

## First year dinner speech 2014

Let me invite you to give a round of applause to the wonderful staff in catering and the kitchen, who have provided your first taste of Somerville's cuisine.



This is one of my favourite moments in the year; a time of celebration for the whole College. We are all delighted to welcome this year's new members. You have come to Oxford from all over the world, many of you arriving in this country for the first time, to study in a language that is not your own first language; and for most of you too, both British and from overseas, this University and this environment will be completely new to you. Whether you come from far afield or close to home, you have all worked hard, you have achieved great things already to make the grade to come to Oxford, and you have taken a leap of faith. I salute you all for the courage and imagination that have brought you here.

Now we are going to ask you to work even harder and achieve even more. You will find yourselves asking new questions and developing intellectually in ways you may not yet have dreamed of. Somerville's tutors and professors, and the many other academic tutors and supervisors you will meet in Oxford, have a hard-won reputation. Some are finding new ways to understand society from ancient times to the present, analysing human language and applying that analysis to modern society, looking at the world through the perspective of patterns, systems and theories, reading the literatures of Europe and the world through their own fresh lens and with the wisdom of centuries at their back. They include people who are pushing the boundaries of science and medicine to find new cures for the world's ills and new understanding of our environment. Your tutors will share with you the excitement that comes from fresh research. Their accumulated achievements help to place the University of Oxford consistently in the top five or six universities in the world.

When it comes to teaching, Somerville's tutors have an especially enviable reputation. Each year, a nation-wide survey of student satisfaction places the University of Oxford comfortably within the top ten per cent of British universities, and among the Oxford colleges, Somerville came at the very top of that league for 2011. Every year since then, while other colleges jostle with us

at the top of the table for overall satisfaction, students like you have rated the learning experience and the quality of the tutors at Somerville consistently right at the top. Somerville tutors quite often win University prizes for their teaching, in addition to the impressive array of prizes, honours and distinctions that they have garnered for their research. Your tutors will do everything they can to help you do as they have done in their own working lives: achieve excellence and then surpass it. Let me say also, that this great college is absolutely committed to your success. We want you to enjoy your studies and excel. When the going gets rough, as it will sometimes, we are here for you too, and we always will be.

So now you have joined one of the most glorious institutions of learning it would be possible to find; and your challenge is to live up to it. But that is quite enough of the scary stuff. You wouldn't be here in the first place if you weren't equal to the challenge. At the end of this speech I will touch on the all-important topic of having fun. First, let me say a bit about the traditions of Oxford, and of Somerville in particular.

Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world. The University has developed over its nine centuries in extraordinary and often eccentric ways, but throughout that time there have been some common threads, and you sitting here tonight partake of that tradition. In 1879 a group of progressive-minded scientists, scholars and writers founded Somerville Hall (it later became a College) to extend those traditions at long last to women, that one half of the population who until then had been excluded from an Oxford education. Mary Somerville, whose portrait you can see at the end of the Hall, had been barred from the world of learning herself but broke into it with determination and sheer talent to become a leading mathematician and astronomer, a best-selling scientific writer and the best known female scientist of her own time. A friend of Charles Darwin and the lead signatory of John Stuart Mill's petition to Parliament for votes for women, she died (aged nearly 92) seven years before the Hall bearing her name opened its doors, but her fame lived on. No more fitting name than hers could have been chosen to signify what this College stands for.

From the beginning, the College opened its doors to people of any and all religious and national backgrounds. All that was asked of them was a

commitment to studying and working hard, and a belief that only the very best they could do was acceptable. Somerville College began its existence by renewing in a dramatic fashion, the University's commitment to include those who previously had been excluded and to open opportunities to those in that community who could reach the highest possible academic standards.

For the past twenty years, Somerville has admitted men and women. You are here in approximately equal numbers, and the women and men amongst our Fellows share notably in a commitment to inclusion, internationalism, tolerance and diversity, which are among Somerville's traditional values. A few examples plucked from our past will illustrate how those values have developed.

There is the first Principal Madeline Shaw Lefevre, seated behind me here, holding one of her elegant silk gloves in one hand. It was her unquestioned good judgement in social matters that qualified her to lead the fledgling hall. She knew that the presence of young women in Oxford was regarded with deep suspicion: there were even Oxford dons who claimed with spurious scientific evidence, that educating young ladies rendered them physically unfit to be mothers. Shepherding and chaperoning her flock of frighteningly intelligent young women into University lectures, Miss Shaw Lefevre lodged them in careful austerity here, at a demure distance from most of the men's colleges, even and especially including that new bastion of ecclesiastical masculinity, Keble. Thus she helped Somervillians to become accepted as a normal part of the Oxford landscape.

Madeline Shaw Lefevre could be quite fearless and innovative when she chose, however: it was she who helped raise the funds to bring our first Indian student here, Cornelia Sorabji, who became the first woman to read law at Oxford and the first woman to practice law in India, where she worked for the rights of secluded women in purdah. Somerville has had a strong international tradition ever since. Today, some 75% of graduate students and up to 25% of undergraduates come from outside the UK, proportions that well exceed the University's average. We are establishing an India Centre for Sustainable Development, whose second year of Indira Gandhi scholars on postgraduate scholarships from India are among you here. And Somerville also houses the secretariat of the Global Ocean Commission, a group of world leaders who are

committed to reforming the way we treat that 45% of our planet that is made up by the world's oceans.

Another portrait you'll see in the Hall, to the right of the High Table, and appropriately wearing her academic gown and hood is that of Emily Penrose, a long-serving Principal with a fierce dedication to high standards. It was fitting that she should be the Principal in whose day (in 1920) women were finally admitted to gain University degrees. She had always insisted that they must take exactly the same courses and exactly the same examinations as the men; the only difference being that wherever possible they should do better. She too was a fierce guardian of Somerville's virtue: when the College was evacuated to Oriel in the First World War to make way for a hospital for wounded soldiers, she ensured that a solid brick wall separated the male from the female students. Enterprising Aurelians breached the wall one evening with a pick-axe, but they were no match for Emily Penrose. Upon news of the breach, she donned her second-best hat and took up her place seated beside the hole in the wall for the night, to prevent any improper commingling of the sexes.

When I arrived at Somerville in the 1960s, Dame Janet Vaughan (whose portrait hangs at the end of the Hall at right-angles to Mary Somerville) was coming to the end of a long tenure as Principal, and introduced some liberal reforms. Most notably, she introduced late keys. I can remember feeling very proud of the fact that Somerville was the first college in Oxford where you no longer had to climb in over high walls and spiked railings if you had been out partying after midnight. Dame Janet had greater claims to fame than that. A distinguished nutritionist, she was the first doctor to enter the concentration camp at Belsen after the Second World War, and studied there the effects of starvation on the human body. She was also the person who set up Britain's national blood-transfusion service.

The most famous of Somervillians, however, are not our Principals but others whose abilities and aspirations have carried them to the top. Well-known novelists like Dorothy L. Sayers, pioneer of detective fiction, who came to the College just over one hundred years ago, and the far more recent Iris Murdoch, are only two in a long succession of Somerville novelists. Winifred Holtby was another, whose fame revived with the recent TV series based on her novel

*South Riding*. To my knowledge, at least four people who have just graduated are writing novels now, so the line continues.

So too does the line of great scientists. Best known of them all is Professor Dorothy Hodgkin, who was a student and then a Fellow of Somerville for most of her life. This year is the fiftieth anniversary of her being awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, the only British woman scientist ever to have won a Nobel Prize. Professor Hodgkin's fame rests not only on her genius as a scientist but also on her idealism, which led her to pursue for most of her life a passionate campaign for world-wide nuclear disarmament.

All these writers, scientists, lawyers and academic leaders have brought reflected fame to Somerville and all in their different ways embodied the values of friendship, hard work and devotion to excellence that form part of the fabric of the Somerville community. So too do the business leaders who have emerged particularly in the recent history of the College, with some prize-winning entrepreneurs among them. But no roll-call at this college would be complete without talking about our politicians. Five current Members of Parliament and five members of the House of Lords studied at Somerville. One of the long succession of distinguished Indian students was Indira Gandhi, the first woman to lead the largest democracy in the world. And then came Margaret Thatcher, a pupil of the great Dorothy Hodgkin, who became not only the first woman but also the first scientist to be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Professor Hodgkin, who was as left-wing in her politics as her student was right-wing, used to visit Chequers regularly to bend the Prime Minister's ear on the need for disarmament. Apparently she was the only person Margaret Thatcher held in awe, and it is said that when Dorothy Hodgkin's visit was expected, the Prime Minister would read up carefully beforehand. Picture that legacy of the tutorial experience: however high you may rise in the world, you may still be in awe of your tutor. There is something both touching and admirable about the way that these two people who had each reached the pinnacle of their chosen career, could listen to each other with respect despite the many opinions that divided them.

My final example is Baroness Shirley Williams, Labour Cabinet Minister under Harold Wilson, champion of civil liberties, and one of the founders of the Liberal Democrats. She read PPE at Somerville from 1947 -1951, and I am

happy to say that she returns often to the College, including a visit planned for next month, when she will speak in memory of her mother Vera Brittain (also a Somervillian) the author of the great classic memoir of the First World War, *Testament of Youth*. Watch the web site and Facebook for the programme.

You will find Lady Williams's portrait in the new Brittain Williams room, carefully framed behind glass to protect it from any inadvertent damage during college bops. When a bop is not in the offing, you may of course prefer to hang out in the new Terrace bar. Somerville is a serious place of learning but, right in the heart of the Jericho district as we are, there is also a bit of a tendency to become party central. (Not always good news for our long-suffering porters and deans.) You will find here, in College and in the wider University of Oxford, outlets for most talents: from rowing, rugby and just about every sport (Quidditch matches in the Parks alongside tennis and cricket) to drama, debating in the world-famous Oxford Union, societies for business studies, and any number for those who want to pursue the arts. Somerville has a brilliant choir and I hope some of you will join it. You can use our practice room for most kinds of music. The list goes on. Most important of all, this is a time when you will make some of the most enduring friendships of your lives. (Incidentally, three Somerville couples got married in College just this year, and at least two more outside.) I know you will all find ways to enjoy the company of your fellow Somervillians, and your friends will be a source of support, comfort and delight.