

# NATURE

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## THE UNIVERSITIES IN WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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IN the third of his Reith Lectures on "Britain in Europe: Reflections on the Development of a European Society" broadcast on November 6, Mr. Robert Birley enlarges on a point which Sir Walter Mordaunt made in his recent book, "The Crisis in the University". In discussing the autonomy of the universities, Sir Walter referred to the recognition by university people of ties and obligations which transcend national frontiers, and are not to be dissolved or suspended by the fiat of any national government. He did not, however, stay to consider the international implications of the profound influence which they cannot help having on the culture of the nation, and it is with this aspect that Mr. Birley was concerned.

Mr. Birley points out that the attitude of the universities largely determines in the end the kind of teaching given in the schools, and he suggests that the universities must accept some responsibility for working to end the intellectual isolation of Great Britain which would seem to be one consequence of the closer association of Britain with Europe. First, on the question of international contacts, he reminds us that much more than international courses for students is required. One of the most depressing experiences he had in Germany was the failure of the international students conferences and courses, which were encouraged at the universities in the British Zone in the hope of providing an answer to the problem of restoring the right relations between Germany and the rest of the world. In the years immediately after the War, such conferences were useful and really essential; but meetings of students for short periods in pleasant surroundings will not, he said, do enough to foster the kind of unity in ways of thinking which will be necessary in Europe.

A much more valuable contribution has been the organisation of visits of students from other countries for longer periods—for a month or a term—as some British and American universities have done. More still has been done in this way by the Rockefeller Foundation, though to this Mr. Birley did not allude. The objectives of the Rockefeller Foundation in assisting the exchange programme of professors from the University of Chicago with the University of Frankfurt are in the first place to aid the cultural rehabilitation of Germany and Austria, as well as to promote the free and unhampered exchange of ideas and personnel between universities and research institutions in all countries. Such exchanges will also stimulate the growth of consciousness of a common Western culture and tradition. The Rockefeller Foundation appropriations have also been used to aid the two-way flow of leaders in other walks of public life as well as in universities.

It has already been urged in these columns that British universities should give more attention to this question of interchange, and that it is one they cannot afford to neglect. Mr. Birley brings a further powerful reason for a determined effort to make the utmost use of the contribution which such interchange

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could bring to the re-birth of a European culture. The exchanges for periods of six months or more arranged under the Rockefeller Foundation bring us appreciably nearer a restoration of the internationalism which was characteristic of the Middle Ages and which Mr. Birley suggests is now needed. It was then normal for a student to attend a university in a country other than his own, and when a university secured the power to confer on its students the right to teach anywhere—which meant in any other country—it was evidence that the university was finally recognized.

From these close relations between the universities sprang the ability to form and express a European academic public opinion which paid no attention to the boundaries between States. As Dr. A. Mansbridge put it: "From one point of view all the old universities of Europe . . . must be regarded as definite and conscious protests against the dividing and isolating—the anti-civic—forces of their period. They represent historically the development of communities for common interest and protection in the great and holy cause of the pursuit of learning, and, above all things, their story is the story of European unity and citizenship". It will be recalled also how Dr. Rashdall, in his well-known "The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages", brings out the striking influence which, as a centre of speculative thought, and of religious life, such universities as those of Oxford and Paris exerted on the life not only of their own country but also of the civilized world. At a crisis in the history of Europe, he wrote, "the universities performed the function which is discharged at the present day by the press, by the platform and even by the polling booth".

The universities are now largely national institutions, and this is one reason why the idea of an international university has been canvassed; and also for the plans, to which Mr. Birley refers, for setting up special institutions, where students of different countries may work together, such as the College of Europe, started recently at Bruges under the sponsorship of the European Movement, which will formally open in November 1950. These plans are now being widely considered, and though such institutions clearly cannot take the place of the regular universities, it is intended that the students should attend them for special courses to study subjects which appear to be particularly closely related to international problems, such as modern history, political economy and political science. We have come nearer to recognizing the truth of Dr. G. W. Keeton's assertion some eight years ago in his pamphlet, "The Case for an International University", that when the War ended most of the continent of Europe would have to be re-educated; and although the institutions to which Mr. Birley refers are narrower in scope than the international university conceived by Dr. Keeton, they at least address themselves to the youth, if not the adult communities, of the nations concerned, and to teaching not a hybrid internationalism but an ordered nationalism in which individual national cultures have an established place in the general pattern. Both experiments would draw their teaching personnel from many countries, and

the interchange of ideas would be further fostered by interchange of students.

Experiments on these lines, which are also contemplated in the programme of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, may be all that is possible at the moment; but although such plans deserve every encouragement, they do not, as Mr. Birley truly says, give us an answer to the problem of how the universities can once more help to fashion a common culture in Europe. It is not enough for young men to study political or economic problems together. They will only come really to understand each other's way of thought when they work together at the fundamental academic disciplines. For the same reason the interchange of professors and lecturers which the Rockefeller Foundation is seeking to promote, and which is also exemplified in the arrangements for exchange between the Imperial College of Science and Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is even more important.

In his Reith Lecture, Mr. Birley refers to some recent developments in the universities. The new college, St. Anthony's, to be founded at Oxford as a result of the munificence of a single benefactor, will be an ordinary college; but it is intended that a high proportion of the students should come from France, and it is also laid down that "no applicants for admission shall be subject to any test of a religious, political or racial character".

In this project the University of Oxford is closely following the medieval custom when it was thought more important that students from different countries should work together than live together, and many of the universities of the Middle Ages were accordingly divided into separate 'Nations', as they were called. With St. Anthony's College may be compared plans for the establishment of a large residential centre for foreign students at the University of Göttingen, which if implemented would make Göttingen a university with a distinct European outlook. Most universities in Europe, however, like most of those in Britain, are not residential, and another way of dealing with the problem is that now being actively pursued at Paris. In the University City idea, a part of the university city or town is set aside for the residence of students, who in this way will gain a much stronger corporate life. The supporters of this policy in Paris have particularly in mind the needs of foreign students, who should, in consequence, find it much easier to enter fully into the life of the University.

For the rest of this lecture, Mr. Birley discussed the problem of a common European language, which the universities of the Middle Ages had but we have not. Here there are formidable difficulties to be met; but it is worth while noting that there are other signs of some community of thought to be found in spite of the absence of a common language, whether or not we accept Mr. Birley's thesis that a common language is essential. One remarkable piece of evidence of this kind is provided in the report by the German Commission on "University Reform in Germany", of which a translation has been issued by

the Foreign Office (London : H.M.S.O., 1949. 1s. 6d.). One section of this report is specifically concerned with the relations of the German universities with those of other countries. The Commission urges the German universities to make full use of any opportunity of collaborating with the organs of Unesco and then observes :

"One of the tasks of the lecturers in the German universities is to awaken and maintain among their students the awareness that science is universal and knows no boundaries of nation, race or creed. No less important than intellectual and technical relations with other countries are direct human relations with them. As soon as economic conditions permit, anybody who is a university teacher should not fail to live in at least one foreign country for a longer or shorter period."

The recommendations of this section of the report, which includes a tribute to the British Military Government and the Foreign Office for assisting the early resumption of international relationships, are directed towards such interchange and collaboration, and stress the desirability of careful selection of students for visits abroad. The most striking feature, however, is the similarity in outlook revealed here with that of a report from the Association of University Teachers in November 1945 dealing with the international functions of a university. The British report includes more specific recommendations, such as those for the establishment of visiting professorships and an international university institute to perform for the universities of the world as a whole those functions which the Association of Universities of the British Commonwealth discharges in its limited field ; but the whole spirit of the report is the same and shows how thought in the two countries is running on similar lines.

If that might perhaps be expected in considering essentially the same problem, it is even more remarkable how much the thought of this German Commission has in common with current thought in Britain on our own university problems. The British member of the Commission, Lord Lindsay of Birker, in a recent article in the *Universities Quarterly*, emphasizes the bearing of the report on the problems confronting British universities, and in particular the value to us of the experience of the German universities during the past hundred and fifty years. Lord Lindsay points to particular ways in which German experience of the dangers of isolation from the rest of the community which may attend preoccupation with high standards in research and the success of the technical high schools may be relevant to a consideration of the extra-mural functions of universities in Britain or the development of higher technological education, and the relations between the technical colleges and the universities.

There are, indeed, separate sections in the German Commission's report which deal with the technical universities and which, like the recommendations relating to the proposed "studium generale" (cf. *Nature*, 163, 552 ; 1949), the constitution of the university and its relations with the State, are most pertinent to discussions on matters with which the

University Grants Committee is concerned. All this, however, is secondary to the revelation in the report that thought in Germany, on the whole approach to the problem of the university and society and the task of the university in the world to-day, has so much in common with opinions responsibly held in Great Britain to-day. We may not ourselves have reached general agreement as to the functions of a university ; but from much that is said on that subject by the German Commission there will be little dissent here. Observations like those on the necessity of constant reform for every institution which, like a university, embodies an old and healthy tradition, on the scope of technical universities, and on the unity of a university as something more than a collection of professional schools, may indeed be the more fruitful in discussion in Great Britain on the purpose or mission of a university for coming from outside.

One such comment in particular should be set against Prof. M. L. Oliphant's remark in his contribution to the symposium in the *Universities Quarterly* that, for him, "the mission of the university is to guard jealously scholarship and knowledge and to preserve the freedom to gather fresh knowledge as and where inspiration comes". The German Commission is no less forthright in its assertion that freedom of teaching and research means that a university must not be confined to tracks prescribed by a political authority, nor put under the command of any outside body which lays down what the result of research and teaching should be. For it also, freedom of research and teaching means the unprejudiced investigation of reality under the sole sway of the search for truth, and the only inner limit to this freedom recognized is set by the general responsibility for the welfare of one's fellow-men.

Nor is this all that might be cited to show that there exist in the post-war activities of the universities of the Western world, in the work of Unesco and other bodies, as the debate in framing the declaration on human rights in particular has shown, the beginnings of a consciousness of a common European tradition and culture. The Ciba Foundation opened in London last June gives practical expression to a sense of community in medical and chemical research, as well as witnessing to the extent to which the ideals of free communication and investigation are shared. Mr. Winston Churchill's speech on October 19 as chancellor of the University of Bristol, with its reference to the need for the universities to inculcate clear-cut thought about the themes of government and society, and Lord Justice Denning's recent lectures in the University of London on freedom under the law, are pointers in the same direction. Mr. Birley rightly stresses the difficulties which beset our relations with Western Europe, and seeks to engender a practical approach to such problems. Nevertheless, it does not appear that a common language is an essential condition, however much the use of such a language, with all it connotes, may contribute to the growth of a common culture and to the defence and enrichment of the great traditions which Western Europe inherits from its past.