

Sir Robert Borden

By SIR JOSEPH CHISHOLM*

BY the death of the Right Honourable Sir Robert Borden on June 10, 1937, Canada lost one of its greatest statesmen. While the news of his passing occasioned deep regret, not only in Canada but throughout all British countries and elsewhere, to the members of the Institute of Public Affairs it was an especial loss for he was the first president of the Institute and he took a deep interest in its purpose and success. When the Institute was formed, the question of selecting a president came up for consideration and it was thought desirable that the most prominent living Nova Scotian, who happened also to be one whose activities were so closely connected with public affairs in Canada, should be invited to accept the post. The desire of the promoters was communicated to him and in a letter dated February 6, 1937, he graciously accepted the offer.

This writer has been asked to contribute a few pages dealing with some features of Sir Robert's busy life. It was his good fortune to have been associated and to have almost daily contact with Sir Robert during the seventeen years immediately preceding his removal from Halifax and thus was given an opportunity of seeing him at close range and of becoming familiar with the strong notes of a really great man. It is not proposed to attempt anything like an extended or exhaustive sketch of his life or of the important measures in which he took part; this is rather intended to be a brief account of some of the incidents of a varied and interesting career.

Sir Robert's life may conveniently be divided into two parts,—the first being antecedent to 1896, the years of his early education, his study for admission to the bar and of his successful practice of his profession; the second embraces his public life as a Member of Parliament, the leadership of his party, his Premiership and his life after he had retired from Parliament.

He was born at Grand Pre on June 26, 1854, and as a lad attended the Horton Academy, then a good private school of which he gives some account in a notable address delivered in 1932 at Acadia University. His progress as a pupil was so rapid that he was made an assistant teacher in the school in his fifteenth year. For a few years following he continued the work of teaching.

He never attended a university but he was all his life an earnest and diligent student. Speaking of his early life as a teacher and his lack of university training he said:

Although I have been the recipient of many degrees, I never attended a university. For five years I was principally engaged in teaching, but I endeavoured during that period to give myself the equivalent. One studying with such a purpose, if endowed with a certain earnestness and persistence absorbs lessons that are never forgotten and especially an intense appreciation of the value of time. So, the handicap, *res angusta domi*, which deprived me of the university education that I so greatly desired was perhaps not without its compensations. But on the other hand, I was without the aid that comes from close and constant association with keen fellow students and the inestimable advantage of the influence and leadership that emanates from great teachers.

From Horton Academy young Borden went to Glenwood Institute in New Jersey to teach and he humourously stated that there he was immediately dignified with the title of Professor. A few years ago, the editor of a Glenwood newspaper asked Sir Robert (as he had become), for an article giving recollections of his teaching days in Glenwood, and he courteously consented by furnishing a detailed relation of the events of that part of his career. He was able to recall the names of many of his pupils, and it appeared that several of those whose training he had directed were still living and watching with pride the achievements of their old-time teacher.

Mr. Borden returned to Nova Scotia to study for the bar. There was no law school then in the Province and the student had to acquire his knowledge of law in the office of a lawyer and by private reading. He studied in the office of Weatherbe and Graham, both partners of which firm were afterwards appointed to the Bench and succeeded to the position of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia. In 1878, Mr. Borden was admitted to the bar and he practiced for a few years in Kentville as partner of the late Judge John P. Chipman. He then came to Halifax to be a member of the law firm of Graham, Tupper and Borden. Thenceforward he devoted himself assiduously to the practice of his profession and soon became a leader of the Nova Scotia bar. His fine intellect, his wide reading in law and in general literature, his robust honesty, his kindness of heart and his dignified and gracious bearing give him a commanding position in the profession and in the community. He won and securely held the confidence of a large clientele. He was on one side or another of every important case argued in the courts of his native Province and he became a familiar figure in the

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Supreme Court of Canada and before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. An excellent raconteur he could entertain his friends for hours with amusing incidents which occurred in the Courts and in intercourse with clients and witnesses. An account of the important cases in which he was counsel would expand this article to too great a length.

The year 1896 was a turning point in Mr. Borden's life. Up to then his exclusive mistress was the law. He had taken no part in politics; he was not known to have made one political speech. As a young man he was classed as a moderate Liberal, but as he afterwards disclosed he had voted in the Repeal election of 1886 with the Conservatives as he did also when Commercial Union and Unrestricted Reciprocity became a part of the policy of the Liberal party. Shortly prior to the Dominion election of 1896, a prominent Conservative Member of Parliament came to Nova Scotia to rally the Conservative forces and in conversation with one who was a Conservative candidate in another county, he pointed out that the Conservatives of Nova Scotia had been represented in the House of Commons ever since Confederation by men of outstanding ability—by Sir Charles Tupper, Joseph Howe, Sir Adams Archibald, A. W. McLellan, Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper, Thomas E. Kenny and Sir John Thompson—and it was highly desirable that the record should be maintained. He said: "We must nominate Mr. Borden as candidate in Halifax with Mr. Kenny. An able Conservative lawyer is needed on the Conservative side and Mr. Borden is the man". This organizer, however, did not himself approach Mr. Borden. One afternoon shortly after, two prominent local men, the late McCallum Grant, who succeeded the late Hon. David McKeen as Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, and the late Hector McInnes, whose recent death we lament entered the law office and asked for Mr. Borden. They were closeted with him a considerable time and then left as solemnly as they had entered. Mr. Borden paced the floor of his private office for a considerable time and then invited one of his partners into his office. "Do you know what these gentlemen have proposed to me?" he said "they are urging me to become a candidate with Mr. Kenny in the approaching election. I have never had any thought of entering upon a political career. My training has been altogether for the law and I do not want to be a politician. And they require an answer tomorrow". Continuing to pace the floor for some further time, he added, "Well, I must see what my wife thinks about it". The next day he agreed, I believe, with some reluctance, to be a candidate, but on the understanding that, if elected, he should be relieved from further service at the expiration of the next term of Parliament. This condition he stipulated later in conversations with the Conservative leader, Sir Charles Tupper.

He was returned and from 1896 to 1900 he was a tower of strength to his party in the House of Commons. He was again elected in 1900. After the election Sir Charles Tupper decided to resign the leadership of his party and the matter of electing a new leader emerged. Mr. Borden neither sought nor desired the honour.

In assuming the leadership, he stipulated that he would lead for one Parliament only and that at the end of that term another should be chosen. But circumstances over-ruled his desire. He was defeated in Halifax in 1904. In that election all the Conservative candidates in Nova Scotia were defeated. The next year, he was elected for the County of Carleton in Ontario and in 1908 he was returned for both Carleton and Halifax and resigned the former seat.

Mr. Borden and his party, reinforced by an important section of the Liberal party, strongly opposed the Taft-Fielding Reciprocity pact in 1911 and before their assaults the government of Sir Wilfred Laurier fell. A new administration was formed with Mr. Borden as Prime Minister, an office which he held continuously until July 1920, when by reason of impaired health, brought on by his strenuous work in the years of the great War, he resigned the Premiership, and retired from active political life. The magnitude of the tasks imposed upon Sir Robert during the War years, the anxieties through he lived, the urgency of each day's work, cannot be fully realized. He was in a sense a war casualty. The success which attended his unceasing efforts to achieve the great end is demonstrated by the fact that in Britain and the Dominions he was the only Prime Minister who held office continuously from the beginning to the end of the Great War. The others for one reason or another had to give up the command but he continued on the bridge directing the ship of state. He attended meetings of the British Cabinet in 1915, was a member of the Imperial War Cabinet and of the Imperial War Conference in 1917 and 1918, attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and took an important part in its deliberations. By his advocacy the position of Canada was acknowledged and representing his own Dominion, he took part in all the negotiations. He was a signatory of the Peace Treaty. He urged successfully that Canada should be represented at the League of Nations. As early as 1912, he publicly declared that in the matter of Imperial co-operation, the people of Canada proposed to have a voice in Imperial concerns and he saw this accomplished in a very few years. Mr. Lloyd-George, who is singularly thrifty of praise when he comes to speak of those with whom he was associated in the great struggle, says this of Sir Robert Borden in his War Memories, page 1743:

Canada was represented by Sir Robert Borden, who was always the quintessence

of common sense. Always calm, well-balanced, a man of co-operating temper, invariably subordinating self to the common cause, he was a sagacious and helpful counsellor, never forgetting that his first duty was to the people of the great Dominion he represented, but also realizing that they were engaged in an Imperial enterprise and that an insistent and obstructive particularism would destroy any hope of achieving success in the common task.

Among the objects of the Institute of Public Affairs are the promotion of a scientific interest in public affairs, public administration and related subjects, and the development of an enlightened public opinion. It fell to Sir Robert Borden, more than to any of his predecessors, by speeches and by legislation directed by him to promote these objects. The war period has been already referred to, when in the most trying time in the history of the Dominion, he had to grapple with problems of tremendous magnitude and to devise expedients fit for their solution. All partisan feeling had to be laid aside. The one pressing matter was the safety of the British Empire and of Canada as one of its component parts. Canada's full moral and material strength had to be mustered in the effort. There had to be a demonstration of British solidarity before the world. The formation of a Union government for the first time in the history of the Dominion was a great step in that direction. To extreme partisans in both parties it was unwelcome at the time. By Sir Robert's persistence in pursuing the larger purpose it was accomplished, and leading men of both parties took a share in administration. That was a step in public administration which at some future time may form a useful precedent in a period of stress. The war had the effect of postponing the accomplishment of some of Sir Robert's other aims in the direction of reform. It delayed but did not defeat his resolve to reform the civil service of Canada, to mention only one of his aims.

What he did in reforming the service is deserving of notice. While yet in opposition he began to stir public opinion on the necessity of reform. In his election address on August, 1907, he announced that there must be a thorough and complete reformation of the laws relating to the Civil Service; and his party became thereby committed to the policy. The reform was urged in speeches in Parliament in 1907 and 1908; and after the formation of his administration in 1911, a distinguished English

publicist was appointed to investigate the whole subject and to make a report upon it. The war interrupted the progress of the intended measures. To the Hon. A. K. Maclean, a member of the Union government was entrusted the task of preparing the required legislation. The changes were embodied in the Civil Service Act of 1918. This Act provides for a Civil Service Commission of not more than three members, for examination of the candidates for admission to the service, for their transfer and promotion and for making regulations touching the whole subject. This Act, as Sir Robert claimed, was a tremendous step in advance: indeed, Mr. Maclean characterized it as revolutionary. One welcome result of its enactment was that Members of Parliament, supporting the government of the day, are relieved to a very great extent of the troublesome necessity of dispensing public patronage.

After Sir Robert Borden had resigned the post of Prime Minister, he continued in another capacity to give the country the benefit of his experience and erudition. He served for short periods as Chancellor of Queen's University and McGill University. By his lectures on the public platform he helped to spread enlightened views on divers subjects—educational, constitutional and historical. The first collection of his speeches was made in the war period; in 1917 Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton published his war speeches under the title of *The War and The Future*. In 1922 his Marfleet lectures on Canadian Constitutional Studies, delivered in 1921 at the University of Toronto, were published in book form, and in 1927, on the invitation of the Rhodes Trustees and the authorities of Oxford University, he gave a series of six lectures at Oxford on Canada in the *Commonwealth*. These splendid lectures, published later by the Clarendon Press, should be in the hands of every Canadian student. The story of our young nation is there told with Sir Robert's accustomed precision and lucidity. The temper and style are admirable; the judgment dignified and balanced. The speeches and books referred to, together with biographical and other historical material written in the evening of his life, which, it is to be hoped, will be published in permanent form and made accessible to the public, will make the most valuable literary contribution touching public affairs, so far made by a Canadian Prime Minister.

