

## NEWNHAM COLLEGE PRESS RELEASE

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### **TS Eliot legacy helps secure English teaching at Newnham College**

A new English teaching fund worth £1.125 million has been established at Newnham College, Cambridge thanks to one of the world's best-loved and most successful musicals – *Cats*.

The fund has been set up with a generous donation by Valerie Eliot, editor, publisher and wife of the late Nobel Prize-winning poet T. S. Eliot. She has been an Honorary Fellow of Newnham College for the past 20 years.

Valerie Eliot was instrumental in encouraging Andrew Lloyd Webber to transform T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* from a beloved collection of poems into a record-breaking musical that enchanted audiences worldwide for 21 years.

Welcoming the news, Newnham College Principal Dame Patricia Hodgson said: "Newnham College is enormously grateful to Valerie Eliot for this generous gift. It will guarantee in perpetuity the tradition of first class English teaching at Newnham, a tradition that has produced the most wonderful raft of writers and academics since the college was founded."

The donation comes from Old Possum's Practical Trust, the literary and artistic charity set up by Valerie Eliot in part with funds generated by the musical *Cats*.

"It is marvellous – and entirely appropriate – that profits from the musical *Cats* are being reinvested in teaching and learning English at Newnham. Almost everyone has a favourite *Cats* poem, and we should always remember that popular literature is rooted in the scholarly tradition of teaching and learning in English," Dame Patricia says.

*Cats* enchanted audiences of all ages throughout the world. Bursting onto the stage in 1981 it ran for 21 years in London, where it attracted audiences of 8 million to almost 9,000 shows. In 1996 it became the longest-running musical ever to play in the West End or on Broadway. By the time it closed it had been translated into 11 languages, and played to more than 50 million people in 300 cities from New York to Tokyo.

The establishment of the Valerie Eliot Fund for English is particularly important at a time of cuts to higher education funding in general – and funding for arts subjects in particular.

"It is a most marvellous example of the generosity of an individual supporting opportunities for young people at a time when public funding is not available, especially for those who want to study the arts," says Dame Patricia.

As well reflecting Valerie Eliot's long-standing link with Newnham College and honouring her outstanding scholarly achievements in her own right, the donation is also a reminder of the poet's association with English at Cambridge. It was his creative and critical writing in the 1920s, and his friendship with the founders of the English Tripos, that has made English teaching at Cambridge so distinct.

Valerie Eliot says: "I am very pleased to help to ensure the continuing excellence of the teaching at Newnham College with the creation of a lectureship in English literature. Newnham has a long and illustrious history in the teaching of English and has produced many outstanding and talented individuals. I am very pleased to be able to assist in ensuring this tradition will continue and it seems entirely appropriate that it has been made possible as a result of my husband T S Eliot's work. I am particularly proud of my own connection with Newnham and this fund will cement that further."

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### **Notes for editors**

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2. Old Possum's Practical Trust is a registered charity giving grants to support literary, artistic, musical and theatrical projects and organisations. The Trust was established by Valerie Eliot with her personal funds in 1990 - 25 years after T. S. Eliot's death in 1965 - and following the enormous success of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical 'Cats'. The musical drew for its inspiration upon Eliot's 'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats' - a collection of poems written for children and first published in 1939.

3. In the 1950s poet Sylvia Plath read English at Newnham. Newnham writers publishing today include novelists AS Byatt, Margaret Drabble, Salley Vickers, Ali Smith, Patricia Duncker, Sarah Dunant; poets Gillian Allnutt and Wendy Mulford; biographer Claire Tomalin; poet, novelist, biographer and translator Elaine Feinstein; screenwriter Emma Thompson; children's authors Mary Hoffman and Caroline Lawrence; and writers and broadcasters Germaine Greer, Lisa Jardine, Joan Bakewell, Eleanor Bron, Katharine Whitehorn and Julia Neuberger.

4. In February 2011 Newnham College launched its Literary Archive to strengthen and celebrate its strong literary tradition. Around 30 authors have already donated material to the archive, including manuscripts, memoirs, letters and photographs, which will go on public display.

5. Newnham is one of the 31 colleges of the University of Cambridge, and has 400 undergraduates, 150 postgraduates and about 70 academic staff. Newnham College was founded in 1871 to promote academic excellence for women and that remains its goal today.

6. Valerie Eliot was made an Honorary Fellow of the College in 1991 to recognise her outstanding editorial and scholarly achievements and of her services to literature. Mrs Eliot has become a living link between T.S. Eliot and the world of learning. A sophisticated scholar in her own right, she has dedicated her life to serving her husband's work as literary executor, research editor, publisher, commentator and benefactor.

Valerie Eliot's first major work was an edition of the facsimile and transcript of the original drafts of "The Waste Land" (1971), long thought to be lost, and only recovered after Eliot's death from the papers of his agent, John Quinn. It earned a rare commendation from Ezra Pound, and was awarded the 1972 Rose Mary Crawshay Prize by the British Academy. It can be said to have changed our understanding of arguably the most important poem of the twentieth century. Later Mrs Eliot edited T.S. Eliot's letters – an immense task.

