UNIVERSITIES PAST AND PRESENT

A Lecture
delivered at the College on
8 October 1953
by

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MY subject sounds very formidable. But all I have to offer you are some random comments—a casual survey of universities, old and new. I have no particular thesis to maintain, no one special theme to pursue, not even a theme with variations. It will be enough if we can catch some glimpses of what a university has been and is, what it has tried to do, and perhaps also what it might try to do better.

Let us look first at the earliest institution, so far as I know, that has any claim to be regarded as having something of the quality of a university. Some time in the early part of the fourth century B.C., in a gymnasium in the suburbs of Athens, named after Academus, a local hero, Plato founded a school. The way for it had been well prepared. His late teacher, Socrates, had spent his life holding informal seminars, conducting experiments in a kind of intellectual laboratory, subjecting traditional customs and beliefs to ruthless analysis—a gadfly stinging people out of a complacent ignorance which they took to be knowledge. A good first year this for a university course. We could do with something of the kind today. I feel that very much whenever I hear a schoolmaster or an undergraduate say that the intermediate year is but a repetition of the last year at school. A good dose of Socratic analysis, administered to all the newcomers, whatever their subjects, would add much to the value of a university course.

But what about Plato's Academy? What did he consider to be its functions? There is a little passage in the *Republic* which throws some light on this. Socrates is discussing the subjects appropriate to higher education, and he asks his young friend Glaucon if he agrees that

astronomy should be one; and Glaucon replies: 'Certainly. It is important for military purposes, and for agriculture and navigation; you can tell accurately the times of the month or year.' And Socrates replies: 'How amusing you are! You are evidently afraid that the public will think you are recommending useless knowledge.' Far more important, he says, than the practical uses to which his subjects can be put is the intellectual training they provide. His subjects must be those which demand a vigorous exercise of the reasoning faculty, and will also by their content give a certain satisfaction to the aesthetic as well as the rational sense. He was rigid in his selection of students for admission. Above the door of his Academy, we are told, was the notice: 'No admission to those who have no mathematics.' Some of us would have found it hard to get beyond that door! Plato would have revelled in modern physics, with its concern not so much for facts as for concepts—for an intellectual framework within which our experiences will fit together in a satisfactory pattern. I suppose their practical application, in engineering, for example, would have left him cold.

The standards of Plato's Academy were high, and his ideal course was long—ten years on mathematics, followed by five in philosophy. We, with all the accession of specialized knowledge that keeps mounting up from year to year, have to talk in terms of three years for a degree, and we are at our wits' ends to know how the quart is to be got into a pint jug.

What did Plato teach, and how did he teach it? We don't know exactly. He never published his lectures, nor did anyone else publish his lecture notes, as was done with Aristotle's. Probably he strictly forbade it. 'There is no writing of mine [he says] nor ever will be' on certain subjects. They were matter for seminars, for discussions —for constant association between teacher and student

—for a wise and mature understanding—for what Plato himself called a 'conversion'—a gradual turning of the eye towards the light through a steady training.

But even Plato, for all his aversion to 'useful' knowledge, was not for cultivating the intellect for its own sake. He has been called the first Puritan. He had no use for self-indulgence. His Academy was not an Ivory Tower. In the same book of the *Republic* occurs the famous simile of the cave. Through sheer intellectual effort a good man will succeed in ascending out of the shadows of the cave into the light of the sun. But when his eyes have got used to its light and come to measure its splendour, he must be willing to go back again into the cave and help his companions to make the same ascent. The young men of his Academy were meant to return to their cities, and give of their wisdom to guide them. Plato conceived his school not as a professional or vocational institution, *except* for the one supreme vocation—that of the statesman guiding his State; and the appropriate preparation for that vocation, he held, was a long and vigorous intellectual and moral discipline. The civil service was his end, mathematics and philosophy his means. Only you could not serve the State as it ought to be served, until you had developed to the utmost your own powers of mind and thought and character—or your 'soul', your *psyche*, as Plato called it.

Now let us leave Plato, having perhaps weighed him in our little scales, seizing what we find in him to be good and valuable, or, if we are hardy enough, setting him aside as a wrong-headed visionary. Let us take a look at the legitimate ancestors of our modern universities, those great institutions which came to birth in the twelfth century—the medieval universities like Bologna in Italy, Paris in France, Oxford in England. What did they make of the functions of a university?

There is no simple answer. The Italian universities on the whole rejected the Platonic conception. They aimed chiefly at giving a purely professional education. Their students were prepared for active careers as lawyers or physicians. Bologna for a long time was only a school of law; theology was an afterthought. Salerno, we are told, had law only even in its most prosperous days. For it was a very profitable art. Paris was different—consciously different. It laid its emphasis on a liberal education, on the training of the mind. And what about Oxford? The one supreme profession for Plato had been the State; for medieval Oxford it was the Church, which indeed was also the world. Oxford, said Gerald the Welshman, 'excelled in clerkly lore'. Certainly its students did not go there with no ulterior object beyond that of acquiring knowledge and cultivating the mind. They were ambitious for places, high or low, within the Church. Learning was part of the equipment of a man of the world. Nevertheless, the essential course, which no student might forgo, was a training in the liberal arts. Seven years they had to give to the study of rhetoric and logic, mathematics and music, with the three philosophies—natural, moral, and metaphysical—thrown in. Two more years to teaching, and only then could the Arts graduate become a Scholar of Theology. After seven more years he might become a Bachelor of Theology. What should we think today of such a course?

It looks rather like Plato all over again, except for a change of emphasis. But the resemblance is superficial. The students of Arts were younger than his academicians, they were far more numerous, the work was less exacting. Though the members of the first of the Oxford halls were enjoined to live like saints and to speak Latin, these great medieval institutions could in fact find room for the easy-going (not to say turbulent) undergraduate,

whom Plato would not have tolerated. There were many casualties. It has been said that only a third of the starters became bachelors, and a sixth masters. But there was also the occasional scholar of powerful, adult mind, devoted to the protracted study of old and new knowledge under eminent specialists.

How much research, we ask today, is valuable? What purpose does it serve in the advancement of learning, when students of no special aptitude are set after graduation to add their quota to the ever-growing mass of still-born essays or insignificant experiments? Would it not be better to let them spend a further year or two in broadening their outlook, extending their reading, and establishing more securely their attitude towards the learning they have acquired? In the medieval university the same question about the value of research was asked, but in a different sense. You could exercise your mind as freely as you liked within certain well-marked boundaries, but the boundaries must be respected. It was presumptuous and dangerous to venture outside them. In theology the universities were the arena for scholastic disputations, which were as bold and subtle as you could wish, and must have provided a training in precision of thought and expression, which fitted the best for leadership in the public life of the time. But in medicine the authority of Galen, who lived in the second century, must be respected even when experiments seemed to prove that he was mistaken. In law you could spend many years at Oxford on the study of the old Roman civil law —that was a recognized, a respectable university subject; but the common law of England—what really mattered —was taboo within the university. Natural philosophy—or, as we should call it today, physical science—was especially dangerous territory. The friars of St. Francis were the progressives of those days. They ventured to

explore this territory, armed with their strange apparatus, only to earn the suspicion of learned doctors and to gain from the mass of their fellows the reputation of being magicians. Roger Bacon was the most eminent among them. Long before his famous namesake, Francis Bacon, he encouraged experimental science. Experiment was the only trustworthy guide, he said; it was useless to rely on authority. But the doctors and masters disapproved. He was branded as a crafty alchemist, seeking presumptuously to penetrate the inscrutable mysteries of nature with the aid of infernal spirits. His great works were suppressed; indeed, it was not until modern times —the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—that some of them saw the light of day. By its neglect of the direct observation of nature and of experimental techniques the medieval university did what some people would like to see done today; it imposed a long moratorium on scientific research.

Why was Plato right to laugh at Glaucon's respect for the 'usefulness' of certain studies? Why was Roger Bacon right to dabble in queer scientific experiments in his simple laboratory? One answer is that where knowledge is concerned there is no final, universal criterion of usefulness or uselessness. The criterion changes with the fashion of the times. Glaucon would have been as surprised as we are at the story that is told of Edmund Rich. He is the first person of whom it is definitely recorded that he took a degree at Oxford. He became a distinguished teacher there, a mathematician and a logician. One day he was busy on some mathematical problems, poring over his geometrical diagrams, when his dead mother appeared to him and reproved him for spending his time on fruitless subjects. He was so affected by the vision that he there and then abandoned all secular studies and turned to divinity as the most useful of university subjects. He ultimately became Archbishop of Canterbury—a fact that suggests that he might have said of his mother what Hamlet said of his father—'It was an honest ghost.'

Many other students, less distinguished than Edmund Rich, with no expectation of becoming archbishops, measured the importance of university studies by the prospects they held out of wealth and position thereafter. Roger Bacon complained that men of ability with a real aptitude for philosophy were turning to the study of civil law because it was the lawyers that prelates and princes honoured and enriched. 'The greedy Faculty of Civil Law', he says, 'attracts the mass of good students.' An archdeacon of the Church, who had specialized in law, could help himself to riches in many ways; indeed, a favourite subject of debate was 'Can an archdeacon be saved?' Others, on doubtful academic grounds, tried to argue that medicine (which was useful and remunerative) was a branch of philosophy. The Franciscans protested against having to spend years on the liberal subjects of the Arts curriculum, the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. Why couldn't they by-pass all that, and proceed directly to the professional study of theology? The authorities were perplexed, but would not yield; the years of preliminary study must be observed.

But we have wandered long enough about the Academy of ancient Athens and the medieval University of Oxford. Let us look at our own universities and colleges—Swansea, and the rest of them. At first, the difference appears to be so great as to render any comparison futile. What is there in common between the three—the first, Plato's Academy, a small school, highly selective, of young aristocrats, engaged under the guidance of a supreme master upon a long and arduous pursuit of wisdom through the most austere disciplines of mathematics and

speculative philosophy; the second, the medieval university, a large and powerful guild of masters and students, ill disciplined, without buildings or endowments, free to migrate elsewhere (as in fact it did more than once) if the discomforts became intolerable, embracing within its membership young striplings and learned doctors, ruled by a bishop and his chancellor, 'a school of the Church', delighting in the subtleties of scholastic philosophy, hostile to natural science; the third, our modern institution, which may not unfairly be described as the upper part of an educational structure, the whole of which is increasingly shaped and directed by the State; it is approached and entered by a carefully graded flight of stairs, tickets of admission having been issued beforehand; and it has its own set of stories, ascended through examinations, up to the topmost levels of directed postgraduate research—the whole, as it were, scientifically air-conditioned. Can it be that the change is so radical, so fundamental, that we had better forget about the preoccupations and the problems of the past? Have you got at Swansea, a college which is only a third of a century old, have I got at Bangor, not yet seventy years old, something so recent, so rudimentary, so newfangled that history has nothing to teach us?

The answer is a decisive 'no'. In the first place, it would not be difficult to show, if we had the time, that there is a traceable, organic relation between the most recent of our universities and colleges and our oldest universities. Secondly, and this is fundamental despite all the differences between universities, and there are differences, easily felt, even among the modern universities; each has its own atmosphere and character, and this is as it should be. Universities, above all (it has been said), should resist any attempt to turn them into uniformities. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the essential

nature of a university has not changed. It still has for its object the acquisition of knowledge, old and new, and it still consists essentially, not of buildings or equipment, but of men and women, masters and scholars, senior and junior students. This is what the President of the British Association said at Liverpool last month: 'The success of a university, its value and status, the distinction of the work within its walls, and the esteem outside them depend essentially not on curricula, apparatus, and paraphernalia, but on the minds and character of those who teach and learn within it.' The statement is almost trite. The point of it for my purpose is that the stuff of a university is human nature in all its complexity of body and mind and will and feeling, and at bottom this does not change. The same limitations, the same aspirations, the same variations persist, and the same questions and problems arise, however much their context may have changed.

There is the question of professionalism. Are we to approve Plato's fastidious rejection of the obviously useful? Are we to say that the university is not concerned with supplying the skilled professions whose activities are necessary for the welfare of the State? Or are we to follow those universities which confessedly trained their students for an accepted profession? I think we may say that it is not a case of either–or. The university refuses to wear either strait jacket—that of purely intellectual discipline or that of mere technical training. The exercising of the mind to promote its growth, the love of knowledge for its own sake, the joy which the student can derive from the intrinsic excellence of any worthwhile branch of study—these are as relevant to the modern university as to Plato's Academy. But that is not to say that the modern university is not, or should not be, engaged in fitting a student to enter the profession at

which he aims. Of course it is so engaged. The Spanish scholar, Ortega, in his book, *The Mission of the University*, is stating the simple truth when he says that 'beneath its non-professional aspect the English university has become, in the last forty years, as professionalized as any other'.

Need we be embarrassed by this apparent conflict between the vocational and the non-vocational functions of a university? I suggest that if we bear in mind a few of its characteristic features, we shall be less inclined to attach too much importance to this question. I have already mentioned what is surely the most important. It is that the material on which and with which a university works are human beings, possessed of bodies, minds, and characters. And this last, character, at once introduces a factor, an unknown factor x, which is apt to upset any neat equations, based upon courses, curricula, and examinations. H. M. Tomlinson recently wrote a short story which he entitled 'Failure'. It tells of a man who was so expert in Oriental Archaeology that he could easily have obtained a professorial chair; but he preferred to be the head of an obscure country school until his death. His successor, whom he had taught, says of him that he was more concerned with a fellow himself than with his attainments. 'If he saw quality in a youngster, he'd take care it wasn't lost in the mangling.' There was a boy at the school, named Hassell—not brilliant, never near the top. He got to a university, and managed to obtain a medical degree, and then (as everybody except his old head thought) threw it away to go as a missionary to Upper Burma. When the Japanese invaded that land, he got away at first to the hills with his savages. Later on he heard of the misery of the prisoners in Japanese hands; and he went down to be a prisoner himself, to help the sick. A crisis blew up when a wireless set was discovered.

Hassell had nothing to do with it, but the Japs picked on him to squeeze him for what he knew. They squeezed him too hard; they killed him, but he did not break. The speaker's comment is one brief sentence—'tell me how to get that sort of thing into a curriculum'.

Another example, less heroic, perhaps, but equally significant, comes within my own knowledge. When I was a student at Bangor forty-five years ago, there was a man there, in the Day Training Department, as it was then called, training to be a teacher—a good ordinary student of no exceptional promise. He was very fond of music, a good singer, and in the summer of 1910 after graduating he toured the United States as a member of the Moelwyn Male Voice Choir. He didn't return. He was attracted by an advertisement asking for teachers for the Canadian province of Alberta, at that time still remote and undeveloped; it had only recently joined the Confederation of provinces. He taught first in a little school house, and his love of music led him to organize a school musical festival, which by now has spread widely throughout Alberta. Then he became an Inspector of schools in a backward district of southern Alberta which had a large immigrant Ukrainian population. He found sixty-seven one-room schools in this remote area, and gradually replaced them with sixteen large, well-appointed central schools. He has just retired, and is counted among the pioneers of the educational life of southern Alberta. This was little Owen Williams of Harlech; we used to know him as 'Now Bach', destined, as we had thought, to fill an insignificant niche in his profession.

Such instances could, of course, be multiplied indefinitely out of the experience of university teachers. They are the products not of a formal syllabus nor of an examination result, but of all that *plus* character finding its own vocation. Academically these men that I have

mentioned were not distinguished, but it appears to be equally true that the achievement of high distinction in any field of knowledge is a function of character as much as it is of intellect. Here is Einstein's testimony (and he ought to know): 'most people think it is the intellect that makes a great scientist. They are wrong; it is the character.' It is just this factor of character—this *x*—that we are so apt to forget about in our theoretical discussions about the function of a university. Character is more important than curriculum.

There is another factor in the pattern of a university—call it *y*—which plays, or should play, an important part. That is community. Character is a private possession; it is your private responsibility. It is community that makes a university. For what is a university but a guild of study, a community of individuals, of masters and scholars, bound together for the purpose of teaching and learning; a community which encourages active relations between student and teacher and (what is just as important) between student and student. Henry James in one of his novels talks about the importance of the 'constant exchange and comparison, the wear and tear of living and talking and observing'. It is the method which Socrates adopted, the method of question and answer, and as he applied it not merely in the school but in the public places of the city—its streets and parks and gymnasia—so it still belongs not only to the lecture-room and the laboratory but to common rooms and lodgings, refectories and playing fields, yes, and to the festivities which are a part of the life of a healthy university. It was Democritus who said that the life without festivity is a long road without an inn. One of the surest tests of a university is whether its eating and drinking together ever deserves to be translated into Greek, and to be called a symposium.

I am sure that this factor of community in university

education needs to be stressed today. There is, of course, never a complete divorce between the individual and the community. They are strict correlatives, so closely bound to one another that the attempt to separate them completely is like the old problem of the chick and the egg —which came first? But there is this to be said especially about the community which is the university. It can have a more abiding influence on the student who embraces it than any previous or any subsequent community, save only the family, while at the same time it can be more easily evaded, because the student is less bound by social restraints, and can withdraw almost entirely into himself, if he so chooses.

When we talk about the tools of education we think of books, journals, apparatus; we tend to omit one which is at least as important—the minds and temperaments of our neighbours. It is a tool from which some of our students will gain most profit; for there are students, and I hope they will always find their way in through the meshes of our examination systems, who will learn more from men than from books; they would applaud John Russell Lowell's sentiment—'books are good dry forage, but men are the only fresh pasture.' But if we are to give its due weight to this factor—the factor of community—we must as teachers and students adopt a sane attitude towards examinations. We must not defer so much to the lonely study and the written answer as to forget that quickening of mind, that burgeoning of personality, that comes through the more informal channels of personal intercourse and reasonable leisure. And yet how tempted the modern student is to do just that—to concentrate on obtaining the formal qualifications that come through the passing of examinations, while neglecting those factors which may do most to set free the mind and to enrich the personality.

I have said 'personal intercourse and reasonable leisure'. You cannot really get the one without the other. A senior tutor of a Cambridge college said the other day that six hours' really hard work was the most that could be absorbed and understood profitably by a student in one day. I dare say that is so, though it is hard to generalize. But I am sure that students should have the time not only to study but also to be sociable. It has been said that the great boon which the university confers on the undergraduate is 'the gift of an interval'—an interval for talking, for reading what his talking leads him to read, and for reflecting on his talking and reading. He should not be deprived of this gift by the exigencies of time-tables or the demands of classes.

Of course, that brings us right up against the problem of specialization. I do not need to expound it; it is too familiar—the ever-increasing volume of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, with its numerous divisions and subdivisions, the need to train experts, whose degree of expertness is apt to correspond with the narrowness of their range. It was your Principal who wrote a few years ago that science and its child, the industrial revolution, divide to conquer. And he also said, what is patently true, that specialized knowledge has its obverse, specialized ignorance. I have no easy solution to offer. I sometimes feel that nothing short of a major operation will have to be performed. There were complaints of specialization in the medieval universities. Then it was specialization in philosophy at the expense of science. And yet science, or natural philosophy, so far as it was taught, was then a part of the liberal arts. By today it has expanded and grown to such huge proportions that the Arts can no longer contain it. And so there has appeared in our modern universities a new Faculty—the Faculty of Science, which is quite distinct from the

Faculty of Arts. Thus we have arrived at an extraordinary paradox. We are in an age which is largely dominated by Science. All our newspapers will give many columns to report the meetings of the British Association, while history or literature or philosophy will scarcely get a line. To know nothing about science, its methods, its modes of thought, its results, is to be ignorant indeed. And yet today our arrangements are such that the student of the Arts in a university finds science left outside, and the schoolboy preparing for entrance to a university must either concentrate on scientific subjects to the exclusion of the humanities or devote his time to literary and historical subjects to the exclusion of science. This dichotomy, this setting of science over against Arts, reflects no law of nature, no fundamental distinction, and I believe that sooner or later in some way or another it must be transcended. I cannot believe that that is impossible. Unless I am mistaken, the tendency for scientific knowledge to become more and more specialized and dispersed is already finding its antithesis, its compensation in an opposite tendency among scientists themselves to realize the interdependence of all the sciences, and this may well lead to a synthesis, a consolidation which will enable the student to grasp the fundamental ideas—the principles, the methods, the final results—without the necessity of a prolonged formal training in the techniques. It is somewhere in this direction, it seems to me, in the humanization of science, that the solution lies.

I am not, of course, proposing that we should no longer specialize. That would be foolish; it would also be futile. The ardent teacher and the able student between them will see to that. It belongs to the nature of the keen mind to penetrate as far as possible. Nor am I merely concerned to add to the student's range of choices and harass still further the poor framer of time-tables.

What I do feel is that in this age of ours, an age whose modes of thought, whose practical contacts, and whose unconscious assumptions tend to assume a scientific shape—in such an age not only the engineer, the doctor, or the chemist, but also the lawyer, the teacher, the administrator, and the social worker will be the better for some informed acquaintance with scientific principles and methods.

So I come back at the end to the question which occupied us earlier—the university and the professions; and I would ask you to consider a statement that was made twenty years ago by the late Samuel Alexander of Manchester. He said that the cultivation of knowledge for its own sake is rather the method than the purpose of a university. Its purpose, he declared, too boldly perhaps, is preparation for the professions, but it is a preparation conceived and carried forward in a liberal spirit. Whether the subject be philosophy or literature or engineering, the university pursues, not the subject alone, but its science, i.e. the rational principles underlying it and its relations to other subjects, not only the facts but the reasons of facts. And to be able to go on doing this adequately it must not only be concerned with acquiring and communicating knowledge, but also with extending it.

May I put it another way? If the universities were to lay their emphasis merely on technical skill for the production of expert technicians—on the 'know how', and not the 'know why'—they could no doubt make through those they train a very considerable contribution to the material amenities of a civilized society (as well as to the dangers that beset it). But they would be neglecting what is their essential responsibility—namely, the cultivation of that deeper and richer soil where the faculties of mind and spirit are most active. Some words of Coleridge are relevant here: 'Civilization is itself a mixed good, and the

nation so distinguished is more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people.' Might we, then, say that a university is more concerned with polish in the best sense than with varnish? That, I think, is what Alexander meant.

I end by offering you his comprehensive definition—with one proviso. The university to which he belonged cared perhaps too little in those days for that factor of social community of which I have spoken; and so I would just add that the knowledge to which he refers must include the experience which life in an intellectual community gives through informal as well as through formal means. 'A university [said Alexander] is an association or corporation of scholars and teachers engaged in acquiring, communicating, or advancing knowledge, pursuing in a liberal spirit the various branches of knowledge which are a preparation for the professions or higher occupations of life.' It should teach the student to be both a cultured person and a good member of a profession.

If I may be personal for a moment, I knew the College at Swansea intimately during its first half-dozen years; I have known it more or less intimately ever since, and I am sure that it is measuring up to all the requirements and all the implications of Alexander's definition.

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