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NORTH AMERICAN RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE UNIVERSITY, 1934–1954[1]

By Dr. ALAN GREGG

THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

FOR the past sixteen years I have had occasion to visit medical schools and institutes of medical research in some thirty countries. In the variety one encounters in such an experience—variety of methods, of purposes and of circumstances—one is reminded of a saying of Oscar Wilde: "When you break the little laws the big laws begin to operate," for out of so many contradictions and differing practices emerge certain underlying principles. I can not forget the first time I saw an Irish jaunting car. My impression was that if that was a vehicle then one could design almost anything for transportation purposes and it might work, for if one sees underlying principles in a great variety of forms the end result is a great sense of freedom to tackle almost any new task.

Now, one question which I should like to ask you this evening is this: Are we prepared here in North America to assume responsibility for the maintenance and continuation of one of the greatest traditions of Western Europe, the university? Everywhere I have gone and seen institutions of higher learning there are traces of that tradition—sometimes strong, sometimes weak, but there is no doubt that in the world of teaching and of scholarship the university as it has developed in Western Europe is the source and the paradigm. How much do we understand of this tradition? If we accept Hegel's definition of freedom as "the recognition of necessity" then are we

[1] Presented at the annual banquet of the Federation of Societies for Experimental Biology, Toronto, April 28, 1939.

free to select the best there is in the university tradition and cherish it?

Of the Tercentenary of Harvard a curious and arresting story is told—as I happen to know quite accurately. In three separate instances European delegates to the Tercentenary remarked privately to their friends: "I came to this celebration with a heavy heart. Our priceless heritage, the university, is in the gravest peril in Europe. But what I have seen here gives me hope again, for I have seen that it can go on in North America." To match this faith, to justify this hope, let us ask ourselves this question, "Are we fully prepared to carry on if need be?" For that may be our greatest task in the next twenty years.

It would be a waste of time to try to appraise the universities in Europe or to attempt to judge their merits compared with our own. Many years ago a student in the Andover Theological Seminary who had fallen in love in the second year found himself but ill prepared for the examination in hagiology. The question posed in the examination was, "Name and describe five of the minor prophets." After much biting of his pencil he wrote: "God forbid that I should discriminate between these pious and holy men." So I shall attempt rather to offer you some of the convictions my years abroad provided regarding phases of European university life which I do not see well developed, nor in some cases indeed even recognized on this side of the Atlantic. Let me speak of things I fear may be lost or weakened and urge you to think of others needed if we are to justify the hope that is placed in us.

Before 1914 we in North America regarded the universities in Europe with earnest respect. Indeed there was admiration—implicit or explicit—and the flattery of imitation. Many of our superior students sought and found in Europe intellectual habit—personal independence, intellectual method—thoroughness and the conviction that there was an opportunity for each to add to the scholarships of the world. Relationships almost filial in their devotion grew up between great teachers and eager Canadian and American disciples. And of peculiar importance and value there spread over Canadian and American university life that wonderful open-mindedness and unselfconscious receptivity which always characterizes ingenuous humility and true modesty. We weren't ashamed to learn nor afraid to try. We had no false pride or narrow loyalties. But our contacts were in the main personal, our admirations individual and the models chosen were from varying systems of university life. It was only rarely that an American or Canadian student was taken into the very heart of institutional guidance and policy-making, there to remain long enough to understand fully the nature of the university as an institution. Such experience on the inside of institutional policy and guidance would have imparted certain values to the younger men—such values as might be worth striving for in the universities in the New World to which they were to return.

From 1914 to 1934 circumstances and attitude have changed. The flow of graduate students to Europe has much diminished where it has not ceased. Europe has had less comparatively to offer: its university facilities often seem niggardly, its professors overloaded and preoccupied and impoverished. Confidence and leadership are not in the air, though the capacity for work and the cultural baggage of the European professor continue to impress the North American visitor. On this side of the Atlantic university buildings, facilities, endowments and teaching loads have increased. We have made some substantial additions to the world's store of knowledge. With one such signal contribution this city—Toronto—is associated. Thus the stage is set for the false conclusion to emerge that Europe can mean but little more to us. Is this the wisest mood?

In this matter of cultural transfer one needs a word which means to translate the function as contrasted with imitate the form. To copy, or to pattern after, or to imitate, all connote attention to form. What is needed is a word that means to secure the transfer of a function not the carrying over of a form. And this is needed to help to make clear this point: It is some of the functions of the European university we could well be taking over, whereas it might be either futile or disastrous to take over their forms. But you are to be spared a new word, for we should be passing now to the consideration of what seems to be lacking in the apparent completeness of the transfer of the functions of the European university to the North American scene. And I must add in these remarks, I am not a xenophile. The word, like the sentiment, is rare these days. I don't wish to seem to belittle what we have nor imply that what is remote is better than what is at hand. But the fact is that the functions discharged by the European universities have shown impressive vitality. They are worth study, and besides that they are our heritage. I want rather to draw attention to what has been called the technique of rejuvenation—to fit functions seen operating elsewhere to our own conditions on this side of the water.

Of all that is worth attention in the European universities, we may have accepted only a part, and of what we have accepted only a part in turn may survive. The better to understand these possible losses it may be well first to examine aspects of the local scene which bear upon our capacity to assimilate and to maintain the functions of the university as it has evolved in the area of its origin.

Higher education in North America has grown in an environment peculiar and in two points at variance with the European milieu. I should suppose that we live in the largest area of homogeneous culture in the

world. Wide circulation of books, newspapers, moving pictures, the radio and easy travel reinforce this homogeneity.

When I was in our Paris office friends arriving from America would ask, "Well, how are things in Europe?" Now that is an impossible question, for Europe is too different to be reported upon in its totality, and yet the question indicated the unconscious assumption that any one might have coming from North America that statements could be made for Europe in general as they can for North America. You will recall the French lecturer who, after a whirlwind trip of the United States in which he met many friends and contemporaries, sank exhausted in his cabin of the boat taking him back to Paris, surrounded by twenty-two books sent him by his American friends to read on the voyage home. When the covers were off the books he discovered that seventeen out of the twenty-two were identical copies of the book recommended at that time by the Book-of-the-Month Club.

But this amazing homogeneity results in a kind of self-assured insularity, for there is real difficulty in finding able outsiders or distinguished critics or other persons proceeding from totally different axioms to challenge our uniform conclusions or throw our major assumptions into doubt. By as much as we are so large and so homogeneous our obvious differences are more superficial than they seem. This similarity of view in one area after another is simply not to be found in Europe, and it can hardly be questioned that homogeneity disposes more to emotional belief than reasoned certitude, since those contrasts and contradictions are lacking which arrest the attention and demand explanation and choice.

Furthermore, it may be of value to note that the position of the intellectual in Europe may be affected by the fact that in every European capital there is a great if not the greatest university in the country. In America, in Canada and in Australia the political capital is not the place of a great university nor a center of affairs. And the only partial variant from this observation—London—is easily reached by men from Oxford or Cambridge. And thus American and Canadian universities have grown up without as easy and as close a contact with political and financial leaderships as is characteristic on the European continent. Are there not peculiar risks in such isolation—as well as some advantages?

Another characteristic in the North American scene: Underlying higher education here we have forms of secondary education which prepare our students for advanced work in the universities less adequately than their analogies in Europe. For their objectives and for society generally our secondary schools may do a passable job, but for the purposes of the university the secondary schools in America leave much to be desired.

I have often wondered why this is the case. One of the reasons must be the relative absence of family ambition and pressure upon young people of the secondary school age. I remember on the suburban train out from Paris I used to see a French father and his son of thirteen or fourteen who used that precious twenty-five minutes in a regular and earnest lesson in English. Later in a similar commuter's train out of New York I saw one time a similar father and son, and this time the father was reading the stock reports and the boy was reading the "Funnies." I commented upon this contrast to a neighbor of mine that very day, and he looked gravely disapproving and said: "Oh, I don't believe in that; that's not what I would have done; I believe in being a companion to my boy and I would have been reading the 'Funnies' with him."

Historically, our universities grew out of the colleges. The colleges were in the main sectarian enterprises to produce teachers and preachers. There was more pressure for the graduates, teachers and preachers to be numerous than to be excellent, and this pressure had also a flavor of sectarian competition, and so grew up the tradition that the college professor's moral and religious duty was to *teach,* and this well-nigh to the exclusion of scholarship and participation in self-government or associate living. In some of the colleges to-day there is a measure of sectarian stubbornness, narrowness and pretension which knows no better standard for self-comparison than the record of some nearby rival.

Add to this preoccupation with the teaching load the aura of political and social approval expressed in the phrase "equality of opportunity" and the staggering mass of poorly prepared students which have been crowding the colleges and universities and you have a dilution of scholarship which is no better than oedema. It will "pit on pressure." As in planting trees too close together, the *equality* of opportunity is not as important as the nature of the opportunity and relief from unreasonable circumstances. It is not the equality but the quality of opportunity that counts. Our universities have accepted so huge a burden of teaching that there is a serious discrepancy in many institutions between the tacit understandings on the campus and the explicit claims and purposes in the catalogues.

There is a better test than numbers, than equality of opportunity, than the moral duty of teaching. We should rather judge a university or indeed any form of human association by what kind of a life it permits, encourages and rewards. I submit that all the colleges and all too many of the universities reward the close following of orders and the hard study of assigned work. Before I went to medical school I went down

to Johns Hopkins to look around and decide whether I should go there. Quite by chance while I was strolling through the anatomy building one of the teachers stopped me and engaged in what seemed to me a perfectly delightful twenty minutes conversation on the business of being a medical student. I found out later that I had talked with Franklin P. Mall. Just after that conversation I saw in the street a student I had known when we were together at a boys' camp. I taxed him for information about Hopkins. "Oh, it's wonderful," he said, "and what teachers—Welch, Howell, Abel, . . ." And then he added suddenly: "All except one, . . ." "Is that so," I replied, "and who is he?" "Oh, his name is Mall," my young friend replied. "Do you know what he did the very first day in Anatomy? He said, 'Gentlemen, the dissecting rooms are open from nine in the morning till ten at night; I can recommend the three following text-books; there will always be some one there to help you if you get stuck, and when you are ready to take the examination let us know.' Now," continued my young friend, "If you can beat that for a ——— of laziness, you're going some." There was a lad who had done well in a system of close following of orders and hard study of assigned work, but completely at sea when the strategy of his existence was placed on his own shoulders. Strategy is the art of knowing when and on what conditions you will engage your strength. Our college students get too little of it. Their life is one of tactics, and tactics of course is simply the skill, the economy and the grace with which you employ your force when the strategical question is settled. Our secondary schools and our colleges produce a fair tactical product, but our students are immature in questions of strategy, and I would rest my case in this claim by pointing out the existence in many a university catalogue of one phrase, disastrous or funny as you choose, *"obligatory electives."*

Moreover, in our schools and colleges learning by symbols—the spoken and the written word—is encouraged. Its importance is exaggerated because there is another kind of learning, namely, learning by experience. My dogs have no symbols, and yet it is stupid to think they don't know me. Perhaps the unit of this learning by experience is the conditioned reflex, but the summation of these reflexes, experience, is of greater importance than the intellectuals realize. Knowledge from experience gives skill; it gives joy, and it gives courage. Courage may be the thing most required of universities in these next twenty years.

And lastly we are flooded by students, by poorly prepared students. We encourage them by our methods, and our tradition of being teachers foremost has accustomed us to being preoccupied with what we are really giving the students. We are sentimental about it. We give till it hurts—till it hurts the student. Let me read from a letter of a college president I received not long ago: "We are trying to work out therefore the implications of an educational philosophy which places the focus of interest in what is actually happening in and to the minds of individual students on our particular campus." Now, my comment would be that instead of having the teacher's attention on what is going on in the student's mind, why not in the maturer stages of education have the student's attention on what is going on in the teacher's mind? One important qualification to this general statement that we are flooded with students should be made in connection with the medical schools, since the medical schools in North America have sharply limited the number of students admitted. They have limited student numbers not on the basis of teaching by symbols—lectures and reading—but on the basis of the opportunities that can be given their students for experience and learning by experience in laboratories and clinics.

Now may I touch upon what European experience has taught me to want to see more of over here?

First of all, we should be more preoccupied with the social and intellectual climate created by the university—a social and intellectual climate in which the creative powers of scholars will flourish. The Scandinavians, when they build a laboratory, provide specifically a room or two for the emeritus professor. What a wise understanding of what retirement could mean! I do not retire my friends at 65, nor does the counsel and contact with men above that age cease to be valuable to me. There should be more appreciation of the concept of the university as a place where any person's genius for the scholarly life is cherished. The system of dining in hall in the English university has something we can't capture in hurried cafeteria lunches at the Faculty Club. There is a leisureliness and an equality among fellows dining in hall which enables them to estimate and experience each other as human beings. That is precious. How soon will we realize that we could pay more attention to each other and thus to the example we set our students? I remember a clinic that I attended given by Widal. First the student presented the case, haltingly and inaccurately, but nonetheless a fair performance in the light of his immaturity. Then the interne presented the same case with improvements in the information selected, in its fullness and in its accuracy. And then Widal's assistant amplified, refined and corrected the information and placed that particular case of bronchiectasis in a clear and entirely satisfactory light. But then the master, Widal, beginning with the anatomy, the physiology, the bacteriology and the pathology of bronchiectasis, chose just the significant facts from the previous statements and went on to

the differential diagnosis, to the nosology of the disease and prognosis and to the indications of where further knowledge is needed. As exposition perhaps it was laborious, repetitive and cumbersome, this turning of four individuals on the same material, but as an example of mastery of subject it was magnificent and not the mastery of a sudden absolute perfection, but, as it were, a graduated mastery, an eminence attainable to any one whose eyes and efforts were turned upward. Perhaps it is this neglect of example that is responsible for the remark of a European professor on returning from a visit to America: "I have never heard from university colleagues so much talk about education and so little about scholarly problems." Now I should expect that perhaps one quarter of the Ph.D.'s in the United States make any subsequent contribution that equals their thesis. That is a serious situation. Our product could well be the quality of our lives together and not merely the qualifications of our graduates to leave us.

It is so strongly in our social tradition to be alert to the encroachments of the few upon the mass that we ignore the depredations of the mass upon an élite. It is almost too delicate a situation to speak of an élite, but I simply mean by that word that rather limited number of men in universities who may wisely be assumed to be their own best taskmasters. I once asked Owen Lattimore what was the Samurai's code. He replied that there was no code, exactly speaking: only this, that a member of the Samurai realizes that whatever he does *is* the standard of behavior for all classes in Japan. The élite exists when capacity, freedom and responsibility are welded together.

The word "freedom" raises many a resonance in university life. One of the shrewdest remarks on that subject is the story of that extraordinary English woman, Gertrude Bell, who knew Arabia so thoroughly that during the Great War she became an emissary of the British Government to various Arab chieftains. To one such she outlined an arrangement, saying something like this: "If you will do so-and-so and so-and-so, the Government will give you full liberty." The Arab chief drew himself up, regarded her with dignity and said: "Madam, may I remind you that liberty is always taken and never given?" It seems to me that if we approach the question of freedom from the point of view of what can be done to secure it our attention can best be devoted to producing an atmosphere of equality.

Equality is the best condition for securing freedom, and whatever helps to make your colleague feel himself your equal is precious to him and to you and to the life of the university. The judicial mind, self-criticism, the readiness to discuss and dispute without dogmatism —and then tolerance, dignity and fair play—all these are exquisitely desirable in order that freedom and variety be given a chance to prove their value. Such a theory of the élite and of equality can be conveyed only by example and experience—lectures, books, exhortations and speeches (including this one) are quite useless. Sometimes I think that our architects should carve above academic entrances a symbol too often forgotten, the mythical animal of the Middle Ages—"the Toad that bears a jewel in his head"—for too often our attitude is captious and picayune; we want perfection in every colleague.

Now I miss the Old World's interest in quality—and their grave expectations of what an élite may be relied upon to do. We speak of graduated thermometers and graduated students—but our graduates are not graduated finely enough. We have been so preoccupied by tending them day by day that no stiff stern measure is set against their performance. We take, compared with Europeans, a motherly interest in their difficulties instead of a fatherly interest in their trials of strength. We reward the élite with distrust and a heavy routine instead of with freedom, expectation and responsibility. Not very long ago a French scholar with no university connections wrote three excellent books in the field of medieval history. In recognition of his ability he was offered a professorship at the Collège de France. He accepted. In late October he called upon a colleague in the Collège to learn a little more of what might be expected of him. After an hour of inconsequential talk he got down to his main inquiry. "Tell me," he said, "what are my duties at the Collège de France?" The reply was, "Ask the janitor. He knows when the rooms are heated, lighted and available. For it is the tradition at the Collège de France to select persons who know how to lead in their fields better than any one else can tell them, and we leave that problem to the men to solve as they see fit."

Now such confidence in superior human beings involves a respect for the individual and a naturalism that are remote from the hire-and-fire atmosphere pervading the college and many a university preoccupied with teaching schedules and processing the student. The professor abroad is selected with more deliberate and thorough discrimination than is yet the common tradition here, and then rewarded with a greater measure of confidence.

I think it was Otto Warburg who told me that if one of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft institutes were to be devoted to histology, and if the man chosen to head that institute wished to devote the largest share of his funds to maintaining an elephant from whose patient hide histological specimens could be daily clipped, the general attitude would be one of curiosity and expectation rather than censure and, as the too sadly current

idiom has it, of "turning on the heat." I liked a story Professor Barcroft told me of Sir William Hardy: "Hardy told me two years before he died that he was beginning to be interested in the edges of substances. Now Hardy was the kind of individual who, had he lived, would soon oblige somebody to look up the Greek word for edge and add 'ology,' for what Hardy began as an interest he was likely to leave as an accomplished field of study."

There is a certain dignity in the scholar's position in Europe; it gives us all pause. I think it derives from the stability of his situation. I remember once visiting a medical school in Scandinavia. The dean told me that in visiting one of the professors I would see a very neurotic individual. It proved to be true, and when I saw the dean later he said a little quizzically, "I think this man would be what you call in your country 'fired,' isn't it?" I said I thought so. He replied: "We think it is more important to have the professorship inviolate than to have one neurotic professor in one subject, in one school. And," he added, "this tradition makes us more careful when we select professors."

As part of the respect for the individual I wish we could have in this country a larger measure of interest in what could be called the natural history of the creative process. All too rarely does one see acknowledgment of the fact that between periods of creative activity many a man experiences a fallow period. When competitive conditions are exaggerated, this fallow period is coldly denominated "sterility." I think we need sometimes less competition and more encouragement. I do not want to seem sentimental, but honestly so intense during the long winter months is the atmosphere of criticism, and unfavorable criticism, that I sometimes suspect that academic people have to stage a parade before commencement with gowns and regalia and words of praise and honorary degrees, in order to recapture the fragments of their fractured self-regard. As part also of a certain naturalism in the European universities comes their custom of rotating administrative work rather than fixing it upon single individuals. Deanships and rectorships rotate and so rotating furnish political education and administrative experience, and, I might add, sympathy, to a large number of professors. Nor are responsibility and policy left entirely to the older men. At Cambridge, for example, the junior fellows share in the actual governance of the college.

What have we in North America to link the university to society in general, to allow occasional but thorough contemporary evaluation of the universities' work? This is part of what I would call ecology of the university. What are the means of responsible criticism by society at large? The university president? The public relations vice-president or office? The alumni? The regents or trustees? What corresponds in competence and impartiality to the rector for the universities in Sweden? To the British Royal Commission? Or to the University Grants Committee? I've always liked the delicacy of the phrase "University Grants Committee," since it's named not for the donor, which is the government, but for the recipients, the universities. If you doubt the importance of the effect of society on the university, think of the danger that lay in the German universities being so close to the government. The professors were in most cases government employees, and when a political group seized the power of the government the professors were included among the newly acquired possessions. We need further reflection upon the ways in which society can wisely criticize the university and ways in which the university could sense and in some cases implement such criticism.

And now to summarize: The North American scene is characterized by a culturel homogeneity that overwhelms dissent and puts protest upon the defensive. Our universities are divorced from national policy and practical affairs, and this heightens a policy to emphasize learning by symbols rather than by experience and makes the word "academic" an equivalent for "impractical." Our secondary education is inadequate, not for its own objectives, but certainly so for the needs of the university. We overemphasize the importance of teaching and so rob the student of experience and of practice in the strategy of his existence. And, lastly, we have too many students, and this dilutes the quality of university experience for those best qualified to receive it.

I think experience in Europe would make you wish we had emphasis upon the conception of the university as a place where a certain kind of living and example are best realized. You'd find a large measure in Europe of interest of the élite in their responsibilities, an interest in quality, be it ever so rare, and a respect for the individual—his vagaries as well as his excellences. You might come to see, as I have, that there are advantages in the measure of self-direction and self-management of the European universities and in the somewhat austere simplicity of the European scholar's life. You'd return reflecting upon the significance of the university to society and the responsibility and reflective criticism each of the other.

In this huge and homogeneous area of North America I have ventured to call attention to functions I should like to see more of if we in the universities are to be in part responsible for maintaining and cherishing delight in beauty, enjoyment of reason and joy in the skills of living.