

# GEORGE MUNRO, "THE PUBLISHER"

By A. J. CROCKETT

## FOREWORD

SEVENTY-five years ago the astounding gifts of George Munro, gifts without parallel in the whole of Canada, gave an impulse to higher education in Nova Scotia the effects of which lie beyond computation. A Pietou Scot, quiet, industrious, unostentatious, absent from his homeland, yet deeply concerned with the welfare of his "ain fowk", at an hour when the fortunes of Dalhousie were at a very low ebb, came suddenly to the rescue. The action of this one man placed her feet firmly upon the road from which she has never since looked back. Students from lowly homes were aided, academies and high schools felt the upsurge, and Munro's example inspired others both in this province and beyond. To use a favorite phrase of one of Dalhousie's beloved presidents, Dr. John Forrest, "it marked an epoch."

In 1881, Dalhousie set aside an annual holiday in his honor yet, strangely enough, even among Dalhousians little is known about Munro. This is nothing new for as early as 1896, in addressing Convocation, Professor "Charlie" MacDonald could say, "To many here he was perhaps little more than a name, distinguished only by a college holiday"; and sadly, it must be said, the situation is little different now.

Before leaving for New York, Munro was, of course, well known in Halifax, where the Free Church Academy flourished under his hand. When he resigned, his pupils presented him with "a handsome highly mounted rosewood desk" and an address which read,—

Sir, — We, the pupils of the Free Church Academy, beg leave to present to you this Desk and Gold Pencil Case, as testimonials of our affectionate esteem and regard. We experience no ordinary regret at parting with you. We feel that we have enjoyed no common privilege in having been so long under your tuition. Your kindness of manner, the assiduity and patience which you have taken in explaining to us every branch of science, shall ever be gratefully remembered by us. That success may attend you in your new sphere of duty, and that wherever Providence may call you, every blessing may be showered upon yourself and your beloved partner, is the earnest prayer of your attached pupils."

This was signed by thirty-three pupils "for themselves and the rest of the school."

"No ordinary regret", "no common privilege", these are words which express something more than mere formality, but memories are notoriously short and, with little heard of Munro through the bleak years of obscurity in New York, it is not difficult to understand how it came about that ere long Munro was little more than a name.

No biography of him has been written. No one has ventured to explore the scanty records and preserve for all time the story of Dalhousie's benefactor. It remained for the graduate of a sister university, Acadia, to make a beginning and in this "Appreciation" to give some insight into the spirit which actuated his fellow Pictonian. Dr. A. J. Crockett, as his title indicates, deals with one aspect only: he writes of George Munro, "The Publisher."

The author, at some length, describes the publishing trade as it was then carried on, the several firms with which Munro worked, and the genesis of cheap literature; and, while at first glance he would seem to have wandered from his subject, he succeeds in painting in the background from which there gradually emerges the silent, patient, persevering figure of Munro working to his ultimate aim, the providing of good, sound, wholesome literature at a price within the reach of the humblest in the land.

While Beadle published dime novels, literally by the cart load, during the Civil War, some of a high order, others not so high, but all of a respectable standard, the author makes it clear that it was not until after the war that dime novels poured in spate from the presses of other publishers, dime novels of questionable character, catering to vulgarity and trashy in the extreme. Hence, apart from the Puritan prejudice against the novel, the dime novel in the post-war years deservedly earned a bad name and, since Munro published his cheap books in this period, the impression got abroad that Munro made his money by publishing dime novels so pandering to the lower and baser elements of human nature.

The author has set himself the task of clearing Munro from this aspersion and he succeeds in showing that he had nothing whatever to do with publishing literature of this type, but that in *The Fireside Companion* and in the *Seaside Library*, which ran to some two thousand titles, he gave to the public some of the choicest literature obtainable and all of sound and wholesome character and at an unbelievably low price. He aimed at enter-

tainment, instruction and elevation, in line with his unflagging interest in education.

The author as well deals briefly with the copyright controversy and here it is well to remember that at that time no non-American author had any rights in the United States. Anyone who chose could publish the works of a foreign author, and this right was defended on a philosophic basis as had been done long before in England. The difference between Munro and other publishers was only that Munro published so many and so came to stand for the head and front of the offending, but the publishing itself was in line with the spirit and temper of the time.

Throughout, the author stresses the over-riding interest of Munro in education, finally consummated in his gifts to Dalhousie and the aid to needy students. The author's thesis is supported by one illuminating sentence of Munro's in his reply to the address given him by his pupils in 1856. After stressing "a right notion of dignity" and "a corresponding aim in your lives," he added, "No man sets out upon a journey without knowing where he is going." Undoubtedly Munro knew where he was going though he might not know how he was to get there.

A word about the magnitude of Munro's gifts. In these days when nations talk in billions, Munro's \$350,000 may seem a comparatively trifling amount, but Munro lived in the days of the blacksmith shop at every cross-road, of the grist and carding mill, of the scythe and the flail. The mechanical age had not yet come, the bicycle had not arrived, the saddle was the quickest conveyance in the mud, the electric light had still to come, the incandescent lamp appearing first in 1880.

When Munro endowed his first chair at Dalhousie the entire revenue of Nova Scotia was \$655,000 and the yearly average ran about \$500,000. In the same year, the salary of the Premier, the Provincial Secretary and Treasurer, was \$2,400. Comparing this figure with salaries varying from \$2,000 to \$2,500 for poor professors Munro's gifts appear in perspective and it is easy to understand how men gasped when his gifts were announced.

In this "Appreciation" of George Munro, "The Publisher", the author has done a service to the memory of a great and good man, a service which will be appreciated by every person interested in the cause of education.

GEORGE FARQUHAR

## I

*Early Years in Nova Scotia*

George Munro, "the Publisher", was born at Millbrook in the County of Pictou and, while much of his life was spent in the United States, he never forgot his own people and the land of his birth. He was a man who should have been well-known to all Pictonians and indeed to all Nova Scotians, but unfortunately this is not so. Even today, when the greatness of his benefactions is more generally recognized, his personality is vague and shadowy and his work and influence far from understood.

The first thirty years of his life he spent in learning the printer's trade, in securing an education, and in teaching, becoming one of the foremost teachers in the province. These were the formative years of his life and the preparation for his later spectacular career in New York. It will be profitable to examine these early years but the materials for such a study are disappointingly meagre, in fact, I have little more than the bald outline as contained in a small memorial volume printed in New York shortly after Munro's death in 1896. The facts, there given, evidently came from Munro himself or from his family and probably it is all he wished known about himself and his early life in this province for he was reticent, modest and unassuming.

He was born in 1825, one of a family of ten, four boys and six girls. This, no doubt, was the reason why, at the early age of twelve, he was apprenticed to the printer of *The Observer* in the town of Pictou. *The Observer*, one of Pictou's earliest papers, made its appearance in 1831. It was first edited by the Rev. K. J. MacKenzie, the "Kirk" minister of Pictou and a colleague of the Rev. Donald Allan Fraser. It need hardly be said that the political attitude of the paper was Conservative, opposed to the Reform Movement and to Dr. McCulloch and his educational policy for Pictou Academy. *The Observer* had a troubled existence and finally expired in 1858 when its assets were acquired by *The Colonial Standard*.

Clearly Munro had done a lot of thinking in the Pictou print shop. Though only a boy he could see that for him there was no future in the printing business in the small town and he felt his need of an education. Before two years had passed, he left the paper and went to school in the neighboring town of New Glasgow. But why New Glasgow instead of the famous\* Pictou

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\*Though Pictou Academy had no degree-granting powers, it was in fact doing the work of a college. As far back as 1824 three of its graduates sailed to Scotland and there applied to, and received permission from the University of Glasgow to stand an examination, and after examination were complimented by the Senatus of the University, which unanimously conferred the degree of M.A. on all three. Munro with very elementary schooling was in no position to enter the Academy and hence went to New Glasgow for preparation.

Academy? Probably it was because he had only elementary training and was not sufficiently advanced to take the courses offered at the Academy.

Basil Bell, "late of Edinburgh Academy" was teaching in New Glasgow. Bell was a competent and inspiring teacher and was said to be "one of the best teachers who have ever been in Nova Scotia." Under him, Munro began the study of Greek, Latin and Mathematics and pursued these studies with great zeal for the next three years. Being dependent upon his own efforts, when his means were exhausted, Munro was obliged to teach school as was the custom in that day. Where he taught he does not say, but during these years of teaching and earning and saving he did not neglect his studies spurred on by the determination to secure an education.

In 1844, at the age of nineteen, Munro entered Pictou Academy where Mr. Bell had already gone as instructor in classics. The Academy records state that Mr. Bell was appointed principal in 1846. The \*Academy by that time had lost its standing as a college and the scarlet gowns of the students no longer brightened the streets of Pictou, yet advanced studies were taken by many of the students. Here Munro was assured of competent instructors and he remained for three years. The work of these years was comparable to the work done in many of the colleges of that time and it can safely be said that there Munro secured an education equal to the average college graduate of his day. This he knew and it gave him confidence.

After graduating from the Academy in 1847, Munro returned to New Glasgow to teach in the school in which he had previously studied and taught for three years. In 1850 he went to teach in the Free Church Academy in Halifax later becoming its principal and remained there for six years studying theology in his spare time. It was hard, incessant work but he completed the courses required for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church, whose educational requirements have always been high. At the same time it would seem that he had no fixed intention of entering the ministry and, as it turned out later, the ministry was not to be his life-work.

The foregoing statement of facts about Munro's early life is brief but it is practically all that is generally known about him and his doings in this province. Beyond this short summary little has been said other than the vague persistent comment that Munro threw up his work and prospects in Nova Scotia for an

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\*The Government grant to the Academy had been discontinued, its teaching staff was reduced and its curriculum cut down.

unknown future in the city of New York, where he became famous and wealthy as the publisher of "dime novels" which the "unco guid" of that day considered to be disreputable books, the implication being that the man who published them was worse than the men who wrote them: further, the opinion was widely held that by publishing the "Seaside Library" Munro became a sort of literary pirate, who grew rich by depriving English authors of their rights by the unauthorised reprinting of their works.

Attention is therefore drawn to the man himself and to his early life that we may know what kind of man he really was and what were the motives and influences which brought the boy from the print shop in Pictou to the principalship of the Free Church Academy in Halifax, from there to publisher and, later, to become one of the greatest benefactors in the field of education in Nova Scotia. While there is much we do not know, we know enough to be convinced as to what he would do in a life of struggle and uncertainty in the obscurity of a great city. It is not unreasonable to think that he would stand fast by the principles of his early youth and manhood.

Why then did George Munro leave his work of teaching and the important position he held and go to the city of New York? Certainly he did not leave Halifax to join the money-making publishers of "dime novels". He left Halifax in 1856, four years before Beadle started to publish his "dimes". It was in 1860 that Beadle published the first of his famous series. Nor was it the lure of wealth by literary piracy which took him abroad, a subject which will be discussed in a later chapter.

Munro was thirty-one years of age and had already attained to a useful and honorable place in the life of the community. He knew his own abilities. He had a trade, that of the printer, no mean advantage. He was well read and well trained, having sat for six years under Bell, described as "a distinguished man of letters." He was an experienced and successful teacher as evidenced by his work in New Glasgow and Halifax. He was likewise a successful administrator, the Free Church Academy, under his management, showing a phenomenal growth. He had ability and character and did his work with all his heart.

From his childhood the ambition of a devoted mother influenced his studies. It was her one ambition that he should become a minister in the church of his fathers, the Presbyterian church. He taught school to finance an education which would fit him for the study of one of the professions and while teaching in Halifax completed the full theological course.

One of the requirements was that the divinity student preach

the sermon at a service of public worship and his mother, knowing this, sent him the linen "bands", made with her own hands, which he would wear in the pulpit. Shortly after the service she received them back again by post, with a kindly affectionate letter, telling her of his pulpit experience and that it had convinced him that the ministry was not his work and he must be satisfied with a more humble position. It was his first and last sermon.

Munro's erstwhile objective was now gone, the printer's ink on his fingers spoke and he packed his bags for New York.

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## II

*The Years of Obscurity in New York, 1856-1866. With the  
Appleton Firm, 1856-1862.*

Generally speaking, not much can be said of the average person who leaves his home for the great city to make a new start in life. The period between his arrival and the time when he has made his adjustments and met with success, is usually one of obscurity and struggle, and the experience of George Munro was no exception. There was a decade of obscure work; ten years of learning and uncertainty.

However obscure, this much is clear, that all his work, as far as we know it, was concerned with the printing and marketing of books. Those who knew Munro's early life in Nova Scotia and what he did in his first thirty years, could be sure that he had a definite and worthy purpose in going to the city and that he saw a future in the printing of books, particularly books for the common man and his family. His whole career fitted him for some such work as this and his move to New York must have been the result of careful thought, "Not for a handful of silver he left us".

In those early years, he was an unknown and forgotten man: while necessarily years of obscurity, they were also years of preparation. Success came slowly and by his own unaided efforts. These ten long barren years, working in subordinate positions, gave him an unrivalled experience in the book publishing trade and a practical knowledge of its intricate details. Such training enabled him in time to meet and better his competitors on their own ground.

It is said that when Munro went to New York there were three hundred publishers operating in the United States, most

of them in the cities of New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore. Philadelphia and Boston, once the leaders, had dropped to a secondary place, with New York becoming the cultural centre of the country.

Munro went to New York as naturally as Benjamin Franklin went to Philadelphia in his day. He found work with the well established and well known firm of D. Appleton & Co. Whether he just happened to find work there or definitely chose the Appleton firm is not known, but he probably considered that firm the most suitable although it may well have been his first chance or the only opening. At any rate, there he made his start, and there he remained for six years. During the remainder of the decade, 1856-1866, covering the period from his arrival in the city until he started a business of his own, he worked for three firms, Appleton's, the American News Company, and Beadle & Adams. All were concerned with the printing and the marketing of books and periodicals. In the light of his later career, it is understandable that Munro, in working for the News Company and Beadle, was working with a definite purpose. It would be unreasonable to suppose that a man with his ability and training would remain in a very subordinate place at Appleton's without some definite purpose in mind.

The Appleton firm specialised in the importing and marketing of English books and periodicals. There is some evidence that they were interested in the publications of W. & R. Chambers of Edinburgh. The Chambers firm, or rather these two men, were the pioneers in the United Kingdom in publishing cheap books and periodicals for the common people. Much could be learned from them for they were booksellers as well as publishers.

In the course of his work with the Appleton's, Munro could not fail to become aware of the position and function of the publisher in Britain and how it compared with the book publisher in America. In the book world of Britain, somewhere about the late seventeen-hundreds, the book publisher emerged as a phenomenon distinct from the printer, the bookseller and the librarian. The end of the second decade of the nineteenth century saw the publisher firmly established as an independent feature of the book trade, and from then on, or until about 1890, the position of the publisher was one of increasing prosperity and influence.

In America, the change in the position of the publisher, as distinct from the bookseller, developed more slowly. Even when Munro went to New York in 1856, the Appleton firm might be classed as booksellers, for they were selling the books of English publishers.

The marketing of new publications was likewise handled differently in England. A leading article in the Times Literary Supplement of April 5, 1941 states that

“In the eighteenth century in England new books found their public exclusively among the upper classes and the well-to-do. With the increase of would-be readers, lending libraries sprang up to spread a few copies of an expensive book over many subscribers. Then, about 1830, cheaper issues of popular current literature began to appear and publishing procedure became stabilised by which people of modest means were forced to borrow their books and did not buy until cheaper editions were available.”

The American publishers were more democratic. Like other merchandisers, they made no attempt to cater to a hierarchy. They did, however, arrange for cheap editions of their popular books but usually not as individuals. The ordinary publisher left that to one of the reprint firms, which arranged with various publishing firms to reprint their popular books in a cheap and standardised form, sometimes with paper covers. Some firms issued their reprints in “Series” or “Libraries”. These Libraries, being issued periodically, enabled the reprint publisher to obtain a cheap second class mailing rate from the Post Office.

The Appleton firm was not a reprint firm. It did not, at that time, issue its popular books in cheap, paper-covered editions, although it did this in a small way at a much later date. Its specialty was the importation and distribution of English books and periodicals. In a way, it was agent for various English publishing firms.

A significant feature of the Appleton firm is that, during the period between 1856 and 1863, it published an American Encyclopedia in sixteen volumes. Apparently the volumes were published at the rate of two a year. In this connection, it is well to bear in mind that it was in 1856 that Munro went to the Appleton's and it was not until 1862 that he left to work for the American News Company. It is reasonable to suppose that during this period Munro worked on the Encyclopedia. Here he would find full scope for his abilities, and when this work was completed, for his own good reasons, he went to work for the American News Company.

It is surely more than coincidence that during this period the firm of W. & R. Chambers was also engaged in a similar publishing project. Their famous Chambers Encyclopedia was issued in ten volumes between 1859 and 1868. Based upon an

older German work, both English and American works were alike in their general appeal to the reader of modest means. Possibly the two firms collaborated. Naturally one was predominantly American and the other British. But for all that, the editor of Harper's Magazine could say in 1871 that the Chambers Encyclopedia "when issued was the best popular encyclopedia in the English language and still has but one peer, that of Messrs. Appleton in this country".

It is not easy to set out precisely the connection between the two firms, but the Appleton firm was doing in the United States a good deal of the same type of work that the Chambers firm was doing in Britain, with the same general purpose and ideals. Even before Munro went to New York he could not help but know the kind of work the Chambers firm was doing and the aim and purpose of its publications. As an experienced teacher, he was familiar with the "Readers" used in the public schools which were published by the Chambers firm. Every school reader advertised the Chambers' books for various educational courses. Other Chambers' publications were also set out in the readers; Chambers' Edinburgh Journal, published in weekly and monthly parts, Information for the People, Papers for the People, Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Facts. It was a new idea in educational circles that useful facts could be entertaining.

The Chambers publications were also advertised in the Pictou weekly papers. In 1845, for months on end, the readers of the Eastern Chronicle, then published in Pictou, were informed that these publications could be had from James Dawson, Bookseller of Pictou. He was the father of Sir William Dawson of McGill University and was the first bookseller in the province outside of Halifax. He used the local press to advertise his books, as did also a Halifax bookseller. Pictou was a place where people bought books and read them.

In 1845 Munro was a youth of twenty near the end of his studies in Pictou. Generations of Academy students were accustomed to frequent the bookstore in the town, to browse here and there in the books on its well filled shelves and to listen to the wise and weighty words of the bookseller who knew and loved books. One may be sure that Munro would often be seen there, and there he would see the books of the Edinburgh firm prominently displayed and would be influenced by them in his thinking.

When Munro went to New York he did not lose touch with this wholesome influence. The two Chambers were the originators in Britain in providing cheap entertaining reading for the

people and their influence was for good. The character of the two men and the quality of their work was such that it brought praise from competitors and business rivals. The editor of Harper's Magazine, which for many years exercised a powerful influence on the people of the American continent, in its issue of April 1871, commenting on the death of Robert Chambers, said that "he had a high degree of literary skill combined with sagacity, prudence and a high-toned integrity which constitute the best features of a truly successful business man", and of the great prosperity of the firm, it said "The popularity of the Chambers publications was achieved without pandering to vicious or even doubtful appetites".

The general impression of the life and work of the two Chambers was aptly summed up by the Harper's editor in a single sentence, "It is not too much to say that no two men in Great Britain have done more to render useful literature popular, and so, by a pure press, to neutralise the evils of a corrupted one, than these two brothers, whose labors attest how true a success attends on any life, consecrated, without hesitation or deviation, to a single high and noble purpose."

Such was the influence left on a rival publishing firm and such was the influence on all those who were associated with them. Munro undoubtedly was so influenced, his career, in its broad general lines, being similar to theirs.

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*(This is the first of a series of articles on George Munro. - Ed.)*