

A muddy field in the Welsh borderlands is not the most obvious place to meet one of the world's most profound thinkers — but that is where I met Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan, honorary fellow at St Anthony's College, Oxford University.

Together with American philosopher, Lou Marinoff we were contributing to a debate at annual How the Light Gets In festival on The Science of Human Nature.

Nayef Al-Rodhan is a new breed of thinker, a professionally-trained neurosurgeon and neuroscientist applying his neuro-scientific perspective to the ills of our hyper-connected, globalised world.

He stands with his feet planted firmly in the neuro-scientific establishment on the one hand, and international relations on the other. He is a true post-modern man, and this year was ranked as "one of the top 30 most influential neuroscientists in the world".

I caught up with him recently and asked him about his work and his mission.

"I was born in Saudi Arabia, and grew up in a wonderful, happy and enlightened home. I was taught early that there is room in the world for multiple moral truths and seeing the world from different perspectives; none have to necessarily be more 'right' than the others.

"Human civilisation is a story of mutual borrowing between all major cultures from early antiquity, through China, India, Greece, the Arab-Islamic world to the modern West. Every culture builds upon the contribution of a previous culture whose golden age may have passed."

Professor Al-Rodhan came to Britain aged 16 to study English and then medicine at Newcastle University. It was there that he met Lord Walton, who was the Dean of the Medical School and later became Warden of Green College in Oxford. Lord Walton stimulated Nayef's interest in Neuroscience.

From Newcastle, Nayef went to the prestigious Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, USA where he became the Chief Resident in Neurosurgery, and was awarded a PhD in molecular neuropharmacology.

He said: "My clinical experience and neuroscientific research enhanced my profound fascination with the workings of the human brain. I became interested in the molecular basis of epilepsy as an entrée into understanding the biochemical basis of human behaviour in general."

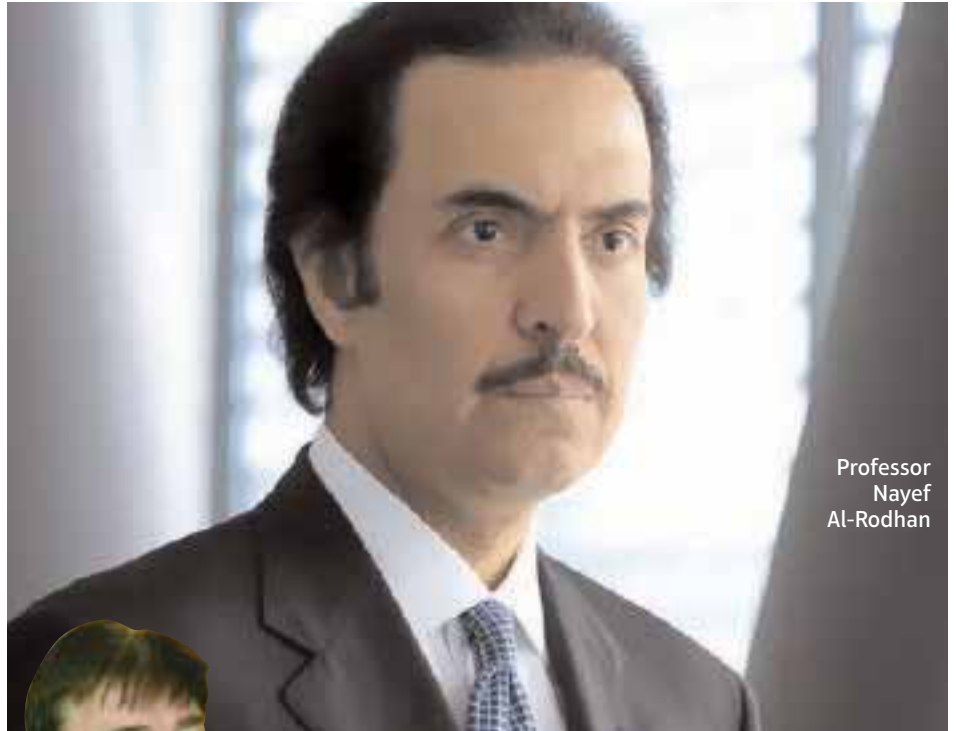
Moving to Yale he specialised in the surgery and science of epilepsy. Becoming interested in the way that the brain and the spinal cord repair themselves — an area which, he claims, we still know very little about — he joined Harvard University.

It was at Harvard that Professor Al-Rodhan's career transformation came.

He said: "I was always interested in philosophy, history and global politics. My first year at Harvard was a research year free from the usual overwhelming surgical commitments.

"This allowed me time to read, reflect and attend various lectures which made me realise that the neurochemical basis of human behaviour might be a useful key to understanding global affairs. It is individuals

# When medicine meets GEO-POLITICS



Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan



Long Hanborough-based scientist and author **Dr Richard Corfield** talks to Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan

that make up governments and societies and so an individual's perception of their emotional self-interest — that has its basis in their neurochemistry — may lead to some useful political insights from the local level to the global."

For Professor Al-Rodhan, competition, co-operation and conflict between groups is a natural progression from an individual's own brain chemistry and that person's ambitions and fears.

He said: "We must never be complacent about the virtues of human nature because, human beings are governed primarily by their emotional self-interest.

"In a globalised world of instant connectivity and deepening interdependence — everyone has to be secure if humanity is to triumph. This security must be based on global fairness, and the guarantee of human dignity".

"Political decisions are not always rational. International relations pre-supposes the rationality of the state, but history is full of examples where states (even democratic ones) over-reach their policies to the detriment of their own national interests, because of personal greed, emotional baggage, or a skewed perception of their own history and the histories of others."

He insists that "dignity is a much more deep and inclusive human need than political freedom. This is true even in mature democracies".

Professor Al-Rodhan is also concerned about the lack of oversight mechanisms for emerging technologies.

"Our humanity and civil liberties are being challenged by the growth in area such as data mining, synthetic biology, cognitive enhancements, and artificial intelligence."

He is proud of his unique interdisciplinary perspective.

"My approach to global affairs and my belief in the importance of human security to a peaceful, cooperative and prosperous human future, is what brought me to St Antony's College, Oxford, where I could develop my ideas further, given the impressive diversity of academic talent here."

I asked him to summarise his philosophy. "My central ideas revolve around my Neuro-Philosophical theory of human nature and history — sustainable history — where the sustainability of any political order and human civilisation as a whole depends on balancing the ever-present tension between human nature, and the need for human dignity."