



FEATURE

Graduation Day - 23 June 1983

James Scotland (Principal, 1961-1983)
Aberdeen College of Education, Scotland

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Graduation Day – 23 June 1983

James Scotland

James Scotland was Principal of Aberdeen College of Education for 22 years from 1961. This text of his final graduation address in 1983 has been supplied by David Northcroft with the kind permission of Mrs Jean Scotland. We print it here not only for its archival interest but also because it portrays the personality of a man who played a significant role in the development of teacher education in Scotland. David Northcroft, a former Vice-Principal, has added a short biographical note.

Address by the Principal

Many years ago, when I was in North Africa during Hitler's War, a story was circulating about one of the Australian divisions. They were to be reviewed by Field Marshal Montgomery and the Divisional Commander addressed them on parade roughly as follows. 'Now listen. When Monty arrives, I don't mind you looking scruffy, I don't ask you to stand to attention, but for God's sake don't call me Jimmy!' We all laughed heartily at that tale, but it was a portent. In the years since then we have steadily drifted away from formality: ceremonial occasions, occasions like this, have gone out of fashion. The day will come, doubtless, when they will vanish altogether. I can only say, with the old lady who was told that the End of the World was nigh, 'Ah weel, thank God it's lasted my time!'

I say that because this is an important day in your lives, and such days deserve to be treated with ceremony. Some of you when you are old, well into the 21st century, will remember this day, as I remember my graduation day almost 45 years ago. It ought to be an occasion worthy of recall.

What is so important about it? Well, for one thing it marks nothing less than an epoch in your lives. You will never stop learning, of course, until the day you die - about your job, about people, about the difficult business of living - but this is really the last day of your formal education, the end of your tutelage. Today you cross the floor of the House, move round the desk if you like, from Us to Them. You could hardly start your career at a more exciting time. You will be joining what has been for well over a century an impossible dream – an all-graduate profession. (Believe me, within a decade the last secondary diplomas will have vanished too.) The whole secondary curriculum and its examinations are being revolutionized. There may be moves towards a middle school. And I don't have to tell you what problems you will face with the people not much

younger than you yourselves, the 16- to 18-year-olds.

An exciting time, yes, but a minefield too, strewn with difficulties and dangers. The society we live in is deeply perplexed. In the last couple of decades there has been a colossal redistribution of the world's goods, both nationally and internationally, and a sunburst of labour-saving technology. The effect has been massive unemployment, with all the social evils that brings, and the greatest of these, I believe, is the collapse of the work ethic, on which our educational system depends. You will be faced with a formidable paradox when you start teaching. You and I will know there has never been a time when our society needed education more, but hordes of your pupils, and their parents, utterly disenchanted, will believe there never was a time when they needed it less.

You will also come up against young people as they are, not as they ought to be. Unfortunately some of the decisions in education are taken by people who think they already *are* what they ought to be. You, not the decision-makers, will have to cope with them, and some of you will have a hard row to hoe.

Is it worth all the struggle, then? As Macneile Dixon put it, 'Was it all, or was it not worth doing, or would it have been better to live in the Garden of Eden cultivating roses for ever?' Year by year in these addresses I have said goodbye to thousands of your predecessors and many of my own old friends. Now the time has arrived for me to bid you all farewell. I have spent over 36 years in the business of Scottish education, as a teacher, as a lecturer, as Principal of this college. If I have anything helpful to say to you, this must surely be the time. The temptation is extraordinary to echo the centenarian once interviewed on Radio Scotland: 'Ay man I've seen a wheen o' changes, and I've been against every dampt one of them!' It is tempting, but it wouldn't be true. I've seen changes in which I take delight - a place in the sun, for example, for the aesthetic subjects: when you think of all the joy people have in music and art and drama, it is no more than they deserve. A beginning at least to the breaking down of religious barriers which have troubled us for centuries. A chance for teachers to play a real part in running their schools and their profession. Here in Scotland we set up the first General Teaching Council in the world, and it is a matter of enduring pride to me that for three years I was its Chairman.

Alas, there have also been changes in which I take no pleasure. The long struggle to smooth the path of the less gifted has combined with the huge increase in labour-saving devices to reduce, I am afraid, the value of effort. As teachers in Scotland, moreover, we always seem to preoccupy ourselves with means rather than ends, and I have seen no change in *that* phenomenon. Let me plead with you - don't allow the waves of day-to-day detail to close over your head. Don't just concentrate on doing things better in the classroom: try to think about *why* you are doing them. But the saddest thing I see is that education has shrunk into a smaller, less respected place in our community. The politicians still spend a lot of money on it, but there are increasing signs that they grudge it, and so do the voters. When a plan was announced in England recently to cope with teenage problems, the schools and colleges were not the place to which the government looked for solutions. It was good to see our Scottish ministers disagree.

So - there is the educational world which I am leaving and you are entering. Fortunately you will find many compensations for its vexations, as I have. You will meet congenial colleagues, men and women with the same view of life as you have, who laugh and are serious about the same things. (That's a very good recipe for successful partnerships, including marriage.) You will also have your spirit refreshed and rejuvenated by the young people you meet, wave after wave of them - children whose remarks I have often quoted like the eight-year-old who was asked how the Israelites got across the Red Sea and answered 'Fine'; the 14-year-old whom I asked to identify Archbishop Makarios and responded darkly, 'a man we were asked about in this test'; the sturdy individualist in Primary 5 who when the Inspector said 'Have you had to work *all* these examples of the same sum?' replied 'Ay - hellish, intit?'; and the immortal 10-year-old whose nativity play contained the following passage of dialogue:

Joseph: I hear Herod's going to kill all the boy babies.

Mary: Tsk, if it's not one thing it's another. What'll we do?

Joseph: What about fleeing?

Mary: Good idea. Where to?

Joseph: What about Egypt?

Mary: OK. You get the donkey and I'll get Jesus.

Many of you will have heard me tell these stories before: it is an old man's privilege, and anyway, they

are worth retelling. Every August you will be meeting youth again, and if you let it, a little will flow quietly into your soul and make your teaching days very happy.

In conclusion then, as this ceremony, which is a significant one for me as well as for you, nears its end, what do I wish for you on your eventful journey? I hope you will live to see the day when Scottish education concerns itself with long-term aims as well as short, with the abiding realities of existence, for we neglect them at our peril. I hope you will see education take its proper place, universally recognised, in our nation's programme, with the resources to stay there and nobody shouting for more than his fair share. I hope by then that teachers will have reached a level of professionalism when the only claim to status is silent, uncomplaining, expert and devoted service. And I hope the climate will be one of cooperation, not incessant dreary confrontation, in a time when no educational group suspects the motives of any other, nor has any need to.

On your journey to this Utopia, even if you never arrive, I wish you as much good fortune as I have had in the pupils, students and colleagues you meet along the way. I also draw your attention to the newspaper advertisement which was quoted on the radio the other morning:

Lost - black and white mongrel dog, mainly fox-terrier, lame in left forepaw, bald patches on coat, blind in left eye, most of right ear missing. Answers to the name of 'Lucky'.

In other words, I wish you luck, and when you can't have it the sense of humour to manage without it.

Finally, I want to wish you what I wished some of your predecessors a few years ago, for it is something you will always need. The dramatic critic, J. C. Trewin, once wrote most memorably of the actor Frank Benson:

Benson kept his sunrise spirit to the end: with him it was always four o' clock on a May morning.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to a most honourable profession. May you play *your* part in it with honour. And on that day I have already mentioned, far into the 21st century, when your hair is as grey as mine and you must say your goodbyes, however dark and dismal it may be outside the windows, deep inside you may it still be four o' clock on a May morning.