

SIR ROBERT A. FALCONER

JAMES S. THOMSON*

THE Historic Sites and Monuments Board are to be congratulated on the erection of this tablet to commemorate the birthplace of Sir Robert A. Falconer. By this action, they give clear evidence that they take no narrow view of our historical past. The outward procession of events with all its diversified interest is but the setting for the inward movement of mind and spirit, from which the springs of action arise and out of which character is formed. We limit the heroic ideal too severely when it is confined to the soldier, sailor and adventurer. There are also warriors of the spiritual life who fight for the emancipation of their fellows through freedom of the mind. Sir Robert Falconer was a courageous and determined champion of the intellectual life as he worked with vision and wisdom to bring Canada into a larger liberty through higher education.

We have come to a new time in the history of our country. There is among us a new self-consciousness of nationhood. We have passed through childhood and adolescence to the status of adult life. We take our place with assurance among the nations of the world, not, we trust, because of any necessity for self-assertion in what we regard as our inherent rights; rather with feelings of trust and responsibility that from those to whom much has been given, much shall also be required. The blood of youth still courses in our veins and our eyes are on the future. Nevertheless, we are also deeply aware of the past, and of what has gone to make us. History has awakened within our national experience, but not as a dream of faded glory or as the light of days past beyond recall; rather as giving substance to the sense of heritage and providing assurance for future hopes.

The history of Canada is a record of pioneer life. Our whole land is a monument to the faith and labour of pioneer men and women. This is true not only of industry and government, but equally of education, literature and art.

On such an occasion, we are carried back over the years, and first, I ask you to come with me to the ancient University of Edinburgh some sixty-five years ago, where five young Canadians were in attendance, all from the Maritime provinces. All were possessed of singular ability and were notable in mind and character. They became warm friends then and so re-

*Dean of the Faculty of Divinity, McGill University; formerly Principal of Pine Hill Divinity Hall, Halifax, and President of the University of Saskatchewan. The address was given at the unveiling of a tablet in Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown, 25 July, 1950.

mained all their lives. All returned to Canada to find a life-work in Church and University. It was my great, good fortune to know and become intimately acquainted with each of them, nearly half a century later. Only one now survives. Four of them were sons of the manse, the fifth was the son of a country physician. This last-named was Walter C. Murray, first President of the University of Saskatchewan, to whom I succeeded in office, and whose wonderful life-work and enduring influence can only be appreciated by those who have lived in the Canadian west. Then, there was Clarence Mackinnon, my much-loved Principal at Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax, whose name and influence are held in such affectionate regard by all who were associated with him. There was Arthur Morton, who, although not in the strictest sense of the word, a Maritimer, nevertheless was of Nova Scotian descent and origin, his father being a Presbyterian missionary at Trinidad. He became the first Professor of History at the University of Saskatchewan and devoted his life to writing the history of the Canadian West, which he has left to us in a monumental volume. Lastly, there were the two Falconers, James and Robert. James was my colleague at Pine Hill Divinity Hall, and we rejoice to think that, as the sole survivor of this notable five, he is still vigorous in mind and spirit. The life and influence of Robert A. Falconer is our particular concern now.

These five young men were fortunate alike in birth and heritage. It will not be counted out of place in Prince Edward Island to mention that they were all of pure Scottish blood—and I should certainly be the last to conceal the circumstance. All were of the third generation of good pioneer stock and savoured to the full what was then a vigorous life in the Maritime provinces. 1867, the year of Sir Robert Falconer's birth, is a never-to-be forgotten date in Canadian history. These were stirring times when political debate was the staple diet of every home in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and, not least, Prince Edward Island. These lads lived through all this with open ears and receptive minds. They must have felt the stimulus of the outward events that provided a lively background for the imagination and dreams of youth. A new nation was in process of birth, daughter of a mighty mother, destined within their life-time to become a name and a power in all the earth.

Modern psychology confirms ancient wisdom concerning the permanent influence of the earliest years. The place of our birth, even more, the kind of home into which we come, our first

social environment and spiritual climate all leave an indelible impression on the course of life. In all of these, Robert Falconer was a fortunate child. Short-sighted minds might see little of good fortune in having the Prince Edward Island of 1867 as a place of birth and early boyhood, but, in such an estimate, they would betray nothing but a lack of understanding. It was still a pioneer land, but already rich in heritage and tradition. Life was not primitive, but it was elemental. People lived close to the soil and to the sea, where they were inevitably exposed to those forces of nature on which we all must depend ultimately for food, sustenance and communication. There was no intervening veil of artificiality that so isolates modern life from what is simple and sincere. Above all, there were the powerful and persistent influences of a deeply religious faith. The home, the church and the school were the chief institutions of common life and all these were rich for young Robert Falconer.

Outward environment alone cannot account for the production of worthy character and achievement. Circumstances must meet with an adequate response in native ability and intellectual promise, and in this respect young Falconer was equally fortunate. Encouraged and stimulated by the influence of home, he set his mind to the life of scholarship and the vocation of the ministry. He learned

"To scorn delights and live laborious days"

until we find him, a young man, at the golden age of 18 years, an undergraduate in the University of Edinburgh.

There comes a time in the life of every lad of destiny when he needs nothing so much as the exposure of his mind to the stimulus of an exciting intellectual environment, which is broad and liberating in its character. He ought to savour the full rich life of the mental world, presented at once in terms of contemporary conflict and of universal reference. The Scottish universities of the 1880's provided just such an ideal education. There, too, he encountered the stir of controversy, not the birth-pangs of new political creation, but the heat, fire, and sometimes also the smoke of new learning. Two closely-related revolutions were in full course—in science and in industry. The heady wine of the scientific method was intoxicating the mind of professor and student. Chiefly, the momentous Darwinian hypothesis of evolution was provoking debate about the nature and origin of man. The studies of geology and biology had extended the whole panorama of history and were raising momentous

questions about the Divine creation of the world. At the time, scientific methods of literary and historical criticism being applied to the sacred scriptures, and the ancient authority of the Bible was being brought under scrutiny of new scholarship. Debate was high; controversy was acute—and the universities were in the centre of the scene. It required a steady mind and a secure faith to swim in such turbulent waters—accept the truth of the new without being carried away by currents of mere novelty. Robert Falconer had the mind and temperament for just such a venture. He abandoned himself to the study of the classics and he became a distinguished scholar in that realm of knowledge. But there was nothing narrow about the Scottish education of these days. He was mercifully prevented from becoming only a specialist in one branch of learning. On his way to a degree, the undergraduate was compelled to pass through the entire range of liberal learning and Falconer took it all in his magnificent stride. He had a steady mind with an eye for central and essential truth. He imbibed the new learning with enthusiasm in its fullest measure, accepting and digesting it without being diverted to an extravagant enthusiasm for its more transient aspects.

It is difficult for us in our time to realize that much of the driving energy for this new learning, particularly in literary and historical criticism had its centre in Germany. In the declining decades of last century, the vigour of German scholarship, alike in its strength and its weakness was the most powerful intellectual force in the world. Thus it was inevitable that five young men should find themselves in Germany, particularly at Berlin, where Harnack, accounted by many the mightiest scholar in all Europe, was at the height of his powers. It is fortunate indeed for Canada that this new learning was interpreted for us by men such as Robert Falconer and his friends. These same intellectual influences came directly across the Atlantic to swamp the colleges and the universities of the United States without the tempering influences of an older tradition and a stabler intellectual life. This subtle, little recognized but nevertheless real difference between the universities of the United States and Canada owes much to the Maritime provinces and the intellectual leadership therein nurtured and also to Scotland, which provided such a congenial environment for the mind of the young Canadian scholar.

Lamentation is often raised concerning the Canadian export of brains—especially from the Maritime provinces. Robert

Fal
only
year
fess
The
the
anc
inte
con
Int
self
As
ma
Tes
hou

Ro
we
tha
var
anc
Alr
vis
pub
cer
in
pro
of
cat
un
lag
as
of
fac
hi
ma
so
w
or
it
th

soner and his contemporaries all elected to come home not to Canada but to their own native shores. For fifteen years at Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax, as lecturer, professor and finally as Principal, he remained from 1892 to 1907. Here he confirmed the Latin poet's observation that crossing the ocean brings no change to the mind, but only to the appearance of the skies. At Dalhousie University there was the same intellectual ferment, accompanied by the same debates and controversies that had been at work in Edinburgh and Berlin. In these discussions the young Divinity Professor threw himself with enthusiasm, courage and, above all, enlightening effect. He lectured to student and popular audiences, he had a remarkably steady effect. He was a great teacher, the New Testament's ideal of a scribe who brings forth from his treasure things at once new and old.

As we move to the wider Canadian scene, in which Sir Robert was to play his major role, it should be noted that here recapitulated the general history of western civilization in that religion was the originating force for most educational advance. The Church was the mother of college and university, and only at a later stage did the State enter upon the scene. Already throughout most of the Canadian provinces the provision of the rudiments of education for all was accepted as a public responsibility—but what of higher education? With certain notable exceptions, the Church had been mainly active in the institution of colleges and universities, for the most part, providing instruction in the liberal arts. But the growing needs of a young country in process of rapid expansion demanded education in science and training for the professions. Moreover, unless Canada was to remain in a position of intellectual tutelage, emancipation from cultural colonialism was as necessary as political self-government. There were, therefore, the claims of post-graduate education to be met. The Churches were faced with a dilemma. They were eager to retain a place in the higher education of youth, and yet the new and insistent demands were beyond their capacity. Far fields were green and some of them were not so very far distant across the border, where opportunities alike for advanced training and subsequent employment were attracting ambitious Canadian youths. Thus, it came about that in the rapidly expanding centre of Toronto, there arose the project of an academic confederation, designed to conserve the interests of church and State in higher education. This new type of university was not to be merely an in-

stitution of compromise; rather a creative agency for learning. A constitution was prepared, but, above all, a courageous and strong leader was required to guide this ambitious project. Once more, the Maritime provinces, what appears to be part of their historic destiny by providing a man who was matched for the task. And so, as they went from Queen's to find Grant and Gordon for Queen's, and later to find Murray for Saskatchewan, they came down to Nova Scotia to summon Falconer for the new University of Toronto. Thus, at the age of 40, he began his supreme work.

The task to which Falconer set his hand was neither easy nor light. He had to reconcile not only the claims of church and state—but equally the rival interests of churches. Necessity was laid on him to embody the apostolic character of bearing all things to all men. There were Roman Catholics, two varieties of Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists to be brought within one academic family—all eager to maintain their rights and established traditions. But with an urbanity of mind and manner, a wisdom of courage and insight, and a patience born of faith, hope and charity, he contrived to become much more than a master of compromise in academic politics. On the contrary, he himself became the personal embodiment of the University, maintaining goodwill, inspiring co-operation, defending the freedom of the institution against political intrusion, until he won the respect, confidence and, ultimately, something akin to veneration from all who came under his influence. Thus with the growing demands of his task, he grew into an academic statesman, under whose hand the university expanded to meet the changing needs of rapidly changing times.

During these early years of the century, Canada was in rapid expansion—particularly in the West. A new era of pioneer settlement had begun. New provinces were being created and a fresh young civilization was emerging, not with the slow movement of former years, rather with a swift urgency that demanded courageous and far-sighted action. The thoughts of men in the young and vigorous west were not concentrated solely on wheat and lumber and minerals. They were stirred by visions of settled and civilized life. Thus the prairie provinces and British Columbia created new universities—a federation in Manitoba fostered by the state, and in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia institutions wholly state-governed and maintained. This was something almost complete.

novel in Canadian life, with many problems of policy and government to be settled. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of what had already been worked out in the University of Toronto. All the new young institutions turned there for a model of what could be accomplished in blending together the essential elements of academic freedom and public support, without partisan political control. Everywhere, the President of the University of Toronto was adviser, guide and friend. It is not too much to claim that, thus, he became the architect of the new academic life of younger Canada, the pioneer of university expansion in this present century.

When it was my privilege to become acquainted with Sir Robert Falconer, he was in the declining years of his physical strength. After thirty years of strenuous life, he had laid down his great office in Toronto and had suffered a severe and crippling illness. But he was still a brave, upstanding figure, impressive without being overwhelming, masterful in mind without being dictatorial in manner, penetrating in his insights but kindly in his judgments. I can recall the cheerful voice, rich with cordiality, calling down from his study when, as he said with a blythe condescension to his infirmities, his doctor permitted him only one journey up and down stairs in the day, and so he could no longer greet visitors at the door. Then, to pass into his study, where the interests of his mind found outward expression in the books and papers that lay on shelf and table, was also to enter upon the experience of sharing the hospitality of a rich and cultivated mind at leisure from the more exacting pre-occupation of a busy life, but still eager and alert—reading, writing, comparing the new with the old, and weighing the merits of both with the gathered wisdom of the years.

My last memory is a gracious one. It was a mellow evening in early summer when he had gathered a few friends to dinner—to talk and exchange views. The wide, full stream of learning till provided the waters on which the ship of his mind was making its voyage, and the hand of the helmsman was sure, firm and steady. He was evidently abreast of all that was coming out from the publishers, but not with the excited interest of a mind caught by the latest opinion, rather with the mature judgment of a man who had seen much, had tasted deeply of life and found it very good. It seemed to me then, as it appears to me still, that in the whole record of his life, his mingling of the scholar with the statesman, the intellectual with the practical interests

of his career, he was the very exemplar of what genuine
ness ought to be.

It is well that the name of Sir Robert A. Falconer should
be kept alive in this city of his birth. We may well recall
the words of Joseph Howe—words that surely provide a motto
for the work of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board:

A wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its monu-
ments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs
great public structures and fosters pride and love of country
by perpetual reference to the sacrifices and glories of the past.