

100 ORIGINAL - LETTERS

The President's Address

At the Opening of the

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One of the Greatest Things in the World*

I WANT to talk to you this morning about one of the greatest things in the world—books. We are to-day at war with certain madmen who do not believe in great things, and whose first object in life has been to destroy university libraries, book shops—books. They must have heard, somehow, of the saying: "The devil has never had a chance: God has written all the books." One of our own Dalhousie professors had collaborated, for years, with a German professor, in scientific research. In the year Hitler came into power, our professor again visited his German friend. The German said to him: "It is no use. They came and flung my books into a bonfire in the front of the house—all the books that had been written by Frenchmen, and Englishmen, and Jews. Go away, my friend, to any part of the world where such things are not done. Germany and the science of Germany are lost."

I made an enquiry, the other evening, in the Medical Faculty about the present cost of books to students in the first and second years of Medicine. I was told, at first, that \$25.00, or at the most \$35.00, would buy all the books a student needed. I was surprised by this statement; and disappointed, when I was given to understand that books meant only technical, text-books. Text-books are not books. There was a time when students in the Arts Faculty allowed a much larger sum than \$25.00 to \$35.00 for the indispensable minimum of the cost of books. Some of these were text-books, some were books of reference and lexicons, but some were real books. And in those days, twenty-five cents would procure a book which to-day costs ninety.

In lamenting this tendency to read fewer books, I hasten to add that that is not quite your fault. I shall return to this matter later. And I am glad to add too, that the Medical Faculty decided to increase by nearly \$50.00 certain scholarships for the purchase of books.

Now, some of you here, to my knowledge are readers. Those of you who are not could begin to-day or to-morrow to lift yourselves from your present plight. This is one of the few university towns in Canada still possessing a book-shop. Do not tell me that you are so poor that you cannot buy a book or two once a month. Students are no poorer now than they were formerly. And do not tell me that you are so busy studying that you have no time to read the great books. Even in war-time Canadian students are no busier than were Canadian students during a former war. And what studies, pray, can you be pursuing, that are so important as to shut you out from the great minds of the world? We who teach you here have tried to make ourselves proficient, in our various ways; but none of us would presume to detain you from the immortals, who are much greater than we.

Yes, I talk of the *great* books, and the *immortal* writers, and I am not stopping over any of the rest, for the moment at least. But I do not wish to be petulant and narrow, and say that you will have time now, and later, only for the first-rate things. Indeed, if I knew that someone had skipped this talk of mine to read Stephen Leacock's latest book, I should be very pleased. But then again, bits of that book may be immortal, too. Neither shall I dogmatise about the first book, or the sort of book, you should buy. It might

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be an old book like Plutarch's *Lives* (which thousands of Canadian school-boys used to think fascinating), or it might be a brand-new book like Leacock's *My Remarkable Uncle*. It might be a novel: Tolstoi's *War and Peace* comes into my mind because two new students I met the other day spoke of it when Russia came into the conversation: one was reading it, and the other had read it. Or it might be Matthew Arnold's poems.

Now all these suggestions are of books that are both cheap and easily accessible. Let me interrupt myself here to say that in this respect at least you live in a fortunate time as well as in a fortunate country. There are men in this room who remember the publication of cheap reprints of the world's literary masterpieces as an innovation. You really could give yourselves the great experience I have been trying to describe to you—travels in the realms of gold—if you confined yourselves to such a series as the *Everyman's Library*. I am limiting my remarks, you see, again for lack of time, to books in English. The collection I have just named contains all, or nearly all, the English classics, and a great many English translations of foreign books.

But, of course, there are very important, very great books, which you could not easily buy. Even our modern English and American publishers are not infallible—e.g., the complete works of Matthew Arnold, one of the greatest of modern poets, and one of the great critics of all time, have long been out of print. Still, you could get, in two volumes of the *Everyman's Library*, enough of his prose and verse to form a judgment on my praise of him. And there are great books which, in a curious way, go out of men's minds—to say nothing of publishers' minds—over long periods. There are fashions in reading as there are fashions in women's head-dress and hair-dress. Now, here is an example of what membership in a university may do, even for a man who is educating himself by skipping university lectures to read great books. There are some of us older people, here, who have given considerable attention to the study of United States history. What Canadian to-day can fail to be interested in the present situation in the United States? But it seems to be so vast, and complicated, and baffling. Suppose one of you—having read, let us say, André Siegfried's little book: *America Comes of Age*, or for any other reason, wishes to try to spell out the riddle. Is there any master-key to all the locks? Goldwin Smith wrote succinctly about the United States. Lord Bryce dealt with it at length. There was a Frenchman much earlier than Siegfried; and these writers are all excellent. The Americans have written tens of thousands of books about themselves—and some of these books are among the best known books in all the world: Lincoln's *Speeches*, for example, and the books of Mark Twain. But there is an American book, seemingly little read at present, even by Americans, and hardly known to Canadians, which in a dozen ways explains the United States of to-day as does no other book (known to me). It is the *History of the United States, 1801-1817*, by Henry Adams. Let me give you a small sample of the enlightenment that a Canadian might derive from that book. Most Americans and all Canadians and Englishmen seem to believe that a League of Nations was a whim of Woodrow Wilson. Adams sets forth, with great circumstance, the fact that a League of Nations (for Europe and America) was promulgated in 1801 by President Jefferson. It is very strange that this book of Adams should so have gone out of knowledge. His autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, was almost a best-seller in Canada and England as well as in the United States. A novel of his, called *Democracy*, was a veritable best-seller,

for decades, in the United States. But that novel was published anonymously, and only in recent years was the secret divulged. There is no accounting for tastes, the proverb says. The autobiography, called rather perversely, *The Education of Henry Adams*, is a perverse book, a baffling book, a book indicating immense disappointment with life, and not an easy book to read. Yet millions read it. The history is straight-forward, easy to read and even fascinating. It is hard to find even historians who have read it.

Is it worth while, in hard and perilous times, to raise such a question? I am not sure. But I do feel sure that, if universities were abolished, if their Arts Faculties, were abolished, such questions would never be raised, and such books would never be mentioned.

May I be autobiographic for a moment or two? When I was a school-boy, a high-school-boy, there were none of us ignorant of Burke's *American Speeches*. In an earlier day, in the lower school, and in the family too, a large part of education consisted of reading aloud. A child, before he was seven, might have read aloud whole books of the *Bible*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and endless amounts of verse. That was through no merit of his own. All children were brought up that way. You see it was regarded as physical training, as well as mental. On the mental side any mispronunciations we made, were corrected. And, at the beginning of each reading task, we might be asked the meaning of certain words we had read last time. In the interval we had looked them up in the dictionary. But reading aloud was good physical training too: you had to stand up straight, throw out your chest, and practice deep breathing. The great offence was to "break" a sentence by pausing for breath in the middle of it. Now, by the early high school stage it was perceived that bits of Burke's speeches were most fitting for this sort of declamation. For his long sonorous sentences you had to breathe deeply indeed. And these selections cast over us a spell. I can remember, as though it were yesterday, when I, a student in high school, bought the *American Speeches* of Edmund Burke. In paper covers they cost me ten cents. I soon knew them by heart. Not until many years later did I know that two very great men, Lord Morley and Henry Nevinson, pronounced these speeches to be the greatest manual of government in existence.

The mention of these books—Henry Adam's *History of the United States* and Burke's *Speeches*—leads one on inevitably to a general remark. Despite its greatness, and the greatness of its theme, Adams' book is, after all, a special sort of book, as compared with the speeches of Burke. Let me put it negatively. A man could be a good citizen of any free country, Switzerland or Sweden, let us say, who had never read Adams. But the writings of Burke are so essential to freedom, and citizenship, so essential to life, that no one anywhere can safely miss them. One of the greatest sentences ever framed by man is a sentence of Swift—a sentence Nevinson was fond of quoting: *Government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery*. Commit that sentence to heart, if you do not know it already, and meditate on it while you live: *Government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery*. Well, Burke's writings are an exposition of that theme; and no matter how many university degrees a man may accumulate, he is illiterate if he has not read Burke.

Now all the books I have mentioned up to this point are both easy and delightful reading. But there are great books which almost demand your reading, which I should hesitate to describe as both easy and delightful. Some

of these books are philosophic, some are scientific, some are mathematical, some are historic. One or two I can think of are a combination of these various human interests. I think, for example, of the great four volumes by Theodore Merz, on the *History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. In a way it is easy to read, and, if you have any curiosity about how men think and discover, it is also delightful. But the very vastness of the theme makes the mastery of the book a formidable task. It is not a book with which to while away the idle hour. Yet I have never known of anyone taking up that book who did not become utterly absorbed in it and read it to the end.

Again do not imagine that by a hard book I mean a dull one. The books of F. H. Bradley are not dull; they glitter and sparkle with brilliance, but their subject matter, philosophy, is not an easy subject. All the books I have named this morning would make a reader think. But philosophy, even when Bradley writes it, makes you think very hard, and very continuously, and that is a very painful process—unless, that is, you are in good mental condition. Football, too, is a hard game, but I never hear players complaining of it as painful if they are in good physical condition.

But this would be an endless lecture if I attempted to cover the whole field of reading. I content myself rather with offering you these few suggestions. There are three points, however, which I wish to make before I conclude:

In the first place some of our great books have left their mark on all the subsequent books. You will miss the full enjoyment and full meaning of our modern literature unless you have read, and read with some attention, the King James Version of the *Bible*. Shakespeare, again, not only produced masterpieces: he left a stamp on our language and on all our subsequent books. You have heard, perhaps, of the university graduate who was induced, late in life, to read Hamlet. He said, "It's a good yarn, but too full of quotations."

Again, our English literature, like our English language, is woven of many strands. A short cut to learning the English *language* is to learn two or three other languages. And it will multiply your enjoyment of our English literature too. But that's a subject for another lecture, all by itself—so I pass on.

Finally, let me ask you to consider a thing Thomas Carlyle said: "The true University of these days is a Collection of Books." He meant, of course, *if you read the books*. And he meant, very manifestly, some hard books, and some in foreign languages. But let all that go. The point I want to make is this: the comparison is set up between *real* universities, and *unreal* universities. On Carlyle's test, most so-called universities to-day are not real universities. Their members do not read books in the sense in which I have been using the word throughout. They do not steep themselves in the great thinkers and discoverers and creators. No, they read, for examination purposes, anthologies and books about books. Real and unreal; book and text-book. Is it worth thinking over?

Good morning, good health, good fortune to each one of you.



