

SCIENCE

VOL. 89

FRIDAY, JUNE 23, 1939

No. 2321

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SCIENCE: A Weekly Journal devoted to the Advancement of Science, edited by J. MCKEEN CATTELL and published every Friday by

THE SCIENCE PRESS

New York City: Grand Central Terminal
Lancaster, Pa. Garrison, N. Y.
Annual Subscription, \$6.00 Single Copies, 15 Cts.

SCIENCE is the official organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Information regarding membership in the Association may be secured from the office of the permanent secretary in the Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington, D. C.

NORTH AMERICAN RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE UNIVERSITY, 1934-1954¹

By Dr. ALAN GREGG
THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

FOR the past sixteen years I have had occasion to visit medical schools and institutes of medical research in some thirty countries. In the variety one encounters in such an experience—variety of methods, of purposes and of circumstances—one is reminded of a saying of Oscar Wilde: “When you break the little laws the big laws begin to operate,” for out of so many contradictions and differing practices emerge certain underlying principles. I can not forget the first time I saw an Irish jaunting car. My impression was that if that was a vehicle then one could design almost anything for transportation purposes and it might work, for if one sees underlying

principles in a great variety of forms the end result is a great sense of freedom to tackle almost any new task.

Now, one question which I should like to ask you this evening is this: Are we prepared here in North America to assume responsibility for the maintenance and continuation of one of the greatest traditions of Western Europe, the university? Everywhere I have gone and seen institutions of higher learning there are traces of that tradition—sometimes strong, sometimes weak, but there is no doubt that in the world of teaching and of scholarship the university as it has developed in Western Europe is the source and the paradigm. How much do we understand of this tradition? If we accept Hegel's definition of freedom as “the recognition of necessity” then are we

¹ Presented at the annual banquet of the Federation of Societies for Experimental Biology, Toronto, April 28, 1939.

Science

89 (2321)

Science **89** (2321), 569-590.

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