

Bernhard Eduard Fernow---An Appreciation

By Dr. Clifton D. Howe

MY first experience with Dr. Fernow in the forest was a sixteen mile tramp across country on a mid-April day in northern Ontario. We had come direct from the confining work of school and probably none of the party of instructors and students had walked a mile a day during the Winter. The snow was soft, the muskegs were knee-deep with slush and the streams without crossings. Dr. Fernow was close to sixty years old then, but at the end of the day he showed no indication of weariness. On the contrary, he still maintained the buoyancy of body which gave that impression of walking without effort, so characteristic of the man. While the other members of the party were too tired to hold up their heads and could hardly drag one foot after the other, at the logging camp that evening he danced a "break down" and told witty stories to the great entertainment of the assembled bushmen. Such was the spirit of the man! Yet to think of this only as an expression of hardiness and self-control would give the wrong impression. His action was reasoned and, from a physiological and psychological standpoint, the very best thing he could have done. The incident is illustrative of his mind at work. He had a unique capacity of envisaging a situation and comprehending its requirements. His mind, although rapid and apparently spontaneous in action was closely analytical and logical in its processes. There were eminent lawyers in his family and he was originally trained for the law. His writings display the concise statement, the marshalling of evidence, and the attitude of pleading of a mind inherently legal in its attributes. His written works, also, display a rare and highly developed feeling for term quality. There was no looseness of expression; every word he wrote had a precise and exclusive value. This attribute led to the frequent formulation of short expressions that contained a world of philosophy. His associates and students can never forget his oft repeated briefs that comprehend the fundamental principles of forestry, such as: We must protect in order to practice. Save by intelligent use. Forestry is a function of the State.

He enjoyed a controversy as a mental exercise in clarifying ideas. His best expressions were brought forth at such times. He would characterize a situation or the weakness of an opponent's argument with cutting

pungency, but always without malice. There was nothing personal about his controversies; he was simply defending certain forestry principles which he ever held supreme. He had just cause for resentments, but he never held them, and he would defend the men who treated him the most shabbily when their motives were attacked by others.

Dr. Fernow's mind was not only expert in analyzing the present situation, but it, also, had a prophetic quality. He predicted events in the development of the forestry movement in the United States and Canada that were almost uncanny in their precision. For example, forty years ago amidst howls of derision he foretold the present timber shortage in the eastern United States. He was only a few years short on the time of its coming and that was due to the fact that neither he nor anyone at that time could have foreseen the extent to which Canada would contribute its pulpwood and its pulp and paper products to the States or could have anticipated the extent to which abandoned farm lands in New England and New York State would furnish second growth white pine.

His mistakes, if we may call them such, were those of pre-vision, rather than of judgment. He was right and the majority were wrong. The proof of such a statement time alone can disclose and time has demonstrated it for him abundantly. For example, certain policies and lines of activity in forestry work were discarded by Dr. Fernow's immediate successors in the United States government service, but after some years of experience they were re-instated and are now regarded as fundamental by the profession.

Some of his actual silvicultural work in the forest was for years declared a failure, but in the meantime the trees kept on growing and now they have demonstrated the wisdom of his course. One of his severest critics once said to me, referring to a widely discussed controversy in which Dr. Fernow's judgment was concerned. "He is right in principle, but wrong in policy." Then he added prophetically: "Some day they will raise monuments to Dr. Fernow, especially in the State of New York." That remark was made twenty years ago. It is a source of profound gratification to his friends that the first monument was dedicated while he still lived, in the form of Fernow Hall, at Cornell University. The value of the



Photo by E. H. Finlayson

A Great Forester—Bernhard Eduard Fernow
Born 1851—Died 1923