



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The year 2012 coincides with the 130th anniversary of the Royal Society of Canada's founding in 1882 by the Governor General, the Marquess of Lorne. Patron of arts and letters, poet and author, the Marquess wished to endow Canada with a prestigious institution that would instil in its people a feeling of pride, belonging, and emulation. If he was unable to remain in Canada "to the end of his days," as he apparently put it to the then Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, the Marquess of Lorne would leave his heart there; such, claimed his sister, was his deep attachment to the country. But he also wished to leave his mark. Spurred by ardent men of enterprising spirit, such as the Ottawa historian Benjamin Sulte, he supported the creation of a "Canadian Academy" of letters and sciences on the double model of the Institut de France and the Royal Society of London. In Quebec, he drew on the expertise of James MacPherson LeMoine and Faucher de Saint-Maurice, and entrusted J.W. Dawson, geologist and Principal of McGill University in Montreal, with the task of leading the project. Dawson became president of the new Society, while P.J.O. Chauveau, who had been Quebec's first premier, was elected vice-president "*cum futura successione*."¹

To mark this felicitous event, I would like to place my charge as Society President under the aegis of Poetry, that supreme articulation of human language. Language constitutes the most extraordinary expression of human genius and the most collective of social inventions. Incipient form of democracy, it is a powerful handmaiden of truth and liberty, even though it may serve other ends as well. The formidable French diplomat, the Prince of Talleyrand-Périgord, who survived a series of political regimes, including the French Revolution, thought that "language was given to man to disguise his thought." And did it not save his life countless times?

Born of language, poetry also harbours its survivors. Scarcely in vain did François Villon, the condemned poet, address his *Ballade des pendus* to his "Human brothers". Poetry is that special place from which the spirit draws strength in exploring the greatest mystery of the universe: the human heart. An enchanted space, it is where the soul voices nature's beauty in every key; it is also that singular sphere where words unfurl their every meaning to catch, under the bustle of daily speech, the future's intangible signals. For poetry is the royal road to knowledge.

¹On the history of the Royal Society of Canada, see Victor Morin, "Les Origines de la Société royale du Canada," *Cahiers des Dix*, Vol. 2, 1937, pp. [157]-198; Carl Berger, *Honour and the Search for Influence. A History of the Royal Society of Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 167 p. On the Marquess of Lorne's biography (John Douglas Sutherland CAMPBELL), see the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* on line.

Witness one of the masterpieces of world literature: Carus T. Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*). The Latin poet sought to wrest his compatriots from superstition by introducing them to the atomic make-up of the universe. Written in troubled times, when the excessive political ambitions of Marius, Sylla, Caesar, and Pompey plunged the Roman Republic into the darkness of civil war, economic disarray, and the tumult of popular riots, his poem gave Romans access to the materialist philosophy of the Greek Epicurus. The poet Lucretius sought to calm the tortured soul of his contemporaries by granting them the two supreme goods of knowledge: wisdom, which makes possible judicious decisions, and serenity, which allows one to live happily.

For 130 years, the Royal Society of Canada has worked in the service of knowledge and culture. Over the years, the institution has evolved, galvanized by new and rapidly growing fields of knowledge. Today, its three components include the Academy of Arts, Letters, and Humanities – commonly called “Academy 1,” it being the oldest, the Academy of Social Sciences (2), and the Academy of Sciences (3). These contribute to the development of a dynamic and vigorous “culture of knowledge,” aimed at raising Canadians’ quality of life and ensuring that Canada occupies a special place in the world.

Consisting of some 2000 members and around fifty institutional members, the RSC recently deployed two innovative means of expanding its influence, and of ensuring its stability in a world subject to complexity. For the first time in its existence, the RSC has a permanent home at “Walter House” (282 Somerset Street in Ottawa), in which to welcome members, house the Secretariat, and host its various programs and activities. For the first time in its history, and thanks to an extensive consultation of its members and experienced professional counsellors, the RSC has conceived a five-year Strategic Plan (2012-2017) to complete its task of self-renewal, to stimulate its growth realistically, and thereby sustain its ability to serve Canadians well. These major developments should enable the Society to pursue, with renewed effectiveness, its three-fold and ongoing mission: a) to recognize exceptional intellectual, artistic, and scientific work; b) to advise policy-makers; and c) to promote the advancement of knowledge and the flourishing of the arts in Canada.

Talents and awards are of little consequence if they remain ends in themselves. Humanitarian concerns have been central to the RSC since its inception. When economic crises, climatic phenomena, social upheaval, and cultural tensions threaten the planet, such concerns become a priority. In 2012-2013, the RSC aims to pursue its Expert Panels program and to propose new themes based on issues of public interest, raised by today’s novel challenges. Wide recognition of the two most recent reports, prepared by its Expert Panels on “Environmental and Health Impacts of Canada’s Oil Sands Industry” and “End-of-Life Decision-Making,” convinced the Society that it is meeting the expectations of its members and garnering public attention on the national and international stage. Two other reports from the Expert Panels are expected in 2012: the first concerns “Ocean Climate Change and Marine Biodiversity”; the second studies “Early Childhood Development.” Recall that the RSC neither endorses nor disclaims the conclusions

advanced in the Expert Panels' reports that its Standing Committee on Expert Panels chooses to commission. The role of the members of the RSC's Committee is to ensure collectively that process and peer review are applied with the greatest academic rigour. The Expert Panels' reports are produced by independent researchers whose mandate is to study the most recent data on a specific question. These documents are aimed at members of the RSC and are accessible on the RSC's website in Canada's two official languages. This approach offers Canadians reliable information with which to make informed decisions on important questions concerning their own future and that of Canada.

As it opens a new chapter of its history, the RSC wishes to see the current diversity of university and artistic communities reflected within its own ranks. It calls upon all of its members to nominate exceptional candidates, taking into account women, Francophones, First Nations, and visible minorities. The commitment of its members and the dissemination of their remarkable works are the RSC's major assets in convincing Canadians and their governments that, in order to guarantee a better future for new generations, it is crucial to invest generously in a strong and vibrant "culture of knowledge." This is what the Royal Society of Canada's mission signifies today.

