

**WARWICK**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

**Dr Fred and Mrs Henrietta Reid**

Hon DLitt

**Oration by Professor Laura Green  
School of Life Sciences**



## Dr Fred and Mrs Henrietta Reid

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Joining us on stage today are Dr Fred and Mrs Henrietta Reid who lost their sight in childhood. Both have fought personal battles to overcome hurdles that society has put in their way, but neither has allowed their blindness to hold them back. They have achieved so much in their own lives and, in addition, they have championed for the rights of blind people, playing a significant part in campaigns to root out discrimination.

I'm delighted that we're honouring their remarkable achievements today. Fred and Etta were both born in Glasgow in 1937 and first met in Edinburgh as teenagers attending the Edinburgh Royal Blind School.

You might have noticed we have also been joined by Hannah, Etta's very well trained guide dog. Last year Etta was given a certificate from the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association for 50 years as a guide dog owner; she has had seven dogs to date, an uncommon length of time and number of dogs.

Etta's first guide dog, Misty, was crucial to Etta obtaining her first appointment as a physiotherapist at the Churchill Hospital, Oxford, in 1963.

She was the first blind physiotherapist ever employed in the City's hospitals. The Board was at first very hesitant about employing a blind physio and insisted on a probationary period of eight weeks. Before the eight weeks were up, her Head of Department said: "You're in. You're just as good as the rest of us."

By then Etta and Fred were married and Etta's job supported Fred financially through his DPhil study at Queen's College, Oxford.

Fred and Etta soon had three children, including twins, all born within 16 months.

Etta's pioneering approach to raising children did not go unnoticed. She was interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *In Touch* programme for blind


and partially sighted listeners. The tips she shared were included in a BBC self-help book for other blind women facing similar challenges. She also helped train sighted readers to understand blindness and establish positive relationships with visually impaired clients when she and Fred were part of the team that set up a local charity, the Kenilworth Readers Service for the Blind.

Etta also helped to influence thinking on the inclusion of blind children in mainstream education through her regular contributions to the conferences of the Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students. She was particularly vocal in raising issues surrounding the importance of subjects such as music and sport.

Etta is very modest about her achievements. "What have I done to be given this honour?" she has asked. Her own life is the answer. She has always confronted life with inspiring courage and cheerfulness. She takes challenges so easily in her stride that she doesn't realise how remarkable she is and she is a rock to Fred.

When Fred announced he wanted to become a lawyer, his school principal said "A blind person cannot succeed in law". When he chose to study history, he was told "A blind person can't read history". Clearly they can, Fred achieved the highest First class degree in his year at Edinburgh University. But even then, when he broached the subject of a PhD with his professor, the response was "Reid, how can a blind man do historical research?".

Clearly they can. From 1966 to 1997, Fred lectured in History at Warwick. During that time, he was actively researching, as we academics do, and published a biography of Keir Hardie and essays on Scottish coal miners in the 19th century. After he retired, he continued in his research and wrote a book about his grandfather, titled *In Search of Willie Patterson: a Scottish Soldier in the Age of Imperialism*. He also wrote *The Panopticon*, a novel based on his time at the school where he and Etta met. His latest book, *Thomas Hardy and History* is scheduled for publication in August this year.



Fred resolved from an early age to speak up for the rights of blind people. He joined the National Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted while he was at university and later served as its President in the early 1970s. He also helped to form The Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Teachers and Students and was a trustee of the Royal National Institute of Blind People for 20 years.

Serving on the executives of The Disablement Income Group and the Disability Alliance, Fred was involved in several ground-breaking government programmes - these included the disability living allowance, access to work, and mainstream education for visually impaired children. He also had a hand in establishing the first inclusive college for visually impaired students, opened by the Royal National Institute of Blind People in Loughborough. Fred continues to work towards greater employment for blind and partially sighted people.

Fred once said that "Every blind person in any walk of life, if they've got any kind of desire to succeed, has to work 50% harder."

This certainly makes Fred and Etta's achievements all the more remarkable - and everyone here today can take inspiration from their impressive work ethic, their tremendous courage and their unwavering determination.

Finally, and for note, Fred and Etta will be Warwick's 499th and 500th honorary graduates.

Provost, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, Dr Fred and Mrs Henrietta Reid.