Address given by Jennifer Allen Simons, Ph.D.

on behalf of the donors at the opening of

The J.S. Woodsworth Chair in the Humanities

Simon Fraser University

February 22, 1990

Jennifer Simons

Mr. Lewis, President Saywell, Fellow Donors, and all the friends I see here, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I want to tell you—first of all—that The Simons Foundation would be a pretty paltry place if it were not for the financial support from H.A. Simons Ltd.

I know that the initial idea was to fund the Chair through individual donations and that corporations generally speaking have different values, and, as well, have rather blank faces. So I want to introduce you to an individual—who shares the same values and concerns for people's welfare as we do—Tom Simons.

I am being presumptuous, I know, in speaking on behalf of all donors. And if I take liberties and express thoughts which you cannot, in some sense, call your own, please forgive me.

I want to say, first of all, that what we have accomplished by accumulating a sum of money, large enough, to open the Chair is an achievement of which we can all be proud; and a genuine cause for celebration.

We can congratulate ourselves because, what is even more important, is that this is no traditional chair in the Humanities—a humanities, which in our time, manifests the tendency, more and more, to focus—using a scientific model—on studies abstracted from human life and experience.

J.S. Woodsworth's concern for individuals and their lives—so succinctly expressed in his statement "What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all"—bespeaks the truly humanistic philosophy in which the J.S. Woodsworth Chair and the Institute for the Humanities is grounded.

I choose to call what we are funding a radical humanities, for to quote Marx, "To be radical is to grasp things by the root .... for man the root is man himself." A Radical Humanities is a truly human-focused, an individual-concerned humanities, grounded in the principle of human dignity—concerned with, and reflecting upon man's place in nature—on issues of peace, justice, equality, and, not only human rights, but, as well, with human survival.

For the individual is an increasingly endangered species, threatened with annihilation through nuclear war—though this threat has lessened somewhat thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's initiatives. And threatened by other human engendered environmental problems, such as disappearing forests, expanding deserts, the extinction of many diverse and necessary species of life, nuclear accidents, toxic wastes, pollution in all its foul forms—causing ozone depletion, climate change, and so on. On a global scale, we are faced with problems of food security, famines, population explosion, the spread of AIDS, and a plague of rising economic deficits in most countries.

The individual is faced with the problems of living in war-based and profit-at-all-costs economies—in a science and technologically driven, bureaucratic society. These are all issues which must be constantly addressed in relation to human life.

Raymond Williams reminds us, however, that technology is not an inevitable series of transformations careering along the ringing grooves of change. Rather, it is a set of humanly decided and humanly alterable options for the application of skills.

German novelist Heinrich Boll writes that "it is our task to remind the world that a human being exists for something more than to be bureaucratized."

Lewis Mumford makes the point that the most important thing to come out of the mine is not coal—iron—or gold. Rather, the most important thing to come out of the mine is the miner.

The notion of the individual as the hub of all human activity; of the human as aware, responsible, the creator and user of technologies, as the "people" of bureaucracies, needs—surprisingly enough—to be constantly brought to attention; to be examined and reflected upon, and to be continuously re-enforced. Furthermore, the notion of the human as merely a part of an extremely complex, interdependent, ecological system which is suffering from degradation and deterioration, is also an essential focus for reflective thought.

Since the Enlightenment, when the great humane ideals of freedom, justice, and equality co-existed in harmony with scientific thought, the understanding of human progress—to paraphrase Albert Schweitzer—has dwelt more and more on the results of science and less and less on reflection on the individual, society, humanity, and civilization.

Moreover, Descartes' concept of being, "I think therefore I am," rather than a

humanistic holistic concept of, say, I live therefore I am, or I am life therefore I exist, has tended to dominate critical enquiry, and has led thought into abstractions—fragments, and away from knowledge of what is in essence human, of what is humane.

Because the tendency of science-driven modernity is to be unreflective, the notion of human responsibility, human value, and human dignity bows out in favour of a different conception of progress, one which discourages humanity in individuals.

Schweitzer writes that "our society has ... ceased to allow to all men, as such, a human value and a human dignity; many sections of the human race have become merely raw material and property in human form." Humaneness "is relegated to an obscure comer."

The task which the J.S. Woodsworth Chair and the members of the Institute for the Humanities have set for themselves—and which we are funding—is to restore and sustain a collective, ongoing, social dialogue on the complex, manifold nature of civilization, and on the issues which confront us today; to re-introduce, through critical enquiry and reflection, the ethical and humane ideals of the Enlightenment, which in turn will foster activity directed towards improving the life conditions of individuals, of society, and of humanity.

It is a task with which the Institute for the Humanities is already engaged. For example, J.S. Woodsworth Resident Scholar Dr. Allan Rudrum's historical enquiry into man's ecological relation in nature.

Jerry Zaslove, Director of the Institute, has introduced critical investigations into such problems as bureaucracy and culture and the fragmentation of knowledge, to name two. In April, the Institute will be exploring a human-centered economic theory Man as an aim—Economy as means.

Bob Anderson, the Director of the Community Economic Centre, associated with the

Institute, is engaged in bringing the resources of the university to bear on the task of encouraging accountable and sustainable community, cultural and economic development in British Columbia.

Steve Duguid—because of his critical enquiry into an environmental ethics—was one of three chosen to represent Canada at the Sixth Economic Conference on Bio-Ethics in Brussels, which provided the basis for the global environmental policy, adopted at the Group of Seven Economic Summit on the Environment in Paris, last July.

These are but a few of the many activities. And I want now, on behalf of you all, to heartily commend Simon Fraser University for its initiative in establishing this unique Chair and Humanities Institute.

The Endowment Fund is now open and the funds will flow. Yet, and I imagine I speak for you all, I recognize that this is just the beginning. What we have accomplished so far is to allow the University to continue to develop with new confidence, a truly human-focused humanities. The sum released from the fund each year is not a large one, and it will require constant scrutiny and careful employment to begin to fulfil the task of the humanities chair and the Institute.

I want you to know that while I can stand here tonight and happily reflect upon our accomplishment, tomorrow I will be asking myself where, and from whom, can I generate more financial support. For to keep the critical problems of contemporary human life continually in the forefront of knowledge is a constant and ongoing struggle.

Thank you.