

The Old and New Roads of McGill

An Address to the Montreal Branch of the Graduates' Society

By SIR ARTHUR CURRIE

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:

I thank you for the kindness you have shown me in inviting me to this function tonight and for the honour of the opportunity of saying a few words to you. Yet I am, in a way, a graduate of McGill, for I have not forgotten the great distinction given me shortly after the War when I received an Honorary Degree from our common Alma Mater. To be admitted into the fellowship of a University having the prestige and reputation of McGill is indeed an honour and is universally regarded as such. But it is a greater honour to occupy the position which I have held during the past ten years. During that time I have been conscious of many shortcomings, but whatever they have been they have not come about because of any indifference to the responsibilities of the position.

During that period much progress has been made and if the rate of progress has not been as rapid as in other places, or if it has not been as marked as all of us should have liked to see, its slowness or its weakness has not arisen because needs were ignored, or weaknesses unrecognized. Efficiency in a University as in most other institutions can be purchased. I know there are weak places in McGill's organization which should and must be strengthened. There exists in many departments a lack of facilities which should and must be provided. There are gaps which should and must be filled if our Alma Mater is to continue to occupy that place and to wield that influence in our national life which it is our duty, as it is our pride, to see maintained.

But there is one thing more necessary than any other, one thing without which little progress or success can be achieved—and that is, an objective. The world will always stand aside for the man who knows where he is going. It is also said that the man who travels a straight road will never lose his way. The same can be said of an institution. We must know what we are aiming at, where we are going, and if that road is straight.

To speak intelligently of that road, we must return to its beginning. It was conceived in the mind of a pioneer merchant of Montreal,—and merchants of Montreal have repaired and extended it ever since until now it is a tradition, a pride and a responsibility with them to see to it that the road is in a position to bear every load such a road should bear.

At the time, nearly a century and a quarter ago, when James McGill realized the necessity of founding a national university, there was widespread depression, there were

sectional jealousies, there were grave national problems and disturbances, there was need of leadership, need of educated men, men of resource and initiative, to tackle the problems and overcome the difficulties which had to be conquered if Canada, with its open spaces, its widely-scattered parts, its varied interests, was to be made a prosperous and contented country for the different races, creeds and tongues which go to make up the Canadian people. And so, with the vision and the common sense so often characteristic of his race, he made provision for the founding of a University dedicated to that higher education so vital in the building of a nation.

Many men of diverse minds have spoken and written much on the ideals of the true University, but in the last analysis their meaning is the same. "If then," says Newman, "a practical end must be assigned to a university, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world. It neither confines its view to particular professions on the one hand, nor creates heroes nor inspires genius on the other. But a university training is a great, ordinary means to a great, but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at applying true principles to popular enthusiasm, and fixed aim to popular aspiration; at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It teaches the student to see things as they are, to go right to the point and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit and to master any subject with facility."

In our own day, William James, that philosopher of noble mind and sweet and human heart, asked, "Of what use is college training?" And he answered his own question by saying, "The best claim that a college education can possibly make on your respect, the best thing it can aspire to accomplish is this—that it should help you to know a good man when you see him."

There is a much shorter definition of the aim of college education which I like very much, and it is this—"College education should teach a man to stand alone."

I recite these things, because I think we must never forget them. Do we bring to bear upon the young and plastic minds of our students such forces and such influences as will guide and strengthen them and give them courage in the great world outside the college? Do we