

ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT NELLES

A2

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY CONVOCATION, COBOURG,

WEDNESDAY, MAY 13th, 1885.

GENTLEMEN OF THE SENATE AND MEMBERS OF CONVOCATION—

You will, perhaps, expect me to offer to-day some remarks on the present state of higher education in the Province of Ontario, and especially in relation to our own University. I shall not attempt to argue, in all its bearings, what we are wont to call the University Question, but content myself with touching upon some particular phases of the subject, at least so far as to define my own position, and without directly controverting what others may have said. I desire, as far as possible, to avoid a controversial tone, feeling convinced that we shall make more progress toward a satisfactory result, by a calm and conciliatory interchange of views, than by many volumes of angry rhetoric. As the Poet-Laureate says of another great educational problem:

“More soluble is this knot by gentleness than war.”

If I have the misfortune to differ from some good friends of our University, they will of course grant that this is not altogether my fault, seeing that they differ as much from me as I do from them. And if I seem to put a little strain upon sentiments and associations which our Alumni naturally cherish, they will remember that no one has more reason than I to feel the force of those associations, and that I would not be likely in any way to disturb them except from an honest regard for the educational interests of the country.

There is always some difficulty in discussing educational questions from the fact that, while few persons study them, every one seems to think that he knows all about them. I notice in our country to-day three or four currents of sentiment, each of which appears to me to set in the wrong direction. First, there is the unhappy notion of those who disparage the advantages of higher learning, and who as a natural consequence are hostile, or at least apathetic, in regard to all appeals for the necessary funds, whether those appeals be made to the Legislature or to private individuals. There is, secondly, the opinion of some ill-informed people who imagine that a University can be adequately sustained upon twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars a year, and with such an endowment can successfully compete with neighbouring Universities having a yearly income of five or six times that amount. Sometimes the difference in

endowment is supposed to be made up by ecclesiastical influences— influences desirable enough when they secure to a seat of learning the resources requisite for efficiency, but not very desirable otherwise. Thirdly, there is the mistake of those who would give higher education an unduly practical turn, or what they erroneously consider to be practical, throwing out of doors, or at least far into the back-ground, the ancient languages and literature, with those higher philosophical inquiries, in which the ancients were the pioneers, and are still indispensable guides. And there is lastly the error of those who, either as a matter of preference or of expediency, would restrict the work of our national University to what are called secular studies, leaving all religious teaching and discipline to the pulpit and the Sunday-school.

I shall not now discuss these several views in detail, but the tenor of my remarks will sufficiently indicate my own opinion, both on the general questions, and on some particular educational measures which are now before the country. I wish, however, to remark at the outset that the great matter with me is neither federation of colleges, nor removal of Victoria College from the town of Cobourg, but a satisfactory system of higher education for the Province of Ontario, and an honourable and effective relation to that system on the part of the Methodist Church. I desire, for my part, to rise, as far as possible, above both local and sectarian considerations, and to keep in view the great underlying principles which governed our fathers in establishing this seminary of learning, principles of a very broad and patriotic character, and which are even more sacred and enduring than either Cobourg and Kingston limestone, or the inviting grounds of a Toronto park.

“At the revival of learning,” as some one has said, “Greece arose from the grave with the New Testament in her hands.” This picture of Greece with the New Testament in her hands, may be taken, by an enlarged interpretation, as an appropriate symbol of a true University. Greece—that is, science, literature, philosophy, and art; in a word, all human culture on its secular side. The New Testament—that is, the Christian religion; human development and perfection on its spiritual or divine side. Both taken together are essential to a well-rounded type of education, as both are essential to individual and national welfare. It is one of the glories of Christianity that it can stand unabashed and unshaken in the presence of all forms of scholarly research, and make them all tributary to its progress; and it is one of the great facts in the history of the universities that they have always recognized Christianity as an indispensable factor in the work of education. But the Christian Church has at length so divided itself into sections, and, on the other hand, the subjects of University teaching have so multiplied and extended, that the relation of the Church to the University has become a difficult problem to solve. In the Dominion of Canada, and especially in this Province of Ontario, we have long had a perpetual and embarrassing conflict on this great matter. Every sect cannot have a genuine University, and the Legislature cannot recognize the claims of one sect over another. And thus between the necessities of the State University, and the rival necessities of a number

of denominational universities, we have at last reached what may be called a kind of dead-lock in our educational progress. We may, therefore, well begin to inquire, and the growing spirit of Christian union enables us to inquire with hopefulness, whether all the Churches of Ontario cannot combine in one national University, and with advantage to the common interests of science and religion. Those who distrust or oppose such a measure seem to me to raise imaginary obstacles, and also to fail in estimating the increasing extent of University work, and the consequent necessity of large endowments, such endowments as we can only secure in this Province by concentrating all our available resources. Such persons seem to forget that, if we keep our Universities poor, we shall have poor Universities in more senses than one. They also forget that in so far as any religious body stands aloof from the national system of education it not only deprives itself of advantages to which it is fairly entitled, but does what it can both to weaken and unchristianize that system. "Let us beware," says Mr. Gladstone, "of a Christianity of isolation."

The extension of University work arises chiefly from the progress of the physical sciences; but we have to remember that the newer sciences, or departments of science, have not rendered obsolete or useless the old academic studies, although they have deprived the latter of the monopoly which they once enjoyed. We have to provide for the ancient as well as the modern. Even the old classical and metaphysical departments are far from being stationary, but involve both new lines and new methods of research. I have no need to set up any special defence of classical studies as against modern science and literature. There is no proper opposition between the two forms of discipline, and no occasion for exalting the one at the expense of the other; but when the popular sentiment runs strongly in one direction, as it now appears to do, it is perhaps as well for us to insist a little more on that which is in danger of being unduly displaced. We may, indeed, value too highly the study of ancient literature, but we may also over-estimate, or mistakenly estimate, the value of physical science. True culture is not one-sided, but many-sided, consisting, as Butler says of human nature, "not of some one thing alone, but of many other things besides." The popular current of to-day will, in all probability, soon go rebounding in the opposite direction, according to that salutary law of action and reaction which governs the river of human progress, as well as other flowing streams. And when men tell us that it is better to study nature than literature, as the works of God are nobler than the works of man, we can but use the decisive argument which I once heard employed by Prof. Goldwin Smith, and say in reply, that man is also one of the works of God, and the highest one known to us, and that the study of man requires the study of his language and literature, and, among others, the language and literature of Greece. It is noteworthy to find the following language used by Todhunter, whose specialty is not Greek but mathematics:—"A decline in the state of Greek scholarship implies more than the failure of esteem for the most valuable and influential of all languages; it involves with it a gradual but certain decay of general culture, the sacrifice of learning to science, the neglect of the history of man

and of thought for the sake of facts relating to the external world." We may, indeed, deny that Greece fully represents the varied wealth of modern learning, but we cannot deny that Greece gave the first great impulse out of which all modern culture has sprung, and beyond which, in some forms of excellence, no advancement has since been made. "Earth," says Emerson, "still wears the Parthenon as the best gem upon her zone." For many minds of the highest order, Homeric studies and Homeric inspiration have lost none of their interest and power. All philosophy, according to a great modern metaphysician, is but Plato rightly interpreted, and the most eminent French moralist of our day announces himself as the disciple and expounder of Aristotle. What is good in these ancient writings agrees with the Gospel, and therefore confirms it; what is false or defective shows the need of the Gospel, and therefore confirms it in another way. The spirit of the olden time, whether from the plains of Marathon or the halls of the Academy, still runs through the generations of men and "enriches the blood of the world." There is no break, and, except by a return of barbarism, there can be none, in the continuity of the world's intellectual life. Men may come and men may go, but this goes on forever. The stream, as it sweeps down the ages, may receive new contributions, but it will never forget or lose sympathy with the primal waters upon the far-off mountain side. More and more, and in all departments of learning, men are employing the historical method as an instrument of progress, running backward that they may the better leap forward. Not satisfied with the ordinary records of history, they are turning with growing interest to the obscure relics of pre-historic times, the ruins of ancient cities, and the customs and traditions of savage tribes, seeking everywhere to find the human footprints on the sands of time—now in the wilds of America, now in the dark continent of Africa, and now "where the gorgeous East showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold."

The history of thought, not less than other forms of history, still returns upon us, again and again, under new points of view, and with larger revelations; but the history of thought proper begins with Greece, and it can no more dis sever itself from that mother-wit of all the schools, than the child can cease to feel the hereditary bias of natural parentage. Back to Kant is the urgent cry lately set up among modern metaphysicians; back to Plato is a cry equally urgent; if indeed it has ever been possible to get wholly away from either the one or the other. Nor is it merely with a view to what some would call barren speculation that men counsel thus, for our eminent and orthodox theologians use the same language. It is in the interests of religion that Prof. Flint and others speak, when they tell us to seek in Plato an antidote against this modern monstrosity of pessimism, that most melancholy of all phases of human thought,

" . . . Whose cogitations sink as low
As, through the abysses of a joyless heart,
The heaviest plummet of despair can go."

By a diligent study of these grand old masters, with their enduring "majesties of light," we are enabled to counterpoise a narrow materialistic empiricism, which, in an age like ours, inclines to a kind of usurpation in the kingdom of knowledge. The discoveries of natural science seem to reach the masses sooner, and more beneficially, than philosophic speculations; but, sooner or later, they both alike travel down into the hearts and homes of the people, interpenetrating each other for good, and sometimes, as in our day, contending in their encounter for the mastery, like the fresh waters and the salt, where a great river meets the rising tide of the sea. All honour to those teachers of physical science who are doing such wonderful things for the promotion of human comfort, and for what Bacon terms "the relief of man's estate;" but equal honour to those interpreters of the spiritual order, who reveal to us the eternal realities behind the shadows of time; who teach us to remember that man does not live by bread alone, and that Lazarus in his rags feeding upon crumbs may be nearer to God than Dives in his palace, though clothed in fine linen and faring sumptuously every day. But no regard for the old system of academic drill can blind our eyes to the fact that the educational problem and University work have undergone an immense transformation. The physical and so-called practical sciences have come to the front with multiplied claims and attractions that cannot be resisted, and should not be resisted. They combine with those historical researches to which I have already referred; they give new and fruitful lessons in the laws of health, the origin, the prevention, and the cure of disease, including many ills of a moral kind; they seek to remould the institutions of society; they assert themselves effectively in the several provinces of moral and religious truth; they throw floods of light, and sometimes very perplexing cross-lights, upon the works and ways of God; and they have become a necessary study, if not for all Christian ministers, most certainly for all Christian Churches, and especially for those Christian scholars who are called upon to vindicate the claims of our holy religion. Every University worthy of the name must not only furnish instruction in what is known of these sciences, but should, if possible, make provision for original investigations. And beyond all these, we must add such subjects as comparative philology and comparative religion, together with the study of what Macaulay calls the most splendid and the most durable of the many glories of England, our own magnificent English literature, now taking a new and well-deserved position in the curriculum of every University.

Thus, then, between the ancient learning and the modern learning, the physical sciences and the moral sciences, with the innumerable subdivisions of these, and with other forms of inquiry seeking to determine and reconcile the relations of these provinces to each other, the range of University work widens and stretches out towards illimitable fields of study. The ever-enlarging proportions of the modern University call for funds and appliances commensurate with the variety and extent of the work to be done. It may be said that young men at college do not need to cover all this wide field of study, and are in fact not able to do so. This fact rather increases than lessens the difficulty, for it necessitates many special courses

of study, and therefore an increased number of teachers, together with a greater variety of buildings, libraries, collections, and other appliances. We may hold different views as to the wisdom of so much specialization, and of making room for such a range of elective and optional work, but the necessity is forced upon us. We cannot prevent the growth of science and literature, even if we would; and as no student can master all subjects within an undergraduate—or even a post-graduate—curriculum, we are compelled to allow a division of labour. In the days of Methuselah it could have been different. Then men lived a thousand years, and had ample time to cover a full symmetrical course of all known forms of learning. Four years could then have been given to the ancient languages, four to the modern languages, four to the natural sciences, and four to metaphysics, and so on for about fifty years of college life, and a graduate, even at that age, would have counted for a boy. But there is no possible mathematical formula for crowding our modern encyclopædia into the contracted space of a post-diluvian curriculum. And so we must elect and specialize, as the fashion now is, and try not to know everything, but some few things well. I can remember when a Canadian University could venture to issue its Calendar with an announcement of a single professor for all the natural sciences, and with a laboratory something similar to an ordinary blacksmith shop, where the professor was his own assistant, and compelled to blow not only his own bellows, but his own trumpet as well. We can hardly be expected to go on in that style now. In a single line of special research a man like Franklin or Faraday may achieve wonders with very scanty appliances, but no man can do that in a college course, where he has to give full lectures to large classes in half a dozen distinct departments of science.

The obvious facts of the case, and even the very word University, seem to rebuke us for the appropriation of the name to anything else than a place where all sound means of discipline can be employed, and all forms of knowledge cultivated, with the best facilities of the age. Such a University we need for the Province of Ontario, and assuredly it cannot be said that we have such a University now. There is not one of those now in existence, not even the Provincial University, that is not complaining sorely, and with good reason, of the want of adequate resources, and the case is rendered the more embarrassing from the fact that, at a distance of a few hours' travel, the well-endowed universities of a foreign country present every attraction to draw away Canadian youth. Meantime the several Universities which we have are so related to each other, and have inherited such a stubborn old quarrel between opposing systems, that, instead of working as allies, they are rather playing a game of reciprocal obstruction and enfeeblement. The evil has reached a point where it must be met, and the most feasible mode of meeting it is by some plan of consolidation, such as would secure for the country a stronger and worthier University than is possible under the present order of things. Due regard should be paid, and I trust will be paid, by our Legislature to all existing interests, and to the reasonable plea of those who contend for variety, for competition, and for religious instruction, in the work of education. Nor

should we forget the immense debt of gratitude due to those religious bodies which provided in earlier days, and which still provide, a liberal education for the youth of the country. But if, with proper consideration for these things, and without doing violence to the great principles on which Victoria College was founded, we can aid in building up a proper national University, and can even help to supply some elements in which we have felt the University of Toronto to be deficient, and can moreover give the Methodist people the full advantages of this improved constitution, then I maintain that no sectarian divisions, no undue regard for local interests, no sentimental attachment to an old order of things for which the occasion has largely passed away—none of these things should induce us to block the way to a great public good by opposing in the Legislature the improvement of a national institution which we profess to uphold, and which, in a new country like ours, will at the very best fall short of the true ideal.

Repeatedly during the past thirty years the authorities of Victoria University and of the Methodist Church have laboured to bring about some form of University federation, but thus far without success. The present scheme has valuable features not embraced in any former plan, and seems to open the way, so far at least as Victoria is concerned, to a satisfactory settlement of this long-continued and injurious controversy. If I thought the scheme would be in any degree unfavourable to the great ends for which Victoria University was founded, then I for one would have nothing to do with the measure. But, as accepted by our Board of Regents on the ninth of January last, I find all reasonable security both for intellectual advantages and religious influences, with even greatly enlarged facilities for both the one and the other. The intellectual advantages are obvious enough, but as regards the religious advantages it must be evident to those who look carefully at the matter that it affords an opportunity for supplying to our national University that religious teaching and influence on which the Church colleges have always laid so much stress, and the want of which they have deplored in Toronto University. I do not think that the Senate or the Executive officers of the Provincial University can be justly blamed for the secular character of that institution. They have done what they could consistently with the constitution imposed upon them by the Legislature. But now that the Senate and the Government propose to widen the basis by this scheme of federation, and to give the denominational colleges scope for adding religious subjects to the curriculum, with collegiate homes and discipline for the students, then if we have been honest in our former contention, why should we not rejoice at this liberal and Christian reconstruction of our Provincial University?

I have not agreed, and I do not now agree, with those who think that the higher education of this country should be purely secular. I plead for a national University, but such a University for a Christian people should somehow employ, both in its lecture-rooms, and in the personal character of its professors, the highest and most effective of all spiritual forces known among men—the power of the Christian faith; otherwise, with all her cold intellectualism, she will stand, like Niobe of old, through her irreverence

and despair, at last hardened into stone, and holding, not indeed the New Testament, but "an empty urn within her withered hands." It is a profound and eminently Christian saying of Dean Stanley's, that all high order of thought seeks to unite the secular learning and the sacred, while all thought of a low order seeks to separate them. Never was it more necessary than in our day to bear this great truth in mind, and to apply it in our national system of education. We have been struggling hard, and with only partial success, to keep the religious element in our Public Schools. Under the present Administration some further steps have been taken in the right direction. And now the federation of colleges affords an opportunity for the Churches to join hands in giving a more positive Christian character to our higher education, and apparently in the only way in which it can be fully done. Why should we let the opportunity pass? If we had no Provincial University, and the denominational colleges had University teaching, as a whole, in their own hands, the case would be greatly altered. But it is evident that a large part, and perhaps an increasingly large part, of this academic work is to be done by the Provincial University, and the question is whether the Methodist Church will do her share in the work or prefer an isolated and less influential position. I have tried to forecast the disastrous results to the Methodist Church which some of our friends prophesy from this scheme, and when I have summed them all up, and at the very worst, I can only find the following:—First, improved intellectual advantages for all the youth of the country, including of course the youth of the Methodist Church; secondly, the same religious safeguards which we possess at present; thirdly, a wider range of religious influence; fourthly, increased facilities for the theological training of our ministers; and lastly, all of these with a smaller or at least a more productive outlay of money on the part of our Church than is possible under any other arrangement.

It will easily be conceived that I have not arrived at my present convictions without much anxious thought, nor without a sense of personal responsibility as well as sacrifice of personal feeling. I had the honour of being one of the two students who first matriculated in Victoria University, in the year 1842, and I have had an official relation to the institution since 1850. My life's best energies have been put forth in her venerable halls, and I will bear no part in doing injury or dishonour to the institution. But I am a Canadian as well as a Methodist, and I am a lover of all sound learning; and finding, as I believe, all important interests likely to be promoted by this scheme of academic federation, I am inclined to give it my support. The final acceptance of the scheme on our part must, of course, lie with the General Conference of the Methodist Church; but if the conditions demanded by our Board of Regents be fairly complied with, I shall regard it as a calamity to the country should the measure finally fail of going into effect.

