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"Sir Wilfrid Laurier"

Sir Wilfrid Laurier died just over thirty years ago. I have one slight personal memory of him. I once found myself in Ottawa and for the first and last time, in the old, pre-fire House of Commons. It was a quiet day, with few members on the floor. But Laurier was there. Presently he rose and went out. As he got to the Bar, he turned and beckoned to a member still in his seat. I shall never forget the gesture - the dignity of the figure, the authority contained in a simple motion of the hand. The member, whoever he was, came running over like a child to his daddie.

No legend gathered about Sir Wildrid as it did about Sir John. Sir Wilfrid still remains a somewhat aloof figure and it is hard to separate the man from the pedestal on which he stands. I confess I have often looked for something that would bring him within comprehension; yes frankly, for some spots upon the sun. Few who know me would call me uncritical. In the case of Laurier, however, I still await a basis of criticism.

No man who held power for fifteen years could have been without toughness, without a sense of dominance - that goes without saying. Laurier, I presume, knew the secrets of command. If he had a weakness, it seems to me that it was what one would expect to grow out of his difficult bi-racial position: he probably admired the English side of the house just a bit too much: perhaps, like any member of a minority who does not remain merely in antagonism, he yielded a bit too readily to the influence of the majority, to the English. Yet, since he was assailed equally by the extremes of both, he cannot have been too far off centre.

To the general public, Laurier was dignified, brilliant and intellectual, but a little too much in the grand manner. On the platform, he seldom indulged in humour, though in private life, he is said to have been full of French vivacity. On rare occasions, his wit came out in public, as, when teasing Sir Charles Tupper, he compared Macdonald and Tupper to the officers of a sailing ship: Macdonald captained the ship, he said, Tupper blew on the sails and provided the motive power.

Wilfrid Laurier was born in 1841, in a little Quebec village. He died in harness, in February, 1919, not much more than a year after the Conscription election. I have no intention of attempting to give a biography: that would be impossible and probably boring. What I would prefer to do is to sift out the essence of the man's career as it affected Canada and present its significance in a word or two.

And there are two words, I think, which will do that for Laurier. Those two words are freedom and moderation. Laurier's career was built on those great words and on others that go with them, words such as tolerance and comprehension. The man was himself, in fact, an idea: that's what makes him unique in Canadian history. I am not suggesting that he was above ordinary humanity; naturally, he could not be. But whatever his foibles and his failings, they do not invalidate the statement: his career was the expression of an idea. I hope to illustrate this by concentrating on what seem to me to be the great passages in his life: the first, the remarkable speech of 1877 on The Principles of Political