
CHAPTER XXIV

W. LYON MACKENZIE AND BISHOP STRACHAN

*On my attempt though Providence did frown,
His oppressed people God at length shall own ;
Another hand, with more successful speed,
Shall raise the remnant, bruise the serpent's head.
Though my head fall, that is no tragic story,
Since, going hence, I enter endless glory.*

THE above lines constituted an epitaph written by the ill-fated Earl of Argyll on the evening before his execution.

It is a pathetic prophecy that the cause he died for would not fail, though he and others were to suffer seemingly in vain. This distinguished nobleman, who lost his life in the cause of the British Revolution of 1688, was the son of an equally ill-fated father, the great Marquess of Argyll, who also died for the same cause some years earlier in the same century. They were great Scotsmen, who, while of ancient lineage and power next to that of Royalty, were in sympathy and ideal and in close touch with the faith and ideals of the great body of the Scottish people,

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who had organised themselves for the triumph of their principles under the bonds of the "Solemn League and Covenant." Strange to say, Argyll's distinguished grandson, the famous Duke, lived to see all of the ideals of constitutional reform, for which the grandfather suffered, carried out.

Scotland has many martyrs of this nature, men who sacrificed all for the cause of the stern principles of right and freedom as seen and felt by the Scottish soul and mind. It seems to be a necessary development of a portion of her history that Scotland should produce a certain number of men who were doomed to suffer, by a sort of vicarious quality of spirit, for the failure of the great mass of the community to live up to its best ideals.

Of a similar nature to those illustrious martyrs of the seventeenth century, though keyed in spirit, by necessity and environment, to the ideals and requirements of a later date, was the personality of that most noted and most resolute, with one single exception, of Scottish Canadians of his period, William Lyon Mackenzie.

While he stood alone in his intense, almost fierce, antagonism to all that was not on the side of his ideals as a reformer, Mackenzie did not stand alone in the community. There were other men of commanding personality, and chief of these, and his leading rivals, if they might be so called, were two other strong Scotsmen, Archdeacon Strachan and Col. (afterwards Sir Allan) MacNab.

It is but additional evidence of the general

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dominance of the Scotsman in all periods of Canadian history that the three leading spirits on both sides of the struggle that largely occupied the period of the first forty years of the nineteenth century in Upper Canada were Scotsmen.

The third of this trio, MacNab, is dealt with in another place in this work. He was a strong and practical character, but without the peculiar ideals which controlled, though in a different way, the other two men. For this reason he was their inferior. But in spite of this he was a man to be reckoned with, and performed work for the young colony that could have been achieved by no other man. I have no patience with those mere party, or sectional, writers who see no good in the ideals and deeds of their party opponents. The one grave weakness of the Scottish and English peoples has ever been the curse of extreme party bigotry. Under this defect in our social conditions, where men are remembered only as leaders of rival factions, history becomes distorted and lacking in that frank, generous sincerity which it should have in the best interests of the highest good of the community. Because of this Sir Allan MacNab stands merely for the old pre-Confederation Toryism of the province, as represented by the much exaggerated ills of the family compact in the pages of many writers. The whole history of that period has yet to be properly written. The large amount of bitter party journalism upon the subject is neither history nor even healthy fiction. When we do produce

an unbiassed account of that period all of these men, on both sides, will stand higher in the opinions of honest readers and students of our history. There were then, as now, no angels on either side. There were then, as there are, perhaps, a few now, men beating the wind of an indifferent public opinion for the redress of certain widely acknowledged grievances. There were then, as there are to an even greater extent to-day, people in high places who were intermarried and formed a network of official power as office-holders and controllers of wealth in the community. Strange to say, the persons who have in the last decade professed the greatest public adhesion to the struggle and principles of Mackenzie have been among the worst sinners in this family compact institution as we have it to-day.

There is no doubt, as John Morley (now Lord Morley) had to admit lately, that often what seems a broad and shining roadway may end in a mere cul-de-sac. He used this expression in voicing his disappointment at the failure of his fond ideal, the American Republic. But it might be put in other language in suggesting that it is easier to hurl imprecations and preach platitudes regarding equality and purity in opposition than it is to practise all these virtues when a party gets into power. It is a strange reflection on our modern so-called representative government and now exceedingly doubtful democracy, that the Reformers always seem to be the office-seekers and the wicked Tories and tyrants the office-holders. This,

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in Canada, applies equally to both parties, and the finest place to breed political cynics is the Gallery of the House of Commons, where the fervent reformers of to-day or yesterday, and the smug, smiling defenders of graft on the Treasury benches, seem to exchange their characters by merely crossing the House after an election. There is no doubt that the thinking people of the British race are more than sick of the really dangerous insincerity of the average political party, which is to-day quite ready to even smash all existing stability of government for the sake of achieving the reins of power in any country.

In spite of this very patent truth, even to-day there are fine men on both sides of the House, though the period does not seem to be kindly to the development of true statesmen. Even on the Treasury benches there are, and always have been, strong and able men, doing, as heads of departments, faithful and good work for the country. Also on the Opposition side there are, and always have been, clean, earnest men striving to better our conditions. But on both sides it is the man who is clean, and not the party. In fact, it is more. It is the decent man in spite of his party. If there is corruption on the Treasury benches, it is because of party. If there is hypocrisy and false clamour on the part of the Opposition, it is because the exigencies of the party success have supplanted the true weal of the whole community.

Likewise was it in the days of Mackenzie,

Strachan, and MacNab. There was no such thing as a perfect phalanx for good or evil on either side. There was much to be deplored on the side of the Tories. But it was the system, as it is to-day, that was largely to blame. On the whole, bad as matters were, there was then in existence a class of men who did stand firmly for certain principles (would that we had such men to-day !), even though they may have sometimes exaggerated their importance. Strachan was a stern, uncompromising Churchman. He believed in the State Church as the necessary complement to the truly moral, truly stable government. He regarded it as necessary that the Church should have its place in the national life, and that the clergyman, as the representative of the Church, had his duty to perform in public life as well as the lawyer. He believed that the University and all education should be in close touch with the National Church. He realised that the Church of England was the National State Church of England, and that as such she should control the spirit of the University and college. He further held that the Church, to keep up her dignity, must be supported by the State, as it is in England. Believing all this, he, as the chief representative of the Church in Upper Canada, made a strong fight to maintain for her those rights and that status that she held under the Constitution.

That he believed and firmly held all this was certainly no crime on his part. On the other hand, it was, after all, but his common duty to

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his Church and his office. He should not be condemned for holding those views, any more than Bishop Macdonell should be condemned for having fought for and secured Catholic privileges along the same lines. He should be judged, rather, by his adherence or lack of adherence to his ideals and his methods of securing them. On the other hand, Lyon Mackenzie should not be condemned for being what he was, a fierce and uncompromising reformer. Strachan was accused of being over "canny" and shrewd, and of being well aware of the value of this world's goods and power. But with this went a strong sense of proper authority and sound rule, a reverence for loyalty to the Sovereign and Church, which had a great effect for good upon many people who absorbed this ideal and needed it to render them good citizens; and it would be better if we had some of this influence in Canada at the present hour. The good Bishop was a firm administrator and a man of sound common sense, a safe man to control society and keep it in a good conservative reverence and respect for law and order. Then, he also could be fiery on occasion, and brave and militant and forgetful of self, as was shown in his daring treatment of the victorious American generals when they captured and sacked York in April, 1813. It was almost heroic, the uncompromising attitude of this stern little Scotch divine, when he rebuked Chauncey, the American leader, and his officers for their ill-treatment of the people of Toronto, and de-

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manded, and secured it too, proper terms for the community.

His noted opponent, Mackenzie, has been accused of weaknesses the very opposite to those ascribed to Strachan. He, on the other hand, has been accused of being both impractical and impossible as a politician and statesman, because he was always ready to uphold principles, whether they were popular or not. It was said that he would not wait for the proper time to demand a reform; but so soon as he realised a wrong he made it his own at once. It can readily be understood that from the standpoint of the keen, practical party politician, who weighed all the chances of success or defeat for his faction, that such a man with such a temperament would be regarded as dangerous, if not impossible.

This kind of man,
This vague, high dreamer with his skyward gaze;
He runs too wide, not broken to the traces,
Where ploughs the furrow of this practical world.
He mocks your hopes, your schemes; you cannot use him
In short, not biddable to the common mind,
He smacks of lunacy.

Such, indeed, is the summing up of such a character by the modern cynic type of man. But for those who—

Believe in God and His eternal laws,
Founded on justice, truth and liberty,

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who believe that—

God made the dome-walls of this splendid world,
Carpet it as you may,

there is a larger, truer appreciation of Mackenzie's personality. To such persons, reading, without party or other bias, the tragedy of this man's whole history (for it was a tragedy), William Lyon Mackenzie's life rises above the mere personal struggle of one man for place or existence. It becomes rather the long-drawn out protest of a sincere soul against the whole miserable, second-best and cynic compromise of our age and conditions. Whether in the Commons in fierce declamation, or deserted and alone as he fled from the pitiable battle of Montgomery's Farm, or in the prison-cell at Albany, Mackenzie was always separated by an insuperable wall from his fellow-men; and for the one simple reason that he was a fierce, burning consciousness far in advance of his own time. He was always to the end the same personality, a lonely voice crying in the wilderness of an unheeding and material world.

I do not justify the Rebellion. No sane man does, or could. Mackenzie himself did not. There is no doubt that, as he himself said afterwards, no one more bitterly regretted it than he did. It is only ignorance, class jealousy, and fierce faction hatred, bent on destruction at any cost, that would pretend to glorify any uprising against law and order. It is always a calamity even for the gravest reasons. Mackenzie did not make the Rebellion. It was only a pitiable episode in

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the whole miserable condition of his day and time, in which he was mixed up. It is true he had his weakness, as all men have ; and his was that he allowed himself, through his bitterness of spirit, which at times verged on madness, to be made use of by vile cowardly plotters who had neither the soul nor the sincerity to openly avow what they secretly desired.

But when all is considered, this part of his career has been made too much of in Mackenzie's life. Those who would immortalise him as the head of a poor abortive rebellion, which never at any time had the slightest chance of success, are his worst enemies. And while they pretend to represent him are really alien from the man's own true spirit and ideals at his best. It will not be until the world forgets his part in the Rebellion that it will be able to see the true Mackenzie at his highest and finest. When this cloak of mere party mist is withdrawn, and the clamour of party invective is quelled, it will be found that he was in many respects a great man, a great Highlander, a seer, a holder of remarkable ideals, and a true benefactor of his kind. It was to a great extent because of this that he was considered to be a failure in his own day. He was, in a sense, always in the clouds ; alone, withdrawn. Then, added to an exceedingly wide and clear vision as to how things should be, there was in his nature, as a natural result, a continual irritation at the imperfection of the life and conditions about him. He saw it continually in others and himself. This eternal weakness and the

inability to cure or check it, immediately, bred in his sensitive nature a whole life's unhappiness. He had a certain kinship to Carlyle, the true poet's irritability at the eternal compromise with evil and imperfection and what is called the "mammon of unrighteousness." When this is fully realised by the student of his life, Mackenzie will be recognised as more than the mere idol of a few narrow present-day Upper Canadian zealots of a cause that they do not even pretend to live up to. He will then be found to be one with the whole Scottish race, as a representative of one of its most characteristic types, the martyr reformer. It is remarkable to see here the similarity to the case of the Earl of Argyll and his grandson, where the tragic personality of Mackenzie is justified and complemented in the personality of his already distinguished grandson, the Hon. W. Lyon Mackenzie King, whose career of conciliation is dealt with in another part of this volume.

But the world needs different types of men to sustain it, or else civilisation would go to pieces. When Darwin was studying marine biology on board ship, and on one occasion so forgetful of mundane affairs that he was not aware for some time that he had been standing in a tub of water, he was engaged in a great work for mankind. But meanwhile some one was necessarily in command of the ship and watchful that all was safe while the great scientist carried on his researches.

And so it was in Upper Canada; while Mackenzie was voicing ideals of government, and suggesting reforms which have all been secured

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since (and which, sad to say, are, many of them, now obsolete), men like Strachan and MacNab were needed at the helm of State. For, imperfect as things may be, the world must be carried on from day to day. And, seer as he was, Mackenzie could not voice and improve all things. There was a side to life, and a very necessary side, to which he was, by reason of his very intense temperament, perfectly oblivious, but to which John Strachan was very much alive, and to which he ministered in no small degree.

To Strachan Canada owes a debt, as regards her culture and education, that she can never repay. He also stood for a much-needed conservatism, which was the strong anchor of British connection, and a very necessary one in a small fringe of provinces bordering upon a large, aggressive, and alien republic. He was, like Mackenzie, small in stature; but, like him, possessed a strong, dominant, and fiery spirit. Strachan was also somewhat of a poet. He wrote some very good verses and was a fine classical scholar. But his strong characteristic was his plain, common-sense, conservative power of controlling a community, and his patience and determination in carrying his point.

In some things those two remarkable little Scotsmen were much alike. In an ideal state of society they might have worked together, and probably in the end did respect each other's character, while by temperament antagonistic to what each considered the other's ideals. After all, they had much in common, and might in time have dis-

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covered that their objects were identical. But they might each be said to represent two strong essentials to the success of civilisation, namely, individualism and the community ideal. Mackenzie was in all ways a fervent apostle of the rights of the individual; while Strachan stood rather for what he understood to be the good of the whole community. Both are in the end synonymous terms when taken rightly, as one depends on the other. But, herein, we have not done enough justice to men of the type of Strachan. He, like Mackenzie, though in a calmer temperament, was equally uncompromising. In this respect also there was something in common between the two men. Strachan had virtually founded King's College, now Toronto University; and then he lived to see it gradually lost to the Church and all his greatest life-work seemingly in vain. In his old age he had to start out anew after a hopeless struggle, and found another Church college, that of Trinity. He also lived to see many of his cherished ideals shattered and destroyed. He has been wrongfully regarded by many as narrow, hard, and domineering. But he spent his whole life in the work of his Church, and was a great missionary of the Anglican Communion in Upper Canada. Strachan's finest work for Canada, however, was in the direction of education; and when our true history is written, he will be remembered as our greatest pioneer in this branch of our civilisation.

Mackenzie also did much for the community. He was, in his ideas and ideals, far in advance

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of his time. He also was deeply interested in culture and education. He had many practical ideas regarding the progress of the country. In 1828 he suggested a scheme for the confederation of British North America, which was very much what was carried out afterwards. He, too, appreciated many conservative principles. He was a firm believer in the British Constitution. He had really in his nature and heredity many of the Old World ideals of good stable government and authority. It would surprise some of his superficial admirers, who have read more about him than is true, to find in his writings such strong, sane, conservative, old-fashioned British conceptions of many political and other matters. Finally, to close this comparison of the characters of Mackenzie and Strachan, it might be said that, as regards the community, Mackenzie was most deeply interested in its improvement, and Strachan in its stability. In this both were right, though both were perhaps partial in their several ideals. Realising this, we find that both were needed; that each performed a great work in his steadfast, earnest, lifelong devotion to an ideal as each saw it. What more can any man do than this?

To both of these men Canada owes much; and all Canadians of Scottish extraction should feel a glow of pride that the two most outstanding personalities of Old Upper Canada, the two men who really acted for the good of the community, were Scotsmen of such fine fibre and high ideals of citizenship as are represented in William Lyon Mackenzie and John Strachan.