

COME DOWN TO KEW IN LILAC-TIME

An Address by Professor Helen G. Edmonds of Durham, North Carolina  
at the Winter Quarter Commencement of  
The Ohio State University  
March 18, 1983

Mr. President, the Reverend Clergy, Members of the Board of Regents, members of the Administration, Members of the Faculty, Graduating Classes, Students, Alumni and Friends: Permit me a special note of tribute to President Jennings who so nobly leads this University accentuating the values inherent in serving people for a lifetime; the same tribute to Mrs. Jennings who shares his high dreams. I tender a note of tribute to Dr. Ann Pruitt, Associate Dean of the Graduate School, and the same to Dr. Frank W. Hale, Jr., Vice Provost, Office of Minority Affairs.

I cannot tell you how delighted I am to be here to participate in the Commencement exercises. Although thirty-seven years have passed since I received my degree here, I feel wonderfully at home in this setting. I hope you love O.S.U. as much as I do. When I was here last November, I paid my Alma Mater this tribute:

As onward the years swiftly roll,  
The Ohio State University lives in memory sweet.  
I bring her my trophies whatever they be,  
And lay them with joy at her feet.

I extend my heartiest congratulations to the members of the graduating classes as well as to their parents and loved ones. This day marks the fulfillment of a dream of greatest importance for all of you. Whether you begin a career after today or pursue further study, you have the congratulations of all of us.

A speaker is permitted to raise issues in an address knowing full well that within the constraints of time the answers may involve an academic quarter of serious consideration. And my dear graduates, equally within the constraints of time, please realize that I come from the deep South where, in our vocal melody, it takes us five minutes to say "Good Morning."

My subject is: COME DOWN TO KEW IN LILAC-TIME: IT ISN'T FAR FROM LONDON.

In his poem, The Barrel Organ, Alfred Noyes, the great poet, describes London:

"... The troubadour begins to thrill the golden street in this city where the sun sinks low, in this city where dead dreams go... O Verdi! For there La Traviata sighs another sadder song; and there, Il Trovatore cries a tale of deeper wrong... And, in all the gaudy busses, there are scores of weary feet marking time with a dull mechanical beat. And a thousand hearts are plunging to a love they'll never meet... There's a thief with a face of frozen stone, in this city where the sun sinks low. There's man of business with a balance of his own. There's a clerk, there's a butcher, all crammed and jammed in busses - - and they're each of them alone. In the land where dead dreams go..."

Six miles from London, in Surrey County, is Kew Garden, England's famous botanical garden. In lilting rhythm, Noyes describes the wonders of Kew Garden for the man or woman who needed moments of reflection, for those who wanted to dream anew. He writes, "In Kew Garden, Cherry trees are seas of bloom and soft perfume, and Oh, so near to London. And there they say when dawn is high and all the world's a blaze of sky; the cuckoo, though very shy, will sing a song for London. The Dorian nightingale is rare and yet they say you will hear him there, at Kew in lilac-time. For Noah hardly knew a bird of any kind that isn't heard at Kew... And when the rose begins to pout and all the chestnut spires are out, you will hear the rest without a doubt, all chorussing for London. Come down to Kew in lilac-time, and you shall wonder hand in hand with love in summer's wonderland." London is the city where dead dreams go; but in Kew Garden, dreams are born anew.

The encompassing sweep of the Industrial Revolution in England in the nineteenth century was brought about through the remarkable development of the natural and physical sciences. Science and its handmaiden technology had brought forth power machinery that would revolutionize the factory system, industry, transportation, and shipping. While the city of Liverpool became the exemplification of England's industrial and commercial growth - - the importation of raw materials and the exportation of manufactured goods - - it was the city of London, the intellectual center as well as the manufacturing



center, which became the symbol of the human and social consequences of that tremendous phenomenon. London was judged to be the microcosm of every station and level in life. The city reflected all the ugly human experiences and struggles for existence that a laboring class faced. I view Alfred Noyes' city of London as having symbolic meaning for our times and special meaning for several aspects of our national life today.

Science and Its Handmaiden, the Computer, in the London of Our Times

For more than thirty years, our daily lives have been affected by this new technology, the computer. It has made us numbers and symbols in the local and national government. Psychology and psychiatry are utilizing computer data to achieve personality profiles in order to predict absolutes in human behavioral responses. It has invaded the field of education as instructional instruments. Nothing has made an impact so profoundly during the last half of the twentieth century as has the computer. Time Magazine, January 3, 1983, paid recognition to the fact when it chose not to present "The Man of the Year," but made its cover page "The Machine of the Year."

Many of my generation suffer "computer phobia," blink and become catatonic when the computer is mentioned. We are made to feel downright ignorant when we see children in the elementary grades using the computer, and youth in their teens either building their own or becoming computer experts. The computer-non-accepters find their solace in questions: Can the computer build a Stradivarius? Did Herodotus, Dickens or Einstein need a computer. Whenever science has made giant steps in technological development, the humanities and the social sciences ask the same questions: Will it usurp the foundation of the arts which liberate man's soul and let him view the magnificence of the creation from Mount Olympus? Will it dim the luster of creative conversation? I find no disharmony between science, the humanities, the social sciences, and the genuine free spirit of inquiry. The computer is here to stay and moving into its third or fourth generation.

I would say to the young computer enthusiast who shouts: "The computer language is in and the English language is out," that such is a mistaken conversion. The formal structure of the English language comes first. And any attempt to substitute the standard

English language to suit one's own convenience - - whether it be Cajun English, black English, Pidgeon Spanish, Gullah dialect, or even the sophisticated computer language, the process will not succeed. Standard English is the gateway to college admission through the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the gateway to graduate school admission through the Graduate Record Examination, the gateway to many professional schools such as the Legal Aptitude Test and Medical Aptitude Test, and rapidly becoming the gateway to the teaching profession through the NCATE examination. While these gateways find far, far too many people in higher education wanting to dilute and/or abolish them, please know that standard English is the language of employment and the language of promotion. Keep the computer language in perspective.

#### Employment in the London of Our Times

The picture is not rosy for the graduates of 1983. Unemployment currently stands at more than 10 per cent nationwide; and 20 per cent for minorities. The questions which face our nation and baffle some of the economists are: Is the high per cent of unemployment a temporary phenomenon or is it to become a permanent blot upon our national labor escutcheon? Are we tending toward a permanent change in our economic structure - - while witnessing the passing of humming plants and belching smokestacks so often associated with heavy industry - - and becoming an economy of rendering services? The jury is still out on these answers.

My best news to you consist of three recommendations:

1. Go where the job openings are as soon as they break. Your generation can master change of geographical locations. Change is what you know best. You are a breed apart.

2. If it is necessary to re-tool with some special courses, proceed forthwith to do so. It may be necessary to find these skills at a comprehensive community college. You graduate today with a flexible mind. You will master that which will give you employment until your special opening arrives.



3. The "world out there" needs from the academic world a commitment to academic excellence. You are graduating today with a developed capacity to think, to continue to learn, to analyze, to reflect, and to discriminate between the mediocre and the excellent. Utilize these talents wherever your path may lead.

The Passionate Revolutionary Movements of the 1960's and 1970's

During the past two decades, there were several revolutionary movements at work. They related largely to American minorities.

American blacks pursued with vigor and urgency their desire to become a part of the American dream and enjoy its benefits. The rise of Martin Luther King, Jr. opened a new and dramatic chapter for the unhampered right to vote and for elimination of segregation in places of public accommodation. It was a long trail marred with suffering and sorrow.

There followed in the early 1960's the Free Speech Movement: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). These were white students clamoring for participatory democracy, the right of students to have a major say in decision-making. Few institutions escaped the wrath of the movement.

Another facet of the youth impulse was the Hippie Movement. They sought to create for themselves a utopian society and requested of the outside world to be left alone - - "to do their own thing."

The Puerto Ricans established the "Young Lords" in New York City, Newark and Chicago. The Mexican Americans of the Southwest found their leader in Cesar Chavez who sought to organize labor unions and begged American housewives not to buy lettuce, grapes and celery harvested by non-union labor. He gave to these lowly Mexican Americans the hope of enjoying the economic rights of the American dream. There were the American Indians confined largely to the reservations. They ran-sacked the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D. C. and the climax of their losing efforts was witnessed in the shoot-out at Wounded Knee.

The last passionate revolutionary impulse was the Feminist Movement which championed the rights of women in a society where employment patterns denied them equal opportunity. They secured from the Congress "affirmative action" and the Equal Rights Amendment, but failed to secure ERA's two-thirds ratification by the states.

What did all of these movements mean to American life? One central theme emerges: they desired more democratic participation in American society and the enjoyment of its benefits. Tragic it was that the resisters to these movements failed to perceive the central issue. Rather, they concentrated on the excesses - - and such excesses generated a backlash which produced a deep, profound conservatism in the national climate of the London of our Times. Frankly, I have never heard or read of a neatly-packaged orderly revolution.

These movements are now behind us. Young people can be proud to know that the results of their activities broadened the democratic processes of government and broadened the mission of higher education.

#### Constitutional Development in Our London

The American society has responded to the moral claim of human equality. Western morality presses the concept. To our nation's credit, we have done some noble things to defend liberty and to reduce inequalities. During the past thirty years, the Supreme Court through its interpretations of the Constitution and the Congress through its legislative enactments have added monumental landmarks to our national heritage of a free and democratic society.

In spite of these giant strides - - so belatedly taken - - racism in our land is all pervasive and it is practiced by and in all ethnic groups in our pluralistic society. No ethnic group remains blameless. The Constitution of the United States cannot cure racism. It can, and does, limit its manifest "patterns and practices" in many aspects of our lives.



There are anomalies within its patterns and practices: the die-hard resisters who refuse to accept the Constitution as a living and evolving document, and those young people who loudly champion a national birthday for Martin Luther King, Jr., shout his principles of universal brotherhood and the elimination of segregation, and now turn their backs upon his rich legacy and systematically seek to re-institute segregation in places and under circumstances where and when it is not necessary -- and all under the guide of ethnic identity. Come down to Kew; it isn't far from London.

To further becloud the issues of our contemporary life, there is the political theory afloat which holds that government policies of the last fifty years have encouraged rising expectations in our society beyond the constitutional system's capacity to match these rising expectations. I doubt if the Founding Fathers were trying to build a mass democracy as De Tocqueville envisioned, but the evolution of our constitutional development has brought it to bear. So, we must make the "American System" work. For upon the results of the American experience depends, in large measure, the future not only of Americans, themselves, but even, perhaps, the future of the whole human race.

Nearly everyone who will have leadership positions in the United States Government during the next fifty years is somewhere in our higher education establishment. This includes you graduates today. What kind of thinking will The Ohio State University graduates bring to their world? Let the difference this University has made in your life make a difference in the hopes and opportunities of all "out there." Prove that the blessings of liberty can indeed make the community of men and women more just, more loving, and more joyous for all.

#### Summary

To those who come after you and to those among you who will go on to advanced and professional degrees, I implore you to stay the course regardless of the sacrifices. My days at The Ohio State University were not blessed with finance. I had exactly 50¢ per day for food. I used 15¢ for breakfast at the Old Student Union. With my 35¢, I chose a more elegant setting, the Pomerene Refectory beside Mirror Lake. I was never envious of others who preceded me down the cafeteria line with money enough to select

a shrimp cocktail and order a sirloin steak. I came to this University with one purpose in mind and that was to catch every golden nugget that fell from the lips of my professors and to read every book and article on their reading lists, and beyond. The 50¢ a day was totally unimportant. For my heart was marching to the beat of another drummer. In that tomorrow when my training would be completed here, the choice of the menu would be mine. I implore you to stay the course.

Truly, Alfred Noyes' poem has symbolic reference for our times. It speaks to the issues of higher education where science, the humanities and the social sciences seek a common ground for achieving the whole person; to the computerized society which could produce the alienated man; and, to the urban cities where dead dreams go, to the thousands of unemployed marching feet with a dull mechanical beat, weary in the sunset glow. It speaks to the rapidly drying up of our national will to face up to the seriousness of the contemporary problems inherent in the nation's unfinished agenda; and it speaks to the human spirit caught up in the baffling social, political and economic forces of disillusionment in the London of our times. May God bless you and make His face to shine upon you, and keep you.

"There is a place where Cherry trees are seas of bloom and sweet perfume, and Oh, so near to London... And there they say when dawn is high and all the world's a blaze of sky; the cuckoo, though shy, will sing a song for London. The Dorian nightingale is rare and yet they say you will hear him there, at Kew at lilac-time. For Noah hardly knew a bird of any kind that isn't heard at Kew... And when the rose begins to pout and all the chestnuts spires are out, you will hear the rest without a doubt chorussing for London. Come down to Kew in lilac-time; it isn't far from London."

Dreams are born anew in Kew.