

The Legacy of Peter Redpath

On October 31st, 1993, McGill University celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Redpath Library, a gift to the University from Peter and Grace Redpath. On that day a century ago they attended the festive opening ceremonies in the presence of Canada's Governor-General and the Countess of Aberdeen.

The 1993 issue of Fontanus was devoted to the generous and significant donations to McGill University from one of its greatest benefactors, Peter Redpath and his family; gifts which included not only the library building but also thousands of books acquired through Redpath funds, which to this very day continue to enrich the McGill Library collections.

The text below records speeches from the 1993 centennial celebrations given by the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of McGill, and the invited guest speaker, Miles Blackwell of Blackwell's Oxford, England.

Le 31 octobre 1993, l'Université McGill a célébré le centenaire de la bibliothèque Redpath, offerte à l'Université par Peter et Grace Redpath. Un siècle auparavant, les Redpath assistaient en personne aux cérémonies d'inauguration de la bibliothèque, en présence du Gouverneur général du Canada et de la Comtesse d'Aberdeen.

Le numéro de 1993 de Fontanus est consacré aux dons exceptionnellement généreux que Peter Redpath et sa famille, qui sont parmi les plus grands bienfaiteurs de l'Université, ont fait à McGill: il s'agit non seulement de la bibliothèque Redpath, mais également de milliers d'ouvrages acquis grâce au Fonds Redpath, lequel continue encore aujourd'hui d'enrichir les collections des bibliothèques de McGill.

Le texte ci-dessous reprend les discours prononcés lors des célébrations du centenaire de la bibliothèque par le principal et vice-chancelier de McGill et par M. Miles Blackwell de Blackwell's à Oxford (Angleterre), qui avait été invité pour l'occasion à venir prononcer une conférence.

Principal David L. Johnston

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be with you today as we celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of this marvellous old building. I want to take an early opportunity to congratulate and thank those who conceived the idea of this celebration and have contributed to its organization—the Director of University Relations, the Director of Libraries, the President of the James McGill Society, the Dean of Music and all those who helped to plan and effect this happy occasion. I remind you that Redpath Hall continues to be as much a part of McGill's life in 1993 as it was in 1893. Students, faculty, staff, and members of the public who came in the past to read books and study come now to attend lectures and hear wonderful concerts. The magnificent

architecture of this building with its double hammer beamed ceiling and gargoyles was enhanced twelve years ago by the outstanding organ built by Hellmuth Wolff that sits so prominently on the west gallery. The Faculty of Music has made of Redpath Hall a home for memorable music. And the original connection with the library and books is continued by the annual Book Sale of the Women's Associates.

This is probably an excellent time for us to consider how Redpath Hall came into existence and to express our gratitude and appreciation of those generous benefactors, architects and craftsmen who created this treasure and provided the University with such a grand setting that can be adapted for so many important

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occasions including the one we are attending today.

The Chancellor told us of one of the important people in its history: Grace Redpath, the wife of Peter, who in her own right contributed to the construction of this building, its endowments, and book collections.

Three other people must also be mentioned who made singular contributions: two benefactors and one architect. The architect was Andrew Taylor, a Scotsman who after studying in England came to Canada as a young man. During his twenty-year career in Montreal, he enjoyed a distinguished career, erecting buildings across the country and teaching ecclesiastical architecture at the Montreal Presbyterian College. Many people consider him to be the finest architect of the McGill campus. Of his six buildings, several survive: Redpath Library where we sit today, and across the campus from us, the old Physics Building now the Macdonald Stewart Library Building, and the old Chemistry Building, now the Macdonald Harrington Building, housing the School of Architecture. All buildings possessed dignified and picturesque exteriors. As for their interiors, they were designed to function practically and meet the needs of students and faculty of one hundred years ago. It is a tribute to the architect and his collaborators that the buildings have also lent themselves to being adapted and converted to the ongoing needs of McGill faculty and students, and are today continuing to serve the University so effectively.

The second important figure in this trio of architects and benefactors is John Henry Robinson Molson, (the son of William Molson who constructed the west wing of the Arts Building). One of the long line of Molsons who have so generously supported McGill over the years, John Molson in 1889-1980 bought the land on which this building stands, with the express intent that Peter Redpath could construct his library here. The gift of the library is an instance of generous collaboration by McGill benefactors.

By any standard, Peter Redpath is one of the greatest benefactors in McGill's history. In 1864 he joined the Board of Governors, in 1871 he endowed the Chair of Natural Philosophy and in 1880-1882 he built Redpath Museum. His love of McGill and his admiration for Sir John William Dawson, McGill's Principal of the day, resulted in his very generous

support of the University.

Peter Redpath's crowning contributions to McGill were the superb book collections he amassed—the Redpath Historical Collections and the Redpath Tracts—and this remarkable structure where we are meeting today. What is so impressive in this story of intelligent benefaction is the forward gaze of Peter and Grace Redpath. They built a Library Reading Room far larger and more splendid than the modest McGill of 1893 required. They provided stack space for many more books than the University possessed at that time. But they were not planning for 1893—and the 19th century—they were planning and providing for the University of the 20th century. It is the same feature which impresses us with regard to their book donations—and they were many, quite apart from the truly remarkable collection the Redpath Tracts. Here were books to form the foundation of research collections, not likely to be used in the near future, but in those coming days of the 20th century when a growing and improving university would count them among their most valuable resources.

You can see to what conclusions my thoughts are going to lead me, almost without my expressing them—but express them I will, for they are so appropriate to our own situation. We are planning today for the future—not for the 20th, but for the 21st century. We too must not let our ideas—nor our dreams—be limited by our needs or capacities of today, but only the potential of the future. "A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's heaven for?" This celebration today with its appreciation of the present and the past, must also serve as an inspiration for the future. We must allow Peter and Grace Redpath and Andrew Taylor and J.H.R. Molson to be not only those who give richness and dignity to our past, but also to be those who beckon us on, encouragingly, into the future.

Taylor, the Architect, and Molson and Redpath the benefactors—assisted by Mrs. Redpath—built better than they realized. Whether as a library reading room, a concert hall, a meeting room, or a grand reception hall, this room lends a sense of dignity and appropriateness to any University occasion. In celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of Redpath Library and Redpath Hall, we are celebrating one

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hundred years of study, scholarship, social and musical life in the history of McGill University. In a sense we are celebrating the three benefactors, Grace and Peter Redpath and John Molson, and the architect, Andrew Taylor; but in another sense we may really be celebrating the countless students, faculty, staff, and members of the public for whom Redpath Hall and Redpath Library have been an essential dimension of their knowing and living McGill University.

Madame Chancellor, we are surrounded in this place by many of those who have served the University so well in the past, and I believe they are encouraging us to go forward with hope into the future!

Miles Blackwell

Dear friends, when I was last in Montreal, on Midsummer's Day, I came into this remarkable building to look at it anew. I have known it for years, and admired it; but had not seen it before with the eyes of someone who had been given the immense honour of reversing Osler's migration to Oxford so as to commemorate the matchless foresight and open-handedness that led to its creation a century beforehand.

On that Midsummer's Day I realised that Peter Redpath's dream was dreamed also by others, who shared his values and qualities, and could inspire him as he did them. And I understood that it was not just the building that mattered but also the great University which prompted its creator and to whose benefit and wider purposes he devoted himself. When we consider what Peter Redpath contributed to McGill we must look also at the purpose McGill conceived for itself 100 years ago.

Frost's History of the University shows what was intended by its leaders for the society in which they worked. It was a society so sure of its ethical and moral foundation that Samuel Butler was inspired to write his Psalm to Montreal occasioned by the banishment of a naked Greek statue as too shocking for genteel view (much as the young Winston Churchill of the same era was not permitted to set eyes on The Boneless Wonder in the fairground):

Stowed away in a Montreal lumber-room
The Discobolus standeth and turneth his face to the wall:
Dusty, cobweb-covered, maimed and set at naught.
Beauty crieth in an attic, and no man regardeth:
O God! O Montreal!

It was a society of high purpose. Principal Peterson, appointed just as this great building was completed, wrote thus during the torment of The Great War of "Canada and the Empire":

We ought to be—and we are—proud of our imperial connection. For we know that in the world as we find it today the strength and prosperity of our United Empire affords one of the best possible guarantees of order and freedom, justice, peace and progress... In their combination in the British Empire they are the highest that has as yet been attained in the social and political development of the world.

It was not, even so, a society wholly without perception or humour. Could it have been in ironic commemoration of Redpath's generosity, as well as in understanding of the human condition, that Stephen Leacock wrote as he did in *Nonsense Novels* about how and who started the feud that split the Glen?

It had been six generations ago at a Highland banquet in the days when the unrestrained temper of the time gave way to wild orgies, during which theological discussions raged with unrestrained fury. Shamus McShamus, an embittered Calvinist, half crazed perhaps with liquor, had maintained that damnation could be achieved only by faith. Whimper McWhinus had held that damnation could be achieved also by good works.

We surely feel redeemed by both Peter Redpath's faith and his good works as they show plain before us now as they have done for a century. Even so, in giving thanks to him and for his example we should not forget his father who laid the foundations of the family's fortune.

We know from the memoriam published for Peter Redpath that his father John was "one of those strong, earnest, pious and clear-headed men of whom Scotland

has supplied so many to build up the colonies of the empire. A leader in the Church to which he belonged, and one of its office-bearers, he was a diligent and sagacious man of business, and displayed his ability in this way by founding the first sugar refinery in Canada, and one of the largest on the American continent." It does not mention that John and his three companions had walked to Montreal barefoot from Quebec City in 1816, each with his only pair of shoes strong round his neck by its laces the longer to preserve them.

I once had pretensions to being an historian, and one of modern history's riveting paradoxes for me is that whereas the Americans won Canada for the British the British preferred to hold on the Sugar Islands than to the American colonies. Thus when Admiral de Ternay is landing General de Rochambeau's forces in Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island in July 1780, Admiral Rodney's fleet is defending the West Indies rather than supporting the American loyalists.

It is predictable that the remaining British possessions should trade with each other with the staple goods at their disposal. Canada had a bounty of fish to export, the Sugar Islands had slaves to feed who could not subsist on sugar and who lived instead on cod.

Feltoe's History of his company tells us that "John Redpath recognized that simply relying on his investments would not secure his family's future. Therefore he began to investigate various aspects of manufacturing... He struck out at a complete tangent to his previous considerations and looked at a business totally without competition in Canada, name sugar refining." I would be greatly surprised if this provision of a return cargo for the small merchant ships carrying the fish, small both because of the need to avoid glutting the island markets as well as because of the difficulty of access to island harbours, did not also yield benefits in lower costs and higher profit margins in just the same way as it would today.

It is worth remark than another of the great libraries of the world has depended even more directly on the harvest of the seas for its benefaction. The Bodleian Library was endowed with a foundation collection of manuscripts donated in the 15th century by Duke Humfrey of Gloucester, younger brother of Henry V, the victor of Agincourt. These were supplanted by

books, most from the gift of Sir Thomas Bodley at the end of the 16th century: the money to provide them came from Lady Bodley, the proprietress of pilchard fisheries off the coast of Devon in South-West England.

There is another link here, that between benefactresses. Sir Thomas Bodley's injunction was to "stirre up other men's benevolence," who had but to look to the example of his wife whose good works so shone before them. In the same way Grace Redpath, first side by side with her husband and later after his death, continued his good works in ways enormously important to the University, by donating the first extension to the original building and in collaboration with the Librarian, Charles Gould, making countless gifts of books. In this respect her influence on the collection was far greater even than that of her husband, in whose memory her own generosity was so touchingly, explicitly and unfailingly exercised.

The purpose of Peter Redpath's generosity was no different from Sir Thomas Bodley's: to endow a Great University with a Great Library. He could not do so today, and the reason is the cost of information, its proliferation and the cost of storing it. As to the last, the number and size of McGill's present libraries testify.

There has been a profound change in the academic's tools of trade. In Redpath's day the monograph was the workhorse of preceptor and student alike although the way in which it was used differed widely. In this library the collection was intended to be for the faculty: it was otherwise at the Baillieu Library of the University of Melbourne, another great colonial university. The comparison is not inapt: Melbourne was characterized by Kipling in *The Night Mail* as one of the four great imperial cities, together with Delhi, London and, of course, Montreal. The Baillieu's collection was built for undergraduates, whose learning was intended to be supplemented by their own tutor's books for more advanced study.

A previous librarian at the Baillieu told me that his modern library was reverting in terms of its book collections to its antique characteristic, that of an undergraduate library: the number of research monographs he could acquire were diminishing in number, not just because of rising prices—which for

books tend to be self-regulating, because as a rule of thumb the more expensive the book the fewer copies are sold, and the publishers must therefore adjust their intentions for their future titles—but because three-quarters of his acquisitions budget had to be devoted to learned journals and these overwhelmingly in the sciences.

There is a double danger here, not just the excision of books from the collection but because, unlike books, the prices of journals are not self-regulating. There is more and more to publish, every inducement for the library not to devalue its current holdings by cancelling subscriptions, and seemingly no will to acknowledge the economic consequences of academic activity. As a result the average price of a current subscription is now \$411 Cdn, has risen 1,470% in monetary terms since 1970 and continues to do so (the price of books has risen by 900% to \$60 Cdn and has stabilised). The consequences for library collections have been disastrous and the outlook is calamitous.

My purpose is not to demonstrate as has your Director of Libraries that at extrapolated rates of expenditure the Library will swallow all the University's resources within a measurable period nor to redescribe at length the publishing chain. The characteristics of the latter process are all too familiar: the researcher works at the University's expense to provide material to a publisher, who processes it and sells it on to a specialist distributor who then resells to the library of the University of origin "at a ridiculously high price," as a Dublin taxi-driver with disarming honesty once offered his services to my parents.

Neither do I seek to argue that various links should drop out of the publication chain nor to dispute which of these should be, as each would have to be reinvented if it did not exist. I seek no exclusive resolution of the problems but rather an inclusive one, because the debate itself simply obscures the underlying truth, which is:

that as a society we risk being infinitely informed but that we thereby hazard wisdom.

Few things can be easier to generate than information, as Marshall McLuhan foresaw. Twenty-six

years ago in *The Medium is the Message* he wrote: "Electric circuitry profoundly involves men with one another. Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information." Even so, information stands in the same relationship to wisdom as "provisions" did to honey for Winne the Pooh.

In Redpath's day wisdom was achieved through learning, and to learn you were both informed and informed yourself. There are several books now to be found that reflect my own concern that computer games are severely damaging to the development of the intellect, which by its own nature is not table-driven.

It is the quantity of information that worries me so much as the unthinking use that can be made of it. We need no reminding of the Princeton student a few years back who was able to create a plan for a working atomic bomb from the contents of articles in scientific journals. We do not need to be told by journalists on the BBC on 13th July this year that they were offered 55 kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium on Moscow's black market and a well-travelled route to the West through the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius. The report went on to show how in a briefcase from readily available materials could be constructed with repellent ease a bomb that would, for a start, vaporise all matter within 500 metres of where we sit and go on to destroy the rest of this great city. I have a dreadful fear that we risk a crisis of unwisdom and of its results.

The existing and developing applications of electronic publishing, driven by technology rather than by inspiration, further risk the suppression of knowledge, without which there cannot be wisdom. The reason is that the ease with which data can be manipulated may predominate over the virtue of the data itself.

The distinction between the medium and the message is captured for me in the celebrated cartoon that appeared some years ago in *The New Yorker*. In it two dogsleighs are shown to be passing in a howling blizzard, travelling in opposite directions. In the back of the departing sleigh the driver is calling to his counterpart, "Well, what if I do happen to be fond of chihuahuas, and in no particular hurry?"—and here

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reality overtakes inspiration, because until 1991 there was a lone competitor in the celebrated Iditarod from Anchorage to Nome who annually entered against the native huskies his team of poodles.

The moral I draw is that the cartoon can be reproduced by technology but its wit is the inspiration of spirit. This relationship creates and enriches the library, it enlightens its users, but each part would be lost without the other—just as society without knowledge, and knowledge without learning, and learning without wisdom will in turn lead to the end of the humane civilisation which so many of us so unthinkingly enjoy, that civilisation which as ever carries within its mind and in its hand the potential for its own destruction.

We are met tonight to give thanks for that goodly heritage of wisdom that this building and its benefactor Peter Redpath exemplify, and to renew our faith in the ideals that inspired them. I say for him, for his advisers, and for what they achieved "Thank God for Montreal" and I thank God too for the inscription beneath the window over there but which used to stand above the fireplace now removed. The words are from the third chapter of the Book of Proverbs: "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding."