

President's address at  
closing - Rothesay Collegiate  
School - June 16/33.

Rothesay Skelton

I suppose some of you will wonder why the head of a University should be inflicted on you at the close of a year. You have had months of lectures and classes from your masters, and now comes still another master for a final word of advice. You know perhaps what was said once about a school-master: that "he should have an atmosphere of awe, and walk wonderingly as if he was amazed at being himself". Perhaps the same witty person would have been even wittier about college professors and college heads. But there is this to remember about teachers, whether teachers in schools or teachers in colleges, not only they are more laughed at than any other class: they long ago learned to laugh at themselves. That is to say they are perhaps the most civilised class in the community, and the sanest.

There is a special reason, of course, for humour being cultivated among teachers. Every one, pupil and parents of pupils, takes the teacher literally; and the teacher knows that he must not be taken literally. It was a teacher, I believe, who said that whenever a statement begins to be generally accepted you may be sure that the statement is two hundred years out of date. There is such a thing as Truth of course, but each generation, and each generation of schoolboys must grapple with the Truth for himself, or it will never be true for him. Most schoolboys, since the world began, have been parrots, and repeated what they heard; but here and there one schoolboy or two has thought for himself, and that is why the world has changed.

There is another thing which amuses teachers. It is generally assumed, you know, that if they are good enough at their job, they



can teach anybody, and that they can teach every one with equal speed and facility. Now the teacher knows that education is a twofold thing; that it means learning, as well as teaching, and that the learning is far the more important of the two. It was a schoolmaster in ancient times who said that a wise man learns more from a fool than a fool learns from a wise man.

For the sake of you schoolboys here, let me put it another way to you, leaving the schoolmasters altogether out of it.

We have heard something of your school record here today. You seem to have a good record, so far as your classes go; but what else do you do? What is your interest in life? Is it just to know so many hundred pages of Hell 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 in these parts once, whose enthusiasm kindled over the stones he saw around him, and in the wonders of a bygone nature that he found in our coal pits, in the cliffs on the Fundy shores. 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 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.

Your teachers are not responsible for this condition of affairs, nor are your parents in particular. This condition of affairs is one of the by-products of human action in the last generation or ~~us~~, which no one foresaw, and no one deliberately intended.

All men and women of my age would freely admit that you boys know many things which we never knew at your age, and some of which we shall probably never know, because we have been caught too late. Yet our education was based on one or two things which the world can only forget to its peril. Mathematics is still the key to the Universe, as the Greeks began to discover about 500 B.C. We are still calling this an age of science, but the evidence accumulates all over North America that science is slipping backwards, and one of the reasons is that mathematics has been neglected at school. You have to get on to the third or fourth year of a Canadian university now-a-days to reach the stage in mathematics which Canadian boys once learned in school. And again, as life grows more difficult, the world will more and more need to cultivate its imagination, and to study what the world was like in the past. At present if our Canadian politic-



ians knew more of the world as it has been, and would muse on the world as it might be, it would help far more than studying the blue-books to see what the world in its present sorry condition is. Well at school we swam through oceans of history and we were fed quantities of imaginative literature. For example, I read the whole of Homer's Iliad while at school. In this materialistic age it would generally be thought waste of time that a boy should read so many thousand lines of imaginative literature. The trouble is that only those who have had such an experience can know its worth and value, and the fundamental change it makes in a readers outlook. As some one said: "A man who has never read Homer is like a man who has never seen the ocean, There is a great experience he has missed."