

Damon de Laszlo

Master of Science

Durham Cathedral, 11 January 2019

Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen,

A “Renaissance man” is how the Daily Telegraph described Damon de Laszlo in the headline of its “Saturday Profile” spread on Christmas Eve in 1994. Damon was at the height of a dispute against Lloyd's of London which he led on behalf of over 1600 distressed Names who had suffered substantial losses as a result of incompetence on Lloyd's part. The court ruled in his favour and awarded very significant damages to the victims.

Damon is indeed a Renaissance man but a very modern Renaissance man. Amongst other things he has been a soldier, a banker, an industrialist, an economist, an artist, a wine merchant, an expert in ancient rock art, a benefactor and a generous philanthropist. His career has been “as diverse as the Universe” says his wife, Sandra, herself a talented art historian.

I had the good fortune of first meeting Damon in his role as patron of the arts. The original building for the Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics was about to be erected. I had seen some remarkable sculptures by John Robinson displayed in the gardens of the Aspen Centre for Physics in the USA and at the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge. Not only were these symbolic sculptures striking but they evoked cosmic and scientific themes germane to the research topics at the Ogden Centre. I managed to locate John Robinson who was happy to give us some sculptures and referred me to his patrons, Damon de Laszlo and US industrialist Robert Hefner. You can view three Robinson sculptures in the East building of the Ogden Centre - the first of several philanthropic donations by Damon to Durham University.

Damon is a complex man of many attributes. If allowed one word to describe him, it would be “curious;” if two, they would be “insatiably curious.” When he learned that I worked on the cosmic dark matter and that there was an experiment attempting to detect it at the Boulby mine in Yorkshire, he asked if we could visit. This we did in 2004 venturing 1.5 miles deep inside this working mine to inspect the dark matter

detector. Damon had no qualms about putting his normal urbane, elegant demeanour to one side, to don the required miner's gear, including helmet, headlamp and safety belt. At the end of the visit, he asked me if there was something that would make a difference to our research at the Institute for Computational Cosmology. My reply led to a generous regular gift that has made a significant difference, particularly to PhD students and our public engagement activities.

Damon left school with one A-level and half a dozen O-levels. "I found school a major interruption in my education" he once said. He is a profoundly intelligent man but severely dyslexic at a time when this condition was unrecognized which prevented him from following a traditional educational route. He has certainly made up for that and is a cultured and knowledgeable man, with very broad interests and abilities. After school in 1961, Damon went into the Grenadier Guards but in 1965 he joined Warburgs Bank to train as a banker and worked in London, Zurich, New York and Australia. Since 1980 Damon has been Chairman of Harwin, a medium size enterprise that manufactures cutting-edge electronic components and connectors in Portsmouth, with offices in Asia and the United States. His ethical approach to business has led him to refuse takeover bids, foregoing easy money for sustained investment in the company and its local community.

In 1987 Damon set up the de Laszlo Foundation, a registered charity that aims to advance education and research in the arts, science, economics and medicine. The charity awards annual bursaries for an artist in residence at a local school and for students at City & Guilds of London art school, and supports a wide range of apprentice schemes in engineering, medical research and scientific projects. The Foundation has provided grants to talented individuals who could not afford to go to university and currently supports two PhD students. It has also supported young ballet dancers.

Since 1980 Damon has been Chair of the Economic Research Council – a registered charity, dedicated to furthering discussion and debate of economic issues of public interest. Damon is an avid student of ancient rock art, travelling across the world in pursuit of his passion. He is the chairman and co-founder of the non-profit Bradshaw Foundation whose objective is to discover, document and preserve ancient rock art around the world, and promote the study of early mankind's artistic achievements. It

funds research into rock art and cave paintings, as well as preservation projects around the world, in collaboration with UNESCO, the Royal Geographic Society, the National Geographic Society and other organizations. Its website provides a public online learning resource and is one of the most respected vehicles for the dissemination of information on rock art.

And Damon is himself an artist, a talent perhaps inherited from his grandfather, the renowned portrait painter, Philip de Laszlo. He produces wonderful stylized flat images in wood. (Two stunning de Laszlo cats adorn our sitting room.) Art and altruism run through his veins. As you enter our extraordinary Ogden Centre West building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, you encounter a glass vitrine, which also serves as a wall of our lecture room. This houses the imposing Robinson collection of maquettes, "The Universe" which neatly symbolizes the originality and creativity we pursue in our research at the Ogden Centre.

In the Ogden Centre East and West we carry out fundamental research into some of the deepest mysteries of our Universe, from the very small - the world of elementary particles - to the very large – the world of galaxies, quasars and the Universe as a whole. I am often asked what is the point of spending resources and time in such a pursuit. When I reply I often think of Damon, the curious engineer, who embodies the reasons: because a deeply engrained curiosity about our world is the essence of what makes us human and because fundamental scientific research is the foundation of the advanced technology upon which our society increasingly depends.

Chancellor, I present Damon de Laszlo, a man of enterprise, brilliance and generosity to receive the degree of Master of Science Honoris Causa.