27. Rôle et défis de l’université privée
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EDITOR’S NOTE


[...]

1 As we stand on the threshold of a new decade, we see more question-marks than sign-posts. Resort to the arbitrament of war has once again disrupted the international economy, at a time when we are still suffering from the revolutionary changes which the last World War engendered or accelerated, and within each of the great democracies there is a ferment of controversy that embraces all important aspects of society. Even the physical sciences have lost something of the evangelical certainty that they seemed to possess half a century ago.

2 Universities have not escaped from the general uncertainty, and many people suggest that great private universities are doomed to extinction. A few prophets, more subtle than their peers, have based this conclusion on the fact that the controversy, within each of the great democracies, regarding the relative spheres of private initiative and public regulation shows recognizable reflections of the ideological struggle that divides the nations. They contend that the functions of government are increasing, and will continue to increase, so that higher education must inevitably be brought within the range of political control. Others, impressed by public debts and the growing burden of taxation, reach the same conclusion by simpler reasoning. Since the epoch of great private fortunes appears to them to be at an end, they insist that all universities will be compelled to seek support from the public treasury and submit to that control of academic activities which is inherent in the power of the purse.
Cassandra will be fulfilled of her prophecies only on one condition: that the great private universities have outlived their usefulness and have nothing more to offer. Money is not life. Although great endowments may prolong the life of an institution that is intellectually sterile, lack of funds have never killed a vital idea that had significance for mankind. Moreover, if the great private universities are intellectually alive, they may do much to determine the outcome of the ideological struggle between liberalism and the totalitarian state.

Even though history does not repeat itself precisely enough to solve today’s problems for us, the story of the past offers pregnant commentary upon the present. Private universities were almost dead at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Princeton was only saved from impending dissolution by Herculean efforts during the decades just before the American Revolutionary War, and Edward Gibbon has left us bitter testimony to the fact that contemporary Oxford colleges were renowned for the contents of their wine-cellers rather than the intellect of the Dons. When Emerson warmly insisted that Harvard had all branches of learning, Thoreau (who had graduated in 1837) commented acidly that it had “all of the branches but none of the roots.”

McGill was scarce worthy to be called a college at the period to which Thoreau’s remark referred. Its faculty seems to have divided the days between arguing over religious donominationialism and tilling the scattered plots of land within the college grounds. The handful of students received little instruction and less education, while the Principal, who administered the affairs of McGill during the moments of leisure when he was not officiating as Rector of Christ Church, was engaged in bitter controversy with both the Trustees and the Faculty. The government in London seems to have deferred action on both the amended Charter and the proposed Statutes in the confident expectation that McGill College would soon cease to exist.

I need not, even if I had time, describe the renaissance that occurred at McGill, and at all the great western universities, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Famous names stand out in the story of each of them as vividly as that of Sir William Dawson dominates the history of McGill from 1855 to 1900, but it would be an error to suggest that private universities were saved from disintegration by the efforts of a few great men.

They were revitalized, often in the face of opposition from entrenched tradition, by the seminal force of an idea. For the first time since de Renaissance, men realised that knowledge was not solely an ornament for gentlemen. To men as widely different in most respects as Adam Smith, Thomas Huxley and Lord Tennyson, knowledge was a powerful force that might shape the destiny of the individual and accelerate that progress of humanity which each of them envisaged. A gospel of progress that acknowledges the doctrine of survival of the fittest must necessarily emphasize the importance of training for the struggle. Students were encouraged to seek for knowledge by observation and experiment, as well as by habits of careful thought, and universities were called upon to bestir themselves and offer adequate facilities for the search.

The great need of the present moment is not the institution of new courses in recondite fields of scholarship, but the coordination and integration of knowledge in such a way that it may aid us in the solution of the grave problems that confront us.

Much of the present controversy regarding the functions of a university arises out of the fact that the Victorians were not curious enough. Those who insist that knowledge is
significant for its own sake, and those who endeavour to organize instruction along the lines of professional training, both stem from the educational disputes of the nineteenth century. Huxley could find words of praise for the traditions of scholasticism as well as for scientific investigation, but neither he nor his contemporaries made any effort to determine the relationship of the two.

To them, the general outlines of social organization were static, and the resources of the world seemed adequate to allow each man to determine the course of his own life as he chose. Liberalism was as appropriate in education as it was in politics and business. Today we are less confident. In medicine, a policy that permits each individual to do as he pleases may endanger a whole population that is confronted with an epidemic. In business, unlimited free competition may lead to unwise exploitation of natural resources or the unconscionable extortion imposed by unfettered monopoly. In the field of political activity the difficulties are even more obvious. What are the relative spheres of censorship and freedom of speech; of public welfare and private initiative; of national prestige and international well-being?

Whether we like it or no, we are faced with the task of adapting human society to the new environment that has been created by two centuries of scientific progress and mechanical invention. That problem must be the central focus of research and education, and although scholarship demands that individuals should always be free to follow their own path of investigation and study, the university as a whole must attempt to synthesize and coordinate the results of their work in such a way that it contributes most effectively to the solution of the central problem. Even in the specific fields of economics and political science this generation has discovered that reasonable solutions to our problems can only be obtained by research projects that involve the cooperation of many persons with widely differing qualifications and, when the problem of society is conceived in its widest sense, it is apparent that every field of science must be called upon to make important contributions to the ultimate solution.

Objectively considered, therefore, the circumstances of today do not necessarily imply the elimination of private universities. But they do constitute a challenge. If our great universities are content to offer traditional instruction of a kind that evades all troublesome issues, if they confine themselves to studies that are far removed from the central problem of society, they will soon cease to be a vital force. Worse still, their failure to accept the challenge, by compelling mankind to resort to superficial programmes devised by demagogues, may permit the gradual desintegration of western civilization as we know it.

But if the gage be accepted, if we are willing, sincerely and with determination, to attack the problems that confront society, the universities may well lead mankind into an epoch of peace, prosperity and justice such as men have always dreamed. Neither love of the humanities nor a deep interest in scientific research could make a man entirely happy in Shangri-la if civilization is disintegrating outside the walls of his refuge but, by pooling the resources of our many fields of knowledge, by cooperative research, and by methods of teaching that equip men and women to think clearly and wisely in the presence of the facts, we may do much to prevent that disintegration. Perhaps it is not too much to say that our great universities hold the future of civilization in their hands.

The prize is worth fighting for and, since the battle is always more important than the victory, eternal youth is the reward of those who never cease from struggling. May we strive to build a greater reputation than that which already invests McGill University—a
reputation won by service to the Dominion of Canada and to the world. We dare not rest upon our laurels.

ABSTRACTS

Le 1er janvier 1940, à l’âge de 36 ans, Frank Cyril James devient le onzième principal de McGill. Né à Londres en 1903, c’est un économiste diplômé du London School of Economics et de l’Université de la Pennsylvanie. Entré à McGill comme professeur à la faculté de commerce, il se trouve propulsé au poste de principal lorsque son prédécesseur, un citoyen américain, décide de retourner aux États-Unis lorsqu’éclate la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. James dirigera McGill jusqu’en 1962. Il est, pendant son mandat, très engagé dans les organismes canadiens et internationaux qui regroupent des universités. Il prédire à une période de grand développement de McGill et à son intégration plus étroite aux milieux d’affaires et aux cercles gouvernementaux fédéraux. Accédant au poste de principal en pleine guerre, il profite de son discours inaugural pour faire l’éloge des universités privées et décrire tant leur rôle dans un monde en voie de transformation accélérée que les défis qui les confronteront. Pour James, le développement croissant de l’intervention gouvernementale dans les divers domaines de la vie des sociétés, dont la vie universitaire, ne conduit pas à la désuétude de l’université privée. Celle-ci, au fil des siècles, a connu des hauts et des bas; elle pourrait connaître de nouvelles périodes de déclin, car la richesse de la dotation propre d’une université privée ne peut, à elle seule, garantir sa vitalité intellectuelle et, par là, sa viabilité et sa pertinence à long terme. En fait, c’est seulement en s’intéressant aux enjeux les plus fondamentaux, confrontant la société et le monde qui suivent la guerre, que les universités privées confirmeront leur pertinence et leur utilité. C’est aussi en renouvelant leurs pratiques, par exemple en recourant à la synergie de leurs domaines d’étude, en favorisant la recherche concertée et en faisant coopérer les diverses disciplines, en modernisant leur pédagogie. Mais James est convaincu que, si elles relèvent les défis qui les attendent, les universités privées conserveront toute leur pertinence et demeureront précieuses pour la société.