

Publications Committee

[95]

The University and the Commonwealth.

ADDRESS OF PROFESSOR WM. M. THORNTON,

Chairman of the Faculty, University of Virginia.

DELIVERED ON COMMENCEMENT DAY IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, JUNE 20, 1894.

[95]

THE UNIVERSITY AND THE COMMONWEALTH.

Gentlemen of the Board of Regents and the Faculty, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have not felt at liberty to decline the flattering invitation of your committee to be with you upon this day. One week ago I witnessed a scene like this in the University of my native State. I come from the eldest of our fair sisterhood of Southern Universities to lay her homage at the foot of the youngest. Witnessing these evidences of her abounding vigor and her rapid growth, remembering that she completes this day but the first ten years of her life, I feel that it needs no prophet's vision to foretell the long series of her labours and her honours. Well might the laureate of her first decennium adopt the hopeful prayer of the sweet Roman singer:

"Vosque veraces cecinisse, Parcae,
Quod semel dictum est stabilisque rerum,
Terminus servat, bona jam peractis
Jungite fata."

The history of such institutions as your University constitutes one of the most impressive chapters in the story of the civilization of our race. What was originally a joint stock company of learned men, a society for the mutual protection of students and teachers against the exactions of the violent and the extortions of the fraudulent, what in later ages developed into a nursery of the church, a seminary for the propagation of a learned and pious ministry, has grown in modern times into a department of the State, has become ancillary to all that is highest and best in human government, and has demonstrated its right to the fostering care of Legislatures and Parliaments, as well as its claim to the private benefactions of wealth and power.

It is, therefore, not without utility, both for the authorities of such schools of learning and for the friends of culture in all the walks of our complex life to ask seriously what are the mutual services due to each other by the Commonwealth and the University. Of the one class there may be some who rate too low both their duties and their rights. In the other there are doubtless those who look to the University for services alike foreign to its true nature and incompatible with its ultimate aims. May it not be possible to clarify and elevate the ideals of the one, and to limit and sober the expectations of the other?

Let it be first said then that the aim of a University is not to make money. In a State which has dealt with its educational interests in so princely a fashion as Texas, which has consecrated to their development a domain larger than the entire State of West Virginia, such a warning might seem absurd. But so deeply have I found this error rooted in the minds even of thoughtful men, that a few words concerning it may not be useless even in this great commonwealth.

As soon as it is attempted to make the higher education self-supporting serious limitations to its efficacy begin to arise. The cry for numbers without regard to quality begins to be heard. The standards of admission and of graduation are wilfully or insensibly lowered. The courses offered are degraded, and those which meet the aspirations of the higher minds and finer natures only are erased from the programme. The instructors are burdened with classes so large that

teaching loses its stimulus and its spring, and degenerates into a mechanical routine. The student himself fixes his ambition on the low goal of mere academical success, and no longer seeks as the chief aim of University life the up-building of his own spirit, the refining of his own culture. Let it ever be remembered that a true University is a great charity school. As soon as its balance sheet shews a profit, as soon as it can be operated without aid from the generosity of the State, or from the usufruct of endowments by private benevolence, it is a self-confessed failure. It has declined from its true and highest mission, and to the children who cry for bread it is feeding stones, or even serpents.

There is yet another direction in which it is often felt that a University should be made a source of direct pecuniary profit to the State. This is in the immediate production of commercially valuable investigations or useful discoveries in applied science. It is very far from my intention to belittle the labours of the men who reach these inventions and so powerfully ameliorate the difficulties and pains of human life. But as a rule, they are not to be expected from men engaged in extending the boundaries of the known. "The great discoveries of scientific truth," said Tyndall, "are not made by practical men, and they never will be made by them; because their minds are beset by ideas, which, though of the highest value from one point of view, are not those which stimulate the original discoverer." For him, on the contrary, the true University is the legitimate home, and the radiance of his genius, like the flash of the lighthouse, throws its beams less into the darkling circle about its foot than over the windswept spaces of the distant future.

Lastly, I could wish that it might be understood of all men that a University is not a reformatory. I believe it true that influences are at work in a well governed University which powerfully tend to mature and sweeten the best traits of human character. But college life is a microcosm, within whose sphere all sorts and conditions of men assemble. They import into it not only the high ideals and pure manners of cultured and Christian homes, but bring other and evil tendencies—the malaria of circles of society, where the brainless hunt for pleasure, has rendered the head a vacuum and petrified the heart; the contagion of parental examples of subjection to the demons of the bottle and the card; the foul infection of Venus worship, and licentious living. The young man must meet these tendencies whether he remains at home or not. The University aids him to resist them, and preserve his purity and rectitude by all the influences of a noble pursuit, of exalted themes of thought, of chaste example, of wise and kindly counsel. But even these may fail to cleanse and sweeten natures already prostituted and impure, even as the perfumed breath of Nature too often fails to resuscitate the poisoned invalid. To heal the heart-sick and the soul-sick is the mission not of the college, but of the church, and the health-conserving influences of University life are not to be denied because they do not accomplish tasks for which they are not designed—because they often leave the filthy and the unjust to be unjust and filthy still. Only divine power can perfect the rescue of the tainted soul.

We turn with greater interest to the positive and hopeful aspects of our theme, and ask now what are the services that the University may be expected and should be enabled to render to the State? I should esteem myself unfaithful to the supreme objects of the teacher's life if I neglected to lay stress upon one great point—the forwarding of original research. When I recall the enormous value to humanity of a single discovery of that illustrious professor, Sir Humphry Davy, the miner's safety lamp, which has doubtless preserved more human lives than all the engineery of modern warfare has destroyed; when I remember

the result of those sixteen years of patient experimental research, which enabled Edward Jenner to give to the world his great discovery of inoculation, and thus to put security against a dreadful disease within the reach of unnumbered millions; I feel that these two scientific discoveries alone have paid the world a thousand-fold for all its bounties to all the institutions of learning which have ever existed. Yet these, although two of the most beneficent, are but two from myriads of such discoveries—inventions which have changed the face of all civilized countries, prolonged human life, augmented its comforts, and ameliorated its woes.

Men are prone to conclude that these accessions to comfort and security are due solely to those practical minds, which apply the abstract conclusions of science to the production of useful inventions. But reflection will convince us that this is far from being true. Every practical application of knowledge has for its germ some scientific curiosity. Every inventor uses more or less consciously and consistently the results of scientific speculation. The steam-engine, the telegraph, the telephone, the electric light, the dynamo, the storage battery, were once the toys of the laboratory. Quench the insatiable curiosity of the student of pure science, stop his investigations, terminate his discoveries, and your man of practice would find that he himself had been scarce more than an automaton. The vital currents which actuated him came from that retired thinker and student, whose discoveries seemed the mere curiosities of a fantastic leisure, useless to himself and unprofitable to the world. Abolish the man of science and the man of practice must discover him anew.

On the other hand, the results of scientific speculation are not salable in the market. They can not be patented, and once announced become public property, a part of the common treasury of all civilized races. Hence we find the necessity for the endowment of research, a necessity which has impressed itself upon thoughtful men from the earliest periods. Kings and queens have been among the patrons of discovery. Churches have utilized the gifts of the religious for the advancement of secular learning. And the rich and noble have expended their treasures in thus promoting the happiness and comfort of mankind. But in our own land, where there can be neither Royal Societies nor Imperial Institutes for the advancement of learning, we have been thrown back upon that greatest of all human agencies, the State, and are trusting the people in their collective capacity to promote those studies, whose results are essential to continue the material elevation of the human race.

In America the State has added to its other great functions that of guardian of the higher learning. Let us as citizens take care that this guardianship is wisely administered; not in alternating fits of profuse generosity and senseless parsimony, but with a wise, continuous, thoughtful liberality, proportioned to the unspeakable import of the trust itself.

Nature herself seems to teach us the true lesson. We see her produce in a few weeks of luxuriant growth some fragile, swiftly fading flower, some flaunting, unsubstantial weed. But when she sets about the creation of the giant oak, how different her patience, her hopefulness, her care. The acorn lies for months beneath the sod ere the tender seedling shows its head. Summers and winters pass and years roll by and yet we find but a sturdy sapling. Through all this time she has never relaxed her tender care. Each rootlet is fed with the elements of growth. Light and heat and moisture are shed upon this plant of promise without stint. And at the last, when decades have lengthened to a century, we have the superb consummation of her work—that stately trunk whose strong fibres defy the onset of storm and tempest, that crown of foliage beautiful to the eye

and consoling us by its cooling shade, those spreading roots fixed forever in the maternal heart of earth. Thus may your great University grow in the heart of your mother State!

I am aware that to many, even to thoughtful men, this statement of the function of the State University as a center of scientific illumination will seem overstrained. Too often men regard the college as a mere teaching machine for conserving the mass of existing knowledge. But every true teacher will feel with me that the teacher's function is higher. When his steps have led him beyond the frontier of the known into that strange and beauteous region of undiscovered truth, he comes back with renewed vitality, that shews itself in his exposition of the very rudiments of his subject. The glow kindled in his own spirit illuminates the body of truth which he expounds like a light set within a translucent vase, revealing not only its outward shape but its inward texture. These incursions into the new grounds of thought are indispensable to the highest order of success in teaching, for from them alone can stimulus and vitality come. For this cause every University which aims at the highest results should give its teachers time and means for research. The overloaded curriculum, which exhausts the energies of the instructor in the routine of teaching and lecturing, avenges itself by making the lessons dead and the lectures barren. To the professor no less than to the student the *schola* should have its old Greek sense of *leisure*—leisure to reflect, to assemble conclusions, to co-ordinate results; leisure to work, to combine the known, to test conjecture by experiment, to divine the unknown. Without leisure to labour in his specialty the teacher's life is misspent.

The influence upon the student also is of supreme value. He learns the holiness of truth, and is taught to see in the search for that pearl the great duty of man's life. The words of the master, however great he may be, cease to bind and to dull. When he has gazed with his own eyes into the secrets of history or of nature, he begins to find for himself the only satisfying ground of conviction. If the University gave to her pupils no other possession, they might well sit for years at her feet to form this one habit of the mind. The great vice of good men is to rest upon conventions, to accept compromises, to be content with something less than the right and the true, to build for the day that is, rather than for the ages that are to come. The trained and cultured spirit can not be thus deadened to the demands of that counsel of perfection which the search for truth postulates. It sees too clearly the intrinsic falsity and folly of error, and is too sensible of its ultimate and inevitable doom. Discarding makeshifts it adjudges each step wise or foolish as it leads towards or away from the goal of truth and right. It fixes hope and directs action upon this sole point. The man who declared that "public office was a public trust," and who threw away the presidency of this great country rather than accept it with the burdens of a dishonest dollar and an oppressive tariff, has found among college men his strongest backing, because his acts appealed to this educated sense of the inviolability of truth and right.

The University which is true to her sacred mission of disseminating truth serves the State by cultivating in her sons this capacity to live in and for ideals. As it is true that not all college men learn this lesson, so it is true that there are avenues to this capacity which do not lead through college portals. It is one secret of constructive genius, wherever and however developed. But the University aims to do systematically and consciously what other agencies do fortuitously and unconsciously. Her training is the culminating stage in a process of selection which begins with the primary schools. The best minds and spirits are there sifted out and passed on to the academy. Here they are again tested

and the residuum conducted to the University, where they are again submitted to the most potent academical influences. A young man thus selected and thus trained enters civil life. His imagination is fired by the greatness of his country and her resources; his enthusiasm kindled by the swiftness of her progress and the magnitude of her destiny. With faith in the future of his native land, with fidelity to the lessons of history, with loyalty to the claims of truth, he combines the student's habit of patient observation and calm reflection, his distrust of custom, his unfettered thought, his boldness to judge and to decide. To men like these the great republic of which we are citizens owed its origin, owes its present safety, and will owe its future greatness. Of such were Edmund Randolph and George Mason and Richard Lee and Thomas Jefferson, those great Virginians who were so conspicuous in that "campaign of education," which united the colonies in their supreme struggle for independence, and then gathered the well nigh wasted fruits of victory by consolidating the free and independent States into the indissoluble Union. It was the college men of that epoch who secured for Liberty upon this continent, not a brief asylum from which the fires of revolution would soon drive her to take flight, but an eternal temple and a home. It is to men of like training and habit that we look to-day when rotting conservatism or anarchistic violence threatens wreck to Church or School or State. And through all future ages such men will be the chosen tools of Heaven in building the higher destinies of man.

Nor is it only by their work that such men serve the State. Their quiet influence and example stimulate public thought, illuminate public conscience, sober public resolve. Such men as Austin and Houston, great by nature and greatly trained in the school of life, are at long intervals sent forth by the divine power to do some great and indispensable work. The one consolidated the first settlers of this great Republic in the resolve to secure civic order and constitutional liberty, at a period when no man of conventional training could perhaps have gained their ears or touched their hearts. The other led them in one heroic procession from the darkness of the Alamo to that supreme charge of victorious valor at San Jacinto, where a general trained in the systematic acts of modern warfare might perchance have met defeat. But the gifts of their genius and courage have been left to the guardianship of the intelligence and conscience of future times. HE, who from age to age has raised up men for the great emergencies of human progress, nowhere intervenes by miracle to preserve the ground thus gained. It is left to forethought, courage, skill, knowledge, wisdom, conscience—the qualities that education aims to raise to their highest potency. Without a general diffusion of the sobering and elevating influences due to educated men the liberty and order secured by statesmanship would prove mere rainbow tinted bubbles, melting as we grasp them into fleeting mist; and the vast accumulations of inventive genius and constructive skill would be looted by anarchy and communism. The very wealth of which many so-called "self-made" men so arrogantly boast, the barbaric luxury with which uncultured opulence feeds and clothes and houses its brainless body, are themselves the unrecognized gift of cultured thought, and are saved from ravage and pillage only by the conservative wisdom of the educated man.

I have dwelt so far upon the appeal which the University makes to the higher elements of intellectual activity. We must not forget, however, that she addresses also the finest of our ethical motives. The Persian moralist Hafiz says of one of his characters, "She believes that by dealing nobly with all, all will shew themselves noble." Upon this postulate the college bases her theorems concerning honour and veracity, her rules for the conduct of academic life.

I at least know no human calling, no trade, no profession, whose ethical system is so pure and exalted, so religiously observed, and promptly vindicated as that of a hightoned University. At her very portal she says to the entering scholar:

“ If you were born to honour, shew it now;
If put upon you, make the judgment good
That thought you worthy of it.”

His intercourse with instructors and fellow students is conducted upon principles of absolute veracity. The slightest breach of truth condemns the offender to immediate and irrevocable exclusion from this society. Thus she teaches fidelity to this high law, both by the sweetness of her approving smile and the terrors of her offended wrath. The habit of life thus developed is one of which the man never divests himself. In politics, at the bar, in the medical profession, in business, he stands for cleanness and honesty, and is the hated foe of the bribing lobbyist, the unjust judge, the quack, and the cheat.

Of all the contributions to education made by that wonderful and versatile genius, who founded my own Alma Mater, this “Honor System” in government seems to me the greatest. When Thomas Jefferson organized the discipline of the University of Virginia in the spirit which “questioned whether fear after a certain age is a motive to which we should have ordinary recourse,” and declared that “the human character is susceptible of other incitements to correct conduct more worthy of employ and of better effect,” and even planned his buildings so that espionage was impossible, he introduced into collegiate government a most potent, purifying and uplifting influence. It has already extended itself through the South, and is rapidly working its way North and West. It is not bounded by the walls of the college campus, but follows college men into the world, and makes political and professional and commercial life more clean and wholesome. The college serves the State in no mean way when it sends out annual classes of young men after the Jeffersonian model—“worthy in themselves, valuable members of society, and fit successors of their fathers in the government of their country.”

The true University is thus not simply a center of scientific illumination and focus of useful learning; but by its intrinsic and indwelling spirit it teaches men to live for and in ideals, and inculcates the voluntary subjection of the heart to the dictates of honour. In these directions we find its most extended and enduring services to the State. If by these means it purifies politics, ennobles social life, dignifies the learned professions, sobers legislation, stimulates reform, enriches the literature of our epoch, enlightens the popular intelligence, and refines the public taste, who shall claim that it is unworthy of public and private support?

Young gentlemen, who to-day are graduated from this seat of learning, I welcome you into a great fraternity—the brotherhood of collegemen. For we are all brothers by virtue of our training, our convictions, our hopes. Life may have in store for you many triumphs, but not sweeter to your hearts than the applause of your fellows and the benediction of your Alma Mater upon this, your graduating day. Great successes may be yours hereafter, but for none will your pulses throb more strongly than in the pride and pleasure of this supreme hour. I think I know your hearts and believe that I may speak for you to all this waiting audience, and say that you leave this home of learning, not only crowned with honours, but filled with a noble resolve to pursue the real and abiding rather than the transient, to accept with truth and right no compromise, to keep unstained the chastity of personal honour.

If these things be in you and abound, then you have indeed tasted of the true University spirit. Permit me to conclude this address by reciting to you a short

stanza from the noble eulogy of a late English scholar and thinker, himself a poet, by a poet friend as a fine expression of this spirit:

“ For he preserved from chance control
The fortress of his 'stablished soul,
In all things sought to see the whole,
Brooked no disguise,
But set his heart upon the goal,
Not on the prize.”

Diplomas, titles, riches, offices are the mere prizes of life. The goal is thirst for truth and ambition to attain it, love for the ideal and determination to pursue it, reverence for honour and resolve to keep it spotless. My brother, set thou thy heart upon the goal, not on the prize!