

Remarks by Dr. Vincent Ravi Booth At the Breaking of  
Ground Ceremonies of Bennington College

August 16, 1931.

In the Near East, where I spent some time last winter, I picked up a strange saying. This is it. "No structure stands for long which has not been baptized with human blood." This is indeed a strange saying!

Over the river Drina, the western boundary of Serbia, at a point where the torrent dashes out of the mountains, is found a stone bridge which for three centuries has withstood the rush of the spring floods. Two of its predecessors were swept away. As the foundations of the third bridge were being laid, - the same one which is there now, - the old priest of the nearby village came day after day to watch the workmen, and each time cried out in his weak voice: "Don't you know that your bridge will crumble unless baptized with the blood of a human victim?" The workmen would grin, and mutter to each other: "the poor old fool!"

But one day, as a great foundation stone was being lifted into position, the derrick chain broke, and the stone fell on the master-mason, crushing out his life. The sorrowful workmen gathered up the mangled remains; and, at the bidding of the aged priest, buried them below the river's bed at the very heart of the central pier. The service over, bystanders heard the tottering priest mutter to himself: "Now the bridge will stand!"

It has! For three hundred years the spring floods have dashed themselves against that bridge, to be broken but not to break. And the people of the nearby village will tell the passing stranger that the bridge will last until the judgment day because it is upheld by the spirit of the master mason who lies buried at the heart of the central pier.

Three centuries from now will Bennington College be standing here? What imparts to a college the strength of the hills? Is it the curriculum? To be sure, - a curriculum which wisely meets the deepest needs of the human spirit, training its powers, educating, - that is marshalling, - its hidden resources, is of the utmost importance. But what guarantee is there that such a curriculum, inspired by clear vision and backed by adequate leadership, will be adopted by the swiftly moving procession of students passing through the portals of Bennington College? I submit that the Almighty for a long, long time has been offering to mankind a perfect curriculum, but the vast majority of men will have none of it, and pass by on the other side.

Is it the faculty which guarantees life to a college? To be sure, no college can be greater than its faculty. A great teacher will never stand in an empty classroom. His lecture hall or



laboratory may not be crowded, but the quality of the minds which he is called upon to guide will compensate for the smallness of their number. And yet there are learned men who are dismal failures, who represent a liability and not an asset to the college with which they are connected. Every college executive could add a few names to the list.

Yes, we must have a wise curriculum, and teachers who are masters of their subjects. But something more is needed. That college endures whose constituency is animated by the spirit of sacrifice. Were Mark Hopkins, Mary Lyon and Emma Willard solely great teachers? Did not the flame of sacrifice burn in their souls? Did they not give their lives that their educational institutions might live?

*In this connection I am reminded of the greatest teacher I have ever had, Professor*

~~On this occasion I have the high honor of representing Boston University, and of bringing to you the greetings and felicitations of its President, Trustees and Faculty. To mention Boston University is to remember~~ Borden P. Bowne, one of the keenest philosophical minds produced by this country. Harvard wanted that teacher; so did Columbia. Chicago University offered him a salary of seven thousand dollars a year; and thirty years ago that was a mint of money. But note his answer: "What would I do with all that money?" And so he stayed in what was then a small college, and helped to make it great by his learning, his masterful teaching, and, above all, by his sacrificial spirit.

It falls to me to turn the first sod for Bennington College. I turn this sod as I would turn the page of a blank book. The page I turn is not blank. Eight years have passed since that first meeting was held at the Colgate home on yonder hill, addressed by President Neilson. This first page is covered with fine writing, - the story of the arduous, up-hill struggle to found this new college. Over and over again the task has seemed hopeless; but each time defeat has been turned into victory by the spirit of sacrifice. The list of those who have sacrificed to the limit that this dream might come true is long. And I venture the prophecy that Bennington College, even as that bridge in Servia, will stand so long as at the top of each new page as it is turned, in crimson letters, is written the word, - Sacrifice.



Bennington College.  
Sod Breaking - August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1931.

For these visioned halls of learning,  
As we list the first green sod,  
(May we have the benediction,  
Of the greatest teacher - God.

(May His presence ever guide us,  
As we build upon this site;  
Lighting newer lamps of learning,  
(May we blaze our trail a-right.

And these lamps that we are lighting,  
May their first small rays so gleam,  
As to make the pathway brighter,  
To a broader, deepening stream.

(May the task that lies before us,  
Be completed and we say,  
Here before us stands our College,  
- We have builded well today.