

DALHOUSIE FIFTY YEARS AGO

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“**A** KING arose who knew not Joseph,” is a Biblical statement that is quite up to date, for in a sense words like those belong to all time. The circumstances may change, but the idea is the same. It is still true that we are interesting to our contemporaries. How often Marcus Aurelius reminds his own soul, when talking to himself, that people are soon forgotten.

We who were at Dalhousie as long as the title of this article suggests had great teachers and excellent work was done, as the product of the university has amply shown. The late Dr. MacMechan paid a lovely tribute to the “Little College,” as he so affectionately called it.

I am going to name over some of the men who helped to make Dalhousie what she is.

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The Professor of Mathematics, Charles MacDonald, or “Charlie” as he was called by the students, was surely one of these. He was a double honour M. A. of Aberdeen, and would never cover that degree by any doctorate, so it was said. He had studied for the Presbyterian ministry, but gave his life to teaching. He used to tell us that he was “here to teach a little English too.” Those who had not Charlie as a teacher missed something. He was like his friend Dr. Allan Pollok, Principal of Pine Hill, a bit of the old world. To use a homely phrase, “They do not grow that kind now.”

Charlie was a somewhat portly man, with a round face and an accent quite his own. In those days we had two years of mathematics and stood when we “did” a proposition in geometry, or worked out an exercise in trigonometry. This however was confined to the Freshman year; we could remain seated when we did the same thing in the second year. The professor would say: “Remain seated, for this is a distinction I make between the first and second year students”. If a student should show undue levity, he would say: “If you are laughing at your own ignorance, you have an inexhaustible fund of amusement.” Or if a student seemed to wander about when dealing with a question, he would hear something like this—“You are in Egyptian darkness.” I am sure his old students will recall how, when he wore his bit of chalk to small proportions, he

would toss it over his shoulder, and how seemingly proud he was that he could use his left hand as dexterously as the right when working at the board.

He had two lectures which he gave in public—one entitled "Time" and the other, "A Trip to the Moon." He found many things on the trip to the moon, and I recall what he said about certain titles that men covet, for instance, that F. R. S. meant "fellow remarkably stupid." He had the gift of sarcasm and used it deftly:

He was a man, take him for all in all,
We shall not look upon his like again.

This was, in a sense, true of "Charlie."

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The head of the classical department was of a very different type, John Johnson by name; we called him "Johnnie." He was a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin. In those days Greek and Latin counted for one class, that is, when we paid our fees. Six dollars was the fee for each class, and after you attended a class for two sessions, you might take it for the third and fourth years free. Quite a number of the lady students of my time took Greek as well as Latin for the B. A. Degree.

"Johnnie" was a slight figure, and had only one arm. We can still see him coming into class, lifting his gown up over his shoulder with the one hand he had. The mathematics Professor agreed that you could get ample instruction in mathematics in this country, but thought that for classics you should go "across the water." Johnnie was a great foot-ball fan. He scarcely ever missed a game, and his umbrella was as ubiquitous as that of Mr. Chamberlain.

His teaching was academic with a vengeance. He did not make one see the beauties that inhere in the classics. His students were like those whom A. C. Benson describes in one of his essays—"They never get the idea that they are in the presence of literature at all. They are kept kicking their heels in the dark and cold ante-chamber of parsing and grammar, and never get a glimpse of the bright gardens within." Tennyson complained of Cambridge in a sonnet—"feeding not the mind." However, Johnson was a splendid teacher, in the way he made his students get to the roots of things. He was an exact marker, and I recall on one occasion, when reviewing the results of the Christmas examinations, he said, "I went over the papers and

I could not advance the marks more than one point." There is a legend that he met with some financial reverses in later life after he retired, and, upon appealing indirectly for some consideration, was awarded an LL.D! He and his contemporary Charlie did much to make Dalhousie what she is now.

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What shall I say about Dr. MacMechan? We called him "Archie." He certainly knew the by-ways of literature. We can see him yet sitting at his desk, and when he had something unusual to say, he would look downward to the left. We may have thought him a bit slow at first, but as we look back, we realize what we owe him. Indeed Nova Scotia is deeply in his debt, for he dug things up that oblivion would have covered over with its dust. "Archie" had a certain dignity; it was a delight to hear him read. I am sure that his old students will recall how he read the "Lucy" poems in Wordsworth. When he finished his course on Carlyle with us, he asked if we had any peculiar difficulties about *Sartur Resartus*, and if so to indicate what they were. We found out later that he was working on his splendid edition of that book.

For years he conducted a literary column in the Montreal *Standard*, called "The Dean's Window". This magazine was edited (and I believe started) by Fred Yorston, one of Dr. MacMechan's most brilliant students. His M. A. courses, designed for students who wished to continue their studies in English, were well drawn up. He had them on Tennyson, Shakespeare and Newman. We liked him better each succeeding year—a good test of a teacher.

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Walter Murray succeeded James Seth in the department of philosophy, and he met his task well. Of course we dubbed him "Walter." I took his very first lectures, and had in all four classes with him. His influence on the students was very fine. His method was conversational, and largely Socratic. Cannot we hear him yet asking at the point of a discussion, with a sort of audible smile, "Do you see the point?"

In addition to his class work he organized a philosophical society which met fortnightly, to which some nine or ten belonged. I remember several of the books discussed—Kidd's *Social Evolution*, Balfour's *Foundations of Belief*, and I think Allen's *Christian Institutions*. Papers were written and read by the members, and discussion followed.

Professor Murray took a deep interest in civic affairs and was an alderman for several years. He was a member of the kirk session of St. Mathew's Church. His work in the wider field of education is well known. The inscription on Wren's monument in St. Paul's cathedral, *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*" might well be engraved over the entrance of the University of Saskatchewan. That was really his great work, and he helped to build up the West on intellectual and moral foundations.

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Then there was "Jigger", the well-known J. Gordon MacGregor, who taught physics. His undergraduate course at Dalhousie was unique in its history—a first class in every subject from start to finish. Later he took the D. Sc. of London, a very rare degree. It was compliment, as well as a great loss, to Dalhousie, when he was offered the chair of physics held by Tait in Edinburgh University. It was then probably the best known chair of that subject in the old land. He found, when he went there, that the equipment of the laboratory was below what he expected.

MacGregor was of slight build, but a regular dynamo, grandson of the Rev. Dr. MacGregor who came to Pictou in 1786 and who left his mark on this country. I recall a lecture that he gave at the college Y.M.C.A. (and of that organization I shall speak later in this article) on Balfour's *Foundations of Belief*. He too was one of those who helped to give Dalhousie a name among scholars.

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But who could think of the college of those far-back days and forget Dr. Forrest, known as "Lord John"? He was no ordinary man; he probably knew more people between Cape North and Yarmouth than any other man in Nova Scotia. He taught history and political economy. He was above all else human, a good thing in a college President, and, for that matter, in anybody. I knew a lady student who, when she met him on a train in the middle Canadian West, impulsively called out, "O Lord John!" Then she apologized for addressing him in that way. He said, "Don't mind—I like that name." He was much more than the President of Dalhousie; the poor in Halifax used to like to hear his steps on their rickety stairs. He never went

from them without leaving them something for the body and the soul.

I remember when the first dance was mooted at Dalhousie. Some of my readers will smile when I tell them that it was voted down. Verily much water has gone under the bridge since then.

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Foot-ball was a very popular game at Dalhousie then, and the chief competitors were the Wanderers. The main theatre of action was the Wanderers' grounds. If my memory serves me right, these were some of the stars of those days—Willard Thompson, J. D. Logan, L. A. MacLean, George Shaw. There were many others who upheld the honours of the "yellow and black." W. A. Henry of the Wanderers could outrun the very wind itself. Lord John and "Johnnie" were regular attendants at those games.

I must mention another and rather remarkable feature of the college life of those days. It was the college Y. M. C. A. This was a religious meeting of students; we met every Saturday night at eight o'clock. The students took the leadership of the meeting in their turn. There was one unusual custom, that at the last meeting for the season the graduating class were to be heard from. We freshmen naturally looked up to the seniors. This happened in my first year. A tall student arose and said that he likely could say what few there could about these meetings. He said that throughout his four years at Dalhousie he had never missed a meeting, but that was the first time he had opened his mouth. The Y.M.C.A. of the college, however, had meant much to him. He was A. Ross Hill, a high-honour man in philosophy with Prof. Seth. Later he became President of a large university in the United States. He married Miss Agnes Baxter of Halifax. Both were Ph.D's—he in philosophy; she, in mathematics. He was a native of Five Islands.

There was also a Y.M.C.A. lecture course in the college organized by the college students. On one Sunday afternoon the speaker was Clarence MacKinnon, then of Middle Stewiacke. His topic was, "What about *Genesis*?" His visit to the city was usually a sort of event in student life. When he had finished that day, Dr. Forrest, who was in the chair, struck a characteristic attitude. He pushed his hands up through his hair, and indicated that the young preacher was a bit too radical for him. The Montreal dailies had an account of the meeting next day.

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These are some of the things that come back as one passes the old red brick building, now fittingly named "Forrest Building." There the arts classes were carried on, and in the wing at the north end was the Law School, from which men like Viscount Bennett graduated, and where Drs. Welldon and Russell were leading lights.

Is the motto of Glasgow, "Let Glasgow flourish"? So say we of Dalhousie, which under its energetic and capable President, surrounded as he is by a staff which is maintaining the tradition of other years, faces the future determined to make its contribution to the intellectual and cultural life of this country. Its motto is a good one—*Ora et Labora*.