

## “OUT OF OLD FIELDS”\*

SEVEN MONTHS ago the Massachusetts Institute of Technology inaugurated a new president. Like today, it was an occasion for greetings and felicitations. Referring to the fact that our new president had served us long in other capacities, and thus had proved himself in advance, James Bryant Conant said, “In short, you are to be envied for doing what most of us Americans spend our lives wishing for and aiming at, namely betting on a sure thing!” We do not assemble here today to dedicate an unused and untried building; we, too, are not laying wagers on an unknown horse. Here also, I suggest, we have a sure thing.

My instructions are to help you to guess what this sure thing may mean for the Rice Institute, for the City of Houston, for the State of Texas, and for the other half of the nation. Before I start guessing, let me pause to pay tribute to those who have made it possible. Let us remember the generosity of the Fondren family, a generosity balanced with foresight and intelligent purpose which has been manifest more than once in this state; let us admire the skill and taste by which the bare theory of a building has been converted into a glowing reality by the architects, Mr. Staub, Mr. Rather, and Professor Watkin; let us be thankful for the unceasing, imaginative, and open-minded efforts of the faculty committee under the chairmanship of Professor Heaps; let us not forget Miss Dean who built the book collection for you, without which you would have no library, be the façade and the rooms ever so splendid; and finally on this day permit me to speak with affection and admiration of that great and enlightened citizen of Houston, Harry Car-

\* An address delivered at the dedication of the Fondren Library of the Rice Institute on November 4, 1949.

others Wiess. The Rice Institute has much to remember Mr. Wiess for; this building should not be the least of those memories.

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We live in a complicated age. Each educated man hangs on a dilemma. To be individually *useful* he must become, according to his bent, more and more specialized in what he knows how to do. But to be among the collectively *good* he needs to be better informed about more complex general problems than any previous man has ever had to be. These two requirements often seem to conflict or at least to compete. Adequate specialization clamors for all of the student's attention and for most of the adult's. Yet we sense that if each educated man attends only to his own specialized knitting, the main patterns of our culture will suffer. The most important affairs of the world will then be managed either by less-educated non-specialists or, more dangerously, by specialists in governing men. We have seen one such group at work in the Reichschancellory. We did not like it overmuch.

Educators are steadily talking about this problem of how to develop depth and breadth at the same time. They want to know how to cultivate an intense understanding of a relatively little area, together with an intense interest in and a reasonable competence about a very much larger area. Educators make experiments in this direction. They call their programs core curricula, or new courses in general education, or integrated education. The proposals have a basic similarity although the name of the program changes from time to time. Fundamentally they are seeking the marriage of the general and the specific, to develop the student's capacity so that professional skill and able citizenship may march forward hand in hand. It is an extremely difficult assignment.

Specialization is possible in every field and common today in most fields. It is by no means unique to science and engineering, nor indeed does it take its most constricted forms in these studies. Nonetheless science has become, for many, symbolic of specialized education, and the liberal arts have become symbolic of general education. I could spend all the time you have allowed me debating the validity of these totems. But I won't. Let us, rather, take them at their face value. Let us agree that the whole man must have an understanding of both. What is important here is that if these two fields stand as symbols, so does the Fondren Library. There was something very significant in the decision taken here—a not very usual decision, you know—to house the libraries of both hemispheres of knowledge in this single building on this campus. It goes without saying that the integration we all seek will proceed more smoothly at the Rice Institute because of this single physical fact. Incidentally, it is also true that this unification would scarcely have been possible had not your faculty shown unity, had they not already been thinking in the direction of integration. I congratulate you on both of these circumstances.

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My text is drawn from a fairly obscure verse by Geoffrey Chaucer. When Anne of Bohemia was getting herself betrothed to Richard II of England, so the tale says, Chaucer wrote his charming seven-hundred-line *Parlement of Foules*. In it the other birds come on St. Valentine's Day to advise the eagle on her choice of a mate. The full quatrain runs:

For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,  
 Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,  
 And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,  
 Cometh al this newe science that men lere.

I am not unmindful of the risks I run in using this quotation. I am familiar with the vernacular meaning of "corn"; I know that Texans do not look too kindly on old fields and think there must always be new ones, if not above, at least below the surface of the earth; I know that any conscientious scientist who is listening has already condemned the apparent meaning of the quotation. These are risks I must run.

I did not select it to display my Middle English; nor to intimidate you with a flash of erudition. I came on it looking for another quotation I could not remember accurately; it seemed apt; I adopted it. This is a very common way of finding erudite references!

I want to set against it, at once, another quotation which appeared a little less than two hundred years later in *Proposition Touching Amendment of Laws*. This was by Francis Bacon, and he said: "Books must follow sciences, and not sciences books."

These two sayings are not at all contradictory. "Science" meant something different to Chaucer than it did to Bacon; but Chaucer would have agreed that you should create by observation and then record, rather than record first. His whole literary life demonstrated that. And Bacon in turn, if he were living today, would have to agree that if one chose the right books he would find in them all that was to be learned at the moment, but would add that the knowledge in books can be increased only by further experiment.

A university library is, it seems to me, a perfect reconciliation of these two ideas.

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We might, however, spend a moment seeing how we are going to define "old." It is, of course, a relative term.

The natural scientist, by and large, finds the greatest part

of his useful references (though not all) in work published in the most recent decade. Something ten years past is likely to be old. The writings of Becquerel, J. J. Thomson, Planck, Rutherford, Bohr, and Meitner are in this sense old—in this sense, indeed, as old as the writings of Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas, or Shakespeare. All have already moved to an age where they are timeless.

It is an interesting if uncomfortable speculation to try to understand why the young in natural science ages so rapidly while the old in politics and ethics and philosophy remains so perpetually young. Great ideas from long, long ago have full force and vigor in some fields, notably in many of the liberal arts; great ideas from comparable thinkers in the sciences have either passed into disrepute or have been modified almost past recognition. Acceptance of major contradictory theories in the liberal arts is somewhat cyclical; major theories in science usually, though not always, are developed progressively and do not turn up again in full value in their older form. Why is this?

One might argue that it simply means that students in the liberal arts have not achieved the same asceticism and concentration and competence as students in the natural sciences, the corollary being that if they had, these old statements from the humanities would then be seen to have no validity or at least not full validity. But it could equally well be argued that the difficulty in the two kinds of study is of a different order and that the scientist works on vastly easier problems.

Or it could be said that the great and important situations in which human beings find themselves, the great hopes and fears which in perilous times are so emphatic, all these have been experienced long ago and many times since. “There is no new thing under the sun.” Since we also have to admit,

as the poet reminded the Greeks, that "there were brave men before Agamemnon," it is only natural that, by now, almost everything important which a man is likely to think up to say has been said. But this could be contradicted, too. Someone might remind us that the writings of Plato and Machiavelli do not tell us how to solve the traffic problem.

I do not propose to level a lance for any of these positions today. I simply want to rest the case on the fact that the university library has in it some very old old things and some very new old things and that these together constitute the stately "old fields" whence comes all the "new corn."

And what a remarkable thing a scholarly library is! How many different needs it serves! Behind its walls we may find all the most important things that man has known or learned or guessed since he seriously began to record his observations. Moreover, these will be remarkably current. Most important things recorded six months ago will be there in periodicals right alongside the important things which were recorded two thousand years ago. Usually the last crop will seem more exciting—but it may not always be the more significant, even for immediate situations.

Moreover, the size of this scholarly library will not place proportional limits upon its wealth of resource. For a very large percentage of the most important things will be found in the small, carefully husbanded library; and only peripheral scholarship will be found to be served better in the great repositories.

How amazing this really is, that in Houston, Texas, and Berkeley, California, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Oxford, England, and Paris, France, and in so many other places in the free world, there will be found the identical fundamental great store of knowledge! How important it is that the university library continue to be able to offer this

harvest year after year for new generations of free men to glean! If these fields are to furnish an ever-recurring golden crop, how important it is that nothing happen which will turn the crop to weeds!

For there is risk as well as pleasure in farming.

When Samuel Johnson was sixty-nine years old, he was coming back from church one fine April day. Down Butcher-Row he walked with James Boswell tagging along behind. He was accosted by a man whom he had known at Pembroke College forty-nine years earlier and had not seen since, but whom he shortly identified as a Mr. Edwards. The ways of the two men had forked sharply. Edwards had trained for the bar and had finally retired to the country, which he lauded. Boswell, who preferred a cobblestone to a blade of grass every day in the week, objected to Edwards' eulogy of the glories of the country, and said, "What you have to entertain you, is, I think, exhausted in half an hour." Edwards protested at this, and said, "What! Don't you live to have hope realized? I see my grass, and my corn and my trees growing." Then as an afterthought he added, "Now, for instance, I am curious to see if this frost has not nipped my fruit trees." Johnson broke in at once and said, "You find, Sir, you have fears as well as hopes."

There are fears we, too, may have and they are by no means trivial fears. Since we are here dedicating a new set of old fields which we want to see bearing good crops for many years, we would be less than prudent if we did not ponder these dangers.

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The scholarly library faces three such dangers today. One is a threat to its clientele, for books which are not read will not furnish new knowledge. The other two are threats to its

freedom. I think the latter are the greater threats. So, if you will excuse me, I will speak first of the former.

We pride ourselves on the degree of literacy we have secured for the people of this country but we do not bother often to look beneath the cover and see if literacy is a word which may have quality as well as quantity. It is not enough that a democratic public shall know how to read and write; it is also of some significance that it shall have a high standard of what it chooses to read and write.

For there is more than one kind of literacy. For the most part we are satisfied to define it in its lowest terms, that is, as the simple ability to read and write. But even matter-of-fact dictionaries do not assign the preferred meaning to such a simple definition. There are higher meanings to literacy.

I am by no means sure that a society fares well simply because all its members read some kind of words every day at breakfast or listen to some kind of words emerging from a loud-speaker into the living room every night. Dictators know that standards matter. They do not want their people to be illiterate in the lowest sense. They want the people to be able to read and to listen; the only price they exact is the ability to determine what the people shall read and to what they shall listen.

So one of the clear dangers to the Fondren Library is born in indifference. It may be described as a decline in our sense of the first-rate. It has ironically been made possible by advances in technology but we can hardly blame it directly on the scientists or engineers. Big beaters and rapidly moving Fourdrinier wires whip a tree into a sheet of paper in a matter of minutes and the paper rolls on to the drums at a trivial cost a sheet; this paper passes through great presses recording words endlessly, day and night, indifferent to what the words say, for the machine is amoral; the press is as ready to

print gibberish as sense, trash as sound coin, evil as good; it never rebels, it simply prints and prints and prints, so that Sunday newspapers are measured in pounds; and the same processes can be observed in the constantly flowing river of motion picture film or in the endless chatter of the air waves based upon the hypothesis that a moment of silence, ever, would presage the end of the earth and that if a speaker is not continuously out of breath he is probably boring his audience.

We might easily drown in this welter of words and sound, too easily seen, too easily heard. There has never been a time in the history of man when there has been so much literary provender or when such a colossal proportion of it was sawdust. The horse that was fed on sawdust died, as you may recall. The same thing could happen to the mind of a democracy.

Since we are being literary here today, let us turn to another quotation:

An intellectual man, as the world now conceives of him, is one who is full of “views” on all subjects of philosophy, on all matters of the day. It is almost thought a disgrace not to have a view at a moment’s notice on any question from the Personal Advent to Cholera or Mesmerism. This is owing in great measure to the necessities of periodical literature, now so much in request. Every quarter of a year, every month, every day, there must be a supply for the gratification of the public, of new and luminous theories on the subjects of religion, foreign politics, home politics, civil economy, finance, trade, agriculture, emigration, and the colonies . . . As the great man’s guest must produce his good stories or songs at the evening banquet, as the platform orator exhibits his telling facts at mid-day, so the journalist lies under the stern obligation of extemporizing his lucid views, leading ideas, and nutshell truths for the breakfast table. The very nature of periodical literature, broken into small wholes, and demanded punctually to an hour, involves the habit of this extempore philosophy. “Almost all the Ramblers,” says Boswell of Johnson, “were written just as they were wanted for

the press; he sent a certain portion of the copy of an essay, and wrote the remainder while the former part of it was printing." Few men have the gifts of Johnson, who to great vigour and resource of intellect, when it was fairly roused, united a rare common-sense and a conscientious regard for veracity, which preserved him from flippancy or extravagance in writing. Few men are Johnsons; yet how many men at this day are assailed by incessant demands on their mental powers, which only a productiveness like his could suitably supply! There is a demand for a reckless originality of thought, and a sparkling plausibility of argument, which he would have despised, even if he could have displayed; a demand for crude theory and unsound philosophy, rather than none at all.

John Henry Newman said this in one of his Dublin lectures, later recorded in *The Idea of a University*, nearly a hundred years ago. Paper and type and ink were still not cheap in those days; the continuous alarm of the announcer or the bleat of the crooner did not invade his house; children were not tempted away from their few books by a televised picture of two overweight females going through a second-rate prepared comedy called wrestling; every statesman did not have a hundred interpreters of what he said and a hundred others to give the low-down on why he had not said something different. And there were no comics.

This flood of mediocrity or worse, this affront to the intelligence, might not be effective save through repetition. But if you say often enough that a cigarette is smoked by a good many doctors, you may trap the listener into drawing a conclusion which has no basis in logic. You have never lied, really. But you have softened his mind, and perhaps you have sold a package of cigarettes.

I am not fooling here. I think man is naturally easy-going. He has had to force himself to his present position. He can drop off a high position pretty rapidly, as history has shown over and over. The sons of the great Romans were not them-

selves great Romans. Something softened them up, too. I am not proposing any solution to this problem today, but I do mean to say that this constant low-level stimulation of words is likely to destroy incentives towards a higher literacy.

Such a lack of incentive towards the higher literacy impresses me as a threat to our democracy. I am not one of those who, because they find Shakespeare more impressive and more provocative and more beautiful than Maxwell Anderson, also believe that Elizabethan England was a better place than the United States of Harry Truman. I am certain it was a worse place.

I know that most Athenians were quite satisfied to tolerate slavery even though some of them attended lofty plays and discourses and erected noble cities; that there were many more starving swineherds in the Middle Ages than there were Abelards; and that the dignity of human life has probably never been held so high as it is held right now on this day in this country of ours.

But I cannot escape the notion that we may become satisfied to teach our citizens to run their eyes past lines of type rather than to think of what the type says, and to be content if what it does say is false or cheap or second-hand; and that at the same time we may manage to endow this print with a spurious and frightening sanctity. Any tendency of this sort constitutes a clear threat to everything for which the Fondren Library stands.

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If the first danger stems from indifference, the other two stem from fear—from the same fear. But they manifest themselves quite differently. One relates to what sorts of new material the Fondren Library shall be permitted to offer its users; the second relates to censorship of the old material.

I doubt if anyone in this audience except perhaps a few

of the scientists knows the extent to which the secrecy policy of the government of the United States has led us in limiting the circulation of new information in some fields of science. The story of secrecy is a long and complicated one and not to be developed here. However, I know of no first-class scientist who believes that this policy is anything but deleterious to the progress of science in the United States or that it does not on the whole create more insecurity than it does security. No nation will survive if, in hiding things from a suspected enemy, it also hides them from its friends so that they limp towards their goals instead of running. No science will continually endure if the corpus of scientists is divided into those who elect to work for a government and hence can be let into the know and those who cannot. Yet there are important contributions to science and engineering, important facts for the general public to know as well, which cannot be placed on the open shelves of the Fondren Library today. There is nothing in the logic of secrecy which confines this kind of censorship to scientific material; there could equally well be economic facts and political facts which it might seem to some people in authority ought to be concealed from the American public. The extension is perfectly logical. The argument would go that our potential enemy is assumed not to know these things; that it will hurt us if he learns them; that we should not help him to learn them; that it is better that many of us should not learn them if that is necessary to keep him from learning them. Then the vicious circle closes and we end with an uninformed public in, of all places, a democracy. Gone are our open covenants openly arrived at. We shall have to guess at everything which is important in our national behavior—and then every few years vote in blinders. This danger is real and can be averted only by eternal vigilance.

The third danger stems at the moment, as I have said, from the same apprehension. Let me start with a question, a nasty question. Is there a fellow-traveler on this faculty? If there is, what are you going to do with him? I know that fifty years ago on these wide expanses your vigilantes would have had an answer. But we have gone farther in our understanding of freedom since then and we look with horror on the purges of others. Most of all we fear the nice tight-rope we have to walk in determining what kinds of freedom shall be free and what kinds shall not. The universities of this country are still groping with this question. It would be much easier for them to find a solution if they had better support from the general public—if they could believe that the public meant business about freedom 365 days in the year.

Now what has a fellow-traveler on your campus got to do with the Fondren Library? Well, simply that there are far more brilliant fellow-travelers in your Fondren Library than you are ever likely to find on your campus. There are people who are brilliantly amoral and even immoral; there are radicals and Tories; there are communists, and fascists. Specifically there are, I am sure, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and I hope there are also Nikolai Lenin and Joseph Stalin; I hope there are Plato and Adolf Hitler; and if you fear sex more than politics, there are surely Freud and Jung and James Joyce and all sorts of other troublesome people. Now this building is full of every kind of temptation to subversion, the most plausible and brilliant subversion, because it has been prepared by the most brilliant minds and because the texts are known to have influenced many men of action whose work we are worried about right now. It is essential that this be so. We are convinced that the mind arrives at mature convictions, convictions which are worth working

for and dying for, only by the tough process of considering matters from all angles. One does not cherish freedom simply by reading eulogies of it; rather, this power is gained by close analysis of what the people who would destroy it say about it. And this is to be found best in their own words and not in those of an interpreter. The studies of a university are not to be deduced from a list of the textbooks it uses, or even a list of its assigned readings, but rather from its card catalogue. And the more catholic this catalogue is, the more complete, the greater will be the stature of the university, the greater its force for freedom. We must maintain Plato and Lenin in our libraries—and everybody else who has anything to say.

Alexander Meiklejohn asks us in his little book *Free Speech*:

Shall we give a hearing to those who hate and despise freedom, to those who, if they had the power, would destroy our institutions? Certainly, yes! Our action must be guided, not by their principles, but by ours. We listen, not because they desire to speak, but because we need to hear . . .

Yet how insidious these writers are. One of your young men or young women can march in and take one of their books off the shelves and sit himself down in an easy chair in an air-conditioned atmosphere while it is hot as Tophet outside, and you will never know what he is absorbing. And all of a sudden he may come alive and something will happen. What are you going to do about that?

Now I expect there would be a great deal of different opinion in this gathering as to what to do about the fellow-traveler; but I expect that very few of us here would presume to name what books to root out, or even to suggest that any books should be rooted out. But that need not leave us much comfort. Everybody does not think that way. Some of

you here have presumably heard of Congressman Wood of Georgia. Do you remember him?

Last June Congressman Wood called on all the universities to send him lists of the books they used in teaching. He is probably a naïve man and believes that university education relies on a few textbooks and that if he extirpated the “un-American” textbooks he would have solved a problem. Someone indeed suggested that he might want a microfilm of the card catalogue of the university library. This Wood foray was started by the suggestion of some Sons of the American Revolution. A mighty howl went up and Congressman Wood beat a hasty retreat. He said his inquiry was just “a routine check-up.” Later he had even the greater effrontery to suggest that the Committee “does not desire to interfere in any manner with academic freedom nor does it intend to censor textbooks”—as though it had any right to, whatsoever.

But the implications of Mr. Wood’s abortive try are very serious. If they were given in to at all, they could lead to all kinds of restrictions—and to a rapid decay in the educational power of a library. The best analysis of the implications I have come across was made by Bernard DeVoto in the September, 1949, issue of *Harper’s Magazine*.

Mr. DeVoto says the colleges must make their stand right now, and continues:

If they abandon as much as one book to Mr. Wood they may as well throw in their hand. They will defy any government control of inquiry whatsoever, or they will be forced to submit to any political dictation, any limitation of academic freedom, and any coercion of academic procedure that a committee majority may care or may be induced to impose. There is no such thing as a partial virgin. There is no such thing as academic freedom that is just a mite restricted. The colleges are entirely free or they are not free at all. Mr. Wood’s absent-minded asininity was no more innocent

than a tidal wave. It means the colleges have got to make the fight. It can be won—but not unless it is made.

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Here, then, are three dangers to the Fondren Library and its brethren which I think are real and present. They will not disappear simply because we elect not to think about them. There are no very easy remedies. But that there are no remedies must be categorically denied.

The treatment in each case probably demands a multitude of little steps which would be tedious to rehearse here in detail; the crusade against the dangers born of fear may need to be fairly aggressive, more aggressive than the colleges and universities have yet been prepared to be; if they are so aggressive they run some risk of defeat and in defeat some forms of disaster. But if there ever was a gage which the colleges should take up, and now, it is the persistent attack on their freedom, of which the witch hunt is but the most spectacular manifestation.

And even if such aggressive action is successful, and I am sure it would be, we shall have to maintain thereafter eternal vigilance: vigilance against the intrusion of the second-rate; vigilance against the compartmentation of knowledge in the interests of what the military people call "cryptographic security" but what is more likely to yield ignorant insecurity; vigilance against encroachments on freedom to possess, to display, and to circulate each and every book which has any scholarly significance, regardless of how unfashionable may be the cause it espouses—remembering always that judgments are not best formed by reading a completely fair middle-of-the-road account but rather by reading completely unfair but brilliantly telling arguments from both sides of the road.

If we keep this vigil, we need not be afraid. If we do not keep it, we may expect to find early symptoms of our decay in what we hold and circulate in our libraries. And as the books are closed, the candles of freedom will also begin to flicker out.

On the other hand, these magnificent surroundings give us cause for the utmost optimism. In the *Aeneid*, as Sir Richard Livingstone reminded us last April, Jupiter says of the Roman people:

His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono;  
Imperium sine fine dedi.

(For them I set no limits of circumstance or time. I have given them an empire without boundaries.)

This should be an attractive challenge in this almost boundless state, on this almost boundless campus. You have a tradition of freedom here in Texas. It seems certain to me that this library under its able librarian and in these ingratiatingly human surroundings will meet the challenge. I congratulate you on the opportunity. I congratulate you on having erected this stately pleasure-dome in which to realize it.

JOHN ELY BURCHARD