

The Times Obituary (before editorial changes)

Stephen George Fleet

Stephen George Fleet, MA, PhD, FInstP, FRSA, Registry of the University of Cambridge, 1983-97, and Master of Downing College Cambridge, 2001-03. Born September 28, 1936, died on May 18 2006, aged 69.

The office of Registry, the chief administrative office in the University of Cambridge, is an ancient one dating to 1506. At times, it was an undemanding appointment. Joseph Romilly, Registry from 1832-62 gave cause for the Vice-Chancellor to rebuke him for “his frequent absences from Cambridge during term time”. The opposite rebuke might have been in order for Stephen Fleet who, as one of the most distinguished University administrators of the late 20th Century, was also well-known in Cambridge for his prodigiously long working hours.

Stephen Fleet devoted his life to the service of the University of Cambridge and its Colleges, and never forgot his debt of gratitude to an educational system that allowed him the opportunity to flourish. He was a Grammar School and scholarship boy, an early example of the great expansion of talent in Cambridge, mainly coming from the Grammar Schools and the Direct Grant schools which gave Cambridge in the 1960's and early 1970's, a wider social mix than before or after. Kingsley Amis's 1959 gibe that “More means worse” was certainly disproved by the cohorts of those years. Fleet was not content with self-indulgent nostalgic reminiscences on College High Tables when the wanton destruction of the Grammar Schools started narrowing the class mix, but set about practical action to ensure that Cambridge was and is open to talent by being deeply involved in the great Cambridge Scholarship Trusts. These have since 1981 have reached a total endowment of almost £300m and have enabled 14,000 students world-wide to have a benefit of a Cambridge education. Fleet served as treasurer, mostly in a voluntary capacity, for the trusts, including being a guiding spirit for the Gates Cambridge Trust whose endowment now worth £170m represents the largest endowment received by any University in the United Kingdom.

Stephen Fleet was born in 1936, educated in Brentwood School Essex and Lewes County Grammar School, Sussex. He came up as a scholar to read Natural Sciences at St John's College Cambridge, taking a first before staying on to take his PhD in Physics at the Cavendish laboratory. After two years working at the Mullard Research Laboratories, he

returned to Cambridge to academic posts in Mineralogy and Crystallography. He published widely in his field of the crystal structure of minerals, phase transformations in minerals and meteorites, and the development of the use of electron optics in mineralogy. He was also heavily involved in teaching being the principal designer of the new Crystalline State course in the reformed Natural Sciences Tripos in the mid 1960's.

During this time he was getting drawn into what was to become his true vocation as an academic administrator. He was elected a founder Fellow of Fitzwilliam House in 1963 and took posts of Tutorial Bursar and subsequently Junior Bursar. These were exciting times for Fitzwilliam as it moved to Collegiate status and to its new buildings on the Huntingdon Road. Fleet's affection for Fitzwilliam lasted his lifetime. He was proud to have been President of the Fitzwilliam Society in 1977 and 1999 and to have been elected Honorary Fellow in 1997.

His experience as Junior Bursar stood him in good stead when he was elected Fellow and Bursar of Downing in 1974. Downing at that time had a reputation as a worthy if slightly dull College, but over the following decade Fleet with Senior Tutor John Hopkins, Admissions Tutor Martin Mays and Morien Morgan and John Butterfield as successive Masters built the reputation of the College academically and on the river and playing fields. Fleet had inherited major debts from the refurbishment of College facilities in the late 1960's but with careful and imaginative investment policies handed on the College finances in good heart. During the decade he was heavily involved in University politics, being member of the Council of Senate and of the Financial Board and Chairman of the Bursars' Committee.

These years gave him an unsurpassed knowledge of the working of a Collegiate University, so his appointment as Registry in 1983 was widely welcomed around Cambridge. The Registryship at the time was the senior in the triumvirate of Registrar, Secretary General of the Faculties and Treasurer of the University and all three posts were held by officers drawn from the ranks of academics within the University or Colleges. Fleet was of the view that a community of scholars needed to be administered by those coming from their ranks, and that although outside professional expertise was certainly necessary when faced with governmental bureaucratic demands, the creation of a separate class of professional University Administrators might well be divisive. His view seems now to be vindicated when after a decade of the appointment of many professional administrators to the University Administration, the

University has found it necessary to appoint a number of academic pro-Vice-Chancellors. How this extra layer of management will affect governance issues has yet to be worked through.

Fleet was an outstanding Registrar. He had that rare gift of being at ease with all, be they the Chancellor of the University, the Duke of Edinburgh, or the University postman. He was in his office before anyone arrived and left many hours after everyone had left. He believed in management by walking about. When he wished to consult or instruct his staff, he would go and find them in their own offices, believing that they would be more relaxed there rather than in the magnificent but daunting Registrar's office. During his 14 years in post, the University of Cambridge prospered in its dominant position within UK Higher Education and became increasingly important as a world-ranking University. One of the important changes that Fleet successfully saw through in his time was the change from the two-year Vice-Chancellorship rotated around the Heads of Houses to the permanent Vice-Chancellorship which has allowed for a more consistent long-term vision from the academic leadership of the University.

In 1997, at the age of 61, after a bout of ill-health, Fleet decided to take retirement from the Registrarship. It was by no means retirement from University and College service. His health improved and he devoted himself to his work with the Cambridge Trusts and to many other organisations including the Cambridge Housing Society and the Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum. He had served Downing during his Registrarship as President (1983-85) and Vice-Master (1985-87 & 1991-94) and in 1997 the College re-elected him Vice-Master. It was no sinecure. A crisis in confidence arose at a time when the Master was taking a term's sabbatical leave. Fleet's leadership at the time saw the College through a very troubled time. His strength of character and deep compassion were evident to the whole Governing Body, so it was natural when the Mastership became unexpectedly vacant at the end of 2000, Fleet was elected overwhelmingly. His Mastership was a great success. It afforded the College a time to consolidate and reflect, and to enjoy his company.

At first meeting, Fleet seemed rather daunting. A large man, he seemed rather reserved and introspective. Nothing could be more misleading. He had an impish sense of humour and he could hide his teasing behind a stern visage. He was kind, compassionate and excellent company. He loved opera, literature (especially history), food and wine. He charmed all College visitors. However his service to the University appeared not to

have given him time to develop any close relationships, and his friends were resigned to seeing the phrase “he never married” appear in his obituaries. That would have given quite the wrong message.

It was therefore with delight in 2001 that his friends and colleagues greeted the news that he had been “stepping-out” with Mrs Alice Percival. They subsequently married in December 2002 and she joined him in the lodge as Master’s wife. Fleet blossomed and looked forward to a long and happy retirement with Alice. Sadly, it was not to be. Shortly after relinquishing the Mastership in 2003, he was diagnosed with cancer. Luckily the next two years of treatment still allowed him to lead an active life and he was still working with the Trusts and taking full part in College activities when he entered Hammersmith hospital for an elective operation where he died from the subsequent complications.

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