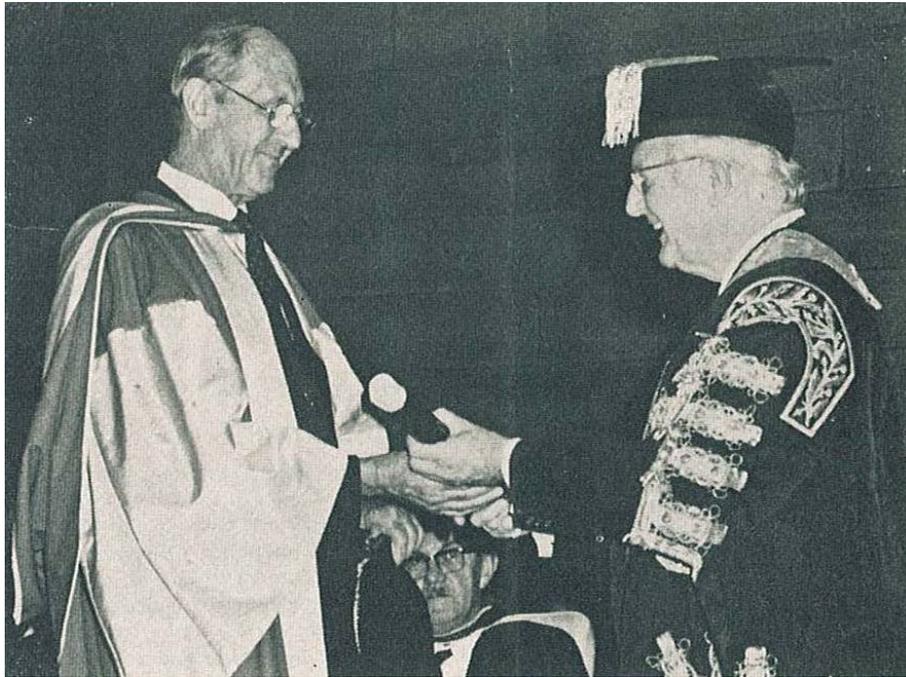
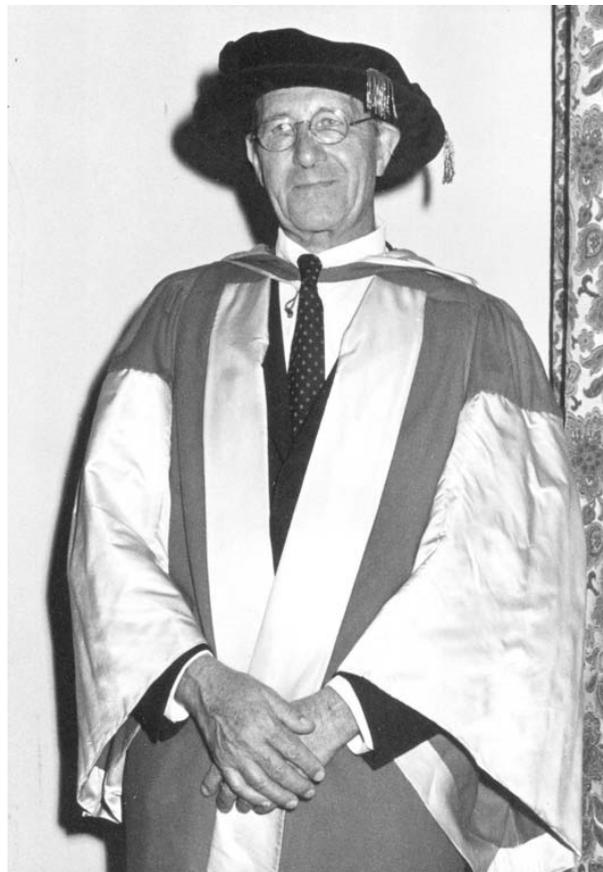


Sir Eric Ashby

The honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Sir Eric Ashby by the Chancellor Sir Hermann Black at the conferring of degrees ceremony held at 9.30am on 28 April 1973.



Sir Eric Ashby and the Chancellor, *photo, 'The Gazette', July 1973.*



Sir Eric Ashby, *photo G3_224_1014, University of Sydney Archives*

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bruce R Williams:

Sir Eric Ashby. Fellow of the Royal Society, Master of Clare College, Cambridge, formerly President and Vice-Chancellor and now Chancellor of the Queen's University, Belfast, Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, started his professional life in plant physiology.

In 1938, at the age of 34 he came here as Professor of Botany. His contributions to University and Australian life soon spread beyond his Department and Faculty. He became in 1940 Chairman of the Australian National Research Council. In 1942 he conducted an inquiry for the Prime Minister into the enlistment of scientific resources in war, and for the next four years he directed the scientific liaison bureau. He was Chairman of the Professorial Board and a member of Senate from 1942 until he went to Russia as Counsellor and Charge d'Affaires at the Australian Legation from 1945-6.

After these eight full years in Australia, Professor Ashby returned to England to "get back to pure research". He spent a "wonderful" four years with his duckweed at Manchester studying the physiology of ageing in plants. However, he was already a marked man and even "the best of men cannot suspend their fate". The Queen's University of Belfast wanted him as Vice-Chancellor and in Ulster "no surrender" is not restricted to religion and politics.

With considerable misgivings he gave up an esteemed profession and took on an activity for which the conventional wisdom required him to say to his mirror each morning "I know I am evil, but am I a necessary evil?", to walk humbly before the academic assembly, to wait patiently for sown ideas to filter up through the proper academic channels. He knew that his days of research in botany were over. What he did not know was that his days of research in the ecology of higher education were just beginning and that his second field of research would bring him wider and probably more lasting renown than the first.

For Ashby is one of those very rare men - a practical man with the power to see beyond the detailed problems of administration in a very complex organisation such as a University to the few critical forces at work, and to explain, in splendid prose, what is happening. His biologist's disposition to analyse the interplay of heredity and environment proved to be an enormous strength.

Diagnosis is one thing; prescription another, and Ashby was properly interested in prescription. He extended his range from ecology to teleology. On this his address at the sesquicentennial celebrations at the University of Michigan, "The Case for Ivory Towers" is already a classic.

His first, and I think his best, book on form and function in Universities, *Technology and the Academics*, was written while still Vice-Chancellor at Belfast. His later books, *African Universities and Western Tradition*, *Universities: British, Indian, African, Masters and Scholars* and *Any Person, Any Study*, were written after his translation from Belfast to the less intense and cluttered life of Clare, and in them he broadened and deepened the analyses and insights of the earlier work.

Cambridge was not altogether relaxed and free of clutter. During the years of student militancy, 1967-69, he was Vice-Chancellor. Fortunately for Cambridge he has always seen the clash of doctrine as an opportunity, not a calamity. Apart from the important part he played in finding the apprentice students a proper place in the modern academic guild, he wrote, with the help of Mary Anderson, *The Rise of the Student Estate in Britain*. The final chapter on "The Conscience of the Student Estate" is of great general significance, and enables us better to comprehend the contemporary problems of Universities - the opportunities and the dangers. Here are the concluding sentences:

"(Students) fear that detachment really means indifference and objectivity means impersonality. If this fear is not dispelled mistrust and cynicism about the educational contract may spread into an epidemic of anti-intellectualism. It is an essential task of University teachers to dispel that fear. The authority of the University for the rest of this century may well depend on the concern for humanity among its teachers."

From The University of Sydney News, 13 June 1973