

Professor Sir Geoff Palmer receives The Edinburgh Award 2022

Professor Sir Geoff Palmer is a renowned academic and human rights activist.

Sir Geoff, who came to Edinburgh in 1964, has excelled in his chosen profession in the field of brewing and distilling, leading to him being appointed the first black professor in Scotland and becoming Chancellor of the University where he completed his groundbreaking research.

On Monday night he became the 16th recipient of The Edinburgh Award, receiving a certificate and an engraved Loving Cup. His handprints are preserved for posterity in a flagstone in the Quad outside the City Chambers.

The award recognises the work Sir Geoff has done in his contributions to academia, and his defence of human rights. This work led him to address the [Black Lives Matter](#) event held in Holyrood Park during lockdown. The Black Lives Matter

movement gathered pace in the wake of George Floyd's death in the US at the hands of the police.

Sir Geoff had told his wife that he was going to Tesco, but he went to the Park instead, telling the audience there: "What is very sad is that after 300 years black people are still being killed in the United States in a manner where somebody, a policeman, is kneeling on a person's neck for the sole reason that he is black. How can we justify that?"



Professor Sir Geoff Palmer at the Black Lives Matter Protest in Holyrood Park in June 2020. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

His criticism of Dundas who stands on top of the 150 feet high column in St Andrew Square for holding back the process towards abolishing slavery was met with some adverse comment. Palmer was criticised by Professor Jonathan Hearn, the Professor of Political and Historical Sociology at University of Edinburgh as well as Sir Tom Devine, Professor Emeritus at the University of Edinburgh who is an expert in his field of history and who has written about Scotland's links to

plantations. Sir Geoff dismissed the criticism from these two academics as racist.

Between December 2020 and June 2022, Sir Geoff chaired the independent Edinburgh Slavery and Colonialism Legacy Review Group whose work has been vital in profiling the capital's historic links with slavery and colonialism in the public realm. The findings and recommendations of the Group were endorsed unanimously by councillors on 30 August this year, and the actions they suggest will form the basis of the Council's continued response to these key issues.



Sir Geoff with Foysof Choudhury MBE, MSP

Sir Peter Mathieson, Vice-Chancellor of University of Edinburgh, was invited to join the gathering at the City Chambers as was Alan Robertson a member of the court of Heriot-Watt University, Divisional Commander for Edinburgh, Chief Superintendent, Sean Scott. The City Chambers was full of those people who support Sir Geoff in his ongoing role as a human rights activist.

Vice-Principal, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Mark

Biggs, of Heriot-Watt University applauded Sir Geoff. He said: “Sir Geoff is a true inspiration to us all and to those of us at Heriot-Watt for many decades. We are hugely privileged to have him back in the role of Chancellor of the University.

“His association with Heriot-Watt has been a long and distinguished one. In all of that time his achievements have been manyfold.

“After all the excellent work at Heriot-Watt he was offered a personal chair at the university.

“The brewing and distilling centre which he founded has gone on to produce many brewers and distillers many of whose names you would recognise.

“It is your inspirational approach, Sir Geoff, which I think is crucial and is the magic ingredient to the many things that have been achieved and that you have produced too.”

Last night belonged to [@SirGeoffPalmer](#) as he received The Edinburgh Award. This is voted for by the people of Edinburgh pic.twitter.com/2R0ZtCenmP

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [November 15, 2022](#)



Sir Geoff Palmer with the Rt Hon Lord Provost of Edinburgh, Robert Aldridge



Sir Geoff with the Lord Provost in the Quad at the City

Chambers

Edinburgh's Lord Provost Robert Aldridge said: "It's an honour and a pleasure to present one of the Capital's most prestigious accolades, the Edinburgh Award, to Sir Geoff Palmer.

"In a career spanning over fifty years, Sir Geoff has done much to promote Edinburgh to the world, celebrating the positive impact that higher education has on this city. His dedication and passion for the sciences, activism, and for our city as a whole – its people, its legacy and its future – is an inspiration to us all.

"I am delighted that the people of Edinburgh have acknowledged his contributions and have chosen Sir Geoff to receive the Edinburgh Award 2022, an honour which he truly deserves.

"Sir Geoff has contributed substantially to the betterment of this great city, and I am confident that his legacy both in academia and activism will live on for many years to come and his handprints immortalised in stone on our very own Edinburgh Award 'walk of fame'."



Sir Geoff Palmer said: 'This award is more than a great honour; it is a recognition of all the people whose goodness has contributed to my life and work. I arrived in Edinburgh as a research student in 1964 and I thank the City of Edinburgh Council for all it has done for the community.'

He explained the circumstances of his arrival in his acceptance speech, delivered eloquently, with not a note in sight. He recounted: "I walked up The Mound. There was a smell and I wondered what it was."

He chuckled at this – the smell was of course hops and beer making which was to become his life's work.

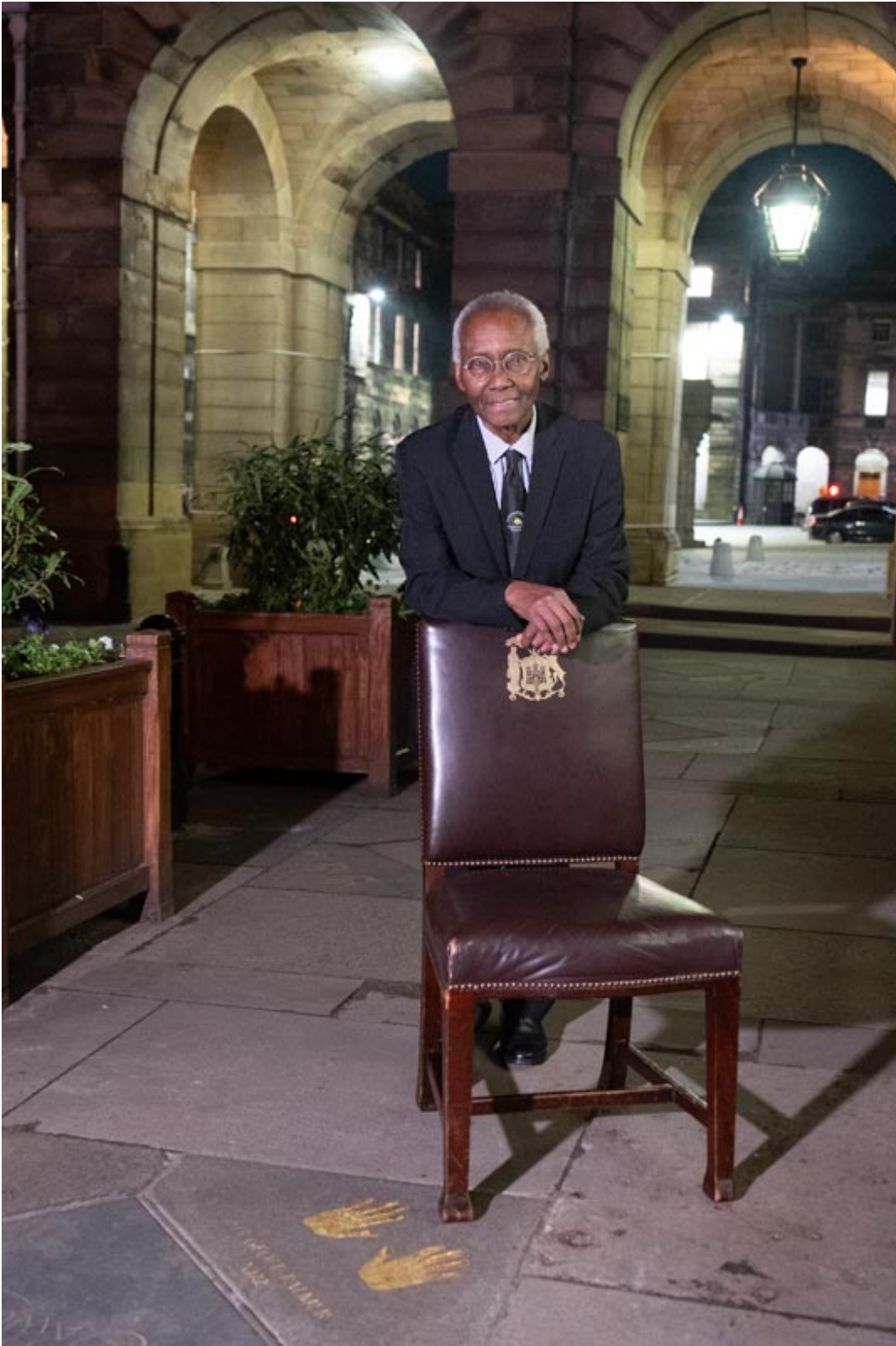
He explained that he went to Chambers Street and was interviewed by "this wonderful woman Professor Anna Macleod". He continued: "She interviewed me. The interview did not last long. She talked to me about brewing and distilling. I had never heard about brewing and distilling. I had seen beer of course, but didn't know where it was made. She talked to me about barley which of course I was to work on. I hadn't heard of that either.

“The prejudice of universities was that barley was a man-made crop, and this did not require teaching

“Nevertheless she interviewed me It took about ten minutes. I said to her “that’s a bit quick”.

“She said to me ‘Well when I was telling you about the industry, you were looking out of the window’. (She was at the same time smoking a 50 pack of Senior Service and drinking a beer.) But she said she would take me. She said it was because I showed no interest in what she was saying. She said it was a very good point in my favour as I would not bother her.

“Professor Macleod from the Isle of Lewis, she looked after me. We published our second paper and that paper changed the whole concept of how the grain improved – much to the distress people at Carlsberg and Heineken who believed that the grain only worked in the way they said it did.”



Sir Geoff Palmer in the Quad at the City Chambers



Sir Geoff Palmer

But it was his love of Burns which allowed him to explain why he became a human rights activist, someone who calls out racism and who advised the Lord Provost to apologise on behalf of the council for “the city’s past role in sustaining slavery and colonialism”.

He said that from his love of Burns first in his native Jamaica and when he moved to Edinburgh and began speaking at Burns Suppers. Of course Burns himself had wanted to go to Jamaica, but Margaret or Mary Campbell who was to go with him on the adventure died in 1786 of suspected typhus. While Burns had a passage to the Caribbean booked, he did not travel. But Sir Geoff said that he got to know Burns and he uses him in his work. This is his work in human rights.

Sir Geoff said: “The concept of slavery is that people are superior to other people. That is a myth and a deception. There is no evidence for it.

“I don’t mind free speech, but free speech in terms of

academia must be very, very special because it kills people.

“Slavery is not evidence based and that is why it has caused all this trouble that we have today – because slavery and racism go together.

“We cannot change the past, but we can change the consequence of the past which is baseless, for the better, using education.

“Burns said “A man’s a man for a’ that” and therefore in fact there is no change to my view that we are one humanity, nothing less.”



Major General Sir Alastair Bruce, Governor of Edinburgh Castle with Dr Reginald Agu

Dr Reginald Agu, who was a brewing and distilling PhD student with Sir Geoff is a great admirer. he now works with the Scotch Whisky Research Institute now. He said: “I lack words

to describe this guy. He is very down to earth, very easy to get on with, but I lack words to describe Sir Geoff Palmer.

“When I finished my PhD I stayed on in the team for three years for an additional project. Since then I have never let him go.”

As part of the Edinburgh Award ceremony, Hannah Lavery, the Edinburgh Makar, recited a poem in Sir Geoff’s honour called Toast.

Let me hold your beer, Sir, while you hand out the champagne (or prosecco) and let me raise a toast to you, trailblazer, truth teller, gauntlet thrower, the parade passes by you great man.



Hannah Lavery

Edinburgh Makar

