Lear recalls inter-war years in Alumni speech

By Richard Best

The period between two wars with which I am concerned this evening was not a lucky one. While those words Floyd Seward Lear, Trustee Professor of History, characterized the atmosphere both of the campus and the world generally of the twenties, the Rice Alumni Association's first Distinguished Scholar Lecture. The address, entitled "History and the Humanities at Rice Between Two Wars," was an account of intellectual currents both at this university and in the national and world contexts as they were interpreted in a series of lectures given by many visiting scholars and subsequently reprinted in the "Rice Institute Pamphlets." 

These addresses reflect Lear's concern for the role of intellectual standards in political life and his well-known distrust of certain features of the mass societies of the twentieth century. They also provide a valid means of analyzing the intellectual history of this academic community in the period.

The inaugural lectures of the Godwin Foundation were delivered in 1929 by the Hon. William Howard Taft, twenty-seventh President of the United States. Taft spoke on "The Constitution of Republican Institutions" and made a defense of the capitalism which Lear termed the "predominating philosophy in Mr. Godwin's Houston when the vision of the Twentieth Century and its promise of achievement came into focus, and it represented the hard work, thrift and saving that made Mr. Rice's benefaction possible." The former President's lecture, it was further noted, was delivered against the backdrop of the encroaching Bolshevik Russia and the Boston Police Strike.

America vs. Athens

In the autumn of 1925, the Sharp Foundation presented a series of lectures by T. H. Glover of St. John's College at Cambridge University. Described as "a large man, bluff and hearty in manner with a fluent complexion and blunny roast beef and ale accent," Glover stressed the mixed nature of American government as opposed to the Athenian democracy, and spoke of the necessity of "recognition of duty and right reason (in thinking, without which) no people is fit to govern either itself or others and the corollary follows that in the long run every people gets precisely the sort of government it deserves . . ."

Perhaps with an eye on the origins of the War of 1914-18, Glover noted that, "A breakdown in foreign policy between weakness at home—even failure to realize and to understand some defect in training or temper, something intellectually of morally wrong, undeveloped or perverted." One of the more controversial lectures of the period was delivered at the 1930 commencement convocation by Ralph Adams Cram, architect of the original design for the campus and its buildings. As Lear put it, "Cram hurled the challenge of aristocratic standards in art, religion and education against popular Protestant democratic order." Equality for women meant a social "arrangement proportioned to the degree of character and intelligence." The Boston architect and medievalist knew "that not every man can write a "Divine Comedy" or even conceive a Lovett Hall as he had done himself."

In 1935 Samuel Eliot Morison, probably the foremost American naval historian of the century, was invited to speak at Rice on the rise of American universities with special reference to the colonial period. Dr. Lear recalled Morison's urging the adoption of a college system somewhat similar to the Harvard House Plan, and his remark upon hearing Rice's increased emphasis on football: "Now you are no better than we are."

The Rockefeller Lectures of 1940 were delivered by Roscoe Pound, the former Dean of the Harvard Law School. Pound was "one of the last great champions of the natural law theory as opposed to the will theory of jurisprudence which runs rampant in contemporary legal thinking."

Natural Rights

In a long discussion of Pound's thought Lear emphasized his view of government as a protector of natural rights and the dangers of administrative law. The latter's dangers lie in the fact that, "Under a guise of solicitude benevolence (if substitutes) security for liberty but in so doing (transforms) the citizen into a subject."

Lear recalled that Pound had also spoken here in 1932 and that at that time stressed the debilitating effects of urbanization on individuals. Lear suggests that Pound's position lay in the answer to the question, "Is it possible that the conditions of political liberty and economic freedom of movement suited to simpler human structures can be continued in the new urban environment with its massive consolidation?"

In 1937 the Sharp Foundation presented three lectures by E. K. Rand, Pope Professor of Latin and Honorary Curator of Manuscripts as Harvard. Speaking on "Horace and the Spirit Comedy," Rand shows that Horace's comedy reflects, in an almost Augustan sense, the foolishness of the wisdom of this world. Lear's emphasis on this point no doubt derives from his belief in the insufficiency of human reason: and the necessity of faith in law which is identifiable both with nature and with God.

All of those lectures display what Lear calls the "continued depression which darkened the bright promise of the first years of our school." Yet he fondly remembers the hallmark of what he terms the old Rice: "beauty . . . gentleness . . . self-respect, scholarship without pedantry and humanity in thought and deed."

Less happy were the decline in the traditional values of public life, as expressed by Cram and Pound, who were conditioned by a world approaching the "black midnight (which) closed upon the free world with the conclusion of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis under the Tripartite Pact of September 27, 1940 . . ."

Access Admonition

Professor Lear recalled the admonition of Dr. Stockton Ax- men to the class of 1926, that they not "dissord the past, but . . . understand it more deeply . . ." He ended with the words President Lovett quoted to the class of 1942, as he had sung to that of 1937:

"To honor, while you strike him down. The foe that comes with fearless eyes; To count the life of battle good; / And dear the land that gave you birth, / And dearer yet the brotherhood / That binds the brave of all the earth."

No one can miss the contemporary significance which a historian of the quality of Floyd Lear would place on these words.