The Degree-Conferring Ceremony--June 15, 1940 Opening Remarks of the President

We are met here again at the spot where nine years ago Bennington College first dug into the soil of Vermont. There are formally assembled in regular session the College Trustees and the College faculty, for the purpose of carrying through in public the last official decisions leading to the award of the bachelor of arts degree to the fifth graduating class. The members of the class have presented themselves.

Less formally there are gathered here the parents, friends and other members of the community to share a common pride and good wishes for this graduating group.

Bennington College accepts as a function certifying the abilities of its students for graduate and professional instruction and for other purposes. The bachelor's degree is such a certificate. Those awarded it are the survivors of a process of selection as well as of instruction. They have combined a long period of general education with more concentrated training in one of the important areas of human achievement. They are qualified as useful workers in one of these major fields.

It would be a mistake to attach undud significance to this certificate as the principal aim or measure of our labors together. The College provides not only instruction; it also offers its students, for a time at least, a way of living. Habits, attitudes, and values are altered. For the four years work and life here, so far as our ingenuity allows, have been contrived so as to be enriching and vitalizing. For the most part it is day-to-day activity leaving a gradual residue we later recognize as growth. The resulting capabilities of the class here present are in no adequate way defined

or measured by the requirements set up for the degree.

Under the institution's influence young women develop in different ways and at different rates. They begin and end at widely different points.

No stated number of years nor any measuring stick yet devised can assess their development. Should we attempt to equate them in other than the narrow terms in which our certificate-degree is defined, we would condemn ourselves to artificiality or confusion.

part in the maturing process of which we have been witness. Back of the experience here lie longer years of schooling, the powerful influence of home and family, the subtle impress of the general environment. Even within the four-year span just ending other agenciess and other institutions than those at work on this hilltop have contributed in important ways to the education of these, whom we like to think of as peculiarly our students. Honestly estimated we are only one of many factors in the process of their education. For their virtues and faults we must share the praise and blame.

It is natural to dramatize this occasion as marking a definite stage in the lifelong process of learning. But it is a somewhat false emphasis. Inexact and inadequate as graduation (that is, measurement), it certainly is not commencement. Education is not pre-existence. It is part of the process of Iving. Nor is this hour in any real sense culmination. For the graduates about to leave us the scene will change. But learning of some sort will continue. If there has been anything stored up for the future, it is not primarily the precarious capital of remembered facts, but skill in learning and doing and a continuing desire to learn.

To the &[{ Ed } am date which these graduates go we commend them. Their presence will yield them a modest increase of youthful energy, purpose and com-

petence in fields where many skilled hands, trained minds and stout hearts are needed for the maintenance and the enhancement of our common culture.

We shall follow them with interest and affection. We shall be proud of their accomplishments and disappointed at their failures—their real failures. For the accidents of fortune which masquerade as failure we shall continue to have, I hope, understanding, sympathy and patience. Similarly, we do not build our hopes or make our judgments upon the accident of popular success or public achievement.

Our expectations will continue to be in terms of the values that in our life together we have agreed upon as enduring. They are: hone st, useful--more often than not unobtrusive--work, the acceptance of responsibility, facing changing realities with humor and sense.--Above all, the maintenance of integrity. These as well as the natural sentiments of association and friendship, are continuing and sustaining bonds between us in the difficult days ahead.