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PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE

Z-1702

Subject: Nerves and Personal Power

Date: Nov. 3, 1922 Publication: Ottawa Journal

Nerves and Personal Power

Some Principles of Psychology as Applied to Conduct and Health. By D. Macdougall King, M.B.

Macdougall King will be remembered by many residents of Ottawa: he practiced medicine here until his health failed in 1913. A competent physician, he had the spirit of public service as well, and the writer of these lines recollects his activity about 1908 in putting forward a plan for preventive medicine among school-children; the lapse of years has confirmed the soundness of his project. He was an unusually attractive man—one can face as sunny. The story of his long illness and of his two books is a record of high and intelligent courage, marked by two difficult, apparently contradictory and yet really consistent decisions; the tale is told by his brother, the Prime Minister, in a moving introduction.

When he found himself stricken by tuberculosis, Dr. King came to the conclusion that by a resolute following of a course of treatment which included much rest he might recover. While he was mending in 1915 and 1916, he wrote "The Battle with Tuberculosis and How to Win It," a book which has been of genuine assistance to many patients afflicted with this disease.

Working at a convalescent, he proceeded with his task very slowly. "Undue intellectual effort is just as perilous in the recovery from tuberculosis as excess of physical effort," says Mr. Macdougall King, in the introduction. "For the greater part of a year the most he dared venture, by way of either research or composition, was from a fraction of an hour to an hour twice a day." Part of the book was written while he was lying on his back; much of it was dictated from his bed. The book was published in 1917, and Dr. King was resuming his interrupted career when a second blow fell—he became a prey to progressive muscular atrophy. He knew that this illness was mortal, and that the only uncertainty was as to the length of time before he must succumb. Again there were alternatives in the pro-

spect that presented itself, the acceptance or rejection of either of which lay largely with himself. He could cease work altogether, intellectual as well as physical effort, and so arrest the disease and hope to live on, possibly for years; or, while compelled to abandon the practice of his profession, he could persevere in intellectual work with the certainty, however, that every hour's effort would hasten the progress of the disease. He had this book on his mind, and he elected to live a shorter time and to write the book. "By actual calculation of minutes," Mr. Macdougall King says, "he believed he could complete it before the end came."

Like Browning's "Grassington," he faced with Death. "He began in such fulness of strength as he had regained; to work, then, with comparative freedom of movement, then, crippled and bed-ridden; finally, with complete paralysis of the greater part of his entire body. . . . Before the end came, in the spring of 1922, he was unable to hold a pen or to dictate a paragraph, but he had completed his self-imposed task. His last days, ever with the assistance and constant ministrations of his wife, were given over to attempts at revision of the manuscript and to correspondence concerning its publication.

Such is the affecting history of this book, and it is a part of the story that, written as it was in the valley of the shadow, it is addressed to the general public, and that its purpose is to assist the victims of a very cruel class of maladies. It is a popular treatment of the newer psychology with reference to its bearing upon the diseases and disabilities commonly described as nervous. Beginning with a description in non-technical terms of the nervous system, it proceeds to an exposition of the influence of the intellect and the will through that system upon health and conduct. "The ancient doctrine of the brain," he says, "consists of an hierarchy of rulers, each of whom not only at one stage of evolution held supreme command, but still lives, and seeks to rule. The intellect is the latest claimant to the throne, and is a usurper of very limited power. Unless the intellect has the support of the moral self, its barbarous predecessors will arise in their might and bedevil its ideals, pollute its wishes, and establish confusion by permitting the alternate sway of contending emotions. Without the moral self we should be but marionettes which, to the stimulus of outside forces, dance on the stage of life, are driven hither and thither, and take no part in the shaping of destiny."

King, Rt. Hon. William Lyon Mackenzie (MG 26 J 7 volume 17) Dr. and Mrs. Dougall Macdougall (Max) King - Clippings - Nerves and Personal Power - Reviews n.d., 1922-1943