

Preserving the Spirit and Respect of Academia Through Traditions

By Nelson Cowan

Through degree ceremonies, academics reach each other and the public. I was fortunate to receive an honorary doctorate of philosophy from the University of Helsinki, Finland along with 11 other people from various countries and disciplines (10 other academics and a musical composer). The degree conferment ceremony, which took place June 5-7, 2003, seemed noteworthy for its power to magnify people's appreciation of academia in ways worth pondering.

The University of Helsinki is one of 12 that have been ranked as European leaders in basic research and are thus included in the League of European Research Universities, along with universities in Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh, Geneva, Leiden, Heidelberg, Leuven, Milan, München, Stockholm, and Strasbourg. The conferment ceremony is held only once every four years and embodies European traditions that have been lost in many countries but have been maintained in Finland for the past 360 years. (Ordinary doctorates are awarded yearly, but the recipient must wait until the appropriate year if he or she wishes to participate in the ceremony.) The nomination came from the chair of the psychology department, Kimmo Alho, with help from affiliated faculty. It was done without my input and I did not know I was even being considered until I received surprising notification of the honor.

The conferment ceremony over three days included a rehearsal dinner, an official ceremony in a large hall with several hundred degree recipients, a cathedral service, a banquet, a boat trip to an island for a picnic, and a concluding ball. In the official ceremony, honorary doctors were prominently paraded, and I received a special top hat, representing academic wisdom, and sword, representing the force of reason, presumably, to be worn only by recipients. The picture of me in full dress, with the hat and sword, can seem both impressive and amusing; both reactions seem in keeping with the spirit of the occasion, which began solemnly and ended joyfully.

The feeling, of emerging from the ceremonial hall on the town square near the front of a narrow procession, of stepping onto a red carpet already laid out, of hearing cathedral bells ringing and seeing citizens lining the streets with cameras, was overwhelming. Several other parts of the ceremony also stand out. There were two jubilee degree awardees — those who received their degrees 50 years ago. In a banquet speech, one of them relayed a message that has been repeated by jubilee awardees since the beginning of Finland's existence. His message emphasized the importance of the acad-

emy in founding the nation (as I gathered from a guest's translation). I was also impressed by the final ball's symbolism and extravagance, which included: traditional dances from 7:30 to 10:00; carrying around various key individuals on a throne (including a representative honorary doctor); "kicking out" the degree-granting professor under a tunnel of swords at

midnight so that the real party could begin; marching and singing with several hundred people through the streets of Helsinki at 2:30 a.m. so that statues of Finnish poets and other important characters could be lauded; and, finally, greeting the sun with more speeches and champagne at 4 a.m.

The conferment ceremony dates back to 1643 in the city of Turku and was moved to the new capital of Helsinki when the university moved there in 1828. Literature we received indicated that "through most of the 19th century, the conferment ceremonies were the only festive events in the country that the general public could enjoy, and graduates and their families were joined by large interested audiences. People journeyed from the countryside to the capital to take part in the festivities, which lasted several days." At some points in time, the ceremony also served to reinforce national unity and independence when the country was ruled by Sweden and then Russia.

The august yet upbeat and open celebration helps communicate the role of academia to the general public. This is true not only of the rare conferment ceremonies, but of most recognized academic accomplishments. In 1993 at the same university, I served as the external opponent to cross-examine a student, István Winkler, in his doctoral defense. The rigorous debate was moderated by an academic "custos" with a sword and was attended by over a hundred observers, including leading academics and Winkler's wife and mother who flew in from Hungary. After he passed with an outstanding grade based on my recommendation to a committee, a celebration followed, joyfully punctuated by laudatory speeches and toasts. ♦



Honorary doctorate Nelson Cowan (right) in ceremonial regalia aside host Kimmo Alho at the University of Helsinki.

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