

I wish to address the young people, first of all.

Pictou Academy
June 1932

This is not the first time I have visited your famous Academy, and the beautiful town of Pictou. Many times I have walked here, and many times mounted the steep height which leads to your School. I have wondered more than once whether your founder did not often quote to himself the line of an old poet, "Steep is the path to virtue", as he took his way, of a morning, to meet his classes. That is a long time since, and in that interval the name, 'Pictou Academy', has gone round the world, as a nurse of famous men, and valiant spirits. But you have many times heard your history, and it would ill become me, who am still a stranger in your midst, to spoil the tale in telling it.

You seem all very gay here to-day. The last time I came it was different. Your Principal and your masters welcomed me, as they have done to-day, but there was a heaviness in the air, and indeed I had no sooner opened the door than I noticed the sulphurous smell which goes with thunderstorms and examinations. As the sun was shining outside I knew it must be examinations. It's an institution which seems very popular in this part of the world, and as I can't find a teacher who has much to say for it, I begin to think it is something like a notorious and much advertised drug, and that children cry for it.

Now I have no doubt that you all pass your examinations - indeed that is in the record, - but what else do you do? What is your interest in life? Is it just to know so many hundred pages of Hall and Knight so well that you can get 78 marks on an examination in it? That would be a dull ambition. But it is not dull to be fascinated by algebra or trigonometry. Many a genius has taken fire over that. The question is have you learned to

take fire over anything, anything that matters? There was a great man among you once whose enthusiasm kindled over the stones he saw around him, in this district, and in the wonders of a bygone nature that he found in your coal pits. They stirred him, brought his mind to active life, wakened his soul. Are you like that? Or are you perhaps a little like other so-called students in these days, caught and ground in the dismal treadmill of routine, so many classes, so many subjects, so many examinations, so many marks. If you are, for Heaven's sake sit back for a moment and laugh at yourselves. You will then want to kick the machine to pieces and start over again, as masters of yourselves and of your destiny.

Now, I don't mean perhaps just what you think I mean. I don't know how examinations and some of the other duller things of life can be abolished. I mentioned Algebra a moment ago, of set purpose. There is something after all, a little dull about mastering the Binomial Theorem. There is something dull about mastering the Latin verb. There is something dull about acquiring the nomenclature of Botany. In fact there is a good deal that is painful and disagreeable connected with education. If it were not so there would not be so many words such as training, discipline, thinking, used in connection with it. All these words have a distinctly unpleasant tinge. But after all they are not so unpleasant as the qualities which appear in their absence. We say that a person who is untrained is awkward, boorish, gauche. We believe that a lack of discipline means a loss in character, and we call a man who cannot think a fool. And again, none of the duller tasks of life are quite so dull as the make-shifts and substitutes which misguided friends of youth offer in their place.

I suppose you have all seen that series of books which began with a text called "German without tears" and went on to the "Dead languages revived", and "Mathematics with no Snarls", and which culminated in the masterpiece "How to tell the Birds from the Flowers". The men and women of my generation have made all the dull things duller in an attempt to make them too easy. By trying to take out the difficulties we have robbed them of any interest. We have made the supreme mistake of insulting your intelligence. You are at last beginning to take your revenge by using your intelligence, (and you have plenty of intelligence, just as much as we have certainly,) on other things than the things we talk about in school. You know all about Hollywood, and the streamlines of automobiles, and the speed of aeroplanes, - of which we knew nothing at your age. We have told you that you ought not to burden your memories, in learning the vocabulary of foreign languages, and so you memorise American baseball scores, and telephone numbers, and a thousand other things. Just as puppies have teeth, so you have this divine faculty of memory, and you must use it, gnawing something. We scold you and tell you all we knew at your age, and in your hearts you are amused at us, and believe that your little fingers are thicker than our thighs.

If it goes on like this it will end in tragedy. It's a sad, wrong world when parents cannot understand their children; when teachers cannot understand their pupils; when youth and age cannot be friends. But I have hopes that it will not end so. For some time we have been laughing at one-another; I see signs that we are at last beginning to laugh at ourselves. Neither of us are quite in the right. We are talking at cross purposes. You are living too much in the present. We are living too much in the past. But they are linked together. You must read more history, and live imaginatively in the past. And we, who are gray, must read Shelley again, and all the young rebels, and try to

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live imaginatively in the future.

May I now say a word to you older Pictovians? One of the things that has pleased me most since I arrived in this province is the willingness of all men and women to gather together and talk about schools. Why do we have schools? Many answers might be given. But the deep, underlying reason is that civilization may continue. We, who are older, want to pass on the torch to the oncoming men and women. Don't be alarmed, therefore, when you hear that education is not up-to-date, that it is merely traditional. It is true that those who come after us must face the world for themselves. It is true that they will meet a somewhat different world than we met at their age. And yet the kindest thing we can do for them is to provide them a little leisure for thinking over some of the great things of the past, the mathematics and science of the Greeks, the laws and institutions of their British forefathers, the music of the Germans, the literature of many European pens, - in short the rich accumulated deposit of mankind. We cannot spell the future for our children, we cannot solve their problems for them, but we believe that we can help them, by schooling them in our experience.

The future of education in Nova Scotia seems to me to look bright. I have referred to the willingness of all classes and all ages to cooperate in discussing the question. I have been about in your provincial schools. I find that all the teachers think they have a friend in the Superintendent of Education, Dr. Henry Munro, whom all of you here remember, as an old Pictou Academy boy, and Pictou Academy teacher. The Universities of the Province, after many years of dissension and misunderstanding, are cooperating as never before. There seems to be

a general recognition of the need of raising educational standards, of securing better and better teachers in the schools, and of giving the brighter spirits among our boys and girls a brighter opportunity. The great curse which lies on the schools and colleges of North America is that a boy and a girl who could do all the set tasks in two years is obliged to linger over them three or four. North America for the last fifty years has wasted the lives of the students who matter. 2500 years ago the greatest of all teachers laid it down that a boy who could do mathematics could do them quickly and easily, and that a boy who could do Mathematics could do anything. A few months ago I talked with a school mistress in Nova Scotia, who said the same thing, in almost this language. I asked whether she was aware that she was quoting Plato. She smiled, and said: "No, I never read Plato, but I learned that after 20 years of teaching". Happy the province where people can arrive at Plato's doctrine, out of their own experience.

Pickov

~~Halifax, N. S.~~

June 20, 1932.