Convocation at the Front

It was rather a unique idea to hold a University Convocation up there, well within sound of the guns. This is how it came about.

In the early part of 1916, when the Western Universities' Battalion and Field Ambulance were formed, a number of the Third Year men who enlisted therein made a special effort to write their spring examinations, and so qualify fully for their year's standing. Thus it happened that such men after a year's soldiering were granted their Fourth Year and their Degree, *Ob Merita in Rem-publicam*. When the date of Convocation, 1917, drew near, it occurred to some of the older University men in the Eleventh Field Ambulance that, rather than that their chums, whose degrees were being granted *in absentia*, should miss altogether the satisfaction of the crowning function of their academic career, they would stage a Convocation on the spot, and reproduce in France the solemn ceremonies that were being carried out in Western Canada.

It was a good opportunity, for all the Unit was together at the Hospital Camp near the Chateau de la Hai, where, after the strenuous work of the past winter, culminating in the capture of Vimy Ridge, they were enjoying comparative rest and comfort in the running of a rest station for sick troops.

Once the Convocation idea was started, preparations proceeded apace. Academic dress, of course, was to be worn, but obviously there were no gowns nor hoods available, so the men set to work to gather all the most promising material from their own equipment, from the hospital Q.M. stores, the salvage box and the incinerator, and some weird, wonderful and hitherto undreamed-of hoods and gowns were cunningly manufactured and laid aside in concealment for the great day and hour.

Shortly after supper a fanfare of bugles rent the air, and an august procession from one of the Nissen tents proceeded slowly and with stately dignity around the camp. If some of the reverend doctors and professors of our University could have come suddenly upon the scene they would have rubbed their eyes in sheer amazement at the procession of graduates and dignitaries that passed
along, clad in the most motley insignia ever conceived outside of a circus. Here were rubber ground sheets and oat sacks doing service for graduates' gowns. Hoods of the B.A. degree were not contrived out of silk and rabbit skin, but out of sand bags and absorbent cotton. University dignitaries (of temporary appointment) were decked with strips of gauze and bandages, stained a variety of colors, with towels of various hues, and in one instance, with a green canvas stable bucket doing duty for a hood.

The whole Unit was assembled in the "Convocation Hut," where they found seats, some on benches, but more on the floor. The procession entered and filed down the middle, the dignitaries taking their places on the platform (which was built of duck-boards), while a bench below accommodated the graduates, six in number, one from Saskatchewan, and five, including two St. John's men, from Manitoba.

The Chancellor's chair was ably filled by a Cambridge graduate, one Percy Fletcher, whose portly form and reverend pate were fitly in keeping with the dignity of his office. "President" F. C. Chapman opened the proceedings with a report of the progress of the Western Universities during the past year, which consisted mainly of an explanation, given in his happiest manner, of the significance of the evening's doings.

The Chancellor then rolled out a sonorous exordium in Latin with such clear emphasis and such simplicity of phrase that even the man who never got past "Hagarty" could follow the drift of it, which was, in brief, that army life in war time is strictly no bon. Then the candidates were presented by their Deans, graduates of Manitoba and Saskatchewan respectively, and the Chancellor, after delivering an appropriate Latin eulogium upon each man, admitted him to the Baccalaureate, and invested him in the hood of his degree.

From this moment the semi-serious character of the function developed into pure farce. Honorary degrees and official medals were conferred upon a number of men in the Unit who were famous (or notorious) for various reasons. For example one man, who was never tired of arguments of the Politico-Religio-Philosophic order was given the degree of M.D. (Master of Disputations.) Another, with prominent literary tastes of rather a high order, was given L.L.D. (Dispenser of Light Literature.)
Some excellent speeches were made by the proposers of these sundry honors, most of them were impromptu, and in a satiric, yet good-humored vein, and there were few camp "characters" who did not "get it in the neck" that night, to the huge delight of the crowded audience. One will never forget the speech made by "Dad" Graham, in proposing that the degree of D.C.L. (Director of Camp Lavatories) be conferred upon "Judge" Crawford, in which he eloquently eulogized the constructive work of that distinguished legal light and sanitary expert. The "Judge," who delivered the "distinguished visitors' speech," was in great form, and he travestied most delightfully the usual oration given on such occasions. Instead of advocating industry, self-respect, humility and the other virtues, he emphasized for the benefit of the poor ignoramuses before him the great need of the three B's, Bluff, Boost and Bull, as the only guarantees of success. One remembers, too, the clever speech of W. C. Pearson, of St. John's, whose reference to another Johnian in the following poetic effusion was greatly appreciated:

"Great-hearted warrior, who hast fought
In many a battle, dearly bought,
Nor ever thought to run or budge,
Great-hearted warrior, dear old Pudge!"

The more regular course of the ceremonies was diversified by some humorously exciting episodes. One of the aspirants to fame was arrested during the proceedings on grounds of espionage, was searched and finally marched away under armed guard. When an altercation arose between the "Minister of Education," Howard Winkler, and the Chancellor and President, some hot recriminations passed between them, and accusations of grafting were bandied to and fro, but the dispute was hurriedly patched up by some kind of understanding on the 50-50 principle.

It was agreed by all that a very enjoyable evening had been passed, and that a regular show, carefully rehearsed, could not have given more pleasure, while the graduates were most grateful to their chums for the celebration, which, though farcical, held a very real significance for them.

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