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## THE ELECTRON: ITS INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE<sup>1</sup>

By Dr. KARL T. COMPTON

PRESIDENT OF THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

WITHIN the past five years, centenaries, bicentenaries and tercentenaries have been much in vogue. Every town or institution or event which has claim to distinction has sought the excuse of the calendar to remind the world of its claims to greatness. Thus we have recently celebrated the centenary of Faraday's discovery of the principles of electromagnetism and the bicentenary of Watt's invention of the steam engine—discoveries which have introduced the eras of electricity and of mechanical power. The city of Chicago has reminded us that the progress of mankind really began with the founding of that community, and has led us to spend millions of dollars to gain the impression that there is really some causal relationship between Chicago and world progress. In my part of the

country, the city of Boston and its suburbs staged a succession of tercentenary celebrations, as proud of their past as Chicago is of its present. Greatest of all was last summer's tercentenary celebration of Harvard University, signaling the firm basis of intellectual freedom and leadership which is the prime requisite for a free people in a democracy.

Encouraged by the success of the Chicago Century of Progress and the Harvard Tercentenary, I venture to feature my address as signaling an anniversary of the discovery of the electron. To be sure, it is only one generation old, and a generation is a sufficiently vague unit of time for my purposes. Yet, in spite of its youth, it bids fair to rival Chicago in its contributions to economic progress, and Harvard University in its contributions to the understanding of this world in which we live. So I venture to assert that no institu-

<sup>1</sup> Address of the retiring president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Atlantic City, evening of December 28, 1936.

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