

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Saturday 27 July 2019, 11.00am

Professor Alexis Wright

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I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to the Wurundjeri and Boonwuring people of the Eastern Kulin nation, their elders past, present and in the future, and to all Aboriginal people here today.

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Deans, distinguished colleagues and members of the Faculty, and most importantly today Graduands, and your family and friends, I offer my greetings.

Vice Chancellor, Professor Sonenberg, thank you for your kind introduction.

Graduands, it is a great honour to be able to congratulate you on this important day of receiving your well earned degrees, and to acknowledge your great achievement for which you and your families should be most proud. My congratulations to each and every one of you for all of your hard work for which the University now honours you. Its vision of academic excellence is fulfilled in each of you.

A new journey begins when you leave today with the degree that you will most deservedly hold in your hand. What a marvellous passport. One that is backed by the vast store of knowledge that you have acquired in your studies along with the memories of never-ending and relentless hard work that goes with the joy of accomplishment and realisation, and of having benefitted from an environment so rich in knowledge, wisdom and creativity in this most prestigious community of learned teachers, creators and educators in the arts.

My journey at your age began a little bit differently, and I want to share with you some of the advice I received while attending the much older universities of our culture in Northern and Central Australia. These ancient places of learning cover the continent, even though we do not usually call the knowledge held in our traditional homelands a university. Nor do we call our elders by the title of professor, but these learned people of great wisdom were our atlases, our weather people, our storytellers, our historians, our survivalists and guides to taking responsibility for a legacy that had brought us here to these times, and they were truly cosmopolitan in their outlook. The knowledge these elders taught, these men and women of high degree who hold the responsibility for sacred laws, is about the importance for the continuation of our culture, and the work that is required from us in the future.

When I look back now on what these elders were teaching us, I can better understand how they were training us to see more clearly, and to know how to take the long view in how to think about the needs of land, the life of country, people, history – all the great hallmarks of our ancient culture. Their teaching and wisdom as preparing us for the long haul in creative thinking that will require big ideas, big vision and big dreams – and big fights, and how to approach the future in our world through working with endless patience and without fear,

and to know that it is okay to fall but be prepared to get straight back up, dust yourself off, and get back on the job, and learn from the experience. These are very good skills to have in our modern circumstances, and for the work I needed to do to become the writer I am today.

These elders wrote no books on paper, but they were modern people who had actually taught me how to read and write, and how to find the great passion I have for stories and literature.

I was a rather impatient young woman in our times of marching and shouting for land rights, but in their wisdom, my elders gave me one of the most important jobs which I did not really appreciate at the time. They taught me patience, and how to listen by giving me the job of writing down every word spoken in hour after hour of their meetings, or writing down their life stories, or the stories of country, and stories of culture. I was a recorder without a tape recorder, and I am very thankful that they taught me how to think, how to catch a word and care for it, and how to grow words with imaginary ideas, and to capture a visionary story over a long period of time. This is how my journey into seeking greater learning begun, and I still practice these skills every day of my life as a writer.

Looking at you I see a great future, and my advice to you is to build your dreams without fear, and to link your dreams to growing a better humanity – one that is capable of caring for all the cycles of life on our planet. You are more prepared than many others to think creativity, to be able to imagine and work towards greater and hopeful possibilities for the future.

Make great stories in art and music capable of catching the light that inspires the world. You will be able to have all of the creative dreams and vision you want, but how these will be realised will depend on how you work at it, and how prepared you are to get better at what you do. You already have an important core skill that the world needs – greater imagination, and your studies have taught you how to imagine with the best in the world. Be prepared for the unexpected and remember to have fun on the journey. It will help to lighten your load.

Thank you.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

This morning, we are fortunate indeed to have as guest speaker a distinguished Australian author and the holder of the Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature, Professor Alexis Wright.

Professor Wright is a multi-award-winning Indigenous writer and land rights activist. She is a member of the Waanyi nation of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Professor Wright has written widely on Indigenous rights and has organised successful Indigenous Constitutional Conventions in Central Australia – ‘Today We Talk About Tomorrow’ in 1993, and the Kalkaringi Convention in 1998.

Her books have been widely published internationally and in translation.

Her collective memoir, Tracker, was awarded the 2018 Stella Prize, while her novel The Swan Book was awarded the 2014 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the 2016 Raka Award.

Her novel Carpentaria (2006) was awarded the 2007 Miles Franklin Award, among other major distinctions.

It is a pleasure to invite her to speak today.

Please welcome Professor Alexis Wright.