

THE LIBRARY OF PARLIAMENT

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I have always been grateful that I spent my childhood and youth in this city of ancient charm and memorable honour; grateful too that for a few years I went to this University whose professor of English, the beloved Archibald MacMechan, instilled in me that love of books which has not only helped me in my career but has also been the solace of my leisure hours.

Today the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws has been conferred on me. In your phrase it is *honoris causa*. In my mind it can only be *mirabile dictu*. However, I am well aware that the growing importance of libraries and librarians is what was really recognized this morning. I am only an ordinary member of my profession, but since the library with which I am connected is both unique and important, I think you may be interested to know something about it.

The first Parliamentary Library in Canada was established in Quebec City in 1792. A few years later a legislative library was organized in Upper Canada. When the two provinces were united in 1841, their two libraries were also amalgamated. In 1865 all the books from both were moved into temporary quarters in Ottawa. The present building—the work of an architect named Thomas Fuller—was begun in 1872. It was formally opened four years later and in the same year was the scene of a costume ball given by Lord Dufferin, then Governor-General. *The Times*, an Ottawa paper of the day, reported next morning that the library had “presented a brilliant scene,” and it took a dozen columns to describe the costumes, the music and the setting, and to list the names of the great and distinguished who had danced on the library floor and flirted beneath the book shelves.

Alone of the Parliament Buildings, the Library survived the fire of 1916. The Library as it stands today is the library that the Fathers of Confederation—Sir John A. Macdonald, Alexander Mackenzie, Howe, Taché, and others—knew so well. Laurier, Tupper, Blake, Cartwright—all our great statesmen were at home in it. In my own early days there the appearances in the library of Laurier, Fielding, Borden, Bennett, King, Meighen, or Bourassa, were just everyday happenings. It was the library also of Parkman, of Archibald Lampman, of Duncan Campbell Scott, and many other familiar figures who have enriched our literary heritage. Lampman's wife

worked there after his death and died at her desk in the library. The manuscript of Lampman's poems, written in his own careful and beautiful script, has been preserved and is forever one of our prized possessions.

When I entered the Library of Parliament the profession of librarian was lightly regarded. There was no such thing as a Library Science degree, and librarians in the lower grades were mostly clerks; the seniors were often men of education and experience. Our staff numbered only sixteen; today we are sixty-eight.

The Parliamentary Librarian at that time was an ex-Cabinet Minister, a cultivated man and an essayist and speaker of distinction. He was once very much amused when he received a letter from a lady in the United States addressed to him as "The Congenital Librarian." In replying to her he asked why she had so styled him. She retaliated with "I don't know why I called you the Congenital Librarian, but why do you call me Madame when I am not married?"

At the bottom of the library's ladder was an ex-waiter who had lost his job because of the coming of prohibition. He could not read or write, but political influence demanded that he get a job, so he was appointed to the Library of Parliament. A Member of Parliament rushing in one day said to him "Where are the Statutes?" He replied, "There is only one I know of, and there it is"—pointing to the effigy of Queen Victoria that is in the centre of our reading room.

The library is an octagonal building crowned with an arched dome. The panelling and shelves that line the walls to a height of three storeys are of Canadian white pine, carved by hand in patterns of extraordinary intricacy and beauty. There are eight alcoves with four stairways giving access to the upper and lower levels, emblazoned with the arms of the Dominion and the seven provinces belonging to the Union in 1872. Thousands of books are shelved on the walls of the reading room, and thousands more are housed in underground stacks. Altogether the library possesses almost half a million books.

Although it was forced to assume additional responsibilities until a National Library was established after the Second World War, the primary function of the Parliamentary Library is to serve the needs of Parliament. For this reason its holdings are concentrated in fields relating to law and legislation. We have, for example, as complete a collection of British parliamentary documents as may be found anywhere in the world. Our set of the Statutes of England goes all the

way back to Magna Carta. British Parliamentary Debates—more commonly known as *Hansard*—start with the year 1660 while our set of British Sessional Papers dates from 1715. United States Congressional documents, now numbering thousands, begin with the year 1802. Canadian documents date back to the commencement of official records in this country, starting with those of Upper and Lower Canada and continuing to the present day. Many other wide subjects such as history, political science and economics, biography, and general literature are also represented. Press files include ancient issues of hundreds of Canadian and foreign newspapers and periodicals, and many more are added every day, to be recorded permanently and economically on microfilm. Among early newspapers there is the *Quebec Gazette*, which goes back to 1764. There is a complete set—probably the only one in the world—of *The North American*, a paper published in Vermont at the time of the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada.

Many individual items are of special and unique interest. One of the most valuable is Audubon's *Birds of America*, in four huge elephant folios. There are only about a hundred sets of this work in existence, and the other day one was sold at auction for \$27,000. Our copy is unusually valuable because it was sold to the library in the early 1860's by Audubon's brother, and many of the plates bear Audubon's own comments in pencil, such as "too blue," or "not light enough here."

The library staff have duties peculiar to their special position. They are daily required to answer queries sent to them by Senators and Members—often from the Floor of the House in the heat of debate—and to supply information relevant to public matters of all sorts. Let me take as an example the special session called last November to deal with the Suez emergency. Speaking of the Canadian position, the Secretary of State for External Affairs told the Commons: "It is bad to be a choreboy of the United States; it is equally bad to be a colonial choreboy running around and shouting 'Ready, aye, ready.'" The day before, the reference staff had been asked to verify Mr. Pearson's quotation. It has a long and interesting history. Addressing the Businessmen's Club in Toronto in 1922 shortly after the Chanak affair, Arthur Meighen said: "Let there be no dispute as to where I stand. When Britain's message came, then Canada should have said: 'Ready, aye, ready.' We stand by you." This statement was thought by many to have cost Meighen the next election. Ironically,

the phrase originated with a distinguished Liberal. In 1914 Sir Wilfrid Laurier, speaking in the House of Commons as Prime Minister, declared: "When the call comes our answer goes out at once . . . to the call of duty, 'Ready, aye, ready'."

Hardly a day passes in which we are not asked to supply a quotation or give its source. With our large collection of reference books, books of quotations, and publications such as *Notes and Queries*, it is remarkable the number of these quotations that we cannot find. Some of them have been carried in the head of the questioner since childhood and had their origin in an old school reader. Some are just lost in antiquity. It must be two years or more since Grant Dexter of the *Winnipeg Free Press* asked us for help in locating the source of a quotation used by John W. Dafoe in his book on Laurier. Dafoe said that a definitive biography of a great man was not likely to be written by one who knew him in the flesh, and that an English public man who was also a novelist and poet had written:

Ne'er of the living can the living judge,

Too blind the affection or too fresh the grudge.

We have never been able to find these lines. The words "English public man," "novelist," and "poet" suggest either of the two Lyttons (Bulwer or Owen Meredith). We went through all their books of poems line by line; we turned every page of almost thirty volumes of Lytton's novels. We are still seeking. Not only librarians, but professors, newspapermen, and literary men throughout Canada are baffled. Letters have been written to the *New York Times Book Review* and similar periodicals—all to no avail. We may yet have to organize a society such as the one which Benham says was formed in England just to discover the origin of the phrase "Earning a precarious living by taking in one another's washing."*

We are often asked what Members read, but one should not disclose "secrets of the prison-house." After all, Parliament is a cross section of the whole country; there are Members who read very little, others who read wisely and well. In the past four years there have been Members who have not borrowed one book; others have each taken out over five hundred.

*When this article had gone to press, Dr. Hardy wrote to inform us that the lines by Mr. Dafoe were in fact written by Bulwer Lytton, but—having been composed in his old age and after his works had been completed and published—they had never appeared in book form. Mr. Dafoe had found them in *Blackwood's Magazine*—to which a team of researchers was finally led—or, more probably, in a quotation from *Blackwood's*. The chief credit for verification goes to the Rev. Stuart Ivison of Ottawa. An account of the search, "In Quest of a Quote," by Grant Dexter, appeared, appropriately, in the *Winnipeg Free Press* (July 20, 1957) and was reprinted in the *Ottawa Journal* (July 24, 1957). —Ed.

I am glad to say that modern readers treat our books well, but I remember in the old days one Senator—a Nova Scotian, I am sorry to say—who used to write in the margin of such books as he borrowed comments such as “Rubbish,” or “This is quite true. I was there myself at the time.”

There is a constant demand for detective stories. There would be a riot if we cut off that very lusty branch of literature. Many quite distinguished Parliamentarians find in thrillers relief for minds jaded with many cares and dulled and deadened by a constant diet of blue books. Ernest Lapointe, that great French-Canadian lieutenant of Mackenzie King, once told me that he owed his good use of colloquial English to the fact that he read detective stories constantly.

In the summer of 1952 fire broke out in the dome of the Library. Both the building and thousands of the books were damaged by water. Hundreds of thousands of books were carried out of the building. The rest were stored temporarily in various parts of the city until the building was restored. The work of restoration, completed only a year ago, took four years and cost more than two million dollars. The dome was completely rebuilt in the moulded plaster of the original. Every piece of panelling was taken down, numbered, shipped to Montreal for cleaning and partial fireproofing, and reinstalled in its former position. A replica of the intricate floor, a parquet of cherry, oak, and walnut, was laid. Two levels of modern stacks replaced the old stone cellar. Working space was modernized. As completed, the project was one of the most complex and elaborate of its kind ever undertaken in Canada. Certainly there was a rare regard for beauty and for the inherited past as well as a scrupulous attention to functional requirements.

In the last analysis, however, all these considerations—of architecture, facilities, holdings, readership—all these are secondary. Ultimately, as a librarian, one has to ask the fundamental question: What good is a book? The question has special urgency today when new techniques of communication are competing with the printed word. Against the enticements of the film, can the book justify its existence? If so, what has it got to offer?

If I were called upon to defend books, I would build my defence around the word “complexity.” All other media simplify, and over-simplify, experience. They do this unavoidably and of necessity. They do so because they are *mass* media. This they must be because their costs are astronomical. Their very existence depends upon their consump-

tion in quantity by large numbers. To reach the maximum audience in a competitive market, they must aim at the broadest common denominator of taste. The interpretation of experience that results is inadequate because it is inescapably stereotyped, crude, cheap, and artificial, yet alluring, attractive, perhaps exciting. For this is the danger, the appalling danger of mass media: the primitive is nearly always stronger than the civilized. In the manufacture of washing machines competition leads to a steady improvement of the product. In cultural expression competition generally leads to debasement of the product.

Now, books themselves are not altogether exempt from pressures of this kind. But to a very considerable degree they are. Costs are comparatively low, and however great the temptation to the contrary, the publisher can afford to limit his market. This means, in turn, that he can afford to deal with life on its own terms, recognizing its fragmentary character, its perplexity, its incompleteness, its intensity. Above all, he will not have to simplify, which is to falsify. He can afford the truth. This, for me, is at once the justification of books and the highest aim of book makers. And surely it is also the justification and highest aim of learning, an experience those of you who are graduating today have just begun.

As I say goodbye and thank you for the honour of your company and the patience of your listening, may I end with words in praise of the treasury of books written by Richard de Bury six hundred years ago:

How easily, how secretly, how safely in books, do we make bare without shame the poverty of human ignorance! These are the masters that instruct us without rod and ferrule, without words of anger, without payment of money or clothing. Should you approach them they are not asleep; if you seek to question them they do not hide themselves; should you err, they do not chide; and should you show your ignorance, they know not how to laugh. O Books! You alone are free and liberal. You give to all that seek, and set free all that serve you zealously.