

What is Robinson College?

Robinson 16/6/24

John Donne: Meditation XVII

I Corinthians 12:14-26

At the very beginning of the Easter term I visited an exhibition on the Sidgwick site of photographs taken by Susan Drucker-Brown, who was both a social anthropologist and a long-term friend of this College, having been married to Mick Brown, one of our Founding Fellows. Susan made a special study of women's clothing, and looking at her photos, I was struck by the dress adopted by children who attended the first schools to be established in the Mexican villages she visited. A new way of life, it seemed, demanded a new mode of dress, so they abandoned their traditional attire for the western clothes they associated with education.

The way we dress says something about the way in which we see ourselves – and the way in which we wish *others* to see us. Why did the first undergraduates at Robinson insist that gowns should be worn on formal occasions? Because it identified them as members of the Cambridge academic community. Architecture plays a similar function. Take churches, for example. It is often said that a church is a community, not a building, yet the building where that community worships tells us something about how its members see themselves, and how they conduct themselves. Go to Ely Cathedral, and you expect formal worship; go to a small chapel, and you will experience something more intimate. Is it the building that creates the worship or the worship that creates the building? It's a bit of a hen-and-egg question.

And it's the same with colleges. Their architecture projects an image. Say 'King's', and outsiders will undoubtedly think of King's College chapel; say 'Trinity', and they will envisage the great court. Say 'Robinson', and – supposing they've heard of us! – they will think of a pile of red bricks! Our buildings are not the College, but they are what outsiders see – and may perhaps tell them more than we expect.

Robinson's building has often been compared to a castle. We have a ramp leading up to an imposing gateway – though there is no moat and no portcullis. Our ramparts seem designed to repel outsiders. It is, in fact, an appropriate image, for when the College was founded, we faced all sorts of opposition. Opposition from other Colleges, who thought they could have used David Robinson's money to better effect; opposition from our neighbours, who were appalled not only by the destruction of three tatty Edwardian houses on Grange Road, but by the thought of swarms of noisy undergraduates who would be moving in. Robinson's 'fortress-like' appearance seems to express our defiance in those early days: we *would* make our way; we would prove ourselves worthy to stand alongside the older colleges. We *would* achieve academic excellence. And we did!

Yet of course this image of a fortress is all a charade! Go back *behind* the façade, and you discover a beautiful garden, open to the world. The wings of the College are like arms inviting everyone in. Here there is no defence – as organizers of May Balls soon discover! Once again, how appropriate for a community that prides itself on being inclusive, friendly, welcoming. Here there are no barriers: unlike other colleges, there is no Fellows' garden, and anyone can walk on the grass!

The traditional Cambridge college is built as a series of courts. We have our courts, too, but they are all squashed together, united by brick rather than lawns – a solid block that houses most of the residents, forcing us to meet one another. Older colleges are designed round staircases – presumably its residents get to know the people on their staircase; in Robinson we are connected not just by staircases but by walkways as well. You cannot escape your neighbour, for you are linked both horizontally and vertically. Our architecture fosters friendship and encourages a sense of community. If you've ever looked at the plans and models submitted by hopeful architects 50 years ago in the competition to build the College, you will see some very different suggestions; lots of separate buildings scattered round the site; cosy, perhaps, but hardly fostering a sense of community, and destroying our big central garden. Solid bricks may be harsh, but they have served their purpose.

A college needs not only study-bedrooms, but communal meeting-places. We have both a large auditorium and a small one, for lectures, meetings and performances, while the Red Brick Café and Bar provide a meeting-place for everyone. We have a Hall, which is anything but traditional; true, we have a ‘high’ table, since we soon discovered that undergraduates prefer their own company to that of the Fellows, but it is not elevated. And our Chapel is also unlike anything in other colleges. Fifty years ago, with the foundations of the College already laid, and the walls going up, the first Fellows were still meeting the architect to discuss its interior. At each of our regular meetings to discuss the Chapel, the architect presented plans with pews sketched in, and at every meeting I protested: ‘We are *not* having pews!’ I’m glad to say I won! The chapel is intended to be a *flexible* space, where we are united, not tied down or divided by any structures.

And ‘flexibility’ is a good term to use of our attitude, in those formative years, to traditions. We spent a lot of time, in the year before our official ‘founding’ in 1977, discussing what kind of college we wanted. We were the first new undergraduate college to be established for a century – what kind of community were we trying to build? First, of course, we saw ourselves as a Cambridge college – and that meant that we inherited many ancient traditions. So – at the insistence of our first undergraduates – we wore gowns for formal occasions, and had a Latin grace before Hall.

But there were some traditions that we regarded as not simply unnecessary but as bad. For centuries, Cambridge had been very introverted: it had been totally male – women were grudgingly admitted as full members of the University as late as 1948; its undergraduates had been predominately drawn from public schools; it recognized graduates of Oxford University and Trinity College Dublin, but treated those from elsewhere as outsiders. But things were slowly changing, and Robinson was founded at just the right time to boost that change. We abhorred traditions that excluded anyone, and we deliberately encouraged those who might never have considered coming to

Cambridge to apply to us. We were mixed from the beginning; we included graduates from other Universities; we welcomed families. We respected the past – honoured what was best of Cambridge traditions – but were open to the future, and to what could now be achieved, without adopting gimmicks. Our original College community was small, motivated, friendly; and from that core it has grown into what it is today.

So what *is* Robinson College today? A thriving institution, clearly, in spite of water trying to destroy our building, but to what extent does it continue to embody our original aims? We certainly claim our place as one of Cambridge's Colleges; traditions – hopefully the best ones – are still embodied in our way of life. History is important to us, as we will be reminded as we come up to our own 50th anniversary. We learn from the past. Never abandon the past simply because it is old; our roots are important.

But what are our aims? According to our Statutes, Robinson College is 'a place of education, religion, learning and research'. People are sometimes surprised by the inclusion of 'religion' in that list, and even want to omit it. Education, learning and research are all clearly part of what we are up to, in our different ways, but religion? Is this simply another of those unnecessary hangovers from the past – from an age when the University was essentially run by and for the clergy? Does 'religion' mean the propagation of the Christian faith? The answer is 'no'. The inclusion of religion in our aims is rather a reminder of the *attitude* with which we should be pursuing education, learning and research. It is a reminder that we should be pursuing education, learning, and research, not for our own satisfaction or benefit or fame, but in pursuit of the truth and for the welfare of others.

We come to Cambridge to learn – yes. But once we join Robinson College, we become members of a community, and we are no longer solitary scholars seeking knowledge, but members of a body that has responsibilities for us, and to which we, in turn, have responsibilities. It is, of course, possible to become a solitary nerd, and ignore others. But being part of this

community means – or should mean – that we are aware of others, and concerned for their welfare as well as for our own. In contrast to the ‘Me too’ movement – not to mention the prevalent unnamed ‘Me First’ movement – we are members of a community where ‘You’ are important; a community where we learn from each other, interact with each other, help each other. Our college is a community where we do things together, learn together, eat together, sing together, relax together; a community where we discover disciplines other than our own. We come to Robinson, not just to get an education, but to be part of a community where friendships are formed, and where we learn to respect the views of others; a community in which the small hours are used, not simply to write essays, but to discuss the meaning of God, the Universe, Life and Everything with our mates.

Those who join this College, whether as undergraduates, graduate students, or Fellows, become members for life. In future years you can ignore us if you wish, but you can’t opt out. Willy nilly, you have been grafted into a body, as John Donne put it: he was writing about baptism into the church, but it’s true of the College. Members of staff, too, some of whom stay here for 30-40 years, feel intense loyalty to ‘their’ college.

What is a college? What is *Robinson* College? It is a vibrant community, devoted to the pursuit of education, religion, learning and research. It is a friendly community that holds together the aim of achieving the highest academic standards with concern for every member. It is a community to which I, for one, am proud to belong,