

REMARKS AT VIC'S GALA CELEBRATION FOR THE 175th
ANNIVERSARY

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

13 OCTOBER 2011

Thanks to the participants and planners (Steve, Stephen; Alison, Valerie Story and all volunteers)

We're at the end of a wonderful evening, celebrating our history and our friendships. It strikes me that those two themes – history and relationships – are central to the identity of Victoria University. If you read the mission statements of universities around the world, they pretty well sound much the same, because we are all in the same kind of business. What makes an institution unique, though, is what no other institution has: and that is its own story, its own location, its own relationships. Space, time and relations, if you want only three words.

Let me say just a little about our identity over time in significantly changing circumstances, and about our relationships.

It's a trite observation that the world has seen rapid change over the course of our history (steam ships were just starting to make transatlantic crossings when our charter was granted). The world will continue to change. I shan't speculate on just how, though we can easily guess that technology will continue to shape experience, and distances between cultures will have shrunk even more in the next 25 years than they have in the last 25. But in these changes, Vic will continue to be Vic.

What does that mean? Victoria, though it has “stood since the time of the flood”, has itself changed in many ways. Our federation with the University of Toronto relocated us from the old Ontario strand at Cobourg to Toronto; our 19th century faculties of medicine and law are no longer. Once dancing was not permitted; nor alcohol, of

course, when some of you lived in residence (I speak of permission, not use!). And now we have our own Vic labels for two reds and two whites. More significantly, the 1974 memorandum with the University of Toronto brought an end to College departments, and over the years Vic made few of its own appointments in arts & science. At the end of the last century, the federated universities wrapped themselves in their earlier identities, but were (or so I believe) in danger of becoming halls of residence, classrooms, offices for some faculty appointed at U of T, and small schools of theology.

Yet in all these changes, Vic has still been Vic. That is because Victoria is more than a set of institutional arrangements; it has its own character and ethos that run through its history.

I am struck by two defining convictions that, from our foundation, have continued to shape us in changing circumstances. The first is that the commitment to the life of faith is also, and predominantly, the commitment to the search for truth. Inscribed upon this community are the words “The truth shall make you free”; though their origin is John’s Gospel, their meaning embraces every member. From our foundation there has been no test of orthodoxy for any member, but instead a welcome to all who would seek truth. That conviction made Vic an early advocate of science education, including evolutionary theory. The same conviction underlies the welcome that Emmanuel College has extended to the Muslim community, and its pioneering degree program in Muslim Studies.

The second conviction is about the importance of public service, especially global service. You can find the Vic mind and passion at work in the shaping of the public education system in this province (the work of Egerton Ryerson), in the social gospel movement that led to social democracy (J.S. Woodsworth studied here); in the Methodist education of women; and in the 19th century and early 20th century global reach of Vic graduates who not only preached the Word, but also founded schools, universities and hospitals, mainly in China, Korea and Japan. That global reach inspired Charles Trick Currelly,

Vic 1898, who brought the ages home (as his memoir has it) to found the Royal Ontario Museum. While we have come to appreciate that some of the reach was paternalistic, imperial, or insensitive, much of the work done by Vic grads abroad helped build stronger communities and relationships. I see our current emphasis upon international experience for Vic students, and our welcome of international students here, as a 21st century manifestation of the Vic spirit of global interest and concern.

Especially in the last decade, in this 21st century, Victoria has been able to profit from its special relationships, which give it even a clearer identity. Emmanuel has assumed an increasingly important role within the Toronto School of Theology, and attracted more doctoral students to fulfill its mission in academic theology. Emmanuel faculty, too, have good ties with Victoria College: some have taught in its programs, and this year Emmanuel is assisting with the new Ideas for the World program offered through the Office of the Dean of Students. You might have read about this latest venture in provoking intellectual curiosity and making social connections outside the formal curriculum.

The primary relationship for Victoria College is with the Faculty of Arts and Science; we can justly claim to have created for our students a first year experience that continues to attract amazingly talented students. Our connections, though, extend elsewhere in the University of Toronto. Vic is a pioneer in concurrent teacher education in partnership with OISE – and in that global reach tradition, we send students for internships in Beijing and now France, with Hong Kong next in line. From the Faculty of Music, neighbour across the road, we have over 100 students in our residences, where they participate fully in the life of Victoria College. This year, for the first time, a Music student is also a student in our new Vic One Norman Jewison stream for imagination and the arts. Faculty and researchers in the Faculty of Medicine contribute a great deal to our Augusta Stowe-Gullen stream, and some of its graduates go on to study medicine at U of T after their undergraduate programs.

And yet we can do more out of our history and defining convictions; we must do more. More of our students, not just the current 15%, should experience international exchanges; like the students we send to Oxford University each summer, more should enjoy internships to round out their education. We must collaborate with departments to carry the Vic experience of personal education beyond first year. We must strengthen our relationships with Music and Medicine. And it is time to forge new relationships out of our history. Vic is uniquely positioned to work with the ROM and other cultural institutions to mount the first undergraduate program in material culture in Canada. And not to forget the theologians, Emmanuel must have a doctoral program that proudly meets the high academic standards of the University of Toronto.

We will accomplish all this in keeping with our mission as a federated university: to use our special history, our defining convictions, to make the total experience of all our students the best that it can be. The prudence of our forebears created an endowment for Vic that will continue to grow in the next campaign through the generosity of our supporters. Those resources must be put into the service of the common good of the University of Toronto.

When you return for our bicentennial celebrations in 2036 (some of you will remember the sesqui in 1986, and many of you will remember this week in another 25 years) – when you return, we want you to be astonished by your old alma mater. We want you to say, “We knew she was good, and honourable, and fair; but we never guessed she had such ingenuity, such resourcefulness, such pride in and care for her daughters and sons”.

On this our 175th anniversary, I thank you for your own care for Vic. Cherish her, support her. Take pride in her many accomplishments. Have faith and hope in her future.

Thank you, and thank you again.