

## DOCUMENTS

### Convocation Address

by Malcolm Ross

(According to his daughter Julie, Malcolm Ross considered the address that he delivered on the occasion of the conferral of his honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Western Ontario on June 12, 1997 to be his most important piece of writing. It is printed here in full.)

I remember vividly the day I graduated from the University of New Brunswick in the Spring of 1933. We were in the very depths of the Great Depression. At a graduation luncheon the speaker dwelt painfully on the difficulties we would surely have to face in finding a job (in those days no one ever dreamed of “jobs, jobs, jobs”—just a job). Then, in dark funereal tone, our speaker went on to warn us of a gathering storm, of a cloud on the horizon as yet no bigger than a man’s hand. A comical little fellow with a square mustache had come to power in Germany and was already rattling his sword. But, he cautioned, we would be wrong to laugh at him. We should, we must prepare to stand on guard.

But we did laugh. We were not dismayed. For we had been reared in a time of marvels. It was only twenty years or so since, in my Fredericton home, the oil lamps were put away forever. I think I was only six when we got a telephone, seven when the last horse-drawn taxi vanished from our streets, and eight when the first airplane flew noisily and low over our house. Soon after came the wonder of radio. Yes, “such a marvel does time allow.” Depression and the rumours of war may have dimmed a thoughtless optimism. But neither then nor in the turbulent years so soon to follow did we let go of hope.

The Class of ’97 lives in a very different world. For one thing, yours is a world of much mightier marvels—space flight, the Internet, television and burgeoning technologies that proliferate at ever increasing speed and variety. Your world is indeed shrinking rapidly into Marshall McLuhan’s “global village.” It is a world ruled increasingly if indirectly by the transnational corporations and such agencies as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and, of course, by those ‘high falutin’ gambling dens on Wall Street, Bay Street and their sister streets in London, Tokyo and Hong Kong.

Once upon a time (in the Great Depression) ruined millionaires leaped to their deaths from skyscraper windows. Today, our millionaires are becoming billionaires even as the parades to the food-banks lengthen. And as poverty deepens in most of the industrialized countries, the pollution of earth, air and water spreads everywhere like a plague. We grow sick from the waste-matter of our wealth. Every day, in mute warning to all survivors, whole species of living things vanish forever.

Nevertheless, I think the Class of '97 has more reason to hope than we had in 1933. We did hope in my day, but it was a hope half-blind. True, in the recent, wild gold-rush of globalization, human rights and environmental health have been sacrificed. Prophets of the piety of this time would have us put our trust in market forces, our faith in holy greed. In devout obedience to this creed, we downsize, privatize, computerize. And, of course, we also "out-source." We skilfully shrink the national deficit by shrinking health care, education and social welfare. Meanwhile, the true but unacknowledged authors of deficit and debt wallow in hitherto unheard-of opulence.

This novel and ingenious process of "reform" (modified at times by an election or ungrateful public protest) may have even more adventurous remedies in store for us. For instance, VIA Rail is disposing of its conductors. In several provinces, we have the prospect of privatized prisons—prisons for profit. "Distance education" with computers in every home gives promise of incalculable savings. It is even being suggested that in the coming "home-university without walls," our abandoned campus buildings might well be used to house the indigent homeless who have been liberated from toil by the blessings of technological advance. However, I am happy to say that I have been assured on good authority that there is no truth in the rumour that Air Canada is about to fly without pilots. Such flights are at least five years away—unless, of course, there is a sudden need of further financial restraint.

The end of a millennium, even more than the end of a century, I suppose, is a time for looking back as well as ahead. For many of my generation, the new is still defined by the old, the future by the past. Do we not now speak of our time and our culture as post-colonial, post-modern, post-Christian, post-civilized? Some would add "post-mortem." I would not. Despite our greed, despite man's inhumanity to man, despite our criminally irresponsible degradation of nature, I believe we could *if we would approach and enter the new millennium with hope. Not with optimism but with hope. Certainly we should not pretend that all manner of things will*

*be well if we merely keep the course, if we continue to put our trust in market forces, our faith in holy greed.*

Not long ago I was given an exhilarating new perspective on our global village and on both our hope and our fears for the time to come. I heard on radio a brief account of an interview with Roberta Bondar, the Canadian astronaut. She had said that when she looked out from the spacecraft and saw from afar the planet Earth she was suffused with a sudden rush of love and awe. For the first time she saw her home, not just Canada, but all of it—the whole world was home! All of it!

And I wonder if perhaps she did not turn her telescope left and right, up and down—to gaze in sad surmise at those bright, dead specks of star and planet that throng infinity, awful in their warning to us. And did she wonder—those scoops and scars and channels on the planet Mars, were they once rivers and seas flowing with water and life? And might she have wondered if one day far-off, refugees from planet Earth would, from their space platforms, look down on scoops and scars that once were Hudson Bay, the Mississippi, the Blue Danube and the Black Sea. I thought of this as I read John Bemrose's review of *A Scientific Romance* by Ronald Wright (this was in a recent issue of *Maclean's* magazine):

the book is saved by its strong central plot, a certain wry humor and a powerful visionary core. Wright offers an unforgettable view of an England where jungle and myna birds have colonized the ruined Parliament buildings, and deformed fish and animals still endure the evil spell of civilization's long-lived toxins. Lambert also discovers the evidence of civil war, mass euthanasia and widespread slavery and torture. It seems that mankind went anything but gently into its final night. Much has been written about the dangers of the modern world's profligate ways. But few writers have imagined the future with such compelling and tragic urgency.

Bizarre as such a vision may seem at first glance, we are slowly but surely moving in this direction. It is a direction we need not take. It is your generation, the Class of '97, which still has the chance (or should I say the duty) to cry "Halt," "Left Turn," "Quick March." This is the cry, the command of Hope; it is a call to action and an end to drift. It is a demand that environmental destruction be brought to an end. As David Suzuki asserts "this is not just a matter of recycling, becoming more energy efficient or planting trees. These things are important. But we need profound changes in our economic system, in government structures and priorities, in the organization of our communities and the way we live."

And I would add, while we have to begin these changes on our own street in the global village, Canada is not an island unto itself. Nowadays nothing happens in the global village anywhere that does not happen to us. As industry enters the Third World the sickness of the global environment worsens. Sweat-shops and child labour compromise and degrade the wealth of all nations. As Maude Barlow recently observed, “Canada’s corporate and political leaders are becoming part of a global élite who have more in common with each other than they have with their own people. Together they have created a world in which the top twenty trans-national corporations have twice the combined revenues of the bottom four-fifths of humanity.”

We now live in a predominately materialistic culture. Ours is a society of consumers bargaining for products. We even talk of our culture industries—the industries that produce books, music, art. Some universities (not this one, I trust) refer to their graduates as their “product.” When we talk of globalization, we are talking in the main about trade—the exchange of products. Even the promotion of our books and art in other lands is justified as an aid to the sale of other products.

We must not “stay the course”—not this course! Hope, an authentic hope requires us to change course, and not just in our own corner of the global village. Our home is larger than this. It is the home Roberta Bondar saw from the spacecraft. Nothing now happens anywhere on the globe that does not or will not eventually happen to us in our small corner.

For the very success of our science, our professional and business skills, has brought us to a climactic point in human history. There has been more radical change in what we can do and what we can undo in the last hundred years than in the previous nine hundred. The speed of change continues to accelerate. In pursuit of economic wealth in our consumer society natural wealth, the real wealth of land, sea and air, sickens and dwindles. This is immoral.

Before it is altogether too late, can we hope to devise an economy which functions in obedience to morality? Certainly it is not moral to strike trade deals with countries where child labour is rife and where the minimum wage in the sweat-shops is as low as twenty cents an hour. This is obscene.

Is it beyond human wit to create jobs in all the global village that are fairly rewarded, to re-shape the economy to meet human needs (and no longer to fabricate unneeded wants)—and to do this without the pillage and the pollution of the natural world? And as technology replaces more and more of the work-force with artificial intelligence (the smart and

smarter computer) will it not be possible as well as necessary to redistribute wealth by a guaranteed annual income to all who give service to society—the care-givers, the home-makers, to everyone who contributes to the common good?

Not practical? Mind you, this is not the way of “common sense.” Perhaps common sense has done its worst. Perhaps it is now time for uncommon sense. Is it more practical to go on making sick the sky, the soil, the sea? Is it not really practical to become what we are—or were meant to be—the stewards and shepherds of our world for our good, for the good of all creatures great and small?

In 1997 we are already well into a global crisis. Unlike the rapidly rising flood in Manitoba, our global crisis advances slowly, inch by inch. But it is time now to begin building dykes. They must be built to last. The threat is never ended. Nor should our vigilance and our resistance end.

To believe this is to recognize that the morality strong and sure enough to keep the economy in its place is, deep-down and at roots religious. Its birth was and is in faith, hope and charity. What I have been trying to say is meant as a prayer—a prayer for the Class of '97, for this new millennium.

It is my prayer for the planet.

Amen