Rudyard Kipling's Uncollected Speeches

Rudyard Kipling

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To the Canadian Club, Vancouver

7 October 1907

Kipling’s tour of Canada in 1907, which apparently began as simply a private visit, turned into a kind of royal progress. While still en route from England he was invited to deliver a series of speeches to the Canadian Clubs across the country. On his arrival he was provided with a private rail car, with its own porter, and in this he and Mrs. Kipling traveled from Montreal to Vancouver and back again to Montreal between 30 September and 22 October 1907. Everywhere they went they were treated as high dignitaries. Kipling made speeches at Winnipeg, Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, and Ottawa; finally, in Montreal, he made two speeches, one at McGill University and one at the Canadian Club. Three of these Canadian speeches appear in A Book of Words, 1928: the other four are now reprinted here.

Kipling’s main themes were the ties of imperial relations and the desirability of a large emigration from England, subjects made more urgent to him by the failure, as he saw it, of the English to maintain power in South Africa.

The speech in Vancouver, the second that he made on the tour, was delivered to “the largest gathering ever assembled at a banquet in Vancouver” (Vancouver Daily Province, 7 October 1907).

MR. KIPLING, on entering, was greeted by loud and continued applause, all the guests rising to their feet and cheering.

Mr. Banfield, in introducing the speaker, said: “Our guest is part of our home and public life, and in talking with him through his books we became better and broader minded citizens. I will not attempt to eulogize or refer to his many splendid literary attainments. We know him without being personally acquainted, and we are tendering him this banquet as the outburst of a smouldering admiration.”

At this point Mr. Kipling looked at the smoking tip of the cigarette in his hands and at the many pipes and cigars in the mouths of the guests and smiled. The audience quickly caught the point and laughed and applauded.

“Anyhow,” said Mr. Banfield, “we can truthfully say Rudyard Kipling is all right. It has been the opinion that through the strong characters in his books he compelled the admiration mostly of men, but judging from the number
of applications we have received from the ladies to hear him to-day, he must also have won the love and admiration of the fair sex.

In order that our guest, Dr. Rudyard Kipling of our Canadian institution of McGill University, may feel perfectly at home with us, I have the honor of making him a life member of the Vancouver Canadian Club.” (Loud applause.)

Mr. Banfield presented Mr. Kipling with a membership card of the Club in a morocco case, on which was engraved in gold letters, the monogram “R.K.”

“And, sir, you are entitled to all the rights and privileges attached there-to,” added Mr. Banfield.

Mr. Kipling on rising to speak was greeted with applause so loud and prolonged that it was several minutes before he could make himself heard. When he did, he spoke with a clearness and precision, and literary neatness that attracted attention throughout.

“Mr. President, members of the Canadian Club, ladies and fellow subjects, thank you for smouldering. (Loud laughter and applause.) I have never heard such smouldering before. (Renewed laughter.) I will not conceal from you that I am deeply interested in certain aspects of the author whose name I happen to bear, and I consider your remarks, Mr. President, as to his merits and demerits may be true or they may not. I don’t know. But my position before you to-day is hardly that of a man who writes in the decent seclusion of his room with a pen, but it is the position of the wandering (dare I say) globe-trotter.

I have suffered myself in three continents and two hemispheres from the visits or rather visitations of wandering fellow-subjects of our Empire (laughter) whose business in life seems to be to darken counsel with words without wisdom. These gentlemen used to jump from trains and steamers and capture our unoffending community before we had time to get our meals, and before they had been six hours with us they would tell us of the problems we had to face and instruct us how we were to face them. They would tell us where we are probably going in this life, and where we would certainly go after we were dead. (Laughter.) I have listened to dozens of such gentlemen urging us to do the one thing that circumstances inexorably forbade us to do, and not to do what we felt we certainly should have to do. I have watched them trying earnestly, or what was worse, humorously, to win the approval of our social community, and have seen them go away perfectly persuaded that they left behind them a most charming impression. (Laughter.)
I used to think these persons a little bit superfluous, but I am beginning to believe that they were only what I am to-day, the creatures of their surroundings. (Laughter.) I am very sorry that I ever laughed at them because it is more or less certain that I shall make precisely the same mistakes as they made. For instance, one of the things that used to annoy me most in their orations was that they as lookers on saw more of the game than we who lived in the heat and the dust of it. I begin to believe now that these very offensive amateurs had a certain amount of right on their side. I have been thinking it over since I have gone over this new City of Vancouver. To put it mildly, it is not the same city I saw eighteen years ago, and again a few years later. But wonderful as it is, beautiful and luxurious and commanding as it appears, beside your still waters and under your soft skies I confess quite humbly that I cannot look at the city as it is for beholding the city it is going to be. (Applause.)

Those among you who have ever seen, as I have, the head or vanguard of an army break through a mountain pass will understand my feeling. You know how one sees the vanguard of an army spreading out over the vast landscape till one sees their camp fires gleaming as far as the eye can reach. You hear the rumbling of the cannon, and you see the multitude of tired and dusty men looking for some place to lie down. Such a scene stirs the imagination profoundly but even more so does the knowledge that these are only forerunners of the vast and wonderful stream of men pouring through the mountains to reinforce and make sure the work of that wonderful part of the army of men. And it is in this light that I look upon your future. (Applause.)

I doubt if I am going to say what I ought, when I say that if I had not as great a faith as I have in our breed and get, I would tremble at your responsibility. (Hear, hear and applause.) But I believe in you [who] have come through the mountain passes already as I believe in the men who are coming through the mountains now to join hands with you. I believe in the great stream that is coming on its way through the mountains now, a strong and fertilizing stream no industry and no power can permanently check, though they may strive for a little time to delay its advent. (Applause.)

You have right to your pride in your city; my pride is in your destiny, because it devolves right upon you here to build up, rivet and make secure a stable Western civilization facing the Eastern sea. (Applause.) The head of the great army of peace is scarcely emerging yet through the mountain passes, but in a shorter time than any dare believe it must come through in full flood. It is you, gentlemen, who must be responsible for the handling of that great army, not the Liberal Government, not the Dominion, but you,
the Province. (Applause.) You will see companies, the battalions, the divisions, the army corps of that great army following—men looking for homes for themselves and their women where they can rear up their children, children born in this land and loving it as the land of their birth. (Applause.)

And perhaps it is worth while remembering that the State depends on the family, and the family depends on the woman, and woman depends upon the home (yes, good or evil, in life or death, the woman depends upon the home), and that is no small job you have taken up, by no means a small job, and I beg you to believe if I have not touched on certain problems, it is not because I underrate the gravity and importance of the great problems that confront you. I have lived too long in lands where men with vastly smaller resources have had to confront problems more disheartening than you, and though I have seen these men borne down for a little while I have never seen them lose their heart or head. (Applause.)

It has often been said, I know, ‘that the glory of an old land is its past, and the glory of a new land is its future,’ and for the promise of that future we are all in greater or less degree through evil and good report, looking with cheerful assurance. So let us order ourselves that in years to come our children may say: ‘Our fathers secured for us a goodly heritage and we bless their memory,’ (Applause), for there is no higher reward that can come to a nation than that.

Gentlemen, I thank you for the patience with which you have heard me, for your great kindness and immense cordiality to me during my stay in your midst. You have only made one mistake; you have made me a life member of the Canadian Club. With most men it would not matter. They would go away and you would hear no more of them; but with myself it is a little unsafe, because I move about the world a great deal and at any moment I may return and claim my rights and privileges.” (Laughter and loud and continued applause.)