

1979



Charles Vernon Gocking

Mr. Chancellor, the occasion of the graduation ceremony is one of the very few when the ancient aura of the University, at least for some of us, momentarily casts its magic spell. For the University of the West Indies, it does more, since it focuses attention on the original, but now battered, concept of Federalism in the Caribbean. In paying tribute to the success and achievement of our scholars we do well to remind ourselves of the important role this institution is called upon to play in shaping the intellectual life of our communities, within the framework of that concept. It is with special pleasure, therefore, that we welcome to our company an eminent citizen of the West Indies who, in diverse ways, has made a selfless contribution to the nurturement of West Indian scholars and scholarship.

I present to you Charles Vernon Gocking, Doctor of Philosophy, Teacher, Educator, Historian, Humming Bird Gold Medallist.

Vernon Gocking's exceptional intellectual talents first surfaced while still a pupil of Tranquillity Boys Intermediate School where he consistently topped his class at the two annual examinations. In 1919 he secured a Government Exhibition and proceeded to Queen's Royal College, the prestigious Trinidad school of the day.

Tragedy struck only months later when he lost his father, and it was left to a strong-willed and resourceful mother to raise two gifted sons, one of whom we have already honoured. His early promise not to be denied, there followed eight years of distinction as a scholar. He collected a House Scholarship and Prizes in English and Modern History, the two subjects to which he had a natural affinity. His hopes and ambitions to proceed to a University were, however, to be cruelly disappointed when in 1927 he was narrowly beaten for the island scholarship, that bitter-sweet trophy of brutal contest, the rock on which so many generations of would-be West Indian scholars have foundered. Indeed, at this time, the school's motto: 'Certant omnes sed non palma omnibus', must have had a particularly poignant ring.

Without private resources to proceed to University studies overseas, the young Gocking took employment with Cable and Wireless Ltd, a firm with which his family had been associated. It was a decision he never had cause to regret, for it gave him a freedom of thought and expression denied to his contemporaries in the Civil Service. In the ensuing twelve years, 1927-39, which, on reflection, he considers to be the period when the foundation for his subsequent career was laid, he read voraciously, intensely, observing life around him, filling the conspicuous gaps left by a deficient system of education, overcoming the narrow individuality that it produced. Above all, he thought deeply about things West Indian — constitutional development, social and political affairs, education and literature. He took a leading part in literary activities and became the moving spirit in the Trinidad and Tobago Literary League and the Queen's Royal College Literary Society. An admirer of Wordsworth, he publicly lamented the absence of a genuine poetry dealing with the subject of the natural beauty of the West Indian islands and in splendid anticipation of the sweet songs, yet unsung, of Carberry and Campbell, Collymore and Roach, he spoke these inspired words at the still tender age of twenty-four:

Our flowers, our birds and our hills, our bays, our rivers, our sunsets and our moonlight nights must by our own hands be set in a literature of our own...

It is our duty, and it should be our privilege to turn our eyes within, upon ourselves, upon our island homes, to think deeply and lovingly on them. If we do this, then the inspiration will come and the literature we shall produce will be genuine and original...

Though deeply absorbed in these activities, he prepared for an External Degree of the University of London, obtaining the BA in Latin, Ethics and Modern History in 1938. He also married and began to raise a family.

This achievement signalled the end of the period of his apprenticeship. After an unsuccessful application for a post at the Government Teachers Training College, he was appointed in 1939 to the staff of his alma mater, Queen's Royal College. There he quickly became known for a style of teaching which was the antithesis of the strict formal techniques of the day. Absent were the hectoring manner, the threat of punishment. Instead he stressed the positive aspects of his art, commanding attention naturally, weaving in interesting discourse the threads of the subject with his experience and knowledge. The extraordinary impact of his technique was perhaps best illustrated by one of his pupils, William Demas, now President of the Caribbean Development Bank, in an address to students in 1974:

...I cannot refer to Queen's Royal College in the 1940's without recalling the name of Charles Vernon Gocking, certainly in my view the greatest teacher in my time. An entire generation of boys in the 1940's and early 50's owe their intellectual awakening to this gifted teacher'

In 1951 at the age of forty-three he left Trinidad for Oxford, on Study Leave, ostensibly to read for the BA. It was a late attempt to attain the full prestige of an internal degree, contemplated only with the unflagging support of his devoted and much loved wife and children. But Vernon Gocking had other ideas. Seizing this unique opportunity, he contrived to abandon undergraduate studies, convincing all, tutors and sponsors alike, that he should instead be allowed to read Modern History for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree.

Setting aside a suggestion that, in the interests of objectivity, he should choose a topic on Modern African History, he commenced studies on a singularly West Indian problem — constitutional development in Jamaica in the post-emancipation period immediately preceding the imposition of Crown Colony Government in 1866. His subsequent research concentrated on the weaknesses of Sir Henry Taylor's 1839 'Memorandum on the Course to be followed with West Indian Assemblies', which became the blueprint for Caribbean constitutional development of that period. With the utmost clarity, he was able to establish that Taylor's cynical analysis was not supported by the true facts. It had ignored the important role of political leaders like Edward Jordon, done great injustice to the political maturity of the black and coloured members of the Assembly, overlooked the genuine integration that had taken place and denied the social and cultural advancement of the society. The study leaves us with the certainty that the Constitution imposed by the British after the 1865 insurrection, 'to thwart the coloured and black interests as well as the white' was a cruel manifestation of an indifferent and irresponsible administration, and that Jamaica in 1866 was indeed ready for responsible Government.

Gocking's penetrating analysis so impressed one of his examiners, the noted historian, Professor Burn, that a decade after the defence of the thesis: 'Constitutional Problems in Jamaica 1850-66', he was moved to write:

'I have examined scores of theses before and since 1955, and I have forgotten the titles, authors and contents of most of them. Dr. Gocking's was one of the very few, I think of three, which I remember after nearly ten years...'

When one considers that in the period of twenty-five years before commencement of the study, Vernon Gocking had been a clerk and a school master, not at all exposed to the stimulus of an academic atmosphere, one perceives a glimmer of what might have been a shining academic light.

It was too late. He returned to Trinidad in 1955 to his post at Queen's Royal College and was promoted to Senior Master in 1956. His career then took a new course. Responding to the expanding needs of the Ministry of Education, he turned to educational administration, when in 1956 he moved across the playing fields to the Office of Assistant Director. In 1961 he was promoted to the post of Chief Education Officer, which he held until his retirement in 1966. At the Ministry he threw himself into his duties with accustomed dedication, and contributed greatly to the formulation of a new policy for education in Trinidad and Tobago, especially to the expansion of educational opportunity at all levels. Many of our young scholars here today might well reflect on their own relatively easy passage to higher education and the debt they owe to those like Dr. Gocking who have been instrumental in effecting a revolutionary change.

Retirement clearly did not have its usual significance for Vernon Gocking. His powers among students undiminished by time, he immediately returned to teaching, this time to St Mary's College where he remained until 1978, only to return to the Ministry to take up his current appointment as Special Adviser to the Minister.

His wise counsel is as regularly sought as it is generously given. In 1962 he was Chairman of the National Anthem Committee and in 1978 of The Library Task Force and the Prohibited Publications Committee. Still active in his seventies, he currently presides over the Joint Committee of Church and State on Joint Management of Primary Schools, is Vice Chairman of the National Advisory Council, Deputy Chairman (designate) of the National Institute for Higher Education, is a member of the National Committee for the CXC Examinations and the National Council for Technology in Development. In recognition of his loyal and devoted service he was, in 1976, awarded the Humming Bird Medal Gold.

When we sum the diverse streams of his character, feel the keen disappointments of his youth, rejoice in his achievements, gain by his wisdom, we witness the embodiment of a noble spirit. Our action now in seeking to add his name to our Roll of Honour merely confirms the high esteem in which he is universally held.

I request you, Mr. Chancellor, by the authority of Senate and Council to admit Charles Vernon Gocking to the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.