

THOMAS BENJAMIN DAVIE, B.A., M.B., LL.D., F.R.C.P.

AN IN MEMORIAN ADDRESS GIVEN IN LIVERPOOL CATHEDRAL ON 23 DECEMBER 1955 BY THE VICE-CHANCELLOR OF LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY

We are gathered here in sorrow and mourning for the death of our friend and former colleague Thomas Benjamin Davie, and in thankfulness to Almighty God for the work he achieved during his earthly life and for the example he has set before us. In him our University has lost one of its most distinguished sons and the whole academic world one of its wisest and most valiant leaders.

It was in 1924 that Thomas Davie first came to Liverpool as a student in the Faculty of Medicine. He was then already twenty-eight years old and was embarking upon a second career. Born in South Africa, he had graduated with first class honours in chemistry in the Afrikaans-speaking University of Stellenbosch and had been trained as a teacher. During the First World War he had been commissioned as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps and had subsequently taught in high-schools in his own country.

It was characteristic of him that once he had made up his mind that medicine, and not high-school teaching, was to be the profession of his choice, he allowed no difficulty to divert him from his path; and slender though his resources were, he faced the future with boldness and determination. It is a matter of pride to us that he deliberately selected Liverpool as his medical school, largely because, as he often told us, the Dean of the Faculty, the late Professor Walter Dilling, showed such understanding and so personal an interest in the application he received from the unknown young man from the other hemisphere.

Davie's career in the Faculty was one of unusual and consistent brilliance. His intellectual power and his capacity for sheer hard work were such that distinctions in examinations and the winning of medals, prizes and scholarships were his well-merited and ungrudged reward. He achieved his degree with first class honours in 1928, his Doctorate in Medicine in 1931; and at a later date he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians.

His professional colleagues are agreed that had he so chosen, Davie could have achieved eminence as a clinical consultant; but his major interest was in the science of pathology. It was in that subject that he became a member of our University staff, first in 1929 as Lecturer and soon as Senior Lecturer. His quality within his chosen field was speedily recognised, and in 1935 he was appointed to the Chair of Pathology in the University of Bristol. Three years later, however, he returned to us as our George Holt Professor, happy to serve again the University he had come to love so much, happy to rejoin his wide circle of friends in Liverpool.

Thus in 1938 it might well have seemed that all the laudable ambition that Davie may have cherished was now satisfied and that the future held nothing but the pleasing prospect of a life of devotion to his medical science, to his students, and to his friends and colleagues.

But for Davie, as for others, the exigencies of war changed the expected course of life and called forth latent powers. It was now that his great administrative abilities became evident, not only within the University, but particularly in the organisation of the regional blood transfusion service; and when in 1945 the University decided that the Faculty of Medicine needed a full-time Dean, it was inevitable that Professor Davie should be the unanimous choice of all his colleagues. Here was a new and untried task to be undertaken; it meant the almost entire abandonment of the teaching in which he had found one of his greatest joys; it meant also, if not the abandonment, certainly the retardation of his scientific research. But to Davie's ear the call of duty was unmistakable and he did not flinch from the sacrifice which was asked of him. Through all the difficulties of a transition period when the National Health Service was being inaugurated, he guided the University with a foresight and soundness of judgment for which we shall ever be in his debt.

The Challenge from South Africa

Then in 1947 came the challenge from the country of his birth: Davie was invited to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town. He was aware, as few others could have been, that it was no position of otiose dignity that he was being asked to accept, but one of the most difficult posts in the whole of the academic world, one which would demand of its holder every resource of tact, diplomacy, firmness and courage. Within the very depths of

his being he sensed that it was in South Africa that his destiny now lay and that it was there that all that was in him could and should be dedicated in service and endeavour. And it was in South Africa that the real measure of his greatness became apparent for all the world to see.

Here let us pause a moment. Biographical details are only the framework within which we discern, as best we may, the picture of a man. It is on no small canvas and in none but the richest colours that the portrait of T. B. Davie could be painted.

His students and colleagues here in Liverpool recall with affection his familiar figure. A good six feet tall, well-built, fresh complexioned, he was both in physical energy and in powerfulness of mind, the very quintessence of vitality. Vigorous in speech and lucid in exposition, he brought to classroom and laboratory the arts of the naturally gifted teacher; and to his Faculty and to Senate he brought counsel and advice, founded on a balanced judgment and on an unswerving loyalty to the best interests of the University. He had a deep and impelling devotion to his students. They in return gave him their respect, their admiration, and their affection; for he was not content merely to instruct them in the science of pathology. He also continuously set before them the ideals, the noble opportunities and the abiding obligations of their profession. He fostered in them an active love of knowledge and truth wherever it might be found and in whatever guise. Above all, by his own example, by being what he was, he gave them a pattern of upright and manly living.

He was easy to approach, none easier; for he had an all-pervading kindliness, a heart sympathetically attuned to his fellow-men, and a sensitive understanding of their hopes and fears, their doubts and their aspirations. No personal difficulty put to him by student, colleague or friend was too trivial for his interest; and in the ordinary problems of daily life, no less than in matters of greater moment, his robust commonsense was like a breath of fresh clean air.

He himself has recorded that his recreation was gardening. We who knew him understand what he meant by that. It was not the lazy enjoyment of other men's labours: he did his own digging; he himself sowed the seed and nurtured the tender plant. Only so could he feel any pride in the maturing crop. There in epitome is the character of T. B. Davie.

One of the most friendly of men, his home was ever open as a haven of hospitality; and on social occasions, and especially in the Students' Union, his genial presence, his sense of fun and his infectious joy in life, added to the pleasure of every company. In all that he did, and in all that he was, there was a glow and a warmth about Tom Davie.

This was the man who sailed forth at the end of 1947 to a new and arduous task in a land where the bonds between Afrikaners and British were loosening, where the word *apartheid* was already a political slogan, where the relations between the State and the Universities were becoming strained. For such a task Davie was fitted as no other could have been. Trained in an Afrikaans University, a man with an established academic reputation, and an experienced administrator, he had a prestige which none could ignore. In addition, there was no aspect of the complex racial and political situation in South Africa with which he was not well acquainted. But beyond all this, he had the moral fibre without which all other qualities and endowments would have been of no avail. If any man could lead his University and his native country in the paths of wisdom, it was Thomas Davie.

Warnings of Crippling Illness

Yet on the very threshold of his new career, and even before he touched the shores of his homeland, he had the warnings of a crippling illness, for which not all the armoury of medical science could provide a cure. Year after year he battled against physical disabilities, long after a lesser man would have asked to be relieved. He refused to regard himself as an invalid. Neither continual pain, nor increasing difficulty in movement nor major surgical operations daunted him; he treated them as annoyances and exasperations, not as obstacles to deflect him from his purpose. He had a task to

perform: the defence of freedom within his University, the upholding of the ideal that Universities should be open to all, irrespective of race, colour, or creed, who can profit by the education they offer.

Single-handed, if need be, he set himself to fight that fight; and he fought to the end. Unyielding to the economic and political pressures brought to bear against his University, he spoke out fearlessly whenever and wherever occasion served. Scrupulously fair to his opponents and respected by them, he passionately believed with all his mind and being in the cause which he upheld; and those who have read them know that his pronouncements on the fundamental nature of a University are amongst the noblest utterances of academic statesmanship.

On him were fixed the eyes of all who value freedom within Universities and without; the fight he fought was not for his University alone, but for all of us. With an indomitable courage, in the face of adversities such as mercifully fall to the lot of few of us, Davie faltered not; for he knew that with the freedom for which he fought there was involved the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God.

It was in large part to demonstrate the faith that was in him that Davie summoned up his last reserves of strength to journey to this country to represent his University at the installation of H.M. the Queen Mother as Chancellor of the University of London. It was there I last saw him: an imposing figure in his robes of

office, his eyes full of fire, his handshake firm and friendly, his zest unabated. We could have wished that he might have been spared to come once again to Liverpool, as we had hoped, to receive not only the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws, but the tribute of affection, admiration and gratitude which any University would have felt privileged to pay to one who had on him so unmistakably the mark of greatness.

What then should be our feelings as we kneel in this Cathedral to-day? First our love, our sympathy, our prayers for the gracious lady, Vera, his wife, who throughout his career was beside him to comfort and sustain him: she too has her part, and that no small one, in this noble and inspiring record.

Sorrow and regret that we shall see no more that rare spirit who has passed from mortal ken—these are man's fitting tributes to man's mortality. But shining through our sorrow and our regret, let there be thankfulness that in this earthly sphere it has been granted us to know one who has so nobly and so finely shown us to what heights, with God's grace, frail humanity can attain. Let there be thankfulness; let there be resolution too—resolution that, in what measure we can, we too will strive along the same path of duty that he has trod. A life such as that which Thomas Davie lived is as a window through which we see the divinity of the human soul. Let us then take courage from his example and make known our thankfulness by our own devotion to the great and eternal causes to which his life was dedicated and for which he gave his all.