



THE BOYS' BRIGADE

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Of Ulbster

2nd Viscount Thurso

A Tribute

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The late Lord Thurso's association with The Boys' Brigade spanned a relatively short period of his long and distinguished life. He once said that his eight years as President was one of the most fulfilling periods of his life and there can be no doubt about the impact he made on the Brigade. The attendance here today is testimony to that, with BB representatives from all parts of this country, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

He accepted the invitation to occupy the presidency at an age when most people are thinking of winding down their activities as they look towards retirement. He came with no previous experience of The Boys' Brigade despite coming from the town in which our founder was born. Indeed, he had more experience of Scouting. Yet he brought to the post a tremendous enthusiasm and travelled extensively to share in Brigade events across the United Kingdom.

The early part of his presidency saw some turbulence in the Brigade. The excitement of the centenary had begun to fade and the Executive were obliged to face the stark reality that without fairly drastic and immediate action we would be overwhelmed by a financial crisis. Robin Thurso's skilful and sensitive chairmanship of the Executive helped members take some difficult decisions which involved short-term disruption and pain but heralded a more optimistic financial future. Whilst he defended with some passion the traditions and methods of the Brigade he, nevertheless, recognised the need for change and was not afraid to raise potentially contentious issues. He was a man of strong Christian faith which he expressed in what he said and what he did.

Lord Thurso was widely regarded throughout the Brigade with great affection which was earned through his total commitment to the Object of the Brigade and the genuine interest he took in every boy and officer he met. He had that capacity only a few possess, which is to make whoever was the object of his attention at a particular time feel that they were the most important person in the world. It was not an act - his interest was absolutely genuine and boys were particularly quick to recognise it. On top of that he had a very special sense of humour - indeed, whenever I call him to mind it is a picture of him laughing.

It was my privilege to work closely with him for most of his presidency. We had a lot of fun and, I think, a special understanding and certainly a great many laughs. He was not short of ideas and frequently the phone would go late into the evening and that familiar voice would say 'Sydney, I've had an idea'. Sometimes they were good. Occasionally, to play for time, I would observe that they were interesting. However, he had the uncanny knack of being able to assess my level of enthusiasm from the way I responded and would act accordingly. Thus, we rarely disagreed, with one particular exception. He was a great travelling companion except that when he volunteered to navigate his enthusiasm tended to be greater than his skill. No doubt, his RAF record would testify that at several thousand feet he always knew where he was going. At ground level he was less successful - but just as confident. However, we always got there.

Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to be among ordinary company officers and boys. He could be joining the fun at Alton Towers or sharing a weekend with our young leaders.

Indeed, many remember both Lord and Lady Thurso dressed as pirates at one theme evening. The number of company displays and anniversaries he cheerfully attended cannot be counted. On many of these he was accompanied by Lady Margaret who quickly gained an equal place in the Brigade's affections and who, even now, we are delighted to have as an honorary Vice-President.

Yet all this activity was at a cost. Few in the Brigade really knew how serious his breathing difficulties were. He looked robust and gave no hint of discomfort if he could help it. I have an abiding memory of him at his last Brigade Council. He had taken the salute at the Parade and he and I sat on a low wall so that he could catch his breath because he was clearly in some difficulty. I suggested we went into the hall where the service was to be held so that he could have a more comfortable seat. However, he would have to pass through a line of Junior boys on the way who had been placed as a guard of honour. I offered to explain that he was not well enough for a proper inspection. He would have none of it - he drew himself up and passed through the line, talking and joking with boys and their leaders which gave them the greatest thrill. Only when he sat down was it evident what that effort had cost him. He recognised what I and many others did not want to admit, which was that there was a limit to how long he could continue to serve the Brigade. He therefore took the decision to retire but not before he had found a worthy successor in the person of The Earl of Strathmore & Kinghorne who is present today.

He gave so much of himself but perhaps among the most important gifts was that he was a great advocate for young people - his confidence in them was absolute. His last

public utterance at a Brigade event was at the Royal Review at Windsor Castle when, in the presence of Her Majesty The Queen, he took his leave of the Brigade and introduced his successor. In his address to the Queen he said *'I am confident of the boy of today. In spite of all the criticisms which we hear of today's youth I am convinced that today's boy is just as courageous and idealistic as the boys of past generations.'* That confidence he transmitted in his approach to boys who responded to him so readily whatever their age.

Thousands of officers and boys have their own very special memories of Lord Thurso as Brigade President. Many can say, with me, he was my friend. We loved him and we miss him.

I am reminded of a prayer derived from Dr William Barclay.

'Grant us so to live that the world may be a better place because we passed through it.'

That surely sums up Robin Thurso. We remember him with thanks and very great pleasure.

SYDNEY JONES OBE

