



View of the reading area of the Richard H. Thornton Library.

Address On The Occasion Of The Dedication Of The Richard H. Thornton Library

GERALD W. JOHNSON

It is more than a polite formula when I say that it is a pleasure to be here today. To be sure, for many years I have always found pleasure in a visit to Oxford, but on this occasion the delight is reinforced by two factors.

In the first place, a few days before I came down I accepted Mr. Thad Stem's invitation to "Light and Rest." The evening I spent with that book was as refreshing as anything I have experienced in a long time; for it bathes Oxford in a shimmering light that will be a blessing to tired eyes long after Mr. Stem and I have gone our way.

In the second place, this time I have the privilege of sharing your pleasure in as pleasant an event as has marked the history of the town in many a day. I am happy to add my tribute to Dr. and Mrs. Thornton. Such generosity is uncommon, but far more rare is the judgment that directs generosity into a channel so profitable to the beneficiaries. The building is of inert materials—brick and wood and glass—but the institution it houses is a living thing, like a young fruit tree, valuable now, but nothing to what it will be when it comes into flower and then fruit, offering to the town beauty and fragrance and flavor through years that no one can calculate.

Finally, I hope you will bear with me while I, a veteran newspaper man, say a word for Tom W. Johnson, the editor who has fought the battle of the public library,

Mr. Johnson, native North Carolinian and former Greensboro journalist, now lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

never faltering, never wearying, year in and year out. It is a record honorable to him, but it also does honor to our craft.

Perhaps you may have noted how often the words "pleasure" and "pleasant" have recurred in this introduction. It is not by accident. It happens that this is the fourth time in the last year and a half that I have talked on some subject connected with libraries—twice to librarian associations, once in connection with Library Week, and now here. On the other occasions I have discussed the problems facing librarians, their civic duty, and the cultural influence of the public library on the community it serves—all very serious subjects.

But as I was preparing to come here it occurred to me that I had never given serious consideration to the library as an amusement resort. So I began to study it from the angle and the subject unfolded in a way that astonished me. But why should I have been astonished? Wise men have always admitted that they were impelled to the pursuit of learning by the sheer joy of the thing.

I suspect that the very fact that people are startled, not to say shocked, by a reference to the public library as a fun house is one of the things wrong with this country. It suggests that we are beginning to regard joy as subversive and laughter as an un-American activity; and if that is indeed the case, we are in a very bad way indeed, for love of life is a necessary condition of survival.

So I deliberately turn away from the cultural aspect and the civic aspect, important though they are, and instead congratulate Oxford on acquiring today an endless source of amusement. I did not say hilarity. Noisy mirth is not permissible in a library. It is one of three places where one speaks softly and walks, if not on tiptoe, at least as quietly as may be. The other two are a funeral parlor and a church.

Yet although one acts the same way in all three, how different are the motives! At the undertaker's one is restrained by respect for death, in church by respect for religion, but in the library only by respect for other people who are trying to read or study and who would be justly irritated by any unnecessary noise. That is to say, in the library one is concerned with the living, and with the pursuit of happiness in this world.

I am aware that this is not true of all libraries. I have been in more than one where the atmosphere was like that of a mausoleum and the books ranged on the shelves reminded one of the niches in each of which are stored the ashes of the dead. In such a place the visitor feels that to take down a book would be almost as shocking as rifling a tomb. But to admit as much is no more than to admit that libraries can be, and some are badly managed. Let us waste no time on them; let us confine our attention to the library that is properly built and properly run.

I submit that it ought to be the pleasantest place in town because the most thoroughly alive. Notice, I didn't say "lively." There is a difference between being alive and being lively. Every first-year biology student knows that if you apply an electric current to the leg of a dead frog it will jerk spasmodically; but it isn't alive. This world swarms with people whose bodies are very much alive, but who in mind and spirit are dead frogs. Their brains will respond to nothing but a shock, and even then they don't think, they merely jerk.

These are the people who most need a library, but they are also the people hardest to get into one. You can't classify them by any known standards. Some are paupers,

but some are millionaires. Some belong to the rag-tag-and-bobtail elements, but some consider themselves among the Upper Ten. Some are obviously idiotic, but some are gifted with great shrewdness along certain lines. Some are failures, but some have achieved positions of power and influence.

One thing they have in common—each of them in his youth somehow missed the right kind of introduction to the wealth of our intellectual heritage. The cause may have been poverty, but more often it was either bad teaching in school, or parental neglect at home, or both. When that is the case, the answer to the question, Why can't Johnny read? is that Johnny has too much sense to try to read. All he knows of reading is that it is a laborious exercise to no apparent purpose, or none that compensates him for the effort.

Yet this same Johnny regards no effort too great in doing something that it is fun to do. There are few, if any, more violent expenditures of energy than that involved in playing a game of football, yet Johnny frequently breaks a collar-bone, or an arm, and sometimes his neck trying to make the team. If anyone, parent, teacher, librarian, anybody, had convinced him that reading a book may be one-tenth as much fun as playing football, he would have mastered the art of reading or died in the attempt.

Oh, without doubt somebody told him. The chances are that everybody told him. But between telling a boy, and convincing him, there is a great gulf fixed, and crossing it is not easy. I suspect that one of the reasons for our failure in this matter is that we assume a too moralistic tone. We insist that it is Johnny's duty to read good books, without remembering that no book is either good or bad in and of itself. Good for whom? Good for what? Until we answer these questions "good" is a meaningless word.

Newton's *Principia Mathematica* is accounted one of the world's great classics, but is a bad book for me because my early education was sadly deficient in mathematics and to this day I am unable to follow a mathematical argument of any intricacy. On the other hand, one of the best books, for me, that I ever read was a paper-back edition of "King Solomon's Mines," by Rider Haggard, a concocter of blood-and-thunder tales about Africa. Intellectually, the novelist was not in the same world with Isaac Newton, but in his book I discovered that there may be tremendous excitement in a page of print, and excitement, not culture, made reading worth while. It is for this reason that I am only mildly interested in the recurrent crusades against the so-called "comic books" that are actually distillations of horror. The grown man that reads them is, of course, a case of arrested development; but in the child, oftener than not, they represent a phase of growth that will lead into a wider rationality.

It is a truism centuries old that the beginning of a man's education is the boy's discovery that there is charm, as well as instruction in books. Once that discovery is made, it is inevitable that the individual, if he lives long enough, will acquire at least the rudiments of a liberal education. Even our official documents acknowledge it, for the Declaration of Independence lists "the pursuit of happiness" as one of the inalienable rights of man; and if books offer a road to happiness, it is our inalienable right to follow that road.

Yet in all the many years that we have known this truth, we have not devised a formula of introduction to the charm of literature on which we can rely. Nevertheless, I suspect that, as far as Americans are concerned, the formula has been right under our

noses since 1776. That formula is to maintain what the Declaration calls "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" remembering always that the boys and girls in our own houses are as definitely part of mankind as the Burmese and the Brazilians.

If Dad considers "Treasure Island" vastly more delightful than the adventures of Superman, I agree with him; but if Junior thinks otherwise, I submit that a decent respect to Junior's opinion may be maintained without accepting it. I am aware that we have the highest possible Authority for it that it is a father's duty to give good gifts to his children; but I am also aware that it is a wise father indeed who knows precisely what gifts are good for his particular child.

Even when he knows that a gift is good—and I am immoveably persuaded that a taste for reading is one of the best—there remains the problem of discovering an effective way of conferring that gift; and that problem, to date, has defeated all philosophy. I suppose the basic reason is that it calls for an impossibility. To know infallibly what is the best book for a boy one would have to put himself in that boy's place, thinking his thoughts, feeling his emotions, knowing his needs; and that can be done at best very imperfectly.

But Dad can, and he most emphatically should maintain a decent respect for the child mind, even when it passes his understanding. To be either shocked or scornful is not to maintain a decent respect. It is not easy, I know, to maintain one's poise when Junior, at the age of eight, seems to have acquired the ethics of Captain Kidd rather than those of a Christian martyr, and when his seven-year-old sister reveals the mentality, not of the little angel she resembles, but of Lady Macbeth. But it must be done if the children are to escape psychological distortion.

Thus when we try to determine what kind of book will give the child an abiding thirst for literary adventure, we are necessarily fumbling in the dark, and if we hit upon the right thing, it is more likely to be a happy accident than the fruit of our wisdom.

Would you, for instance, choose snakes as a means of introduction to "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome?" Hardly—and yet it can happen, as I know by experience. As a small boy I happened upon a book that cannot have been of any great merit for I long ago forgot even its name. It was a work on Grecian mythology and it was open at an illustration—a photograph of the famous sculpture now in the Vatican museum portraying the fate of Laocoon — which I pronounced Lay-oh-coon—and his sons, destroyed by huge serpents that the angry goddess Athena caused to come up from the sea. That marble is regarded as the supreme example in sculpture of the combination of physical agony and physical beauty; but what it conveyed to me was, that about such snakes there must be a blood-curdling story which I was bound to know. So I labored through it, and went from that to another story, and so through the book; and from that book to *Tanglewood Tales*, and from that to *Bulfinch*.

Years later in college I gained much prestige as a student by breezing through a course that was considered tough—one on Cromwellian literature based on "Paradise Lost." Milton's innumerable allusions to such names as Hermes and Persephone and Tiresias and the like had the other boys sweating prodigiously, but they were old stuff to me, for I had discovered them in the search, not for learning, but for excitement. Yet who could have planned it that way?

This brings me to what I consider the most important negative virtue in a well-run public library. That virtue is, not too much guidance. A wise librarian will, of course,

steer a small boy away from a shelf of works of sociology, or higher mathematics. But if he brings up before a shelf of good fiction, let him alone. What he chooses may startle you, but if so, the best comment is no comment. The fact that he has taken down a book is evidence that something about it attracted him, and the attraction is the fragile plant that should be most carefully cultivated.

Certainly the librarian must come to the rescue when asked, but only on request. Sometimes it requires fast thinking. I was told by a librarian at Asheville that she was almost stumped when two small girls asked her, one for a book on friction, the other one on biology. But she rose to the occasion by supplying one with a book of fiction, the other a biography. And there was the one in Baltimore who faced a round-eyed ten-year-old who asked for something by a poor man about a crow. She met his request with Poe's "The Raven."

But this is but the reverse of the public library's great positive virtue, which is liberty. What is the institution, after all, but a fortress defending freedom of the mind? It has no higher duty than to maintain Jefferson's "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Hence its atmosphere should be the air of liberty which, after all, is linked with the pursuit of happiness. It means liberty under law, of course. Reasonable precautions must be taken to prevent damage or loss of the books. A library book wantonly defaced is a disgrace to any community; but one falling to pieces from constant use is a badge of honor.

Thus the well-managed library, it seems to me, always meets three requirements. It should be the easiest place in town to get to. It should be the place where every visitor, regardless of his identity, is assured of a cheerful welcome. It should be the place where some other person's opinions or tastes are least likely to be thrust upon you.

It is not every community that can maintain such a library. I am not thinking primarily of the money cost, or even of public patronage; I am thinking, rather, of the spirit of the town, of the intellectual climate it has developed. It is the grim truth that America, this land of freedom, is strewn with towns, and even some large cities, that walk in deadly fear of ideas, that are slaves to prejudice and superstition. How else can one account for the stories constantly appearing in the newspapers of self-appointed censors, of snooping committees raiding the library shelves, of librarians persecuted, and sometimes actually prosecuted, for the crime of trying to inform their people of the best that is being thought and written in the world today?

I do not know how to characterize these places, but it is clear that they are not a part of free America. Never have their hearts responded to the prayer,

Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,

for they regard freedom's light as anything but holy. Truth is for them the Gorgon's head, which they dare not face for fear of being petrified.

Such places are not worthy of the name of towns or cities. They are slave-pens, whose denizens are lashed by the bullwhips of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice, the most terrible of slave-masters. To expect such a community to maintain a public library worthy of the name is to expect what never has been and never will be. Oh, they may erect huge and costly buildings, containing miles of shelves loaded with

thousands of volumes of triviality and trash, they may hire flunkys by the score and the hundred, they may squander millions; but they will never maintain a library.

It is for that reason that I rejoice to see the library in Oxford properly housed, for this town can maintain it. You have here a long tradition of respect for learning, in part derived from educational institutions some of which have vanished, but not without leaving their mark upon the town. I do not think there are many communities in North Carolina—and I include everything from the city of Charlotte to a hamlet of three houses and a cross-roads store—that are more completely free of the fear of intelligence, less inclined to stamp upon any idea that comes in from the outside world.

I rejoice that you have a new library because you can use it, and above all, you can enjoy it. "There is no frigate like a book, to bear us lands away," sang Emily Dickinson. I know that within these walls, for years and years to come, Oxford people, boys and girls, but grandfathers and grandmothers too, without moving from their chairs will voyage through the realms of gold, from Oxford to Xanadu, to silken Samarcand, to Circe's isle and the garden of the Hesperides; and so voyaging will

look on life

And find it brave and splendid.

Can man attain to higher enjoyment in this world? Certainly you will learn, too. You will enrich your culture, you will broaden your horizons, you will profit in countless ways; but above all you will enjoy, and it is for this that I consider you most enviable; for when you open a really great book you will capture something of the rapture of the poet on first looking into Homer:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific — and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Report of the Governor's Commission On Library Resources

A 287-page report has been completed by the Governor's Commission on Library Resources after a six-month study by a survey staff and consultants. In this report the current resources and the needs of North Carolina's libraries of public schools, colleges and universities as well as special collections, public libraries and the State Library are summarized and recommendations for continued improvement are made.

John V. Hunter III served as the chairman of the Commission, comprised of thirty-nine citizens of the state. The survey staff was headed by Dr. Robert B. Downs of the University of Illinois.

Copies of this report, in its final printed form, will be distributed in the near future to all libraries which participated in the statistical survey. It will also be possible to obtain a copy of this report upon request from the Governor's Commission on Library Resources, c/o North Carolina State Library, Raleigh, N. C.