

PROMINENT CANADIANS.—XXV.

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 MacLachlan, Hon. J. A. Chapleau, Sir Richard Cartwright, K.C.M.G., Sanford Fleming, C.B., LL.D., C.M.G., Hon. H. G. Joly, Hon. P. J. O. Chauveau, Sir William Buell Richards, Hon. Wilfrid Laurier, M.P., Hon. Honoré Mercier, Q.C., Hon. William Macdougall, C.B., Rev. Principal MacVicar, D.D., LL.D., Prof. Charles G. D. Roberts, M.A., George Paxton Young, M.A., and Hon. Auguste Rea Angers.

WILLIAM RALPH MEREDITH, LL.D., Q.C., M.P.

IN the year 1834 John Cooke Meredith, who had been studying law at Gray's Inn, London, laid aside his books and took passage for Canada. He was a native of Ireland, and had graduated in Arts at Trinity College, Dublin. When he went to the great metropolis of England to study law, it was no doubt his intention to adopt the profession of a barrister; but preferment then, as it is still, was very slow at the English Bar, no matter how industrious one might be, and fortune only smiled ultimately on those of the proverbial patience of the future Lord Eldon, or on the few who could command the necessary influence. Whether the thought of this made Mr. Meredith change the purpose of his life we have no means of knowing; but this at all events is certain, that having heard of the future that awaited young men of pluck and energy in the then opening New World, he abandoned his studies and whatever prospects the bar may have had in store for him, and threw in his lot with many others, to seek a home in Canada. On arriving here he found that the means of transit were of the rudest kind; but, nothing daunted, he succeeded in reaching the western part of Ontario, now known as the Township of Westminster, in the County of Middlesex. Here he secured a grant of land and commenced farming. After the elapse of a year or two he married Sarah Pegler, who bore him eight sons and four daughters, all of whom are still alive. The eldest of the former was destined to become distinguished in law and politics.

William Ralph Meredith, the leader of the Opposition in the Ontario Legislature, was born on the 31st of March 1840. In his early days he showed no symptoms of individuality; he was not precocious like Lord Brougham, but commonplace like Napoleon. He enjoyed the society of his companions, entered with zest into all their sports, laughed most heartily, while his sportiveness and geniality made him a favourite among his companions. He was even then a manly fellow and always took, as he has taken through life, the side of the weak. He was placed in the London Grammar School where he received his education from the late Rev. Benjamin Bayly, through whose hands so many pupils afterwards distinguished in life have passed. Mr. Bayly was not only noted for his classical attainments, but for the thoroughness of his system of training; and when young Meredith left him he possessed all the scholastic armour necessary to enable him to win his way in any of the learned professions.

We next find the future leader studying law in the office of the late Thomas Scatchard, of London, who was a prominent Reform politician in his day, and who for many years sat in Parliament both before and after Confederation. The student applied himself diligently and under the direction of Mr. Scatchard acquired a thorough knowledge of the principles of law. Notwithstanding this he did not imbibe his politics. In 1859 he entered the Toronto University where he obtained a scholarship in law at the Matriculation Examination; and while studying in this city he served some time in the office of the then firm of Cameron, McMichael and Fitzgerald. In 1861 he was called to the Bar. In the following year, having in the meantime returned to London, he entered into partnership with Mr. Scatchard which continued until the death of the latter in 1876. On the 26th of June, also in 1862, Mr. Meredith married Mary, the only daughter of Mr. Marcus Holmes of London. In 1863 he graduated LL.B.

Fairly launched now on both law and matrimony, the young barrister felt that his success depended entirely upon his own efforts; and to the painstaking attention which he then gave, and has ever since given, to his professional studies and practice is no doubt largely due the position he occupies to day as a leader at the Bar and in politics. In November, 1888, he came to this city to take the vacancy in the then firm of Foster, Clarke and Bowes, created by the death of W. A. Foster, Q.C., the style of the firm being changed to Meredith, Clarke, Bowes and Hilton. Mr. Meredith's removal to this city is an undoubted acquisition to local forensic talent. In 1875 he was made a Queen's Counsel by the Ontario Government and subsequently by the Dominion Government. He has been a Bencher of the Law Society ever since the elective system has been in existence; and twice he secured the largest vote over the entire profession. This was alike a tribute to the professional eminence and popularity of Mr. Meredith. On Monday last the University of Toronto conferred on him the degree of LL.D.

As a member of the Ontario Bar Mr. Meredith's future is assured. Well directed energy, combined with ability, has made his career a series of successes, and one factor which has contributed in no small measure to this is the importance which he has always attached to minor details. The close attention which he gives to every case entrusted to him is well known, and their variety and character have caused him to master the several branches of law. His presence in court is somewhat prepossessing; his pleadings are forcible and dignified; his examination of witnesses thorough; while there is in his manner that directness

and sincerity which inspires confidence in clients, and strikes terror in the hearts of nervous and unscrupulous witnesses on the other side, when subjected to the fire of his interrogatories, and the broad gaze of his lustrous eyes. It goes without saying that Mr. Meredith has been engaged on many important cases, both criminal and civil. Of the former class the Biddulph murder case, which at the time created a profound sensation throughout the country, has become historical by reason of its importance and the mystery that has always surrounded it. Mr. Meredith and Mr. (now Justice) McMahon were counsel for the defence. It will still be within the recollection of many that the defence was conducted with admirable skill, and that the speech delivered on the occasion by Mr. Meredith must ever rank among the finest efforts of forensic eloquence in the annals of the Ontario Bar. Again in the McCabe poisoning case, where a George McCabe was charged with poisoning his wife, Mr. Meredith, on a second trial, obtained his acquittal, and won for himself fresh laurels to his already rapidly growing reputation as an advocate.

The subject of this sketch is an undoubted authority on municipal law. The accident of his first partnership may in a measure account for this. When he entered into partnership with Thomas Scatchard the latter was City Solicitor for London, and upon his death Mr. Meredith succeeded him and retains the position to this day. He is also Honorary Lecturer of the Law Faculty of the University of Toronto in Municipal Law, an appointment which he received from the Ontario Government as an acknowledgment of his attainments in that subject. He is deeply interested in the welfare of his profession and has for some time been prominently identified with the question of reform in legal education. He believes in providing law students with every equipment for their profession, and he is known to be strongly in favour of decentralising legal education, claiming that it is unfair to law students residing at a distance from Toronto, and who may not be too well provided with money, to compel them to come to Toronto to study; and that it would be a great improvement on the present system to establish law schools throughout the Province. He has frequently urged this view at meetings of the Benchers, but so far it has taken no tangible form. Mr. Meredith has this subject closely at heart, and his efforts to establish a law school in connection with the Western University; the prominent part he has taken in the Middlesex Law Association, founded some eight years ago, and of which he has been President since its inception; and the interest he has manifested in the establishing of County Law Libraries—to be maintained partly by the Law Society and partly by local contributions—for the benefit of students, who would not otherwise have access to texts and authorities; and the excellent libraries there are now in existence, place law students in particular under a debt of gratitude to him for his valuable services on their behalf. It is conceded by all who enjoy an intimate acquaintance with Mr. Meredith that not only is he a sound lawyer, but possesses also a sound judgment and a fine judicial mind; and that while his abilities and character would no doubt shed a lustre on the bench, his elevation thereto would be severely felt by the Ontario Opposition.

On the abolition of dual representation in Parliament in 1872 Mr. Meredith was elected to a seat in the Ontario Legislature on the resignation of Mr. (now Hon.) John Carling, who, having previously sat in both Houses, chose to sit in the Dominion Parliament. The newly elected member to the Legislature grew rapidly in popularity among his colleagues. His manner was not only genial and captivating, but he at once evinced a keen interest in political affairs. While a Conservative, he soon proved that he was superior to party dogmatism. He ranged himself on the side of the working man, and he has directed his best efforts in the Legislature to the extension of his privileges and the protection of his rights. In 1875 he was a potent advocate of manhood suffrage, which was obtained in 1887, although when first brought up three votes only were recorded in its favour. Mr. Meredith's name is also closely linked with such labour legislation as the exemption of wages to the amount of \$25 from seizure; the Mechanics Lien Act; the Workmen's Compensation for Injuries Act, which makes employers, in certain cases, liable, to a limited extent, for injuries sustained by workmen through the negligence of their fellow labourers, and other measures of a similar character.

In 1878, on the elevation of the late Sir Matthew Cameron to the Bench, Mr. Meredith became Leader of the Opposition. Long before this occurred, however, it was already a foregone conclusion that he would become leader, a post for which his personal popularity and accurate knowledge of political affairs so eminently qualified him. During the same year the North-West Boundary Award was made, but the memorable agitation it created did not commence until 1879. Discussion was at a premium in the Legislature, and the party press helped to keep the flame of public interest alive. If the utterances of the Government and the Opposition were not always dignified they were at least acrimonious, and removed the treatment of the question above the hum-drum of Parliamentary procedure. Mr. Meredith said that before the award could be considered final it would be necessary first to secure its confirmation by the Dominion Parliament. The Government contended that such a course was expedient but not necessary. However, a resolution was introduced by the latter, and unanimously carried by both sides, asking the Dominion Government to submit to Parliament the necessary legislation to confirm the award. It was at this time conceded on all hands that such legislation was required. The Dominion Parliament, however, rejected

the award on the ground that it did not define the true boundaries. Mr. Meredith then said that the only course now left was to submit the matter to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England; and in order to place the soundness of the position he had taken beyond any cavil he insisted that before agreeing to make any reference at all that the question as to the validity of the award, independent of its confirmation by the Dominion Parliament, be submitted to the Privy Council.

The question dragged its weary length along for some years, but when finally it was submitted to the Privy Council that body sustained the contention of Mr. Meredith, and he thus obtained a decided victory on an important constitutional question. While it was under discussion in the Legislature, the Government charged the Opposition with endeavouring to deprive Ontario of part of its territory. It is only necessary to say now that there was no truth in this. The Opposition stood with the Government for all the territory Ontario could get, but they desired at the same time to have the validity of the award placed beyond peradventure. Mr. Meredith and his colleagues were severely criticized by the Government press. The Opposition was said to be a joint in the tail of the Ottawa Government, but the metaphor was wholly undeserved, as neither directly nor indirectly was it or is it prompted from Ottawa. Their principles, no doubt, are to a large extent the same, but their actions are sometimes at cross purposes. On constitutional questions Mr. Meredith's views are generally sound. They at least have the merit of being practical. For example, in 1882, when the matter as to the power of disallowance came up, he gave it as his opinion that we cannot have a strong Confederation without a strong central government. If every Legislature, he believes, was to be at liberty to pass any laws whatever within its own sphere, it would be impossible to hold the machinery of Confederation together. Hence he has no sympathy with the Provincial Rights scheme. It is a mistake, he considers, to shorten the arm of the Federal Government with regard to its control over provincial legislation, and he is opposed to referring the veto power to the Colonial Office, on the ground that Canadians should know better than any one else how to control their own affairs. The use of French in the schools finds a supporter in Mr. Meredith when it is merely a subject of the prescribed course, but he denounces any further use of it, for as this is an English Province, the primary language of the schools must be English. It will be remembered, too, that while this question was being discussed at the recent session of the Legislature he recognized the right of the State to control all public and separate schools, and to prescribe the books to be used in them, excepting those dealing with religious education. He bases this opinion on the law which was in force in this Province respecting education prior to Confederation, which placed the control of the schools in the hands of the Chief Superintendent of Education of Upper Canada, while the course of training was subject to such regulations as might be imposed by him from time to time. He is strongly opposed to making the Education Department a political machine, giving the Minister an immense power over the teachers and all others similarly situated, whose futures he can make and unmake at will. Theoretically such a power was right, but practically it was wrong. Mr. Meredith is in favour of a strict license law, and is opposed to license commissioners being appointed by the Government of the day, as it is extremely dangerous to put so enormous a traffic as the liquor traffic under the heel of the Government.

Mr. Meredith has no sympathy with political cant in any of its forms, and deprecates the agitation that has been going on for some time respecting the future of this country. He believes that Canadians would serve the interests of their country far better if they abandoned the agitation altogether and turned their energies to the development of Canada by natural processes. He is confident that we want neither Imperial Confederation nor Commercial Union, but solidarity—less politics, but more patriotism. He favours the decentralizing of political power as much as possible, and so making the exercise of it a great educating force. He considers the system of Government, as it exists in Canada, the grandest in the world, and ought to be the means of making first-class men.

There is no member of the Legislature who takes a deeper interest in the business of the House than does Mr. Meredith. He can do nothing by halves. He not only attends closely to all matters pertaining to his own party, but watches keenly all Government measures, and constantly makes suggestions which are very frequently adopted by his opponents, hence he is twitted by his colleagues as being the seventh member of the Government.

Mr. Meredith is perhaps the best looking, he certainly has the best presence of any member of the Legislature. As a speaker he would do credit to any deliberative assembly; impassioned, with an excellent command of language, a fine voice, logical, and persuasive, he makes his finest speeches when he warms to his subject and is completely carried away by it. The impression he creates on the listener is that he is thoroughly in earnest.

The Leader of the Ontario Opposition is plain, unassuming in his manner, with an open countenance and a friendly smile that has the tendency to encourage familiarity almost at first sight. He is entirely lacking in that consciousness that is a marked feature in the character of those less eminent in mind. His life moreover has been too busy a one to permit his cultivation of this weakness, while his thoughts have evidently been turned entirely into an objective channel. He is one of the type of men who make history for a country like this, and leave behind them lessons for others to acquire.

G. S. A.