Mr. Chancellor, each generation produces a few individuals who come to serve as exemplars of talent, intelligence, industry, and courage. Julie Payette is one such individual. Like the intrepid coureurs de bois, she, too, has undertaken an amazing quest, one that has stirred the hearts of all Canadians. It is with great pride that I present her to you today.

Julie Payette’s achievements give fresh credence to Aristotle’s words: “Excellence is not a work of art. It is only a habit.” Indeed, excellence is a habit she developed early in life. An exceptional student in science and engineering, she received many top honours at McGill University and the University of Toronto, including the Greville-Smith Scholarship, a Massey College Fellowship and an NSERC post-graduate Scholarship.

Julie Payette’s professional success adds luster to her sterling academic record. Her research activities are many and include natural language processing and automatic speech recognition. At IBM Canada she worked as a systems engineer. Later, at Bell Northern Research, she tested human-computer interaction and artificial intelligence. In June 1992, she was selected as an astronaut by the Canadian Space Agency, one of four recruits out of over 5,000 candidates. She worked as a technical advisor for the Mobile Servicing System, established the Human-Computer Interaction Group at the Canadian Astronaut Program, and served as a technical specialist on the NATO International Research Study Group training program. On May 27, 1999 she boarded STS-96 Discovery and made history as the first Canadian to participate in an International Space Station assembly mission and to board the Space Station. As a crew member, Julie Payette brought honour not only to herself, but also to her country. Her expertise in robotics, artificial intelligence and the complex human-machine interface was critical to the success of the mission, demonstrating to the world the contributions of Canada and Canadians to international space efforts.

Like many exceptional people, Julie Payette has many talents. A skilled pilot who obtained her captaincy on military jets, she has also sung with world-class choirs. A diver, she also speaks five languages and plays piano. Perhaps one of her most outstanding qualities, however, is her willingness to take the time to share her knowledge and experience with others. In 1995 our Women of Science invited her to speak to our female students in science and engineering. A strong advocate of the role of women in these disciplines, she accepted immediately and gave an eloquent speech about the importance of realizing one’s potential to the fullest. Mr. Chancellor, it seems most appropriate to me that this university - whose namesake himself braved new frontiers - should confer upon Julie Payette the degree Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.