



Davidson Sylvester Hector Willoughby Nicol

Mr Chancellor,

The conferment of honorary degrees at our annual Graduation Ceremony is an entirely rewarding experience, moreso for the University than the recipient of our award. It gives us the opportunity to seek out men and women of learning and wisdom – of our own, and of other places. Its significance, however, lies in our identification with the honorary graduand and thereby in the reflection of our interests and priorities. Those whom we honour have become eminent in the Arts or the Sciences, in public life or in service to mankind. Our graduand today is exceptional in that he is distinguished in all of these areas of human endeavour. With such thoughts uppermost in our minds we bid welcome to Davidson Sylvester Hector Willoughby Nicol, Under-Secretary General of the United Nations, Executive Director of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Grand Commander of the Order of the Rokel, Grand Commander of the Star of Africa, Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George. We greet him first as a scholar in the Sciences and Medicine; next, we recognize his outstanding service to his country as an educator and public servant; we acknowledge his gifts as a writer, but, most of all, we salute his work as an international figure in the vanguard of the struggle to establish and maintain order and security, freedom and justice, in a world increasingly threatened by crisis: of inflation, energy, the environment, population, hunger, poverty, disease, violence – worse, the crisis of confidence of mankind in its ability to meet and overcome these challenges.

Dr Nicol was born and grew up in Freetown, Sierra Leone. He attended the Government Model School and then the Prince of Wales School where his potential as a scholar was clearly established by the time he graduated in 1943 as a Science Master. Freetown, in the early 40's, was the centre of higher education in the whole of West Africa. Graduates of its Fourah Bay College, which had been founded in 1827 and was the only institution granting University degrees, had provided intellectual leadership throughout the Region. Its tradition of scholarship and the intense desire for education among its population were firmly established. Such was the ambience of his youth. Fourah Bay College had, however, fallen on hard times and faced financial crisis in the early years of the second World War, to the extent that its Science courses had to be suspended. After a short stint as a temporary clerk in the Civil Service, the young Nicol left for Christ's College, Cambridge University, and the hazards of Britain at war. Four years later he had distinguished himself at his studies, being six times Prizeman in his progress to a First Class Honours Degree in the Natural Sciences. Formal recognition of his scholarship was later bestowed when he was elected Fellow of Christ's College. His foundation in the Sciences thus firmly laid, he switched to the study of medicine at the University of London, where he qualified as a Doctor.

His academic achievements in this formative period, however, conceal the exciting development of his personality and the awakening of his national and international consciousness. At home he had been exposed to the pervasive racialism of the Colonial Power but his revulsion against these attitudes was tempered by a consciousness of the distance and depth of feeling between the Settlers of the Coast and the indigenous inhabitants of the interior. In Europe, similar social tensions on a much larger scale had erupted in the horrors of war, confirming the virulence of bigotry and discrimination not founded in race. He adjusted his view of European life while meeting liberal and not-so-liberal groups of all persuasions. More important, he and his fellow African and West Indian students were caught up in the intense debate of the political activists, concerning the liberation of Africa and the colonies. He was influenced by the cultural ferment focussed in Paris among their French speaking counterparts whose movement recognised the leadership of Aimé Cezaire and Leopold Senghor. The concept of Negritude had been enunciated and one of its chief apostles, Alioune Diop, had undertaken its articulation as editor of *Présence Africaine*. All of these diverse streams of intellectual activity and experience contributed to his development and they seemed to propel him to the inescapable conclusion that he would, in due course, have an over-riding responsibility as an intellectual leader. Many years later he would speak of the role of the African intellectual in these inspiring words:

"Our countries are just beginning on a long journey in the modern world. Our flame must burn bright and pure our standards be undiluted. The role of the intellectual in modern Africa must be to pass to future generations, undimmed and untarnished, the great ideals he inherited both from his African ancestors and from his own heritage of world culture."

In 1952 he took up an academic appointment at the University of Idaban as Lecturer in Physiology and Bio-chemistry but returned again to Cambridge two years later to carry out research into the structure and mechanism of action of human insulin. His predictable success culminated in the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Teaching and research at Cambridge were intellectually stimulating and rewarding and he might have extended his sojourn for a longer period were it not for an invitation from the Sierra Leone Government to head the Pathology Branch of the Medical Services. Fifteen years before he had been a junior Clerk, now he was returning to a senior position with all its difficulties and frustrations, but which would provide the opportunity of experience of the real world of Public Service. His appointment two years later to the post of Principal of the Fourah Bay College on the occasion of its attaining University status, was a recognition of his abundant talents as an academic and administrator. The move proved to be a significant milestone in his career, for it marked the suspension of his work as an active scientist and doctor, and a new beginning at the higher levels of national administration. Simultaneously, he accepted an appointment on the Public Service Commission and, for the next eight years, served with distinction in both capacities. When Fourah Bay College became a constituent college of the University of Sierra Leone in 1966, he was elevated to the position of Vice Chancellor. Under his administration this institution expanded and prospered. Courses leading to degrees in Civil, Mechanical and Electrical engineering were started and service to the community intensified through the Extra Mural Department. By 1969 when he left for New York as Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the United Nations, his reputation as a University administrator had so increased that he was already an international figure. In recognition of his services of this period he was awarded the Independence Medal of Sierra Leone and the CMG.

His adjustment to work at the United Nations was swift. He has served as member of the Economic and Social Council, member of the Security Council, over which he presided briefly in 1970, and as Chairman of the Committee of 24 on Decolonisation. This series of appointments established his pre-eminence in International Affairs and provided the spring-board for his present positions as Under Secretary General and Executive Director of UNITAR which followed his appointments as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and Ambassador to Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

This outstanding man, who finds himself at the very heart of mankind's struggle for survival, is sustained by an informed intellect finely tuned by years of continuous application, but also by personal qualities of charm and humour. Miraculously he finds the time to contribute regularly to the Press and to a number of Journals. His literary work, which includes verse, is considerable and much of it has received critical acclaim. It is fitting that he should be the recipient of the accolades of Governments and Universities. In adding our own today we express our deepest concern for his success. As he presides over the turbulence wrought by our 'universal hunger' we trust his steady hand; in our uncertainty we look to his wisdom, in the hope that confidence will return and that humanity will finally answer the calls to freedom and "to produce out of its closest intimacy the succulence of fruit".

By the authority of the Senate and Council I request you, Mr Chancellor, to admit Davidson Sylvester Hector Willoughby Nicol to the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.