

TWENTY-SECOND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Prof. Gordon, D.D., Elected Moderator.

Full and Encouraging Reports.

Good Attendance; But Many Familiar Faces Missed—
Messrs. Robinson and Ballantyne Appointed to
Chairs in Knox—Prof. Baird's Sketch of Dr.
Robertson, Retiring Moderator.

(By Our Own Reporters.)

THE REV. JAMES ROBERTSON,
D.D.

RETIRING MODERATOR, GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

BY REV. PROFESSOR BAIRD, D.D., WINNIPEG.

James Robertson was born in the village of Dull, near Aberfeldy, Perthshire, Scotland, in 1839, attended the parish school like every other child there, came to Ontario in 1855, taught school for five years, attended the Grammar School at Woodstock for eighteen months, matriculated in the University of Toronto, 1863, attended University College for three sessions from the autumn of '63 till the spring of '66, in which latter year he went out as a member of the Queen's Own Rifles to face the Fenians at Ridgeway. He studied theology for two sessions at Princeton, and for one session in the Union Theological Seminary, New York, graduating in May, 1869. He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and in November, 1869, was settled as pastor at Norwich, Ont., where he remained until 1874, in which year he was called to Winnipeg to be pastor of Knox Church. He held this position till 1881, when he was unanimously chosen by the General Assembly to fill the newly created position of Superintendent of Missions. The Presbyterian College in Montreal conferred on him in 1888 the degree of Doctor of Divinity, thereby anticipating another Canadian institution which was about to propose his name for the same honour. In 1892, having been chosen a delegate to the Pan-Presbyterian Council in Toronto, he read by invitation a paper on "Church Life and Work in Canada." In 1895 he was unanimously chosen Moderator of the General Assembly, and presided over the sessions of the Assembly in a most satisfactory manner. Here is the statistical skeleton of Dr. Robertson's life. Let us now look at some aspects of it in a more detailed way, especially his pastoral work and his work as Superintendent of Missions.

In the pastorate, Dr. Robertson did enduring and much appreciated work. His preaching was the preaching of a man keenly alive to the opportunities and responsibilities of his office. Epigrammatic in expression, direct and forcible in delivery, it was couched in the terms and illustrated by the similes of the present day. Indeed in his Winnipeg congregation at least, the circumstances in which he and his people found themselves, so full of newness and change and brisk movement, could not but influence a man who took so keen an interest in what was going on about him. No less conspicuous than this up-to-date quality was the strong scriptural flavour of his preaching. It put in the forefront the great central verities of the Gospel, and was full of Bible truth. One talks now with scarcely a member of the Winnipeg congregation of those days who does not say "What an instructive preacher he was!"

But the characteristic strength of the man was seen nowhere better than in pastoral work. He was an indefatigable visitor, and his own selflessness and absence of self-consciousness made him a sympathetic and tactful friend in times of distress. He was then, as now, a prodigious worker, and he never seemed to grudge the amount of time and trouble he took in meeting the steam boats and trains by which immigrants were arriving, and in advising and befriending strangers. Hosts of these people were made his life-long friends and admirers by all kinds of help, sometimes prayerful, sometimes sympathetic, sometimes tangible, and sometimes all three together.

All the while he was taking a front place in every movement which made for righteousness in the young city. He had a considerable share in shaping the early policy of Manitoba College, and for years he gave unremunerated services as a lecturer in its philosophical and theological departments. He was a leader in the founding of the University

of Manitoba, and until his nomadic life as Superintendent obliged him to resign, he was a member of its governing council and an examiner. He was a member, too, of the Provincial Council of Public Instruction, and took a conspicuous part in the early fight for a uniform system of public schools.

From these facts it will be seen that Dr. Robertson was by no means an unknown nor an untried man when the General Assembly in 1881 put him in the position of Superintendent of Missions. Indeed, he had for years been unconsciously qualifying for just such a post. In common with

incident as the following, which is a story a few years old: A minister of a considerable town congregation in Manitoba was about to be absent from his pulpit for a Sabbath, and arranged with the student who was in charge of a neighboring mission field to occupy his place for the occasion. On Saturday the student boarded the train at his own village station to go to fill his temporary appointment. Dr. Robertson was on the train. With his usual cordiality he greeted the student, and made room for him in the seat he was occupying. After a few preliminaries the Doctor said:

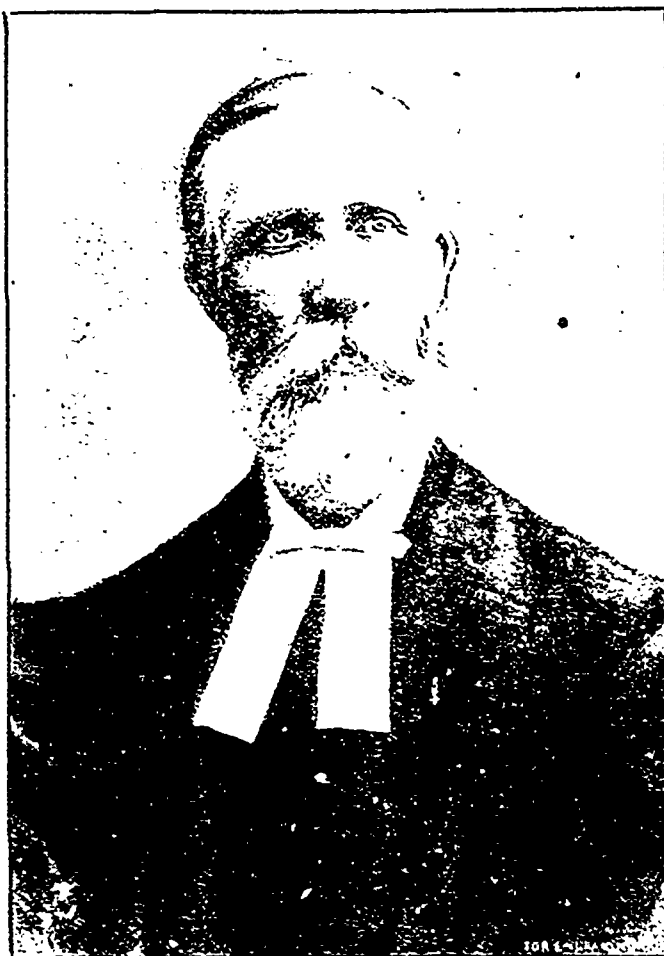
"Where are you going?"

"I am going to supply for Mr. Blank. He is to be away from home for a few days."

"And who is taking your place?" asked the Doctor.

"Well," replied the student, "Mr. Blank and I talked the matter over and we both thought that since he had to go away, and since one of the places would be vacant anyway, it would be better that my little mission field should be left unoccupied rather than his important congregation."

The Doctor's lengthy figure suddenly elongated itself like the drawing out of a telescope and there was a vigorous pull at the bell-rope. The conductor came hurrying in to know what was the matter. "This young man," said the Doctor,



REV. JAMES ROBERTSON, D.D.

his brethren in the Presbytery, but in a greater degree than most of them, he had taken part in organizing and overseeing the mission fields, which at that time were being planted throughout the nearer part of the Province of Manitoba. The rapid increase of these partially equipped mission stations, and the need for more, made the appointment of a superintendent advisable, and with the need came the man.

Dr. Robertson entered upon his duties with an admirable intermingling of energy and prudence. His influence began to be felt over the whole Western field. It soon became apparent that we had a Superintendent who meant to superintend, and yet the work was done in such a way that there was scarcely a congregation which did not eagerly welcome his visits and turn to him for help in an emergency, and scarcely a missionary who did not look upon him as a trusted counsellor and a friend. There were some differences of opinion for a while about the proper relation in which he ought to stand to the rest of the Church's Home Mission organization, but thanks to his modesty and good sense on the one hand, and to the growing appreciation of his services on the other, these soon adjusted themselves, and now the work goes on without a jar.

His duties are many and varied, and require the best skill and judgment available. That he is a genuine *episcopus* and can act with promptness and despatch may be illustrated by such an

"has made a mistake and wants to get off here." The train stopped, and the Doctor, in helping the young man off preparatory to his half-mile walk back to the village, found time to remind him that his own field was the work he had been sent there to attend to, and that the emergency would be grave indeed which would justify him in neglecting it.

Another and no less characteristic side of the man is seen in an incident told by a young minister who accompanied the Superintendent a few months ago on a visit to a mission field in a recently colonized quarter of central Alberta. They had a drive of some miles to their destination; the weather was perfect, the roads were good, their way lay past fields of wheat which covered the ground so thickly and evenly that they gave to the unskilled observer promise of a bountiful harvest. But there had been a deadly frost a few nights before, and the fields were exchanging the yellow of a golden harvest for the sickly white which showed that the chaff covered only shrivelled grains. The Doctor was much depressed and repeatedly spoke to his companion of his sympathy with the farmers who had but begun to found homes, who were in most cases counting upon their harvest to enable them to meet debts already incurred, and before whom loomed a winter which would inevitably be marked by privation, and in many cases, likely by acute distress. "You go first,"

said the Doctor, "and just give them a simple Gospel address." This was done, and the Doctor himself rose to speak. He began with lessons drawn from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and, warming with his theme, he left the desk of the little school-house in which the meeting was held, and came down the passage among his hearers. "Rally about your Church," he said, "encourage the heart of your minister by the faithfulness of your attendance on the service and by the godliness of your lives. For the rest we will help you. You have a great Church at the back of you; it sympathizes with you, and will not take away from you the services you enjoy." The effect was thrilling; many were deeply moved. At the close the men crowded about the visitors, each eager to exchange some personal word. One brawny young Irishman wrung the hand of the younger member of the deputation, and said: "You don't know how much good you have done us by your visit. Do you know, you look just like my brother in the Old Country? It does me good to see you." The deputation had been addressing congregations in other parts of the country, urging, arguing, warning in the style for which the Superintendent is well known, begging the people, in the name of honesty, of gratitude, and for the love of God, to be mindful of their obligations, and not to fail in providing a decent maintenance for their minister and means for the extension of missionary work. But this was no occasion for words of that kind, and no word of that kind was spoken. And so every man in the little group went back to his home prepared to see encouragement in the same horizon in which a few hours before he had seen only blighted hopes, and ready to do his duty in the name of God.

But this paper threatens to be too long, and I must stop without speaking of the Church and Manse Building Board, of which Dr. Robertson was the organizer, of which he is the life, and which in the fourteen years of its life has helped to build 255 churches and 60 manses; without speaking of the statesmanlike character of many of his reports, or the patriotism which shines through them and his speeches; without speaking of his knowledge of, and interest in, the theological problems of the present day, in virtue of which his critical opinion is of much value; without speaking of his manner of life, permitted to spend only a few weeks with his family each year, and living for the most part on the road, welcomed, it is true, wherever there is an opportunity to the best the manse can afford, but many a time forced to accept the uncouth and perhaps tardily-offered hospitality of mining-camp or frontier shanty; without speaking of his tours through Eastern Canada, giving accounts of the progress of the Western work, looking for men, or averting a deficit.

There is not a man in our Presbyterian world in Canada who is better known, and in proportion as he is known the Church respects him, admires him, and is proud of him. But for those of us who have worked in the Home Mission field under his superintendence, another and a higher word is necessary—we love him.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

FIRST DAY.

WEDNESDAY EVENING.

At the close of the sermon, which has already appeared in full in our columns, and which was a most able and interesting presentation of the Home Mission work of the Church, and an argument for its vigorous prosecution, the Court was constituted with prayer, and the junior clerk, the Rev. Dr. Campbell, of Montreal, called the roll, referring before doing so to the death, since last Assembly, of the senior clerk, the late venerable Rev. Dr. Reid, whose face and services have been conspicuous at every Assembly meeting for over a generation past. Owing to this blank, the clerk asked that Rev. Dr. Warden be allowed to assist him until a permanent appointment to the office was made. This being agreed to, the retiring Moderator addressed the Court, referring in affecting terms to the losses which the Church, during the past year, has sustained by the death of some of its leading men; and after thanking the Assembly for the honour conferred upon him in appointing him to the Moderator's chair, asked for nominations for a successor, whereupon the Rev. Dr. Terrance, of Guelph, proposed the name of the Rev. Professor Gordon, D.D., of Halifax. The name was also proposed of the Rev. A. J. Mowat, of Montreal, who promptly declined to be nominated. The Rev. Dr. Gordon was then unanimously appointed, who, after assuming the robes of office