

**UNIVERSITIES, ANCIENT AND MODERN:
READ BEFORE THE BIRKENHEAD
LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC
SOCIETY AT THE OPENING OF ITS FIFTY-
FIRST SESSION, ON MONDAY, THE 7TH
OCTOBER, 1907**

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Universities, Ancient and Modern: Read Before the Birkenhead Literary and Scientific Society at the opening of its Fifty-First Session, on Monday, the 7th October, 1907 by Benjamin Moore

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BENJAMIN MOORE

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Universities, Ancient and Modern.

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on Monday, the 7th October, 1907.*

BY THE PRESIDENT,
BENJAMIN MOORE, M.A., D.Sc.

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UNIVERSITIES, ANCIENT AND MODERN.

By BENJAMIN MOORE, M.A., D.Sc.

THE ancient Universities, both of this country and of the continent of Europe, have reached their position and functions in relationship to the thought and intellectual life of the present day, by a long process of evolution, lasting since the mediaeval times in which most of them began to exist.

Without a continued adaptation to environment no institution of civilized man, however powerful, can outlast the passage of centuries. As knowledge increases all our institutions must either become transformed by a gradual process into harmony with new conditions, or be swept away by something in the nature of a revolution to make way for a new departure.

Whenever the continued working of free enquiring minds over social, intellectual, or political problems has accumulated sufficient store of discoveries to show that any human doctrine, policy, or theory, is erroneous and stands in the path of progress, then there must come a renunciation sooner or later, and a new rendering must be put upon what is old to blend it into harmony with what is new.

In such a renunciation, or rather re-modelling, it is usually only the worthless dross which disappears, and out of the fire of criticism there appears something nobler and better than before. For a time, it may seem to an unprepared and unreceptive age that the new work is rank heresy, destroying ruthlessly long loved and cherished doctrines; but in a few years general progress demonstrates that the old eternal essential facts are shining forth like gems in a more appropriate setting and forming a grander jewel with the added gems that patient work has unearthed and polished and placed alongside of them.

TO VINDICATE ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The longevity and worth of any institution of learning hence depends upon the ease with which it can escape from the fetters of false authority forged in the past, hold fast to what is essential and eternal, abandon all that is useless and antiquated, and attach and assimilate the discoveries which new thought and experiment bring forward either from within itself or from the outer world.

In order to make the matter stand boldly out by stating it in one concise sentence—the one necessary and sufficient condition for continued growth and vitality in a University is absolute freedom. Perfect liberty of intellectual life in all the forms of activity of the human mind fostered within its walls. Freedom to think and work with unbiassed mind and with philosophic calm, and to teach without fear the results of such untrammelled study, to its students and to the world.

The fight for intellectual freedom has been waged by the master minds of the Universities, by the leaders of thought within them, through the many long centuries since first they began their careers in the darkness of the middle ages. In fact it was the struggle for intellectual freedom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the restless searching for truth, for more light and knowledge, and the demand for free access to knowledge for all comers which led to the first informal commencements of the earliest Universities.

But, it may be urged, surely at the present day all Universities do enjoy such freedom, they are nowhere threatened any longer as to what they shall study, teach or investigate by king, pope, or prelate, they flourish in an intellectual age, they are endowed and fostered alike by government and municipality, and by the munificence of the wealthy citizen.

What more is there to be desired, in what sense is there any lack of academic freedom?

While every true lover of intellectual development must rejoice at this more widespread and universal patronage and endowment of learning and scientific enquiry which has become characteristic of our time, those who quietly reflect upon the causes of it must realize that the welcome and ever increasing

stream of support requires to be directed and controlled so that it may be utilized to the full advantage.

The world has seen no age at which scientific investigation and development were more encouraged and subsidised than the present time, yet, there never was an age more purely materialistic, or more inclined to love knowledge exclusively for the creature comforts that increased knowledge brings in its train.

This narrow utilitarian spirit is as dangerous to academic freedom in the present time as was narrow ecclesiasticism in earlier times, and it behoves modern Universities to fight as hard against modern commercialism as the ancient Universities had to battle with the monasticism of the middle ages.

In no sense does this belittle the service which science has rendered and will render to commerce and industry ; but it must be remembered that scientific service, as Universities may be expected to yield it, is intended not for one nation but for the whole world.

No narrow selfish spirit can confine scientific advance to one community, or one country, the whole world must benefit from it, and no University in its broader and higher work can serve one community exclusively, but must shed its influence and the light of its achievements to all mankind. Nor is there anything to be deplored in this communism in the advancement of knowledge, for while we cannot, if we would, confine the advances we make for our own exclusive benefit, we on the other hand reap the results of the knowledge acquired by the research of all other civilised nations.

The true emulation which ought to exist between communities and nations in the acquisition of knowledge is therefore not a selfish and secretive one, but one with far higher and more altruistic motives as to which shall be first and most powerful to advance the cause of a common humanity, striving to pierce forward into the unknown land of discovery.

Finally, as will be pointed out in detail when we come to consider the work of the modern University, this continual grasping for immediate results of applied science ultimately

defeats even its own narrow purpose, for nature never yields her choicest secrets to him who approaches with a mercenary spirit. All the great practical applications arise subsequently to discoveries made by those who study for the pure love of knowledge in fields where apparently, at first sight, no practical application can accrue.

A discovery which when first made is beautiful and important only to the initiated and to the general world seems trivial and unimportant, nay, even a waste of time and patience and a misapplication of University funds or public endowments; becomes in the course of time the basis, and the only possible basis, of a far reaching practical application in which the whole community, and the whole world shares.

Instance after instance of this order of events could be quoted from all fields of intellectual labour, but the world seems slow to learn that even from its own utilitarian standpoint it pays to subsidize organized study upon a broad basis by men who dream not of applications, and are only curious to know more of what still remains unknown.

Let it not however be thought that one word of what has been said is intended to depreciate the value of scientific application for utilitarian purposes, or even to minimize the work which ought also to be undertaken in Universities towards such application. The work of applying scientific knowledge to specific problems which face humanity lies well within the sphere of University labour, and often requires the same type of mind exactly as that which first discovered the general principles. Also the labour of practical application is often as truly scientific as the pursuit of abstract truth. The point is that enquiry must be absolutely free to travel where the spirit and the indications lead without stopping to enter into questions of utility, either immediate or remote.

The point of view of the scientific or philosophical enquirer in arts, science or letters must be that all knowledge is beautiful and useful both in itself and as a path to further knowledge. In this faith he must trustingly and unhesitatingly

go forward, and in this faith must the world support him and follow in his path.

It is only by such a pure philosophic faith and creed that the realms of ignorance can be conquered and intellectual wealth increased, and it is only by unswerving loyalty to this doctrine in their teaching and research that Universities and other institutions of learning can carry out their high destinies, and lead forward the intellectual forces of the world.

Hence, while any government or municipality which endows and supports a University has a full right to demand that such University shall supply the intellectual needs of the community, that it shall disseminate the common knowledge of the world of science, arts and letters, and make common the knowledge which it itself is acquiring, that it shall teach and train the youth of the community for the learned professions and for public life and service, and that by every means in its power it shall broaden and deepen the whole intellectual life of the community. Still at the same time, the community should in its own best and broadest interests and in those of the whole civilized world, remember that the University should not be overweighted with task work, that its whole duty does not lie in undergraduate teaching, however important and essential that duty may be both to community and University, but that ample provision and endowment must be made, if the University is to be worthy of the name, for higher teaching in the region of research, and that here perfect freedom of development must be allowed, for originality cannot be trained and bound but must be allowed to grow freely or it will never flourish.

And now having attempted to establish that the fundamental principle in the life and constitution of the ideal University is perfect intellectual freedom of thought, enquiry and teaching, we may come to examine more in detail the work and functions of a University in modern times.

It may however be both interesting, and of assistance to us in mapping out the functions of our modern University, to

glance for a few moments at the causes which first led to the establishment of Universities, and at their earlier history.

✓ The ancient seats of learning in Greece and Italy in classical times, although they possessed little organization of a University type, were nevertheless nearer to the ideal pointed out above of what a University ought to be, than any institutions which have since arisen, in possessing the priceless boon of academic freedom in all its purity.)

The lack of state or municipal organization and endowment, were made good by the munificent patronage of rulers, statesmen, and emperors who were themselves often either professors or students. The classical literature, philosophy and fine art, which, now long ancient, have still remained a prototype for successive generations of civilized man, then lay before the student in pristine freshness or were actually in the making before his eyes.

The splendid example and stimulus of the old world's greatest philosophers and thinkers actually constructing and creating their immortal works, played directly upon the student's mind as he met them day by day, came into actual touch with them mind to mind, and caught their inspiration and enthusiasm in living breathing force.

This touch of living fire made the student himself, if he had the potentialities within him, a worker, a thinker, a philosopher.

This, and nothing less than this, is ideal University teaching, and this it is which is sadly missed in the weight of book-learning of the present age.

Books are the accessories and tools of enquiry, and learning, and as such in modern days are essential to progress in specialized branches of learning. But the first essential point for the student to grasp is that they are only his tools, and the first object of his teacher ought to be to teach him to use his tools with a master workman's knowledge. The intelligence to use these tools is what a University education should cultivate. Similarly, in such branches of science as are taught in laboratories, the laboratory with its equipment, and