



Laudatio for Anthony Grafton by Edoardo Tortarolo
CISH International Prize for History 2026

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ladies and gentlemen, distinguished colleagues, fellow historians, dear friends,

It is a great honour—and a particular personal pleasure—to present the CISH International Prize for History 2026 to Professor Anthony Grafton.

An award of this importance recognizes more than a distinguished list of publications, appointments, and honours. It recognizes a life devoted to scholarship: a sustained commitment to knowledge and intellectual curiosity, a scholarly presence that has transformed entire fields, and an example that has shaped the work and outlook of several generations of students, scholars, and readers across the globe.

CISH created the International Prize for History in 2015 to honour historians of exceptional distinction whose research, publications, and teaching have made a major contribution to historical knowledge. Anthony Grafton embodies these ideals with singular brilliance. The range of his work is extraordinary: early modern intellectual history, the classical tradition, the history of scholarship and education, the history of science and magic, Jewish and Christian erudition, the history of books and readers, and the history of historical method itself. Yet this range has never produced dispersion. Across more than four decades of scholarship, one can recognize a remarkably coherent historical intelligence at work.

I wish I could present Anthony Grafton's scholarship in all its multidimensionality. To do so would mean travelling through a bewildering variety of cultural worlds, examined from continually renewed perspectives. Any ambition to be complete must be abandoned this evening. Anthony

Grafton is, in fact, evidence that in at least one respect Sir Isaiah Berlin may not have been entirely right.

Taking his cue from Archilochus, Berlin famously distinguished between the fox, who knows many things, and the hedgehog, who knows one big thing. Few historians have managed to be both as completely as Anthony Grafton. He has the fox's appetite for different subjects, languages, methods, and places. But he also possesses the hedgehog's tenacity: a lifelong dedication to a central problem—the ways in which human beings create, test, organize, preserve, and sometimes falsify knowledge about their world and their past.

His scholarship combines empirical rigour with theoretical agility, methodological solidity with imaginative flair, sophisticated literary prose with lucid argument, and profound respect for historical evidence with an acute awareness of the shifting boundaries between past and present. His work teaches us that intellectual history is not the disembodied history of ideas moving effortlessly from one canonical text to another. Ideas are made by people at work. They arise from practices: reading, annotating, collating, calculating, translating, copying, correcting, arguing, teaching, printing, and exchanging letters. They take shape in libraries and workshops, classrooms and courts, observatories and printing houses. They are carried by bodies, voices, objects, institutions, friendships, rivalries, and networks.

This vision was already present in Grafton's first monumental undertaking, his two-volume study of Joseph Scaliger (1983 and 1993). Scaliger, one of the most formidable scholars of late sixteenth-century Europe, was hardly an easy subject. To reconstruct his world required command not only of classical and early modern Latin, textual criticism, and biblical scholarship, but also of ancient calendars, astronomical systems, and the competing chronologies of Babylonians, Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians, Arabs, and others.

Grafton entered what he himself called the no-man's-land between classics and history. He emerged having redrawn its map. He showed that classical scholarship was not a marginal or exhausted enterprise, but one of the central sites at which early modern Europeans confronted the plurality of human time. Chronology became a dramatic intellectual practice: an effort to bring discordant textual traditions, sacred histories, astronomical observations, and newly recovered evidence into a single temporal order. Scaliger's successes were astonishing; his eventual recognition of the limits of textual criticism was equally important. In Grafton's account, erudition becomes an adventure in knowledge—technically difficult, institutionally situated, intensely competitive, and intellectually consequential.

That achievement established one of the guiding principles of Grafton's work: begin again from the evidence. Do not accept inherited accounts of what humanism, science, or scholarship was supposed to have been. Examine citations, marginalia, drafts, notebooks, correspondence, and working copies. Reconstruct how scholars actually read and reasoned. This approach transformed intellectual history by expanding its archive and changing its scale. The history of thought could now be discovered not only in completed books, but in crossings-out, corrections, stains, misprints, diagrams, and notes crowded into a margin.

In *Forgers and Critics*, first published in 1990, Grafton overturned another comfortable opposition. We like to imagine criticism as the enemy of forgery: the honest detective pursues the deceitful fabricator. Grafton showed instead that forgery is criticism's "criminal sibling." Forgers needed to understand the conventions, expectations, and technical methods of scholarship in order to deceive scholars; critics refined those same methods in order to expose them. Sometimes the same learned individuals participated in both activities. The capacity to manufacture plausible evidence and the capacity to unmask it developed together.

The argument was elegant, surprising, and also deeply historical. Grafton neither celebrated the forger's ingenuity nor reduced the critic to a heroic ancestor of modern science. He reconstructed the unstable ecology in which truth and falsehood were produced. The lesson has become more urgent with time. Critical methods do not descend from heaven fully formed, and falsehood is not simply the absence of knowledge. Both have histories; both depend upon shared conventions of credibility; and each can stimulate the development of the other.

This interest in the architecture of credibility also inspired *The Footnote: A Curious History*. Grafton turned the small print at the bottom of the page into the protagonist of a history that ranged from antiquity to modern professional scholarship. The footnote, in his hands, was comic and serious at once: a display of learning, a weapon in controversy, a trail left for verification, and a compact between writer and reader. The book revealed a quality characteristic of all his work—the ability to take an apparently minor object and show that it contains an entire intellectual and moral world. The footnote may not guarantee truth, but it makes a claim answerable to evidence. It represents the historian's promise that an argument can be retraced, questioned, and tested. That promise has guided Grafton's studies of reading. In the celebrated essay written with Lisa Jardine, "Studied for Action," the annotations of Gabriel Harvey revealed that reading Livy was

not a passive reception of classical wisdom. Grafton taught historians to read readers: to examine how they marked books, reorganized texts, extracted information, and adapted old knowledge to new purposes. A book, in this perspective, is never merely a container. It is the scene of an encounter, often a collaboration and sometimes a struggle, between many hands and minds.

The same insight animates the essays in *Inky Fingers* (2020). Here the life of the mind is inseparable from the work of the hand. Scholars compile notebooks; scribes make copies; compositors set type; correctors revise proofs; authors negotiate with printers; readers identify errors. Renaissance book culture appears in all its material density and human untidiness. The printed book did not arrive as a flawless technological miracle. It was produced through labour, adjustment, improvisation, and repeated correction. Grafton restores visibility to the many people whose work stood between an author's manuscript and a reader's copy. In doing so, he offers not only a history of scholarship but an ethics of scholarship: knowledge is rarely the solitary possession of a single mind. It is a collective achievement.

Collaboration is also a defining feature of Grafton's own career. These partnerships are not secondary to his scholarship. They express his deepest conviction about intellectual life: that knowledge grows through dialogue and that genuine mastery does not close a conversation but makes richer conversations possible.

Consider also one of my favourites, Cardano's *Cosmos*, his study of the physician, mathematician, writer, and astrologer Girolamo Cardano. Astrology underwent such rapid discrediting in the modern period that it became difficult to see how an intelligent person could ever have practised it seriously. Grafton refused the easy satisfactions of condescension. He sought to do justice both to the rational and the irrational elements of Renaissance astrology, to its inherited doctrines and innovations, to its ancient sources and its new social uses.

His declared intention was "to be surprised." This is more than a charming phrase; it describes a demanding historical method. Instead of imposing fully formed questions upon Cardano's papers, Grafton allowed the surviving archive—the materials assembled by an early modern scholar for his own purposes—to reshape the investigation. The resulting *Cardano* inhabits a world at once close to us and radically distant: a European market for printed knowledge; a network of patrons, patients, rivals, and readers; and a cosmos in which astral influence could become the subject of disciplined observation.

Grafton showed that Cardano's astrology involved an empirical effort to study his own body and soul and those of others. It could serve as an inquiry into the depths of the self, attentive to emotion, corporeality, character, and the singular course of an individual life. Astrology did not become a modern science. But it formed a significant, long-overlooked part of the multilayered process by which Europeans created, tested, and dismantled systems of knowledge. Grafton's great gift is to make such a world intelligible without making it falsely familiar. He allows us to understand beliefs that we do not share while preserving their strangeness.

This generosity toward the past culminates in *Magus: The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa*. The learned magician of the Renaissance was not simply the credulous opposite of the rational scientist, nor merely a charlatan waiting to be exposed. He was a distinctive intellectual type who combined ancient learning, natural philosophy, astrology, theology, technical skill, and social ambition. Ficino, Pico, Trithemius, Agrippa, and Faustus explored the border between visible and invisible powers, legitimate and illicit knowledge, divine and demonic agency.

Grafton does not turn magic into science before its time. Nor does he dismiss it as a medieval survival. He reconstructs it as a field of inquiry whose boundaries were contested and whose practitioners tried to establish methods, criteria, and forms of authority. Here again, the past is revealed as a world of possibilities rather than a corridor leading inevitably to us. Grafton's historians' art lies precisely in recovering roads not taken without pretending that they led to the present.

This is why his work matters far beyond Renaissance studies. It offers a sustained reflection on how knowledge is made and unmade. It reminds us that rationality and credulity can coexist in the same person; that new methods emerge from old practices; that error may generate discovery; that traditions survive by being transformed; and that disciplines acquire authority through fragile, revisable conventions. In an age preoccupied with misinformation, technological disruption, and the public authority of expertise, these are not antiquarian lessons. They help us see our own intellectual world more clearly.

Yet no account of Anthony Grafton would be adequate if it stopped with his books. His scholarship has always been an intensely social practice. He is a legendary teacher and mentor: exacting but never domineering, prodigiously learned but genuinely eager to learn from others. He has guided students toward intellectual independence rather than reproducing disciples.



The breadth of the work produced by his students is itself evidence of his method as a teacher. The highest achievement of mentorship is not to produce copies of oneself. It is to enlarge the field of possible scholarship.

Grafton has also exemplified the historian as a public intellectual. For decades he has written learned and accessible essays for readers far beyond the university. He has defended the value of archives, libraries, philology, and humanistic inquiry while remaining alert to new technologies and new publics. He has shown that accessibility need not entail simplification, and that erudition need not entail isolation. His prose welcomes readers into the workshop. It conveys the pleasure of discovery while making visible the discipline that discovery requires.

It is especially fitting that we honour him here at the American Academy in Rome. Rome, and Italy more broadly, occupy a central place in the intellectual geography of his work: Poliziano and Alberti, Cardano and Ficino, Pico and the humanists who recovered antiquity while creating new scholarly worlds. But the fit is institutional as well as geographical. The Academy represents the international, interdisciplinary, and collaborative life of scholarship to which Anthony Grafton has contributed so much. He served for years on its Board, and his work embodies its ideal of sustained conversation across national and disciplinary boundaries.

The timing is equally fitting. In 2026, CISH celebrates one hundred years of international cooperation among historians. At a moment when historical truth is often subordinated to political convenience, and when communication technologies distribute error as efficiently as knowledge, Anthony Grafton's example has particular force. He reminds us that truth is neither automatic nor solitary. It emerges from disciplined inquiry, criticism, exchange, and the willingness to revise. It depends on institutions, but also on habits of honesty, generosity, and attention.

Professor Grafton, for the originality and depth of your scholarship; for transforming our understanding of humanism, erudition, books, science, magic, and historical method; for your service to students, colleagues, and the international community of learning; and for the intellectual generosity with which you have inspired generations of historians, it is our privilege to present you with the CISH International Prize for History 2026.

Dear Tony, please accept our warmest congratulations. The former president of CISH Catherine Horel will present you with the CISH medal.