

Address at the Opening of the College

M. Carey Thomas, October 4, 1916

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IT gives me pleasure and satisfaction to announce on behalf of the Faculty that the thirty-second year of Bryn Mawr College now formally begins. The Faculty of the College will try to make it the best year that Bryn Mawr has ever known. But to do this we need the cooperation of our student body. During the past thirty-one years at Bryn Mawr we have worked together in a peculiarly close and intimate way, we your teachers and you our students, but we wish to ask you this year to give us an even closer cooperation. This year as in previous years we must together enter on the tremendous adventure of making you as students free citizens of the great republic of letters. It is our duty as your teachers by some means or other to inspire you to make the great effort necessary to cross the gulf that yawns between educated and uneducated men and women. We must teach you how to trim your sails and start on that solitary voyage that must be made by every one of you across the dim waters that now divide you from the shining country of the chosen people of light and leading .

Ever since men began to develop what we mean by intellectual life the older generation has tried to show the younger generation how to break away from material things and enter into this other kind of kingdom. The nations that have succeeded best in teaching this to their youth are the only nations that are now remembered. In every country today youth is being taught – sometimes well, sometimes ill – but always being taught in some fashion. When I was in Egypt and Turkey I found it of absorbing interest to watch the hundreds of boys from ten to twenty years old who were squatting on the floor of every mosque, each little group with its own teacher rocking backwards and forwards in unison learning by heart aloud hundreds of pages of the Koran. To me this seemed a perfectly futile task, and yet I was assured by learned Egyptians and Turks that men who had been subjected to this discipline were infinitely more intelligent than the unlearned peasants; and that women who never had had this to us seemingly barren teaching were intellectually like peasants and children whose opinions simply did not count at all among educated Egyptians and Turks.

This same difference between educated and uneducated persons exists, we are told, even in China where an unchanging tradition of inconceivably difficult and preposterous learning has

kept an extraordinarily intellectually gifted people shackled and stationary while the world of intellect has passed it by. However unwise the teaching may be, the mere effort made to acquire even foolish knowledge in itself trains the mind. The gulf between the educated Chinaman and the uneducated coolie and between all educated Chinamen and all uneducated Chinese women is as great and impassable in China as it is elsewhere. It seems to be a law of the human intellect that it develops only by genuine and continuous exertion and in *no other way*. That is what we mean by saying that there is no royal road to learning – rich man, poor man, king and peasant, each and every man and woman, white, yellow, brown, and black born under the sun – must pass by this straight and narrow way into the company of the elect, of those who have learned how to think, of those whose thinking counts. If you want to convince yourself of this you have only to read of the kind of education given in Great Britain and Europe to the boys and girls who are expected to become kings and queens. It is infinitely more strenuous even than the education Bryn Mawr gives you.

As far back as you go in history you will find that everyone who is expected to rule others has been subjected to peculiarly severe mental discipline. If the present intellectual supremacy of the white races is maintained, as I hope that it will be for centuries to come, I believe that it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women.

So difficult is this evolution from the physical to the intellectual that it seems to require not only a wise system of instruction for the youth of a given country but also favorable climatic conditions in order to develop marked mental ability. It seems to be only in a strictly limited temperate zone, only on a very small part of the earth's surface that men can maintain continuous intellectual activity. Roughly speaking this zone includes Great Britain, Scandinavia, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Holland, probably the greater part of the United States and Canada, some parts of Russia and South America, and perhaps parts of certain other countries that have not yet been sufficiently investigated. So stagnant intellectually have the descendants of some of the ancient civilizations become that it seems probable that, for example, the climate of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and parts of Asia may have changed since the time when the wonderful prehistoric civilizations that flourished there perished.

One thing we know beyond doubt and that is that certain races have never yet in the history of the world manifested any continuous mental activity nor even any continuous power of organized government. Such are the pure negroes of Africa, the Indians, the Eskimo, the South

Sea Islanders, the Turks, etc. Our own semi-civilized American negroes have shown in Haiti what they revert to when left to themselves. Even a people of genuine intellectual power like the Poles seem to have a fatal instability and infirmity of purpose that prevents steadfast organization. ...

These facts must be faced by a country like the United States which is fast becoming, if it has not already become, the melting pot of nations into which are cast at the rate of a million a year the backward peoples of Europe like Czechs, the Slavs, and the south Italians. If the laws of heredity mean anything whatsoever, we are jeopardizing the intellectual heritage of the American people by this headlong intermixture of races. We are surely endangering our great position among the leading nations of the world.

Our first immigration was made up of the dominant races of the world, the English, Scotch, French, Dutch, German, and the singularly gifted even if politically unsuccessful Irish and Welsh. Our present immigration is precisely the reverse. I believe that the time has come when for the sake of future Americans we must close our doors and let the great tide of the unprogressive races of Europe sweep into South America and the temperate parts of Africa. ...

Our New York and Chicago slums are now as bad, if not worse, than anything in the old world. The conditions in some of our mining towns in Pennsylvania where few words of English are heard are said to surpass anything in Europe. The diseases of European poverty and filth are brought here by our foreign immigrants, and like our present epidemic of infantile paralysis are propagated under conditions that we cannot control in the shockingly overcrowded tenements which disgrace our country. I understand from physicians who have studied the question that soon every epidemic known to older civilizations will ravage our American people. Surely the time has come for us Americans to change our childish happy-go-lucky attitude and address ourselves seriously to saving ourselves intellectually and physically as a nation.

President Jordan and other pacifists are vigorously pointing out that war by killing off the bravest and best of the manhood of warring countries compels the children of the next generation to be born from the physical weaklings and slackers. ... But ... as the terrible slaughter of war lowers the intellect and physique of a people, how much more insidiously dangerous is the lowering of the physical and mental inheritance of a whole nation by intermixture of unprogressive millions of backward peoples. ... Men and women can be bred again after several generations from the same great stock, but if we tarnish our inheritance of racial power at the

source, our nation will never again be the same. Our intellectual and moral place among the dominant nations of the world will be gone forever.

Our early American stock is still very influential, but this cannot continue indefinitely. For example, each year I ask each freshman class to tell me what countries their parents originally came from and for how many generations back their families have been on American soil. It is clear to me that almost all of our student body are early-time Americans, that their ancestors have been here for generations, and that they are overwhelmingly English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh; and that of other admixtures French, German, Dutch largely predominate. All other strains are negligible. Our Bryn Mawr College students therefore as a whole seem to belong by heredity to the dominant races.

You, then, students of Bryn Mawr, have the best intellectual inheritance the world affords. You are studying in a college situated in one of the great temperate zones where the adolescent human intellect can best develop. We call upon you with confidence, you who are thus the flower of the fortunate youth of the great races of the earth, to make the stupendous effort everyone must make to pass through the straight gate of the golden city of the mind. ...