I meant when I said the liberal order was falling apart. We failed to critique ourselves. We let pass things that many voters found irritating, or even ridiculous, without question. Speaking as someone firmly embedded in the liberal camp, I can say that we got complacent. We used words like 'woke' with uncritical self-satisfaction and assumed we were on the right side of history. I include myself in this critique. We didn't ask: "Hang on, what are we missing here? What are we failing to see?"

Brexit was another case in point. I remember sitting around the dinner table saying, "Wouldn't it be dreadful to leave the EU? Isn't the Eurostar wonderful?" You can get from central London to central Paris in just a few hours! But where I come from, in Shropshire, most people have never even been to Paris. Talking like that was deeply out of touch. We were, frankly, tone deaf.

...on civilised dialogues

What concerns me most–and perhaps this is a particularly academic response–is the coarsening of political language. That's what I find deeply troubling in the current political climate, particularly in the United States, though not exclusively.

The simplification of debate, the reduction of complex ideas to crude binaries like "he's a nice man" or "he's a nasty man", has consequences for all of us. And I don't know how we reverse that. How do we reintroduce nuance, responsibility, and respect into public discourse once it has been eroded?

> **The idea that we all have to sign up to one monolithic cultural viewpoint is stifling, and it ignores the fact that these issues are complex and often contradictory.**

What worries me is that we may be losing not just the rhetoric of respectful disagreement, but the very capacity for it. And if that happens, I fear we'll have lost more than we could ever gain.

...on the 'cancel culture' of recent years

I did take some nasty hits. Interestingly, a lot of those came from the political left rather than the right. And that was especially hurtful, because I felt: "Hang on, I'm on your side!" I remember thinking, "If I'm the enemy, then we're in serious trouble – there are people out there far worse than me." Sometimes, all it took was saying something mildly off-message, and suddenly I was being treated like a traitor. But we ought to be able to disagree. We ought to be able to critique one another. The idea that we all have to sign up to one monolithic cultural viewpoint is stifling, and it ignores the fact that these issues are complex and often contradictory.

I've been around long enough to see this play out repeatedly. I once visited a secondary school where students were discussing free speech. They were quite anxious, even outraged by certain topics, but also hesitant – they were afraid to say the 'wrong' thing in front of their peers. At one point, we asked how long they thought free speech had been a debated issue. They assumed it started with social media. They thought Twitter invented free speech problems.

They were astonished when we introduced them to figures like Giordano Bruno – or even Socrates. When we explained how Socrates was sentenced to death in Athens partly for corrupting the youth and challenging accepted beliefs, the discussion really deepened. They felt free to debate that because Socrates, of course, won't cancel you – he's already been cancelled. He's dead.

But say something controversial about Taylor Swift, and suddenly it's a different story! That, for me, is a key reason why studying Classics matters. It gives us a space where we can talk about difficult things and think freely.

...on feminism

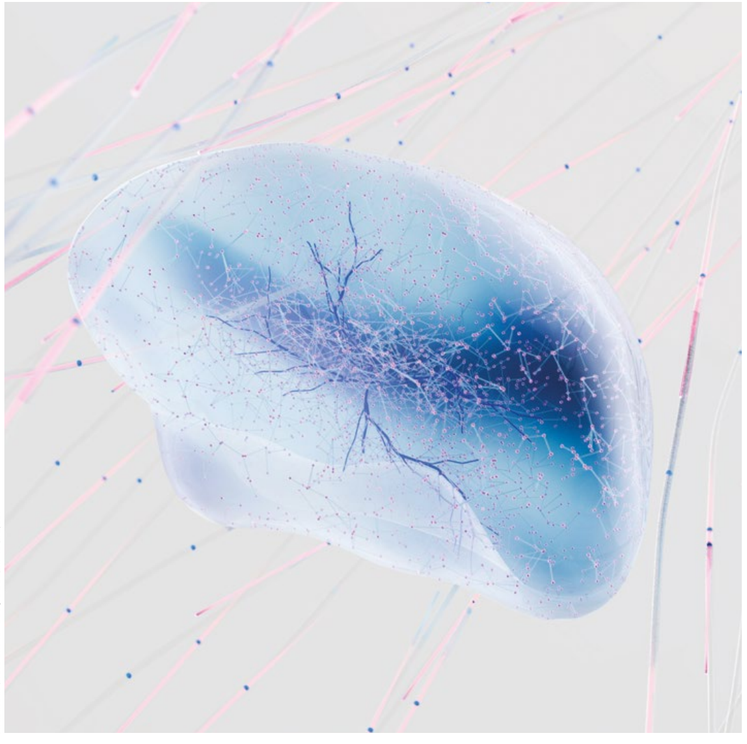
I was brought up with the basic principles of feminism: equal rights for women in terms of pay, opportunity and representation. It was the classic mid-20th century model – focused less on identity politics and more on practical issues like access to childcare, fair wages and maternity leave. And I had a very supportive father who believed in all of that.

For me, those principles have always felt completely self-evident. Yes, we can argue about the margins, but the core ideas are just obviously fair and true. I can't imagine seeing the world any other way. But I also think feminism isn't just about fairness for women – it's about fairness for everyone. If we, as a culture, fail to take advantage of the full talent pool available to us, we're all diminished. So this isn't – at its heart – a sectional issue. It's something that affects us all, whether we're talking about gender, race, class or any other form of inequality. ■

PROFESSOR MARTA HALINA
PHILOSOPHY OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE

Can AI become conscious?

Images shown are artistic impressions of biological sentience, as created by Google DeepMind, an artificial intelligence research laboratory.



Artistic impressions for Google DeepMind project

Artificial intelligence could be one of the greatest opportunities for humanity – but is it also our biggest threat? Opinion ranges from believing AI can transform health care, government and every aspect of our life, to a fear that it has the potential to go rogue and destroy us all. While the debate intensifies, we asked Selwyn fellow **Marta Halina** to guide us through the origins of human sensations towards an answer to one of the most-asked questions: could AI develop its own consciousness?

Phenomenal consciousness, the first-person 'what it's like' to be an organism, remains an intensely debated topic in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and other sciences of the mind. The subjective quality of experience – the specific feeling of your body against a chair, the unique sensation of smelling freshly cut grass, or the pang of a stubbed toe – these characterise phenomenal states. Such 'raw feels' or 'qualia' may include bodily sensations, perceptions or emotions. Crucially, such states seem inherently private and fundamentally distinct from third-person scientific descriptions.

The unique features of consciousness pose daunting challenges for assessing the inner lives of non-human animals and, increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI). When we ask whether a bat, an octopus, or an advanced AI is conscious, we are asking if it possesses such qualitative, first-person experiences. Thomas Nagel's famous query, 'What is it like to be a bat?' vividly encapsulates this difficulty: how can we truly comprehend the subjective experience of an organism navigating the world through fundamentally different senses to us, such as echolocation? Extending this methodological leap to sophisticated AI, whose architectures may differ radically from biological systems, deepens the mystery. Their potential for experiences remains beyond our current understanding, though it's a growing area of concern.

Despite these challenges, many researchers today actively investigate consciousness as a biological phenomenon, particularly its evolution on Earth. Indeed, there is a growing conviction that these lines of inquiry might help reconcile subjective, first-person experiences with third-person accounts. My own research contributes to this expanding field by studying the biology and evolution of cognition and consciousness in animals, and applying insights from these areas to the assessment of artificial systems.

What do we know about how consciousness evolved? All animals today likely descended from a common ancestor (the Urmetazoan) over 600 million years ago. There is now an emerging consensus that consciousness evolved early in animal evolution, around 540-485 million years ago. This period, known as the Cambrian, is famous for its diversification of animal life. Before the Cambrian, animal forms were generally simple, with few tissue types and limited mobility. By the early Cambrian, animals had developed complex bodies, appendages, and sensors, including legs, antennae, spines, sophisticated mouthparts, image-forming eyes, and other novelties. Researchers propose that this radiation of life was accompanied by a range of subjective experiences, including a sense of self, complex perceptions (combining information from senses), and rich evaluative experiences (such as feelings of pleasure and pain).

The emergence of a 'sense of self' serves as a compelling example of how researchers trace the evolutionary origins of subjective experience. The story begins with multicellular organisms. Unlike unicellular life forms, these are complex collectives of diverse cell types that demand sophisticated integration to achieve unified action. Nervous systems, researchers argue, were pivotal in providing this coordination, enabling capacities such as self-motion.

The evolution of self-motion, however, introduced a critical new challenge: organisms needed to distinguish sensations arising from their own actions from those caused by external events. For instance, an organism had to discern whether rustling leaves signalled its own passage or the approach of a predator. The solution lay in coupling motor and sensory systems. While sensory signals inform appropriate motor commands, the motor system, in turn, alerts sensory areas about upcoming movements. This allows the organism to predict the sensory consequences of its own actions. The result is a continuous, internal mechanism that differentiates self-generated sensations from other-caused ones, thereby forming the basis for a rudimentary sense of self.

Similar explanations from evolution also apply to other aspects of consciousness, such as what we see and how we judge things. The neuroscientist Bjorn Merker, for example, argues that vertebrates rely on their midbrain (the uppermost part of the brainstem) to generate an integrated 'reality model'. This model simulates the organism's body (including its motivational states) within the surrounding environment. Merker contends that such a simulation is not only necessary for acting effectively in a complex world but is also sufficient for phenomenal consciousness, as it generates a unified, first-person perspective of oneself in the world. The relevant midbrain structures are highly conserved across vertebrates and thought to have evolved during the Cambrian period.

Intriguingly, a functionally analogous structure, known as the 'central complex', has been identified in arthropods, including insects. This is particularly significant because arthropods were not merely present but were ecologically dominant predators during the Cambrian period. It is plausible, therefore, that these ancient arthropods possessed a central complex comparable to that found in modern insects, potentially supporting an early form of subjective experience.

The growing recognition that a suite of neural and behavioural markers for consciousness appeared early in animal evolution carries significant ethical implications. For many, the moral consideration afforded to other organisms hinges on their capacity for conscious experience, particularly states such as pleasure or pain. If consciousness is indeed an ancient trait shared broadly across diverse taxa (vertebrates, octopuses and even insects), this significantly widens the potential scope of our ethical responsibilities to include these organisms. Conversely, if consciousness were a more recent evolutionary development, perhaps exclusive to mammals or even just humans, then our ethical obligations towards many other animals might be less extensive. While a minority of scholars maintain this 'latecomer' perspective on the evolution of consciousness, the philosophical and scientific consensus increasingly favours an 'early origin' view.

Early origin views of consciousness suggest that subjective experiences are not exclusive to humans or even mammals, but might extend to a wider range of animals, potentially including invertebrates, such as insects and octopuses. This expanded perspective on biological consciousness prompts the question: if our views about consciousness in relatively simple organisms are shifting, should we also reconsider the possibility of consciousness in complex artificial systems?

Philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith, while aligning with an early origin perspective on consciousness, draws a conclusion that pushes against this extension to AI. He argues that the very reasons consciousness might have emerged early in biological evolution also make its emergence in current AI unlikely.

Godfrey-Smith's argument hinges on a distinction between the broad, coarse-grained functions AI might replicate (such as problem-solving) and the specific, fine-grained functions he deems essential for phenomenal experience. He argues that consciousness, having evolved biologically, is inextricably linked to a particular fine-grained functional profile. This profile, Godfrey-Smith holds, is rooted in the metabolic activities distinctive to biological life, which are driven by the unique material properties of molecular environments: nanoscale molecules in random motion dissolved in water. Such an environment enables fundamental processes, such as including attraction, repulsion, diffusion and spontaneous motion.

Godfrey-Smith suggests that phenomenal consciousness requires biological material; in other words, qualia cannot be instantiated in non-biological systems like contemporary computers. This requirement, however, stems not from any mysterious property of biological matter itself, but from its unique capacity to support the particular fine-grained functions essential for consciousness. It is precisely these functions, he emphasises, that materials such as the metal and silicon chips characteristic of current AI cannot replicate. Thus, insofar as AI systems lack the ability to engage in the types of fine-grained activities we find in living systems, they will remain devoid of consciousness, regardless of their sophistication in performing coarse-grained tasks. ■

Artistic impressions for Google DeepMind project

Alumnus **Chris Parker** (SE 1988) has spent his career writing for some of the most familiar voices on British television – from *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* to *Peppa Pig*. We asked him what it's like to write for characters who are already household names and, in an industry where budgets are tightening and AI tools are on the rise, what the future holds for the television writer.

Coronation Street, AI and me

Coronation Street creator Tony Warren spent his early childhood hiding under the dining room table, eavesdropping on his mother and her friends, soaking up their stories, their attitudes, their turns of phrase. He turned these into the world's longest running drama, driven by the desire to capture a world that was fast disappearing – terraces falling to the wrecking ball in the name of slum clearance, to be replaced by high-rise 'streets in the sky'. Ken Barlow, Elsie Tanner, Ena Sharples and the riveting backstreet universe that revolved around them entranced millions of viewers.

It's sobering to look back at this 1960 launch – the television drama equivalent of the Big Bang – from the vantage point of 2025. With production budgets slashed for all but the few shows with a guaranteed global audience, TV fiction faces profound questions about its ability to reflect the world of its audience – and what role actual human writers will play in its production. Within a year or two, will the eavesdropper under the table be the latest-generation AI tool?

Chris Boland

Tony Warren passed the *Coronation Street* writing baton to generations of under-the-table-lurkers who grew up eavesdropping on the show itself. Fast-forward several decades and one of them was me. The show had always been admired by its devotees for being 'true to life' and we writers dutifully strip-mined our memories and day-to-day lives for material as we raced to fuel this relentless juggernaut. But the writer's number one responsibility was to step convincingly into every character's shoes – to inhabit their voice so that it felt true to everything they had said up to that moment. No pressure!

"Testing times," murmured one of the old-guard writers, trying to unnerve this rookie as I prepared to turn in my first episode. And he wasn't wrong. I'd spent so many hours of my life absorbing these voices, I could feel them in my bones, and yet... Was my Ken Barlow Ken enough? Was he, in fact, too Ken – a parody of himself? Add long-suffering wife Deirdre to the mix and the possibilities for a mis-step increased exponentially. And that was before they'd taken a trip to the Rovers. I'd cut my writing teeth on five years' worth of teenage antics on *Hollyoaks*, but no amount of snogging and illicit cider-swigging could prepare me for my first visit to Rita and Norris in the Kabin, or the ins-and-outs of staging dialogue amid the whirr of sewing machines in the Underworld underwear factory.

Every character, it seemed, spoke in their own language, unique as a fingerprint. Only by attempting to write in those voices could the code, eventually, be cracked, and the characters could begin to live convincingly on the page and screen. And there's something both magical and terrifying about seeing characters you've watched for years begin to speak dialogue you've written, a little like John Travolta and Uma Thurman pulling you up to join them on Jack Rabbit Slim's dancefloor in *Pulp Fiction*.

I created my own piece of *Coronation Street* history, inventing the long-surviving character Chesney Brown, brought to life by the brilliant Sam Aston, which feels like having sewn a stitch on the Bayeux Tapestry. I moved on to write for *EastEnders* and, when my children were born, I began to write for shows that they could enjoy, beginning with *Peppa Pig*, where I had to think my way into the skin of Daddy Pig and Madame Gazelle. Later, on *Postman Pat*, I wrote Pat's first (and possibly last) delivery trip with a jet pack, while trying to nail the unique speech patterns of postmistress Mrs Goggins.

I've since gone on to write hundreds of episodes of animated shows ranging from Netflix's *Chip and Potato* to *Milo*, *Bing*, *Happy Town*, *Numberblocks*, *Timmy Time* and *Clangers*. For me, there's something uniquely wonderful about television – the fact that it's there, all the time, in your living room. The fact that it's our shared culture, and our memories of it weave their way through our whole lives. I love the fact that we take it for granted, like family and fresh water in the tap – like all the things that matter most to us. But also I worry that we won't know what we had until it's gone.

Chris Parker is the author of *Nameless Lake* (Salt Books) and *The Yes Bunny* (Magic Cat).

> **"This is the scenario that keeps writers awake at night — the idea that AI is whispering its promises of cost-cutting when the industry has reached a crunch point."**
>
> CHRIS PARKER

On any long-running show, the balancing act is to keep familiar voices fresh and unexpected while sounding exactly like themselves – a 'same but different' sweet spot that also goes for the kinds of stories shows prefer. With that in mind, it wouldn't require an outrageous plot twist to have show producers use AI tools to produce story outlines or even dialogue that mimics the speech patterns of well-known characters.

Much of the concern around AI has focused, rightly, on developers using writers' work without permission and infringing copyright. But there are other, perhaps equally pressing, reasons to be concerned. Remember all those social media posts when ChatGPT first appeared, where people would ask it to write, say, a passive-aggressive memo about keeping the workplace fridge tidy in the style of a Shakespeare sonnet? What's to stop a drama series tapping in a few prompts and using AI to churn out story suggestions and even dialogue, based upon the vast amount of "learning" material readily available?

Most writers begin a script by producing a 'draft zero' – a very rough early draft which is shared with no-one, but which is a crucial stepping stone between the blank page and the first draft that lands in the script editor's inbox. It's beginning to feel very possible that these draft zeros – lumpy, imperfect, but bearing the DNA of what ends up on the screen – could be routinely AI generated, with vast implications for the role of the writer.

According to the Writers' Guild of Great Britain's (WGGB) policy position statement, "While the AI systems are not yet sophisticated enough to produce works which accurately mimic the standard of writing produced by professional writers, this is a likely future scenario."

It quotes a report by KPMG, Generative AI and the UK Labour Market, which estimates that 43% of the tasks associated with authors, writers and translators could be automated, with humans 'fine tuning' machine output.

"Writers could be brought onto a project to 'polish' scripts written by AI tools rather than develop original work themselves and be paid less as a consequence," the WGGB claims. And this is the scenario that keeps so many writers, insomniac at the best of times, awake at night – the idea that AI is whispering its promises of cost-cutting at the very moment when the industry has reached crunch point.

A post-Covid boom in programme-making created a glut of shows, some of which are still on shelves waiting to be aired years after completion. Investors want streamers to focus on profitability, not simply expansion of the subscriber base. The result has been a dramatic contraction in global production which began in 2023 and has gathered momentum ever since. UK creative industries union Bectu has found that over half of the country's film and TV workers are not currently able to find work in the industry.

Writers can come across as Luddite in their approach to AI, but privately most understand that it has value as a brainstorming tool – something to bounce ideas off, at a time when writers have less and less opportunity to come face-to-face in meetings or to lock horns in that semi-mythical and highly-endangered space, the writers' room.

I have to stress that every producer I've worked with has, without exception, placed a very high value on the role of the writer, and has treated me with respect. I'm not aware of any shows using generative AI to produce story outlines or scripts – yet. But as pressure on budgets increases and new, more powerful versions of AI are released, I think it's inevitable that some will experiment with a view to eliminating the writer as an expense.

The monochrome world of 1960 sometimes feels unimaginably distant. But Ken Barlow still crosses the cobbles to fetch his *Weatherfield Gazette*, watched by millions. It would be heartening to think that today's kids, pretending to be engrossed by Roblox while secretly dissecting the foibles of the adults around them, will find there's still a place to tell their stories when they get the urge to capture the way we live. ■

Music at Selwyn

Shelly Lee (SE 2024), MPhil in Sociology.

The amount of musical activity enjoyed at Selwyn by Music students and non 'Musos' alike has always been plentiful and comprehensive. While the Selwyn College Choir may be the public-facing flagship, heard on BBC Radio and at college carol services and alumni gatherings throughout the year, enormous amounts of other music-making are going on as well. The Selwyn College Music Society (SCMS) Sunday evening recital series, started by then organ scholar Frederick Rimmer (SE 1946) shortly after World War II to allow returning servicemen to rebuild their musical careers, is still going strong, and several of those photographed here have played in it this year. The annual Williamson Prize for Musical Performance was endowed by former Keasby Research Fellow Matthew Seccombe in 1982, and was won this year by Shelly Lee, clarinettist (pictured right), and choral exhibitioner Amy Bolster. SCMS runs a popular weekly Thursday lunchtime organ recital series on the wonderful instrument in chapel, and there is plenty of informal music-making around the college as well, including the non-auditioned lunchtime choir 'Selwyn Voices' which includes members of staff, several fellows and plenty of students. As ever in Cambridge, those who do one thing really well, tend to do other things really well too, and students' discipline and striving for excellence can be seen in their dedication to the instruments that they play as well as to their academic work, regardless of academic subject.

Photos by Nigel Cooper

Above: Louisa Paterson (SE 2024), reading MML.

The Lady Springsteens. On drums: Max Fullalove (SE 2022), reading HSPS. On keyboard: Jake Solway (SE 2022), reading Law. And on guitar, Emmy Warr (SE 2022) reading Theology, Religion and Philosophy.

James Cozens (SE 2018), PhD in Engineering

Every year in this magazine, we profile three of our fellows to find out more about their academic work and what brought them to Selwyn. In these profiles, we discover that their starting points were Italy, Malaysia and Iran.

Global talent

Dott. Claudia Domenici

College Position
Director of Studies in Italian
University Position
Associate Professor in Italian
University Department
Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics, Italian
Subject
Italian
Research Interests
Language teaching methodology, and the interaction of language and culture with a focus on the transnational perspective

Thisath Ranaweka

Dott. Claudia Domenici

Where did your love of language start? Tell us about your background.
Travel has always been part of my family life. Many of my relatives live abroad, so I grew up with quite an outward-looking perspective.
My parents encouraged my sister and me to learn English from an early age. It wasn't a formal or strategic decision – it was just part of who we were.
And in the provincial part of Tuscany, Italy, where I grew up, that wasn't very common at the time. I'm very grateful to my parents for that, even though it sometimes made me feel like a bit of an odd one out.

Did you always plan to build a career in the UK?
When I was first starting out, I had very different plans for my life and career. My first degree was in Modern Languages at the University of Pisa. I then took up a temporary role as a language assistant at Cardiff University – my first job in the UK. During this period, I began to see the potential for building a life and career here. I realised I could continue what I'd begun with my degree in Modern Languages, but with a more specialised focus on teaching Italian. So, I moved to Lancaster, where the University offered an MA that allowed me to explore an interest in translation and translation studies whilst teaching Italian. After my MA, I worked at the University of Bristol running the Italian language programme. Then I was appointed to my current role in Cambridge, and this is by far my favourite part of the journey.

"The field has moved from viewing cultures as specific to recognising them as interconnected and transnational, and this perspective has become central to my work."

Dott. Claudia Domenici

Your expertise is in language teaching methodology. What does this mean?
There are two key aspects to my teaching. First, I'm deeply interested in integrating language and culture. Studying a language means engaging with the culture it expresses: its history, philosophy, art and more. Language is the key that unlocks everything: students can't go deep enough into their studies of culture without it. My aim is to give students the language tools to explore these dimensions by using material drawn from current affairs, literature, the arts and other cultural products.

The second aspect reflects a broader shift in modern languages over the past years. The field has moved from viewing cultures as specific to recognising them as interconnected and transnational, and this perspective has become central to my work. Italian culture today is an ideal case study, as it is shaped by migration, post-colonial identities and global exchange.

What does this approach look like in the work that you do with the students?
A key focus of my teaching is integrating all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening – across the programme. I've embraced this holistic approach through an ongoing project in which students prepare for and conduct interviews with Italian authors. They read and watch relevant materials, speak and listen in real time during the interview, then write, translate and reflect afterwards, which is a full, meaningful engagement with the language. The interviews are recorded and provide rich material for further language work.

The project reflects the transnational shift in Modern Languages. We began with major literary figures like Andrea Camilleri and Dacia Maraini, then moved to postcolonial writers such as Shirin Ramzanali Fazel (Somalia) and Gabriella Ghermandi (Ethiopia), exploring Italy's colonial legacy.

It's about understanding culture through contact, migration and exchange, which are core themes in today's curriculum. Like in English studies, there's increasing focus on decolonising the syllabus, and language teaching plays a vital role in that shift.

And in your free time, what keeps you busy?
Travelling is definitely high on the list of things I enjoy whenever I have a bit of spare time. It also means I get to spend time with family and friends, who are scattered across Europe and beyond.

In Cambridge, we love walking our dog in the beautiful countryside nearby. I really enjoy my yoga classes, and thanks to Selwyn, I've discovered a love of (attempting!) to sing with the wonderful Selwyn Voices choir.

Dr Anita Balakrishnan

College Position
College Lecturer in Medical Sciences
University Position
Consultant Hepatopancreatobiliary Surgeon, Addenbrooke's Hospital, nd Affiliated Assistant Professor, University of Cambridge
University Department
Department of Surgery
Subject
Anatomy
Research Interests
Pancreas and bile duct cancers

Could you tell me a bit about your early life?
I was born in Malaysia and began my early education there, before completing secondary school in Singapore and returning to Malaysia for the equivalent of A-levels. With both my parents being doctors, I was exposed to

Dr Anita Balakrishnan

Thisath Ranaweka

"There's a long tradition of Malaysian students coming to the UK for medical training. My parents did some of their postgraduate training here, so it felt like a natural step"

Dr Anita Balakrishnan

medicine from a young age and always knew I wanted to pursue it.

There's a long tradition of Malaysian students coming to the UK for medical training. My parents did some of their postgraduate training here, so it felt like a natural step. I came to Nottingham Medical School, really enjoyed it and decided to stay. I was drawn to surgery early on, and as I progressed through training, I knew it was the right path for me.

Medical training in the UK isn't quick. Where did the process take you?

Medical training in the UK is a long but well-structured process. For me, it began with a foundation year placement in Derby and then Taunton. These were smaller hospitals compared to Addenbrooke's, but they offered a broad range of training and valuable hands-on experience. After that, I completed a basic surgical training programme in Norwich, during which I developed a particular interest in hepatopancreatobiliary (HPB) surgery, which focuses on the liver, pancreas and bile ducts.

Then, I was nominated to undertake a PhD at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. It was an incredible experience and sparked what has become a long-term interest in research. My research was on how the intestine adapts to large volumes of food, particularly looking at changes in protein and gene expression. The Royal College of Surgeons recognised my work in 2017 and awarded me the Hunterian Professorship, which was a huge privilege.

After returning to the UK, I began the final six years of in-depth training to become a consultant, on the East of England rotation. For HPB, the main centre is Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, so I became an Academic Clinical Lecturer there, which allowed me to continue with basic science, translational and clinical research. I've been based in Cambridge ever since.

What are you working on now?

My clinical work focuses on cancers of the liver, pancreas and gallbladder. A typical week includes ward rounds, multidisciplinary team meetings, operating lists and on-calls.

Research is a big part of what I do. I lead a translational research project focused on pancreatic cysts and biomarkers for pancreatic cancer. We're working to understand the molecular changes that occur at the very earliest stages of cancer development, to improve early detection. I'm also involved in gallbladder cancer research – we recently completed the largest international multicentre study on outcomes following gallbladder cancer surgery, which has helped inform current treatment guidelines.

Teaching is also something I value deeply. I teach anatomy to undergraduate medics at Selwyn, and I support clinical training for medical students on placement from the university. On the postgraduate side, I examine for the final exit exams taken before becoming a consultant surgeon, write exam questions and sit on the panel that approves trainees graduating to become new consultants.

Are there any more research projects on the horizon?

One area we're focusing on is studying the molecular differences between gallbladder cancer tumours from different parts of the world – it's rare in the UK and Europe but much more common in regions like North India, Chile and South Korea. Thanks to the international collaborations formed through our earlier work, we're now collecting tumour samples and plan to analyse them in partnership with researchers at the Cambridge Biomedical Campus.

I'm also involved in the European-African HPB Association, which is the main surgical society for our speciality across those regions. We're working to coordinate large, collaborative scientific projects, building on studies we led during during the Covid-19 pandemic and on more recent research efforts.

What brought you to Selwyn?

I joined in 2021, shortly after the Covid-19 lockdowns. I was approached by Charlotte Summers and Grant Stewart to teach anatomy after the previous fellow retired. I hadn't experienced the Oxbridge collegiate system before, but it has been a great opportunity and I'm really enjoying it. There's a real sense of intellectual exchange among people from completely different fields. The support we can offer students is outstanding, and the environment helps them truly flourish.

Do you get a chance to unwind amidst all your responsibilities?

For a few years, I practised judo and jiu-jitsu, which I enjoyed. Unfortunately, I injured my hand, so I've had to take a break. I'm hoping to return to it once I've recovered. In the meantime, I've been reading more and focusing on my research while I've got a bit of time.

Dr Iman Tavakkolnia

College Position
Fellow in Engineering
University Position
University Assistant Professor
University Department
Faculty of Engineering, Electrical Engineering Division
Research Interests
Photonics, Optical Communication, Space Technologies

You've had a long journey across various UK universities, but your first degrees are from Iran. Tell us about your background.

I am from Rasht, a beautifully green city near the Caspian Sea in northern Iran. My childhood was shaped by academic achievement, influenced by my father, a professional doctor who consistently ranked at the top of his university class. I always aspired to follow in his footsteps.

Through a lot of hard work, I was accepted into the University of Tehran, one of the most prestigious institutions in the country, where I studied electrical engineering. For my master's degree, I went on to study telecommunications at Sharif University of Technology, widely regarded as Iran's leading technical university.

After completing my studies in Iran, I applied for opportunities abroad and was offered a place to pursue a PhD at the University of Edinburgh. I moved to the UK in January 2014. My research focused on optical fibre communication, approached from a theoretical perspective grounded in mathematical modelling. The PhD was a success: we published several papers, and the work supported my supervisor in securing further research funding.

After your PhD, you spent a while in Scotland, across universities. What were you working on?

I spent the next three years at the Li-Fi Research and Development Centre at the University of Edinburgh. I have always been drawn to a challenge, and this was an entirely new field for me: optical wireless communication, or Li-Fi. While it might sound similar to the focus of my PhD, it was quite different. I had to start from scratch and familiarise myself with a completely new set of ideas.

I later moved to the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, which has strong industry connections in my field. Unfortunately, this was in 2020, and the Covid-19 pandemic meant many of those connections could not be developed as planned. Even so, there were positives: Strathclyde was where I began my academic career. As a Chancellor's Fellow, I supervised my first PhD student and started work on a major national telecommunications project called Project REASON. The project involved collaboration with government offices and universities across the UK, and focused on developing advanced semiconductor devices with a multi-million-pound budget.

At first, the scale of the work was daunting. I sometimes found myself leading meetings with professors who had completed their PhDs before I was even born. But it proved to be an immensely valuable learning experience, and I continued contributing to the project after moving to Cambridge. Since then, I have also been involved in another major telecommunications initiative, Platform TITAN, which is led by Cambridge University.

Could you contextualise where optical wireless communication technology is applied?

It builds on principles from optical fibre systems but removes the need for physical cables, enabling applications from underwater to space. Li-Fi technology allows any light source in an indoor environment to communicate data. The data is modulated at very high speeds, so your eyes can't detect the change, but a photodetector can. Compared to radio waves, it is capable of much higher data rates. But it's still a relatively young technology – you don't see it in everyday use just yet. Some of my work focuses on exploring outdoor and space-based systems too, such as satellite communications. Beyond data transfer, this technology is used in non-communication applications too, which is what my current project focuses on. We can use these systems to provide extremely accurate location data, with centimetre-level accuracy.

Thisath Ranavaka

How have you found fellowship at Selwyn?

I was fortunate to be approached by a few Cambridge Colleges, but when I spoke to Mike Sewell, James Moultrie and the Master, I felt that what they were looking for aligned very closely with what I enjoy doing, particularly in terms of teaching and college life. Since I joined in October 2024, I have enjoyed the community and the support I've received to manage my responsibilities. It hasn't been easy, but coming to Cambridge was the right decision.

I now teach a module in the Department of Engineering and supervise first-year students at college. My teaching covers the foundations of communication and electrical engineering, but students are often curious about more advanced areas, such as lasers or space-based optical links. So whenever I can, I try to spark interest by sharing these ideas. While I don't formally teach my research in supervisions, I think it's vital to raise awareness of these areas. Fewer students in the UK are pursuing advanced degrees in engineering, leading to gaps in expertise across industry and government, but I've seen the impact exposure can have. This year, I supervised three final-year undergraduate projects in optical wireless communication. The students began with little knowledge of the wider field, but now some are seriously considering PhDs. That's encouraging, and it shows how important it is to promote research and academic careers in engineering.

What occupies you outside work?

Much of my time is spent with my two young children, who keep me busy. When I do have time to myself, I enjoy kayaking and being outdoors. The rain in the UK doesn't put me off, as the climate in my part of Iran is surprisingly similar. I'm also passionate about woodworking and often make pieces for the house and garden. ■

Development News

Over the past year the college has benefited from many new acts of generosity from alumni and friends. Here is a selection of a small number of these new initiatives, which in different ways will directly benefit the lives and experiences of our students.

Robert Martin Summer Projects Fund for Economics

The college has received a new gift from alumnus and fellow benefactor, Robert Martin (SE 1984), to support undergraduate students in Economics wishing to take part in an innovative summer research internship programme at Selwyn College. Up to six internships will be offered lasting for approximately 10-12 weeks during the long vacation. The programme will consist of both research and training components and is intended to provide focused research opportunities for students at the end of their first or second year of study. It will be directed by the Robert Martin Economics fellow, Oleg Kitov, with support from other Selwyn Economics fellows. The overall aim is to support students' learning, and our fellows believe this experience will significantly enhance their future career prospects. The college would be pleased to be able to offer similar opportunities to students in other subjects and the development director would be happy to hear from any readers who might be in a position to help.

Robert Martin.

The R C Read Fund for medical projects

The US-based Read-Gostick Education Fund, which was established by an alumnus, Raymond C. Read (SE 1941), and his wife, Lillian J. Gostick, has recently made a gift to the college. The gift is for the support of Selwyn medical students who wish to undertake elective or other research projects within the UK as part of their studies. Additionally, the Read-Gostick Education Fund has recently endowed a PhD scholarship that will support a Selwyn student studying at the Heart and Lung Research Institute, Cambridge; the director of which is Selwyn fellow Professor Charlotte Summers.

Professor Charlotte Summers (left) with Dr Jennifer Read of the Read-Gostick Education Fund in San Francisco.

Michael Colyer (SE 1985) with his Newfoundland – Henry (right).

The Michael Colyer Bursary

Around 25% of Selwyn's undergraduates receive bursaries, which vary in amount according to family circumstances. These bursaries help to create a level playing field amongst our students, ensuring that everyone can get the best out of their time at Selwyn and Cambridge. We are most grateful to individuals such as Michael who provide this support, which can make a huge difference to the students' experience.

John Craske Legacy to SCMS

Selwyn's students and SCMS have benefitted from a kind £5,000 legacy left to the college by John Craske (SE 1952). John read Medicine during his time here, winning the Scruby Prize, and enjoyed SCMS concerts throughout his time here. Split equally between student support and Selwyn's musical life, John's gift will help to support the expanded Cambridge Bursaries programme as well as helping underpin SCMS' renowned weekly concerts and purchase new music for the choir. For more information about leaving a legacy to Selwyn to support our students' extracurricular life, please contact Sam Davis, Major Gifts and Legacies Manager on +44(0)1223 767845 or at sjdd2@cam.ac.uk

New musicians at the Freshers' Recital in September 2024.

Master's Diary

The installation ceremony for my successor Suzanne Raine will feature a woman master being ushered into office by a woman bishop, Sarah Mullally of London, assisted by our dean of chapel Arabella Milbank Robinson. The election process was overseen by Selwyn's vice-master Janet O'Sullivan. This would have come as a surprise to the college's founders. When we talk about the college's traditional values, it is hard to square the exclusions of our foundation – women, and anyone who wasn't a member of the Church of England – with its spirit today. As John Morrill writes in this magazine, even Catholics faced barriers within living memory; and women have only been members for about a third of the college's existence.

And yet... We know that Kathleen Lyttelton, the wife of the first master, was an ardent supporter of women's suffrage; and early masters, including Arthur Lyttelton, were too. Kathleen was also a pioneer of women's trade unionism and was the first editor to commission Virginia Woolf. If you have been back to the college in recent years, you may have spotted that the former Tower room was renamed as the Kathleen Lyttelton room to celebrate her many achievements – and it is, we should note, somewhat bigger than the Arthur Lyttelton room on the other side of the court. I like to think that the Lytteltons would heartily approve of the college we have become.

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When people ask me what a master does, I sometimes say "I go to dinners". There are a few other elements of the job too, of course, but dinners fill the diary year-round. There are the set pieces of matriculation, graduation, admission of scholars; then the regular High Tables and formal halls; an array of reunions; the more informal freshers' suppers; and a multitude of invitations to other colleges and to university events. They have all been enjoyable, and I have learned to manage the potentially-horrific calorie consequences: go easy on puddings, and keep the alcohol intake low. (Unless it really has been one of those days...) Inevitably, heads of house become familiar with the quirks of catering across Cambridge. There is one college where the chef likes meat to be so rare that you can expect to see the main course gambolling round the court during the starter. Another likes challenging menus, so guests were served an eel starter and a rabbit and offal main course – though that was beaten by a jugged hare offered at another grand college.

I am firmly of the view that some traditional dishes have disappeared for a good reason. I aim still to be attending Cambridge dinners for a few years yet, but I hope it doesn't sound ungrateful to say that the idea of some suppers in the kitchen at home is alluring.

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We're used to the national dialogue being about 'broken Britain' and, as an optimist, I think that's sometimes overdone and the potential for our future remains huge. But one of the things that has become unquestionably worse in my time in Cambridge is the traffic. It is often quicker to walk from the station to Selwyn in the teatime rush hour than to rely on a cab. The new hazard is the council's traffic management system near the Catholic Church, which turns Hills Road and Lensfield Road into car parks. Buses can't move, either. Every so often, a local politician suggests the answer is light rail and some tunnelling – and that must surely be right if the city is to expand in the way the government wants. But nothing has happened, and Cambridge's multiple layers of local administration seem incapable of getting moving.

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The photo on this page shows one of the perks of the jobs and the benefits of celebratory dinners. How can you not love a college where the ranks of amazing alumni include Hugh Laurie and Tom Hollander, both honorary fellows of Selwyn? My suggested caption is "two stars and an old master", which in my case is about age and title rather than capability. But I must learn from them how to take a bow and leave the stage.

Roger Mosey