

A PLEA FOR THE UNIVERSITY TRADITION*

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MR. PRESIDENT, your Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, Members of the Senate, fellow graduates, and guests of the University: The President has asked me to say "a few words of wisdom" to my fellow graduates.

I must begin by expressing my appreciation of the high honour which this University has done me in making me a member of its distinguished alumni. This University, like the University of whose staff I have the honour to be a member, has grown from an institution known as King's College, and has been called into existence by a charter from the Crown. The traditional relations of the University to the Crown may be traced from the University of Paris, which the King of France called his eldest daughter. An eldest daughter in any family is an important person. Her imperiousness may lead members of the family to leave the household, and students rebelling against the University of Paris started the University of Oxford. Again students rebelled against the University of Oxford and started Cambridge. Such a daughter will resent encroachments on her rights, and she was not slow to remind even the Papacy that there were limits to its authority. She had the interests of the family at heart: to her was intrusted the supervision of writing, printing and associated activities connected with manuscripts and books. But the influence of the eldest daughter depends not only on her relation to other members of her family: it depends also on the position of her father. The Crown has always been jealous of the eldest daughter, and in France gradually removed jurisdiction over the press. Under the close paternal supervision of the Crown and the Church, learning migrated in the late 16th century and early 17th century to Holland. In England, from the quarrel of Henry VIII with the Papacy to the 19th century, the Universities were kept under the close supervision of the Crown, with the result that advancement of learning took place to a large extent outside their walls.

In the 19th century in England, perhaps in sympathy with the emancipation of women, the Universities were emancipated by science and mathematics at the expense of the humanities.

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Emancipation after such a long period under the supervision of the Crown, and the discovery of her new freedom, perhaps made this daughter flighty. She began to follow one fashion after another. In the republics where she lost the parental solicitude of the Crown, she became less conservative and even disrespectful as she consorted with one fad and then another, to the neglect of her tradition in the humanities and learning. Her influence was sought by business, by political parties, and by ecclesiastical organizations. She came to be known by the company she kept.

It is in this period that you and I have been introduced to her and made a part of her community. In what fashion can we best contribute to a strengthening of her position? First we must understand her environment. She is besieged on all hands by villains. She no longer represents western civilization as she did in the Middle Ages, when Latin as a common language made it possible for her to serve as a repository of the highest traditions of western culture. The printing press destroyed internationalism, and accentuated the importance of differences in language: these differences were widened by propaganda and by the use of such terms as "race". Growth of science meant an interest in laboratories and buildings: also the neglect of humanities and of an interest in individuals. The social sciences followed science and talked of organization and planning. Professions emerged to narrow her concern in the problems of life. The University lent her ear to those who on all sides told her they had discovered truth, and she forgot that her existence depended on the *search* for truth and not on truth. But with all these distractions throughout her history, since she assumed the mantle for the promotion of learning from the monastic orders, she has preserved an interest in the search for truth. The interest has been *more* or *less* intense as we have seen, but the University as the *studium generale*, the concern with general studies and the problem of knowledge as a whole, has remained.

Her traditions and her interest demand an obsession with balance and perspective—an obsession with the Greek tradition of the humanities. The search for truth assumes a constant avoidance of extremes and extravagance. Virtue is in the middle way. There are no cures. Always we are compelled to be sceptical of the proposal to cure the world's ills. We cannot tolerate the dominance of any individual or of any group. The University of Paris checked in France the virulence which characterized the Inquisition in Spain. In our time it must resist the tendencies to bureaucracy and dictatorship of the modern State, the

intensification of nationalism, the fanaticisms of religion, the evils of monopoly in commerce and industry. "All the triumphs of truth and genius over prejudice and power", said Macaulay, "in every country and in every age have been the triumphs of Athens." "Nor do the artificial concentrations of good minds in more modern capitals approximate even remotely to the intellectual intercourse of Athens. Men of parts move to the capital only when they are already famous, some of them achieve little afterwards, or at any rate not their best, and one might well imagine that it would be better for them to go back to the provinces. There is not much exchange between them; indeed given the present-day notions of intellectual property, exchange would be looked at askance. It is only very vigorous epochs that can give and take without wasting words. Now, a man must be very rich to allow others to take from him without protest, without "claiming" his ideas as his own, without squabbling about priority. And then comes that intellectual pest of our time:—originality. It supplies the need tired men feel for sensation. In the ancient world it was possible, under the beneficent influence of a free intellectual mart, once the truest, simplest and finest expression had been found for anything, to form a consensus. The most striking example is to be seen in visual art, which (even at its zenith) repeated the most excellent types in sculpture, fresco, and we may assume in all forms whose monuments have not come down to us. Originality, must be *possessed*, not striven for. . . . What the free intellectual mart really achieves is the clarity of all expression and the unerring sense of what men want. The arbitrary and the strange are shed, a standard and a style won, while science and art can interact. The productions of any age clearly show whether they came into being under such an influence or not. In their meaner form, they are conventional; in their nobler, classical. The positive and negative sides are always interwoven.

"In Athens, then, intellect comes out free and unashamed, or at any rate can be discerned throughout as if through a light veil, owing to the simplicity of economic life, the voluntary moderation of agriculture, commerce and industry, and the great general sobriety. Citizenship, eloquence, art, poetry and philosophy radiated from the life of the city. We find here no demarcation of classes by rank, no distinction of gentle and simple, no painful struggles to keep up with others in ostentation, no doing the same thing "for the sake of form," hence no collapse from overstrain, no Philistia in shirt-sleeves one day and flashy

social functions the next. Festivals were a regular feature of life, not a strain. Hence it was possible to develop that social intercourse which is the background of Plato's dialogues. On the other hand, there was no exaggeration of music, for us the cloak which covers a multitude of incongruities, nor was there any false prudery covering a mean and secret malevolence. People had something to say to each other and said it.

"Thus a general understanding was created. Orators and dramatists could reckon with an audience such as had never before existed. People had time and taste for the highest and best, because mind was not drowned in money-making, social distinctions and false decencies. There was comprehension for the sublime, sensitiveness for the subtlest allusions and appreciation of the crassest wit."¹

In our time, unfortunately, the power of resistance to extremes has been greatly weakened. In Europe the University has largely ceased as a vital force, though we learn of steady persistent refusal in Denmark to grant degrees, and of a determination in Norway to maintain its traditions. It may be that the University has been strengthened by this ordeal of militarism, but the costs are and will be high. Years will be required to repair the damage. In the allied countries energies have been mobilized and the Universities reduced to a skeleton. In Canada staff and student bodies have been depleted. But in the allied countries there has been a recognition of the necessity of preserving the Universities. In Canada the traditions have been cherished. Many of us who suffered from the neglect of these traditions in the last war, and all of us who have felt the loss of the flower of our youth in the years since the last war, have realized that we must not desecrate the memory of those who fell by a similar neglect in this war. Here I must pay tribute to the resolution of representatives of the Maritimes—to the late Norman Rogers who played an important rôle in the early formation of government policy with relation to the Universities, to President Smith of the Universities Conference, and, if I may be permitted a personal comment, to your own President. It is through their efforts that many of you have been able to take your degree on this day. As a veteran of the last war, as a member of the generations, our comrades and our sons, of this war and the last, it is with the utmost satisfaction that I participate in these ceremonies of a Maritime institution. I must not break faith with the confidence you have shown in me, and I

1. Burekhardt, *Force and Freedom*, pp. 214, 217.

must speak of the problems of scholarship in Canada as you have demanded.

When one has pointed to the efforts to maintain the position of the Universities in Canada, one is still aware, painfully aware, of the low position of scholarship in the Arts faculties, which are the centre of University traditions, in Canadian institutions. In the public mind the scholar is typified as the absent-minded professor, and all too often the professor is thought of as a salesman of patent medicines. Or he is regarded as an agnostic, a free-thinker and a radical whose primary concern is the corruption of youth. The frustration to which Canadian scholars are subjected through lack of facilities in libraries and laboratory equipment in comparison with those of Great Britain and the United States is evident on every hand. We are scarcely within shouting distance of the scholarship of those countries. In spite of our efforts, scholarship in the liberal arts has been interpreted as not even in the national interest. Books written by Canadian scholars are compelled to resort to the presses of other countries or to support from funds from those countries. Scholars in Canada must be forever grateful to their colleagues in Great Britain and the United States for recognition and support. Only by such recognition and support can they maintain an existence, resist the overwhelming pressure to emigrate to take advantage of higher salaries and better facilities, and hope to strengthen their position. Canada makes heavy demands on her scholars. University presidents, with two or three notable exceptions, including your own, have shown little interest in scholarship. The arts tradition has largely disappeared in appointments—the Church, Law and Business are drawn upon instead. If anyone thinks that University presidents are interested in scholarship, in the humanities and the social sciences in the Faculty of Arts, let him read their pronouncements on those subjects. They are willing to do anything for the Arts courses but get off their backs. In the main they are not themselves appointed because they are scholars, and it is possible that they never will be and possibly never should be. While it has been the rule to appoint scholars to administrative posts in Great Britain and in the United States, the general low opinion of scholars in Canada makes it largely impracticable.

With the weakening of the power of the Crown, the University has been left to the tender mercies of a stepfather in a Board

of Governors. A University president in Canada is required to have some of the qualities of the superintendents of lunatic asylums or of ring masters in circuses. But they should be appointed from those concerned with the protection of scholars against colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, ecclesiasticism, academic nepotism, political affiliations and the demands of special groups and classes, and with encouragement of scholars concerned with the search for truth. The presidents of state institutions are exposed to political influence chiefly through boards of governors. The organization of Canadian Universities tends to have the vices of British and American institutions and the virtues of neither; boards of governors have been known deliberately to torture scholars and students in the interests of political demands. They have been known deliberately to interfere with the content of courses in the interests of particular groups or classes, political parties or ecclesiastical organizations. Apparently they have felt compelled to lend themselves to the systematic rape of scholarship. The suppression of scholarship brings the distortion of scholarship and the necessity for more suppression. Austere associations of scholars have been known to devote whole sessions of their meetings to the discussion of political platforms, and the politician has always been on hand to share in the reflected dignity of discussion and to enjoy the appearance of being taken seriously. No wonder the younger parties have been able to exploit the scholar in their own fashion, when older parties exploit and suppress him in theirs. Nothing has been more indicative of the decline in cultural life in Canada since the last war than the infiltration of politics in the Universities, and nothing has done more to hamper the development of intellectual maturity than the institutional framework of Canadian Universities which permits and encourages the exploitation of scholars, and plays the treasonable rôle of betraying the traditions for which we fought in the last war and for which we fight in this. Men did not suffer and give their lives for this. This is not a pleasant subject, and is not to be explored further on this occasion. Nor is it the fault of any person or group of persons. The deterioration of intellectual life does not admit of scapegoats. It has come about partly as a result of administrative machinery which has failed to check the inroads of politics and to protect the scholar. Such machinery has been of little avail with the marked decline of interest in classical studies, the disappearance of a generation of scholars from Great Britain, and our inability to replace them effectively with native stock; also,

I am sorry to say, with the enormous extension of interest in the social sciences. "Constitutional, radical, social claims were being put forward, supported by the general equalization of rights, and, by the way of the press, were reaching the public on a gigantic scale. Political science became common property, statistics and political economy the arsenal from which every body took the weapons he could best wield. Every movement was oecumenical. The Church, however, seemed to be nothing but an irrational force; religion was desired, but without the Church." But the University tradition to which we have been formally admitted in these ceremonies compels us to be ever alert to the possibility of protesting against distortion, and of fighting for conditions which make it possible for scholarship to survive and flourish. Scholars have no weapons with which to combat organizations of power always insidiously waiting to prey on them. We have most to lose from encroachments of power. "Power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it. . . . Art and Science have the greatest difficulty in preventing themselves from sinking into a mere branch of urban money-making, and from being carried away on the stream of general unrest. The utmost effort and self-denial will be necessary if they are to remain creatively independent in view of the relation in which they stand to the daily press, to cosmopolitan traffic, to world exhibitions. A further menace is the decay of local patriotism, with its advantages and disadvantages, and a great decrease even in national patriotism."²

The arrangement by which Boards of Governors in North American institutions and particularly in Canadian institutions are appointed without reference to the academic staff implies a theory which has reference to public opinion. Members are appointed by governments which provide the funds for political reasons. The Presidents appointed by such Boards of Governors are compelled to bridge the gap between the scholarly interest of the staff and the political interest of the Boards and of governments. This is almost a superhuman task, and involves extremely heavy demands on Presidents. Universities have grown beyond the high-school stage of development which this arrangement suggests, and maturity involves a study of the political science of University administration with a view to proper recognition of the rôle of the scholar and of the University in the nation's life.

2. Burckhardt, 226, 3 *ibid.* pp. 297-8.

The efforts to maintain the traditions of the University are in themselves a testimony to these traditions. As recent graduates, we dedicate ourselves afresh to the maintenance of a tradition without which western culture disappears. We pay tribute to the memory of those who fell in the last war, and of those who have fallen in this war, by the ceremonies in which we have participated. These ceremonies peculiar to an institution which has played the leading rôle in the flowering of western culture remind us of the obligation of maintaining traditions concerned with the search for truth for which men have laid down and have been asked to lay down their lives.