ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

IN ANNAPOLIS

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

Supplement to the Bulletin

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

APRIL, 1940

Founded as King William's School, 1696

Chartered as St. John's College, 1784

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THE REGISTRAR
St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland

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The Governor of the State of Maryland, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Delegates of the Maryland General Assembly and the Judges of the Maryland Court of Appeals are *ex officio members* of the Board.

Report of the President

The third year of the St. John's Program has been increasingly punctuated by the visits of those who wished to observe its operation in daily practice. The visitors have come singly and in delegations. They have included administrative officers and teachers from other colleges of liberal arts, undergraduates from other institutions, headmasters and principals from the secondary schools. A year ago they came to witness "a novel educational experiment." Most of this year's visitors are aware that the St. John's Program is neither novel nor experimental. Most of them are as aware as we are that the elective system which we have discarded is novel, that it is experimental, and that the experiment has failed. Most of them are aware that St. John's is attempting to restore liberal education, of the sort once available in American colleges of liberal arts. But the questions they ask soon convince us that they are hazy as to what end such education had in view. Since that end dictated the instructional means we are employing, these means have been often misread. We have been heartily congratulated for doing things which we are not doing at all.

Individually, our visitors have been most welcome. Collectively, they have by their very number posed serious problems. Our faculty have gladly recognized the professional obligation to tell other teachers what they were doing. They are fully aware that teachers, like doctors, cannot have trade secrets. But they are also aware that neither the teaching art nor the medical art can be properly practised in a goldfish bowl. We have had therefore to place certain restrictions on the visiting of classes. That much of the problem is not hard to handle. What is disturbing, though understandable, is how little many of our visitors have learned from their visits. In many cases they would have learned far more by devoting the same amount of time to the right reading.

If we have often failed to instruct our visitors, at least they have instructed us. Their difficulties have reminded us how

persistently those who, like ourselves, dedicate themselves to liberal education, substitute means for ends. No matter how earnestly St. John's College strives to avoid that substitution, we shall not be exempt from the common danger. It behooves us not to assume complacently that because we pledged ourselves to a clear purpose three years ago, we cannot be confronted with a broken pledge, or worse yet, a broken purpose. Moreover, even if we have kept the faith, there is still advantage to be got from a clear restatement now. During these three years both the Board and the faculty of St. John's College have gained experience relevant to that common purpose, experience which throws abundant light on the end at which both aim. I therefore invite the Board of Visitors and Governors to reflect again, with us in the faculty, on the end of liberal education, as well as upon the means we at St. John's are using to reach that end.

For more than two thousand years our Western civilization has drawn sustenance from liberal education. That education, like the civilization it sustained, has had its dark ages and its rebirths; but wherever and whenever it has flourished healthily, its declared purpose has been to liberate the human intellect through the practice of the liberal arts. Wherever and whenever it has flourished, it has recognized these arts as the arts of thinking, of using symbols, and particularly as the arts of using words and numbers. It has recognized that man, as man, has intellectual powers, which, like his physical powers, can be brought through exercise to operate well, and even to operate habitually well. To develop these powers into actual operations, then into good operations, and finally into habitually good operations has been the end of liberal education. To effect this end, colleges of liberal arts were set up in Europe and in America. Such colleges clearly did not hold a monopoly of the liberal arts, since the arts of thinking are practised well or badly by all men. They were set up in order to expedite the transformation of intellectual powers into intellectual habits.

In order to practise the liberal arts, the colleges selected subject matters upon which they might be profitably exercised. For obvious reasons, the most basic of these subject matters, in terms of the objective, were languages and mathematics. But

the aim of the college of liberal arts was not to turn out professionally trained mathematicians or professionally trained linguists. The aim was to develop in men the power to use mathematical and linguistic symbols well on whatever problem human existence might pose them. For a long time in both Europe and America, Latin, Greek, and mathematics were basic subject matters. That the colleges should have chosen Latin and Greek as the best available languages for the practice of the liberal arts was due to a number of considerations, but not least to the fact that each was the vehicle of a great literature, a literature in which truly great ideas had been greatly dealt with. Both these languages, as means, had been moulded to that high end. Both, in brief, had served intellects of the first order, as had, in another set of symbols, mathematics. But the time came when the colleges forgot why they had chosen them and began to teach them professionally. Then men found they were being trained as Latinists, as Hellenists, as mathematicians. Some of them quickly decided that, if professional training was the objective, there were other fields than philology and mathematics in which they would find training more useful. And they were correct. Mathematics, Greek, and Latin began properly to give way to the various subjects now taught in the modern elective system. Having ceased to serve as means towards the end of liberal education, they had become ends in themselves. Next they became means to the practice of a profession; and as such they came into sharp competition with other professional training.

Unhappily, this custom left us without liberal education. No other appropriate means to that end replaced Latin, Greek, and mathematics. For the end itself had been forgotten. The difficulty today of re-stating that end is that — as always happens when liberal education declines — there is no contemporary vocabulary in which to do it. The term "liberal arts" has become soft and empty. The very term "intellect" is under universal suspicion. In so far as it continues to signify anything, it has come to signify "the cold light of the intellect," something far removed from "the healthy emotional life" which contemporary man states he wants. Yet no term has replaced it, because on the whole men have not recently felt the need for

discussing it. Indeed, our colleges have for many years not seriously concerned themselves with the human intellect. They have concerned themselves instead with professional training or sometimes with imitations of professional training. Their most solid "course offerings" have on the whole been designed to prepare young men for a real or imaginary job with real or imaginary wealth ahead.

Since there is no contemporary equivalent of the term "intellect," and since St. John's College has re-dedicated itself to developing, in those who come to it, their intellectual powers, I do not think we can yield the traditional term, even if we should be misunderstood. To those who ask us what we mean by the term, we shall have to answer in metaphor, and fortunately we can fall back on that metaphor which countless generations of men have found useful in discussing intellectual operations. We shall beg our questioner to forget for a moment the terms which professional educators now use: trends, attitudes, measurement, student-interest, I.Q.'s, and the like; and to reflect on light. We shall remind him that men get light on things when they reflect; that they see things in a flash; that ideas dawn on them; or that they still feel they are in the dark; that they are blind to the facts, although they admire lucid explanations. Something illuminates their problem; they get a bright idea, or, alas, a hazy, obscure one.

That flash of inward light they get is intellectual light. All men have that flash sometimes; some men have it frequently; and a few, through painfully acquired habits of the reason and imagination, can induce it when it is needed. It is that light, and the habits that induce it, that is under discussion when we say that liberal education has always had as its purpose, not the dissemination of facts, not professional training, but the liberation of the human intellect, that it might see that light and see it steadily.

Such liberation is the true purpose of every college of liberal arts. The temporary substitution of any other purpose leads straight to confusion and impotence. The ultimate outcome is either, on the one hand, the ivy-clad impotence of a "cultural" finishing school, or the respectable alternative of professional, vocational, or technical education.

Neither those who have accepted the finishing school, nor those who have accepted professional training, as the proper end of liberal education will understand this year or next the pledges exchanged between you of the Board and us of the faculty three years ago; and I suggest we will do wisely to rest our case upon a metaphor until light dawns again. If we are successful in leading a revival of liberal learning in this country, there are still available terms which will make discourse again possible. Meanwhile, I invite the Board to join the faculty in self-examination, and to see if the decisive steps which St. John's College has taken during the past three years have fulfilled or broken our pledges.

The Board will recall that the first of these steps was the agreement in principle, if not in detail, upon the curriculum — that is, upon the basic means which might be deemed proper to the end we sought in common: the awakening and disciplining of all the intellectual powers. It was determined that the basic materials employed should be a hundred or more of the greatest books which our civilization has produced from Homer to the present. If we were to avoid the intellectualism which the honest word intellect now implies to our generation, such a list would need to include not only books from many times and places but books exhibiting the human mind dealing with all the major sorts of problems that confront it: poetry, history, law, medicine, theology, mathematics, and the natural sciences. But they would be chosen on the basis of their own worth, not on the basis of covering so-called fields of knowledge. Lesson One in the art of thinking would be what Lesson One has been perhaps at every renaissance of liberal learning: watching great thinkers think and following their operations with one's own understanding. We assumed that any young man who consorted habitually with the men who wrote the books we were choosing, and who understood what these men said so far as his capacities allowed, would emerge with those capacities developed.

But the books included some genuinely difficult works and were worth a full four years of time, and freedom from intellectual triviality. So we completely abolished the textbook and we completely abolished the elective system. We counted on experience steadily to improve the list through constant re-

vision, and steadily to increase our own powers to teach the books on that list. Finally, to protect the reading of the books from dilettantism, we supported the seminar discussions of them with systematic and rigorous work in language, mathematics, and laboratory science. The curricular devices which emerged are familiar to you: seminar on the books twice a week for four years; mathematics five times a week for four years; language instruction five times a week for four years; laboratory science for three hours once a week the first two years, three hours twice a week for the third and fourth year; one or two formal lectures a week.

Some of the College visitors, of whom I spoke earlier, have expressed astonishment at the amount of Greek which many of our freshmen have acquired in one year's study but bewilderment at why we did not require, or at least allow, a second year of Greek. Their bewilderment has measured their incomprehension. They have applauded us for teaching so much Greek when we have not been primarily interested in teaching Greek as such. We have sought in Greek the linguistic and literary medium upon which first-class intellectual operations have left their signature; and like our ancestors, in Greek we found them. It is obvious that our requirement of four full years of laboratory science is not an attempt to produce professionally trained physicists or chemists or biologists. We are interested in having our students know what a man is doing when he carries on scientific investigation with a view to explaining the phenomena of nature which confront him. Unless our visitors remember constantly that the subject matters we make use of, along with our ways of teaching them, are dictated by one purpose and by one purpose only, the developing and perfecting of the intellectual powers of our students, then their plaudits and their reservations are equally irrelevant to the problem at which we are working.

I should like to recall to the Board that it was only when we had already agreed on that one purpose and on the basic means of achieving it, that they took up the question of who should assume as President of the College the primary obligation of seeing that this purpose was adhered to. I would further recall that, once the curriculum had been set up and an administration

put in charge of it, the Board chose to undergo a complete reorganization of its own membership in order that the College might receive from that direction the maximum possible support. The reorganization of the Board was carried out successfully, despite the risk that it would be considered by the public one of those personal altercations which afflict college boards when no common purpose unites them. Meanwhile faculty appointments and reappointments were recommended by me, and acted upon by the Board, with the same ultimate goal in mind. Student admissions, while the technical requirements were left unchanged, have been constantly subject to one consideration: that the matriculant should understand in advance, as completely as possible, what a liberal education is, what its high utility is, and precisely what utilities it declines to serve.

The faculty have given constant thought to the problem of student activities and to the sort of community life that would support a genuine liberal arts curriculum. It is obvious that true learning cannot go on *in vacuo*. Should it attempt to do so, the result I should expect would be the kind of intellectualism which our generation blindly fears and fumblingly denounces. For the intellect feeds on sense experience, only some of which can be supplied by a laboratory. Its habits are related to moral habits. It requires the support of the imagination. On the other hand, the college activities which have grown up in recent decades, bear the anti-intellectual characteristics of the period during which liberal education has decayed. In their present form, therefore, they not only fail to support liberal education; they actually compete with it and destroy it. Intercollegiate competition in athletics is a case in point; and once we were sure it could not be subordinated to the purpose of the College, we abolished it, in order to clear the decks for an athletic system that would give that purpose the support it should find in physical sport and bodily skills. That it might have the support of the fine arts as well, the College developed an extensive musical program. Finally, these vitally important considerations of what extra-curricular activities could do for the curriculum itself have led to a constant re-examination of the physical plant in order that its advantages might be fully exploited in terms of the main issue.

The external relations of the College involve, as in the case of other colleges, three concentric rings. There is the Board of Visitors and Governors, to whom the College administration is responsible but who cannot from geographical and other considerations participate fully in its daily life. There are the graduates of the College, who likewise cannot participate fully but who do not share the same burden of responsibility for its affairs as do the Board. And there is the general public, without whose understanding the College cannot serve well the purpose for which it was founded.

I have deemed it my duty to keep the Board more fully informed of the day-to-day work of the College, than boards commonly are, if only because of the necessity that they help the faculty interpret the College's purpose to the general public. In the case of our graduates, a Baltimore radio station has made it possible for me to discuss the work of the College monthly for more than two years now, at least with those of our graduates who live in the Maryland area; and this courtesy has exempted me from the pleasant but, in terms of time, costly duty of visiting localities where our graduates have settled, in order to satisfy their proper desire to know what the College is doing. In the case of Board, graduates, and general public alike, it has seemed to me imperative, if the College was to use properly the leadership which has fallen to it, that our purpose be stated and restated, constantly and in as many different ways as ingenuity might devise. With that obligation in view, we have followed a few simple rules on what colleges term their public relations. We have never sought publicity, on the grounds that it is an irresponsible and dangerous medium of communication. We have tried to answer all questions, carefully and fully, whether they were put by other teachers or by journalists. We have tried deliberately to inform accurately those persons whose understanding seemed most likely to forward the ultimate purpose of the College.

If this constant reference of all decisions to the aim of developing the intellectual powers of our students sounds doctrinaire, even to members of the Board, I can but remind the Board that this accusation is an essential feature of the terrain through which we must pass if we would win our objective.

It has been a long time since an American college of liberal arts restated the ageless purposes of liberal education in definite fashion. In the midst of indefinite talk, any definite assertion always sounds doctrinaire.

Meanwhile, I think I detect two imminent dangers to the success of our common educational enterprise. On the one hand, from being "an interesting educational experiment" St. John's is beginning to look like a model to the thousands of teachers and laymen who have written the College approvingly. Unless its true purpose is constantly reiterated, I predict that the means it has chosen to employ will be mistaken for ends, and copied as ends, by other institutions, with results I need not attempt here to describe. On the other hand, precisely because a clear vision of the end we seek has created within the College means which are impressively vital, precisely because teaching and learning in it have become so extraordinarily exciting, we too run the daily risk of mistaking our educational means for ends; we too will emerge from the strenuous struggle of these years to the complacency of an apparently permanent victory; we too will go the way of all flesh and forget that the prize for what we seek to achieve is not awarded here. Against that all too human fate we have no other safeguard than singleness of purpose. I have tried to recall to the minds of the Board as well as to the minds of us who are teaching at the College, what that purpose is, in the light that has been shed upon it by our common service to it.

STRINGFELLOW BARR.

Annapolis, Maryland,

April, 1940.

APPENDIX A

SCHEDULE OF READINGS BY YEARS

	Languages and Literature	*Liberal Arts*	*Mathematics and Science*
First Year	Homer	Plato	Hippocrates
	Herodotus	Aristotle	Euclid
	Thucydides	Lucretius	Nicomachus
	Æschylus		Aristarchus
	Sophocles		Archimedes
	Euripides		
	Aristophanes		
	Plutarch		
	Lucian		
Second Year	Tacitus	Cicero	Apollonius
	Virgil	Plotinus	Ptolemy
	The Bible	Augustine	Galen
	Justinian	Bonaventura	Copernicus
	Dante	Thomas Aquinas	Galileo
	Burnt Njal	Nicholas of Cusa	Descartes
	Song of Roland		Grosseteste
	Chaucer		
	Villon		
Third Year	Cervantes	Calvin	Kepler
	Shakespeare	Spinoza	Harvey
	Milton	Francis Bacon	Gilbert
	Rabelais	Hobbes	Newton
	Corneille	Locke	Huyghens
	Racine	Berkeley	Leibniz
	Molière	Hume	Boyle
	Erasmus		
	Montaigne		
	Montesquieu		
	Grotius		
Fourth Year	Gibbon	Kant	Fourier
	Voltaire	Schopenhauer	Lavoisier
	Swift	Hegel	Dalton
	Goethe	Peacock	Hamilton
	Rousseau	Boole	Faraday
	Adam Smith	De Morgan	Maxwell
	American Constitution	Bentham	Joule
		Clifford	Ostwald
	Federalist Papers	Mill	Darwin
	Malthus	James	Virchow
	Marx	Freud	Bernard
	Fielding	Poincaré	Galton
	Zola	Hilbert	Mendel
	Balzac	Russell	Cantor
	Flaubert		Dedekind
	Thackeray		Riemann
	Dickens		Lobachevski
	Ibsen		Gauss
	Dostoevski		Veblen & Young
	Tolstoi		

APPENDIX B

CLASSIFICATION ACCORDING TO ELECTIVE SUBJECT MATTERS

Literature	*Philosophy*	*History and Social Science*	*Mathematics*	*Natural Science*	*Laboratory*
Homer		Herodotus	Euclid	Hippocrates	Laboratory (three hours per week for four years)
Æschylus	Plato	Thucydides	Nicomachus	Aristarchus	Graphical Constructions
Sophocles	Aristotle	Plutarch	Aristarchus	Archimedes	Instruments
Euripides	Lucretius	Tacitus	Apollonius	Ptolemy	Crucial Experiments
Aristophanes	Cicero	Justinian	Archimedes	Galen	Concrete Problems (Presented and brought up to date in Laboratory Manuals)
Lucian	Plotinus	Montesquieu	Ptolemy	Grosseteste	
Horace	Augustine	Grotius	Descartes	Copernicus	
Virgil	Bonaventura	Spinoza	Newton	Galileo	
Bible	Thomas Aquinas	Calvin	Leibniz	Kepler	
Dante	Nicholas of Cusa	Hobbes	Peacock	Harvey	
Burnt Njal	Spinoza	Gibbon	Lobachevski	Gilbert	
Song of Roland	F. Bacon	Locke	Gauss	Newton	
Chaucer	Hobbes	Rousseau	Hamilton	Huyghens	
Villon	Locke	Galton	Fourier	Boyle	
Cervantes	Berkeley	Bentham	De Morgan	Leibniz	
Shakespeare	Hume	Mill	Boole	Lavoisier	
Milton	Kant	Freud	Riemann	Fourier	
Rabelais	Schopenhauer	Adam Smith	Cantor	Dalton	
Racine	Hegel	American Constitution	Dedekind	Clifford	
Corneille	Bentham	Federalist Papers	Hilbert	Faraday	
Molière	Mill	Malthus	Russell	Darwin	
Erasmus	Poincaré	Marx	Veblen & Young	Maxwell	
Montaigne	James			Joule	
Voltaire				Ostwald	
Swift				Virchow	
Goethe				Bernard	
Fielding				Mendel	
Zola				Galton	
Balzac				Freud	
Flaubert				James	
Thackeray					
Dickens					
Ibsen					
Dostoevski					
Tolstoi					

APPENDIX C

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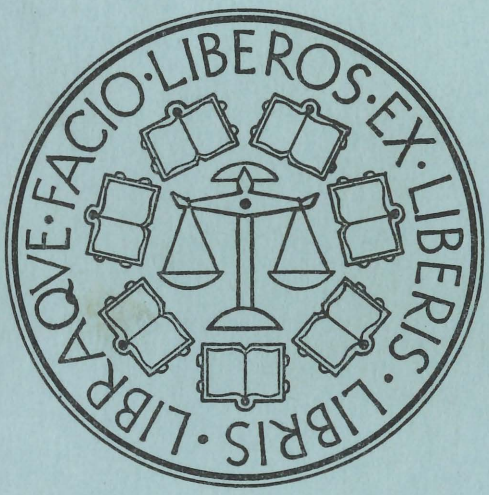
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