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The Convocation Address

Delivered by His Excellency Lord Soulbury at King George's Hall, on
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I AM very glad to be given the opportunity to address the Graduates and Under-Graduates of this University of which I am intensely proud to be the Chancellor, for I know that I am speaking to those who in years to come will bear the responsibility for guiding and directing the affairs of this country. Ceylon will look to them for leadership in government, in the professions, in industry, commerce and agriculture, and in the promotion of artistic and cultural activity.

A University must ever aim at attracting, encouraging and developing an *élite* which in the nature of things can never be more than a relatively small proportion of a country's population. We all realise that the bulk of an Army must consist of non-commissioned officers and privates. To train every recruit to become an officer would impose an intolerable burden on the Higher Command, which would in any event only find it possible to provide commissions for a very small number. Thomas Huxley in the last century quoted with approval Sir Francis Galton's estimate that not more than one in four thousand of the population of Great Britain could be expected to attain distinction and that not more than one in a million would have "some share of that intensity of instinctive aptitude, that burning thirst for excellence which is called genius".

Napoleon is credited with the observation that every soldier carries a Marshal's baton in his knapsack. That could only be true if all soldiers were born with the same innate capacity, but they are not. Education cannot create natural ability, it can only develop it, and the boy or girl who gets to a University probably possesses and certainly should possess superior natural ability. It is the business of the educational Higher Command to select those whose qualities of mind and character appear to be outstanding and provide every opportunity for their cultivation and improvement.

For that reason the standard of admission to a University should always be very high and to lower it in response to popular or political pressure would

be to betray a University's function as the training ground of a nation's leaders.

Up to the First World War, so far as my experience at Oxford goes, and I expect the same was true of Cambridge, there were many Under-Graduates whose presence at the University was mainly due to their fortunate possession of parents with sufficient resources to maintain them. The number of Scholarships available for poorer students, if they were successful in winning them, was far too small, and the standard of Scholarship required was extremely high. There were, of course, in Oxford in my time many very clever and hardworking men, but I had a considerable number of friends whose capacity to profit by their University education was in inverse ratio to their capacity to enjoy the many other amenities which the University provided. Indeed, it was remarked by some cynic that the University was a place to which a parent sent his son in order to learn how to spend what he would never have the ability to earn. I am glad to say that the situation is now very different. In Great Britain and in all progressive countries, it is realised that a University education can no longer be the privilege of a limited class of boys and girls from well-to-do families. Apart from the injustice of such procedure no country can any longer afford the waste of intelligence involved. Clever boys and girls are a national asset no matter what homes they come from, and it is a national duty to give them every facility for the development of talents which can and should eventually be placed at the service of the whole community.

But this most necessary and desirable change of outlook has not unnaturally produced increasing pressure from all sections of the population to obtain a University education and has brought with it three problems—

- (1) The output of a number of Graduates in excess of the possibility of employing them in occupations commensurate with their qualifications or at any rate with what they think their qualifications merit ;
- (2) a tendency to over-specialize and favour a utilitarian aspect of education ;
- (3) the maintenance of a high standard of admission.

1. The first problem is by no means a new one. It worried Germany long before it worried Great Britain, mainly, I think, because it had always been easier for a child of poor parents to gain admission to a German University and, just because his parents were poor, more necessary for him to find employment as soon as he had graduated. Bismarck was disturbed by the problem and rather cruelly nicknamed this surplus of Graduates "Hunger Candidaten". France had the same trouble, for you find French writers complaining in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century that the number of young persons in France with an advanced education was increasing more

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rapidly than the number of careers which such education opened to them, and warning their countrymen that the acquisition of knowledge for which no use could be found was a sure method of driving men to revolt.

I believe that the fashionable word for that state of mind is now "Frustration". This is no new feeling, and is a very real affliction. So it may be some consolation to those who suffer from it to recollect that as long ago as the end of the Sixteenth Century, Burton, the famous author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was also a victim. "We that are University men", said he, "like so many hide-bound calves in a pasture tarry out our time, wither away as a flower ungathered in a garden and are never used, or, as so many candles, illuminate ourselves alone, obscuring one another's light". I might add that he had a curious remedy for his ailment, for he tells us later on that he would fall into such a state of despondency that he could only get relief by going to the bridgefoot at Oxford and hearing the bargemen swear at one another.

Poor Burton clearly suffered from "frustration" and there have been many other sufferers since his day. The problem is still with us.

Nearly twenty years ago, when I was first given a measure of responsibility for Education in England and Wales, the usual avenues of employment open to University Graduates were the Civil Service and the Professions—Law, Medicine, Teaching and so forth, but there was and had long been a definite prejudice in the minds of the leaders of manufacturing and trading concerns against the employment of Graduates, on the ground that their education was too academic. Preference was given to young boys and girls who could be trained from the outset by their employers.

I spent a great deal of time in trying to convince the heads of Industry and Commerce that it would be in their interests to attract and engage the best brains from the Universities, and indeed in the long run fatal to their interests if they did not. No doubt for a short while after engagement, the University Graduate does not earn the equivalent of the salary which his age and prolonged education justify, but if Trade and Industry are to have proper leadership in the future, the best trained intellects are needed, and organizations that do not value trained intelligence are doomed.

Here and there, though not often, I used to discover an employer who had some acquaintance with the Republic of Plato, and I reminded him of the parable of the Cave. You will remember that Plato tells us that the philosopher when he first turns from philosophy to the life of the World sees badly, like a man going back from the light into the darkness of the Cave. But with practice, says Plato, he will come to have a far better insight than others into practical affairs because of all that he has seen in the clear light. If you substitute University education for the light, and Trade and Industry for the darkness of the Cave, you will appreciate the relevance of this parable.

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I think my arguments had some effect, for today there are few, if any, really important concerns in Great Britain which do not have on their staff a number of University Graduates, and the field of employment for those who have had a University education has been considerably enlarged. But even so, the potential scope for the employment of those who have been trained at a University is limited, for the number of leaders required is in the nature of things relatively small.

2. The second problem, the danger of excessive specialization, leads me to say a few words about Technical Education and the function of a University in that regard. As I have already mentioned, up to comparatively recent times, the majority of Graduates, at any rate from the older Universities, found employment in the Civil Service, the Church and the Professions. When they went into Industry or Commerce, it was usually a family business, and most of them came from the great Public Schools or Grammar Schools. There was, of course, a sprinkling of highly gifted men who subsequently reached great distinction in the sphere of science but, broadly speaking, our factories and commercial concerns did not draw many recruits from the Universities, which were supposed to give a liberal as opposed to a vocational education and for that reason did not commend themselves to manufacturers and business men. Technical training was secured either in actual employment at an early age or in Technical Colleges and Institutes, mainly at evening classes after the day's work was over. That was roughly the position at the beginning of the First World War. At the end of it, we realised how lamentably deficient our technical education had been, and great efforts were made between that war and the next to remedy the position. We suffered, as other countries have suffered and still suffer, from a widespread preference for black-coated jobs. They had a higher social prestige and were on the whole more remunerative. But for some years before the last War we made strenuous efforts to increase and improve the facilities for technical training, and I and my colleagues spent a good deal of time endeavouring to impress upon teachers, parents and children that it was just as respectable and honourable to turn a lathe or drive a tractor as to work in an office. These efforts bore fruit and it was fortunate that they did, for the Second World War produced a vastly greater demand for technically trained persons than the First, and since the Second War it has not been the black-coated but the manual jobs which have attracted the largest increases in pay. But I did not at that time, nor do I now, consider it to be the function of a University to become a Vocational Institution. Technical education is, I think, mainly the province of the School and the Technical College. Some of the Universities in the United States have found that it was a mistake to blur the distinction between the University and the Technical College and Mr. Winston Churchill when speaking at Harrow a year ago, declared that he was terrified at the idea that Universities should become

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Technical Schools where every form of material proficiency was imparted in different grades. The duty of a University, he said, was to teach wisdom and character and not just technicalities. In his opinion no amount of technical knowledge could replace an appreciation of the humanities.

And yet a University cannot ignore the activities that a mechanical age like ours has evolved. But there is a wide distinction between the training of the faculties and training for a vocation and I think it is part of the work of a University to deter the student of science or mechanics from the specialization that confines a man to a narrow one-sided view of life. It has been well said that specialization is the instrument of advance but exacts a heavy price by destroying in the mind of man the unity of what is essentially related. The best physician according to the ancient Greeks was also a philosopher, and I think it was Froude who wrote, "Every honest occupation to which a man sets his hand would raise him into a philosopher if he mastered all the knowledge that belonged to his craft". A University is not, and should not be, the handmaid of Industry, but it can formulate and illumine technical principles; it can explain the "why" rather than the "how", and relate vocational studies to the other manifold activities of mankind. In short, it can liberalise the vocations and help the engineer, chemist and physicist to "see life steadily and see it whole".

3. The third problem—a general problem—confronting educationists all over the World is how to satisfy the increasing demand for education, including University education, without lowering educational standards.

In the eighteenth century Dr. Johnson said, rather unfairly, of the Scots—"Their learning is like bread in a besieged town; every man gets a little, but no man gets a full meal". I am inclined to think that the reason for Dr. Johnson's jibe was the attempt made by the Scots, long before the English, to broaden the basis of their education and give something like an equal chance to the poorer children, despite resources inadequate for the purpose. They met with considerable success and I am sure that their effort made no small contribution to the remarkably large number of Scotsmen, considering the small population of their country, who distinguished themselves in England and most other parts of the World during the succeeding century. I think, however, that England is now catching Scotland up.

We are all of us today facing much the same task that the Scots began to tackle two hundred years ago, the securing of equality of opportunity in education for every child.

In Great Britain the provision of suitable post-primary or secondary education for all children over eleven years of age is putting a very severe financial and administrative strain upon her resources. It may be many years before real progress is made and there is, of course, always the tempt-

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ation to try to do too much too quickly and thereby run the risk of lowering the whole level of education.

Nevertheless, it is, I think, a risk that we must all run if any worth-while progress is to be achieved, but I believe that the Universities can be relied upon as the ultimate safeguard against any irreparable damage.

It follows that in these days of educational advance and experiment a very great responsibility rests upon Universities and their members. Whatever is to pass into the life of a nation must first be taught in its Schools and whatever is to be taught in its Schools must first be cultivated in its Universities. If their standard of cultivation is maintained at a high degree of excellence, then in due course the Schools will conform and the whole level of culture will rise.

A great opportunity now presents itself to Ceylon, and I like to think that she can look forward some day to a cultural revival such as occurred in ancient Greece and in England in the Elizabethan era. What gave birth to those remarkable flowerings of human genius I do not know. Perhaps the defeat of the Persians at the battle of Marathon and the relief from a mortal danger evoked an upsurge of national confidence. Perhaps the spirit of the Renaissance, the defeat of Spain and England's consciousness of herself as "an Island with an Ocean destiny" liberated the energies of her people. Whatever the explanation, comparable periods may well recur from time to time in the history of other lands. But only on one condition. As Pandit Nehru has said in his remarkable book *The Discovery of India*—"the loss of political freedom leads inevitably to cultural decay". I feel sure that the life-blood of the creative impulse that produces great Art and Literature is freedom. Ceylon is now free.