Speech by Richard Tillett, Principal of Queen's College, London on Founder's Day, 29th March, 2023

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you very much for joining us at this very special Founder's Day service.

I would like to start by thanking those who have made this event possible today:

- Father Stephen for allowing us to use his church;
- Eric Wilkins for sorting out all of the logistics and, with Annabel Johns, choosing readings representing some of the early history of the College;
- And of course the fabulous musicians and readers who have made this so much more stimulating and interesting, well, than the next fifteen minutes or so is going to be.

For those of you not familiar with Founder's Day, it is the first of not one, but two annual Speech Days, the second one being Annual Gathering in the summer. This one always focuses on an aspect of the history of the College, and the convention is that I focus on an anniversary that falls in each Founder's Day's particular year.

This year, then, it is a no-brainer, as today, of course, is the exact 175th anniversary of the foundation of Queen's College; a huge milestone not just in the history of this remarkable institution, but in the history of the education of women in this country, a history which we have showcased this week in a beautiful Archive Exhibition in the Waiting Room at Queen's. If you haven't yet managed to look around the exhibition, which has been beautifully curated by former pupil Julia Rank and assembled by Emilie Sitlani and Elly Broughton from our Development and Marketing team, please do try to do so while you still can, over the remainder of this week.

But what actually happened on 29 March 1848?

Well, like many momentous historical events, it must have seemed quite low-key at the time. It was a lecture to a few dozen people in Hanover Square by FD Maurice, a renowned academic who held no fewer than three professorships at King's College, London – in History, English Literature and Theology - and who is now recognised as the Founder of Queen's.

In his lecture he outlined his three-pronged vision for what the new institution was founding, which had just received Queen Victoria's support and could thus be known as Queen's College, should be. Women, he argued, should be ready to enter employment, would almost all be teachers themselves in some form in future so needed to be educated themselves, and should be given a grounding in knowledge for its own sake.

The original idea of the Committee of Education, which Maurice and a group of fellow professors from King's had set up a year before to lay the foundations for the establishment of the new College, was to educate governesses. These were a group of (usually) young women who found themselves caught in the middle of the incredibly stratified Victorian society; part servant, part member of the family, from a genteel background, but unmarried and needing to support themselves, so unable to take part in many of the social rituals and events of the time.

On its first curriculum, Queen's College offered these women the chance to study subjects like Arithmetic, Mechanics and Geology, which had never been done before. They could then use these qualifications to go to university, which until that point had been exclusively the preserve of men.

There were six students to begin with, including two young women called Frances Buss and Dorothea Beale, who later became famous in Victorian society for their determination to advance the cause of women and their complete indifference to relationships with men. There was even a children's nursery rhyme about them:

'Miss Buss and Miss Beale, Love's darts do not feel.

How different from us, Miss Beale and Miss Buss'

Within a year Queen's had grown from six to over 250 students, and it was soon opened up beyond governesses, to any girl aged over 12 whose family wanted them to be part of this ground-breaking institution. In 1849, Bedford College was founded as the first higher education institution for women in this country. A year after that, Frances Buss, one of those first six pupils, founded North London Collegiate, with the other I mentioned, Dorothea Beale, founding Cheltenham Ladies' College a few years later. Women's education was up and running, and has not looked back. 29 March 1848 was a momentous day.

Those few dozen witnesses in Hanover Square, then, will have known that they were listening to something truly radical. It is hard to overstate how ahead of his time FD Maurice was. Even twelve years later, in 1860, a Parliamentary report concluded that women should be educated only to be 'decorative, modest, marriageable beings'. The idea that they should be educated to the same standard as men was truly revolutionary.

But then I suppose 1848 was an appropriate year in that respect. Political revolutions were breaking out all over central Europe – it was less than 60 years since the French revolution, of course – and Maurice himself is said by one biographer to have welcomed the 'shattering of thrones, the convulsions of governments' that marked that period.

Britain itself was experiencing a rapid growth in radical ideas too. This was the year that the Chartist movement, with which Maurice had a lot of sympathy, was at its height, and its leader, Feargus O'Connor, had organised for a mass rally to be held on Kennington Common on 11 April, demanding, among other things, that MPs

should be paid, all men should have the vote, and that it should be allowed to be an MP even if you didn't own property. It was called off only after the government recruited 100,000 special officers to crush it.

Maurice was disappointed by the failure of the Chartist movement, and, having established Queen's College, immediately turned his attention to other forms of social reform. He got together with a group of like-minded radicals to consider other ways of improving life for the working class. The first meeting of what became known as the Christian Socialist movement, with Maurice as its leader, took place in London on 10 April 1848 – less than two weeks after that founding lecture in Hanover Square.

It is important to recognise that Maurice was not a Socialist, however. This group did not want the overthrow of the government. They were *Christian* Socialists; their discussions centred on how the Church could help to <u>prevent</u> revolution by tackling what they considered were the reasonable grievances of the working class. As his biographer, Bernard Reardon, put it: 'Maurice … disliked competition as fundamentally unchristian, and wished to see it, at the social level, replaced by co-operation, as expressive of Christian brotherhood'.

Early in 1850 the Christian Socialists started a working men's association for tailors in London, followed by associations for other trades. To promote this movement, a Society for Promoting Working Men's Associations (SPWMA) was established with Maurice as a founding member. His second great educational institution, the Working Men's College, was founded in Red Lion Square in 1853 and he remained as Principal there for the rest of his life.

His legacy lives on in this respect too; you can still enrol for courses at the Working Men's College in one of its two branches in Camden or Kentish Town today, and the

SPWMA became very influential in the development of the co-operative movement later in the nineteenth century, with the Co-op, of course, still flourishing now.

However, Maurice was soon to have more time to devote to his social projects that he might have anticipated, because in the same year that he founded the Working Men's College, 1853, he was sacked by King's College. It is at this point that we need to get a bit technical.

Because for all of his astonishing social achievements, Maurice was first and foremost a theologian, a religious scholar in other words, writing numerous works which go into very intricate detail about the nature of Christianity, discussing ideas that might seem very obscure to us now.

It is important to remember the historical context here. While these days we might argue in our PTE lessons or with our friends about the existence of God, or the rights and wrongs of different religious traditions, Britain in the nineteenth century was almost entirely Christian, with around two-thirds of the population attending Church every week. Religious debate therefore instead centred on what type of Christianity was the right one to follow. Legislation in the 1820s had opened up certain professions and educational establishments to people who were not members of the Church of England, and this had given rise to an explosion of alternative forms of Christianity.

To illustrate this, in the 1851 census – the first one after the foundation of Queen's, of course – everybody in the UK population was asked to tick one of 39 different boxes to describe their religious affiliation. One of these was Jewish - the other 38 were all different types of Christian. There was no option to say that you were Muslim or Hindu, for example, and no option to say that you had no religion at all. There were, however, six different types of Baptist to choose from, and seven types of Wesleyan Methodist, among many, many others. Around half of all Churchgoers attended

services in these alternative forms of Christianity, rather than the Church of England.

This was the world in which FD Maurice lived and worked, and he was one of the great thinkers at the heart of these detailed debates.

In fact he had been immersed in these divisions within Christianity from infancy – his mother converted to Calvinism when he was a young child, believing passionately that everyone was destined to go to heaven or hell from the moment of birth, while his father remained a devout Unitarian. He eventually settled on the most common form of Christianity at the time, Church of England Anglicanism, and a good job too, as his College at Cambridge, Trinity, had resisted the rise of alternate Christian belief systems and still didn't allow anyone who believed in anything other than the established Church to graduate. At least, unlike many other Oxbridge Colleges, you didn't have to pass a test of orthodox religious belief before you started studying there in the first place.

Maurice settling on Anglicanism is perhaps our first sign of his role as a mediator, a balancer. He was described by one biographer as someone who desperately wanted the various factions of Christianity to get better at listening to one another and respecting one another; I wonder what he would make of the polarisation of opinion we see in the world today.

But despite being a moderate, it is one of these controversies about the detail of Christian belief that eventually cost him his professorships.

In 1853 the most hotly debated of Maurice's many books, his Theological Essays, was published. In one of these essays, Maurice argued that when the Bible talked about eternal life, it was not talking about time – i.e. going on for ever – but about a state of being in the present. Maurice believed that God simply would not allow

people to live in suffering for ever; instead, people were constantly choosing whether to be in 'eternal life' or 'eternal death' depending on if they believed in God or not.

This clashed completely with the established Church, which taught that heaven and hell would go on for ever, and was seen as so morally dangerous to the undergraduates at King's that Maurice was asked to resign by the Principal of King's, Richard Jelf. Maurice stuck to his principles and refused, demanding that he be either 'acquitted or dismissed'. He was dismissed.

His departure from King's also marked the end of his association with Queen's. Concerned that the controversy might affect his new educational institution for women, Maurice 'severed his relations' with the College. He became priest of St Peter's in Vere Street, just around the corner from Harley Street, attracting large congregations to hear him preach. He also remained as Principal of the Working Men's College, and was allowed to do some teaching back at Cambridge. He died aged 66 in 1872.

So what lessons can we learn from this man? Well, like most great figures of history, opinions are divided. As we often talk about in assemblies at school, everybody is a mixture; nobody can please everyone.

He certainly had his fans. The theologian Julius Hare described him as 'the greatest mind since Plato', and no less a figure that the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who knew Maurice well, said that 'there was more intellectual power in Maurice than in any of my contemporaries.'

Admiration was not universal, however: the critic Aubrey Thomas de Vere said that listening to Maurice preach was like 'eating pea soup with a fork'; pea soup or not,

though, even his critics seem to agree that he was a kind, thoughtful and generous man.

He clearly had a phenomenal mind, and a determination to stick up for his principles, even at the cost of his job, and a clear vision to improve life for groups overlooked in the society of the time.

He was also a moderator, a balancer, a listener, a calming influence. In his religious belief, he tried to find a middle way, a moderate compromise between the extremes. He preached about the importance of trying to understand people with different views, rather than shout them down. As arguments raged about Darwin's new theory of evolution, for example, sending religious conservatives into a spin at the idea that all living things may not have been created by God, while some radicals felt it disproved the Bible completely, Maurice calmly argued that the Bible and Science were trying to answer different questions and were not actually in opposition to one another at all.

But being moderate, of course, often ends up pleasing neither side. Religious conservatives thought him too unorthodox, many liberals thought he was not radical enough.

So there is no real consensus on his theological legacy. We can all agree though, I think, on his social and educational one. The word 'visionary' is overused these days. It is sometimes used to business leaders, politicians, even football managers. But F D Maurice most certainly really was one.

He saw that access to education needed to be widened and that society needed to be made more just, and he worked tirelessly to make that happen. By founding Queen's, and then the Working Men's College, he showed that education does not need to be the preserve of the elite, and that everyone in society has something to offer. Meanwhile, in the way he taught and spoke, in everything he did it seems, he demonstrated a willingness to listen, to compromise, to understand and not to judge.

So that is the legacy of our founder, this truly remarkable man who, 175 years ago today, started this extraordinary institution. We owe it to him I think, to our College, and to ourselves, to be tolerant, reflective and courageous. If we can do that, we will do him proud, we will help ourselves, and, in our own way, we might just make the world a slightly better place. That, ultimately, is what FD Maurice was all about, and what we are all here for.

Thank you.