

Hockerill Anglo-European College

26 June 2004

Chairman of Governors, Principal, IB Class of 2004, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you very much indeed for inviting me today. I have heard a great deal about Hockerill College and I want to tell you how much the International Baccalaureate Organization admires and values what you have achieved here. I believe you are unique: a maintained school offering only the IB Diploma Programme in the sixth form, a maintained school with international boarding provision, a maintained school that takes a particular pride in its teaching of foreign languages. You represent everything that we, the IBO, stands for and I shall continue to use you as an shining example of what the IB can achieve with motivated students, a committed staff and outstanding leadership.

My only regret is that I am missing the “fête des promotions” in my village in Switzerland this afternoon. Every year children from the village primary school celebrate their promotion to the next class with a parade through the village. The children ride on farm carts drawn by tractors from the local farms. They are followed by women dressed in traditional costume and by the band of the sapeurs-pompier. The whole village turns out to congratulate them on being a year older and wiser and to thank their teachers. It is a moving reminder of a society that takes its education very seriously indeed.

I hope that my remarks during the next few minutes will be of interest to everyone here this morning but I trust you will forgive me if I address them particularly to those students who have recently taken their IB examinations and are leaving the college. By the way, you will all be relieved to hear that there will be no further mention of IB examinations: you must wait about another week for the results and then, no doubt, blame me!

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A few weeks ago I was in India and I took along with me Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography to read. Gandhi has always been one of my heroes, particularly since he was committed to non-violent action in achieving India's independence. His biography is open and honest; so honest in fact that you realize that Gandhi was far from perfect. Even allowing for the earlier age and for cultural differences, the way he sometimes treated his wife (I had no idea Gandhi was married) is hard to accept. I realize that my hero is flawed.

This reminded me of another hero, Nelson Mandela, and the shock of reading in his biography that, as a young man, he had helped to create a terrorist organization that was willing to use violence to achieve its political ends. Another hero is flawed.

A very special hero of mine, and without doubt Geneva's greatest citizen, is the 18th century philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau wrote extensively and

persuasively about education and, while doing so, not only neglected, but actually abandoned his own children. Oh dear...another flawed hero.

And what about that most famous of British heroes, Winston Churchill, voted last year by TV viewers as the greatest ever Briton? Well, I am afraid he would have been judged a political no-hoper if it not been for one unique period of leadership, lasting just five years, during World War II.

Alas, no hero is perfect; each of them has a weakness, a skeleton in the cupboard, an embarrassing failure to conceal. But wait a minute: let's see if we can turn this to our advantage by looking again at someone who is normally labelled not a hero, but a villain.

I want to present someone to you this morning who despite having a very bad press, has interested me throughout my life. I have been in the house where he was born, the house where he lived much of his life; I have seen where he died and, most spectacularly, where he is buried. For his funeral, in 1902, the writer Rudyard Kipling wrote:

The immense and brooding Spirit still
Shall quicken and control.
Living he was the land, and dead,
His soul shall be her soul!

I am talking about Bishop Stortford's most famous hero, or most infamous villain, Cecil Rhodes, who was born not a mile from here.

Rhodes was born in 1853 and when he was 17 he went to South Africa, mainly because of his poor health. He staked a claim in the newly discovered diamond fields and made a fortune. Later, his ambitions turned to the North and he tricked the Matabele chief, Lobengula, into giving him the mineral rights of what is now Zimbabwe. Rhodes became the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony but the famous Jameson Raid brought his political career to a shameful end and he died during the Boer War in 1902.

Some people would insist that Rhodes was a white imperialist who wanted the British to control the African continent from the south to the north. That he was a crook who cheated the Matabele chieftain, Lobengula, out of the wealth of his own country. That he was a dishonest politician whose blunders led to the outbreak of the Boer War in South Africa. And there is some truth in all those statements.

However, other people might say that Rhodes's business interests, like De Beers Mining Company, created a wealth in South Africa that, a century later, gives it an economic stability that is the envy of other African countries south of the Sahara. That, despite a debilitating heart complaint, Rhodes achieved more by his death at the age of 48 than ten normal people would achieve in their lifetime. That after his death, Rhodes used his fortune to create the most prestigious scholarships in the world – the Rhodes Scholarships – that bring students from the Commonwealth, the United States and Germany to study at Oxford. And there is some truth in all those statements.

For me, the most attractive thing about Cecil Rhodes is the way he left instructions for the selection of his scholars. He even awarded points out of ten, so he awarded 3 points for academic ability, 2 points for sporting ability, 3 points for “truth, courage, protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship” and the remaining 2 points for “moral force of character and the ability to show leadership”. I cannot believe he was such a bad man!

My time is nearly up and I must leave you to think more, and perhaps to read more, about this fascinating and complex man who was born in a vicarage just down the road from where we are today and whose father gave the land on which this College stands today. IB students may want to ask themselves why no definitive biography exists for this remarkable man. I have brought Cecil Rhodes along this morning because I want you to understand that very little in this world is all good and very little is all bad. But unfortunately that is what we are encouraged to believe, particularly by the media, and that is what often leads to extremism. I hope the IB has given you students in the class of 2004 the capacity, and the courage, to explore that difficult and often controversial area between the extremes, because that is where the truth so often lies.

Et maintenant, étant donné que cette école est bilingue je vais terminer mon discours en français. Une fois encore je tiens à vous remercier de m’ avoir invité et du soutien que vous apportez au BI. J’espère que vous aurez d’ excellents résultats à vos examens et je vous souhaite succès et bonheur dans vos futures vies.

George Walker
director general
23 June 2004