

The First President of the C.A.A. -- John Murray Gibbon

(By D. A. Chalmers)

Ending, in *The Canadian Magazine* a few years ago, an informative and fine-spirited review of "A British Novelist in Canada" and his works, Mr. Bernard K. Sandwell, now editor of *The Canadian Bookman*, wrote this sentence:

"Perhaps it will be necessary to prohibit him from leaving the country for the next two or three years, in order to compel him to devote his talents to the work that we really want him to do, namely, to help in putting Canada on the map of literature."

We do not know whether the Canadian Authors' Association was anything of a dream or vision in 1918—though it may have existed in the imagination of Mr. Sandwell or Mr. Gibbon then—but probably no anticipation regarding a Canadian writer has been, or could be, more fully justified than that statement by Mr. Sandwell. For, from all reports from the local British Columbia branch, no less than from the national organization, it seems to be unquestionable that Mr. John Murray Gibbon has been the moving and directing force in connection with the formation of this Association, and the onerous work it has been engaged in affecting amendments to the Canadian Copyright Act.

The latter fact might indeed have been gathered, or inferred, but only incidentally, from the quietly-delivered luminous address ("not for publication") which Mr. Gibbon gave to the British Columbia branch this month, at the dinner arranged in his honor in Glencoe Lodge. "Only incidentally," for this man, well-grounded in learning, widely travelled, supervising work that surveys continents or the world at large, outstandingly able in expression in writing or speech, is typically British; and—notwithstanding our numerous and increasing club and other affiliations with our kindred in the southern portion of this continent—we hope he may be said to be also typically Canadian in his indisposition to magnify, or overuse the first personal pronoun.

It seems that diplomacy as well as brains had to be exercised in dealing with these trained politicians, and the experience of men and affairs common to the "Committee" and the president was all needed; and we are glad to gather that there is reason to believe that the work has not been in vain. The case for revision and amendment of the Canadian Copyright Act is certainly a strong one, which should have the unqualified support of the fair-minded men of all political parties and of none.

It was the good fortune of the editor of the *British Columbia Monthly* to meet Mr. Gibbon in Montreal in the fall of 1913—shortly after the latter entered upon his work at the C. P. R., and then to receive from him a copy of his first book, "Scots in Canada." Readers generally, who are interested in the development of our Canadian heritage, and members of Vancouver Scottish Society particularly, may be pleased to know that, because of the lasting value of the subject of that book, we recently raised the question of reproducing it in the *British Columbia Monthly*, and hope to be able to arrange to make it this Magazine's first serial story.

At the function in Vancouver this month, Mr. Gibbon remarked that he supposed he had been made president "because he was Scotch"; but nevertheless, because of his work as a Canadian literary man, and as the first presiding officer of that important organization, the Canadian Authors' Association, we take pleasure in putting on record in this representative literary "Magazine of the Canadian West" the following biographical notes, selected from Mr. Sandwell's article of 1918, already mentioned:—

"I am inclined to regard 'Scots in Canada,' 'Hearts and Faces,' and 'Drums Afar' as the three first volumes of 'Gibbon's British Empire.' Their author is only forty-three, and

has ample time to give us the fifteen or twenty additional volumes which would be needed to furnish a complete picture of the life of that vast entity at the present time, and the result, while not quite so voluminous as 'Gibbon's Roman Empire,' will be fully as instructive and have a great many more readers.

"Nobody is better qualified to give us a general view of the great Anglo-Celtic community which speaks the English language and pursues British ideals of communal and individual development. Look at the career of the author of 'Drums Afar' up to the present stage, and note its effect upon his successive writings. John Murray Gibbon was born in Ceylon, where the breezes are still spicy, but man is no longer considered so vile as he was in the days of Bishop Heber, a century ago. From earliest youth, distance was nothing to him; halfway round the world was merely halfway home again; the stupendous spread of the British Empire became as familiar to him as the features of his own country are to the average English novelist, or those of his own state to the average writer of American fiction. Bear in mind, though, that he was not a mere traveller, noting the externals of each country's life with a curious eye, and passing out from it as much a stranger as he came in. He found work to do wherever he sojourned, and it was work that threw him into the main current of life, never into its eddies and backwaters. He was educated at Aberdeen, both at school and for three years at the University; and, thus protected by a substantial Aberdonian integument from the unduly assimilative powers of an English university, he proceeded to Christ Church, Oxford. . . ."

"In London . . . John Murray Gibbon became a newspaper man, but he compromised with his Paris art training by making it an illustrated newspaper. He joined the staff of 'Black and White,' and it is suggestive to note that the man whom he succeeded when he was promoted after a year of subordinate work to the important post of assistant editor, was Eden Philpotts, himself one of the most serious and industrious of the young English writers who were striving to make the novel a sort of history of our own time. Mr. Gibbon soon became the responsible editor, but his health broke down and he went to Algiers; when illness supplied so good an excuse, it would have been a shame not to go to the remotest possible place with the right kind of climate. When he came back he free-lanced for a time, and dwelt, but only as a friendly and comprehending visitor, in the realm of politics, doing a weekly letter on the political situation for 'The Illustrated London News.'

"About 1907 the orbits of Canada and John Murray Gibbon began to draw together. The Canadian Pacific Railway had decided on a lively propaganda in continental Europe. There was no young journalist in England with a better knowledge of continental Europe and a livelier conception of propaganda than Gibbon. Baron Shaughnessy is generally credited with having 'discovered' him, so far as Canada is concerned. It is consistent with the Baron's record for man-picking. At all events, John Murray Gibbon began to travel all over the ancient world, including Russia and Japan, preaching C. P. R. doctrine with the largest type but the smallest human voice that propagandist ever employed. Never was panther's footfall quieter than the voice of Gibbon enunciating some tremendous new idea, whether it be about the C. P. R., or the art of fiction, or Japanese colour-prints, or old French-Canadian songs. You know the French boulevardier's story beginning with the words, 'An empty cab drove up to the theatre and Sarah Bernhardt got out.' It has been rivalled by the Montreal writer, himself of Gallic extraction, who said: