

OXFORD DEBATERS IN CANADA

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THERE is no man, living or dead, to whom I owe a greater debt of gratitude than to Christopher Columbus. Many grave charges may be laid to his account when the day of historical judgment comes, but this one thing can be added to his credit side—that he alone made it possible for three Oxford debaters to be certain not only of finding land after crossing the Atlantic ocean, but also of finding universities to entertain them and to supply them with opponents. That that entertainment was so lavish and that those opponents were so formidable are, however, things for which we must thank entirely a later generation of people, and for my part—looking back upon the tour of last fall—I declare that I consider it to have been the greatest privilege of my undergraduate days. It was the most invigorating, amusing and hard-working holiday I have ever spent. There is no other body of students so hospitable as those of the Dominion; they welcomed us in cars—a luxury little known in our island—they fed us, they did our thinking for us; and if we proceeded on our journeys trailing behind like comets an ever increasing cloud of lost articles, which never quite caught us up, it was not their fault.

To describe one's impressions in detail would be an immense task. I arrived a pad of blotting paper, I went back a book; and from a general glance at that book I realize that I came over an Englishman and returned a citizen of the British Empire. The deepest impression which remains is certainly the whole-hearted affection found everywhere for the Old Country. At a time when the Empire is facing new responsibilities and new problems, when professional pessimists are busy prophesying discord and responsible authorities are worrying both themselves and others about the status of the Dominion, it is a joy to experience in person the strength of the bond which unites lands no ocean can divide.

After sharpening our Old World claws upon some of the forensic champions of the United States, we arrived at Toronto not long after the Varsity had assembled. Canada was to be the tour's climax, and we found it full of surprises, of excitement, of instruction. The magnificence of the Student House at Toronto was as little expected as the natural beauty of New Brunswick and Nova

Scotia. To be called upon to address Montreal students in French was as surprising as to witness a game of English "rugger" at Acadia University. Of embarrassments there were few. Occasionally European English broke down, and very often in the press there appeared reports of us which could be described only as "such stuff as dreams are made on." Whether from a sense of self-preservation or from jealous concern for their sisters, we were in general kept rigidly by our hosts from prying into the atmosphere and ways of the more feminine side of university life. The barrier was broken on one occasion, at Acadia I think, by the fairer section of our audience asking the assembled company in loud though respectful tones "What's wrong with the Oxford boys?" They asked the question only to answer it with a disconcerting frankness which we hoped was typical of our Canadian cousins. On the whole, from observations we had the opportunity of making at the Royal Victoria College, Montreal, and at Shirreff Hall, Halifax, it seemed that the girl students were as buoyant as our own sisters, but a little more inclined to world domination!

One exceedingly interesting factor to watch in university life is the relation between students and their tutors. The mediaeval network of custom and regulation which is set about the path of the Oxford undergraduate is proverbial the world over. It has its glamour, its advantages, and above all its humour. It does however tend to a lack of consideration on the part of the average undergraduate towards his tutors. I was therefore impressed with the kindly and tolerant way in which Canadian university men behaved towards their professors. It was not a rare thing to find students who had encouraged professors not only to come into their private living rooms, but even to call them by their Christian names. How long will it be before Oxford students become generous enough to regard their tutors as human beings?

With regard to the actual debating, many novelties were in store for us. Holding ourselves ready to speak in favour of the League of Nations or against the French policy in the Ruhr, we had in our mind that the universities in the United States would choose to match their orators against us on the former question and those in Canada on the latter. Exactly the reverse happened; but there was no occasion on which a keen struggle did not ensue. Travelling long distances as we did, and arriving at each university only an hour or two before the evening's debate, we owed a lot to the audiences, whose enthusiastic reception invariably inspired us.

To make a debating tour is not only a rare thing in England,

but is indeed utterly foreign to our conception of debating, and necessitates methods to which we have been unaccustomed. The one great purpose behind our visit was to initiate an era of much closer contact between the student bodies of our two great countries, and if there was one thing which interested us less than any other it was the awarding of the verdicts in the contests. To make comparisons of rhetorical styles and to learn as much as we could about public speaking were indeed purposes constantly before us; but however gratifying it may have been to us personally to know that we were not considered by the appointed judges inferior to the speakers we met, nevertheless to marshal our forces for deliberate victory and to co-ordinate our attack for that end was never one of our aims.

Friendly but nevertheless very definitely and carefully nurtured rivalry is a striking feature of university activities in Canada. To have glamour, an event—it seems—must be a staged contest; and not only students but the general public as a whole are trained, as were the Romans of old, to look for these gladiatorial shows and to appreciate them mightily when they come. In many activities we in England also have our great contests. The whole world lines the Thames in order to see the Oxford and Cambridge crews on their annual four-mile race; but debating has never been systematized to that extent and, as far as my knowledge goes, there never has been in England a rhetorical battle between two universities except upon the visit of an American team. Such a thing as a contest is unknown. There are no debating teams, no managers, and no trainers. It is difficult at first to realize what a difference this is bound to make to the style of speaking evolved in Canada and in England.

At home we certainly have debating societies, of which one of the most distinguished is the Oxford Union. With a hall fashioned after the House of Commons, and with a procedure as near that of parliament as is convenient, the Union meets each week to discuss in a public and formal manner some political resolution or one of outstanding interest in other spheres. Two speakers will have been selected three days before by the President to champion either side. After their speeches the debate is thrown open to the House, and is sustained by members who signify their desire to speak. Both during the debate and at the close a vote of all members in attendance is taken upon the resolution "on the paper", and the whole energies of all the combatants have been directed not to win a dialectic duel over their opponents, but to carry or defeat the

resolution. It is difficult to say what governs the voting,—logic and persuasion on the part of the speakers, sentiment and prejudices on the part of the audience, all play their part, and speakers in order to be successful at the Union must learn by practice to cultivate just those qualities which curry favour in the eyes of an audience. Naturally enough, sequence of argument and the systematic building up of a logical case on either side are usually lacking. While we were on tour, the audience frequently witnessed the comic tragedy of our speakers scoring points against each other. On one occasion not only was one of my colleagues guilty of sarcasm at the expense of our opponents, but in referring to what I considered a particularly descriptive passage in my own speech he said "as my honourable colleague has *tried* to tell you!" For the rest of the tour I did my best to get even with him, but as he usually spoke after me it was not an easy thing to do, and I had to content myself with private recriminations. On the other hand a very large degree of spontaneity both of thought and expression is obtained by the method of a weekly open debate, and all who aspire to take constant part in debating are compelled to keep themselves well informed upon the various currents of contemporary politics. With regard to the style of their speeches, it is obvious that the first lesson they must learn is to establish sympathetic contact between themselves and their hearers. Admiration for the brilliance of a speech may otherwise be set off by an intense repugnance for the speaker. Humour inevitably plays an important part in "getting on the right side" of an audience, and an average speech in the Oxford Union is constantly interlarded with humour, farcical or dry, in order to sustain interest. Satire and sarcasm are by no means forbidden, but all thrusts are delivered with a grace which makes the ensuing laughter more merry and less caustic. The style of speaking is dignified, at times impassioned, but is always relieved by lighter touches, and is always natural.

The Canadian mode of debating is in direct contrast. With a system of rhetorical contests it is inevitable that the verdict shall be pronounced by selected judges. It would be scarcely more satisfactory to take a vote of the audience than it would be to award victory to the football team whose supporters made the loudest noise. That being the case, it is also inevitable that speeches in such contests should be aimed not at pleasing or convincing the audience, but at registering the greatest number of points on the score sheets of the judges. The delivery is restrained as regards both inflections of the voice and also gesture. The material is carefully compressed, and the whole argument is ordered with a

symmetrical precision. Speakers are careful not to lose time or to break the thread of their argument by sallies of wit at the expense of their opponents. Their speeches in fact tend to be extremely well-considered and well-constructed declamations upon the subject at issue, and—as far as can be judged—are frequently committed to memory. A considerable period is spent in training for a contest. Libraries are scoured for books of information, and each member of the team becomes an expert upon the topic fixed for debate. The side which he shall defend is chosen for him, and he is trained to make his speech ring with conviction. To students from the Old Country the system throughout cannot but seem artificial, and on general lines parallel to the evolution of a football game in which play is regulated by code numbers. Upon every occasion this contrast in forensic style was the subject of comment both in student journals and in the public press. It soon became obvious that we, the visitors, had a great advantage over our opponents as far as the popular verdict was concerned, and that is only natural when it is remembered that we had been gradually though unconsciously training ourselves to appeal to an audience. Generally speaking their orations were, from this public standpoint, colourless and unexciting. What was less to be expected was that selected and impartial judges should have awarded the verdict to the visitors on every single occasion. I can only attribute this to the fact that in addition to preserving our native style of presentation, with its peculiar regard for tinges of colour and touches of personality, we had to some extent adopted the dialectical tactics upon which the Canadian system insists.

The decisions of the judges seem to confirm the general impression gained upon the tour, that to a large extent the training of Canadian teams for debating defeats its own object. It has its very excellent and invaluable advantages. It ensures a thorough examination of the point at issue; it engenders the lawyer-like ability to speak on either side; it finally presents a well-constructed case. But on the other hand it confines and cramps individual personality, and damps the fires of conviction. It fails to develop versatility in speech, and neglects to train that faculty which is all important from whatever standpoint debating may be viewed, namely to think on one's feet. This can be matured only by a far more impromptu method, and—unless debating in the universities is to degenerate into rhetorical dialectics—the habit of composing set declamations must be modified. Its result was only too clear; for we found the Canadian debater exceedingly forceful, plausible and eloquent at stating his own side of the case—that alone made

him a formidable opponent—but he was not so ready at countering unexpected points raised by the other side. These would be either neglected or dismissed by a sentence or two at the opening of his speech. There was lacking that ability to rearrange one's battle formation to meet the enemy; the troops were solid, but not mobile. To take one illustration, it fell to my lot on one occasion to open the debate against the French occupation of the Ruhr. This occupation being intimately bound up with the question of Germany's devastation of France, I thought it my duty to state with exact figures the smallness of the area affected by that devastation and the completeness of its restoration. The facts were unanswerable, and rightly or wrongly I produced the impression that France was not quite as mutilated as she and the world imagined. The opponent who followed me nevertheless delivered his oration as it had been composed, and without comment upon my remarks drew vague but lurid pictures of France's ravaged territory, which would have produced considerable effect had they not already been discredited in advance by facts and figures which he made no attempt to controvert. The result was the opposite of that which he intended.

To conclude that the Canadian system of debating is indefensible would, to my mind, be false. It insists upon a thorough analysis of the subject in hand, it demands that the debaters shall view the question from every possible standpoint, that their speeches be exact, convincing, and logically without a flaw. Such a method has its value; it is admirable for arguing a legal brief; and, as far as we can see, it is inevitable so long as debate contests exist, unless they be organized and decided upon very different lines. If it be arranged that the subject for an inter-varsity debate shall not be chosen until a week before the event, and that the verdict shall be given in favour of the team whose speakers are more brilliant at thrust and parry, more convincing in style, more appealing in manner, more happy in humour, then undoubtedly a great deal of spontaneity will be regained.

Such is the conclusion with regard to debating methods which is left in my mind at the end of the tour. It would be extremely interesting to hear our method in its turn severely criticized, as no doubt it can be; but what is patent to all who attended any debate on the tour is that not only did speakers and audience derive a great deal of enjoyment from the novel event, but also that a first step has been taken towards even closer connection between the students of Canada and those of England. What the Rhodes Scholarship means to Canada was brought home to us. The possibilities of a

more general co-operation are being considered, and it is my firm conviction that along this road lies not merely the consolidation of the British Empire, but the peace and moral well-being of the world. Students the world over have tremendous obligations in these post-war days, and not the least of those lie in the international sphere. It is for this reason that student tours have a special importance of their own which one cannot in a moment envisage, and it is for this reason that I hope they may always be encouraged.