

ADDRESS

The Cornell Tradition: Freedom and Responsibility

By CARL L. BECKER

[The seventy-fifth anniversary of the signing of the charter of Cornell University was recognized on April 27, 1940, by the holding of a public meeting of the university and the delivery of the following address by Professor Becker.]

SEVENTY-FIVE years ago today Reuben E. Fenton, the Governor of the State of New York, signed a charter for Cornell University. The founding of the university was made possible, in great part, by the generosity of Ezra Cornell, a citizen of Ithaca. The first faculty was assembled, the university was organized, and instruction was begun under the far-sighted leadership of the first president, Andrew D. White; and in a relatively short time, as such things go, the new institution, as a result of the distinguished achievements of its faculty and the high quality of instruction offered to its students, acquired a reputation which placed it among the leading universities of the country.

In the process of acquiring a reputation Cornell acquired something better than a reputation, or rather it acquired something which is the better part of its reputation. It acquired a character. Corporations are not necessarily soulless; and of all corporations universities are the most likely to have, if not souls, at least personalities. Perhaps the reason is that universities are, after all, largely shaped by presidents and professors, and presidents and professors, especially if they are good ones, are fairly certain to be men of distinctive, not to say eccentric, minds and temperaments. A professor, as the German saying has it, is a man who thinks otherwise. Now an able and otherwise-thinking president, surrounded by able and otherwise-thinking professors, each resolutely thinking otherwise in his own manner, each astounded to find that the others, excellent fellows as he knows them in the main to be, so often refuse in matters of the highest import to be informed by knowledge or

The Cornell Tradition:

guided by reason—this is indeed always an arresting spectacle and may sometimes seem to be a futile performance. Yet it is not futile unless great universities are futile. For the essential quality of a great university derives from the corporate activities of such a community of otherwise-thinking men. By virtue of a divergence as well as of a community of interests, by the sharp impress of their minds and temperaments and eccentricities upon each other and upon their pupils, there is created a continuing tradition of ideas and attitudes and habitual responses that has a life of its own. It is this continuing tradition that gives to a university its corporate character or personality, that intangible but living and dynamic influence which is the richest and most durable gift any university can confer upon those who come to it for instruction and guidance.

Cornell has a character, a corporate personality, in this sense, an intellectual tradition by which it can be identified. The word which best symbolizes this tradition is freedom. There is freedom in all universities, of course—a great deal in some, much less in others; but it is less the amount than the distinctive quality and flavor of the freedom that flourishes at Cornell that is worth noting. The quality and flavor of this freedom is easier to appreciate than to define. Academic is not the word that properly denotes it. It includes academic freedom, of course, but it is something more, and at the same time something less, than that—something less formal, something less self-regarding, something more worldly, something, I will venture to say, a bit more impudent. It is, in short, too little schoolmasterish to be defined by a formula or identified with a professional code. And I think the reason is that Cornell was not founded by schoolmasters or designed strictly according to existing educational models. The founders, being both in their different ways rebels against convention, wished to establish not merely another university but a somewhat novel kind of university. Mr. Cornell desired to found an institution in which any person could study any subject. Mr. White wished to found a center of learning where mature scholars and men of the world, emancipated from the clerical tradition and inspired by the scientific idea, could pursue their studies uninhibited by the cluttered routine or the petty preoccupations of the conventional cloistered academic life. In Mr. White's view the character and quality of the university would depend upon the men selected for its faculty: devoted to the general aim of learning and teaching, they could be depended upon to devise their own ways and means of achieving that aim. The emphasis was, therefore, always on men rather than on methods; and during Mr.

Freedom and Responsibility

White's administration and that of his immediate successors there was assembled at Cornell, from the academic and the non-academic world, a group of extraordinary men—erudite or not as the case might be, but at all events as highly individualized, as colorful, as disconcertingly original and amiably eccentric a group of men as was ever got together for the launching of a new educational venture. It is in the main to the first president and this early group of otherwise-thinking men that Cornell is indebted for its tradition of freedom.

Many of those distinguished scholars and colorful personalities were before my time. Many of those whom I was privileged to know are now gone. A few only are still with us—worthy bearers of the tradition, indefatigable in the pursuit of knowledge, in the service of Cornell, in the promotion of the public good, young men still, barely eighty or a little more. Present or absent, the influence of this original group persists, and is attested by stories of their sayings and exploits that still circulate, a body of ancient but still living folklore. It is a pity that some one has not collected and set down these stories; properly arranged they would constitute a significant mythology, a Cornell epic which, whether literally true or only characteristic, would convey far better than official records in deans' offices the real significance of this institution. Some of these stories I have heard, and for their illustrative value will venture to recall a few of them. Like Herodotus, I give them as they were related to me without vouching for their truth, and like Herodotus, I hope no god or hero will take offense at what I say.

There is the story of the famous professor of history, passionate defender of majority rule, who, foreseeing that he would be outvoted in the faculty on the question of the location of Risley Hall, declared with emotion that he felt so strongly on the subject that he thought he ought to have two votes. The story of another professor of history who, in reply to a colleague who moved as the sense of the faculty that during war time professors should exercise great discretion in discussing public questions, declared that for his part he could not understand how any one could have the Prussian arrogance to suppose that every one could be made to think alike, or the Pomeranian stupidity to suppose that it would be a good thing if they could. The story of the eccentric and lovable professor of English who suggested that it would be a good thing, during the winter months when the wind sweeps across the hill, if the university would tether a shorn lamb on the slope south of the library building; who gave all of his students a grade of eighty-five, on the theory that they deserved at least that for patiently listening to him

The Cornell Tradition:

while he amused himself reading his favorite authors aloud, and for so amiably submitting to the ironical and sarcastic comments—too highly wrought and sophistically phrased in latinized English to be easily understood by them—with which he berated their indifference to good literature. There is the story of the professor who reluctantly agreed to serve as dean of a school on condition that he be relieved of the irksome task at a certain date; who, as the date approached with no successor appointed, repeatedly reminded the president that he would retire on the date fixed; and who, on that date, although no successor had meantime been appointed, cleared out his desk and departed; so that, on the day following, students and heads of departments found the door locked and no dean to affix the necessary signature to the necessary papers. A school without a dean—strange interlude indeed, rarely occurring in more decorous institutions, I should think; but one of those things that could happen in Cornell. And there is the story of the professor of entomology, abruptly leaving a faculty meeting. It seems that the discussion of a serious matter was being sidetracked by the rambling, irrelevant, and would-be facetious remarks of a dean who was somewhat of a wag, when the professor of entomology, not being a wag and being quite fed up, suddenly reached for his hat and as he moved to the door delivered himself thus: “Mr. President, I beg to be excused; I refuse to waste my valuable time any longer listening to this damned nonsense.” And even more characteristic of the Cornell tradition is a story told of the first president, Andrew D. White. It is related that the lecture committee had brought to Cornell an eminent authority to give, in a certain lecture series, an impartial presentation of the Free-Silver question. Afterwards Mr. White, who had strong convictions on the subject, approached the chairman of the committee and asked permission to give a lecture in that series in reply to the eminent authority. But the chairman refused, saying in substance: “Mr. President, the committee obtained the best man it could find to discuss this question. It is of the opinion that the discussion was a fair and impartial presentation of the arguments on both sides. The committee would welcome an address by you on any other subject, or on this subject on some other occasion, but not on this subject in this series in reply to the lecture just given.” It is related that Mr. White did not give a lecture on that subject in that series; it is also related that Mr. White became a better friend and more ardent admirer of the chairman of the committee than he had been. It seems that Mr. White really liked to have on his faculty men of that degree of independence and resolution.

Freedom and Responsibility

These stories are in the nature of little flash lights illuminating the Cornell temper. A little wild, at times, the Cornell temper; riding, not infrequently, as one may say, high, wide, and handsome. Some quality in it that is native to these states, some pungent tang of the soil, some acrid smell of the frontier and the open spaces—something of the genuine American be-damned-to-you attitude. But I should like to exhibit the Cornell tradition in relation to a more general and at the same time a more concrete situation; and I will venture to do this, even risking a lapse from good taste, by relating briefly my own experience in coming to Cornell and in adjusting myself to its peculiar climate of opinion.

My first contact with the Cornell tradition occurred in December 1916, at the meeting of the American Historical Association at Cincinnati, where Professor Charles Hull invited me to come to his room in the hotel to meet his colleagues of the history group. Intimations had reached me that I was, as the saying is, being considered at Cornell for a position in European history, so that I was rather expecting to be offered a job, at a certain salary, on condition that I should teach a certain number of courses, assume certain administrative duties, and the like. I took it for granted that Cornell would handle these matters in the same businesslike way that other universities did. But I found that Professor Hull had a manner and a method all his own. He did not offer me a job—nothing as crude as that; he invited me, on behalf of his colleagues, to join the faculty of Cornell University. The difference may be subtle, but I found it appreciable. On the chance that I might have formed a too favorable opinion of Cornell, Professor Hull hastened to set me right by itemizing, in great detail, the disadvantages which, from a disinterested point of view, there might be in being associated with the institution, as well as, more doubtfully, certain possible advantages. Among the disadvantages, according to Professor Hull, was the salary; but he mentioned, somewhat apologetically, a certain sum which I could surely count on, and intimated that more might be forthcoming if my decision really depended upon it. By and large, from Professor Hull's elaborate accounting, I gathered that Cornell, as an educational institution, was well over in the red, but that, such as it was, with all its sins of omission heavy upon it, it would be highly honored if I could so far condescend to its needs as to associate myself with it.

There apparently, so far as Professor Hull was concerned, the matter rested. Nothing was said of courses to be taught, minimum hours of instruction, or the like mundane matters. In the end I had to inquire what the home work would be—how many hours and what courses

The Cornell Tradition:

I would be required to teach. Professor Hull seemed mildly surprised at the question. "Why," he said, "I don't know that anything is *required* exactly. It has been customary for the Professor of Modern History to give to the undergraduates a general survey course in modern history, and sometimes if he deems it advisable, a more advanced course in some part of it in which he is especially interested, and in addition to supervise, to whatever extent may seem to him desirable, the work of such graduate students as may come to him. We had rather hoped that you would be disposed to do something of this sort, but I don't know that I can say that anything specific in the way of courses is really *required*. We have assumed that whatever you found convenient and profitable to do would be sufficiently advantageous to the university and satisfactory to the students." Well, there it was. Such a magnification of the professor, such a depreciation of the university, had never before, in similar circumstances, come my way. After a decent interval I condescended to join the faculty of Cornell University. And why not? To receive a good salary for doing as I pleased—what could be better? The very chance I had been looking for all my life.

And so in the summer of 1917 I came to Cornell, prepared to do as I pleased, wondering what the catch was, supposing that Professor Hull's amiable attitude must be either an eccentric form of ironic understatement or else a super-subtle species of bargaining technique. Anyway I proposed to try it out. I began to do as I pleased, expecting some one would stop me. No one did. I went on and on and still no one paid any attention. Personally I was cordially received, but officially no one made any plans to entertain me, to give me the right steer, to tell me what I would perhaps find it wise to do or to refrain from doing. Professor Hull's attitude did seem after all to represent, in some idealized fashion, the attitude of Cornell University. There was about the place a refreshing sense of liberation from the prescribed and the insistent, an atmosphere of casual urbanity, a sense of leisurely activity going on, with time enough to admire the view, and another day coming. No one seemed to be in a hurry, except Mr. Burr of course, and sometimes perhaps Mr. Ranum. But that was their affair—a response, no doubt, to the compulsion of some inner daemon. At least I saw no indication that deans or heads of departments were exerting pressure or pushing any one around. Certainly no head of the history department was incommoding me, for the simple reason, if for no other, that there didn't seem to be any history department, much less a head. There were seven professors of history, and when we met we called ourselves the "History

Freedom and Responsibility

Group," but no one of us had any more authority than any other. On these occasions Professor Hull presided, for no reason I could discover except that we met in his office because it was the largest and most convenient. Whatever the History Group was it was not a department. If there was any department of history, then there were six; in which case I was the sole member, and presumably the head, of the department of Modern European History. The only evidence of this was that twice a year I received a communication from the president: one requesting me to prepare the budget, which consisted chiefly in setting down the amount of my own salary, an item which the president presumably already knew more about than I did; the other a request for a list of the courses given and the number of students, male and female, enrolled during the year. I always supposed, therefore, that there were six departments of history, each manned by one professor, except the department of American history, which ran to the extraordinary number of two. I always supposed so, that is, until one day Professor Hull said he wasn't sure there were, officially speaking, any departments of history at all; the only thing he was sure of was that there were seven professors of history. The inner truth of the matter I never discovered. But the seven professors were certainly members of the Faculty of Arts, the Graduate Faculty, and the University Faculty since they were often present at the meetings of these faculties. They were also, I think, members of the Faculty of Political Science, a body that seemed to have no corporeal existence since it never met, but that nevertheless seemed to be something—a rumor perhaps, a disembodied tradition or vestigial remainder never seen, but lurking about somewhere in the more obscure recesses of Goldwin Smith Hall. I never had the courage to ask Professor Hull about the university—about its corporate administrative existence, I mean—for fear he might say that he wasn't sure it had any: it was on the cards that the university might turn out to be nothing more than forty or fifty professors.

At all events, the administration (I assumed on general principles that there was one somewhere) wasn't much in evidence and exerted little pressure. There was a president (distinguished scholar and eminent public figure) who presided at faculty meetings and the meeting of the Board of Trustees, and always delivered the Commencement address. But the president, so far as I could judge, was an umpire rather than a captain, and a Gallup poll would have disclosed the fact that some members of the community regarded him as an agreeable but purely decorative feature, his chief function being, as one of my col-

The Cornell Tradition:

leagues said, "to obviate the difficulties created by his office." I never shared this view. I have a notion that the president obviated many difficulties, especially for the faculty, that were in no sense created by his office. There were also deans, but not many or much looked up to for any authority they had or were disposed to exercise. Even so, the general opinion seemed to be that the appointment of professors to the office was a useless waste of talent. "Why is it," asked Professor Nichols, "that as soon as a man has demonstrated that he has an unusual knowledge of books, some one immediately insists on making him a bookkeeper?" In those days the dean of the College, at all events, was scarcely more than a bookkeeper—a secretary elected by the faculty to keep its records and administer the rules enacted by it.

The rules were not many or much displayed or very oppressive—the less so since in so many cases they were conflicting, so that one could choose the one which seemed most suitable. The rules seemed often in the nature of miscellaneous conveniences lying about for a professor to use if he needed something of the sort. An efficient administrator, if there had been one, would no doubt have found much that was ill-defined and haphazard in the rules. Even to a haphazard professor, like myself, it often seemed so, for if I inquired what the authority for this or that rule was, the answer would perhaps be that it wasn't a rule but only a custom; and upon further investigation the custom, as like as not, would turn out to be two other customs, varying according to the time and the professor. Even in the broad distribution of powers the efficient administrator might have found much to discontent his orderly soul. I was told that according to the Cornell statutes the university is subject to the control of the Board of Trustees, but that according to the laws of the state it is subject to the Board of Regents. It may or may not be so. I never pressed the matter. I was advised not to, on the theory that at Cornell it always creates trouble when any one looks up the statutes. The general attitude, round and round about, seemed to be that the university would go on very well indeed so long as no one paid too much attention to the formal authority with which any one was invested. And, in fact, in no other university that I am acquainted with does formal authority count for so little in deciding what shall or shall not be done.

In this easy-going, loose-jointed institution the chances seemed very good indeed for me to do as I pleased. Still there was an obvious limit. The blest principle of doing as one pleased presumably did not reach to the point of permitting me to do nothing. Presumably, the general

Freedom and Responsibility

expectation would be that I would at least be pleased to do something, and the condition of doing something was that I alone had to decide what that something should be. This was for me something of a novelty. Hitherto many of the main points—the courses to be given, the minimum hours of instruction, the administrative duties to be assumed—had mostly been decided for me. I had only to do as I was told. This might be sometimes annoying, but it was never difficult. Mine not to question why, mine not to ask whether what I was doing was worth while or the right thing to do. It was bound to be the right thing to do since some one else, some one in authority, so decided. But now, owing to the great freedom at Cornell, I was in authority and had to decide what was right and worth while for me to do. This was not so easy, and I sometimes tried to shift the responsibility to Professor Burr, by asking him whether what I proposed to do was the right thing to do. But Professor Burr wasn't having any. He would spin me a long history, the upshot of which was that what I proposed to do had sometimes been done and sometimes not, so that whatever I did I was sure to have plenty of precedents on my side. And if I tried to shift the responsibility to Professor Hull I had no better luck. He too would spin me a history, not longer than that of Professor Burr, but only taking longer to relate, and the conclusion which he reached was always the same: the conclusion always was, "and so, my dear boy, you can do as you please."

In these devious ways I discovered that I could do as I pleased all right. But in the process of discovering this I also discovered something else. I discovered what the catch was. The catch was that, since I was free to do as I pleased, I was responsible for what it was that I pleased to do. The catch was that, with all my great freedom, I was in some mysterious way still very much bound. Not bound by orders imposed upon me from above or outside, but bound by some inner sense of responsibility, by some elemental sense of decency or fair play or mere selfish impulse to justify myself; bound to all that comprised Cornell University, to the faculty that had so politely invited me to join it without imposing any obligations, to the amiable deans who never raised their voices or employed the imperative mood, to the distinguished president and the Board of Trustees in the offing who every year guaranteed my salary without knowing precisely what, if anything, I might be doing to earn it—to all these I was bound to justify myself by doing, upon request and in every contingency, the best I was capable of doing. And thus I found myself working, although without interference and under no outside compulsion, with more concentration, with greater satisfaction, and,

The Cornell Tradition:

I dare say, with better effect, than I could otherwise have done. I relate my own experience, well aware that it cannot be in all respects typical, since it is characteristic of Cornell to permit a wide diversity in departmental organization and procedure. Yet this very diversity derives from the Cornell tradition which allows a maximum of freedom and relies so confidently upon the sense of personal responsibility for making a good use of it.

I should like to preserve intact the loose-jointed administrative system and the casual freedoms of the old days. But I am aware that it is difficult to do so in the present-day world in which the complex and impersonal forces of a technological society tend to diminish the importance of the individual and to standardize his conduct and thinking, a society in which life often seems impoverished by the overhead charges required to maintain it. Universities cannot remain wholly unaffected by this dominant trend in society. As they become larger and more complicated a more reticulated organization is called for, rules multiply and become more uniform, and the members of the instructing staff, turned out as a standardized article in mass production by our graduate schools, are more subdued to a common model. Somewhat less than formerly, it seems, is the professor a man who thinks otherwise. More than formerly the professor and the promoter are in costume and deportment if not of imagination all compact; and every year it becomes more difficult, in the market place or on the campus, to distinguish the one from the other at ninety yards by the naked eye. On the whole we all deplore this trend towards standardization, but in the particular instance the reasons for it are often too compelling to be denied. Nevertheless, let us yield to this trend only as a necessity and not as something good in itself. Let us hold, in so far as may be, to the old ways, to the tradition in which Cornell was founded and by which it has lived.

But after all, one may ask, and it is a pertinent question, why is so much freedom desirable? Do we not pay too high a price for it in loss of what is called efficiency? Why should any university pay its professors a good salary, and then guarantee them so much freedom to follow their own devices? Surely not because professors deserve, more than other men, to have their way of life made easy. Not for any such trivial reason. Universities are social institutions, and should perform a social service. There is indeed no reason for the existence of Cornell, or of any university, or for maintaining the freedom of learning and teaching which they insist upon, except in so far as they serve to maintain and promote the humane and rational values which are essential to the

Freedom and Responsibility

preservation of democratic society, and of civilization as we understand it. Democratic society, like any other society, rests upon certain assumptions as to what is supremely worth while. It assumes the worth and dignity and creative capacity of the human personality as an end in itself. It assumes that it is better to be governed by persuasion than by compulsion, and that good will and humane dealing are better than a selfish and a contentious spirit. It assumes that man is a rational creature, and that to know what is true is a primary value upon which in the long run all other values depend. It assumes that knowledge and the power it confers should be employed for promoting the welfare of the many rather than for safeguarding the interests of the few.

These are the rational and the humane values which are inseparable from democracy if democracy is to be of any worth. Yet they are older than democracy and are not dependent upon it. They have a life of their own apart from any form of government or type of civilization. They are the values which, since the time of Buddha and Confucius, Solomon and Zoroaster, Socrates and Plato and Jesus, men have commonly recognized as good even when they have denied them in practice, the values which men have commonly celebrated in the saints and martyrs they have agreed to canonize. They are the values which readily lend themselves to rational justification, but need no justification. No man ever yet found it necessary to justify a humane act by saying that it was really a form of oppression, or a true statement by swearing that it was a sacred lie. But every departure from the rational and the humane, every resort to force and deception, whether in civil government, in war, in the systematic oppression of the many or the liquidation of the few, calls for justification, at best by saying that the lesser evil is necessary for the greater good, at worst by resorting to that hypocrisy which, it has been well said, is the tribute that vice customarily pays to virtue.

In the long history of civilization the rational and humane values have sometimes been denied in theory, and persistently and widely betrayed in fact; but not for many centuries has the denial in theory or the betrayal in fact been more general, more ominous, or more disheartening than in our own day. Half the world is now controlled by self-inspired autocratic leaders who frankly accept the principle that might makes right, that justice is the interest of the stronger; leaders who regard the individual as of no importance except as an instrument to be used, with whatever degree of brutality may be necessary, for the realization of their shifting and irresponsible purposes; leaders who subor-

The Cornell Tradition

dinate reason to will, identify law and morality with naked force as an instrument of will, and accord value to the disinterested search for truth only in so far as it may be temporarily useful in attaining immediate political ends. If these are indeed the values we cherish, then we too should abandon democracy, we too should close our universities or degrade them, as in many countries whose most distinguished scholars now live in exile they have been degraded, to the level of servile instruments in the support of state policy. But if we still cherish the democratic way of life, and the rational and humane values which are inseparable from it, then it is of supreme importance that we should preserve the tradition of freedom of learning and teaching without which our universities must cease to be institutions devoted to the disinterested search for truth and the increase of knowledge as ends in themselves desirable.

These considerations make it seem to me appropriate, on this memorial occasion, to recall the salient qualities which have given Cornell University its peculiar character and its high distinction; and, in conclusion, to express the hope that Cornell in the future, whatever its gains, whatever its losses, may hold fast to its ancient tradition of freedom and responsibility—freedom for the scholar to perform his proper function, restrained and guided by the only thing that makes such freedom worth while, the scholar's intellectual integrity, the scholar's devotion to the truth of things as they are and to good will and humane dealing among men.

