

A GREAT CANADIAN: SIR JOHN BOURINOT

By MADGE MACBETH

THE name of Sir John Bourinot stands high on our list of great Canadians, and I think I can accurately state that Montaigne's cynicism. . . "One has to die to be praised". . . did not apply to him. Appreciation and honors accumulated during his too-short and intensely busy life and his influence touched not only the Canadian scene but was felt abroad, especially in the Commonwealth countries. While still living, Sir John received tributes from politicians, scientists, literateurs and leaders in all phases of intellectual endeavor. Not the least among his accolades were a C.M.G. and eight years after the first decoration, the K.C.M.G. and a knighthood. "The C.M.G.," said a report of the time, "comprises in its ranks many distinguished colonists all over the British Empire, though Mr. Bourinot is but the third Canadian to achieve this distinction on account of literary work."

Sir John chose for himself a very happy background. His parents were outstanding as were his grandparents, and no doubt we might say something similar about his more remote antecedents.

He was born in Sydney, Cape Breton, in 1837. His father, was Lt. Colonel the Hon. John Bourinot, a Huguenot of Norman descent, who had made his home in Sydney for many years and had come from the Channel Island of Jersey to settle in Nova Scotia. The family's original connection with Normandy was renewed when young John Bourinot went from Jersey to attend Caen University—a name, by the way that became very familiar to Canadians in the second World War. In Canada, he was Vice-consul for France and represented Cape Breton in the House of Assembly at Halifax. His name appears in Queen Victoria's Proclamation of Confederation, among the first men called to the Senate of Canada.

Sir John's mother was a daughter of Chief Justice Marshall, described as "a fearless advocate of temperance, an able writer on social and religious topics, a sound jurist and a gentleman much respected in the community in which he lived." An instance of his sturdy independence is shown by the fact that he once ran against his father in an election for the Legislature and defeated him at the polls! After his retirement, he spent his time lecturing on temperance, touring the British Isles and the

United States. His lectures and sermons were published and his legal text, "The Justice of the Peace," is still a standard work. Going back another generation, the Judge's father, Captain Marshall, was a British Army officer, and after the War of Independence, he was a member of that little group who forsook their homes in the newly-founded Republic and settled in Canada. They formed the nucleus of our United Empire Loyalists.

Again quoting from a periodical of the times; "Thus it will be seen that the man (Sir John) who has now achieved for himself not only Canadian fame but Continental and American renown also, came into this world under the most favorable circumstances, and with every inherited instinct that would lead him to endeavor to be great."

His early schooling was conducted in Halifax under a fine tutor who never ceased to be amazed by his young pupil's brilliance. The lad had a quickness of perception and an intellectual grasp far beyond his years, and later at Trinity University in Toronto, he seemed to have no trouble winning scholarships of various kinds. But he *did* have trouble after graduation because of a circumstance that does not apply to too many students no matter how great their intellectual attainments. . . he was so good in such a variety of subjects that he couldn't decide what profession to pursue! His first, his and his family's inclination was for the Church but eventually law and letters attracted him more strongly and in a sense, he followed both these callings, beginning his career as a parliamentary reporter—writing shorthand—in Halifax. The task was a rewarding one for Howe and Tupper were then in their prime and their speeches were models of fiery eloquence. Sir John in later life, often declared that whenever he needed inspiration, he had only to read Joseph Howe's addresses to find it. Furthermore, a friendship was established between the young reporter and these two great parliamentarians that lasted all their lives.

Many other interesting associations could be cited. For example, in making his official report of one year's proceedings, Sir John wrote: "I also beg to acknowledge the excellence of the work done by my assistant, Mr. John S. D. Thompson." This assistant reporter was to be the Prime Minister of Canada and to pass many years seated at a desk within a few feet of the table occupied by his old chief. This was after Sir John had been appointed Chief Clerk of the House of Commons.

The name of another Prime Minister is associated with Sir

John. He was long honored by the friendship of Sir John A. Macdonald, who consulted him on many occasions when constitutional and parliamentary matters needed clarification. Letters in the possession of Mr. Arthur Bourinot, Sir John's son, provide abundant evidence of this fact. His opinion on puzzling questions was also sought by the Provinces and Municipal Councils. One such written opinion given to the Legislature of Quebec Province and now lodged in the Nova Scotia Archives, entitled, "The Forms Necessary to Bring Validity to a Statute," is to be found in Beauchesne's 2nd edition on page 343 without acknowledgement of the original authorship.

In 1860, Sir John founded and edited *The Halifax Reporter*, a first-class newspaper in its day. After a few years in the journalistic field he was appointed to the Hansard Staff of the Dominion Senate, his experience in this type of work in the Nova Scotia Legislature having served a most useful purpose. Next, he became Assistant Clerk of the House of Commons and then, inevitably, rose to the position of Chief Clerk, a post he held until his death. The following description of him appeared after this latter appointment.

"The most familiar face in the Commons Chamber is that of the veteran Clerk, John George Bourinot, C.M.G., D.C.L., who occupies a seat at the end of the long baize-covered table between Government and Opposition benches. He is the only man in the House whose position is permanent, who never has to appeal to a constituency for re-election and to whom it makes no difference which party is in power.

"As he sits in his comfortable, cushioned chair—which chair is still in the House, the only piece of furniture surviving from the old House of Commons after the 1916 fire—he is a figure of more than ordinary interest to every visitor. Who can fail to remember the little bald-headed man leaning closely over the table and seemingly the busiest person in the House?" Sir John suffered from poor sight in one eye, and wore a monocle. "No matter how laughable a joke was going the rounds, he still preserved the same gravely dignified silence as if almost to frown down any attempt at levity in so sacred a place as the House of Commons!" And the article continues with this graphic bit. . . "When the Speaker was embarrassed by a question new to him, it was an interesting sight to see Sir John whisk up from his chair and with silken robes flying, speed to the Speaker's chair where, standing behind the Throne, he would give His Honor, sotto voce, the advice needed." The

article observes that this appeared strange to newcomers but frequenters of the House and Press Gallery took no notice of it for it was a familiar part of every day's routine.

Procedure varied one day when an unusually ticklish question agitated the House. Arguments were loud and long. Of course, Sir John was called upon to settle the matter, which he did. Whereupon a Member, thoroughly bored with the whole proceeding, muttered in a low voice but one that carried all over the Chamber: "O Bourinot, may you live forever!"

Sir John had a prodigious memory. In his time, when a vote was called for in the House, it was the custom for the Members to rise and deliver their wishes orally. The Clerk indicated each man by name or by his constituency. Sir John never referred to a note or a list. He identified everyone correctly and without hesitation. The Members would often get to their feet and cheer him.

The grave and dignified silence he maintained in the pursuance of duty was punctuated by periods of delightful and whimsical gaiety when in the company of friends and especially when romping with his children. He liked to take part in all the traditional celebrations; birthdays, anniversaries and holidays, not only encouraging the youngsters to go in for fun and frolic, for example on *Hallow-e'en*, but insisting that they play an active role. On Christmas morning, he got up at first light to accompany them down to the drawing room for the breathless task of emptying bulging stockings. At the re-modelled farm house which he occupied during the summer months at Kingsmere, he loved to swim and hike and fish with his family. He organized and led many a thrilling paper chase, and of course, let some small child win. And speaking of fishing, he had had plenty of practice, for in the old Bourinot home in Sydney, he could throw out his line and haul in his catch while sitting on the verandah! An old Baedeker notes; "Sydney is one of the chief resorts of the French North Atlantic squadron, and there is generally a French man-of-war in the harbor in summer. Near the water's edge is the large white Bourinot Mansion, long the home of Senator Bourinot, French Vice-consul, and containing numerous and interesting mementoes of Sydney's visits from the French Navy." The Senator entertained many a famous French naval man and at all times entertained royally. Sir John, his son, came naturally by his gift of hospitality.

He was happy driving one of his fine horses and it might be thought that he would have liked to travel. But such was

not the case. He had plenty of opportunities for transportation companies offered him many an interesting trip to far-away places in exchange for the publicity he could give. However, Sir John turned down these offers, preferring to stay at home. His flower gardens on Cooper Street and at Kingsmere gave him deep pleasure. Although he loved all plant life, pansies among flowers, were his favorites and he cultivated them tenderly.

"Literary evenings" were popular in Sir John's day and those held in his home were memorable. His guests included such men as Sir Gilbert Parker, Martin Griffin, John Reade, Duncan Campbell Scott, Archibald Lampman, and William Wilfred Campbell. On several occasions, too, Pauline Johnson joined the group. She used to come to Ottawa to give readings from her work, dressing in native Indian costume.

Most of the writers gathered in the Bourinot home read their poems, too, and once when a certain versifier indulged in an over-generous offering of his compositions, and when perhaps sensing a bit of impatience in his audience, he paused to ask—wistfully—"Shall I go on?" Sir John patted him on the head and replied in a teasing manner, "Oh, yes! I think we can take it a little while longer."

He was a great novel reader, George Eliot, Marion Crawford, Winston Churchill (the American), W. D. Howells, and Hawthorne being his favorite authors. He loved fairy tales and when not engaged in the House, delighted in reading them to his children. During the Session, he worked cruelly long hours, rarely getting home before two and three o'clock in the morning. Even then, he had time to joke and tease in his kindly un hurtful way. One of his most frequently recurring themes concerned Lady Bourinot. He used to tell her that she must write his biography, a grim command that she did not always appreciate. It is worthy of note that although she did not write his biography, most of the work of cataloguing his library was hers. Sir John's scrap books, pamphlets and magazine articles are all in the Nova Scotia Archives.

Speaking of articles, when Queen Victoria died, *Collier's Magazine* wired Sir John for an article to be ready the following day! He sat up all night to produce suitable material and telegraphed it to the magazine. . .several pages of it.

His work was in great demand and he contributed to such periodicals as *The London Times*, *Blackwood's*, *The Quarterly Review* and *The Magazine of American History*. His papers

read before The Royal Society of Canada covered subjects like the intellectual development of the Canadian people from the French regime to his day, the history of the Maritimes, our native literature and so on.

He was one of the founders of The Royal Society of Canada and its administrative, honorary secretary from the founding in 1882, until his death. He edited the Society's transactions which throughout the years expanded into nineteen large volumes. Sir John was President of the Society for the customary term of office, and a note in Robert's "History of Canadian Biography" states; "To his efforts, the Society largely owed its success." Another reference reads; "He was President of The Royal Society. He was also its Secretary, and in the latter office looked after all the details. . . Each new President was beholden to Mr. Bourinot for the smooth and easy manner in which the proceedings were carried on."

His greatest work, "unquestionably great in every sense of the word and the one by which he is known in every part of Her Majesty's Dominions" is his *Practice and Procedure of Parliament*, with a review of the origin and growth of Parliamentary institutions in Canada. This work was accepted as an authority in every dependency of the Crown, and I might add, it has been the source from which every subsequent work dealing with the subject has been drawn.

Sir John Bourinot was the recipient of many honors: receiving recognition *honoris causa* from almost all of Canada's Universities. From Queen's, LL.D., in 1887; Trinity, D.C.L., in 1889; University of New Brunswick, D.C.L., in 1890; Bishop's University, D.C.L., in 1895; Laval University, D. és L., in 1895.

From his youth, Sir John began to collect rare books. His home overflowed with them. They crowded every nook and corner. Books and pets; dogs, cats, rabbits, white mice; and he always kept a horse. He was especially interested in the early voyages of the Cabots and Columbus; in the history of Hudson's Bay and the Red River settlement. Also, the French wars, and he owned what is believed to be one of the finest copies extant of the *Atlantic Neptune*, "a book rarely met with in any but a very imperfect condition." And so intense was the collector's zeal, that he copied by hand pamphlets, documents and other material found in various Archives and which he could not obtain in any other way!

His library, one of the finest collections of Canadiana and

Americana ever assembled, was offered to the Canadian Government. Mr. Martin Griffin, then Parliamentary Librarian, approved the purchase of it. So did a Committee of the House, but the Government turned it down—one of the many examples of its short-sightedness. A contemporary wrote: "Sir Wilfred Laurier is Prime Minister. Can it be possible that politics enter into this matter?" What became of the collection? It was sold in small lots by auction in New York and it brought a sum so small as to be incredible. Many of the volumes and manuscripts were absolutely irreplaceable. The following titles give an idea of the treasures lost to us; a fine and almost complete set of Thomas Haliburton; *Relacam do Combate*, Lisbon 1775; a contemporary account of the engagement between the British fleet and the French expedition despatched to recover Acadia; a *very rare* First Edition of Benjamin Franklin's *Observations on the late and present Conduct of the French, with Regard to their Encroachments upon the British Colonies in North America*, and another exceedingly rare volume, *Rogue*, being a set of plans and Forts in America reduced from Actual Surveys, 1763. Documents of particular interest included a First Edition dealing with Cabot's discovery of America, and Humboldt's *History of the Geography of the New Continent*.

Among Sir John's published works were *Local Government in Canada*, 1887; *Manual of the Constitutional History of Canada*, 1889; *How Canada is Governed*, 1895, the 12th Edition, 1928, revised and edited by his son, Arthur S. Bourinot; *The Story of Canada*, 1897; *Canada Under British Rule*, 1900; *Lord Elgin*, 1903, etc.

Sir John was a man of quick decision. Neither in work nor in play did he dawdle in making up his mind. Once, at Kingsmere, the house caught fire and was blazing by the time he discovered it. He rushed to the worst spot and having nothing else handy, smothered the fiercest flames with a table cloth. His action was so prompt and effective that not a great deal of damage was done. He had plenty of courage, too, and could have dealt sternly with a burglar who broke into his home had he been present. Fortunately, no considerable loss was sustained in this case, either; the most valuable item stolen being his K.C.M.G. It was later discovered under a mattress in a Lower Town home!

Sir John was married three times, in 1858 to Delia, daughter of John Hawke; in 1865, to Emily Alden, daughter of Albert Pillsbury, the American Consul at Halifax and in 1889 to

Isabella, daughter of John Cameron, Toronto. It is an interesting coincidence that the name John occurs so frequently in Sir John's life.

A bronze bust of him stands in the House of Commons and a plaque to his memory was unveiled in the Sydney Post Office by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board. He died after a long illness on October 13th, 1902, and the tributes to him would fill a large scrap book. Mourning for this great man was not confined to Canada. The Prince and Princess of Wales sent a cable to Lady Bourinot expressing their sympathy, and from the farthest corners of the Commonwealth condolences poured in.

I think the following excerpt from one of our newspapers set forth the general sense of loss when it said. . . "With but a few exceptions, Sir John Bourinot might be regarded as the most eminent man of letters in Canada at the time of his death. His was no purely local fame, for long since he had come to be regarded as the authority in Canada from a constitutional standpoint. . . In fact, Sir John has been pre-eminently the exponent of Canadian Nationality."