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Men of the Day

The Life Stories of Two Famous Georges

Sir George William Ross

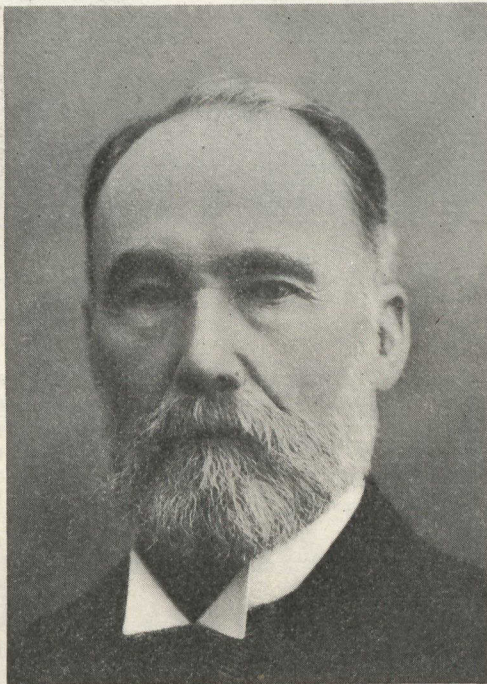
WHETHER or not Sir George Ross may be a memory by the time this goes to print, makes no difference to what may be said about a man that has left so unmistakable a mark upon Canadian life. No public man in this country has kept his light shining so many years after popular opinion reckoned he was due to retire. It is many years since Sir George was able to hobble about the corridors of the Ontario Legislature without a cane, or go anywhere on the streets without a carriage or his once well-remembered tricycle that used to be so familiar a sight up at the Education Department in Toronto. He has been physically half a man for many years: when the half that stayed alive was his brain that never seemed to go weary. Most men with twice his mere strength and half his ailments would have let go long ago. Sir George hung on; because he had acquired the habit, and the habit was born of an unconquerable Keltic quality in the man that never quite knew the meaning of defeat.

Had Sir George Ross lived in the days of Roderick Dhu he would have been a great Highland chieftain. But he was born in Middlesex County, Ont. His parents were Scotch. He was born almost in the bush. He knew Ontario in the rough; was a public school teacher at \$300 a year and Inspector at less than \$1,000. A man somehow born to be a sort of educator; and if he had not worked himself up in the cause of education, the once Premier of Ontario would never have left the mark on this country that he has. It was the universal instinct of the young man getting away from the Canadian bush farm to a place in the world of mind that kept Sir George always so keenly interested in problems of education. Incidentally he was a lawyer. He became a member of the House of Commons in 1872, and remained an M.P. until 1883, when he made the shift that afterwards made him famous, by entering the Ontario Cabinet under Sir Oliver Mowat, as Minister of Education.

What Sir George Ross would have achieved had he remained in the Commons it is hard to say. At least he would have added another to our diminishing minority of parliamentary orators. For when most of us may have forgotten the Ross regulations, the "Ross Bible" and the remarkable changes in the educational system of Ontario under his regime, we are likely to remember having heard the man deliver a great speech somewhere, or having read one of his speeches in the Globe, of which he was for so many years a director.

Sir George was an unmistakable orator. If he had not been an orator he would have been accorded mere recognition as an educator and as a skilled politician. Oratory was to him the breath of life. And he had the gift of making a speech because of what it contained as well as because of its style of delivery. He was most at home on constitutional and Imperial questions. He learned the former under Sir Oliver Mowat, who was no orator but a great constitutional politician and statesman. The latter he dug out of his own experience. He had a constant desire to impress a public assemblage, and the last thing he did before he went to the hospital a month ago was to make one of his customary great speeches in the Senate in the debate on the address in reply to the Speech from the Throne. Sir George will rank among the great orators of Canada because he had the gift of making a dry subject scintillate with interest and the power to make a mass of dull details work up to a magnificent climax. That gift did a great deal for his career, both as Minister of Education and as Premier of Ontario.

In some respects it was a sort of fatal gift. It sometimes made him forget how mean and miserable a game politics is likely to become; or



SIR GEORGE ROSS

School Inspector; Member of Parliament; Minister of Education for Ontario; Premier of Ontario; Leader of Liberal Party in the Dominion Senate; orator and author; born Middlesex County, Ont., in 1841.

seem to forget. It kept him ambitious to hold what he had and to keep his party intact in the Legislature when mere tactics and finesse would have been defeated. The fact that he could rise in the House and put a bright face on a gloomy episode, making the newspaper reports of his speeches bristle with brilliant sarcasm, and almost turning a defeat into a victory, kept him at the head of the Ontario Legislature when ordinary political methods would have

broken up the ancient Liberal regime before it reached the age of thirty-two years. Sir George made his reputation as a political orator while he was Minister of Education. Some of his best speeches were on the subject of education, on which he often became as enthusiastic as he did about Canada and the Empire. There were times when less oratory and more practical administration might have been better for the educational system of Ontario; but even Sir George's political detractors will admit that with all its experimental defects the Ross regime was the most brilliant epoch in the educational development of older Canada. A cynical educationist once remarked more than twenty years ago that the Minister of Education got his first-class certificate once upon a time "by the grace of God and the mercy of the examiners." And there may have been times when Sir George sympathized with Sir John Macdonald who at a memorable assemblage of the University of Toronto, when he was made an honorary LL.D., confessed that for the first time in his life he felt like a university man. But there never was an educationist in Canada, unless it was the late Dr. J. A. McLellan, who could keep any kind of audience, whether a political mob or a gathering of university men, interested so long in mere problems of education. He got his primal interest in that subject at a time when, for a farm boy to break away from the handspike to a professional career was counted one of the greatest things in the world. He never lost that kind of interest.

LONG before he became Premier of Ontario in succession to Hon. A. S. Hardy, who succeeded Sir Oliver Mowat, George Ross had become schooled in professional politics. He knew as much as any man what had been the inside history of political Ontario. He knew as well as any what Ontario meant to the politics of Canada. There never was a time in his career, whether as Minister of Education or as Premier, when he could not have stepped into the House of Commons at Ottawa and commanded the attention of the House almost as well as Sir Wilfrid Laurier, on subjects of broad national interest. His habits of reading, his Keltic sympathies and his quick understanding of men and events kept him from being provincial. In his national outlook he was as broad as Sir Oliver Mowat, with less than Sir Oliver's sagacity and much more than his obvious gifts as a public figure.

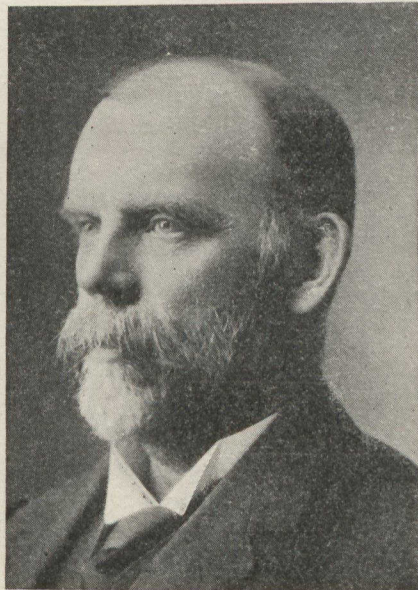
And he had a passionate regard for his party. There never was any conjunction of circumstances that could have made a Conservative or even an Independent of George Ross. He believed in Liberalism. He had

such faith in Liberalism the world over that he sometimes blinked at the lame Liberalism of Ontario. There were times when he became obviously infatuated by Liberalism abroad to the extent of forgetting—or seeming to forget—how narrow and intolerant a thing Liberalism was becoming in Ontario. In his passion for the party he sometimes lost his practical perspective on local conditions. Or again—he seemed to. Whether he really did or not must be left to those who knew him most shrewdly to decide. After he became Premier, knowing to what a party machinery muddle he had succeeded, partly of his own making as Minister and chief apologist, he was asked by a friend why he did not come out openly and admit that the party needed reformation, and why he did not get rid of what about that time were called by the editor of the Globe "barnacles on the ship of State?" The old chieftain had a shrewd twinkle in his eye. He knew better. He was into the thing somewhat for the game of it, and he thought it better game to hang on and do his best to get the ship into port again, barnacles and all. That he failed to make the harbour in 1905 everybody knows. He knew long enough that he could

TWO NOTABLE OPPOSITES



W. K. McNAUGHT, M.P.P.
Manufacturer, whose opinion on the size of the House of Commons appears on page ten.



DR. MICHAEL CLARKE, M.P.
Radical Free-Trader, whose opinion on this subject also appears on the same page.