

**Vic 175<sup>th</sup>**

**All-Years Reunion**

Saturday 15 October 2011

Welcome to grads from 8 decades.

Thanks to all those volunteers.

This week we conferred, in the presence of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, honoris causa, upon Henry Newton Rowell Jackman, Vic 5T3. At the dinner in Alumni Hall, Hal's cousin Alex Langford proposed a toast, in which he recalled that their common grandmother, Nellie Langford Rowell, graduated from Vic in 1896. This building would have been open for only four years, and Alex recalled how he heard Nellie's story of walking across the mud on a wooden plank to enter what was 'New' Vic at the time.

It was striking to have a piece of oral history which connected, through memory and testimony, that 19<sup>th</sup> C. past with this 21<sup>st</sup> C. present. We've enjoyed a long history that we're celebrating this week, which evokes some reflection upon Vic's identity and character over the years.

That we are now entering our 176<sup>th</sup> year makes us special, just because of age. We were the first non-Anglican educational institution in the British Empire to receive a royal charter. Our venerability is all the more striking when you consider that, at our founding, Charles Darwin had just come back from his voyage on *The Beagle* and would take another 23 years before publishing *The Origin of Species*. The young authors with reputations still to be made were, in England, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Charlotte and Emily Bronte; and in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

If you'd like a Canadian marker of our antiquity, listen to the CBC, happily announcing its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary: "CBC was there!", whenever 'there' was, as long as it was 1936 or after. When the CBC was born,

Vic was celebrating its centenary (as Ronald MacFeeters reminded us on Thursday night).

Age alone does not, however, create a distinctive identity. What makes Vic different from any other respectable university? We're federated with the University of Toronto, of course, but so are our two younger sisters, one to the south and the other to the west. We're in Toronto, but so are two other institutions, one of which is bold enough to bear the name of our founder. We do have special relationships, and distinctive buildings, including this one which the Board of Regents at one time considered wrecking instead of renovating.

But this afternoon I want to suggest that what makes Vic unique is not its mission statement, nor its legal status, nor its institutional arrangements. Rather, our distinctiveness is found in the collective experience of all of our members. A B B Moore said, "Education must take place in a community", and we can add that the lived experience of that community, cherished and retold over time, creates the living organism that is Victoria University. Perhaps that is why Northrop Frye remarked, at our sesquicentennial in 1986, that one's university education becomes better *after* graduation, when the effects of learning gather greater force and continue to ripple through life.

As we look forward to our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in twenty-five years, we want to do an even better job of creating conditions for lively communities within the Vic family. You will each have memories of your time here along with stories about how your education is a present reality, not just a past accomplishment like your B.A., B.Sc. or B.Comm. Our current students have their own stories and aspirations: they want to hear from you, to learn what kinds of lives Vic grads are living. You are inspiration for them: but even more, in getting to know their own thoughtful ambitions, you would find yourself moved and inspired. If someone you know is in need of the tonic of hope for the future, bring them to next year's Charter Day ceremony where Susan McDonald, our Registrar, presents accomplishment snapshots

of some of the 550 students who have won awards this past year.<sup>1</sup> Whoever crafted the metaphor of a ‘heart *bursting*’ with pride in a community must have anticipated the experience of this award ceremony.

So, one of our many resolutions this year is to forge an alumni alliance with Vic students. Chancellor Cecil has made this her own priority, and the offices of the Dean of Students and Alumni Affairs are collaborating on programs that will make those connections. But there are many ways to facilitate interactions across the several communities that make up Vic. I’ve been dreaming about how we might build a Virtual Victoria, a portal where you could meet Vic grads, the sung and the unsung, the famous, the notorious, classmates and roommates, the long dead and the newly graduated. Technology makes it possible to include photos, short bios, videos of performances and lectures. This might be a strange dream for someone who much prefers real reality to virtual reality, who is absolutely convinced of the importance of personal education, face-to-face, embodied learning. Nevertheless, I suspect that we could better facilitate human interaction by using the technological tools now available to share information. It would take a lot of work and a generous donor to fund such a project. But stay tuned: one day we just might surprise ourselves that a dream has become a reality, if only a virtual one.

Why do I dream, and scheme, about how we can do more to connect alumni with each other and with our students (who are, in the U of T Act, themselves alumni after a year of study!)? Partly because it’s fascinating work, to witness what happens when you put interesting people together. But more fundamentally, it’s because, in learning the stories that make up the collective life of this great community, we uncover the very identity of Victoria itself.

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<sup>1</sup> That’s close to 22% of the eligible population, compared to about 9% of the students in 1995

Pre-eminently, Victoria is known in all her daughters and sons, in their passions and convictions, their manifold achievements. In the measure that they regard Vic as their nourishing mother, their *alma mater*, in that measure do their characters and accomplishments constitute the character, the soul, of Victoria University.

Victoria, old as she is, does not *grow old*. She is not wearied by the infirmities of age. She outlasts the buildings which are but the physical foundations, material conditions, of her teaching and learning. The more sons and daughters she nourishes, the stronger and more vigorous she becomes. Vic's name shall never die from the old Ontario Strand, from this city and this country, from all countries blessed by her graduates.

Vivat, vivat Victoria!