

*Hugh MacLennan*

## Valedictory

It has long been men's practice, at the close of any period of their lives or business, to pause for a moment to reflect on what has just happened, before turning their eyes to what lies ahead. This is the practice that has given rise to the valedictorian; one whose duty it is to review the years he & his classmates have spent together in college, to try to estimate the profit those years have given them, & finally, to say a formal farewell to their University & professors.

Many of those who have performed this duty before have thought this a fine custom, that enables one to put into words one's *feelings* on such an occasion, but, for my part, this is far from being so. We cannot put our *feelings* into words for the simple reason that we do not know what our feelings are. Pervading everything is that vague apathy that already seems to follow times of stress & activity. But of one thing we are certain, —that whether these years have done us good, or harm, or whether they have had no effect at all, we must value them greatly. We value them *because they are part of ourselves*, even as we "are a part of all that we have met." And it is this very thing that makes it impossible for a valedictorian to do his duty properly. For it is not tolerable to speak publicly of the personal things we value most &, therefore, I will have to pass over the heart of the whole matter & deal only with the framework & externals.

As we grow older, I think that we shall find that Dalhousie's best gift to us has been four years of leisure—leisure in the classic sense of the word; leisure from the pressing needs of livelihood, on the one hand & from utter idleness, on the other. During the past four years, our ideas, (if we had any at all) were changing steadily at the rate of about once a month. We may therefore consider ourselves very fortunate that we were able to undergo these changes without suffering for them as we

might very possibly have suffered had we been engaged in business or some other occupation. We entered college thinking ourselves men & regarded as children by everyone else. Now we are leaving it, regarded as men by the world, & (if we are wise), regarding ourselves as children. If Dalhousie has worked this result on us she has set us in the fair way of learning something. She has done her work well & we must thank her for it. Entering college, as we did, just after the age of self-consciousness had arrived, in the age when disillusionments come swiftly & naturally, in the age when the mind is more open to outside influence than it ever will be again, Dalhousie has done her work on us. Whether she has done that work well or ill is for each man to say for himself.

The second great gift Dalhousie has had to offer is the gift of freedom. Gilbert Murray says that the greatest enslaver of mankind is the present moment—the thousand and one little cares & details that are pressing around us every day & moment of our lives & that keep us from living the best that is in us. In college these details are fewer than they are in after life. We have an opportunity to look before & after. Of course, we rarely do so. But that is not Dalhousie's fault. She offers us many good things & leaves the choice to ourselves. For a liberal education never professes to show us “this sorry scheme of things entire.” It only tries to show us that there is a scheme of things, & to enable us to take our places in it with a little grace & intelligence instead of blundering along, in cheerful ignorance, as though it did not exist at all.

It is from these two things—this leisure & this freedom—that whatever intellectual advances we have made, have had their beginning. But in after years, when we think back on these years we have spent here together, thinking, perhaps, that they have been the happiest of our lives, it will not be in these terms, I think that we will reflect on them. Rather we will be seeing the little things, things of everyday that passed into our lives unconsciously & remained there. The quiet talk with our friend over the winter fire; the crowds laughing together at the football matches; the sun making shadows in the rafters of the library—another time, perhaps, we will be glad to remember these things, but it is hardly fitting to speak of them now; for each man knows them best for himself.

If I must say anything of those who have been our professors, let me sum it up in this one sentence: “they have been kind to us & have always tried to make us feel that they were doing their best for us.” A public testimony of thanks is at best a cold & hollow thing & in the

handshake we give them as we go, let us hope they will read the gratitude & the friendship that we really feel.

I have now spoken what words I had that seemed to me appropriate for this occasion & it is time to be going. Let us go then with high hopes & trusting,—perhaps too fondly—that in these years:

“We have built a house that is not for time’s throwing.”