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Personalities and Problems

No. 20—Sir John Willison

Who by a Single Ambition and Much Reading in His Youth Became one of the Most Unusual Editors in Canada

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

MURAL Decoration for—say the Press Gallery in the Ottawa House of Commons—a stately knight, decorated with a pitchfork, a sword and a pen; inscribed "Johannes Stephanus Willison, Knight by the Grace of God and consent of King George the Fifth in the year 1913 on the day of the New Year." As accessory elements in the design have the knight's feet pedestaled upon a Hoe octuple press; at his right hand a linotype machine; at his left copy of an advertising contract; his robe cleverly brodered with galley proofs; over his right ear a quill pen; upright at his right elbow—not too prominent—a pitchfork in lieu of a sword under his cloak; over all a succinct halo caused by the emanations from a huge fiddle of telegraph wires.

I am quite aware that this design would cost a lot of money and would probably drive the artist into a lunatic asylum. Nevertheless, it would be greatly worth while and confoundedly suggestive. Sir John Willison is the first simon-pure editor in Canada that ever got a knighthood. Sir Hugh Graham was born to be a newspaper proprietor—or else manager of a hippodrome. Sir John has won his spurs by his pen; and by nothing else. To quote his own oft-repeated testimony,

"No, I don't think there is another calling on earth at which I could have made a living. I always wanted to be an editor. I never had the least instinct for business or speculation; never made a dollar on the stock market—for I wouldn't know how."

At the same time the editor of the *Toronto News* and Canadian correspondent for the *London Times* is financially beyond the reach of care. If he were transported to twenty years ago he would be rated as a wealthy man. He lives in style at 6 Elmsley Place, which, I am told, is as knightly a retreat as could be found in Canada; a place which he has had rebuilt and garnished to suit his own ideas of living with an immense two-storey library and reading room.

Now for the soft pedal. I remember once when a scribe on the *News*, under then Mr. Willison, being swiftly summoned to see the editor-in-chief, whose first word to me was,

"Never—"

Then a significant pause.

"When you are assigned to interview people in private houses never describe the furniture. It is journalistic bad taste."

One of the places in question was the Grange, which, as I pointed out, was about as public a place as the City Hall. The other was a fashionable residence where the guest was a famous actress who refused even to be looked at—so what else was there to do but describe the house?

This, of course, is talking shop. But it illustrates at least one characteristic of Sir John Willison. He has always banked on journalistic dignity as a principle; as a rule which permits of occasional exceptions.

But if Sir John's ambition was to be an editor it surely never was to be a knight. He knew nothing of this title until about a week before Christmas. It came as a surprise. When he got wind of it, of course he thought it over.

"It took me about five minutes to decide—that I would take it," he said. "Why should I refuse? If I had refused it I suppose reasons would have been invented to prove that I was trying to be

singular. A title is an honour—certainly if it is unsolicited. The Governor-General and the Prime Minister must concur in the selection before any candidate for a title is nominated to the King. The King has the traditional right to dispense honours in his kingdom and empire. I suppose our notions of the empire trace up to the King. If we deny him the right to dispense favours, what becomes of our theory of kingship?"

It was to me most interesting to hear Sir John discuss the ethics of title-giving in his plain but elegantly comfortable office in the *News* building, next to the National Club, on Bay St., Toronto. Many years ago he discussed this question with Lord



"The First Simon-pure Editor in Canada That Ever Got a Knighthood."

Aberdeen. Time and again—or somebody else on his staff—he has paid some tribute with his pen to some fresh recipient of a title in Canada. He knows all the knights in Canada by reputation, and most of them personally. He is well acquainted with Sir Wilfrid Laurier, our most distinguished knight, as he was fairly acquainted with Sir John Macdonald, in his day the chief of knights. He remembers many a man who might have been expected to get a title, and has not—yet; some cases of men who were slated for titles by both Governor and Premier but refused by the King—why? And I am sure that Sir John could write a book about titles in Canada.

It is much more interesting to trace the career of a man who, by wielding a pen, got away from the pitchfork to a knighthood. Sir John wears his honours with becoming distinction. He has the bearing of a knight. He looks the part. He requires nothing of the imagination.

But how did he get from the pitchfork to a knighthood? This is interesting, because there are a million or so people in Canada who may never get further than the pitchfork—which, however, once upon a time, about 1812 and 1837, was a fine knightly instrument of war in the hands of many an awkward squad on the border. Sir John was born on a farm up in Huron county, Ont. As this was a pretty old settlement, it's not likely he had much to do with logging-bees and stump-pulling. But it was real farming that the Willisons did. The lad John ploughed with the long-handle plough, bound wheat by hand after the four-rake reaper and the cradle-swath, dug potatoes with a fork and went with a pitchfork to threshing-bees when the horse-power antedated the steam-engine.

And he had also a passion for reading. There must have been many a wet day when he hoped his father wouldn't be able to find a job fixing the granary or cleaning wheat; when in all probability he hiked himself to the haymow with a book. He read every book he could get his hands on; though he omitted Shakespeare till he was old enough to vote.

Up till the age of seventeen, however, he read the newspaper more than any particular kind of books. His father was a Conservative. The paper that was fetched from the post-office every day into the Willison home was the *Daily Leader*, the Tory paper that preceded the *Toronto Mail*. I suppose there was a weekly from Goderich or Kincardine or some of those Huron towns; and he read them all. But he read the *Leader* with great gusto. It was a city paper. The lad had a hankering for city life. He devoured it all, editorials, cable despatches if any, telegraph news, births, marriages and deaths, and the ads—which in those days were not very numerous. It was the daily joy; probably the picture of a bigger world which some day he hoped to belong to. He read also the *Daily Telegraph*, in those days a paper published by John Ross Robertson before the birth of the *Telegraph*.

He was a lad of seventeen when the Pacific scandal got into the newspapers. I guess his father had some way of explaining that phenomenon; but somehow the scandal stuck with the lad, who in those days had large, sombre notions of patriotism and the like. In fact I remember hearing him say once at a Press Club dinner that when he was a youth about the age of Bryant when he wrote "Thanatopsis," he had the most melancholy outlook upon all things mundane, and sometimes wrote