



THE WOLFSON FOUNDATION

‘The Wealth of Nations: the Health of Society’: 60 Years of the Wolfson Foundation

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Lecture given at Wolfson College, Oxford, 8 June 2015, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Wolfson Foundation

Janet thank you very much indeed for that generous introduction, and thank you above all for inviting me to pay tribute to the Foundation and to your father and grandfather, and what the Foundation has done and what it represents.

This is as you all know a year of anniversaries, and indeed June the month of anniversaries: 800 years of Magna Carta and two hundred years since the Battle of Waterloo, which has also cast along historical shadow. It is also, and for this evening’s purposes, above all, the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Wolfson Foundation, and the history of that Foundation is in the excellent booklet that has just been published, but I would like to pay tribute to its two founding figures, its founding Chairmen: the grandfather and the father of the current Chairman, Janet Wolfson de Botton.

Isaac Wolfson, who was born in poverty in Glasgow in 1897, came to London to make a fortune with Great Universal Stores, and used that fortune, as you know, to endow the Foundation. And his son, Leonard Wolfson, who continued not just GUS, but also the Foundation, developed it remarkably.

I never knew Isaac Wolfson, but I did frequently meet Leonard, and was the recipient of enormous generosity and encouragement, and also extremely testing conversations. It was always the first thing: this extraordinarily generous man, already committed to helping the institution that one was trying to ask for money for, always began with a very firm and ringing endorsement that the one thing he would not pay was VAT. That was the given. The next one was also that, whoever you’d employed as professional consultants – architects, surveyors, quantitative surveyors, whatever – they were always charging too much, and had we been better at negotiating we could have got a better deal. But there we are. Then when the thing was over (and magnificently there was never any intervention at all in between the two process), when it was completed, he would arrive, and that was when the really testing and difficult moment began. I remember taking him proudly into the new spaces we’d produced at the National Gallery to house pictures that were temporarily removed while the room was being refurbished, and he came in and said ‘This is going to look much better when you’ve spent our money on it.’ And then extraordinary warmth, generosity, encouragement, and – I think I might almost dare to say – friendship. A remarkable man.

As Hermione has said, we all know what these two men, and the Foundation that they led, have done for education: colleges in Oxford and Cambridge; pioneering support for access for women to

Higher Education (the new building at St Anne's at a moment when women's colleges were not nearly as rich as their male equivalents and it was difficult to find endowments); support for Higher Education across the country, with halls of residence at Glasgow and elsewhere. But as Hermione has said, most recently and perhaps most inspiringly, the decision of the Foundation after the Browne report: worried about the debt burden on students wanting to continue in the humanities, providing research scholarships in the Humanities to ensure that that aspect of education and scholarship survived. And it's not just at the Higher Education level – in schools also, the idea of access to good education, working with the Sutton Trust to foster the best state schools in poor areas – this is a Foundation that has played an enormous part in particular in promoting and realising an ideal of humane education for a whole society. And indeed the whole Foundation is about, I would argue, making a certain kind of society – making a certain kind of citizen.

But I want to start, not with the founder and his son, but 250 years ago. I want to start at the moment of the new United Kingdom of Great Britain; Great Britain after the union; Great Britain the wealthy, extraordinarily wealthy, growingly wealthy centre of world commerce. This is of course the world of Adam Smith, the world of the *Wealth of Nations* published in 1776, and Adam Smith himself a child, a product of the union with Scotland. Educated at the University of Glasgow, then at Oxford, coming to London to see what this great global economic machine did, and publishing that analysis of it. It is, if you like, I think the moment at which not only the Scots have access to the English trade, but Scottish intellectuals have access to England's global experience, and the result was a very remarkable one. The new rich London unexpectedly an unimaginably rich city, produced (as such wealth often does of course) the consequent urban deprivation and social dislocation epitomised in Hogarth's *Gin Lane*. And this, I think, was one of the key questions of any society, certainly of the eighteenth century: how does the great wealth properly respond to the social dislocations that come in its wake, whether directly as a consequence or not? How do you connect those two images to make a society that is not only richer, but one in which all can live comfortable and in dignity? And I want to start here because I think this is the same question that confronted the world when Isaac Wolfson was born in 1897 in the Gorbals in Glasgow at the end of the nineteenth century; enormously, inordinately rich on global trade and industry, and in the Gorbals having some of the worst housing in the whole of Europe with some of the greatest social problems in consequence. It was in the Gorbals in 1897 that Isaac Wolfson was born, the son of Jewish immigrants from what is now Poland (and what was then Russian Poland), Orthodox Jews, and where his father came to work and to trade. It is, I think, worth starting here because the circumstances in which Isaac Wolfson grew up were known and remarkable across the whole of Europe. The stone houses built as rich mansion flats had turned into effectively slum accommodation, living one family to a room, and the round towers at the back providing not just the staircase but the lavatories for the whole house, the whole floor, several families. It is not surprising that these conditions produced some of the worst urban health in Europe. The usual diseases, if I might say, of deprivation of TB, scarlet fever, but also (because of the particular circumstances of Glasgow water and the living conditions of people) the worst rickets in Europe with the hideous obstetric consequence of that and very high infant mortality. This was a world where survival was limited, and where the social and medical problems, compounded by alcohol, were every bit as acute as Hogarth's London 150 years before. One might look at the two and think that nothing had really changed.

I wanted to start here because it seems to me to give an extraordinary salience to the prime concerns of the Foundation when Isaac Wolfson set it up. Coming from this world, moving to London with access to funds, he created a Foundation which set out to offer, it seems to me, two solutions to this question. First of all, how do you improve the health of these people, and then how do you

allow them access to education? And the assumption – or the hope – that if you can make a population healthy and allow them to be healthy, they can shape the world they're in. And this I think is a remarkable phenomenon. It set the terms for a great deal of the early years of the Foundation – great grants to medical research, the first major grant in 1959 (a huge grant to the Royal College of Physicians), Chair in general practice (not a fashionable subject), Chair also in criminology (not a fashionable subject), addressing research into the state of health, the state of society... From that knowledge, from that research, could come the understanding, could come the policies that would change it. The same with universities and the same with schools. And the same also with an engagement with the past. The public have a right to health, to education and to their history.

I want to suggest this evening that the ideals of the Foundation and the ideals with which it was created and has been executed are in fact strikingly close to the ideals of the Scottish enlightenment. And I think it may not be accidental that Wolfson grows up in Glasgow. Glasgow University, the University of Adam Smith in nineteenth century manifestation [here] is interestingly placed beside the western infirmary and beside the art gallery which you can see in the distance. Why I think this matters is these are of course the three aspects of the Wolfson Foundation's prime concerns. Health, medical research, university research and then the arts. And the epitome of this, and the man whose museum was long housed here, is William Hunter. And I want to start this evening with William Hunter, because he articulates I think a new idea of what a museum can be in a society, and an idea that is particularly significant today and very aligned to what the Wolfson Foundation has always been about. Hunter is born near Glasgow, trains as a doctor, goes to London in 1740. He is a brilliant researcher, does a great deal of research particularly on obstetrics and on the first great publication on the gravid uterus. And his great break comes in 1760 when George III comes to the throne. In 1761, George III marries Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. Very quickly it's discovered to everyone's joy that she's pregnant and the great concern is to find the right doctor. Hunter is called in and made the male midwife to the Queen. And as you see she turned out to be an extremely good investment! Every one of the children delivered by hunter who cared for the Queen all the way through. There are 6 here, there are 9 more to come, and 13 of them survived, which is astonishing and must in some measure be a tribute to hunter.

The success that he enjoyed medically was quickly translated into money: he's appointed royal male midwife in 1761, and in 1762 his balance at Drummonds in the Strand is £28,148 13 shillings and 3 pence. A colossal fortune, and Hunter decides that he's going to use this to make a museum, a collection. He's in the London of Sloane, the founder of the British Museum, but Hunter is a very particular case in point. The money is from medicine and he cares about medicine. He cares about health, above all about neo natal health, and he's fascinated, of course, like everybody of this period of global expansion, in how you make sense of your own place in a world that is suddenly profoundly unfamiliar. And he collected everything; he collects geology from all over the world, he collects insects, animals from all over the world, a wonderful huge library, *materia medica*, the whole world natural and human is collected, and he also collects (very unusually) great paintings. He gets Stubbs to paint for him the version of the Canadian moose – he's very interested with the Canadian moose, whether this newly discovered animal is in fact the same thing as an Irish elk (this was apparently one of the great debates of the time). I can obligingly reveal to you that the answer is no, they are not the same thing! But, typical of Hunter, he gets Stubbs to paint the animal. He also, extraordinarily (because he's living in London, he's in contact with the whole world through London), he is the first person to collect paintings by Chardin. And the two Chardins in Hunter's collection are very typical of his interest in Chardin's engagement with ordinary work, with humble people beautifully painted, and this amazing collection of manuscripts and books and natural history,

geology and fine art, he leaves to the University of Glasgow in 1783 when he dies, and it becomes the first public museum that has paintings and the other material in it. Hunter is of course a certain epitome of the Scottish enlightenment; he's part of a great trail of Scots who arrive (to the horror of the English), to take advantage of the opportunities of London. And he uses the money that he earns from these advantages to set up and endow his museum given to the University of Glasgow, to use as it sees fit for the best advantage of the students. This is, I think, a remarkable phenomenon; it's gathering the world to make sense of the world, and giving it away to ensure the people can see it. Now I would like to suggest that in this reign of Scotsmen, if we were taking a historical view, we might include Isaac Wolfson. And I think it is indeed not surprising that when the Wolfson Foundation made its first major grant to a museum, it was to the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons in London. Hunter's collection (the building had been badly damaged in the war) and the rebuilding of the Royal College in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and the collection of the museum was a very important step. It is, I think, not surprising that this is where Isaac Wolfson decided to give the first great museum grant. And I think it's fair to say that in terms of the history of the Foundation this is where the museum aspect begins to become really significant, and of course that's what I really wanted to focus on.

This aspect of the Foundation was developed greatly by Leonard Wolfson – a man as many of you know from first hand, here this evening, who was passionate about history. The Wolfson History Prize must be one of the greatest statements of confidence in research, research made accessible, made usable by a very wide public, and I am conscious that there are several Wolfson History Prize laureates in the room. And it is, I think, a remarkable fact that the rigour of the research has always been as important, the most important phenomenon in the awarding of the Prize, on the condition that it is usable by the public. It is, I think, a key question: how do we allow the public to make use of the past, and to be sure that the past that they're trying to understand is a past addressed with integrity and with rigour? How do people, in short, take possession of their history?

That brings us back, I think, to Magna Carta, the anniversary of its signing, and what Magna Carta became. As we all know the British Library has two versions of Magna Carta – this one, and the one that was burnt that has the seal of King John still attached to it. There's one in Lincoln, there's one in Salisbury Cathedral – these are the two in public possession. How they came to be in public possession is, I think, absolutely critical. The two copies that I've just shown you were, in the early seventeenth century, in the collection of Sir Robert Cotton. Cotton, a Member of Parliament, a member of the group that become increasingly concerned about Charles I's exercise of power and who, with Cotton, is part of the re-addressing of Magna Carta to find in it justification for challenging the King. A very interesting and important idea of the public purpose of history at a particular moment of high political drama. The Cotton Library in Cotton House near the Palace of Westminster becomes, in the 1620s, a place of resort for those wanting to consider the constitutional and legal history of England, and the two copies of Magna Carta become increasingly significant in that debate, to such an extent that Charles I, in 1629, orders the closure of the Cotton Library. Nonetheless, as you all know, in the time of Charles I Magna Carta is used as one of the justificatory elements in calling to account the King. And after the execution of the King, and the Commonwealth, the two copies of the Magna Carta remain in the Cotton Library near Westminster, and there they stay in the possession of the Cotton family until the end of the century. At that point, the Cotton family are not clear whether they can go on keeping it up, and Parliament has to decide what is to be done with this particular collection which has played such a particular role in the history of the country. And in the Bill of 1701 they do something completely extraordinary – Parliament creates the first ever trust to hold a collection. This document is the beginning of our public museums, and it is, I think, a very remarkable phenomenon. It is setting up a body for the better setting of the Library

of Cotton House for the benefit of the public. And there's a key question right at the beginning – this collection with Magna Carta, used as Magna Carta has been, and Magna Carta of course invoked again to get rid of James II and William III's coming, cannot possibly be under control of the ministers of the Crown. The device of a trust taken from private law and moved into the public realm is the first parliamentary trust set up, and I think a very interesting idea. It is an idea that of course lies behind, and is consciously emulated when the British Museum is set up 50 years later – a set of trustees to hold for public benefit objects that may be studied without the consent of the Crown; indeed they may be studied in order to come to views that would not be approved of by the Crown. And this of course is what happens. In the eighteenth century, Magna Carta continues to be reinterpreted and reused and becomes an extraordinary model of how the past can be used to argue with the government. This celebrated image of Arthur Beardmore who in 1765 was charged with sedition: he was later acquitted, but he had this image of himself painted by James Watson at the moment of his arrest – totally fictitious – that as he was arrested he was actually reading Magna Carta to his son, and it's inscribed with the words in the text below from Deuteronomy “those words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thine children.” It's a wonderful demonstration, I think, of the way in which history made public can be used, but above all can be used for a political purpose separate from the state. And it is of course, I think, at the heart of what happens at the British Museum, it's at the heart of an idea of the museum: the public collection as a place of individual enquiry outside the control of the ministers of the Crown, in sharp distinction to what is happening in Paris. And I think it's fair to say that Leonard Wolfson would've approved of this idea of history preserved, made available to the public and taught to the children, and he might even have approved of the quotation from Deuteronomy.

His commitment to the past and to archives is enormous, as you know the Foundation has done great work with the British Library, and it has also of course promoted libraries in universities across the country and libraries most recently in Birmingham – the idea of libraries not just as university and civic libraries, but branch libraries working in Birmingham and Manchester, that this is how the young especially can access the past, can study it, and can come to conclusions from it that they want. And I think it's totally aligned with this idea of history being available and usable by as many people as possible that lay behind Leonard Wolfson's long commitment to the museums of the United Kingdom.

And that brings us, I'm afraid, to the British Museum, which is the only museum I can really talk about, but which is for these purposes – I think – also emblematic. The generation before Hunter coming to London as a doctor to make his fortune, another doctor of Irish-Scots descent, Hans Sloane comes to London. He, like Hunter, rapidly acquires a society practice, he carries out a great deal of research on *materia medica*, and he makes, like Hunter, a fortune, and he puts together an extraordinary collection just as Hunter does. Sloane is living, of course, in the London of Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, and his collection is going to finish at the British Museum (the museum is just behind the church spire in the background of the print). Because that is the spire of St George's, Bloomsbury, and at the top of it is a particular emblem of the Great Britain of the day: it's George I, the new king, of Great Britain's union of Scotland, Ireland and England, all rather nervously perched on top of the mausoleum, but George very firmly looking towards Westminster. You couldn't, I think, have a clearer emblem of the established church of a Protestant nation in 1730 when this church opens, and Hogarth of course is, I think, making the point that when you're confronting questions of human rights, the church is not going to be very helpful, because it will usually be too close to power and that is not going to be the answer to the problem.

Sloane is exactly part of the same world of London in dislocation and a London in contact with a whole world, and his collection is like Hunter's but I think in some material ways different. Sloane puts together from his contacts around the world, using the ships coming and going, a collection of objects from around the world designed to look at how different societies do the same things. And this is I think a very powerful idea. At a very simple level, every society needs shoes. What is a shoe like? What does a shoe do? And he asks, he has agents shopping, buying round the world and they bring back the pattern from Malaya, the straw espadrilles from the Pyrenees, the Moroccan leather, and then the silk slippers from China. And from this kind of comparison interesting questions can arise. It becomes very quickly clear that you can only make a shoe out of what you've got, you can only use the materials you have, and you only make them for the circumstances in which you find yourself living. If you like, what Montesquieu does for laws, this collection does for shoes. You tie it in different ways, but it leaves you of course with an extraordinary set of questions. First of all, that all humanity is trying to do the same thing in different ways, and it also becomes very clear in this unthreatening area that there's no such thing as the best way: that's not a sensible question, and is one to which there is clearly no sensible answer. The best question will depend on many things. It's the purpose of Sloane's collecting across a huge area to look at how different societies address questions of faith, how they address questions of keeping children safe, how you guarantee health, how you organise power, something all societies do, and which if you gather from round the world you can compare.

And I think this is, even more than Hunter's, a new idea. This is not just a finding out about the world, it's gathering the world together through things which are things of ordinary, daily use, and then leaving them available for anyone to study. He has a huge collection when he dies – it's probably the largest collection of objects, antiquities, natural history, book manuscripts not in princely hands – and it includes, just as Hunter's, great works of art. He has some amazing works by Dürer, and the most celebrated of course, he has the drawing and the print of the Dürer rhinoceros. And he's interested exactly as Hunter is about how you make new taxonomies for new experiences in a world which is shattering the certainties in which the categories you thought you understood no longer work. Sloane's collection is open to everybody who wants to study; it's used by scholars all over Europe. And when he dies, he very strikingly decides that he wants it to stay together so that it can be used by any scholar, and he offers it first of all to the British Crown. If the British Crown will not pay the money for it, it's to be offered to St Petersburg, to Berlin, to Paris, or Madrid. Very, very interesting idea that this is about the world being able to understand the world, and all that is required is that it must be kept together and that it must be available free of charge to all studious and curious persons. Where that happens is secondary, the fact that it happens, and the fact that collection can be used to make sense of the world is, I think, remarkable.

And Parliament decides to buy it. They then discover they don't have the money, and they have to have a lottery. And the lottery is so corrupt even by eighteenth century standards that it's the last one until the lottery that we all know about. But the result is that they do something again unprecedented, and here I think it is really important to recognise the revolutionary nature that they have done. They wanted, in the line of the Cotton Library of the Magna Carta (the Magna Carta is added to Sloane's collection and put together) they want to create a resource that will be held for the public benefit, and that will not be under the control of the ministers of the Crown. So the trustee museum is born, and the trustees hold it for the public benefit. And the purpose I think, just as with Hunter, is to make a new kind of citizen, a certain kind of citizen – a citizen who can explore the world, a citizen who has access to libraries to collections in order to ask the questions they want to ask. And of course there is no university in London (because I think of the power of Oxford and Cambridge in retaining their position); London, this huge city doesn't have a university, and in some

measure this will be a kind of university. But it's also about making a certain kind of citizen, and it's a citizen of a new kind of country, and it is the first public institution to be called 'British' – the British Museum, is to be placed with the 'British Citizen', and a citizen not just of this country but of the whole world.

And extraordinarily this collection, which is to be aimed at universality according to Parliament, is kept together is put into a single house – the Duke of Montague's town house. You visit it by asking to visit it, and get taken in by the housekeeper (the trustees' first employee who joins at the age of 11 and works for over 60 years), and what has happened is, I think, something very remarkable. The British Museum has become the private collection of every citizen, and every citizen has an opportunity to order the world and to think the world. That seems to me a totally remarkable and admirable phenomenon, and one which over the years grows steadily. It has to be held together so it stays in one house, but to Sloane's original collection come the new discoveries from all over the world: the first things from the South Seas, from New Zealand, and then over the centuries, as you know, the other great objects like the Rosetta Stone which change world history, but always with the idea of looking at how societies organise themselves and how they function as societies from the very beginning, from the hand axes from Africa right up to today. How do societies manage all those things that they have to do: power, religion, how do you confront death, money, law – all those things that can be explored through material cultures. And that is, I think, the reason why this institution and all the other public institutions that have come from it across our country have such an important role to play. This institution, this museum created by Parliament in the 1750s is at the head of all the other public collections – all of them to be free, all of them to be available for research, study, enjoyment – all of them to allow the citizen to explore their place in the past in the world and to think about how they stand in this new constantly changing world.

It is, I think, an ideal that Leonard Wolfson supported throughout the whole of his life and particularly the whole of his time at the Foundation. The support given to museums and galleries across the United Kingdom is prodigious. The Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, quite properly one of the major beneficiaries, but it is across the whole country, every major museum has benefited, whether it's the natural history section in Edinburgh (the National Museum of Scotland); whether new galleries in Wakefield (the Hepworth) where the new opportunity to allow people to explore the world through works of art; or collections that might initially seem rather recondite, like the Harris Museum in Preston's world collection of scent bottles (a remarkable resource to think about different ways of doing similar things and placing the visitor in the context of the world).

In the history of the Foundation over 200 museums in the UK have benefited from Wolfson generosity – that is incomparable. And it is, I think, a very great achievement of the Foundation and it's one that all museums I think try now to emulate. But it raises, I think, a question for now: the idea of a museum community of Britain, of the UK, is one that is very firmly rooted by a long, long history of collaboration and co-operation; it is one that the devolution settlements – reserving culture to the devolved authorities – has made more complicated. And I think one of the questions that comes out of thinking about what the Wolfson Foundation has achieved is: how do we ensure that, in spite of different devolved authorities with different cultural powers, the idea of a shared inheritance for the whole of the UK is made a reality? The British Museum was created as exactly that, as a museum for the whole country, and how that is made real is a question that I think we need to think about, and the wider context of devolution and constitutional dispensation.

And it's not just, of course, the buildings which the Wolfson Foundation has helped, it's also the collections. Lorenzetti at the Ferens Gallery in Hull, El Greco in Edinburgh, Manet in Oxford; everywhere, again, every great collection they have helped to improve their holdings, and of course,

the story of this aspect of the Foundation begins in 1961: the moment when the Duke of Leeds decided to sell Goya's *Duke of Wellington*. It was bought at auction for £140,000 by a Mr and Mrs Wrightsman of New York and there was immediately a great public outcry that this must stay in the country. Mr Wrightsman very generously agreed that if £140,000 could be found that he had paid that he would be very happy for the picture to stay in the National Gallery. The Wolfson Foundation was approached and, characteristically, one of the great things about the Wolfson Foundation is they have always wanted to work in partnership with government. The insistence that the government must say that it believes that this is worthwhile and that it is going to spend some money on it. The government must speak in favour and spend in favour, and then Wolfson will co-operate. And this was the first great test – was the government going to do anything? So it was agreed that a call would be paid to Mr Macmillan in Downing Street, and Mr Macmillan in July 1961 agreed that it was of the greatest importance that this wonderful picture stayed in the National Gallery, but of course it was out of the question that the government could contribute anything given the current economic difficulties. And very interestingly the Wolfson Foundation stood its ground and said that it would not buy the picture unless the government made a contribution. It was eventually agreed that the government would fund £40,000 and the Wolfson Foundation would put up £100,000. Characteristically (Leonard Wolfson thought this was really not good enough) made a wonderfully, characteristically trenchant remark that if anybody was going to make a charitable donation to help keep the picture in the country, it should be the man who'd just pocketed £140,000, the Duke of Leeds himself. We don't know whether this proposal was put to His Grace, but nothing happened. But the Wolfson Foundation agreed that they would pay the money, Mr Wrightsman surrendered the picture, and it was put on show in the National Gallery. It was put on show at the top of the steps in the front vestibule on a freestanding screen to which it was attached by two hooks on the screen. It went on show at the National Gallery on the 3 August 1961, and on the 21 August 1961, it was stolen.

It was stolen because, as later transpired, a Newcastle lorry driver (or perhaps his son, we're not quite sure) climbed through an open lavatory window and simply lifted it off the screen, and then took it away. This caused, as you may imagine, a certain amount of consternation! The thief wrote to the trustees saying the picture was perfectly safe and he didn't want to damage it, but he felt that if this money was being spent on charity and art then the government should spend the £40,000 on providing free TV licenses for old age pensioners, and if they would agree to do this, he would return the picture. The trustees weren't at all sure that this was actually a real thing (they were getting other calls from other people), and then he sent through the post one of the labels from the back of the frame, at which point it became clear that this was indeed somebody who had it. And at that point the trustees went to the police and the reward was offered.

It turned out to be extremely embarrassing for the trustees because the security arrangements turned out to be rudimentary. And it also transpired that the gallery had a habit of not attaching pictures to walls in case war broke out. This had been established as practice in 1937 and at the trial evacuation for the Munich crisis had proved very valuable and a certain number of pictures had simply been unhooked, put in taxis, and driven round Leicester Square as a test of the evacuation. This had remained the practice. And they said very firmly that fire had been a greater risk than theft (there had never been a theft before). The Director and the trustees all offered their resignation to the Prime Minister. It was refused, but the security arrangements of the gallery were changed forever, and the whole basis of security in our national institutions goes back to this episode. But the picture had become, of course, the most famous picture in Britain. And there was one problem, because while the Wolfson trustees had agreed to pay the £100,000, they hadn't actually yet paid it.

And there was a – I think you can say – tense trustees meeting where they had to decide whether they were going to pay £100,000 for what they described as ‘a share in a blank space on a wall.’

Admirably, and totally characteristically, there was never any question. It was made absolutely clear from the beginning that an undertaking had been given, the money would be paid, and that was that. A very, very extraordinary demonstration, I think, of generosity and integrity. The picture remained as we all know famous and unseen until those of you old enough to remember *Dr No* in 1963 remember Sean Connery in *Dr No*’s underground bunker looking at all the splendid works of art he has tucked away, and the camera simply glanced over it, and he says ‘so that’s where it is!’. And those of you old enough to remember will remember cinemas all over the country roaring with laughter. And then in 1965, the lorry driver from Newcastle decided he was fed up with it all, put it in a bag, and left it at a Birmingham railway station in left luggage and sent the left luggage ticket to the press. He was put on trial, and the judge admirably came to the conclusion that as he’d always made it perfectly that he wanted to return the picture if the government would provide free TV licenses for old age pensioners, he had no intention permanently to deprive and therefore could not be charged with theft. But in the process he had lost the frame, so he was sent to prison for 3 months for the frame. It is Ealing Comedy at its highest and particularly one extraordinary moment earlier in ‘65 when they’re hoping it’ll come back, when the President of the Royal Academy invites the thief simply to submit it for the summer exhibition and no questions will be asked!

What is demonstrated was the level of generosity and the absolute integrity of the commitment of the Wolfson Foundation and their insistence that the government play its part. And the histories that we need, the history that every citizen has a right to, became an essential part of the Wolfson Foundation’s activity. Helping museums become, particularly through capital improvement, what they ought to be. I believe that this is a critical role for museums and indeed for our society. Enabling the citizen to have the histories they need to understand the world as it is, is what Hunter was doing with his collection and what Sloane was doing with his. As the world changes, we need to know something about the history of the countries (that we do not learn properly) that are shaping our world. It is one of the great roles of our museums to enable the public to explore their world, to understand it. And not just history in the political sense but history of course in the sense of religion, ever more significant in the world we live in and an ever more valuable resource for our museums across the whole country, to consider different religious traditions, different religious practices and the complexities behind them, and behind the history of the object in the museums. I’ll show you very briefly the wonderful thirteenth century Orissan statue of the God Shiva with his consort Parvati – not, as we might expect, imperial loot, in the traditional sense, quite the reverse: collected by Hindu Stuart in Calcutta in 1815 as part of his attempt to persuade the British that Hinduism was a superior ethical model, and used in the museum in India to present the value of Hindu culture to a non-Indian public. Brought to London later, and now visited by Londoners of Indian extraction, and an object in front of which we frequently find offerings of flowers and fruit. These objects are very significant, I think, in our attempts to understand the communities we live in now, and across the country they are the same. And this depth of the histories is remarkable; if Hindu Stuart is collecting this in order to promote Hinduism as an ethical tradition, this extraordinary object A’u from the South Seas was presented by the people of the Austral islands to the London Missionary Society as a demonstration of their conversion. And again, a strange narrative of the role of religion in different societies, different communities and through history.

I think this is a role that museums have to play more and more. The recent exhibition Hajj at the British Museum was an opportunity – the first opportunity – for non-Muslims to consider this pillar of Islam in which they cannot participate which is central to this idea of Islam as a worldwide

community. And how museums can play this role is related to the fact that they are uniquely a civic space equally owned by everybody, to which everybody comes on equal terms, and predicated on the notion of individual enquiry and individual conclusions without political control. It is very hard to see where else in our country at the moment those civic spaces exist for us to address these key questions, the central questions of the kind of society we want to live in, how we want to address it, how we want to change it, and it is I think that idea of the museum across the country as a civic space – particularly in an area where churches and mosques are no longer able to be neutral, in this area and in other areas, the opportunity afforded by the museum space is remarkable and must I think be defended. And it must be defended not just in London but across the whole of the United Kingdom.

I want to conclude with the idea of that central question of how the wealth of nations can be used to promote the health of society. Not just health in the medical sense but health in the civic understanding, access to education, access to knowledge, but above all understanding of how we might function together. And the traditions of the Wolfson Foundation I think are valuable for all of us. The idea of operating in partnership, the idea of insisting that the government support what the government says it believes to be important, not just with words but with money, and that through these different aspects of a healthy society – medical health, education, and a proper engagement with the past and with the world around us – we can create the kind of citizen that we want – what I think is the purpose of the British Museum, what I think is the purpose of every museum now across the country. Jeffery Alderman in his *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Isaac Wolfson said that the creation of the Foundation came from his belief that the acquisition of wealth could be justified only if it contributed to the public good – a reflection of the Orthodox Jewish faith in which he had been brought up. It is certainly what happened with the Foundation, and the public good, the public benefit, was secured in three key areas of civic health, and carried on by his son. Martin Paisner in his *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Leonard Wolfson says the following: “He was proud of his Jewish heritage, but if one were asked finally what was Wolfson’s belief, it might well be said of him, as Gibbon said of Marcus Aurelius, that he believed in a just society.”

That is where I want to end. I think it is fair to say that every one of us has been touched in different ways by what the Wolfson Foundation has achieved – not just those of us in this room who have been affected by academic work and university work, but citizens across the country whether in hospices or in art galleries, or in student hostels, or in libraries, have been able to experience the value of that commitment of the Wolfson Foundation and of its two founding Chairmen to the idea of a society in which understanding is as important as health. Thank you very much.