6. The Sheldonian Theatre



The Sheldonian Theatre was completed in 1669 after a design by a young Christopher Wren who was then Professor of Astronomy at Oxford. He based his design on a 16th century engraving of the Theatre of Marcellus, built in Rome in the first century B.C.E. For as long as I can remember I was in some awe of this building because it was surrounded by 17 heads, known as the Emperors. They are not emperors, or indeed anyone in particular. They were commissioned by Wren from the sculptor Williams Byrd. Initially there were 13 but another four were added later. They are imposing

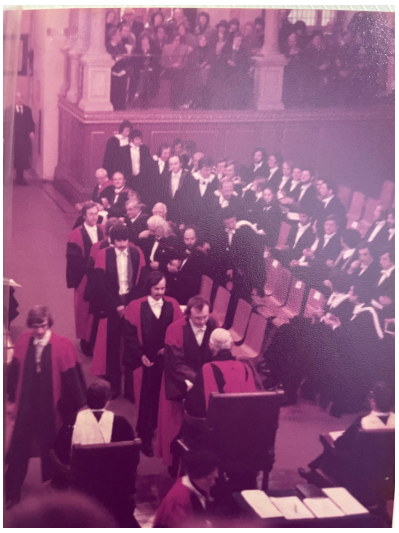


and each one is unique. Most remarkable was Wren's insistence that they show a look of surprise to reflect Wren's frustration with his patron, Gilbert Sheldon, who underwrote the building of the theatre. This seems somewhat churlish when you consider that Sheldon stumped up something like £14,470 (£2,230,228 today), in an age where a mid-level craftsman's wage was typically around £3 per year. The heads, as I first encountered them, were Victorian replacements of the originals. Alas, the stone the Victorians used was not as robust as the 17th century Clipsham stone Byrd used and they gradually disintegrated in the 20th century's polluted air. In 1972, a local sculptor, Michael Black, created new ones based on meticulous research on Byrd's originals. The theatre itself is magnificent and used for degree ceremonies and music concerts. It has a splendid ceiling fresco by Robert Streater, painter to Charles II.



308 years after its completion I am sitting in Christopher Wren's Theatre. Next to me is Hertford College Dean of Degrees, a man I just met, who is presenting me to the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University as a candidate for *philosophiae doctor* in Biochemistry – D. Phil. for short. In the stands of the oval theatre I can see Nancy, my Mum and Dad and my friend Randall Hundley. The registrar rises and says, in Latin, that he is satisfied that all the candidates are properly qualified. Then the proctors stand and walk up and down the aisle of the theatre,

after which the senior Proctor announces that the degrees have been voted. I, and the other doctoral candidates, are then presented by our college Deans. The Dean takes my right hand in his right hand and peers into his cap, in which is pasted a paragraph of Latin, which he recites. *Supplicant venerabili Congregationi Doctorum et Magistrorum regentium hi Studiosi qui compleverunt omnia quae per statuta requiruntur (nisi quatenus cum eis dispensatum fuerit); ut haec sufficiant, quo admittantur ad gradum enumeratum.* It sounds much better in Latin than the English: *These students, who have completed all that is required by the Statutes (except in so far as dispensation has been granted), supplicate the Venerable Congregation of Doctors and Regent Masters that these things may suffice for admission to the specified degree.* After this we bow to the Vice-chancellor and Proctors and they bow in return. We then exit stage right and remove to the robing room where I take off the black gown I have been wearing and don the scarlet and blue D. Phil. robe. We re-enter the theater and I shake hands with the vice chancellor and join my fellow, newly-minted, Doctors in seats especially reserved for us from which we watch the rest of the service. Then its over and I have acquired the greatest placebo in the world of education – a degree from Oxford. Talk about branding, there is nothing quite like it.



Cambridge, Harvard, the Sorbonne – forget it. Even with those hallowed credentials you could still be suspect. But Oxford, well, that's different. Whatever drivel one espouses, people will assume it is good, right, and worthy of consideration. Which, of course, it is!

