

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES



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CANADA'S DUAL HERITAGE

Address by His Excellency Governor-General Georges P. Vanier during the Inauguration of the Programme of French-Canadian Studies at McGill University, Montreal, on November 26, 1963.

(Translation)

Mr. Chancellor and Mr. Principal,

My first duty, and a most pleasant one, is to congratulate you on the happy initiative that you have taken in establishing a programme of studies on French Canada. This is a warm gesture towards your French-speaking fellow-citizens, which I am sure they will not fail to appreciate. In addition to that gesture, you have very kindly invited me to address you in French. Need I say that I accept your invitation with pleasure.

The programme which has just been described is comprehensive and will assist the spread of the French spirit within the University. I also note that you have formed an Advisory Committee in which you have assembled university people not only from the Province of Quebec but also from other provinces. In this way you will have the invaluable co-operation of other universities, both French and English speaking.

The task that you are undertaking can contribute very considerably to unity in Canada, and thus to the greatness and prestige of our country.

You have understood that your University may play a part in acting as an interpreter of Quebec and the rest of Canada one to the other. This is the hope expressed here recently by one of your Governors, Mr. Arnold Heeney, at a dinner of the Faculty of Law:

"Upon one aspect, participation in public affairs, the direct service of the state, I can speak with more personal knowledge. Here it seems to me that the English minority in Quebec -- McGill men and women especially - have a special responsibility and a unique opportunity. This is true in both politics and the permanent public service. For who should be as well qualified to explain in Ottawa and elsewhere in Canada the core and meaning of French-Canadian aspirations? Or who, in Quebec, should be as well fitted to interpret the views of the rest of Canada...?"

You have understood the importance of French culture in the world, the benefits which it can bring, the essential role that it plays here in your immediate neighbourhood. You are right in wishing to understand French culture.

In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, France, through her cathedrals and her poets, played a preponderant part in our Western world. And, in order to understand our modern world, to grasp its deepest aspirations, its need for justice and liberty, whether in anguish or revolution, is it not in France that we should seek its origins and principal initiators? The French language, coming as it does from Latin and Greek, offered a unique means of expression, of clear and orderly analysis, and so of universal communication. Over the centuries French has added to its wealth through a history which, while no doubt playing a military, political and economic part of the highest importance, exercised to an even greater extent a spiritual influence on the world through its artists, philosophers and saints.

Language and History

The mutual knowledge of our two languages and of our two cultures will help us to understand the respective histories of France and of Great Britain. Are they not to some extent one and the same history? From the general point of view, how can we possibly separate these two countries which, almost always, are to be found together in the same military, scientific, diplomatic and economic fields? According to the time or place, one precedes the other, but in most cases the second one immediately reappears as a competitor or as a protagonist. The history of these two countries is the same, but seen from two different angles according to the two different but complementary geni. If these two great nations have come up against one another so frequently in the past, either on a battlefield or in a race to explore some unknown universe, or to extend their respective empires, was it not because they both had the same sense of universality and the same noble and magnanimous will to spread civilization?

The world will not find peace, except through the harmonization of the universe as a whole. France and England -- countries which in history and geography represent the world at middle age -- retain an essential role, and it is this that explains the spiritual destiny of our country. By her geographical and historical situation, Canada, if it wishes, can have a leading role to play in the conciliation of other nations, in the effort to bring together all men of good faith for the realization at last of a unity that will permit every man in every country to have a human existence in justice and in peace here on earth.

So it is that English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians must know one another and understand one another in order that they may continue the long tradition of Anglo-French civilization.

Rudyard Kipling expressed the same thought in the following terms at the Sorbonne in November 1921:

"For 30 generations, France and England in secular but fruitful conflict have engendered and sustained a civilization which has been attacked by an immense and highly organised barbarism..."

In this joint secular work, France has made an immense contribution to the heritage of the moral, spiritual and civilizing forces of humanity. In fact, the world is her debtor. Her culture has enlightened and enriched it for centuries.

Earliest Element of Canadian Culture

These are some of the reasons, taken from history, which should incite Canada to know and to understand France. I would add another. French culture was the first element of civilization planted in Canada. Nothing can change the historic fact, that during 200 years it was the only one in the country. Many Canadians are unaware of its existence because of their distance from the centre of this culture, but it exists in abundance, and has made in cultural affairs a prodigious progress during the past few years. I will not offend you who know how important it is by an enumeration of its many manifestations. They are so numerous in the fields of literature, painting, sculpture, music, the theatre, and the dance, that I might run the risk of omitting some. Those who wish to know what these cultural activities are, have only to consult the report which is published annually by the Canada Council.

And this culture goes back a long time. Because of my forebears, anything I say about French culture in Canada might be thought biased, so I shall quote the testimony of a few of my predecessors.

Here is what Lord Dufferin said in Quebec in 1878:

"It is needless for me to assure you with what pleasure I again find myself taking part in those refined and artistic relations with which the French race delight to solace their leisure ... It has been one of the happy peculiarities of your nationality that you have ever known how to enliven the serious occupations of life by a graceful gaiety and to introduce a brilliancy of colour amid the sombre shadows of our dull work-a-day world. This happy temperament not only sheds its benign influence over your social existence, but it has invested everything you have touched -- your architecture, your literature, your history -- with a most attractive individuality. Brilliancy, picturesqueness, dramatic force, a chivalrous inspiration -- these are the characteristics which have thrown over the annals of Canada a glamour of romance which attaches to the history of no other part of the continent ...

"Your past has refused to die. Its vitality was too exuberant, too rich with splendid achievements, too resonant, too replete with the daring and gallantry of stately seigneurs -- the creations of able statesmen -- the martyrdoms of holy men and women, to be smothered by the dust of ages, or overwhelmed by the uproar of subsequent events."

The Marquess of Lorne, on his arrival in Quebec in 1879, said in French:

"I am expressing these sentiments in that beautiful language which, in so many countries and during so many centuries, was considered as the prototype of a clear and concise expression of man's feelings and the best interpreter of human thought.

"The whole world, when it makes use of it, remembers as you do that it is the language which, in the Church, was used with eloquence by Saint Bernard and Bossuet and that it was used on the battlefield by Saint Louis, Du Guesclin and the Maid of Orleans.

Lord Tweedsmuir, at Quebec, speaking to the Congrès de la langue française in June 1937, declared in French:

"Canada has been fortunate to inherit two great European traditions: the French and the English. You have retained your language, your laws, your religion and your culture, so rich in history and so precious for the whole of Canada. Your language especially is a priceless gift, for French language and literature constitute a wealth not only for French-speaking Canada but for English-speaking Canada as well."

Still speaking in French, he added:

"Your poetry, which expresses the soul of a people so well, has deeply impressed me. French Canada is only just starting on its literary career. It combines all the elements of a great literature -- a people whose history is one of the most romantic to be found, and a peasantry which has fortunately remained in close contact with the soil and preserved its ancient traditions. I foresee French Canada taking part and distinguishing itself in those achievements of the mind which will always constitute the basis of true civilization, for it shares two great traditions, the French and the English."

Such testimonies show that Canada has long been a centre of French culture. In time, it will become, I have no doubt, truly a genuine source of this culture and will thus make an essential contribution to the development and to the heritage of French genius.

French Pathfinders

Why should Canada have a special affection for France? In the first place, because it was the French who founded Canada; their presence is felt everywhere. Their roots are thrust deep in the earth. The first to leave their imprint were the martyrs, the discoverers, the settlers. These pioneers not only penetrated Canada but the United States also. You know enough of your history that I need not recall for you the explorations of: Champlain to Georgian Bay, 1615; Brulé, Sault Ste. Marie, 1620; Jean Nicolet to Lake Michigan, 1634; Radisson and Groseillers, to Hudson Bay, 1662; Albanel to Hudson Bay, 1672; Louis Jolliet and Père Marquette to the Mississippi, 1673; LaSalle, the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, 1682; LaVérendrye and his two sons to the South Saskatchewan River by way of Lake Superior, 1731, and on to the foothills of the Rockies in 1743. In this common thought I associate with these Frenchmen such men as Hudson, Kelsey, Mackenzie, Fraser, Thompson, Hearne, and all those who contributed to the exploration of Canada.

Addressing French Canada at Montreal on November 21, 1872, Lord Dufferin declared in French:

"A brave and noble race which was the first to provide Europe with the means of importing civilization to the American continent. A valorous and fearless nation, whose explorations into the hinterland of this continent enabled European industry to take root not only on the shores of the St. Lawrence, but also in the rich valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi; through the sound judgment and the instinct that characterize them, the early forts they erected and the first settlements they established have today become the nucleus of large cities and powerful populations, and it is to their present co-operation and natural intelligence that we owe a good part of the prosperous state of this province."

Canada in France

Another reason for Canada to have a special affection for France, and for France to have a special affection for Canada, is that there has been an extension of Canada into France. In the course of two Great Wars 110,000 Canadians gave their lives. In so far as it has been possible for me to establish, there are 50,000 of these who lie buried in France. These are striking figures, which reveal the vigour, the valour and the courage of Canadians. Only a country which possesses these qualities can make such an effort despite a sparse population. No, Canada, with so many of her children over there, cannot renounce her intimate friendship with France. The dead and the living are but one in the narrow and profound communion of the nation.

Each of us carries the hope of those who have gone and those who are yet to come. Upon each of us is incumbent the duty to keep the sacred fire which, across the ages, has enlightened and inspired men who adhere faithfully to the principles of truth, of justice, and of charity.

A part of France belongs to us: Vimy, where on the Canadian monument there are inscribed the names of more than 11,000 Canadians missing during the First World War. The Government of France has officially ceded to us this most sacred ground. But it is not only Vimy which belongs to us. I claim the land wherever our dead lie in France. Canadians, whether living or dead, will always be at home there. Our dead rest far from their native land, it is true, but the flowers of France adorn their graves and French hearts surround them with profound and grateful affection, particularly on Remembrance Day. Recently, at a large official luncheon in Montreal, the French Minister of Cultural Affairs proposed the following toast:

"I lift my glass to the first French child who, on Remembrance Day, will put a flag on the tomb of a Canadian soldier."

The landings on the sixth of June were profoundly meaningful for our country. Many of the Canadians who, at that time, set foot on the soil of Normandy were the descendants of the French pioneers who, during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, left their country to found a New France.

But, without distinction of origin, all the Canadians who disembarked were proud of being able to participate in the liberation of the country which was for so long, and will remain, a home and bastion of human liberties.

When I went to the Cimetière des Vertus at Dieppe, I found graves of Canadians from every province. These men rest peacefully side by side in death. It is inconceivable that the heirs to the great Western civilization should be unable to find a brotherly way of life based upon respect for rights conferred by history, a respect for conventions freely accepted nearly a century ago but adapted to the exigencies of our time.

For Canada to be a great nation, strong and united, there must be among English-speaking Canadians and French-speaking Canadians a living and profound sense of the need of one for the other. This friendship supposes, in the first place, a clear and decided devotion to the common good of the nation, but it depends also upon frequent and friendly relations between the different communities, and these relations cannot be friendly unless each community tries to understand the other, to respect its just wants and to complete and aid its needs. The soul of a country is great and strong by the unity of its ideal and of its aspirations.

We have already said that the annals of history record the glory and the renown of Great Britain and of France. The future of Canada is intimately allied to this fabulous double heritage. I hope and pray that Canadians of Anglo-Saxon and French descent, whose two cultures are a source of mutual enrichment, will be an example of fraternal co-existence, and that they will advance hand in hand to make of Canada a great nation, hand in hand also with Canadians of all origins, without distinction of race or creed, with their languages and their cultures.

In conclusion, let me quote the last paragraph of my Installation Address:

"Each one of us, in his own way and place, however humble, must play his part towards the fulfilment of our national destiny. To realize how mighty this destiny will be let us lift our eyes beyond the horizon of our time. In our march forward in material happiness, let us not neglect the spiritual threads in the weaving of our lives. If Canada is to attain the greatness worthy of it, each of us must say 'I ask only to serve'."

S/C