The following addresses were given by Dr Stuart Warren and Sir John Bradfield at the Memorial Service for Dr Marrian in the College Chapel on 16 February 2008.

Denis was an organic chemist. His first inspiration came in Glasgow from the twins next door who had a chemistry set, and this was enough to give him the determination to choose science at Glasgow Academy against the strongly expressed wishes of the Rector, who wanted him to take Greek. In his sixth form the school, by now Newcastle Royal Grammar School, brought in a local graduate to teach organic chemistry, and Denis was hooked – the main attraction again being the practical work.

So where should he go for university? It was assumed that he would go to the local Armstrong College until a cousin, Guy Marrian, the Professor of Chemistry in Relation to Medicine at Edinburgh, told him that Manchester was the only place for a budding organic chemist because a young man – the 31-year-old Alex Todd – had just been appointed as Professor. So there he went in October 1939. He played tennis for the students against the Senior Common Room, whose star was Todd himself. Denis said that it was impossible to lob Todd at the net as he was well over six feet high. Maybe because he met Todd on the tennis court, but more likely because of his evident enthusiasm for organic chemistry, he was invited to stay on for a Ph.D. in Todd’s group. This was on war work, and Denis never spoke about it. But it led to great things. Up to 1944 there were only two really top class (5* as we should now say) Chemistry departments in Britain: Manchester and Oxford. Cambridge was in a bad way, as the last of the old Professors, Sir William
Pope, had died in 1939, but in 1944 Todd was appointed to the Chair. He took with him from Manchester to Cambridge an unprecedented fifteen organic chemists, including Denis, who was rescued from a tedious job at the Shell refineries at Stanlow by this move. This group of chemists was christened ‘The Toddlers’ by Todd himself, and had an annual dinner until very recently. Cambridge chemistry was transformed by the Toddlers and, as you will know, Lord Todd got the Nobel Prize for his work on the synthesis of nucleotides. Denis’s comment on the move: ‘I’m afraid we showed ourselves less than impressed not only by the laboratories but also by the archaic chemistry then being taught for the Natural Sciences Tripos.’ Todd was brilliant at picking research projects that were always timely and sometimes so far ahead that they couldn’t be solved. Denis worked on the potato eelworm hatching factor – that chemical exuded by growing potatoes in minute quantities which causes the eelworms to hatch from their cysts and attack the potatoes. This problem could not have been solved in the 1940s as there was then no NMR, but I have never forgotten Denis’s tremendous enthusiasm when I told him that I had just heard at a conference in France in the year 2000 that Henk Hiemstra had solved the problem at Amsterdam. Denis got in touch with Henk and wanted all the details. During his Ph.D., Denis had played bridge with Dr Friedmann who had moved by now to the new Department of Radiotherapeutics here under J.S. Mitchell. A post for an organic chemist was part of the establishment; Friedmann suggested that Denis apply, and he got the job. The idea was to find small organic molecules that were selectively absorbed by tumours – simple naphthoquinones turned out to do that job – and load them with a weak 3/4-emitter such as tritium. The tumour would then be irradiated selectively. Sadly it was impossible to get enough tritium into the molecules for them to be effective.

In 1956, Denis and Biddy had a sabbatical year at MIT and, according to Denis, ‘I had more time to read in the evenings, and began to plan some rather more advanced types of supervisions.’ Denis played golf in a famous four which included Todd and F.G. Mann, the then Director of Studies in Chemistry at Trinity. Denis mentioned to F.G. that he would like to do some teaching, and so he was appointed a Teaching Fellow in 1959. Denis again: ‘It could be argued that I went to Manchester because I had a cousin who knew Alex, that Alex took me on to do research because I played tennis, that I got my University post because I played bridge, and that I got my Fellowship at Trinity because I played golf. I don’t think one could be much luckier than that.’ This is typical Denis of course, and we may have different opinions on the role of merit in those appointments.

I must become more personal now. My first year at Trinity was a disaster. I too was desperately keen on organic chemistry but the
teaching, both at the University and in College, was, to use Denis’s word, ‘unimpressive’, and I felt I was learning nothing. But in October 1958 I was sent to a new supervisor in a hut at the back of Old Addenbrooke’s. There I was addressed by my first name, introduced to my supervision partner, sat down in front of a blackboard and asked what I thought about some chemical reaction. I gave a bland answer of the kind that was acceptable in the previous year but Denis (you will have guessed that it was he) said, with a smile, ‘You don’t really think that, do you? Now tell us what you really think.’ This was an electric shock – here was someone who had an intellectual approach to chemistry and was really interested in what undergraduates thought! From that moment forward I was committed to understanding rather than learning organic chemistry. Supervisions with Denis were very challenging but they were enormous fun, and he led us to discover for ourselves the mechanistic approach to organic chemistry. I have tried to use similar methods myself. As a Ph.D. student I became good friends with Denis and Biddy. When I had my nose broken in a cricket match while I was writing my thesis, they rescued me from Addenbrooke’s and took me back to their house to recover. Denis arranged a postponement of submission. That thesis got me a Research Fellowship at Trinity, and the traditional telegrams in the cabin on the Queen Mary at Southampton as I set off for a Post-Doc at Harvard were most untraditional in their content: ‘Congratulations, elected Research Fellow at Trinity, Denis.’ When I started lecturing to undergraduates here Denis was very supportive, wanting to know how and why I was choosing the examples I did and suggesting ways to explain difficult concepts. He came to my first IA lectures, sat in the front row of the 500+ audience, and rescued me from a foolish mistake in the very first lecture.

Leaving chemistry for lighter matters, Denis got me into Camden Cricket Club, leading to twenty-five years of happy off-spinning. I played cricket with Denis (and with Christie and Anthony). Denis was a rather solid batsman and a more than competent wicketkeeper. He had been a member of Caius when he first came to Cambridge and, when Camden played Caius one summer, they had a University slow left arm bowler. For some reason, Denis took offence at this and, most uncharacteristically, hit him twice into Barton Road. The Fellows versus Staff matches were great fun, with Denis and Brian Mitchell as unusually competent players, but we appointed another Camden member, John Carter, as groundsman. He was one of the very best club or minor county fast bowlers, and the easy times were over. When I gave up cricket and wanted to play bridge, Denis again found me a berth at the Thursday Club as his partner. He could be a difficult partner, and I think
Biddy was relieved to be allowed to play with someone less demanding. Denis was an excellent bridge player with presence at the table and we did quite well, though to start with some of my bids earned the reprimand ‘See me in my study afterwards.’ He loved conventions and reading bridge books, and I found that we did better if I casually enquired which books he had been studying in the last few days. He was largely responsible for the club playing at Adrian House – a venue envied by most Cambridge bridge clubs – and he had the welfare and enjoyment of the members very much at heart. So much so that he was made President to general acclaim. Denis was appointed Senior Tutor in 1964 – John Bradfield will talk about that – and had less time for chemistry. But he very much kept in touch, and when he learnt that I was writing a series of books about the teaching of Organic Synthesis, he was keen to be involved. He checked all the references, proof-read the texts, and made sure the diagrams were as helpful as stencils could make them. When we had virtually finished the first book he announced that I had one more change to make. To my dismay he said that I should rewrite chapter 1. ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘So that the readers might want to go on to chapter 2’, he replied. The book was a success, but Denis would accept no more acknowledgement than a bare mention in the preface. The second edition, nearly finished, will be dedicated to the memory of a teacher and friend. Nothing was ever too much trouble for this kind, hospitable man with a deep insight into both science and people.

STUART WARREN

IT IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE to speak about the character and services to Trinity of such a loyal and devoted member of the Fellowship as Denis Marrian.

Stuart Warren (who was Denis’s outstanding research student and later a Trinity Research Fellow) has eloquently described the full flowering of Denis’s early fascination with chemistry, how he came under the benign influence of that giant among modern chemists, Alex Todd, how he moved from Manchester to Cambridge with Todd, and how in Cambridge he encountered the Trinity organic chemist F.G. Mann through mutual golfing involvement with the famous so-called Rutherford Four, and supervised some of Mann’s pupils, including Stuart himself. Stuart – never easily impressed – found Denis’s supervisions superb and mentioned this is to Mann, who was nearing retirement and recommended Denis as his successor.

So in 1959 Denis became a Teaching Fellow of Trinity and energetically continued his excellent supervisions. His temporary room

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overlooked the Bowling Green. He watched Rattenbury, Broad, Fox, and Binnie skilfully playing there, and with typical enthusiasm went off to the London Docks and chose a fine log of lignum vitae for forming a set of bowls, thus adding yet another game to his extensive sporting portfolio.

Denis’s keen interest in his pupils resulted in his appointment as a Tutor four years later, in 1963. In 1964, the then Senior Tutor, Mark Pryor (outstanding zoologist, supremely independent mind, and great debunker of bureaucracy), suffered a tragic car accident, and after nearly two years in a coma he sadly died. Denis succeeded Mark as Senior Tutor in 1964. Despite taking on this vitally important post after only a year of tutoring, Denis made a great success of the exciting period which was to follow, and which was to include high spots like the Prince of Wales and low spots like the student troubles. Denis records that the eldest son of Lee Kwan Yew, outstanding Prime Minister of Singapore, was the brightest mathematician he admitted – and that’s saying a lot in Trinity. But his most notable undergraduate was of course Prince Charles. I never forgot the day he went to the Palace to meet the Prince’s Equerry, David Checketts, whom he found making the coffee in a semi-basement with Nescafé, powdered milk, and saccharine. Informality could hardly go further; this seemed to set the scene for the whole of Prince Charles’s time here. Denis devoted particular effort to liaison with David Checketts and a senior local member of the Press in order to ensure that the Prince was relatively free of Press attention, which could have been so troublesome. But there were a number of amusing incidents of course – as when the Prince commented on disturbance from loud early morning noise of dustbins being emptied – and Giles produced next day a cartoon depicting a haggard looking Denis in mortarboard and pyjamas negotiating by lantern light with burley corporation employees. And then shortly before Charles’s installation as Prince of Wales at Caernarvon, Denis was asked by the BBC to record an appreciation of the Prince in case the latter was blown up. So Denis detoured from the Lords’ Test Match and gave an off-the-cuff twenty-minute provisional obituary. Denis records that when the Prince heard about it from Denis, he fell about, acting out what he imagined to have been Denis’s tearful expressions.

Constitutionally the most important event during Denis’s Senior Tutorship was the period of student troubles 1969–72, when many other Colleges and the University were experiencing much student unrest, some of it quite violent. Here unrest was not violent – nor should it have been, seeing how well our students are looked after. But we had a major Working Party of senior and junior members and massive Open Meetings in Hall presided over by Rab as Master (he sat for much of the
time with arms folded and eyes shut, but woke periodically to utter a cogent comment, showing he had heard every word). Negotiations were helped by the wisdom of Keith Moffatt as Senior Treasurer of the College Union and Michael Proctor as a shrewd and active Secretary of its Committee – both now pillars of the establishment! We also had the Magpie and Stump solemnly debating the motion ‘This House demands co-residence – backdated to 1 October’. We did not add junior members to the College Council and College Meeting, but we did create a new and substantial Liaison Committee of junior and senior members which has for thirty-five years done good work on a wide range of matters of direct interest to junior members. Credit goes to Denis in all this for his common sense and skilful approach in student relations. As he remarked in his eighty-fifth birthday speech, ‘In more ways than one we were the envy of many other Colleges’.

Gareth Jones followed as Senior Tutor in 1972. But when Gareth became a Professor, Denis stood in as Senior Tutor again – till Tony Weir ultimately succeeded him in 1976. It was a halcyon period for Senior Tutors, and other notables were to come.

With tutoring complete, Denis went back to full-time chemistry. The admirable Frank Hayhoe, Head of Haematology, invited him there, where he spent some successful years synthesising radioactively-labelled drugs, using techniques he had developed in his earlier work.

In 1982 Denis took early retirement from research, offered by a favourable University scheme. But he continued in the important post of Senior Proctor for a year and retained numerous honorary posts, including membership of the Governing Body of Westminster School; he was welcome there, and supported our precious Tudor links with that leading establishment, which gave us Trinity giants like Edgar Adrian, Master, Andrew Huxley, Master, Will Hawthorne, Head of University Engineering, and Robert Rattenbury, Registrar.

On the sporting side Denis remained President of the University Golf Club, a member of the Real Tennis Club Committee, and Fixtures Secretary for University Rugby – if you missed an international on TV and wanted to know how Jonny Wilkinson won for England with a last-minute drop-goal, you could rely on Denis for an account of the decisive moment.

Denis also made time for a thorough reorganisation of the College Wine Cellar, as Secretary and later Chairman of the Wine Committee. He never bemused you with connoisseur jargon; and his quiet efficiency solved many problems. When the cellarmen was unwell in late 1992, deliveries accumulated in the cellar and cartons disintegrated from falling condensation. Denis enlisted the help of a like-minded Committee
member, Brian Mitchell, and between Christmas and New Year the two
of them, with help from their families, spent every morning clearing up
the mess, carting the bottles mostly to the far end of the cellar and
stacking them in the bins. Denis’s liver withstood countless commercial
wine-tastings, some unspeakable, but undertaken stoically in the interests
of the College! He started the famous draw of bin-end wines at the
Master’s Christmas party; caused cheese to be served with wine in the
Combination Room; and asked the Council to investigate Spouses’
nights on the first Saturday of every month. If Trinity had a Social
Secretary, Denis would certainly have held that post!

His love of wine was so deep-rooted that it even penetrated his
sailing. For many years he sailed a conventional 14 ft Wayfarer dinghy
with sturdy multi-purpose qualities rather like Denis himself. But in 1975
he graduated to a 32 ft cruising catamaran (one of the twin-hulled lighter
group of boats which sail very fast in good conditions); and because of
his devotion to the ineffable Château Lafite claret he named the
catamaran ‘Cat o’Lafite’, which must have puzzled many fellow sailors,
but would certainly have won any competition for the most ingenious
catamaran name.

Sailing was a relatively infrequent holiday pleasure. But Denis’s golf
continued regularly on Sunday mornings with the so called ‘Rutherford
Four’. Originally this was Rutherford (who had been taught golf by J.J.
Thomson) plus various trios of Rutherford’s friends, such as Aston,
Fowler, and G.I. Taylor, but gradually it had transmuted via F.G. Mann,
Jack Roughton, Gordon Sutherland, and others to a membership of
Denis, Richard Glauert, Michael Berridge, and Peter Lawrence. Here yet
another of Denis’s little-known talents flowered. He blossomed into
comic verse about his fellow players; and I quote only two of many such
verses. Here’s one about Richard Glauert; and to enjoy it fully non-
golfers like me need to know that hitting the ball up the middle of the
course is good, but that you may occasionally be constrained by
unexpected defects in your clubs, or ‘irons’. It’s entitled ‘Ode to the
Junior Bursar’.

The saving grace of Richard G.:
Though up the middle of the tee
Suspect irons his game constrained
Accounting for his outcries pained
But on the green his putter magic
Oft erased those errors tragic.
And another on Michael Berridge, entitled ‘RIP Sir Michael Berridge’.

Stranger, as you pass this tee  
Spare a thought for Michael B.  
At top of swing he backward swayed  
By hip-kept wallet overweighed.  
The moral’s clear – in simple parlance  
Dispense the wad and keep the barlance.

Of course if you will go on winning one big international science prize after another you must expect to have a weighty wallet – and in extremes of golfing exertion to lose your balance (or ‘barlance’, with Denis’s poetic licence). But Michael gets his own back each Christmas with brilliant pin-man illustrations and comment about his colleagues at play – his manuscripts would be equally at home in the Fitzwilliam Museum or the Wren Library, and Denis looms large in them.

Clearly Nature had dealt Denis a full hand of sporting talent; and for a fine all-rounder like him cricket, lawn tennis, real tennis, golf embellished with comic verse, bowls, rugby football, sailing, and ski-ing are eight natural bedfellows. But you may be agreeably surprised to learn that Denis’s wide-ranging sporting talents were accompanied by an unusual further talent for lecturing on musical appreciation. He attended classes at the University of the Third Age on that subject; and ended up giving for them courses of sixteen lectures on the structure of symphonies and concertos from Haydn to Sibelius. He knew nothing of the subject when he started; and could neither play an instrument nor read a note of music. Yet the lectures drew audiences of a hundred or so, including notables like Owen Chadwick, theologian-philosopher, and David Harrison, chemical engineer and academic politician, both – as it happens – former holders of endowed chairs and Masters of Selwyn.

I shared a few of Denis’s interests – such as cricket, tennis, rugby, sailing, and musical appreciation (though all in a much lower key than he attained). And we had some other common interests, as diverse as investment trusts and runner beans. Denis would often phone me for investment trust ideas. And we often compared notes about growing runner beans – that most delicious of UK summer vegetables where the young bean picked fresh from the garden can be so superior to the shop bean. The king of runner bean growing in Trinity is of course John Rallison, who will doubtless publish his special method in the Gardeners’ Chronicle one day. But Denis was no slouch in this field. He got well ahead each year by starting his beans indoors and cleverly preventing them from getting too leggy before planting them out – a fate which overcame mine when I copied him.
However, I would not like you to think that all this sporting, investment, and gardening activity, elegantly gilded with musical appreciation, prevented Denis from continuing to work for Trinity in retirement. In 1984, at the age of 69, he went in to bat again for Trinity; in this case it was an eighteen-year innings as Praelector, Father of the College, the officer who in the Senate-House presents to the Vice-Chancellor Trinity members taking degrees (other than Honorary Degrees) – on the face of it not a huge job, but an important one nevertheless, which has a large audience and must be done in a seemly manner without blunders. Denis not only accomplished that, but also brought to bear the fluent Latin which he had acquired at Glasgow Academy from the master who had so strongly opposed his opting for science. Even more important, Denis was really hospitable in his room, in Hall, and in the Combination Room to all those returning to take a senior degree, thus generating happy memories for the graduands and contributing greatly to good alumni relations. And all this was out of the sheer goodness of his sociable nature, and long before there was any thought that the University’s 800th Anniversary Campaign would be helped thereby.

But Denis’s eighteen years as Praelector was important in another way. It was a fine example of what retired Fellows can do for the College and the University by taking some of the administrative load off those in mid-career, who must concentrate on research and teaching in order to strengthen the University’s performance in the vital Research Assessment and Teaching Assessment Exercises, on which we crucially depend for securing Government finance sufficient to help maintain Cambridge’s premier position as No. 1 UK and No. 2 World. Other retired Fellows recently helping to free up those battling with the Research and Teaching Assessment Exercises have included Richard Glauert formerly and John Easterling now as Editors of the Annual Record; Chris Morley now and John Easterling formerly in the major job of Secretary of the Council; and John Lonsdale managing Trinity’s part in the University’s 800th Anniversary Campaign; and there are former Tutors who could admirably do in retirement further five-year stints as particularly experienced Tutors if asked and willing. But Denis’s eighteen-year stint certainly takes the biscuit for length of service in these helpful adjuvant roles.

And now, sadly, I approach the end. Last summer Denis was diagnosed with a fatal thyroid tumour. I well remember my last talk with him at Addenbrooke’s Hospital, a few days before his death. I enormously admired his calm courage. We spoke of sport and wine, investment trusts and runner beans, but only briefly because Denis was dominated by spontaneous reminiscences about his Tutorship. He reminisced about the
Prince of Wales, of course, and also about the brightest mathematician he
had admitted, Lee Hsien Loong, elder son of Lee Kwan Yew, and now
Prime Minister of Singapore. Denis reminisced too about the old pre-
1970 admission system itself. In those days Entrance Scholars and
Exhibitioners were chosen by the Teaching Staff (after the Scholarship
Examination); and then Tutors accepted numerous good near-misses.
These three classes of outstanding or high academic quality made up
roughly 65–75% of the entry, and usually kept us at or near the top of
such league tables as existed. For the rest, Tutors – normally in
consultation with Teaching Staff – looked for good academic quality
combined if possible with considerable other desirable qualities which
help the world go round. Denis felt that Henry VIII would approve such
people as being much needed in today’s beleaguered world, and that they
might be as helpful to us as we would be to them. So he wondered how
a modest element of that Tutorial discretion might somehow be re-
introduced, though with the main stream guided by the Teaching Staff
and with a co-ordinating Admissions Tutor as now. He feared that we
may be missing a few outstanding people of tomorrow because they are
good, but not overwhelming, at A levels today; and that A levels in any
case are too subject to State fiddling, to course work, with widespread
copying from the web, and to other defects. He felt that under the old
system Trinity was at the zenith of its academic distinction – and the
zenith of other kinds of distinction among its alumni. Quite by chance
I later came across rather striking figures for certain categories which
accord with this view, but of course don’t prove it.

JOHN BRADFIELD