

JOHN JOHNSON, M. A. FOR MEMORY

J. W. LOGAN

IT is set forth in the minutes of a meeting of the Board of Governors of Dalhousie held on the nineteenth of October, 1863, that John Johnson of Trinity College, Dublin, is appointed to the Chair of Classics of this university. Johnson was then twenty-eight years old, and had graduated from that famous seat of learning in Ireland—a Double First in Classics and Mathematics. How he came then to this College, which was at that time being newly organized, how he thenceforward with high credit and distinction held the position of Professor of Classics for thirty-one years, and how he helped at that formative period of our history to establish and maintain a noble tradition of training and customs, is known to all old Dalhousians and especially to those who came within the influence of his teaching.

He retired from active service at the university after the Convocation of the year 1894, and Howard Murray, an old student of his, resigning the principalship of the Halifax Academy, was appointed his successor—the disciple taking over and carrying on the work of the master.

After his retirement he lived for the most part at Drummondville, Quebec, where he died on the 23rd day of December, 1914.

I have before me now a copy of the *Dalhousie Gazette* of the date Jan. 22, 1915, which contains an appropriate and warm tribute to the character and abilities of this noted scholar who had just passed from among us. This contribution is not signed, but from internal evidence I can confidently set it down as coming from the pen of Dr. MacMechan—a firm friend of his older colleague for a quarter of a century. From this article, and from other documents, and from my own memory of my old teacher and friend, I have written this short sketch of the man and his work.

I see him clearly to-day in my mind's eye as he sat at his desk in the old classroom on the east side of the Forrest Building fifty years ago. The room was seated with chairs, and had long common desks rising theatre-wise from the front to the back

of the room—an arrangement which gave his keen eye an easy control over every student, but he would have that by any arrangement. I see him hitching up his gown over his left shoulder with his right hand, like a sailor hitching up his trousers. He had lost his left arm in his early years, and it is typical of the reserve with which he hedged himself around that nobody knew how he had lost it.

On the right of his desk was a door opening into a smaller room where he met his more advanced students, and it is as we knew him there that I remember him best. On Fridays we gave him a Greek or Latin version of a piece of English prose. These he read on the next Saturday forenoon, returning them with comments on the Monday—always *then*, for care and punctuality were strong features of his character. I have many memorials of him belonging to this time, some of them of too intimate a nature for mention here. One of them is a Latin version of a piece of English prose which, as he told me, when he bade me wait behind the others for a minute or two, he had read with some degree of satisfaction. On another occasion, when I had used a word of somewhat doubtful ancestry, he said, "May such words and you be better strangers in the future". They were. Being Irish, his ready wit was sometimes biting as well as genial. To a former student, who said to him, "You didn't make a classical scholar of *me*", "No," he replied, "I never professed to work miracles."

He had no use for a showy appearance of acquaintance with Greek or Latin literature not based on a sound basis of knowledge of the accidence and syntax of these languages. At the end of a term, to a student who had a zeal not according to knowledge, and who asked him what Latin he should read during the summer vacation, he said, "What *you* had better read is your Latin Grammar".

He was noted for the extreme accuracy and justice with which he estimated the work of his students on their examination papers, dividing one man's work from another's even by the fraction of a point.

He loved to be outdoors in the intervals of his work—an untiring walker, a skilful skater, and an enthusiastic lover of the game of Rugby football.

In 1900 Dalhousie bestowed upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

In 1907, on the occasion of a visit he was making to Halifax, some of his old students gave him a little dinner at the Club.

That was the nearest he ever came to delivering a "public" address, in words never to be forgotten. I saw him once after that when he was passing through Halifax on his way to Bermuda seeking improvement in health.

In March, 1914, he was invited to lay the corner-stone of the Macdonald Memorial Library, but his failing health would not allow him to come. In a letter sent at that time he speaks of the "heart-breaking" task of having to write declining the honour.

I shall close by quoting the concluding words of the tribute paid by Dr. MacMechan to his old colleague and friend, to which I have already referred.

"Fine in intellect, fine in courage, fine in courtesy, proud, reserved, sincere, Johnson has passed away, leaving none like himself behind. He had no small share in founding the Dalhousie tradition, and in setting the Dalhousie standard. Without child of his own, Dalhousie had a son's place in his heart. Dalhousie must remember him, if all others forget."
