

Letter #1

13 rue Calvin,
Geneva, Switzerland,
May 12, 1946.

Dear friends,

My present job leaves me with so little time for letter-writing that I must resort to the present, admittedly unsatisfactory, expedient of an "epistle general" in order to fulfil that primary Christian duty of satisfying the legitimate curiosity of my friends as to my comings and goings. In addition, since I shall include in future editions references to the "university question" which engrosses my attention at the moment, it is being sent to some of the folk with whom I discussed this matter in my recent travels. The first two letters will be much longer than their successors which, I hope to produce approximately monthly.

Abschied tut Weh.

Shall we begin in Kingston, New York, or London? "In the beginning is my end and in the end is my beginning" as T. S. Eliot correctly remarks in his FOUR QUARTETS which has been giving me a great deal of pleasure; so let's start in Kingston which was quite definitely a beginning and an end.

From July to September I plugged away at Queen's trying to inculcate the rudiments of calculus into the minds of about 80 returned men, teaching about eleven hours a week, marking scads of exercises, and doing some private tutoring. As Treasurer of the S.C.M., I did a bit of work raising money to establish Rev. Jack Long as the S.C.M. Secretary. The first half of the summer had involved a long session at the meetings of the enlarged Executive Committee of the World's Student Christian Federation where I gave a talk on "The Mission of the S.C.M. in the University" which was followed by one week's holiday in Princeton during which I read the proofs of "The Theory of Lie Groups" by my friend and former Professor, Claude Chevalley who is generally regarded as one of the leading modern algebraists.

On October 1, I joined the staff of the W.S.C.F. "with special responsibility in the area of the Mission of the S.C.M. in the University and in particular of the preparation for a thorough discussion of this subject at the general committee in August 1946". My appointment was for one year to be extended for one or two further years at the pleasure of the General Committee.

Departure from Kingston involved packing two years' accumulated stuff and brought me to the firm conviction that books are better in bookcases than in packing cases. It also involved the end of two very pleasant years of teaching which I had enjoyed very much. Teaching mathematics requires a stretching of the mind of the student which occasionally becomes visible as the light of insight breaks over his perplexed face. Sometimes after I had laboured diligently, repeating, prodding, tackling the point from different angles and then finally the light dawned, I would bubble with such joy and self-complacency that it was an effort to refrain from laughter. A class of third year engineering physics students was the best class by far that I ever taught; so of course I could not refuse their

request to deliver extra lectures during the Spring term for two hours a week on advanced material and though the sheer delight and the privilege of teaching them was sufficient recompense for the work, it was as gratifying as it was surprising to receive a magnificent Queen's ring from their diffident spokesman on the last day. During my two Queen's years I managed to accomplish about as much mathematical reading as during the three years I worked for my doctorate and began to feel that if I were to continue at that rate I might possibly be worthy in about ten years of the superlative title "mathematician". In addition to this, my "bounden duty and service", I put a good deal of time and energy into I.S.S., S.C.M., and the Co-operative Residence of 32 men of which I was so-called "Don", and the choir of St. George's Cathedral in which I sang bass.

I am sure there is no better training for young boys than to sing in a choir under a strict and competent leader. Nor in my view, is there more divine music than the psalms chanted by an all male choir in the English tradition. It is a great pity that we in Canada are almost totally unconscious of the great wealth of glorious church music which a dozen or more first-rate English Church musicians - Purcell, Gibbon, Croft, Morley, Greene, etc. - have bequeathed to us. It was leaving St. George's which I probably regretted most in my departure from Kingston. The Anglican liturgy, properly performed is a thing of sheer beauty. I suspect my Kierkegaardian friends will accuse me of some form of idolatry. Certainly, I know of and have indeed experienced the danger of allowing the form to take the place of the substance of religion. But I know too, that beauty can speak to us of God and that when I entered into it properly the liturgy was a most potent force in shaping my emotions and conforming them to true godliness. On my last Friday in Kingston, I went along to choir-practice and sat in the dark nave of the cathedral listening to the choir. How could I help but be grateful and profoundly humbled that God should grant us the enjoyment of such riches, the experience of a foretaste of the harmonies of the celestial hosts. Who would not join with the psalmist and sing "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord".

Living in the co-op. was a marvelous experience for me. Scarcely any of the members were professing Christians, but everyone of them was an excellent chap; so I was forced to face the difference between ethics and Christianity. Seven of the members of the house I lived in were Medical students who continually discussed the usually most taboo subjects with an embarrassing frankness and dispassionateness which quickly dispelled a great deal of my prudishness and my Christian-shock-reaction to the facts of life. The organization was owned and controlled completely by students, and provided, I believe, the best possible education in living and co-operating with other folk. Two rather terrifying experiences were entailed in the responsibility I had to assume for two boys connected with the co-op. who became mentally ill, one with schizophrenia, and the other with hypomania (a mild manic depressive). With the first I stayed up several nights quietening his fears and keeping his mind away from his obsessions. I took to reading, with much greater earnestness than ever before, works on psychiatry. To actually witness a mind departing from normalcy is most frightening, more so for me than any experience of death has been. Man is like a tightrope-walker balancing over the abyss of personal and social insanity. There is no simple conclusion with which

I can terminate this paragraph, and so perhaps for that reason it is dragging on. Certainly many of the acute problems of some of these boys I knew so well would have been easily surmounted if they had been nurtured and established in an intelligent Christian pattern of life. Sometimes Christians talk about the Christian life as though entering upon it is simple and immediate. By no means, for I am thoroughly persuaded of the essential importance of habit, of sanctification if you will. (I suspect some of you won't, and look for acute replies!). And most of the difficulties these boys faced in understanding and apprehending Christianity were a result of the deficiency in the witness of the Church, especially in its divisions and in its failure to speak at the level of intellectual honesty and precision which an educated person demands to-day. Any relapse into an oversimplified dogmatism, such as Barthianism and Anglo-Catholicism represent, to my mind can do nothing but harm.

VANCOUVER TO WINNIPEG

On October 2, I flew to Vancouver beginning a trip which so far has taken me to over 40 colleges in as many places and over 15,000 miles. In Vancouver I had a good chat with N.A.M. MacKenzie the new president of U.B.C. "Larry" as he is known to almost everyone, including the students, was once an S.C.M. secretary in the Maritimes. He seemed to be working very hard and enjoying himself immensely. He is in closer and more vital contact with the students than any other university president I know. Perhaps you read the recent (Feb.18) account of the mushroom growth of his campus in "Time" magazine. Its usually misleading manner is well adapted to portray that particular situation. Many of you know Alex Grant who, I thought, was doing an excellent job as S.C.M. Secretary. At U.B.C. I succeeded in accomplishing the three-fold objective which I had on each Canadian campus: (1) to describe the work of International Student Service to the Executive of the student body and the local I.S.S. Committee and to any wider group of students; (2) to talk to S.C.M. students about the W.S.C.F.; (3) to meet a few members of staff, especially professedly Christian ones, to discover their mind on the main problems confronting the university world and to present to them some of the thinking of the Dutch and British. The U.B.C. ex-servicemen are in a more advanced state of organization than those of any other campus I visited. Six hundred of them heard me patiently while I held forth on I.S.S.

Due to the enthusiasm of President MacKenzie and Professor Basil Mathews, my presentation to a small group of staff resulted in the formation of a study group of about fifteen faculty members who have since met several times seeking to discover the true relation of Christianity to the university. The minutes of their meetings which I have received, suggest that it is a serious and lively group.

On my trip west, the plane was delayed three hours and this brought us into the Rockies just at sunrise. Floating over the great jagged snow-tipped peaks with the sun breaking through the dark vapours of the night was, I should think, the best possible first approach to the Rockies. I recrossed them by train to Edmonton. From the plane one lost any sense of the height of the mountains. From below they were rather more breath-taking. But I must stop trying to give impressions of my stream of consciousness or this letter will be impossibly long. Leaving Don Read, Jim Romeyn and Edmonton, I went on to Saskatoon and met J. S. Thomson, the President, a truly

great person steeped in the Scottish philosophical and Christian tradition; from there to Brandon where I enjoyed some marvelous oatmeal porridge with rich, rich cream in addition to more intellectual delights, and then to Winnipeg. The University of Manitoba was in the throes of celebrating Freshman day in all its pre-war fun and happily had assembled well over 1500 students in the main theatre who heard the story of I.S.S. with most generous attention coming as it did after twelve hilarious speeches, the best of which undoubtedly was by the new President of the University of Manitoba, Mr. Trueman (note the "e").

Minnesota to New York

From Winnipeg it is an easy night journey to Minneapolis; so soon I was in the Twin Cities where I spent the greater part of a week trying to gain some feeling of the nature of a "typical large State College". Whether or not it was typical, I do not know. Certainly it was large. Their giant Union, co-educational with separate facilities for men and women makes Hart House look quite small. My first encounter was with 125 live Lutheran Students at a week-end conference planned by Carl Lund-Quist (Lund hyphen Quist, as he is called by one irreverent student) the secretary of the Lutheran Student Association. I gained a very real admiration for the vitality of the Lutheran tradition in the Middle West at this affair for the thirty young folk in the commission I conducted, had, compared with similar sized groups I have led, achieved a fair degree of integration of a sensible brand of Christianity with their thinking about other things. That does not express any too well what I want to say. The phenomenon I thought I detected was social rather than personal. I felt that I had entered into a community which was different from any other than I had known. It was different in that the acids of modernity so potent in most of North America had not dissolved so much. The same might be

said of Quebec, but here the forces resisting the dissolution were not purely conservative but were based on a positive apprehension of a form of Christianity of which I approved.

From Minnesota I went on to Chicago to visit Arnold and Ethel Nash and to see my god-son David and his older brother Keir. The whole family seemed very well and happy. Arnold is teaching Church History at McCormick Theological Seminary and enjoying it very much. That a leading Presbyterian seminary invited a priest of the Church of England to teach is due almost wholly to the enthusiastic reception his book *THE UNIVERSITY IN THE MODERN WORLD* has received. Keir seems to have improved greatly in social adaptability; my god-son you will be glad, and surely not surprised, to hear, has a very sunny disposition.

On to New York for a meeting of the North American Committee of World Student Relief and my first meeting with Andre de Blonay the delightful Swiss upon whose shoulders fell a tremendous burden all during the war years in his office as General Secretary of World Student Relief. He sketched graphically the terrific need among students of the world. It became clear as we studied reports and budgets and auditors' statements that a most valuable and indeed miraculous work had been accomplished, but that financial resources were about one-tenth of what was needed for an adequate programme. I left that meeting oppressed by the appalling needs of the university world, and heartened by what had been accomplished with so little resources

and by the spiritual significance of our student relief work.

Toronto to Toronto

I returned to Toronto to see the family and have what I considered was a well-earned rest. Instead, I spent a week in rather feverish activity ordering clothes, etc. for my trip to Europe, and helping the I.S.S. Committee before setting off for the Maritimes.

On my way, I paid my last visit to Queen's, talking to the I.S.S. and S.C.M. committee, then stopped at McGill and saw President James and the President of the Student Council about I.S.S., and finally arrived in Fredericton to talk about I.S.S. to the University of New Brunswick. My timing was not propitious because the community had just been upset by the death of a young Physics professor who had tried to save a lad from drowning. The professor was a Quaker who was very highly regarded in Fredericton. The funeral service from the University Hall was extremely simply and most moving. The president, Brig. I.F. Gregg spoke briefly and by his sheer starkness, was tremendously effective.

The S.C. . . crowd at U.N.B. seemed very keen. Since I was there on a Sunday, I was invited to preach in the Anglican Cathedral. To receive the invitation was considered a step forward in relationships, and it was no doubt due to the fact Canon Hiltz had warned the Dean that a young Anglican from Upper Canada would be straying in those parts. Afterwards I talked to a group of students and this led into an absorbing discussion about original sin which went on till two o'clock. My bus, due at 4 A.M., was late; so I missed the ferry across the Bay of Fundy. We arrived at the dock just in time to see the boat casting off! This was a great tragedy since I was due to speak the next day at a Mission at Acadie. However, I was too tired to

worry over my plight, wired Acadia and went to bed....only to soon be rudely awakened by the order that I must proceed overland by train to be met by a car thirty miles from the campus. Since this meant most of a very slow night in a very uncomfortable train, my rebellious nature took some beating down, but the spirit finally prevailed and I boarded it (not the spirit). According to a Meritimer (so I may repeat this story), if a Meritimer train stopped to pick up a dozen eggs and only eleven had been laid, it would wait for the twelfth. My train exemplified this exactly. However, sure enough we arrived at 5.30 and there were Jack Bishop and two stalwart Acadia students waiting for me. We reached Acadia at about eight, in time for breakfast and a short break to prepare my remarks.

Before a full auditorium, Merrick Christie (THE WOMAN!) of the S.C.M. of Canada, Prof. McCracken (THE THEOLOGIAN) of McMaster and now of Riverside Church in New York, and myself (THE SCIENTIST) did our piece and the mission to Acadia University was well underway. It proved to be a very interesting and educative event for me. It had been well prepared for by the local committee, was sponsored by the official student body, had the full support of the President and the active sympathy of most of the faculty. Acadia has a solid Baptist background, and unfortunately the more fundamentalist inclined theological students arrogated to themselves the term Christian, so to a large extent Christianity is identified in the popular mind with Victorian taboos. This to my mind was the main point we had to combat; so I took the line of being an objective mathematician who did not think that Christianity consisted in conventions. Two of us held forth each night for a little more than an hour altogether. That session was followed by discussion groups under the three leaders. We rested for half an hour and then went into a bull-session in one of the residences. These last were where we did the best work, and got to grips with the real problems of the students. In the afternoons about twenty students in all came to consult us on some personal problem. One of my subjects was LIFE'S DECISIONS,

and I chose as illustration, choosing a job and choosing a mate as the two most important decisions most of us face. The conviction with which I spoke on this led to an embarrassment when one girl who consulted me privately came to discuss a marital problem and only at the very end of the interview a chance remark I made led her to entertain for the first time, to her infinite confusion though not to mine, the idea that I was not married! It was a great joy to work with Miss Christie and Professor McCracken, both of whom did an excellent job. I can scarcely imagine a team working together with greater harmony. I was humbled by discovering a new way I could sin, for this was the first time I ever consciously thought of myself as trying to convert people. It gave me an insight into what must be one of the great temptations of a preacher.

Acadia was followed by visits re I.S.S. to Dalhousie and Mount Allison where there was already considerable enthusiasm. From Mount Allison I worked in a most pleasant overnight visit with Glynn Firth, who is the United Church minister at Northport. He has been active in Co-ops (having started a couple) and seems to be loved and respected by his parishoners (if a United Churchman has parishoners which somehow I doubt!).

From Northport to Harvard, Yale, Brown, and Connecticut and a transformation from I.S.S. to the task of the Christian, in particular the professor, in the University. At Harvard I had the good fortune to lunch with a member of the committee which recently published EDUCATION IN A FREE SOCIETY. The University of Connecticut is remarkable for its isolation and the existence near-by of a community church in which folk of all denominations (even R.C., at least until recently) participate actively. For a state university the handling of the religious problem seemed quite advanced and good, largely due to the excellent work of Paul Pfuetze a member of the philosophy department who teaches religion.

When I reached New York with the object of doing some work for Roland Elliott while he was away in China, I found that there was practically nothing to do; so I caught

what I diagnosed and treated as a mild case of 'flu. . When my temperature reached 102.5, I decided it was time to go home; so got a sleeper and headed for Toronto. I slept well and felt much better on my arrival but decided to consult a doctor who immediately decided it was central pneumonia. So off to the hospital I went to be injected with penicillin every three hours for five days. The needle was about one and a half inches long....very gruesome but after awhile it became a not unpleasant routine. The effect on my temperature was miraculous, and I was allowed out the day before Christmas. The cure is a little deceptive because evidently one must rest for a long time after.

Farewell America.

January 8 saw me make my fond adieus to the folks and away to New York to stay in Windham House, a very proper and delightful hostel for Episcopalian girls! On January 17 I embarked on the Queen Elizabeth with the Palestinian Commission. The next instalment which will follow fairly soon, will get me from the Queen Elizabeth to rue Barthelemy Henn, Geneva.

I suppose that what will interest you most will be my reactions to Europe. If you want these letters to continue, I will need some encouragement, and also some guidance as to what you want to know. The chronicling of mere motion has been so considerable in this letter that there was room for little else; however, after we reach Geneva, my motion slows down considerably; so we can become more philosophical and sociological and then your questions would help a lot.

All the best,

JOHN.

Duplicated for A.J. Coleman, by the Student
Christian Movement, 25 Bloor St., W.,
Toronto, Ontario. August 14, 1946.