

Centennial of UBC's First Convocation

On August 21st the University of British Columbia marked a significant milestone in its history which few people remember or even know about. On that date, exactly 100 years before, the inaugural meeting of Convocation – perhaps UBC's primary governing body, responsible for electing the University Chancellor and other officials, for awarding degrees to graduating students, and for “consider[ing] all questions affecting the well-being and prosperity of the University” [*University Act* (1908), s. 21] – was held. Although in 1912 UBC was still without physical existence, with no campus, faculty, or student body, the provincial government clearly regarded the meeting as a launching ceremony for the University.

As early as 1877 proposals had been made to establish a university in British Columbia – when the province's total population was still less than 50,000. In 1890 the legislature had in fact passed an act establishing a provincial university. However, the political rivalry of the period between Vancouver Island and the mainland led to a dispute over where the new “University of British Columbia” should be located. The first meeting of the new university's senate was held the following year in Victoria. It failed to reach quorum when some members from the mainland refused to attend. A second meeting was never held, the original legislation was allowed to lapse, and the proposed university died before it was really born.

Post-secondary education didn't come to British Columbia until 1899, when Vancouver College was established, jointly operated by Vancouver High School and Montreal's McGill University. In 1906 McGill took it over entirely and renamed it McGill University College of British Columbia. The college offered only a two-year program in arts and science; students still had to go elsewhere to complete their degrees.

In 1908 the legislature passed the *University Act* establishing the University of British Columbia. The four-year delay until the first Convocation was convened was due to the need to determine the site of the University; the perception that because McGill University College was operating satisfactorily there was no urgent need to establish a full university programme; and, especially, the government's preoccupation with planning and financing railroads across the province.

Under the *Act*, the first Convocation was to consist of all graduates of any Canadian or British university who had lived in the province for at least two years, plus twenty-five provincial government appointees – later Convocations would also include the University's own graduates. Letters announcing the meeting were sent to university graduates around British Columbia in July 1912, together with ballots for electing the Chancellor and fifteen members of the University Senate.

The meeting was called to order at 10am on August 21st, 1912, in the auditorium of South Park School in Victoria, with over 400 of the 739 registered members of Convocation in attendance. Also present were Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Paterson, Premier Sir Richard McBride, Minister of Education Henry Esson Young, and other members of the government. Minister Young was elected to serve as temporary chairman until the ballot results for Chancellor were announced.

Lieutenant-Governor Paterson spoke briefly and eloquently. He congratulated the people of British Columbia, and the members of Convocation in particular, on the establishment of a university “which, he felt assured, would in time equal if not surpass any university in Canada” [Convocation minutes, p. 2]. Premier McBride also expressed his optimism for the future of UBC, and paid tribute to Minister Young for his untiring efforts to establish the new University.

While the Convocation awaited the results of the Chancellor and Senate elections, Young spoke at length about the progress that had been made to date in establishing the University, and what remained to be done. He spoke enthusiastically about the site of the future campus at Point Grey; the competition then being conducted for the design of the campus; and the ongoing work of McGill University College. Regarding the Board of Governors, Young promised that the provincial government would appoint men of both business ability and integrity to manage UBC’s business affairs. As for a University President, he declared that the search was ongoing. The government, he said, was looking for

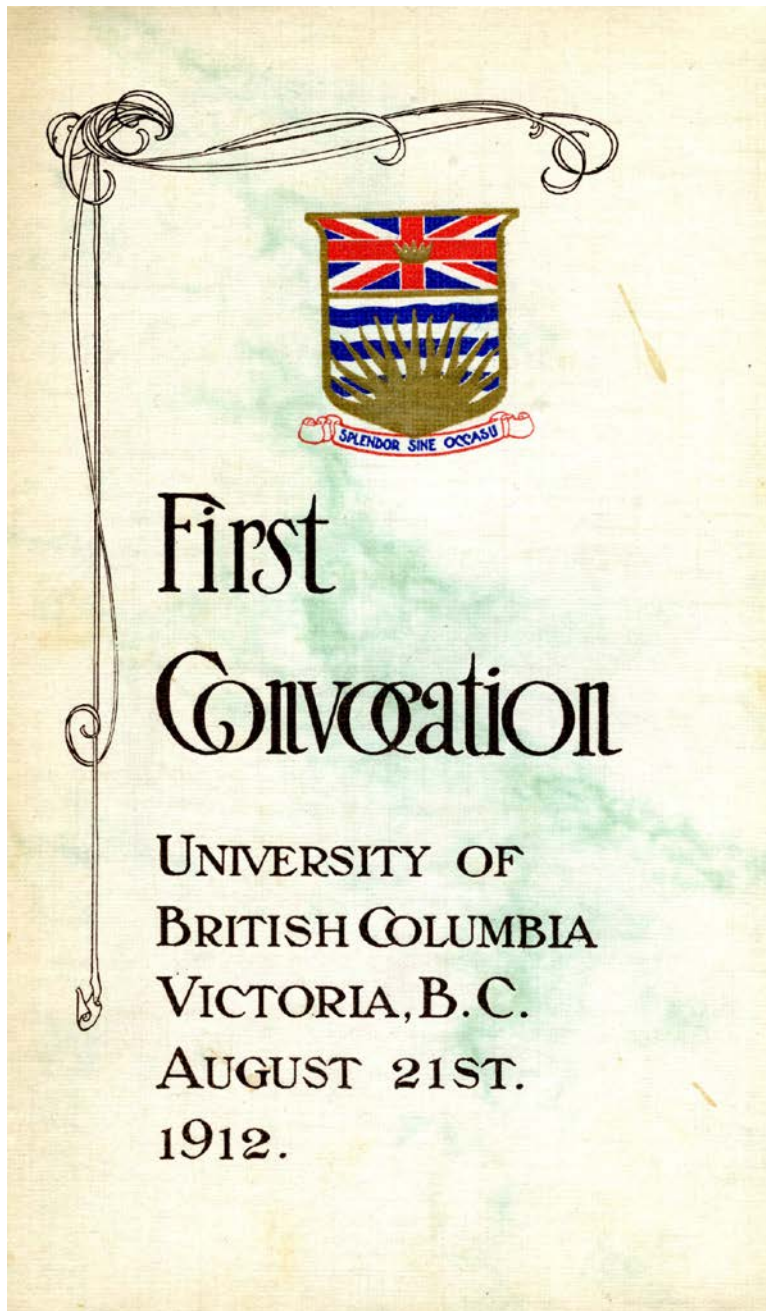
not merely a scholarly man with administrative ability but a scholarly man with executive ability and a noble character – a man who would leave the impress of his noble manhood on all the students of the University [Convocation minutes, p. 4].

After Young concluded his address the voting results were announced, and Francis Carter-Cotton was declared winner of the election for Chancellor. A well-known public figure, Carter-Cotton had been a member of the provincial legislature for fifteen years, and had also served as minister of finance. As owner-editor of the *Vancouver News-Advertiser* newspaper, he had been a consistent supporter of higher education in the province. Perhaps most significantly, he was also chancellor of McGill University College – that position would ease the transition from the College to UBC. On accepting the position, Chancellor Carter-Cotton expressed his thanks to Convocation, modestly suggested that the honour was due more to his work for McGill College than to any other accomplishment or personal merit, and promised to fulfil his duties to the best of his ability.

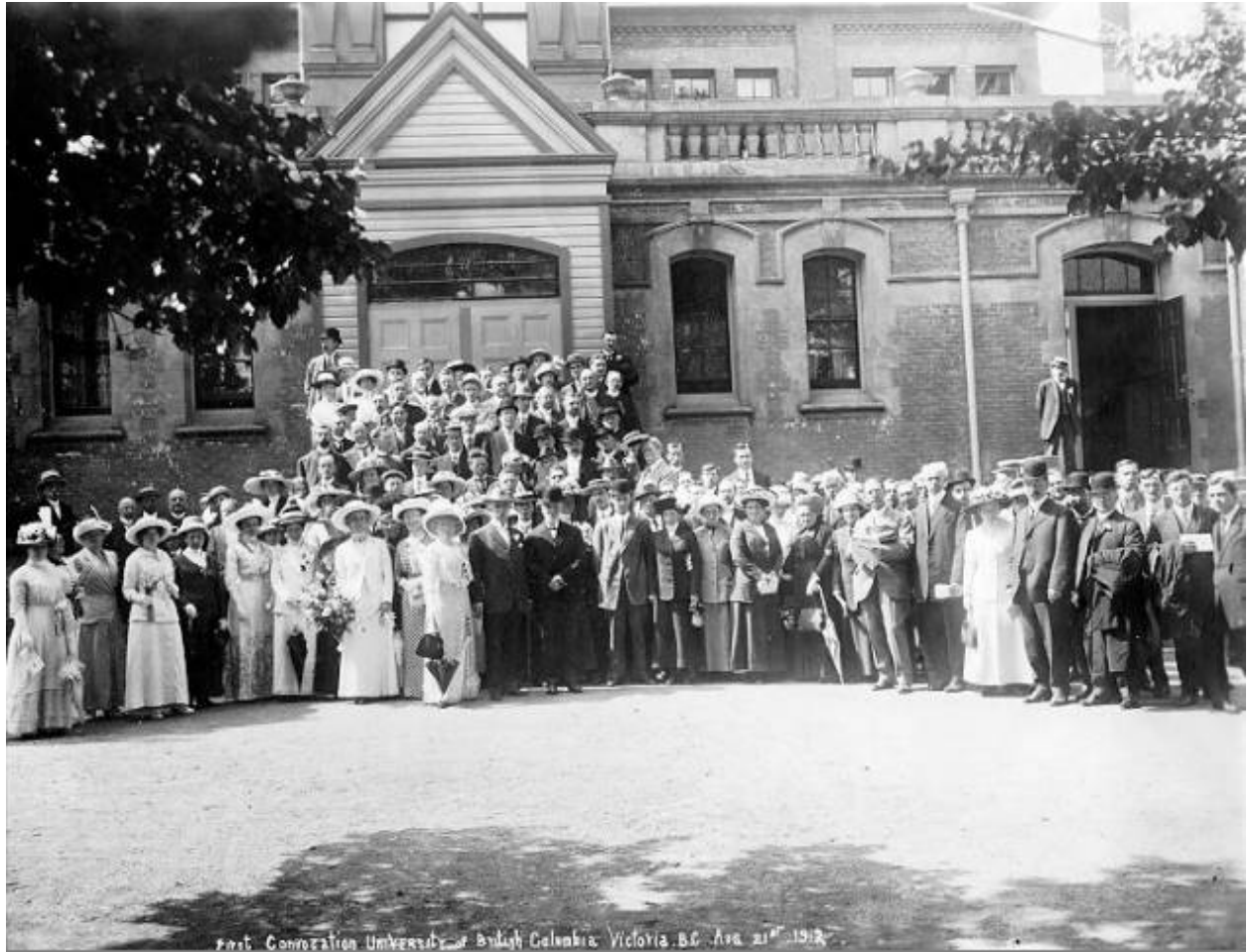
Fourteen elected positions on the University Senate were then declared filled. As there was a tie in the votes for the fifteenth spot, it was decided that Senate itself would decide the issue at its first formal meeting. Convocation then proceeded to elect its own officers: Secretary, Treasurer, and a five-member Executive Council. For the Council, a nominating committee was struck to nominate candidates. Considering the fate of the proposed university of 1890, it is significant that the committee was explicitly instructed to propose candidates “who would be representative of the Island and the Mainland” [Convocation minutes, p. 7].

The assembly then voted its thanks to Minister Young for his work as temporary chairman and for his inspiring address earlier in the meeting, and its appreciation and thanks to the Lieutenant-Governor and the Premier for agreeing to host a reception for the members that evening. There was also a vote of condolence to the family of Otis Staples, a member of Convocation who had died before he could attend the meeting.

Finally, the names of all those present were collected and recorded in the minutes. With that, the inaugural meeting of Convocation adjourned on a note of optimism, and a sense of the historical significance of UBC's "launching ceremony".



Programme for first Convocation



First Convocation University of British Columbia Victoria, B.C. Aug. 21st 1912.
First Convocation, 21 August 1912 (UBC 1.1/1)