

# THE MICHIGAN ALUMNUS

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## THE SEVENTY-NINTH COMMENCEMENT

MICHIGAN celebrated her 79th Commencement on Monday, June 18th, with a significant departure from a precedent of long years standing. Owing to the size of the senior class it was found impracticable to hold the exercises in Hill Auditorium and the seniors therefore received their degrees on Ferry Field where a special pavilion had been erected facing the South Stand. The change, however, proved most fortunate. Never before has the beauty of Commencement been more apparent. Instead of losing in effectiveness, the exercises were as impressive and dignified as they have ever been before, while they gained greatly in the new opportunity for an academic pageant, the like of which, we venture to say, has seldom been equalled.

With over 1500 seniors actually present to receive their degrees out of the 1916 who have been graduated since January first, the mere mass of black gowns on the green sward of Ferry Field was in itself thrilling. The gayer robes of the Regents, Faculties and guests of honor, as they filed between the ranks of the honor guards to the strains of "The Victors", completed a picture which will never be forgotten by those who participated in it.

Practically the whole of the South Stand was filled with the members of the

senior class and their friends. Thanks to the installation of the sound amplifiers which had been mounted above the pavilion, every word uttered by the speakers was heard distinctly.

Shortly before eight o'clock the seniors and Faculties gathered at their respective posts on the Campus waiting for the march down State Street to Ferry Field. So carefully timed were all of the arrangements that the last seniors were filing up the steps to their sections on the South Stand at precisely nine o'clock. Inasmuch as practically the whole audience was seated in the open sun, the time had been set one hour earlier in order to avoid the full heat of the noon day sun, which, however, proved somewhat oppressive even though relieved by a slight breeze.

Owing to the perfect arrangements, however, the granting of the degrees took less time than at any Commencement of recent years and the exercises were over before eleven o'clock.

### The Commencement Address

Following the Invocation of the Reverend Sidney S. Robins of the Unitarian Church the Commencement Address was delivered by the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick of New York City. He spoke on "Private Conscience and Social Institutions," and said in part,



ALL social institutions are the organization of a general, popular average and therefore they do two things to us—they level up our worst and they level down our best. This is true, for example, of government. Government is the organization of a general human average into a machinery of power. The benefits of this are obvious: government forces those who are below the average to live up to it or else suffer the consequences. But it also has another effect: it tends to force those who are above the average to live down to it or else suffer the consequences. For this reason the prisons of history has been filled with two kinds of people, the worst and the best.

This double activity of organized human averages should be impressed upon Christians every time they think of Calvary. Three crosses stood on Calvary. On two of them hung robbers; on the third hung Christ. The Roman government, like all organized forms of life, was troubled by two kinds of people: outlaws, who were below the level and would not live up to it, and saviors, who were above the level and would not live down to it.

It is obvious, therefore, that as young men and women go out into our social life they will drift sooner or later into one of three places: they will be below the average, lawless and anti-social, or they will be on the average, a part of the dead level of those who think what everybody else thinks, or they will be above the average, pioneers whose visions are more prophetic than the majority yet see. If there is any place on earth where one has a right to plead for recruits to that all too small minority of independent men and women, above the average and ahead of the time, surely that place is a college campus on Commencement Day.

### The Influence of Democracy

In this endeavor to grasp the social significance of being above the average, we have at the very start one antagonistic force to overcome: the influence of political democracy. Democracy is not all clear gain. For one thing, its method of reaching decisions by vote creates the general impression that the majority is right. From a ladies' sewing circle to the assembly of the League of Nations we count heads when we want a matter settled. The result is that we modern democrats, who would scorn to truckle to an autocrat, truckle to the majority with all

the obsequiousness of a courtier before a king. We do not go through the outward ritual of kneeling to their majesties, but in effect we continually bow before the two great sovereigns of the democratic state, The General Average and The Majority Vote.

In political procedure it doubtless is true that the best way yet discovered in which to run a government is to elect public servants by popular suffrage. But to grant the wisdom of political democracy is a very different thing from saying that in any decision which calls for spiritual insight the majority is likely to be right. Upon the contrary, the majority is almost certain to be wrong. Put to popular vote the query, which interests them more, the movies or Hamlet and King Lear, and where would the majority be? Which are more popular, novels written by those animated fountain pens that turn out love stories by the gross, or the great classics of our English speech? The idea that the voice of the people is the voice of God is largely nonsense. The fact is that in any realm where judgment calls for spiritual and intellectual fineness only the minority who are above the average are ever right. And the whole hope of democracy lies in that minority who lift the level of the general average instead of letting the general average level them down.

### Critical Problems Before Us

To be sure we must not forget the critical and perilous problem that our country faces now from the people who refuse even to live up to the level of our social institutions. Downright, flagrant lawlessness, living way below the average, is appallingly rampant in America. In the last 35 years we have lynched over 4,000 people in this country. Consider the meaning of such statistics as this. In the United States in 1916 there were 8,373 culpable homicides and 115 executions. In 1917 there were 7,803 culpable homicides and 85 executions. In 1918 there were 7,667 culpable homicides and 85 executions. Surely ex-President Taft is right when he says that "it is not too much to say that the administration of criminal law in this country is a disgrace to our civilization."

Just at present we are having an appalling wave of lawlessness with reference to the Volstead act. I do not see how a good American citizen can take any less stand than this:



First, that he hates the liquor traffic and all the damnation that it brings on human life.

Second, that he recognizes the right of the state to put down the liquor traffic if a majority will, as it would put down a contagious disease, even though that involves the right to go into your home and take your child and put him in an isolation hospital.

Third, that if he doesn't like the present law he is perfectly at liberty to agitate for its rephrasing and amendment to make it more reasonable and enforceable.

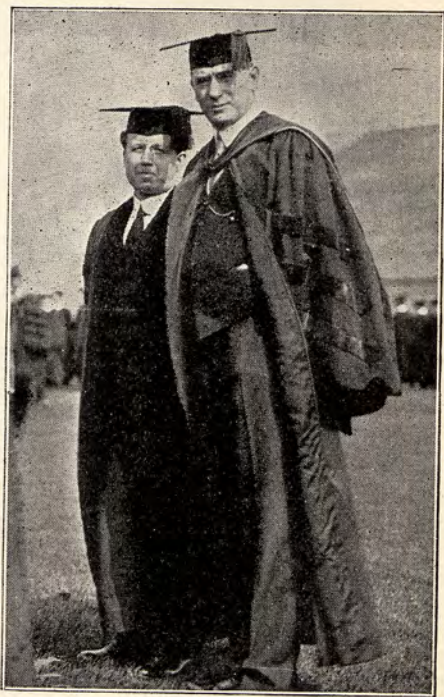
Fourth, that in the meantime he will keep the law.

To plead for a law abiding life, however, before such folk as you would be to present an inadequate ideal. Indeed, a professor in Harvard whom I recently questioned as to the peril which most of all threatens the character of our young men, answered, "Law-morality." He meant that they are content with the legal standard as their ideal. They desire to be no worse than the enforced average, but they feel no call to be any better. They are as good as is necessary to get by. They have betrayed the country that trusted them. For why has the Commonwealth educated you if not because it expects you to be above the average and ahead of the time?

### The Need for Citizens Above the Average

Dr. Fosdick applied this fact that social institutions level up our worst but level down our best to the organized business, the organized church, education, and international relationships. He closed by saying:

Of course minorities are not right just because they are minorities. Some minorities are intollerable nuisances. Joining a minority and becoming a non-conformist requires intellectual discrimination. If a man lacks it he would better join the majority. He is far safer there. Joining a minority is like getting married: it is not to be entered into 'unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.' But this also is true: all humanity is divided into three parts: those who are below the level, those who live at the level, and those who are above the level. And the best hope of Democracy in America lies in



PRESIDENT BURTON AND THE SPEAKER  
OF THE DAY

Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick of New York City.

having universities like this turn out generations of young men and women who will live above the average and ahead of the time.

Immediately upon the conclusion of Dr. Fosdick's address followed the impressive ceremony of granting the degrees to the largest senior class in the history of the University. The class of 1923 was the first to matriculate after the Armistice and will probably remain the largest class for some years to come.

The pictures of the various events of the day for the most part are published through the courtesy of the *Detroit News*, to which the acknowledgment of the editor is due. The pictures offered on pages 1051, 1054 and 1063 were furnished through the kindness of the staff photographer of the *Detroit Free Press*.