

# A SCOTTISH HINT FOR CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

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AN office peculiar to the Scottish universities is that of Lord Rector. The title is high-sounding and the office is an exalted one, but it is more ornamental than useful; for whatever his powers may be, the Lord Rector seldom or never uses them in the governance of the university. Actually, his main duties are the delivering of a speech and the requesting of a holiday for the students! Nevertheless a halo of peculiar brightness surrounds the head of a Lord Rector, and there are many men already famous who would give a great deal to add this to their honours. For a singular glamour belongs to the office; it is an honour not applied for, but achieved: it is the gift of generous admiring youth.

The road to a Lord Rectorship is by way of popular election. The office is an ancient one, and for many years it was an exclusive gift in the possession of certain high officials of the university. Nor did the students always have sole right of election. But by the Universities (Scotland) Act of 1858 all duly matriculated students were given the right to vote. In Aberdeen University, for example, the students are divided into four groups or "nations" according to their place of origin, and they vote accordingly. In the event of a tie, the casting vote is given by the Principal.

That is the official mode of election, but the students have their own *modus operandi*. The first duty is the selection of a candidate. This is done through representatives of the student body. If the election is to be political, then candidates are selected according to their party label. But a rectorial contest conducted on political lines is not now general, although the recent contest in Glasgow University was political—and the only non-political candidate was successful. The number of political candidates varies with the strength of the parties represented by the students, but in a non-political contest the number is usually two. In the latter case Scottish students will travel far beyond their country and even beyond their race to secure the man of their choice. The realm of letters and science and discovery they will roam until they find the man they desire to honour.

As soon as consent to stand is received from the candidates—they take no part in the election—the contest proper begins. The

overworked word "hectic" may suitably be applied in this connection. Committees are formed, "literature" is published in many and divers forms, and endless (*sic*) meetings of the most stirring and vocal kind are held. At these meetings "heckling", a form of questioning dear to the heart of Scottish audiences, is nearly always indulged in, and the speakers may even have to be prepared for missiles, usually of decayed comestible matter. Committee rooms may be stormed and pillaged, and free fights, all fought in good part, may be the order of the day, or night. The climax of the contest is the "peace-meal" fight, when the men belonging to the opposing factions range themselves in the quadrangle, and attempt to secure their opponents' standard which is usually attached to a well-greased pole firmly wedged in a doorway and strongly guarded by a phalanx of sturdy defenders. For one hour the fight may last; but unless the combat is very equal, the issue is decided long before the umpire calls "Time". The two sides then join forces, and in dusty array march together through the city with a piper at their head. At night there is the usual torchlight procession, followed by a dance. This is only one way of conducting the contest; other methods are in vogue, or new ones may be devised.

It is needless to say that the contest is a disturbing force, for the time being, in the life of the university. But that is what it is intended to be. The contest, however, is almost almost held when examinations are not imminent, and it is invariably of short but furious duration. Further, it may be three years, as in the case of General Smuts, before the elected candidate can come to give his Rectorial Address.

The delivering of the address is the chief duty of the Lord Rector. The occasion is a gala one, and besides the Lord Rector some other worthy men or women are made recipients of honorary degrees from the university at the time. It goes without saying that the orator will put considerable effort into his address; for, such is the standard that now prevails, a "Rectorial" can always command front-page publicity, and even a Speech from the Throne will pale beside it. Sentences from it pass into current speech as, for example, Lord Birkenhead's dubious remark about the world's glittering prizes for stout hearts and sharp swords, while Barrie's far-famed and incomparable address on "Courage" has become a modern classic of English literature.

Why should not the Canadian universities institute the office of Lord Rector? It will be at once objected that a rectorial contest may be made the occasion of too much horse-play. In reply, it

may be said that the discipline of the students for that particular time at any rate may be safely left to the students themselves, and to their own sense of honour and the fitness of things. And in any case a Rectorial Election is held only once in three years. Or it will be urged that the effect of that sort of contest is unsettling. Granted. But that "crowded hour of glorious life" consumed by a rectorial election is of more value than many hours of concentrated study. It gives the students an unrivalled opportunity for self-expression—physically, socially and intellectually. A rectorial contest, indeed, is a healthy tonic, a good katharsis, after which the students settle down all the better to the regular routine of study. Further, it will bring them into intimate touch with an outstanding figure; and to come under the spell of his personality and to hear his particular utterance is a liberalizing and inspiring experience. Surely the student life of the small but ancient University of St. Andrews has been immeasurably enriched of recent years by the presence and speech of such world-famed men as Lord Haig, Sir J. M. Barrie, Rudyard Kipling, Dr. Fridtjof Nansen, Sir Wilfred Grenfell and General Jan Christian Smuts.

There are many more men to be honoured—in Canada, in Britain and throughout the British Empire. And beyond the confines of the Empire there are men like Albert Einstein in California, Guglielmo Marconi in Italy, Admiral Byrd in the Antarctic and Albert Schweitzer in Central Africa, to mention only a few. In honouring men like these, the Canadian university students would honour themselves.