On arriving at a University

This I fear may be the last straw.

You have been talked to by the Director, by the Registrar, by the Librarian by your Tutors; you have been prematurely advised about your careers; you have been told where the lavatories are and what time the bar opens; you have been received, paraded, welcomed, registered and given a free tea. Some of you have attended a week-end party designed to prepare you for what is to come. You must be beginning to think that, after all, there may be something in being a student at a university. But the worst of all this for me is that I am left with nothing to say but what you've already heard, probably three times over.

However, I said I would talk to you; and the best thing I can do is to try to entertain you for a few minutes by letting my imagination play round the experience of being a first-year undergraduate.

But before I begin, let me say two things to you.

First, a great deal of the propaganda which has been directed upon you before you got here has been designed to make you believe that you are here to learn how to be a more efficient cog in a social machine. Forget it. You are here for nothing of the sort. You are here to educate yourselves, and education is not learning how to perform a social function. 'Society,' no doubt, will make demands upon you soon enough, and you may find yourself (like the rest of us) a wretched cog in some vast machine which asks only that you perform what is called your function. But that is not what you have come here to learn; you have come here to get acquainted with truth and error, not with merely what is
and what is not serviceable to a productivist society.

Secondly, almost everything that has happened to you since you arrived here, and much of what was told you beforehand, has tended to turn you into self-conscious 'Students', people with many rights, a few duties and a special status in society. Indeed, some people seem to think that being a 'student' is a sort of profession. Forget it.

You are certainly card-carrying members of something — but of what? The cards are certainly useful; they let you into special exhibitions at the Tate for half-price, and they give you the run of the Youth Hostels of Europe. But I hope you will not let them make you feel that you have joined something like a trade union. What the cards signify is that you are members of something much more like a confraternity of strolling players — to which I, also, am glad to belong. The police sometimes move us on; but we are tolerated, and to live in an area of toleration is much pleasanter than having a niche in society.

Half the world prays that it may be forgotten by the system that surrounds us; we are the happy few who are more nearly forgotten than anyone else. Let us enjoy it.

Students since the world began have been an unruly lot — noisy, irreverent, eccentric and irresponsible. For innumerable generations they have hitch-hiked about the world learning what they could and where they could. They are serious and light-hearted at the same time; having nothing but a few books, and a few half-baked ideas and a few tunes in their heads, sometimes rebellious, often uncomfortable, but on the way to acquiring what in the end, on their distant death-beds, they will recognize as one of the things most worth having: a mind and some thoughts of your own.
Although it is over 40 years ago, I have never forgotten my first day at a university. Waking up on that first, brilliant October morning free, and with the world in front of me. I felt like a newly liberated slave must have felt; or like one of those boys in the fairy-tale who pull on their boots, kiss their mothers goodbye and set out to seek their fortunes.

It was an unforgettable experience; and it needs only October and the beginning of a new University year to make me feel the excitement of it all over again. But each year I owe it also to you: when I look at you, each setting out to find your intellectual fortune, I am reminded of what it was like to be a first-year undergraduate — the release, the freedom, the expectancy in which there was no fear of disappointment.

But if I were to pay attention to what I read in the newspapers — a very unwise thing to do; journalists have a happy knack of getting everything just wrong — I should almost believe that you are worried rather than elated, depressed rather than excited, anxious rather than expectant. A student was even reported the other day to have used the expression "the terrifying freedom of a university". I wondered what he could have been thinking of. And sixth-formers have, I am told, banded themselves together into a mutual protection society. It's all very surprising. I suppose a newly liberated slave does feel a bit bewildered. But, believe me, a university isn't as bad as all that. Indeed, I have a piece of good news for you, which the others may have forgotten to tell you: you are actually meant to enjoy yourselves here.

What is there to be enjoyed?

Being at a university is, in the first place, a merciful postponement of having to take up the often dreary responsibilities of an adult. Schooldays and
the frustrations of childhood are behind you; but you are not yet adults and
(though it is hoped you will behave in a more or less civilized manner) you are
not expected to be adults. What you have got is an interval between childhood
and what the poet has called "the long littleness of life". It's magic. A
reprieve for three years from the rat race, from "the deadlines of doing", as
the hymn says.

Some people would call it a privilege. I wouldn't, because I think what
is talked about privileges is mostly nonsense. At all events, you had better
not waste time being grateful to the tax-payer or anyone else for it. Take it
as an aristocrat takes his position - not as a right, nor as a burden, but as
what belongs to him by good fortune. You are lucky, and you are here to enjoy
your good luck as Pope Pius II on his election said he intended to enjoy the
papacy.

The Greeks had a word for what there is to be enjoyed in a university;
they called it σχολή, which we translate 'leisure'. But it is a lame trans-
lation. For them σχολή meant not only freedom from household chores (not having
to do the washing up) and freedom from having to earn a living; it meant, also,
freedom from having to take that attitude towards the world in which it is
regarded merely as material for satisfying human wants. 'Leisure', which they
connected with being at 'School', was having none of these practical and
utilitarian distractions, and consequently being free to think, free to contem-
plate, free to converse and to exchange ideas. Free, indeed, to be a little
crazy about ideas.

Now, it is this 'leisure' which three years at a university offers you.
It is something very different from doing nothing; but it is also something
very different from participating in the great enterprise of extracting from the world satisfactions for our wants and contributing to that blessed 4% per annum increase in productivity.

No doubt there will come a time when you will find yourselves with your noses to the grindstone, part of the great productive enterprise of satisfying the wants which you would never have had unless you had been told about them. Because, of course, this interval will come to an end. Meanwhile, however, you can forget it: at a university you do not have to do any of these things. This 'leisure', this disengagement, ought to be the easiest thing in the world to manage. It may, perhaps, be unfamiliar, but there is certainly nothing to be anxious about. It will be time enough for you to be anxious when you have five children, a job at the Board of Trade and an enormous hire-purchase debt.

What does it matter if you don't know exactly what to expect here, or how to spend your time, or whether you shall read six hours a day or eight? That's what you're here to find out, and nobody expects you to find it out all at once. These things aren't problems to be anxiously pondered. They're much more like wondering whether or not to kiss the girl. If you've been well brought-up you can't go far wrong if you do what you feel inclined to do; and if you are left puzzled - well, take your time, look around. The great thing about undergraduate life is that there is no desperate urgency about anything; and you can make a good many mistakes without having to pay very much for them. The only general principle I know - and that is not always true - is that one regrets less the things one does than the things one does not do.

What opens before you, then, is not a road which you have got to tread carefully, always keeping to the middle, but a boundless sea; and all you have
to do is to spread your sails to the wind. You are not here just to get a degree — that is a by-product. Nor are you here to "follow a course". A university is a place where you educate yourselves and educate one another, and that is what you are here to do.

Not long ago, a girl at an Oxford college got into fearful trouble because, when she was asked by the Principal of her college what she had come to Oxford for, she answered: 'I've come for the life'. You can see it all, can't you? 'And why, Shirley, have you come to the University?' 'Oh, for the life; the life' the thing, madam.' And yet, although she got a black mark, and was sent to the bottom of the class for this reply, the poor girl was really quite right — or may have been. The life is the thing; this magic, fully occupied but 'leisured' life; you'll never get the chance of it again.

But let me tell you a little more about life at a university. About one-third of it is spent in sleep; this is regrettable, but unavoidable for human beings. Horses need less sleep and cows none at all. Of the remaining two-thirds a large part is taken up with such activities as playing the flute, sitting with your feet up in the common-room reading 'Lady Chatterly', or whatever the current craze is, and arguing among yourselves. None of this is regrettable; it is what you should be doing.

But there's something else that belongs to life in a university. The inventors of it (whomever they were) seem to have thought that it is a good thing, even for people who are going to spend their lives in practical occupations of one sort or another and in judging the utilities of things, to get acquainted with what may be called the 'academic' attitude to things. It is a peculiar
attitude, the interest and value of which does not depend upon its immediate usefulness in practical life; indeed, it can be said to have no more than an oblique bearing upon practical life. And since you are here to get acquainted with it, I had better say a word about it.

It is often thought that the word 'academic' stands for something pretty remote from practical affairs of any kind; and so, indeed, it does. But that is merely one of its negative characteristics. The positive side of being 'academic' is being concerned, not with prescriptions and injunctions, not with learning what to do and how to do it, not with discovering merely how things work and what they can be used for, but with explanations. And perhaps you can see at once how, to be concerned with understanding and explaining, and to enjoy 'leisure', are only two ways of saying the same thing. 'Leisure', here, is precisely, being free to give your attention to understanding and explaining because you are undistracted by the necessity of doing anything or learning how to do anything.

For the 'doer' (and most of us, for most of our lives are condemned to be 'doers') the world is material to be made use of, it is something to impose our own purposes and designs upon, it is something to be conquered and exploited. But to the 'explainer', to the 'academic', the world is something very different from this. It is something to be understood, not used; something to be discerned and made intelligible, not exploited. He is concerned to see the world as it is, not to take from it what will satisfy some want or other.

This, you may think, is a very odd attitude to take to the world; but for better or worse this is the 'academic' attitude. And you have come here to spend a few years getting acquainted with this peculiar 'academic' enterprise
of explaining things.

Now, you have chosen to give your academic attention while you are here to the set of studies which compose the B.Sc. (Economics). These studies are sometimes called the 'social sciences'; but this is a very high-sounding expression which means next to nothing and you had better forget it. What in fact you will be concerned with is different kinds of explanation of human conduct. These differ explanations do not conflict with one another; none of them is fixed or finished; each is a manner of explaining human conduct which is in process of being explore.

The three central studies you will be concerned with in your first year are Economics, History and Politics. And each of these should be understood as an attempt to explain human conduct.

Economics is trying to explain human conduct when human beings are in the position of having to make a choice between different courses of action. It does not tell you what to do; it gives you an explanation of what may be supposed to go on when you are in the position of having to make a choice. Oh, I know that, in these days, economists spend half their time telling the Chancellor of the Exchequer what to do. But don't be misled. Like the rest of us they have their opinions and sometimes they are wise; but economics itself is not, knowing what to do - it is giving an explanation of a situation, it is exploring a world of explanatory, not practical, ideas.

History is another sort of explanation of human conduct. It doesn't tell you what to do; it merely makes intelligible, or explains, in a manner peculiar to itself, what human beings from time to time have done.

Politics, on the face of it, looks like being the odd man out in all this,
because the word 'politics' usually stands for doing things, wanting to do things, and knowing how to do things. But here, in a university, we mean something else. We are not concerned with recommending political beliefs of any sort to you, nor do we design to prepare you to participate in public affairs. 'Politics' is understood to be a certain sort of human activity - the activity of governing and being governed - and we are concerned with explaining it. To study politics here is simply a good opportunity to explore and to become familiar with a number of different ways of explaining human conduct - historical, legal, psychological and philosophical explanations.

You are at 'leisure', then, in a university because you are concerned with understanding and explaining things and not with doing things or merely finding out how things work. You are concerned with trying to understand the qualities and characteristics of different sorts of explanation and not with trying to decide (or to gather information for deciding) what is the best thing to do or how the world may be used.

But, a university is not a factory which turns out neat little explanation all in perfect working order and guaranteed for 12 months. Nor is it a shop; we have nothing ready-made to sell you over the counter. What we can do is to talk to you, to listen to what you have to say, to tell you some of the books you ought to be reading, and to read and criticise what you write - the rest you must do for yourselves. There is no telling where you may find your intellectual fortune; it may come in a lecture, or in a book - more likely in a book. But you will have to read a great many books of a great many different sorts if you are to recognize it when it appears.
If you pick up some information while you are here you will have done nothing you ought not to have done. Information is useful stuff. But you are not here primarily to gather information. You are here to get some practice in thinking - not just in thinking in no manner in particular, (like Belloc's orchestra played no music in particular) but in thinking in the way in which an economist or an historian or a mathematician or philosopher thinks. And you are here to get some practice in expressing your thoughts.