

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THINGS PAST

(An address to a special Convocation for the conferring of Honorary Degrees, Dalhousie University, Munro Day, 8 March, 1949.)

THOMAS H. RADDALL\*

LET me voice at once my gratitude to the Members of Senate, and the University, for this signal honour, and to Professor Bennet and Dr. Kerr for the very kind things they have said. When I was a boy, my father once pointed out Dalhousie, which then was housed in the Forrest Building, and said, "Some day I hope to see you graduate there." That, unfortunately, was not to be. The War of 1914, which changed so many lives, changed his and mine. But life holds a strange chance now and then, and the chances that most warm the heart are those that bring unexpected gifts. My father did not live to know, and certainly I never dreamed, that one day I should stand here and receive the very great honour that is mine this morning. Believe me, I am deeply moved, not only in view of that boyhood memory, but in view of the personal friendships and other indirect but happy associations with this famous and venerable University that I have enjoyed from time to time through the years.

Dalhousie now is one hundred and twenty-nine years old. It was born soon after the close of a great war that had convulsed the civilized world for a whole generation, and in the midst of a post-war depression that seemed not only to emphasize the ruin that the war had brought, but to provide a very dismal picture of the future. All the arts and graces that were the best features of life in the eighteenth century seemed to have been swept away. The military empire that sprang out of the French Revolution had been overthrown; but it had pulled down the props of the old Europe as it fell, and the taint of its cynical doctrine still hung in the air. And now the machine age had begun. The steam engine had been invented; already men were building steam ships and railways, and as time went on the steam engine was to become the very symbol of a new and ugly materialism which proposed to do away with all the old spiritual values as it swept away the sailing ship and the coach-and-six.

The past, men said, was dead and best forgotten—a statement that we often hear to-day. Now, we in Nova Scotia are

\*Distinguished Nova Scotia novelist and short-story writer.

often accused of living in the past; but I have noticed that the accusation usually comes from quarters that have no particular past to look back upon, and sometimes I am wickedly reminded of the mule, which (as an acute American once pointed out) can have no pride of ancestry and, alas, little hope of posterity.

There is a great difference between living in the past and keeping in mind the story of the past, which gives us light on things to come. The greatest living proof of this is the genius of Winston Churchill, whose perceptions, confirmed again and again in our own time, have been rooted in a constant scrutiny of history. Even the humble author who wishes to write something of the story of mankind in the form of historical romance must first make a long and careful study of the facts. Times change, and with them costumes, manners, ways of speech, all of which must be studied to the point where his mind can move freely in a bygone age. But what he chiefly discovers then is that men and women do not change.

The human qualities that made and broke Napoleon Buonaparte were essentially the qualities that made and broke Adolph Hitler. The human curiosity and courage that took the Norsemen across the North Atlantic by sea a thousand years ago were precisely the qualities that took Lindberg across by air in our own time. And this is true of lesser folk and humbler lives. That is why the author who wishes to tell a convincing story of the past must combine with his study of old things and ways a careful and keen observation of contemporary life, which confirms and makes clear so much that happened long ago.

Looking back, we perceive that Dalhousie College was born in a time of unrest and ruin, and it was cradled in a city that had become, in the course of the long wars, a scene of license and depravity notorious throughout the British domain. If ever a light was planted in darkness, it was this college. For many years the light was small. There were times when it went out altogether. But it was re-kindled and nourished by men of faith and wisdom through the long years until the munificence of George Munro and others enabled it to flourish and to throw its beams afar.

In that time the little college had become a university, not without dust and heat. The passion for education, which everywhere characterized the nineteenth century, had produced the usual conflict of minds and purposes. In no direction was

the passion for learning more manifest than in the founding of universities and of university colleges for the final courses of instruction. University College, London, had been opened in 1828—eight years after the founding of Dalhousie—and opened as a non-sectarian body with a staff teaching the arts, law and medicine. When its founders proposed to seek power to grant degrees in subjects other than theology, they were fiercely opposed by the older universities and the Royal College of Surgeons; and when their leading spirit, Lord Brougham, asked Mr. Bethell, the counsel for their antagonists, what was to stop University College from taking the proposed step, he received the crushing reply, "The opinion, sir, of the civilized world!"

Dalhousie too, in its day, received much opposition from those who, in various quarters, were eager to invoke the name of the world for narrow and local ends. But Dalhousie went forward by the faith of her sons and the generosity of her friends, and happily the day of opposition has long since passed away.

Nowadays, when the name of the world, civilized or otherwise, is being invoked by all sorts of strange philosophies for every sort of end, we find it curiously like the world in which Dalhousie College was conceived. Then, as now, the world had just emerged from a long and bloody war. Then, as now, Russia had become the strongest power in Europe, her armies were far beyond her borders and showed no sign of withdrawing, and her ruler showed every sign of putting himself in the place of the despot whose empire and ambitions had just been overthrown. In short, then as now the future was dark and filled with menace, and the prospect of peace with which the war had closed, had become an empty dream.

But what actually *happened*? The storm rolled away, not by chance, but chiefly because the very presence of Russian soldiers in the midst of people who had known and could demonstrate the value of free institutions produced a train of thought in Russia itself that was dangerous to the dictator and the instruments of his rule. It was especially noticeable in the younger Russian officers, who quickly formed secret societies dedicated to the Western idea of politics and government. Their attempts at open revolt were premature, and failed; but their ruler saw that this march of ideas was not to be stopped merely by shooting or sending to Siberia the men who were caught expounding them. And so, after a period of

defiance, of boorish diplomacy and clumsy political sleight-of-hand, the Russian colossus withdrew into the security of its own den, and there remained more or less for a century, engrossed in its own strange and fearful destiny. For the rest of the world the gloomy twilight after Waterloo proved to be in fact the dawn of the greatest age of progress it had known. There was turmoil of various kinds in the years ahead, and minor war from time to time; but there was to be no general conflict for one hundred years. It seems to me that such an age is before us now, and that our danger is not in the present darkness but in a blindness created by it, a blindness to the lessons of the past, and an obsession with present fears that may prevent us looking clearly into the age that is to come.

When we consider the war that ended less than four years ago, and compare it with that older world crisis, we are struck by the way in which, step by step, history has repeated itself. The seizure of power in a single nation by a ferocious military genius, the capture of almost the whole of Europe by chicanery or downright conquest, the failure to beat down the lonely but inspired resistance of Britain, the attempt to seize Egypt and the road to India, and finally the great adventure into the Russian plains that marks the beginning of the end—from first to last the pattern is the same. To say that all this is pure coincidence is to ignore the fundamental pressures, ambitions, fears and weaknesses that were the same in the Europe of Napoleon as they are in the Europe of our time.

The Russian who sat down and bargained with Napoleon in 1807 for the ruin of England, was essentially the same Russian who bargained with Hitler for the same end in 1939. And the Russian who found that the very presence of his troops in Western Europe after Waterloo was bringing a poison to his own politics is essentially the Russian who sits in the Kremlin and contemplates that very situation to-day. Is it too much to hope, indeed to expect, that the Russian who withdrew behind the Vistula a few years after Waterloo is the Russian who will withdraw again tomorrow, or next year, or the next—and for the same fundamental reason?

All we know of Russian history and character supports that belief. Mr. Henry Ford once declared that all history was "bunk." It was a sweeping statement, perhaps more sweeping than Mr. Ford intended; for "all history" takes in amongst other things the history of certain events in Palestine more than nineteen hundred years ago that have had, and still

exert, a profound and acknowledged influence upon the minds of men. Even the more legendary parts of history have their lessons that are indisputable. A celebrated Anglican divine once startled his hearers by summing up the story of the Garden of Eden in these words: "Adam was a cad. Eve was no better than she should have been. And for my part, I have long considered the serpent the most respectable of a very disreputable trio." Fortunately or unfortunately we cannot dismiss the whole story of human behaviour in that airy and amusing fashion. The most recent lesson is too bitter, and too close.

In the light of history, what we have to fear most is not the temporary presence of Russian troops in Western Europe or anywhere else, but the disease of an idea that has been scattered in their path and through the world. It is not a new disease, but it has been given a new virulence by the tortuous Russian mind, and by the confusion in many western minds that cannot distinguish between man's natural and legitimate desire for social and material equality, and the harsh doctrine that the Russians would make a world religion. That confusion will afford our greatest problem in the age of material progress that assuredly lies before us, as one lay before the first Dalhousians; for we shall be assailed on the one hand by those who insist that all our views must be stark red, and on the other hand by those who insist that all must be stark white, or black, or some other colour. In all this crying of voices we shall be hard put to it to find the truth, and our only earthly guide will be the story of human experience, which is history.

Finally, in emphasizing the importance of things past, let me repeat the words of a great Englishman who was born eleven years before Dalhousie was founded, and who lived almost to the end of the century. He was speaking at a time when the tremendous march of the Victorian Age was getting near its crest, and when the voices of the new materialism were talking much of freedom and the need for throwing off all the "shackles of the past." William Gladstone then was in his sixties, and he had seen in his time the rise of Britain as the foremost industrial power and as the centre of the greatest empire known to history.

He said: "You will hear incessantly of the advancement of the present age, and of the backwardness of those which have gone before it. It has been, and it is, an age of immense mental as well as material ability; it is by no means an age abounding

in minds of the first order, who become great immortal teachers of mankind. But what I wish most to observe is this, that it is an insufferable arrogance in the men of any age to assume airs of unmeasured superiority over former ages. The free thought of which we now hear so much seems too often to mean thought roving and vagrant more than free, like Delos drifting on the seas of Greece, without a root, a direction, or a home. It is now not only the Christian church which is attacked. The proposition is boldly proclaimed to deal alike with root and branch, and to snap all the ties which unite man with the unseen world. My friends, you will hear much to the effect that the divisions among Christians render it impossible to say what Christianity is, and so destroy the certainty of religion. But if the divisions among Christians are remarkable, not less so is their unity in the greatest doctrines that they hold. Surely there is some comfort here, some sense of brotherhood, some glory in the past, some hope for the times that are to come."

---