

ROBERT MACGREGOR DAWSON, 1895-1958

THE death of Robert MacGregor Dawson on July 16, 1958, deprived the University of Toronto of a distinguished professor of political science and the country of its leading authority on the government of Canada. He died in his sixty-third year, hard at work on what he hoped would be his greatest contribution to Canadian scholarship. It is difficult to convey to those who did not know him the impress that his vivid personality made on friends and colleagues and students. He was one of the most vital of men.

He was born in the town of Bridgewater in Nova Scotia in 1895. His home was on the banks of the Lahave River almost at the exact spot where the salt water and the fresh water meet. His great grandfather had come out from Scotland and had later been drowned off Port Mouton in 1825. It was a fitting, if tragic, beginning for a Nova Scotian family. His grandfather and his father had prospered in the timber trade and in shipping, and then as general hardware merchants. His mother was Mary MacGregor who was a grand-daughter of the famous Rev. Dr. MacGregor of Pictou County.

Robert MacGregor Dawson (and he always used all three names) never had any quarrel with his start in life. He rejoiced and was proud. He was proud of his Scottish Presbyterian ancestors, he loved with an intense love the province where he was born, he never forgot the call of Lunenburg County or the sound and the smell of the sea. He was a Nova Scotian of Nova Scotians.

He was an only son, and his father would have been only too pleased if he had been willing to carry on the family business. That career was rejected with decision. To Dalhousie University he would go and in 1915 he graduated with a B.A. degree and in 1916 with a Master's degree. After a year at Harvard where he obtained an A.M. degree he went to England and graduated with an M.Sc. (Econ.) and D.Sc. (Econ.) from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Then began his teaching career for which he always had the greatest enthusiasm. He never forgot the names of his best students, he followed their careers with the greatest interest, and gloated over their successes with an almost proprietary interest. He never was one to suffer fools gladly, but no student was ever treated as a fool if he showed any promise. When in the last years of his life Professor Dawson had to give up teaching it was with the greatest regret.

His first teaching post was at Dalhousie in 1921. From there he went to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and then to Rutgers University. It was however with great delight that he returned to Canada in 1928 to become the head of the Political Science Department at the University of Saskatchewan. In 1937 he joined the staff of the University of Toronto which he only left in 1951 in order to go to Ottawa.

Besides being a great teacher he was a great productive scholar. He always had "a ship on the stocks" and his mind teemed with schemes of others to follow. His thesis, which he wrote in London under the guidance of Graham Wallas, for whom he always had the warmest admiration and affection, was

published under the title of *The Principle of Official Independence*. He never forgot, and he never allowed his friends to forget, that he published the book at his own expense. That never happened again.

Other books followed in his chosen field—*The Civil Service of Canada*, *Constitutional Issues in Canada*, *The Development of Dominion Status*. He edited *Canada in World Affairs: Two Years of War* and he wrote the usual quota of articles and reviews for learned journals. With great satisfaction he succeeded in founding and then editing the Canadian Government Series for the University of Toronto Press, a series in which no less than nine studies had appeared at the time of his death. Undoubtedly his most important book was *The Government of Canada* on which he lavished a great deal of thought and time and care. For this he was awarded the Governor General's gold medal in 1947 for academic non-fiction. Later a revised and condensed version was published under the title *Democratic Government in Canada* and this received a second medal, somewhat to the surprise and amusement, but not less to the satisfaction of the author.

Everything that he did, he did with enthusiasm. When in his presence even the most cynical was infected by his passion for his subject—the government of Canada in all its aspects. His was not the enthusiasm of the dry-as-dust scholar for the minutiae of his chosen field. Behind the political scientist was an ardent Canadian nationalist. Never an imperialist, he saw with the greatest satisfaction Canada grow from a colony to a nation.

In 1943 he was appointed a royal commissioner to report on the state of his native province. He entered on this task with his usual energy and gusto and produced a report valuable almost in inverse proportion to the state of obscurity into which it has been allowed to fall. The royal commissioner had few of the arts of the politician.

In 1951 he was chosen to be the official biographer of William Lyon Mackenzie King. He accepted the task with considerable hesitation. It meant that he would have to give up teaching for at least two and possibly three years. Twice three years have passed and the biography is not half done. The original plan of two volumes has been expanded to three, and not until last year was the first volume published. However, much more than that has been actually accomplished. Dawson did not begin his work for the biography with a study of the ancestry and early life of his subject. That could wait. He plunged at once into the problem of the constitutional issue under Lord Byng and the conscription issue near the close of the Second World War. These he knew were the key problems and he was anxious to write them up while the men who had taken part in them were still alive. This accounts for much of the delay in the publication of the first volume. In addition there was the immense amount of material that was available, the study of which, even with the help of able assistants to whom he gave generous praise, took much more time than he had ever expected.

Honours came to him. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, was elected president of the Canadian Political Science Association in 1945, and held honorary doctorates of law from the universities of Dalhousie and New Brunswick.

Robert MacGregor Dawson was a great teacher and a great scholar but those who knew him will remember him for himself. He was an impressive character in a world where characters are few. He went through life with not a little sound and often with considerable fury. Tall, lanky, with a mop of white hair, always on the move, never without a decisive opinion, ready for an argument, equally ready to admit and admire an opponent's argument, with a hearty laugh and an instinctive hatred for humbug and pretence, no company was long unaware of his presence.

Honesty and courage were outstanding characteristics. He was honest in everything. He would not say a thing behind a man's back that he would not say to his face. He never pretended to like people whom he disliked. He was never afraid to express an opinion because it was unpopular. Fundamentally kind and considerate he was too outspoken to be notable for his tact. When he came to Halifax in the fall of 1943 to take up his duties as royal commissioner he had not been in the city an hour before the telephone rang and he was asked to speak at the next meeting of a prominent service club. There was a crushing finality to his booming answer, "I never speak to the Rotary Club." When a friend protested at his lack of diplomacy he laughed and said, "Well at least they know where I stand."

That was always his way. People knew where he stood. They might be offended but they could never say afterwards that there had been any doubt or uncertainty about what he meant or what he intended to do. He expected the same honesty and the same forthrightness in others.

His home in Nova Scotia he loved passionately. He would not tear down the house that his grandfather had built, but during the last years of his life he rebuilt it with endless patience and care. A new house might have cost no more than what he lavished on the old. Around it he gradually built up one of the finest gardens in the province. Trees and shrubs and flowers were as much a part of his life as the decisions of the judicial committee of the Privy Council or the clauses of the B.N.A. Act. Every storm in Nova Scotia filled him with anxiety for the fate of ancient pine trees or recently planted Koster spruces. Sentimentalism he might despise but he himself was full of sentiment. He lies buried less than a quarter of a mile from the home where he was born.

G. E. WILSON

PUBLICATIONS

The following list is based on one prepared by Professor R. MacGregor Dawson a year or so before his death. [MANAGING EDITOR]

The Principle of Official Independence. London: P. S. King & Son. 1922. Pp. xv, 268.

"The Independence of the Lieutenant-Governor," *Dalhousie Review*, July, 1922.

"Proportional Representation," *D.R.*, April, 1923.

"Canadian Civil Services before Confederation," *Canadian Historical Review*, June, 1924.

"The Canadian Civil Service, 1867-1880," *C.H.R.*, March, 1926.

"The Constitutional Question," *D.R.*, Oct., 1926.

"The Functions of a Civil Service," *D.R.*, Jan., 1928.

The Civil Service of Canada. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1929. Pp. 266.

"Smith," *D.R.*, April, 1929.

- Editor. *Constitutional Issues in Canada, 1900-1931*. London: Oxford University Press. 1933. Pp. xvi, 482.
- "The Gerrymander of 1882," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, May, 1935.
- "The Canadian Civil Service," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Aug., 1936.
- Memorandum on the Civil Service of Nova Scotia*. N.p. 1934. Pp. 25.
- "The Imperial Conference," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Feb., 1937.
- Editor. *The Development of Dominion Status, 1900-1936*. London, Toronto, New York: Oxford University Press. 1937. Pp. xiv, 466.
- "Memoirs of Sir Robert Borden and Hon. E. M. Macdonald," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Feb., 1939.
- "The Select Committee on the Civil Service, 1938," *C.J.E.P.S.*, May, 1939.
- "The Cabinet Minister and Administration: The British War Office, 1903-16," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Nov., 1939.
- "The Cabinet Minister and Administration: Winston S. Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911-15," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Aug., 1940.
- "The Cabinet Minister and Administration: Asquith, Lloyd George, Curzon," *Political Science Quarterly*, Sept., 1940.
- "The Impact of the War on Canadian Political Institutions," *C.J.E.P.S.*, May, 1941.
- Editor and author. *Problems of Modern Government*. University of Toronto Political Economy Series, no. 12. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1941. Pp. xvi, 124.
- "Our Bashful Bureaucracy," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Dec. 18, 1942.
- "The Cabinet Minister and Administration: A. J. Balfour and Sir Edward Carson at the Admiralty, 1915-17," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Feb., 1943.
- Editor and author. *Canada in World Affairs: Two Years of War, 1939-1941*. London, Toronto, New York: Oxford University Press. 1943. Pp. viii, 342.
- "British-Canadian Co-operation," *Canadian Affairs* (Overseas Series), vol. I, no. 6, July 15, 1943, pp. 1-12.
- Report of the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Provincial Development and Rehabilitation*. Two vols. Halifax, N.S.: King's Printer. 1944. Pp. 589, 598.
- "The Cabinet—Position and Personnel," *C.J.E.P.S.*, Aug., 1946.
- The Government of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1947. Revised, 1954, 1957. Pp. x, 662.
- Democratic Government in Canada*. Toronto: Copp Clark Co. Limited. 1949. Revised, 1957. Pp. 188.
- "The Federal Constitution" in George W. Brown, ed., *Canada* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; London: Cambridge University Press, 1950), pp. 281-96.
- "The Government of Canada" in *Encyclopedia Americana*.
- William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography*. I. 1874-1923. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1958. Pp. xiv, 521.