

# REMINISCENCES OF W. H. DRUMMOND

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**I**N gathering up the reminiscences of my friend, Dr. Drummond, I find an embarrassment of riches from which to choose. Therefore I shall select only a few incidents, such as I think strikingly characteristic, and shall quote extensively, so that Dr. Drummond may speak for himself in his own words. To the sketches by his wife and his friend Neil Munroe I am indebted for the brief outline of his biography.

It was in the late nineties that I first met him. At that time he was a little over forty years of age,—born in 1854. His birthplace was Currawn House, near the village of Mohill in County Leitrim, Ireland. The impressionable days of his early boyhood were passed amid the romantic surroundings of Tawley Manor House, the birthplace of his three brothers. He has given us a perfect pen-picture of this spot in the well known poem "Child Thoughts," written in October, 1900, to commemorate the birthday of his youngest brother Tom. Looking back over the vista of years, he said:

O Memory, take my hand to-day  
And lead me thro' the darkened bridge  
Washed by the wild Atlantic spray  
And spanning many a wind-swept ridge  
Of sorrow, grief, of love and joy,  
Of youthful hopes and manly fears,  
Oh, let me cross the bridge of years  
And see myself again a boy!

While he was still a boy his father died, and he was taken by his mother to Canada, bringing with him a memory of Ireland which gave a tinge of Celtic pensiveness to his later years.

His first years in Canada were a time of struggle. Drummond realized at an early age that his mother sorely needed his help, and insisted upon shouldering his share of the burden. The brothers were all exceedingly devoted to their mother, and it was their daily custom—continued to the end of her life—to pay her a visit each morning on their way to business.

In the initial days of his work William Drummond was a tele-

graph operator at Bord-a-Plouffe. At that time this place was a great centre of the lumber trade, and there he first came in contact with the *habitant* and the *voyageur*,—a class of men whose ways he was destined to expound, as well as to bring into sympathetic touch the French and English races in Canada. It was here that he heard from the lips of Gideon Plouffe the tragedy of the "Wreck of the *Julie Plante*," out of which he wove the famous poem, a poem of which he himself thought little, but which made its way through the length and breadth of the American continent, and which was to be the herald of his future fame. It was a legend of Lac St. Pierre:

On wan dark night on Lac St. Pierre,  
 De win' she blow, blow, blow,  
 An' de crew of de wood scow "Julie Plante"  
 Got scar't an' run below—  
 For de win' she blow lak hurricane  
 Bimeby she blow some more,  
 An' de scow bus' up on Lac St. Pierre  
 Wan arpent from de shore.

After a few years of productive work, William Drummond resumed his interrupted studies and entered the Montreal High School, whence he passed to McGill University and Bishop's Medical College, from which he graduated in 1894. In athletics his splendid physique and immense strength gained for him many honours on the university campus. In snow-shoeing, hammer-throwing, and putting the shot he had few equals, and for a time he was Canadian amateur champion in fast walking. Many years later Neil Munroe wrote of his personal appearance: "A man, it seemed to me, less physically suggestive of a poet it would be difficult to conceive . . . the last man to suspect of literary vigils and of enervating dalliance with the sisters of the sacred well; and yet I would not for the world have him otherwise. The poetry of Canada, particularly the poetry of the *voyageur*, could not in common decency be made by delicate and myopic men."

After graduation Dr. Drummond's first medical appointment was that of House Surgeon to the Western Hospital, where a large bas-relief—a really excellent portrait of him—has been placed in the entrance hall. After this followed five years of country practice at Knowlton, where the mountains, glens, woods and lakes of Brome County ministered to every aspect of his nature and gave him the reality from which to draw his pen-pictures of "The Country Doctor":

I s'pose mos' ev'ry body t'ink hees job's about de hardes'  
 From de boss man on de Gouvernement to poor man on de town  
 From de curé to de lawyer, an' de farmer to de school boy  
 An' all the de noder feller was mak' de worl' go roun.'

and also in the tale of our good friend "Doctor Fiset":

Ole Docteur Fiset of Saint Anicet,  
 Sapré tonnerre; he was leev long tam!  
 I'm sure he's got ninety year or so,  
 Beat all on de Parish 'cept Pierre Courteau,  
 An' day after day he work all de sam'.

These are pictures of his own experience, all unconsciously making a very faithful portrait of himself.

After an absence of a few years he returned to Montreal and started practice at the family residence on St. Antoine Street. In 1894 he married Miss May Harvey of Jamaica, taking up his residence with his bride in an old-fashioned house on Mountain Street which had been the home of Jefferson Davis during the years immediately following the close of the American war. It was there he wrote most of the poems which make up *The Habitant*. Then and during his subsequent career his wife was a constant inspiration. To her encouragement of his gifts the country and the world will always be indebted. These first poems were written rather for domestic entertainment than for a larger public, and it was only at the earnest solicitation of his wife and brothers that the manuscript of *The Habitant* was sent to Putnams, the New York publishers. Its merits were at once appreciated, and the book—beautifully illustrated by Frederick S. Coburn, whose drawings marvellously caught the atmosphere and spirit of the poems—was immediately successful. When the pictures for this book were brought to him, Dr. Drummond said to the artist: "Fred, you and I can never be parted." It was to Mr. Coburn's illustrations that he always ascribed much of the credit for the success of his works. Certainly neither pictures nor poems would be complete without the other.

Dr. Drummond was hailed by the late Dr. Louis Frechette as "a new pathfinder in the land of song," and the exquisite preface by this critic dispelled all fears that his fidelity to the dialect, his true portraiture and kindly word-picturing of the foibles of the *habitant* might prove unpleasant to the race and class delineated. Dr. Drummond's affection for his French compatriots and his tenderness for little children are charmingly exemplified in the poem

"Leetle Bateese." We can almost see the pride of the old gran'pere in the sturdy little fellow he was rocking to sleep:

You bad leetle boy, not moche you care  
 How busy you're kipin' your poor gran'pere  
 Tryin' to stop you ev'ry day  
 Chasin' de hen aroun' de hay—  
 W'y don't you geev' dem a chance to lay?  
 Leetle Bateese!

Of a truth the work has no fonder admirers than the *habitants* themselves, who found in it the attitude of a sympathetic friend. Of ridicule Dr. Drummond was temperamentally incapable. He gave the Anglo-Saxon Canadians a new respect for their French fellow-citizens. "I would rather cut off my right arm than speak disparagingly of the French Canadian people," he once remarked to a colleague.

On the publication of *The Habitant* Dr. Drummond's place in the highest rank of American letters was assured, but his increasing reputation in literature did not in any way affect the conscientious discharge of his professional duties. Rich and poor alike among his patients shared his consideration, and it is related of him that once when two calls came simultaneously—one from a wealthy man, and one from a poor carter of whom a fee could scarcely be expected—he chose to attend the carter first, saying "The rich can get any number of doctors, but poor Pat has only me." For several years he occupied the chair of Medical Jurisprudence at Bishop's Medical College, earning the affection and confidence of students and professors alike.

At the time of the publication of *The Habitant* Dr. Drummond was residing on St. Catherine Street, and when I first started to practise I was fortunate in securing an office and a waiting-room in his house. I therefore had the opportunity of spending many happy and instructive hours in his company, and was greatly impressed with his lovable and approachable nature. He was the soul of kindness, and his good humour was so infectious that it radiated to all about him. He was most interested and solicitous about my success, and when I gained his confidence he did everything in his power to assist me professionally. I shall never forget how he would refer his brothers George and John and Tom to me, and afterwards enquire with a twinkle in his eye whether I had found anything of a serious nature wrong with their throats. When I replied that I had not, he would advise me to charge them well for my services, as they could well afford to pay me.

Dr. Drummond was never a bookish man, but he had a fine appreciation of the literary gifts of others, and was fond of reading aloud from the works of some favourite author. The novels of Neil Munroe and the poems of Sir Henry Newbolt were most frequently his choice, and he considered "Kelly, Burke and Shea" by I. C. Clark, which appeared in the *New York Sun* shortly after the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana Harbour, to be one of the most characteristic Irish poems ever written. It was from Sir Henry Newbolt that he took the motto of his later life, "Play up, play up, and play the game," and often his deep rich voice rang out those stirring words. Into the realm of politics he did not enter, though flattering offers were made to him.

In friendship he was loyal and true as steel, with abhorrence of anything that suggested double dealing. At one time he and his brothers were offered a high price for a mine which they owned. "The Drummonds would not take unlawful gain," he said: "If it is good enough to sell, it is good enough to hold."

Among his dearest friends was the Hon. Peter White, of Marquette, Michigan, a pioneer of that northern peninsula. To him Dr. Drummond dedicated the second volume of his poems, *Johnnie Courteau*. That exhilarating story is a delightful example of the author's spontaneous gift:

Johnnie Courteau of de mountain  
 Johnnie Courteau of de hill  
 Dat was de boy can shoot de gun  
 Dat was de boy can jomp an' run  
 An' it's not very offen you ketch heem still  
 Johnnie Courteau!

In quite different vein, but equally characteristic is "The Curé of Calumetté":

Dere's no voyageur on de reever never run hees canoe d'ecorce  
 T'roo de roar an' de rush of de rapide, w'ere it jump lak a beeg  
 w'ite horse,  
 Dere's no hunter man on de prairie, never wear w'at you call  
 racquette  
 Can beat lettle Fader O'Hara, de Curé of Calumette.

Dr. Drummond's friendship for Mr. White is of course responsible for "Pierre Leblanc," of which I quote only the last verse:

An' he's leevin' wit' us now, Pierre Leblanc dit Peter White,  
 But we won't say not'ing more about hees name;  
 Let heem try it if he can, makin' out he's Yankee man,  
 But never min', for Pierre Leblanc he's good man jus' de sam'.

So if you want to know de State of Michigan,  
 Very easy to remember—in case you might forget—  
 Only two man mak' her go, 'cos ma fader tole me so,  
 An' wan is M'sieu Pierre Leblanc, de oder Père Marquette.

I well remember accepting an invitation from Dr. Drummond to join him in a hunting party at the Hon. Peter White's camp in northern Michigan. For a week we tramped three or four hours daily in search of deer; but though we were provided with an expert Indian guide, we were not fortunate enough to run across any game. However, round the campfire at night the conversation was exceedingly interesting, especially when our host told of the early days of hardship in blazing the trails through the virgin forest, and the troubles of the early settlers in overcoming the difficulties of a new country. Dr. Drummond would recite his poems and relate amusing incidents of medical students' life in the early eighties, his ready wit and humour charming the entire party.

The day before leaving camp, thinking I must be disappointed at not seeing any deer, he volunteered to act as my guide. After walking not more than five minutes we saw four deer about 450 yards away from us. Dr. Drummond, who was a born hunter, asked me to aim, but I insisted that he should fire. He did so reluctantly, and I well remember how he said at the time that he hated to do it, declaring deer were such innocent looking animals and such an ornament to the forest that he could not bear to destroy them. It was true, as his friend Neil Munroe said of him, that "though full of the lore of the hunter, he had long since lost his love of the gun." If the wild creatures claimed his protection, so also did the domestic animals, and he was particularly fond of dogs, especially Irish terriers, of which he bred some of the best in Canada.

Though he was a sportsman, and the woods and rivers had a fascination for his nature, it was his love of the wilds and his sense of kinship with the enduring men he found in the camps that attracted him to lakes and woods. The strong appeal of the great Canadian forests, their mighty mountains and hidden lakes, their rushing rivers and picturesque brooks, inspired such poems as "Little Lac Grenier." To my mind that piece is one of the rarest gems of North American literature, and in this opinion I am not alone:

Leetle Lac Grenier, she's all alone,  
 Right on de mountain top,  
 But cloud sweepin' by, will fin' tam to stop  
 No matter how quickly he want to go,  
 So he'll kiss leetle Grenier down below.

Dr. Drummond occasionally accompanied me to my father's summer home at Beaurepaire, and I well remember that one evening a severe storm came up. While the thunder was crashing and the rain falling in torrents, he suddenly felt the call of the elements to which his soul responded. "I love to be out in a storm," he said, and walked out into the night. The wind bent the trees overhead, and the rain fell on him unheeded. He only remarked that the neighboring poplar trees looked like splendid phantoms in the dark, and it was great to be in tune with the elements.

In October, 1899, the Boer War began, and nearly everyone expected an easy walk-over. Lord Wolseley said "We are going to make no mistake this time, and under-estimate the enemy. We are putting 30,000 men in the field, and will be in Pretoria by Christmas." It turned out that we had 3000 men in Pretoria by Christmas,—but as prisoners. The week of December 10th to 17th was known as "Black Week." On December 9th General Gatacre was defeated at Stormburg. On December 10th occurred the repulse of Magersfontein, when the Black Watch was cut up; on December 15th General Buller was defeated at Colenso, and Lord Roberts's son was killed trying to save the guns. This triple calamity in one week stunned a self-complacent empire. A few days after Colenso, Dr. Drummond coming downstairs late one afternoon, with the perspiration rolling down his face, hailed me: "Come in here, Bob, and see what you think of this," and he read me

Here's to you, Uncle Kruger! slainté! an' slainté galore.

You're a dacint ould man, begorra; never mind if you are a Boer. So with heart an' a half ma bouchal, we'll drink to your health to-night

For yourself an' your farmer sojers gave us a damn good fight.

My dear friend, the late Dr. J. C. Cameron, related an interesting incident that occurred one evening at the St. James's Club. Dr. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia, at that time perhaps the most prominent critic of America, in passing through the city was being entertained at the club, and Dr. Drummond had been persuaded to recite some of his poems. As he began to recite, Dr. Weir Mitchell leaned back on the sofa with a tolerant expression; he had heard local poets before. During the first verse he remained in that position, smoking, and at his ease. During the second verse he looked up, took the cigar from his mouth, and listened attentively. During the third verse he leaned forward, cigar forgotten, drinking in every word. He knew at once that he had discovered a genius, recognizing the rare gift which could depict the people and scenery of his homeland with a touch at once strong and tender, subtle and

sympathetic and true to life. Dr. Weir Mitchell became one of Dr. Drummond's warmest friends, and wrote the dedication to his last work published after his death.

During the summer of 1905, in company with his brothers he became interested in Cobalt, and undertaking the surveillance of the Drummond mine he spent most of his time in that district. The climate of northern Ontario delighted him. It was not only his interest in nuggets, but the picturesqueness of the wild region and the rough miners who flocked there that supplied a keen and constant source of enjoyment. On his last stay in Montreal he attended the annual dinner of St. Patrick's Society, and read to a charmed audience his last completed poem "We're Irish yet," which had been specially written for the occasion. I remember his reading it to me, and asking "Will this do?" Each of his poems seemed to me "the best yet," and it was fitting that this final effort should reflect so strongly the affection for his early home which never waned.

It had been Dr. Drummond's intention to spend Easter Day, 1907, in Montreal with his family. But hearing that smallpox had broken out in the camp at Cobalt he hurried away, leaving the home he was never more to enter. It was just a week later that he was stricken with cerebral hemorrhage. With others I was summoned to his bedside to render what assistance we could, but after five days of unconsciousness he passed to the Beyond.

He was cut off at the zenith of his power, when it seemed to us who knew and loved him that not only his literary talents but his broad and comprehensive mind, together with his love for his country and for mankind, were of inestimable value to Canada and to the world. Like Abou Ben Adhem, William Henry Drummond might truly have said to the visiting angel: "Write me down as one who loves his fellow-men." On the flat tombstone that marks his last resting-place on the side of Mount Royal are engraved these words from Moira O'Neill:

Youth's for an hour,  
Beauty's a flower,  
But love is the jewel that wins the world.

One may recall, too, the deep affection which Dr. Drummond felt for his wife and children. The death of a beautiful young son, "Little Billy," revealed even more clearly his tender spirit. On the child's stone, now so near his own, he had marked "He loved the leetle one best of all"—a line taken from "The Last Portage," written during the first days under the heavy shadow. Had he lived, how proud he would have been of the splendid record that

his young relatives—especially his son Barclay—made in the Great War!

A comparison has been suggested between the poetry of Dr. Drummond and that of other contemporary writers such as Bret Harte or Walt Whitman. Perhaps I am too close to my subject to get the right perspective; but it seems to me that though one may find points of resemblance and difference, Dr. Drummond's song was so original and spontaneous, so entirely an out-growth of the life and people about him as to remind one rather of Burns and his great songs of simple things. His place in literature is for the future to determine. It is to be noted that the sale of his books now increases every year.

How can we compare the song of the canary with that of the meadow lark? Or the notes of the wood thrush with those of the nightingale? One may paraphrase the words of Kipling:

Each sings the song as he feels it  
To the God of things as they are.

And it was indeed a beautiful tribute which Dr. Weir Mitchell wrote to his friend's memory:

Peace to his poet soul. Full well he knew  
To sing for those who know not how to praise  
The woodsman's life, the farmer's patient toil,  
The peaceful drama of laborious days.

He made his own the thoughts of simple men,  
And with the touch that makes the world akin,  
A welcome guest of lonely cabin homes,  
Found, too, no heart he could not enter in.

The toilworn doctor, women, children, men,  
The humble heroes of the lumber drives,  
Love, laugh, or weep along his peopled verse,  
Blithe 'mid the pathos of their meagre lives.

While thus the poet love interpreted,  
He left us pictures no one may forget—  
Courteau, Batiste, Camille mon frère and best,  
The good brave curé, he of Calumette.

With nature as with men at home, he loved  
The silent forest and the birches' flight  
Down the white peril of the rapids' rush,  
And the cold glamour of your Northern night.

Some mystery of genius haunts his page.  
Some wonder secret of the poet's spell  
Died with this master of the peasant thought.  
Peace to your Northland singer, and farewell!