ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT THOMAS AT THE OPENING OF THE COLLEGE,
OCTOBER 4, 1916

It gives me pleasure and satisfaction to announce on behalf of the Faculty that the thirty-second year of BrynMawr College now formally begins. The Faculty of the College will try to make it the best year that Bryn Mawr has ever known. But to do this we need the cooperation of our student body. During the past thirty-one years at Bryn Mawr we have worked together in a peculiarly close and intimate way, we your teachers and you our students, but we wish to ask you this year to give us an even closer cooperation. This year as in previous years we must together enter on the tremendous adventure of making you as students free citizens of the great republic of letters. It is our duty as your teachers by some means or other to inspire you to make the great effort necessary to cross the gulf that yawns between educated and uneducated men and women. We must teach you how to trim your sails and start on that solitary voyage that must be made by every one of you across the dim waters that now divide you from the shining country of the chosen people of light and leading.

Ever since men began to develop what we mean by intellectual life the older generation has tried to show the younger generation how to break away from material things and enter into this other kind of kingdom. The nations that have succeeded best in teaching this to their youth are the only nations that are now remembered. In every country today youth is being taught—sometimes well, sometimes ill—but always being taught in some fashion. When I was in Egypt and Turkey I found it of absorbing interest to watch the hundreds of boys from ten to twenty years old who were squatting on the floor of every mosque, each little group with its own teacher rocking backwards and forwards in unison learning by heart aloud hundreds of pages of the Koran. To me this seemed a perfectly futile task and yet I was assured by learned Egyptians and Turks that men who had been subjected to this discipline were infinitely more intelligent than the unlearned peasants; and that women who never had had this to bear teaching were intellectually like peasants and children whose opinions simply did not count at all among educated Egyptians and Turks. This same difference between educated and uneducated persons exists, we are told, even in China where an unchanging tradition of inconceivably difficult and preposterous learning has kept an extraordinarily intellectually gifted people shackled and stationary while the world of intellect has passed it by. However unwise the teaching may be the mere effort made to acquire even foolish knowledge in itself trains the mind. The gulf between the educated Chinaman and the uneducated coolie and between all educated Chinamen and all uneducated Chinese women is as great and impassable in China as it is elsewhere. It seems to be a law of the human intellect that it develops only by genuine and continuous exertion and in no other way. That is what we mean by saying that there is
no royal road to learning—rich man, poor man, king and peasant, each and every man and woman, white, yellow, brown, and black born under the sun—must pass by this straight and narrow way into the company of the elect, of those who have learned how to think, of those whose thinking counts. If you want to convince yourself of this you have only to read of the kind of education given in Great Britain and Europe to the boys and girls who are expected to become kings and queens. It is infinitely more strenuous even than the education Bryn Mawr gives you. As far back as you go in history you will find that everyone who is expected to rule others has been subjected to peculiarly severe mental discipline. If the present intellectual supremacy of the white races is maintained, as I hope that it will be for centuries to come, I believe that it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women.

So difficult is this evolution from the physical to the intellectual that it seems to require not only a wise system of instruction for the youth of a given country but also favourable climatic conditions in order to develop marked mental ability. It seems to be only in a strictly limited temperate zone, only on a very small part of the earth’s surface that men can maintain continuous intellectual activity. Roughly speaking this zone includes Great Britain, Scandinavia, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Holland, probably the greater part of the United States and Canada, some parts of Russia and South America, and perhaps parts of certain other countries that have not yet been sufficiently investigated. So stagnant intellectually have the descendants of some of the ancient civilizations become that it seems probable that, for example, the climate of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and parts of Asia may have changed since the time when the wonderful prehistoric civilizations that flourished there perished. One thing we know beyond doubt and that is that certain races have never yet in the history of the world manifested any continuous mental activity nor even any continuous power of organized government. Such are the pure negroes of Africa, the Indians, the Esquimaux, the South Sea Islanders, the Turks, etc. Our own semi-civilized American negroes have shown in Haiti what they revert to when left to themselves. Even a people of genuine intellectual power like the Poles seem to have a fatal instability and infirmity of purpose that prevents steadfast organization. This was illustrated last winter in New York when an attempt was made to relieve the Polish war-sufferers. The Poles divided into two relief associations under two great Polish artists. They seemed unable to unite even to save their perishing kinsmen. If there emerges from this war a great Polish nation, as we hope, it remains to be seen whether the Poles have learned through adversity the indispensable lesson of union and cooperation.

These facts must be faced by a country like the United States which is fast becoming, if it has not already become, the melting pot of nations into which are cast at the rate of a million a year the backward peoples of Europe like the Czechs, the Slavs, and the south Italians. If the laws of heredity mean anything whatsoever we are jeopardizing the intellectual heritage of the American people by this headlong intermixture of races. We are surely endangering our great position among the leading nations of the world. Our first immigration was made up of the dominant races of the world, the English, Scotch, French, Dutch, German, and the singularly gifted even if politically unsuccessful Irish and Welsh. Our present immigration is precisely the reverse. I believe that the time has come when for the sake of future Americans we must close our doors and let the great tide of the unprogressive races of
Europe sweep into South America and the temperate parts of Africa. Mr. Bryce says in his book on South America that there is room there for a century's immigration. Our New York and Chicago slums are now as bad, if not worse, than anything in the old world. The conditions in some of our mining towns in Pennsylvania where few words of English are heard are said to surpass anything in Europe. The diseases of European poverty and filth are brought here by our foreign immigrants, and like our present epidemic of infantile paralysis are propagated under conditions that we cannot control in the shockingly overcrowded tenements which disgrace our country. I understand from physicians who have studied the question that soon every epidemic known to older civilizations will ravage our American people. Surely the time has come for us Americans to change our childish happy-go-lucky attitude and address ourselves seriously to saving ourselves intellectually and physically as a nation.

President Jordan and other pacifists are vigorously pointing out that war by killing off the bravest and best of the manhood of warring countries compels the children of the next generation to be born from the physical weaklings and slackers. I wish you would all read his illuminating little book on this subject which I will place in the library. It may interest you to recall when you read it that the very first time that he spoke on this subject was at a Bryn Mawr commencement and that our then professor of French rushed from the platform in horror when President Jordan said that the long succession of Napoleonic wars had lowered the physical and moral stamina of the French nation. But inevitably as the terrible slaughter of war lowers the intellect and physique of a people, how much more insidiously dangerous is the lowering of the physical and mental inheritance of a whole nation by intermixture of unprogressive millions of backward peoples. Even a war god like Napoleon and the long succession of Napoleonic wars could impair only temporarily the great French race. The last two and a half years have proved to all the world that the new generations of French men and French women grown to manhood and womanhood during forty years of profound peace are able to win immortal glory by defending the sacred soil of France which is sacred also to every one of us who cares for freedom, democracy, intellect, and beauty. Men and women can be bred again after several generations from the same great stock, but if we tarnish our inheritance of racial power at the source our nation will never again be the same. Our intellectual and moral place among the dominant nations of the world will be gone forever.

Our early American stock is still very influential but this cannot continue indefinitely. For example, each year I ask each freshman class to tell me what countries their parents originally came from and for how many generations back their families have been on American soil. It is clear to me that almost all of our student body are early time Americans, that their ancestors have been here for generations, and that they are overwhelmingly English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, and that of other admixtures, French, German, Dutch largely predominate. All other strains are negligible. Our Bryn Mawr College students therefore as a whole seem to belong by heredity to the dominant races. You then, students of Bryn Mawr, have the best intellectual inheritance the world affords. You are studying in a college situated in one of the great temperature zones where the adolescent human intellect can best develop. We call upon you -with confidence, you who are thus the flower of the fortunate youth of the great races of the earth, to make the stupendous effort every
one must make to pass through the straight
gate of the golden city of the mind.

You, all of you, have begun to learn how
to begin to make this effort because you
have met our requirements for admission. I
believe that without it you cannot get into
Bryn Mawr. I assure you that it is more
worth while than anything else in the whole
world to determine to do whatever may be
necessary to make yourselves members of
the glorious company of the intellectually
fit. This absolutely necessary thing is to
study seriously and hard—not all the time
but a sufficient time—each day, each week,
each year, so that at last you may enter into
and take possession of your splendid
intellectual heritage. Your professors are
here to help you in every way, but you too
must do your part. Your professors are ready
to assist you not only by lectures and class
work but by advice and explanation in their
consultation hours and in their laboratories.
Your wardens have all of them gone through
the Bryn Mawr discipline and are only
waiting for you to talk over your work with
them. Dean Schenck, Dean Maddison, the
Secretary, and the Pres’dent are in their
offices for many hours each week and
everything that they can give you is yours
for the asking, but it is your duty to ask. You
need not follow our advice if it does not
commend itself to you but we beg you at
least to find out what our advice is. It would
be wonderful if we could really work out at
Bryn Mawr some new plan of closer
cooperation between professors and
students. It is what all the college world is
trying for. In the United States Harvard,
Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Amherst, and
other colleges are making every effort to
honour scholarship and to select the
intellectually ablest students. The Harvard
freshmen dormitories are a great
contribution made by President Lowell to
college education. They mark a return to the
earlier and better methods of personal touch
and influence in education. This new interest
in education is found not only here but
abroad. All the countries of Europe are even
now making ready to reconstruct intellectual
ability after the war. The papers report that
the Prussian Minister of Education has
announced that in future Prussian boys and
girls will no longer be separated at twelve or
thirteen years of age into two groups—one
group made up of poor children to go to the
peasant schools and the other more fortunate
group to go to the gymnasia, or classical
schools, to be prepared for the universities.
Hereafter all German children must all study
in the same classes for a much longer period
so that educational experts may be able to
select out, and give the highest possible
university education to, the boys and girls
who are endowed with genuine ability in
order that the intellectual life of the German
nation may be created anew after the
slaughter of able men in the great war. That
nation that best develops the intellectual
ability of its young men and women after
this wholesale destruction will rule the
civilized world whether or not it has been
pronounced conqueror or conquered by the
terms of peace.

Let us try at Bryn Mawr during the present
college year to make some real contribution
to this greatest of all great adventures—the
adventure of inspiring our girls and boys to
turn aside from things temporal to things
eternal, to seek knowledge, to get
understanding. After all, this is what you
have come to college for. During the past
few days I have been talking with the
freshmen and their parents and I have
realized afresh what it means to you to be
students of Bryn Mawr, how you have
looked forward to it—many of you as far
back as you can remember—what an effort
you have made to get here, how your parents
have planned for it. We are now beginning
to have as freshmen the children of the
mothers who wanted to come to Bryn Mawr
and were not allowed to come. Think what it must mean to the mother who longed for a college education herself and could not have it on account of the conservatism of her time to have her daughter at Bryn Mawr! I think what a disappointment it will be to her if her girl does not take advantage of being here! I hope that the older students will be very careful to encourage the desire of the freshmen to study. Try not to spoil their enthusiasm in any way. It is a wonderful thing to want to study. On behalf of the Faculty and the older classes I welcome our freshman class to our little community of teachers and students and assure you that we shall try to fulfil your brightest anticipations. In return we ask you to give your unwavering support to our Bryn Mawr traditions of conduct and scholarship.

There are two splendid Bryn Mawr traditions that we wish especially to appeal to you, our incoming students, and to our whole student body to support and to improve. There is your new and admirable student regulation of attendance at classes. This is your own plan. It is your own voluntary system. It worked beyond all expectation well last year. We expect you to make it work even better this year. The more you attend classes the easier it will be to attend classes and the more of a tradition it will become. If it grows like your other traditions, the students will soon have forgotten that they ever could stay away from classes. Regular attendance will become part of the great Bryn Mawr tradition.

I want to say a word to you also about our great Bryn Mawr system of students’ self-government. It is your own honour government and you are on your honour to carry it out. This is the only college, I believe, in which the students have such complete jurisdiction. You carry your self-government out yourselves. No member of the Faculty helps you. If you yourselves hide things from yourselves, and if you cooperate with each other in deceiving your own Executive Board, what becomes of your own government! Our Bryn Mawr system of unrestricted student self-government is Bryn Mawr’s greatest contribution to the student side of college life. It would be a terrible thing if Bryn Mawr should not continue to have the best self-government of any college. For the last few years I have felt a little anxious about the future of self-government. Every now and then, when a student is disciplined by self-government I have to talk with your parents about it and I find that you have not made your parents understand about self-government. You ought to make clear to them what it means to you and to the College. You ought yourselves to support by every means in your power this most splendid of all your splendid Bryn Mawr traditions.