

THE FUNCTION OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

JOHN BASSETT, LL.D.

Montreal

My first duty and pleasure, on this occasion and in the presence of such an assembly of illustrious leaders in the field of education, is to express my appreciation of the gracious invitation extended to me in entrusting the responsible task of delivering a message at this Founders' Day ceremony of the University of New Brunswick.

It is a great responsibility, and I am fully conscious of what may be regarded as daring on my part in consenting to be your speaker at this function, when no doubt I shall be expected to have much to say about the vision of those pioneers who blazed the trail and prepared the foundations upon which the moral and cultural life of our nation was to rest.

I may, I hope with confidence assume that the story and record of those men whom you annually delight to honor as the Founders of the University of New Brunswick are so well known to you all that it would be presumptuous on my part to indulge in a repetition of their record, inspiring as it may be to all who have in any measure benefitted by their example, and the heritage they bequeathed to succeeding generations.

Gratitude should move us to heed the ancient philosopher's exhortation, "Let us praise famous men and the fathers that begat us," and I am sure that it may be taken for granted that all who have in any way been associated with this great institution of learning whether as professors or students, cherish in their hearts homage for the courage and faith which led to its foundation.

I am pleased for several reasons to be with you tonight. Neither my family nor I will forget the distinction of the Honorary Degree conferred upon me last spring by my old and cherished friend, your eminent Chancellor, Lord Beaverbrook, whose life and career are an inspiration to the young men of the nation.

The warmth of your welcome then touched me deeply, and I returned with haste to be with you again tonight.

Patriarchial Feeling

An occasion of this kind gives me an almost patriarchial feeling. We are gathered in the hall of a University whose history goes back to the year 1785—one hundred and sixty-three years. That is a great stretch of time in the history of this country. But I find it quite natural and always satisfying, to think with the perspective of long periods.

For the institution of which I am President, the Montreal Gazette, goes far back into this country's storied past. It was founded in the year 1778, and had already published for seven years when the idea of founding this University was first conceived by the United Empire Loyalists.

Products of Revolt

Indeed, though the American Revolution brought about the loss of the thirteen colonies to the British Empire, it also brought about two incalculable blessings. For if it were not for the American Revolution, neither our University nor the Montreal Gazette would ever have come into existence, and we would not be here so pleasantly together at this moment.

It was the United Empire Loyalists, coming north into this Province that first determined that a University should be built in this city. It was a French printer, named Fleury Mesplet, coming north from Philadelphia to Montreal at the time of the Revolution, who established the Montreal Gazette.

If the truth must be told, and I should be the last man to suppress the truth, Fleury Mesplet was himself a revolutionary. Montreal had been seized by the American troops invading Canada. Benjamin Franklin, the trouble-shooter of the Revolution, had been sent to Montreal to buy or persuade the inhabitants, most of whom were French, of the advantages of revolutionary doctrine and practice.

Since Montreal had no printing press, he sent for Fleury Mesplet, a printer from Lyons, in France, whom he had some time before persuaded to come out to America, perhaps with a view to his usefulness for just this type of work.

But Divine Providence had a far better purpose for Fleury Mesplet than printing propaganda for the Revolution. When he arrived in Montreal he found Benjamin Franklin getting out. The American forces were retreating, and Franklin wished to leave before a British man-of-war should appear in the harbor. Mesplet, however, was immobilized by the printing press he had brought with him all the way from Philadelphia. When the British forces took possession of Montreal he was seized and put in prison. But a printer in those happy days was still rare enough to be looked upon with something like awe, and after a few months of captivity he was released. Mesplet used his press to print a book of prayers—the first book printed in Montreal, and two years later, from the same press, he printed the first issue of the Montreal Gazette.

The Tory Bible

There are people today who refer to the Montreal Gazette as "the Tory Bible." When it is remembered that it was founded by a radical of the Revolution we may indeed see in how mysterious a way God moves His wonders to perform. No doubt, too, this fact has helped to give me my faith in the possibilities of sound political conversion, which remains to this day the marvel of my friends.

For me, in my own work in Montreal, the sense of history and tradition is part of my daily atmosphere. I look out from the windows of my office upon an historic city, and often think how it has grown through the centuries from a fur trading post in the forest, and how the story of that development is told as a day to day record in the files of my own newspaper.

From time to time some chance event serves to make the past especially real. One such event occurred last summer.

From my office window I could see a quaint little stone building, built more than a century ago in an old-fashioned Gothic style. It was a building with a long and varied educational history. It has been the High School of Montreal, the Arts Building of McGill University, the Normal School of Lower Canada, and finally the offices of the Montreal Protestant School Board. In this little building lectures in Arts were given by McGill's great Principal of the nineteenth century. Sir William Dawson—the same man who was one of the Commissioners who reorganized this University under the present name of the University of New Brunswick in the 1850's.

Well, this old building was demolished last summer, and in the work of demolition the workmen came upon the original cornerstone. I remembered having read how the Governor-General Sir Charles Metcalfe, preceded by a military band from the Montreal garrison and accompanied by a great company of leading citizens, had mounted the hill to lay that cornerstone on July 11th, 1845. A copy of the Gazette for that day had been placed in the lead box and sealed with mortar spread by the Governor's own hand. It was on a July day in 1947 that the cornerstone was discovered by the workmen demolishing the building. Into the light of the twentieth century was brought from its lead box that same copy of the Gazette. That paper, which had been folded and put away more than a century before, represented on that day the present quite as much as the papers that came off the presses this morning.

Tangible Reminders

There are many tangible reminders of the past at this University. You have your Arts Building, erected in the year 1825, the old University building in the Dominion of Canada. In your library are the precious documents that tell the story of the University's development, from the days of the eighteenth century, when it was conceived and hoped for by the United Empire Loyalists, who had made their way into this distant Province for the sake of loyalty and principle.

There is much that is stabilizing and reassuring in the vitality of institutions that outlast all the changes and chances—all the come and go of this very uncertain life. They visibly bind the generations together. They are a living reminder that there is no past, present or future, but only a process of broader reality in which all three are merged into one.

In his magnificent soliloquy contained in "Virginibus Puerisque," Robert Louis Stevenson says:—

"We uncommiserate pass into the night
From the loud banquet, and departing
Leave behind a tremor in men's memories
Faint and sweet and frail as music.
The features of the face,
The tones of the loved voice
Perish and vanish one by one.
Meanwhile in the hall of song
The multitude applauds the new performer,
But one perchance, one ultimate survivor lingers on
And smiles and to his heart recalls the long forgotten.
But ere the morrow die
He too, returning through the curtain comes
And the new age forgets us and goes on."

But I would not subscribe too fully to such a gloomy doctrine.

Sharp and Definite

When we think of the past and of tradition and all that they mean to us, we should, I think, try always to realize that the past is not something blurred and unreal. It is as sharp and as definite and as urgent as the present. We have no special claim upon vividness, or life or experience. We are only actors in a pageant that greatly transcends ourselves.

We have our exits and our entrances, but the great pageant goes on to its mysterious and destined end, though we may belong to the future for a little while, we shall belong to the past forever. It is the past that sends us out to play our role, and which receives us home when our part is played.

Thus when we honor our predecessors—as all who have received a trust from the past must do—let us rememebr that we must one day join them and that our portion will be with them. We must be worthy of our predecessors, if we are worthy to take our places with them. To inherit a trust is to inherit great advantages and opportunities, but it is also to be put on trial by the past, and by the past to be judged.

The moment our feet tread the campus and enter the university halls, libraries and laboratories, we find the accumulations of over a century of honorable academic history at the disposal of the younger generation.

Here are grounds and buildings of great value—here are libraries and other educational facilities—created by the brains and hands of men who have given of their best. Here you have a body of scholars who give the best years of their lives and their best efforts for the edification and culture of the future leaders of our nation.

The generous actions of men and women whose energy, gifts and brains have made all this possible put the younger generation under obligation.

Matter of Mood

Students should come here not merely to spend a few years pleasantly and gain a certain distinction which comes from a 'Varsity man or woman. If they come merely to read some more books and listen to lectures and thus broaden their own culture and feel themselves that much more of a gentleman or gentlewoman—if they come merely to gain a certain added measure of information and an increased amount of technical skill, enabling them to go out and market their abilities at a higher figure—if they come in any of these moods, then I fear that the main purpose and intention of the founders have been misunderstood.

But I urge if they come with faith in their fellows and faith in God with a high resolve to make their own life count for the highest and best, and to achieve something worthy to be added to the splendid history of the University; if they come with a feeling that education means the gaining of a more just and intelligent appreciation of the meaning of life, that it means having one's life made more capably responsible for the well-being of the society they find themselves in, then the best of all that they will find here is theirs.

This University is theirs to enjoy, to possess; theirs to carry away with them into lives of honor and usefulness. *

In the Modern World

I would like to speak tonight of the University in the Modern World at the moment our world is a confused and disagreeable place. Our civilization is still shuddering from the impact of total war. Millions of lives have been sacrificed, heavy blows have been dealt to morality and decency, bitterness and resentment abound and rival interests divide the counsels of statesmen.

Our old robust faith—that the world was being conducted to a peaceful consummation—is hard put to it to preserve a foothold in the shifting sands of cynicism and disillusionment.

What has the University to contribute in the present world situation?

The University stands in a strategic position between the past and the present, and its first task is to see that no ancient good is lost out of the world.

Its second task, as I see it, is to fight against evil in all its forms until it loses its hold upon mankind. Its third task is to infuse a noble, spontaneous and creative activity into the minds of men. We are prepared to regard the University as a critic, scribe and prophet. We like to think it is the master of thought and the mainspring of action.

In spite of certain restrictions and limitations, modern universities try to live up to that high standard.

It must, however, be clear to the most superficial observer of our present age that we are coming, if we have not already come, to a new synthesis of men and nations. The mighty forces released by two world wars have had the most far-reaching and transforming effect upon life and thought. We are passing from an old order known and definite to a new order dim and uncertain. New ideas are shaping themselves and groping for expression, but it is disappointing to some people to find rather a dearth of great men who can properly control these new ideas and theories that are gaining currency.

There appears to be a lack in leadership that interprets the moral and social needs of our time in brave, clear policies with truth as their basis and wide human well-being for their aim.

New Situation

In every department of the world's work we are faced with an entirely new situation. Policies, systems and even doctrines have had their sanction challenged—and their foundations shaken. It does appear that great uneasiness stirs the minds of men rather than great hopes. No conceivable advance can be made, social, political, international or educational, that does not violate accepted interests and time-honored policies.

Such is the situation and so we ask what part is the University with all its far-flung influence to play in the transformation which must take place in the life of the world. What is its leadership to mean in these days? Can it by its present methods mould and develop the men and women who will dominate the future? Has it a commanding and decisive word to speak on the vital issue challenging mankind, or is it to isolate itself from living issues?

In this urgent hour these are pertinent questions, which can only be answered by those upon whose erudition and diligent labors the efficiency and effectiveness of the university rest.

There are three ideals—of education, democracy and religion—to which it seems to me that a definite guidance is expected from the university, though I do not aspire to be an authority on such matters, I venture to offer my opinions first on education.

Education

From the days of Aristotle there have been conflicting views in regard to the meaning and purpose of education.

There is a common tendency to regard education as primarily an intellectual process, concerning itself only incidentally with moral issues and personal relationships. "It has been the greatest error of human modern intelligence," said Ruskin, "to mistake science for education. True education has no other function than the development of what is lovely, decent and just."

However, popular opinion may differ from that of Ruskin's, we feel that we do not educate a man by telling him what he knows not, but by making him what he was not.

Some of us have little or no sympathy with the view that education is an intellectual process from which only those of marked intellectual capacity are capable of deriving any benefit from learning, and that the great mass of ordinary people are for the educationist's useless material.

We are witnessing today a great struggle between the forces of revolution and the forces of education. At the moment we cannot be certain as to what the outcome will be, but the issue will largely be determined by the attitude which, spiritually and intellectually minded people take to the question of education.

If they belittle it, if they regard it as a luxury, if they conceive of it as merely an intellectual thing, grave difficulties and perplexities await us, perhaps, even disaster.

We look to the universities for guidance and enlightenment in this matter of education. Let us now turn to the ideal of

Democracy

How often were we told during the First World War that the conflict was being waged to make the world safe for democracy? Never was the mind of the modern world so struck as by the power of that sentence. Democracy has become a watchword of magic strength and of subtle strategy.

There is no more important task for the mind than the clarifying of the meaning of that key word and this task comes as a challenge to the university in a fashion whose demand cannot be escaped. The word itself must be rescued from ill-treatment if not mutilation.

The content of the idea of democracy consists of a sense of the individual and a sense of the common good and the theory of democracy may be approached through either or both. When approached through sense of the individual, democracy is giving to every individual man the rights and opportunities which make for the largest life. When approached through the sense of the common good, democracy is organization of life for the purpose of the common good.

Each of these conceptions alone is incomplete and even dangerous—amply illustrated in the social experiments of men and nations, which have been and still are the fashion of our generation.

Democracy regarded as a theory and practice related to the individual alone tends to philosophical anarchy. That man ought to be allowed to do anything in any way at any time. Life would soon become a nightmare of clashing individualities.

On the other hand, when we think of democracy as a theory and practice related only to society, difficulties again soon emerge. The world becomes a vast machine in which the individual has no real or valid place. The individual is submerged in the group. The common good becomes uncommonly bad when it crushes the individual life. Instead of being a person, who uses a machine, man becomes a machine who has lost his personality.

The Same Uniform

Life becomes, as Dr. Lyon Hough once said "a vast orphan asylum in which all the orphans wear the same kind of uniform."

Such an analysis of the tendencies implicit in contemporary interpretations of democracy surely makes evident the necessity for close and clear thinking.

What ideal then of democracy, may I ask, will the university of large and adequate leadership offer to men and women of today and tomorrow?

Democracy is found in that articulation of life where the individual receives all that can be given to him without interfering with the common good—and society receives all that can be given to it without crushing the individual.

Both conceptions must be kept in constant and equal perspective.

When it comes to details such close and delicate work will require the utmost skill of the most highly trained minds, and there the university can and will do work of the utmost value.

Religion

The need for a clear and satisfying word from the university about religion and its place in human life is obvious to all. What are the demands which are to be made upon the university on this subject?

As a layman I hesitate to enter into a discussion of this subject, but such is the importance of religion in the life of man that it cannot be lightly sidestepped by an indifferent attitude on the part of university authorities.

It is inevitable that a series of questions be asked which penetrate to the very heart of life's most fundamental problem.

We turn not only to our official religious leaders, but also to the university for strength of enlightenment and guidance there.

Insidious Suggestion

I feel that a further word is required from the university to correct the insidious suggestion "that God becomes progressively less essential to the running of the universe."

Never in man's history has faith in God been more necessary to sane, wholesome, vigorous and hopeful living than today.

I am bold enough to believe that the founders of this University of New Brunswick, whose memory you honour today, were inspired in their efforts by their strong and unwavering faith in the guidance of God, and that it was their hope that this university would become in a noble sense a spiritual leader on the new day.

The challenge of our day is hard upon us.

The testing, far-reaching question has to do with our capacity to rise to the opportunity the times present.

We look with confident expectancy to the centres of learning such as this university, for voices which shall unite the richness of the past with the potentials of the present and thus become leaders in the re-making of the world.

EDITOR'S NOTE— This address was given at the annual FOUNDERS DAY ceremony of the University of New Brunswick, held on February 18, 1948.

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