

# PROMINENT CANADIANS.—XXI.

SKETCHES of the following Prominent Canadians have already appeared in THE WEEK: Hon. Oliver Mowat, Dr. Daniel Wilson, Principal Grant, Sir John A. Macdonald, K.C.B., Louis Honoré Fréchette, LL.D., Sir J. William Dawson, Sir Alexander Campbell, K.C.M.G., Hon. William Stevens Fielding, Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, Sir Samuel Leonard Tilley, C.B., K.C.M.G., Alexander McLachlan, Hon. J. A. Chappleau, Sir Richard Cartwright, K.C.M.G., Sanford Fleming, C.E., LL.D., C.M.G., Hon. H. G. Joly, Hon. P. J. O. Chauveau, Sir Wm. Buell Richards, Hon. Wilfrid Laurier, M.P., Hon. Honoré Mercier, Q.C., Hon. William Macdougall, C.B., and Rev. Principal MacVicar, D.D., LL.D.

PROFESSOR CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS, M.A.

On January 10th, 1860, in the little village of Douglas, York County, N.B., occurred an event rich with importance to our rising Canadian literature. The event was the birth of Mr. Charles G. D. Roberts, who, during the last eight years, has justly won for himself, both at home and abroad the position of one of our ablest *littérateurs*. While he was still an infant, his father went to Westcock, N.B., where our poet dwelt until his fourteenth year, drinking deep draughts of inspiration from the exquisite scenery about this place. He, however, had not to depend entirely upon nature for his song. Already the true poet-life was throbbing in his veins. His mother, a daughter of the late Judge Bliss, was connected with a race of poets and thinkers; among others, America's great son, Emerson. His father, too, son of George Roberts, Ph.D., late Professor of Classics in the University of New Brunswick, was of a line of scholars, and himself able to write strong, sweet verse, although neglecting the muse for the higher duties of the Gospel of Love. It is to him that our poet can turn tender, grateful, eyes for every new glory his pen may win him. Left, at Westcock, without the usual opportunities of receiving a higher education, his father was ever watchful of his mental training; and, in the press of his labour in a large parish managed to find time to introduce his son to the classics and the French language, together, of course, with the ordinary round of a young lad's studies. That the youth was exceedingly precocious, may be inferred from the fact, that, at this time, Milton was his favourite poet. He had all a boy's fondness for romance, and, before fourteen, had devoured whole libraries of story books.

These were balmy days. The broad stretch of Tantramar marches, on the edge of which Westcock was situated, gave many a pleasant opiate draught, filling the soul with dreams not yet understood, but long after to spring into realities in such powerful verse as "An Ode to Drowsihood," or "Lotos." The youthful eyes would often turn to the distant "strong hills propping up heaven, made fast in their place for all time," and receive rare gleams of the sublime. In after years, it was in these hills he saw "no change." Westcock had few companions for the young dreamer, and much of his time was spent alone with nature, fishing in the gentle brooks, gathering berries on the hillside, or drowsing away the summer afternoons beneath the spreading trees. He well knew his indebtedness to this glorious scenery, and ably sings it in "The Tantramar Revisited," the last lines of which beautifully express the dread all have when revisiting the scenes of youth lest the beauty be in their own imaginations:—

"Yet will I stay my steps, and not go down to the marsh-lands.  
Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see,  
Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion,  
Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and of change."

In his fourteenth year, his father was appointed rector of Fredericton, and moved there with his family. The lad at once entered the Collegiate School, where he proved, by winning the Douglas medal in Latin and Greek, that his early teacher at Westcock had given him a remarkably good ground-work. While at school, the discerning eye of the head-master, Mr. Parkin, already noticed sparks of genius in his pupil, and took great pains to stimulate him in his search for knowledge. For this care, he has always been most grateful, and tenderly mentions his teacher in his "Epistle to Bliss Carmen" as "that wise master." Leaving school he entered college in 1876, and ran a very successful course, winning the classical scholarship and the gold medal for a Latin Essay, graduating in 1879 with Honours in Mental and Moral Science and Political Economy. During his college days, while preparing for the battle of life, he was not forgetful of the muse, and from time to time produced most promising poems, one indeed, "Memnon," which, at the early age of seventeen, he succeeded in getting into *Scribner*, being a masterpiece, both of art and thought. While at college, too, that classic gem, "Ariadne," not yet surpassed by himself, was written.

In the year of his graduation, he took charge of the Grammar School at Chatham, N.B., "by the tide-vexed river—the broad, ship-laden Miramichi." Here amid the rush of school work he eagerly toiled to complete his first volume of verse. In 1880—in his twentieth year—"Orion, and other Poems" appeared, and the boy-poet at once leaped to a foremost position in *arte poetica* in Canada. Perhaps Canadians have been much slower to recognize this than they should have been; but able critics and poets both in England and America, on the appearance of his volume, recognized his power.

In this same year, the wish of his "Love Days" was realized, and he was united in marriage to Mary Isabel, daughter of George E. Fenety, Queen's printer, Fredericton. One has but to turn to his after-verse to see what happiness this early marriage had in store for him. In the following year he received the degree of M.A., and was shortly after appointed Head-Master of York Street School, Fredericton. This must have been a great source of poetic joy to him. Nothing can be imagined more beautiful and inspiring than the nestling little city, the Queen of the East. Even the Yantramar scenery pales before it. The long, slow river dragging

itself towards the far-off ocean; the shady canoe-haunted retreats of the Nash-waak, and the Nash-waak-sis on the opposite side of the river; the beautiful upland walks; the willow-shaded streets, all make it the pleasantest of summer cities. Here, too, the Gothic Cathedral could always fill the imagination with medieval scenes, and the gem-church—Little St. Ann's—might quiet the soul with holy calm.

Soon after his return to Fredericton he was called to Toronto to take charge of THE WEEK, but retained this position for only a short time. In 1884 he returned to Fredericton, where he worked at letters until appointed to the Chair of Modern Literature in King's College, Windsor, N.S., where he still labours. In 1887 his second volume of verse, "In Divers Tones," was published in both Boston and Montreal, showing that, although the battle of life had to be fought, his muse during the seven years since the first volume appeared was not altogether silent.

Professor Roberts is a thorough child of nature, passionately fond of out-door sports, and a strong, well-trained athlete. The birch canoe has been the greatest recreation from tired study-hours and the worries of the world. The Miramichi and the St. John have both been well voyaged over by his light *Mélocite*. No more determined arm or daring ever brought a dancing birch down a wild-cat rapid or through a boisterous sea. Any one may feel safe in a canoe as long as his certain hand and dexterous wrist have charge of the stern paddle. This pastime has been a source of inspiration to him, and his "Birch and Paddle" has a heart-ring about it that tells of vivid experiences.

Neither of his volumes can be read without impressing the reader with his thorough knowledge of the poetic art and the careful study he must have given to some of the masters, but he possesses such a strong individuality that we never feel like accusing him of following any too closely. Milton, his early love, has been of no slight aid in determining his bent. In "The Marvellous Work," we have a piece of verse of Miltonic strength with Emersonian breadth of thought:—

"His  
The impulse and the quickening germ, whereby  
All things strive upward reach toward greater good  
Till craving brute, informed with soul grows man,  
And man turns homeward, yearning back to God."

Keats has, perhaps, left his impress on his classical verse, and some of his dreamier poems, while "the wild childheart of Shelley" has helped him to see nature with a rhythmic gladness that only true poets can know. Some late critics point out resemblances in his work to other poets. Even when meaning praise rather than blame, this method of criticism is dangerous, as the general reader, in this age, is apt to say at once, "plagiarist." One of these critics has said that his line "Waist deep in dusty blossomed grass" is distinctly Tennysonian. It may be so! but it is as distinctly his own. He is the poet of objective reality. Every line is from some scene that has occurred in his own life, and this merely pictures naturally some incident of the past. It seems almost too realistic, he simply was "Waist-deep in dusty-blossomed grass," and required no help to say it. He has learned from all, but has copied none. He is at his best when depicting nature, and gives us many rare treats for winter hours and the dust of the city. "Fredericton in May Time," "In the Afternoon," etc., are as dainty vignettes as could be culled from nature. Occasionally he has a line of surpassing strength that carries a great deal more to the reader than is said, as in "The Sower":—

"Alone he treads the glebe, his measured stride  
Dumb in the yielding soil."

This vividly calls to mind Millet's great picture, "The Potato Harvest." The lines of the weary bodies, the great brown field are all that strike the eye, but what a tale they tell of labour and hardship; so here, little is said, but how vividly we see the weary sower toiling alone, horny handed, casting the seed from side to side, his tired limbs pressing the newly ploughed field, happy in his work; for though unconsciously it may be

"Godlike, he makes provision for mankind."

"Afloat," "Nocturne" and many others are rare models of rhythmical expression, "Afloat" being one flood of sad sweet music that must carry all readers along on its lulling current. One of Professor Roberts' strongest inspirations is his Canadian patriotism and undying hope that we shall one day see fit "to front the world alone." He has written several stirring poems giving passionate expression to this hope.

While his poems have such lofty merits, they have also defects, but, fortunately, these are nearly all "the defects of his qualities." One of his gravest is the frequent use of double-epithets and coined words. This is apt to be a fault of genius; Milton and Shakespeare both erred in this respect in their early poems, and Coleridge said the reviewers justly blamed his tentative volume for the same fault. Strong imaginations, in the flush of youth, are inclined to think ordinary language weak for their creations, and to create words for themselves. This fault is most conspicuous in his early verse, and in the next volume it will probably not be noticeable. Another error is due to his love of being realistic. In the "Potato Harvest" he leaves nothing to be imagined, in "Tantramar Revisited" the description of the shore laden with ropes, nets, blocks, etc., becomes too much like a catalogue, but perhaps, if it were in Homer, we should say: "How sublimely truthful." This fault obtrudes itself in the exquisite lyric "In Notre Dame," more than in any other poem. The heart that passionately cried: "And oh, my sweet, how swift we went adrift!" would hardly have calmly thought out the many rare beauties of his lady love. Emerson would describe the verse that pictures the beauty of Eloise as fancy, rather than imagination. "Fancy paints," he says, "but is silent in the presence of great passion and action." The picture is a very beautiful one, but it is