Honor and Service to Country First and Always: Usable Advice from A True Patriot
A Commencement Address By Dr. Davidson Nicol

Introduction by Patrick S. Bernard

Introduction:

In lieu of an interview, we are publishing the commencement address of Davidson Nicol to the graduating class of the University of Sierra Leone in December 1992.

Dr. Davidson Sylvester Hector Willoughby Nicol, known to Sierra Leoneans as Davidson Nicol or Abioseh Nicol (born September 14, 1924, Freetown, Sierra Leone, and died September 20, 1994, Cambridge, England) represents one of the famous and well-known pillars of Sierra Leone’s intellectual, scholarly, and academic achievements. During his life, he played many parts, and he did so proficiently and patriotically. Dr. Nicol was a physician, writer, poet, academic, diplomat and public intellectual. He was the first Sierra Leonean Principal of Fourah Bay College (1960-1966) and first Vice Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone (1966-1968). He was, from 1957 a Fellow, and later a Distinguished Honorary Fellow, at Christ’s College, his alma mater, at the University of Cambridge, and was the first African to be so named at either of the two prestigious English universities of Cambridge or Oxford. In addition, he was a lecturer at Cambridge University’s Center of International Studies for many years. Dr. Nicol also served as a Visiting Professor of International Studies at the University of South Carolina (1990-1991). As a physician and man of medicine, he became known for his groundbreaking research into the structure of insulin. His work as a diplomat was equally prolific, having served as his country’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1969-1971), and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom (1971-1972). He was also the United Nations Under-Secretary General, and Executive Director (1979-1982) of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). In addition, he served as President of the World Federation of UN Associations (1983-1987). As a writer and poet, writing under the nom-de-plume Abioseh Nicol, he stands as one of Sierra Leone’s finest. His short stories and poems are considered among the best to have emerged from West Africa. His Two African Tales (1965) and The Truly Married Woman, and Other Stories (1965), for example, define his virtuosity as a writer. In his “Introduction” to A Critical Introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature (2008), Eustace Palmer states that The Truly Married Woman, and Other Stories “established Nicol’s reputation as one of the best practitioners of the art of the short story in Africa” (23). Palmer continues: “Abioseh Nicol also gained an enviable reputation as a poet whose works were soon to be featured in the most authoritative of anthologies of African
poetry” (23). In essence, “Nicol was the first Sierra Leonean writer to capture the world’s attention. He dealt with issues that other African writers were also preoccupied with and he explored them with consummate skill” (Palmer 24).

Generally, graduation speeches, like this one by Dr. Nicol, are farewell speeches. They inspire and give graduates age-old words of wisdom about life, work, and relationships; national duty and civic responsibilities; the meaning of knowledge and its place in their hope and direction for the future. However on hindsight, this address was also, personally for Davidson Nicol, a farewell speech, his valediction, to his beloved Sierra Leone, because he died less than two years after he delivered it. In that regard, this commencement speech is probably his last written piece on matters related to Sierra Leone by Dr. Nicol. I also believe it is his last speech delivered in Sierra Leone. The address synthesizes the views that he had expressed in his earlier writings about Sierra Leone and their meaning to him and his fellow citizens. Some of his opinions in the address could be considered, by a few, as dated, provocative, and controversial, but no one would doubt their passion, patriotism, intellectual probity, and vibrant vision for a better Sierra Leone. As his goodbye to Sierra Leone, this speech demonstrates his abiding optimism for and faith in the transformation and development of the country and the betterment of its citizens.

The speech shows the nimbleness of his mind and the reason he is justifiably considered and admired as Sierra Leone’s intellectual heavyweight. In fact, although dead, he still remains the symbol of the intellectual to Sierra Leoneans. He was such a symbol of academic accomplishments that the former President of Sierra Leone Siaka Stevens compared him, rather derisively, to Bailor Barrie, a rich businessman of the period when he (Stevens) was trying to make a point about what must matter to Sierra Leoneans—money and not intellectual pursuits. In what has now become a famous saying in the Sierra Leonean psyche about the desirability of money/business over education/scholarly pursuits, Stevens said infamously: “Den say Bailor Barrie, you say Davidson Nicol.” (The ideas, loosely translated, mean: “The choice between money and intellectual achievements is a no-brainer.”) However, Dr. Nicol realized that life must never be put into such strict boundaries as Stevens imagined and practiced. Thus, in this address Dr. Nicol openly, for the first time engages Stevens’ materialist ethos, which he (Dr. Nicol) impugns and castigates as wrong and misguided. According to Dr. Nicol, the interrelationship of life choices as well as the resources Sierra Leone should deploy for economic and social transformation must never see the Davidson Nicols and Bailor Barries as mutually exclusive, but rather they should be complementary.

The enduring image that emerges of Dr. Nicol in this address is that of the public intellectual—that learned, erudite, intelligent, and well-known person whose written works and academic achievements as well as social and cultural contributions are acknowledged not only by academics and scholars, but also by the public at large. In short, public intellectuals are persons who are intensely and passionately devoted to the life of the mind and to its effect on the society at large. Public intellectuals are also social and cultural critics who raise legitimate and fundamental questions about public life, and by so doing challenge and question the status quo. Although a trained physician and natural scientist, the works and writings of Dr. Nicol go beyond his discipline and his training to engage a broad range of issues that relates to the social and cultural world around him. In the speech, Dr. Nicol demonstrates the meaning and function, obligations
and responsibilities, of the public intellectual in society. He unquestionably reflects the relationship between the public intellectual and the public, and the reason why I consider him as perhaps Sierra Leone’s first and, so far, greatest public intellectual. As the public intellectual, his address shows the quality of his engagement in matters that touch every aspect of Sierra Leonean life, one he envisages in the contexts of, for example, inclusivity, gender parity, human freedom and knowledge, equal opportunities, and the possibilities of the democratic promise. For me, the most impressive message of Dr. Nicol’s address to the future leaders, citizens, fathers, mothers, and workers of Sierra Leone he was addressing that day is this: although Sierra Leone is well-endowed with natural resources, such as diamonds, iron ore, gold, bauxite, timber, produce, etc., not once did Dr. Nicol mention any in his speech as the basis to develop the country or the hope for its economic transformation. Instead, the only resource he mentions in various reiterations and that he considers the sine qua non for the sustainable development of Sierra Leone is the country’s human asset.

Before he departed Freetown, probably in early January 1993, Dr. Nicol left a copy of his address with his brother W. A. Tani Nicol of 28, Victoria Street, Freetown, authorizing him to take the speech to the Secretary of State of Information for press circulation. By then I was editing a newspaper Liberty Voice in Freetown, and was given this copy to publish. But my newspaper had ceased publication during that period because I did not have the financial wherewithal to keep it in circulation, so I never published the address. However, I have kept it with me all these years, together with the envelope in which it was enclosed and Tani Nicol’s business card.

Work Cited:


Here now is Dr. Davidson Nicol in his own words:

University of Sierra Leone

Annual Congregation for the Conferment of Degrees, Diplomas and Licenses
Held on the 19th, December, 1992

Commencement Address and Vote of Thanks by Dr. Davidson Nicol

Mr. Pro Chancellor,
Dignitaries of the University of Sierra Leone,
Members of the armed forces and police,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to have been asked to give the Vote of Thanks on behalf of diploma holders, graduates and the three honorary graduands including myself, whom you have this day accepted into your learned society.

His Excellency the High Commissioner for Nigeria has accepted the degree of Doctor of Civil Laws on behalf of General Babangida, a great friend of Sierra Leone who has been a pillar of strength to us in both war and peace.

As he leads his country into civilian government and the Rule of Law, this distinction is particularly appropriate and it is with profound respect and gratitude that we greet him. His statements and actions have shown that his D. C. L. could well stand for Direction towards Civilian Life.

His Excellency Abubakarr himself a skilled diplomat who has served Nigeria in the Kingdom of Morocco, will no doubt himself be honoured one day if he has not been honored already.

Dr. Godfrey Lardner, a great expert in economic development is well known and highly regarded in many countries in Africa. His advice is constantly sought. The success of each new assignment brings him an invitation to another circle and he circles the globe constantly like the Shakespearian Ariel, spreading wisdom and support to governments in need.

As for me personally, I have a long list of those to whom I owe gratitude, beginning from my parents whose strict and loving advice gave me a wonderful start in life under privileged circumstances of comfort and wealth. My teachers in Kaduna, Port Harcourt and Lagos in Nigeria and in Freetown, Sierra Leone were always kind and encouraging.

At Fourah Bay College and as Vice Chancellor of the University, then comprising that College and Njala University College, I learnt from both the students and staff as I hope I gave them in my own modest efforts at strong and affectionate leadership. My later careers in diplomacy at international organizations owe a great deal to my experience here at Fourah Bay College with an excellent administrative and academic staff.

In the past few years, I have usually spent half a year as a lecturer at Cambridge and the other half as a Visiting Professor in International Relations at the University of South Carolina, with its 25,000 member student body. Last year, the latter invited me to give two Commencement Addresses and to participate in two important academic and administrative committees. I found that the experience I had gained as head of this University was of great benefit as institutions of learning have similar features all over the world. As an individual also who has presided over international committees at the
United Nations and even more so, over discussions with determined Professors in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Cambridge, one has gained battle experience for any committee in the world! Many lessons had been learnt, one for example, being that with controversial matters, more useful work is done by negotiations before a committee meets, rather than at the committee meeting itself.

In the world scene this year, some have sought my views on our difficult situation in this region. There are now wars going on in Sierra Leone and in Liberia involving armies from several of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). We grieve for our brothers and sisters in Kailahun, Kono, Pujehun and other places in Sierra Leone for their sufferings. We are deeply grateful to our armed forces for struggling to save our desperate situation and to our leaders of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) for their bravery and wisdom. They are the first leaders of Sierra Leone who have been in active combat, fighting for their country.

May God bless them.

As one who has been involved in wars and conflict situations in almost every continent during the past twenty years as both a member of the United Nations Security Council and as an Under-Secretary General, I look upon our local scenario respectfully but with an objective, experienced global look.

Much fighting has taken place and valuable lives lost, but there really seems to be no great progress; only one abortive meeting following another in Africa and Europe. The result of most of these meetings has not been successful as there is no confidence on either side. Confidence-building measures are always important as a preliminary step to every settlement. We should either carry out massive counter-insurgency measures crushing the insurgent leaders—Foday Sankoh of Sierra Leone and Charles Taylor of Liberia, or, and this is important, proceed to seek mediation from friends outside our continent.

The Sierra Leone army under its brave leaders can conquer Sankoh’s forces. The ECOWAS forces (ECOMOG) under its outstanding Nigerian leadership can equally conquer Charles Taylor’s army. But the cost in bloodshed and African suffering will be unnecessarily high on both sides.

The United Nations has acted, at the insistence of ECOWAS, by passing resolutions imposing an arms embargo on Liberia excepting those to ECOMOG forces and it has appointed an expert to visit Africa. Enforcing the embargo will not be easy as the borders of Liberia with neighbouring countries are too wide and Taylor, too wealthy. Sankoh and Taylor will not easily give up. They have conquered large areas of territories and they export diamonds, ore, timber and produce. They control a main port, Buchanan in Liberia. They have powerful supporters in Africa and Europe and they have access to the international arms market. The friends of the governments of Sierra Leone and Liberia should help these countries equally with more support of arms. Taylor and Sankoh have pointed out that more than half of the governments in Africa were installed by military
means and that they are now being denied victory over former President Doe’s tyrannical regime in Liberia and that of the former President Momoh’s APC in Sierra Leone. Taylor and Sankoh do not seem to trust most African leaders for arbitration purposes. What can we do?

Perhaps after the UN expert has reported, we should seek through UN auspices, a team of trained external mediators from Scandinavia, Latin America, or Asia—regions which have no vested interest in the conflict—and encourage them to talk to opposing sides at length without any assumptions or presumptions of legality or regional stability.

Case studies of Namibia, Angola, Nicaragua and that of on-going Cambodia illustrate possibilities of alternatives to fighting, famine and warfare. Resulting elections by supervisors from outside the region may then give the final legitimate answer.

De Klerk and Sam Nujoma needed outside assistance for peace in Namibia and they are more powerful than Taylor and Sankoh; so did Dos Santos and Jonas Savimbi in Angola; so do Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. We recollect also the success of the Latin American diplomats, Perez de Cuellar of Peru, the former UN Secretary General, and Diego Cordovez of Eucador, in halting the conflicts in Afghanistan which involved both Pakistan and the former Soviet Union.

We know that considerations of prestige are important but they should not always stand in the way of peaceful and negotiated solutions.

In our own more immediate situation in Sierra Leone, I repeatedly urged, in the past as Vice Chancellor and Principal, that a Reserve Officers’ Training Corps should be instituted at the University so that a pool of trained officers would always be available while later carrying out their civilian duties.

I also suggested the formation of a civilian army where every literate and able-bodied man and woman in our main cities would do a few weeks military training at stated intervals as done in Switzerland. In case of an attack from outside, there would then always be a trained army and a disciplined officer corps available. These suggestions were refused by our various Presidents as they wished instead to have armed forces which would keep them, their families and friends indefinitely in power, rather than one which would defend the country from invasions and rebellions.

Early this year also, several major international figures called to urge myself and other senior Sierra Leoneans to persuade the military government—the NPRC—to return early or immediately to multi-party democracy. My own views were that in Sierra Leone, we had been used to democracy for about two hundred years, but under the present circumstances, without necessary safeguards, we would quite bluntly, simply be exchanging one band of thieves for another bunch of crooks.

Before multi-party democracy is instituted, any new constitution must ensure that no one person or party has absolute hold on to power.
There should be external supervision of elections by the Commonwealth, the UN or the former US President Carter’s Conciliation Group.

There must also be continuous auditing of state funds and foreign contracts by independent auditors acceptable to all parties. No minister or official including the President should have a foreign bank account. If he or she wants one, he or she must resign.

The idea of having only two parties to prevent tribalism as has been suggested in Nigeria is attractive and as is the case in Nigeria also, some individuals should be banned from politics for life.

As is the case in Costa Rica in Central America, no President need serve for more than four years and no President should be allowed to stand for re-election, except in very exceptional circumstances which should not be determined by the holder or his supporters. A President should be elected separately from parliamentarians and by rotation for each region—North, South, East and West, so that every group will, in turn, have a share of power. No President should be succeeded by a member of his own community.

Sierra Leone residents in commerce and industry of whatever race or colour should be allowed to play a prominent part in discussions of our government’s financial affairs. They have practical knowledge of the handling of business and finance. No amount of University degrees or patriotism can be a substitute for this. Siaka Stevens was insufficiently comprehensive in pointing to the immensely wealthy Bailor Barrie to young people as a better role model than the intellectual Davidson Nicol. This country needs both the Bailor Barries and the Davidson Nicols for a successful economy.

I believe we need in addition, a special bureau to attract back qualified Sierra Leoneans from abroad. There are many, both young and old, who can come full time or part time to work for their country. Personally, I had made offers during the previous regimes of former Presidents Stevens and Momoh, but these did not seem acceptable.

It was then that I started accepting posts abroad, some of which involved lecturing high ranking officers in the British Ministry of Defence and also diplomats from different countries, all studying at Cambridge for a Masters degree in International Relations. As President of the World Federation of United Nations Associations, I also actively consulted with officials in the Kremlin, Washington and other countries in Africa and Asia.

One of my former pupils, a British Colonel on the General Headquarters Staff, informed me that during the Gulf War, my lectures on International Organizations enabled him to advise on correct steps to be allowed on UN Security Council Resolutions. I was naturally highly gratified. I asked another student if he had mentioned, to any of his senior officers, that I was black and African. He had not, he replied, as he and his
colleagues had simply considered me one of their lecturers and an expert in my field and not as anything or anybody else. Another expressed the view that my being black was simply another Cambridge eccentricity and they were never quite really sure where I came from. Since Africa, to the outside world, often represents starvation, violence, ignorance and foolish power-struggles, it is perhaps understandable that those of us who, by chance, and effort have succeeded in the international arena are anxious to replace that image for a more positive one of expertise and knowledge.

The current Commissions of Inquiry in Sierra Leone and their alarming details of financial irregularities now reveal the reason for the refusal of Stevens and Momoh to employ myself and others. They knew that many of us would certainly not have connived at the wickedness, mass robbery and corruption against our people since, as with other compatriots, we regard ourselves as more servants than masters and plunderers of the citizens of Sierra Leone.

I now wish to praise those honest and deserving Sierra Leonean citizens, professionals and residents of all races, who have remained at home and continued to help in our crisis. On your behalf, I wish also to thank profusely foreign governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, commercial concerns and religious bodies also for their generous help to our University and our country. I pressingly urge them to continue and increase their aid in this time of greatest need.

In conclusion, I congratulate you, our graduates, on your degrees and diplomas. You have worked hard for them. They are the end of a long and difficult road. They will help you in your future careers. But I urge you to remember that:

- Your B.A. stands for Bachelor of Arts in Learning and not Bachelor of Addition of Other People’s Money into your pockets;
- Your B.Sc. is for Bachelor of Science and not Bachelor of Swindling;
- Your M.A. for Master of Arts and not the initials for MANipulation of State Funds;
- Your LL.B. for Bachelor of Laws and not Bachelor of Lawless Behaviour
- Your Ph.D. for Doctor of Philosophy not for Doctor of Filling Up Your local and foreign bank accounts with illegal wealth, neither is your Ph.D. for philandering with innocent youth.

We regard our own honorary D.SC conferred on us today as standing for Dedication to Serving our country and for the community of mankind.

Remember that we have had twenty-one years of corruption and treachery to conquer, and a whole generation of materialism and dishonour, when some of us, including
myself, allowed ourselves to be misled in the early years, through patriotism to serve the regime. We shall strive to overcome this shame. For most of you, new graduates, your memory may go back only ten years. Let me assure you that Africa has had honest and diligent politicians in the past and that there are still some at present. Our first Prime Minister, thirty five years ago, Sir Milton Margai, an outstanding leader whom I regarded as my patron and inspiration, died leaving mortgage payments still outstanding on his building. Contrast that with a member of the erstwhile government who owns over ten houses fully paid for in Sierra Leone and abroad, and acquired over the past few years.

Some of you will be faced with making difficult decisions in life. To those of you who are women, I would advise that you work hard, maintain your virtue and do not use your femininity for gain or for promotion or for shopping abroad. If you do so, it will soon become a wasting asset with age. Be competent instead of your duties, be dignified, and fight sexual discrimination firmly when encountered.

To young men, I would urge you to treat women with respect and friendship, as competent, equal and sometimes superior colleagues, and not take advantage of them as objects for sexual gratification or pleasure. Honour them and do not mock them. They are half if not more of our human resources.

Those of you who are Christians will remember that biblical scholars write that there were three major figures in the life of Jesus who where women—Mary his mother who had the first vision; the woman at the well who pronounced “Thou art the Christ”; and the despised Mary Magdalene who first saw the risen Christ at the Resurrection.

About six hundred years later in Arabia, Mohamed the Prophet and founder of Islam, was first cherished and guided by Kadija, a rich widow whom he married and also that it was through the descendants of his daughter, Fatima, that Islam spread all over the world.

To you both men and women, I would urge you to go forth and do good as many who have studied at this great University have done and continue to do. Do not strive to escape responsibility as leaders, nor try to gain quick popularity and easy illegal wealth even under pressure from family, friends and communities. Donations from weddings, funerals, anniversaries, scholarships, food and housing will all be required from you and from those in high positions. Be generous, as financial hardship is now widespread, but be courageous enough to refuse when you cannot afford to help. A cabinet minister, professor, politician, or senior civil servant in Africa earns a salary which in foreign exchange, may only be equal or less than that of an office cleaner in developed countries. We should therefore as a people put less financial demands on our high officials so that they do not become driven to temptation and dishonesty. Do not buy praise and popularity with public money.

When you are faced with difficulties at work or in your personal life, do not avoid making decisions. Too many of us do. Take advice from those qualified, but do not postpone an issue by seeking endless advice. Act on principles; share praise with those who work with you when there is a successful outcome; if there are problems or failures,
shield them, and correct them privately; you will thus win their loyalty and devotion and they will do better next time. In a crisis, ask yourself “What is the honourable thing to do? What should a person of honour do?” Having made that decision, act on it and do so with fearlessness and courage. I pray that you will succeed in life, even if you falter occasionally because we all do.

May God and Allah bless and guide you.