

Regent's Park College, Oxford

THE FIRST HALF-CENTURY

TO be asked to address this Close of Session gathering for the third time in twenty years is an unusual honour and one I greatly appreciate.* And this is, of course, a special occasion. We are celebrating this year not only the Silver Jubilee of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II, but also the Golden Jubilee of the College's move from London to Oxford.

At this meeting ten years ago I told how one afternoon in 1926 I walked down the present quadrangle with the then owner of No. 55 St. Giles. It was his garden. There were some old farm buildings where we now are. On the right behind the tutor's house was Drewitt's Yard, a row of old cottages, still tenanted; on the left facing Pusey Street a row of small houses. The letter I wrote to Dr. Wheeler Robinson that evening brought him quickly down to Oxford. The negotiations for the purchase of the site were completed in March, 1927. Mr. Dodd, an evangelical Anglican of strong convictions, was willing to part with his ancestral property to Baptists because, he said, he was sure they would not re-sell to Roman Catholics! A month later, a large gathering of former students took leave of the imposing building in Regent's Park, which had been the home of the College for seventy years and—believe it or not—I was drafted to sing to them the College song, the chorus of which was

"So we raise, as time goes by,
Our Marseillaise, our battle-cry,
Forward Regent's!"

Later that summer Dr. Wheeler Robinson moved into No. 55 and Eric McKeeman and I unpacked his books in the room on the first floor that became his study. By 1928 the first four students—all of them still alive—were here in Oxford, registered with St. Catherine's and enjoying the hospitality of the Mansfield College Junior Common Room.

That was fifty years ago. The College was moving for the third time. It had been beside Stepney Green for forty-five years, then in Holford House, Regent's Park. The move from London was not accomplished without some hesitation and shaking of heads. True Dr. Angus, the great Victorian Principal, and later Dr. Shakespeare, a distinguished alumnus and Secretary of the Baptist Union, had dreamed of a Baptist college in either Oxford or Cambridge, but the older universities were still viewed by some Nonconformists with suspicion as dangerous strongholds of social privilege, conservatism

*This address was given at Regent's Park College in June 1977.

and Anglicanism. What after half a century can now be said? Has the move here justified itself?

There are various ways of estimating what has been attempted and accomplished. For twelve years we were without any buildings of our own. Skilful negotiation led to St. John's parting with the corner of Pusey Street and the row of houses. This gave us a site roughly the same size as that of St. Edmund Hall. In 1935 a building fund appeal was launched and plans were drawn up by Mr. Harold Hughes, an architect already known in Oxford. To him, and to his daughter and son-in-law, the College owes a great debt. Again and again their plans have had to be altered to meet changing circumstances and restrictions of various kinds. There was a fine scheme for a front entrance on St. Giles, but the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society discovered that not only were there students lodging there in the closing decades of the 13th century, but parts of the tutor's house may date from 1500. The roof is probably the oldest in Oxford. However, the main stone-laying took place in 1938. The Helwys Hall, the Library above it, sixteen men's rooms and the domestic offices were completed in 1940 just as the Government placed war-time restrictions on all private building.

During the war we could return Mansfield's hospitality, for its buildings were requisitioned (as ours were very nearly—for some seventy Wrens!). We also accommodated the London School of Slavonic Studies and a public air-raid shelter. No. 55 has suffered a number of alterations, not all of them improvements. When the College was given the status of a Permanent Private Hall of the University, it was, however, made somewhat more suitable as a Principal's Residence. In 1961 gifts by Mr. Bernard Balding and his family enabled more student rooms to be built. Between 1966 and 1968 the Pusey Street side of the quadrangle replaced the old houses as a result of further generous giving and an advantageous arrangement with the University's Department of Bio-Mathematics. This year, on the site of the garage on the north-west corner of our site, a tutor's flat and some accommodation for married students are under construction.

This alone is quite an impressive achievement. We have had few very wealthy benefactors, but we have not had to resort to long, large-scale borrowing. If you walk through the buildings, you find the names of a number of former students and others, who have been commemorated by special gifts. By and large these buildings were provided by folk like ourselves who understood something of the important possibilities of this place. There have been the surprises—some welcome, some disappointing—that always accompany an enterprise of this kind.

During the fifty years there have been four Principals. Dr. Wheeler Robinson was here for the first fifteen years, well-known as an Old Testament scholar and theologian, warmly welcomed here in Oxford, one for whom all who had contact with him feel reverence and

gratitude, a truly great figure. Then for sixteen years Robert Child guided affairs with patience and wisdom, gaining the respect and affection of students and a far wider circle. For the next fourteen years Dr. Gwynne Henton Davies was the Principal, another *Alt-testamentlicher* and responsible for two important extensions to the buildings. In 1972 he was succeeded by Dr. White, an accomplished church historian, who in the past five years has deepened the sense of community in the College at a time of rapid change in student attitudes and needs.

Nine others have served on the tutorial staff since 1927 for longer or shorter periods and the College has also benefited greatly from the ladies who have presided over No. 55 and from a succession of bursars and domestic helpers. Such persons make a vital, but sometimes forgotten contribution to the ongoing life of a college.

It is for the benefit of the students, however, that the buildings are provided and that staff, academic and domestic, spend themselves. This is a theological college, existing primarily to train ministers and missionaries for the Baptist denomination. In the fifty years some 325 students have completed theological courses in this place. Since the College became a Permanent Private Hall roughly another hundred men have been welcomed here as lay students—a return to what was offered in the 19th century during the last decades of Dr. Angus's long reign. A number of other men from other colleges have been lodgers here. But it is the theological students who are the core of the institution and give it its special character. In view of the doubts expressed fifty years ago, we may first ask: Where have they come from? For some years Dr. Wheeler Robinson commuted between Oxford and London in order to complete the courses of men already at work for London degrees and certificates. He also helped twenty-five of them to come on from London to Oxford. In 1935 an arrangement was made with Bristol Baptist College by which men who applied to Regent's Park College, but were not immediately able to enter Oxford University could go first to Bristol. Sixteen men benefited by this arrangement, most of them coming on here afterwards. Bristol College itself has supplied another thirty men; Rawdon sent ten, Cardiff eight, Spurgeon's and Bangor three each, Glasgow and Carmarthen one each. Bristol has regularly sent men (and now women) here. The supply from the other Baptist colleges has slackened. Putting the figures together, however, one finds that just over seventeen per cent of the 325 theological students have come on here from the other Baptist colleges of the United Kingdom. Ten men have come after completing first degrees at other Oxford colleges; ten have come from Cambridge—that is, about six per cent of the total. More than thirty men (ten per cent) have come from overseas, fourteen—the largest number—from the United States, four each from Jamaica and Germany, two each from New Zealand, Japan and the World Council of Churches' Scholarship scheme, one each from South Africa, Denmark, Ceylon, France, Canada and Romania. Three men have

held here the Lord Medical Scholarship. The student body has always been a varied and stimulating one, with the riches of Oxford available to all. Take all these special groups into consideration and over fifty-two per cent of the 325 have applied directly from the Baptist churches of this country for theological training in Oxford.

These figures vindicate the hopes of Dr. Wheeler Robinson and those who supported him, so far as supply is concerned. What has happened to the men trained here? Almost all of those from overseas have returned to the countries from which they came. Of the rest ten or a dozen—no more—have found a spiritual home in other denominations, most of them as parish priests. Twelve men have died. Of the remainder two hundred are on the current lists of the Baptist Union or the Baptist Missionary Society—a remarkable and very satisfactory figure, which will compare favourably, I believe, with those of other colleges (both our own and those of other denominations) for the past half century.

Of this two hundred, six are or have been Principals of Baptist Colleges in the United Kingdom and more than another dozen have held staff appointments; three have become General Superintendents; eight have served on the staff at the Baptist Church House and one of them is the present General Secretary; after service overseas, two have become Senior Secretaries of the B.M.S., one of them passing later to an important post in Geneva. The President of the Selly Oak Colleges is among the two hundred, and for twenty-seven years another of our men was the Old Testament Professor there. For seventeen years Walter Bottoms edited the *Baptist Times*. Ray Taylor has become a key figure in the world of Industrial Mission. Broadcasting in this country owes much to the services of Edwin Robertson and Robert Walton. The Bible Society is debtor to Wilfred Bradnock, Bryn Price and a number of others. L. H. Brockington toiled devotedly on the Old Testament of the New English Bible. Stephen Winward played an important part in the preparation of both a Ministers' Manual and *The Baptist Hymnbook*. Eric Sharpe was involved with the latter as well as with *Praise for Today* and had John Matthews with him in work for the more recent book. And so one could go on! The men I have mentioned have been in the limelight. The College has reason to be no less proud of the many men who have rendered faithful and effective pastoral service during decades when it has seemed that the tide of faith, if not receding altogether, has been moving into other channels, many of them in ecumenical experiments.

Some seventy men of the 325 are not on the official denominational lists. At least ten hold (or have held) academic or executive posts overseas. They include Tom Warriner and Mervyn Himbury, Principals of Baptist Colleges in Australia, Eric Rust at Louisville, Kentucky, R. F. Aldwinckle and J. R. C. Perkin in Canada, David Jackson in Australia. T. O. Ling is Professor of Comparative Religion in Manchester and A. A. Anderson holds an Old Testament post there. Another ten or more are now engaged in teaching or social

work in this country. Nor must one forget Sir Thomas Williams, Q.C., M.P. Tutors, like parents, often watch the development and prowess of their offspring with surprise! All this leaves only a handful of men unaccounted for, many of whom are known to be usefully and effectively at work.

A shelf full of books and a score of doctoral theses have been produced by members of the staff or by those who have been here as students, many based on the still unexhausted riches of the Angus Library. All in all it can be claimed, I think—particularly when the contribution of the lay students is remembered—that never in its history has the College more clearly demonstrated the variety of the gifts of the Spirit, of which the New Testament speaks.

Could all this have been achieved had the College remained in London? The answer is emphatically "No". The former Free Church Divinity Schools of the University of London, of which we were one, have all disappeared. There are many reasons for concern about the state of the churches (our own and those of other denominations) and many reasons for a re-examination of ministerial training and ways of worship, witness and service, but in the light of our record here over the past fifty years, we may well echo a comment made by the Principal of St. Stephen's House, Oxford, after he had read a recent Anglican report on the training of the clergy: "The Church would be taking leave of its senses if it actually withdrew from Oxford" (*Church Times*, 15 April, 1977).

It is on the basis of what has been achieved that the College appeals for continued and increased support. Further resources are and will be needed to meet inflation but—more important—to provide the new and enlarged facilities this age requires. Men and women's basic spiritual needs remain the same and "Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be for ever" (*Hebrews* xiii, 8, Jerusalem Bible). But the framework of our lives, social conditions, the intellectual and religious climate, have all changed greatly since 1927. There has been a great expansion of higher education and a revolution in ways of communication. Not many nowadays make the mistake of the Baker in *The Hunting of the Snark*:

"I said it in Hebrew—I said it in Dutch—

I said it in German and Greek;

But I wholly forgot (and it vexes me much)

That English is what you speak."

Indeed, we may have gone too far in the other direction. Oxford is a very different place from what it was fifty years ago. Once more time has made much ancient good look a bit uncouth.

During 1927 and 1928, as the College began its life here, the first four volumes of the "Library of Constructive Theology" appeared. They were by H. R. Mackintosh, O. C. Quick, C. H. Dodd and Wheeler Robinson, himself one of the planners and editors of the series. In all some ten volumes were published, several of them securing a wide circulation. They were an attempt "to think out anew,

in the light of modern knowledge, the foundation affirmations of Christianity", basing themselves on "the value and validity of religious experience". In the 1920s a sharp challenge to belief had come from the new science of psychology. In the background loomed the forbidding figure of Sigmund Freud. The General Introduction to the books was brilliantly parodied in verse by Professor E. L. Mascall, a conservative High Churchman (see *Pie in the Sky*, 1959, pp. 57-60), but the volumes helped sustain the faith of many clergy and laity through the 1930s and the years of World War II. Now, after the period of neglect which comes as the shoe pinches in a different place, their value is being rediscovered. In the 1930s Karl Barth burst upon the theological stage—in this country rather later than he should have done, though we may take satisfaction from the fact that one of the first books in English about Barth's message came from a Regent's man, trained in the early years of Dr. Gould's principalship. There was a revival of what was somewhat pretentiously called "Biblical Theology".

Barth, Brunner, Bultmann—the students of the post-war period had to try to understand them and to come to terms with form-criticism, new theories about Hebrew origins and the background of the psalmists and the prophets and then, towards the end of the 1940s, there came rumours about the discovery in the foothills near the Dead Sea of ancient Hebrew texts and documents connected with a Jewish sect roughly contemporary with Jesus of Nazareth. For twenty years or more the debate about the dating and significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls continued. Meantime Bonhoeffer and Tillich had become the dominant stars in the theological firmament. As the 1960s began Britain became excited over John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963), while in North America there was talk by some theologians about the "Death of God". Now in the 1970s eyes are turned to South America and to so-called "Revolutionary Theology" or "The Theology of Liberation", while across the continents and ecclesiastical boundaries in the wake of the kind of campaigns associated with Billy Graham sweep new charismatic movements, some of them bringing new life to dry bones, some of them reproducing phenomena regarded as long outgrown and dangerous.

Why recall these things? Well, they all come from the fifty years we have been thinking about and they indicate that theology as well as Christian discipleship is a living and not unexciting discipline. So do other changes. In 1927-28 the ecclesiastical doves were excited over Parliament's rejection of the Revised Book of Common Prayer. Even bishops advocated the disestablishment of the Church of England. A few years later students, even more than the world at large, found themselves thrown off their balance by the now generally forgotten Oxford Group Movement. But in 1927, a few weeks after Dr. Wheeler Robinson arrived here, the first World Conference on Faith and Order was held in Lausanne. Already in this country the first hesitant discussions about relations between the

Churches had begun. A World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches had been formed, as well as an International Missionary Council. A Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work had been held in Stockholm in 1925. What we now call the Ecumenical Movement was under way. The Nazi attack upon the Jews and the Confessing Church in the 1930s speeded its development. The Second World War delayed the formation of the World Council of Churches, but made its creation the more imperative. The increase in the membership of the World Council from the 144 Churches which joined together in Amsterdam in 1948 to the present number of over 270 speaks for itself. The Council now includes not only Protestants and Orthodox, but Pentecostals and Churches from the Third World which do not belong to any of the main Christian traditions of the past centuries. Controversial some of the actions and declarations of the World Council may be, but its existence is one of the great new facts of our time. Beside and inseparable from it is all that has followed in our own and other countries from the Second Vatican Council.

Relations between Christians have changed dramatically and for the better, though the attempts at the uniting of separate denominations have in many instances failed, usually—though not always—for non-theological reasons. So far as our special Baptist tradition is concerned, both as regards the rite that gives us our name and our doctrine of the Church, we are in a stronger position in the eyes of others than we were fifty years ago.

The missionary movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries carried the Gospel to every corner of the earth. Much that was accomplished then was aided—though this was not its motive—by imperialist and colonial attitudes. Recently there have been considerable movements of peoples in the reverse direction. We are becoming a pluralist society. Many of the newcomers to this country come with an enthusiastic and challenging Christian allegiance. Others arrive with a sincere devotion to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, faiths that fifty years ago were thought to be in decay.

What an extraordinary half-century it has been! Five decades of revolutionary developments in every aspect of human life! We are here to give thanks for what has been accomplished amid all these changes in this small community, this little collegiate enterprise, which we believe to be part of the witness and service of Christ's Church. We are met to greet and cheer those who guide the College as it starts its 167th year, its 51st in this place, and to speed those who now go out from these walls, their training here over. The changes I have spoken about affect the lay as well as the ministerial students. They provide the intellectual and religious climate in which all of us live. Students are sometimes critical about what they have been offered. Only gradually do any of us realise that much said to us in and out of the class-room is not of the instant-remedy kind. It is intended to help us meet what may lie ten, twenty or thirty

years ahead. The changes of the next fifty years are likely to be quite as unexpected as those since 1927. This applies to every discipline and profession. The revolutions that take place may even be, in the older sense of the word, a return to older systems and ways. In any case we send out you who leave today, ministers and laymen, whatever your rôle, to do your own thing in your own way—in the name of Christ, we hope. We have learned again in these fifty years that His Face “decomposes but to recompose”.

T. W. Manson, who taught many of our men here in the 1930s, thought that a nearer equivalent to the Aramaic word Jesus used, which we translate “disciple”, would be “apprentice”. “A disciple is the greatest of all calamities”, said Kierkegaard caustically. “Theology requires free men”, declared Karl Barth, “and I would not like my life to result in the founding of a new school. I would like to tell anyone who is prepared to listen that I myself am not a ‘Barthian’; because after I have learnt something I want to remain free to go on learning” (Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, 1976, p. 417). The task of a Faculty of Theology, according to Barth, is to give students “a ‘brief-case’ for exercising their profession and the necessary instructions for using it”, to help them to have clear heads and to want to go on studying (*ibid.* p. 443). That also applies to every profession. That has always been the aim and spirit of this College, for which long ago the motto was chosen: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (I *Thessalonians* v. 21).

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