

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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"THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE"

An address by Mr. Hume Wrong,
Canadian Ambassador in the United
States, at Gettysburg College,
Gettysburg, Pa., May 31, 1948.

It is not easy to decide what to talk about. The traditional subject of commencement addresses is youth, the excellence of youth, the importance of youth, the opportunities of youth, the responsibilities of youth. I am not, however, going to bore you by harping upon this admirable but time-worn theme. It does, however, suggest a question which may be worth asking, even if it cannot be answered. Is this a good age in which to have been born? Or, to put much the same question somewhat differently: Are those graduating today more fortunate than the graduates of one, two or three generations ago?

I think that few intelligent persons would today answer these questions with complete confidence in the affirmative. Now, if the same questions had been put at the time when I graduated from college, I am sure that a good many intelligent people would not have hesitated to answer confidently: Yes, it is a good age, and you are more fortunate than were your fathers and your grandfathers. I graduated when the First World War had lasted for only the first nine months of its weary and blood-stained four and a quarter years. I am not sure that quite the same optimism would have been shown in any year since 1915. I dare say that today a good many people would find it easier to answer the question, if they had to say yes or no, with a flat negative.

It seems to me of interest to examine some of the reasons for the change. I grew up in an era when it was popularly accepted that progress was inevitable, automatic, a natural law as certain as the law of gravity. There were of course wise men and prophets, and cynics and scoffers, who did not accept this superstition; but it was an important part of the popular faith, and to dispute it was a form of heresy.

In 1914 there had been no major war for almost fifty years, no general war since the defeat of Napoleon. Man was thought to be growing wiser all the time. He was constantly contriving new and wonderful things for his happiness, safety, and comfort. As the scientists and technicians unwrapped the mysteries of nature, new opportunities, vistas of further progress, were revealed. The ugly things - and there were many of them which troubled the conscience - were in time to be eliminated. There was only one way to go - forward to better days. Each year was to be a little better than the year before. Especially in North America, but also in other continents, the horizon of the future seemed limitless and serene.

This attitude towards life was neither a philosophy nor a religion; it was rather a climate of opinion. Climates are fickle. Since then there have been many inclement seasons. No more is it possible, with easy optimism, to forecast the weather of the years to come as set fair. The tempests of war, the bitter cold of economic disaster, the thunder of clashing nationalisms, and now the thick fog of rival ideologies have dissipated, in the middle of the twentieth century, the old confidence

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