

McGILL UNIVERSITY

MONTREAL



AN ADDRESS

BY HIS EXCELLENCY

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

LORD TWEEDSMUIR

G.C.M.G. C.H. LL.D.

VISITOR OF THE UNIVERSITY

*at a special Convocation*

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*Mr. Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen.*

THIS afternoon I understand it is my duty to deliver to you a short address. It occurs to me that I might say something pertinent to the special position of McGill in this great city of Montreal.

Montreal is something more than the largest Canadian city; it is one of the most historic. Much history has been made around its walls. It is the chief city of a province which exhibits a phenomenon, happily common in our Empire, the friendly union of two races. Like all Scotsmen, I have an hereditary affection for France. Do you remember, in Stevenson's novel *Catriona*, how, at a critical moment in the adventures of David Balfour and Alan Breck, Alan turns to David and says, "They are a real bonny folk, the French nation"? I have always subscribed to Alan's view. It seems to me that one of the chief safeguards for the future of the world must be a close understanding between the British Empire and the Republic of France. Just before I left England we entertained Marshal Pétain, and he said one thing which impressed me. He said that he would like to see the day when a young Englishman naturally finished his education in France, and a young Frenchman naturally completed his training in Britain. You are fortunate here in Canada, where this admirable curriculum can be more or less achieved within the boundaries of your own country.

But I am not going to talk to you about the political aspects of that friendship. I would rather turn your mind for a few minutes to the tradition of which, in a special degree, Britain and France are the guardians in the Old World, and of which, it seems to me, you in Canada, where the two strains are united, should be the special guardians in the New World. I call that tradition the Mediterranean tradition, which descends from Greece and Rome, and therefore carries with it the whole classical culture, and which, in the Middle Ages, was enlarged and adapted by the great Mediaeval Church, and amplified by bequests from the Northern peoples. I am not going to attempt to describe its historical sequence. Suffice it to say that on it are based the thought and the philosophy, the art and the letters, the ethics and religion of the modern world. Of civilisation, as we understand it, it is the foundation. If I tried to describe it in one word, I

should take the Latin word *humanitas*. It represents in the widest sense the humanities, the accumulated harvest of the ages, the fine flower of a long discipline of thought. It is the Western mind.

What are the characteristics of this Western mind, of which the tap-root is the great Mediterranean tradition? Let me suggest a few.

In the first place I think we may say that it is, in the respectable sense of the term, worldly. It is pre-eminently interested in the world which is governed by the categories of space and time. In its outlook on politics it is wholesomely secular. Therefore it can never be put for long under any kind of theocracy. Again and again, in the last thousand years of our history, a theocracy has been tried. The story of the early Middle Ages is the story of a bitter strife between Church and State for a sovereignty which was partly a secular sovereignty. A theocracy was set up by Calvin in Geneva, but even in a single city it did not last long. The same thing was tried in seventeenth century Scotland, and failed disastrously. The Western mind is determined that temporal things shall never be in the hands of the men whose business is with eternal things.

In the second place the Western mind has a strong bias towards a reasonable individualism. It insists on regarding human beings as individuals as well as units of society. It always finds some difficulty in that mystic idealisation of the State as a thing with rights far transcending those of its citizens. In the last resort it regards the *person* as what matters. Therefore it insists on a high degree of personal freedom. It believes that we are men and women, and not animals living in a hive or an ant-hill.

In the third place it is not very tolerant of abstractions. It likes concrete things and ideas which can be given a visible and tangible expression. It has its own poetry, of course, but it always returns to practical realities. It can never be captivated for very long by a bare theory, a mere idea. It may talk grandly about liberty and the rights of humanity, but, when it comes to fight, it will always be in order to get rid of some concrete abuse, or to establish some personal franchise. Therefore the State, as an abstraction, will not mean very much to it. Its affections are dedicated to a people or to a country—concrete things which anyone can understand.

Again, the Western mind has in a high degree an aptitude for discipline. It is always ready to accept leadership and to give loyal

obedience. It is uncomfortable in a slack society, and whenever there has been a breakdown in institutions it has always looked about for some leader to restore discipline, and has sometimes given him a blind allegiance.

Again, it is interpenetrated with what might be called humour, a sense of proportion. It has that best of all gifts, the power of standing back occasionally and laughing at itself. It is perfectly capable of rhetoric, but it rarely carries rhetoric too far, for a wholesome and humorous realism creeps in. If it is given too much discipline its attitude will be that of the Highland crofter, who refused an extension of his holding, which involved keeping some thirty or forty official commandments, on the ground that he could get the whole of the Kingdom of Heaven by keeping ten! It puts an end to false heroics by a homely matter-of-factness, and it has an uncommon gift for pricking bubbles. Voltaire and Dr. Johnson were very different people, but they had the same antiseptic quality in their minds, and I think you will find this gift always present in the national genius of both Britain and France. Let me take a few parallels. In the seventeenth century you had Dryden and Molière; in the eighteenth Dr. Johnson and Voltaire; in the nineteenth, out of many, I should select George Meredith and Anatole France; and to-day, when we have few creative writers, but many good critics, I would instance Virginia Woolf and André Maurois. Neither race is inclined to a foolish extravagance. You remember the story of Dr. Jowett, the celebrated Master of Balliol. "Master," an earnest young man once asked him, "do you think a good man could be happy on the rack?" "Well," was the answer, "perhaps a very good man—on a very bad rack!"

Again, the Western mind has an acute sense of history. Its roots are deep down in the past. It realises that every problem is long-descended, and that, in Sir Walter Raleigh's words, "the councils to which Time is not called, Time will not ratify." It knows that society is a complex thing, the result of a slow growth, and no mere artificial machine. It holds that things die and must be cleared out of the road, that institutions and forms and dogmas lose the stuff of life and must be scrapped. But it also realises that in this world we cannot wipe the slate clean and write a new gospel on a virgin surface. It knows that true progress must be an organic thing, like the growth

of a tree; that, if our building is to endure, we must make use of the old foundations, for otherwise we shall have a jerry-built erection which will presently fall about our ears.

Lastly, the Western mind is based upon the Christian ethics. I wish I could say, the Christian spirit. At the back of all its creeds is the acceptance, in the broadest sense, of the moral code of Christianity. It has often been unfaithful to it, but it knows that it has sinned against the light, and it has always returned to it. It is not capable, for example, of the solemn anarchy of a man like Nietzsche, who repudiated the whole of that moral code, or of those strange people in Germany to-day who follow the cult of Thor and Odin, and the gospel of naked force. There is another point to notice, too. The Western mind believes in a reasonable degree of dogma and definition. It is not prepared to blur the outlines. It realises that life must be lived according to rules, and that though the rules must be revised, some rules there must be, if civilisation is to continue. There is always a homely good sense in its idealism. It is a little suspicious of high-flying, transcendental creeds, and a slack-lipped charity, for it believes that they may as easily have their roots in moral and intellectual slovenliness as in divine wisdom, and that the qualities which may characterise the saint are just as likely to be an attribute of the mollusc.

I suggest these characteristics to you as a step towards the definition and understanding of that great tradition which is the heritage of the English and French peoples. It is the basis of our politics; it is the basis of our art; it is the basis of our thought; and it is the basis of our conduct. To-day it has many critics. Because it involves discipline, it offends the natural rebel. Because it is based upon history, it is antipathetic to the *déraciné*, the rootless folk, who have no links with the past. Because it has balance and poise it is no creed for the neurotic. Because it is rich in spiritual ideals, it is no creed for the materialist. Because it is the faith of free men, it can never be a creed for the slavish and the timid. I have called it the central culture of civilisation, and I believe that is a true description. There are other cultures in the world, each with its own value for its own people. On them I pass no criticism, except to say that they are not ours, and that they do not mix well with ours. There is a good deal of anarchy in our art and letters

to-day, caused by permitting alien elements—Slav, Mongol, Negroid—to intrude into a sphere in which they have no place. These elements have their value, no doubt, but that value is not for us, and I do not believe that we shall have again great poets, great artists, or great thinkers, except by a return to the tradition which in the past has produced the first order of genius, and whose inspiration is not exhausted.

As I have said, because of our happy race combination, Canada seems to me to be, in the New World, in a special degree the trustee of this tradition. One of the great germinal minds of the modern world was the Frenchman Voltaire, and no man ever guarded more vigilantly that freedom of spirit which is an essential part of it. Do you remember what he wrote in Chapter 23 of *Candide* about this country of yours:—"Vous savez que ces deux nations sont en guerre pour quelques arpents de neige, et qu'elles dependent pour cette belle guerre beaucoup plus que tout le Canada ne vaut." A few acres of snow! That is a remarkable instance of how bad a prophet a great man can be. I should like to think that these words in *Candide* will increasingly become one of the supreme examples of the irony of history, and that this Canada, of which Voltaire spoke so lightly, will be one of the principal wardens of the faith which, with all his imperfections, lay close to his heart.

Let my last word to you be that of John Ruskin, a writer a little neglected to-day, but who was both a poet and a seer; "We are rich in an inheritance of honour bequeathed to us through a thousand years of noble history, which it should be our daily thirst to increase with splendid avarice."

