

A Mutable Mentality

Character Impression of Professor James Mavor, Our Most Remarkable Accumulator of Diverse Knowledge

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

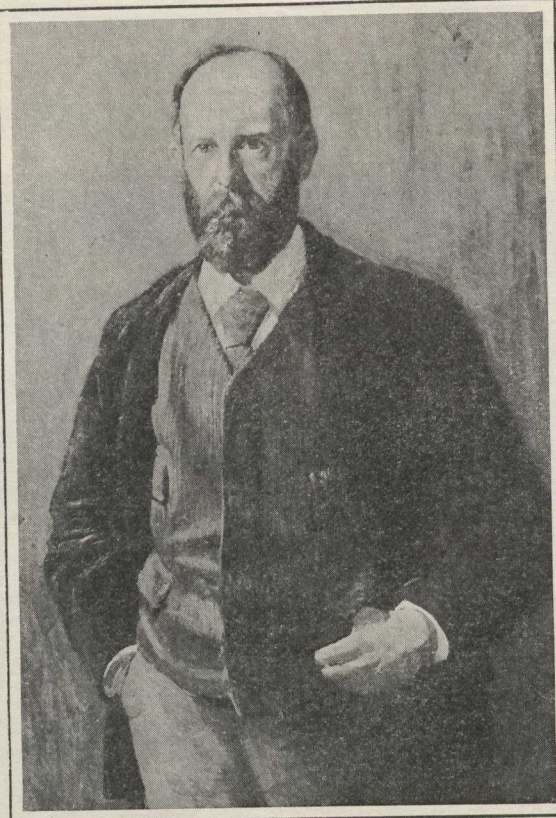
YEAR of the Diamond Jubilee, in the full flush of the later Victorian era, a Scotch professor in the University of Toronto began to work on *An Economic History of Russia*. At that time telephones were still something of a commercial novelty, electric trolleys were in the infant stage, Marconi was only working out his wireless experiment and there were still a number of millions in Russia who thought the earth was flat. It was the year when political economy in America got a new spasm of hysteria over the grand march of gold-seekers to the Yukon. It was the year before the United States drove the Spaniards out of Cuba; when Teddy Roosevelt was just beginning to look like a possible vice-president; the year after Wilfrid Laurier came into power at Ottawa, and the year that Fitzsimmons gave Jim Corbett the solar plexus knockout at Carson City. And in that tremendously eventful year Professor James Mavor, head of the political science department in the University of Toronto, began to gather material for his projected economic history of Russia.

About three weeks ago two bulky volumes, totalling four hundred thousand words, or the length of six modern novels, began to circulate among English readers; and only last week the first copies were passed out to reviewers in Canada. Seventeen years in the production of one work is probably the record in this country. In England, a good while ago, Edward Gibbon spent twenty years writing the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but he did nothing else. In the seventeen years that Professor Mavor spent on his economics of Russia, he has also kept his place at the head of the department of economics in the University of Toronto, and has injected his peculiar Scotch energy into almost as many divergent affairs as Sir Edmund Walker.

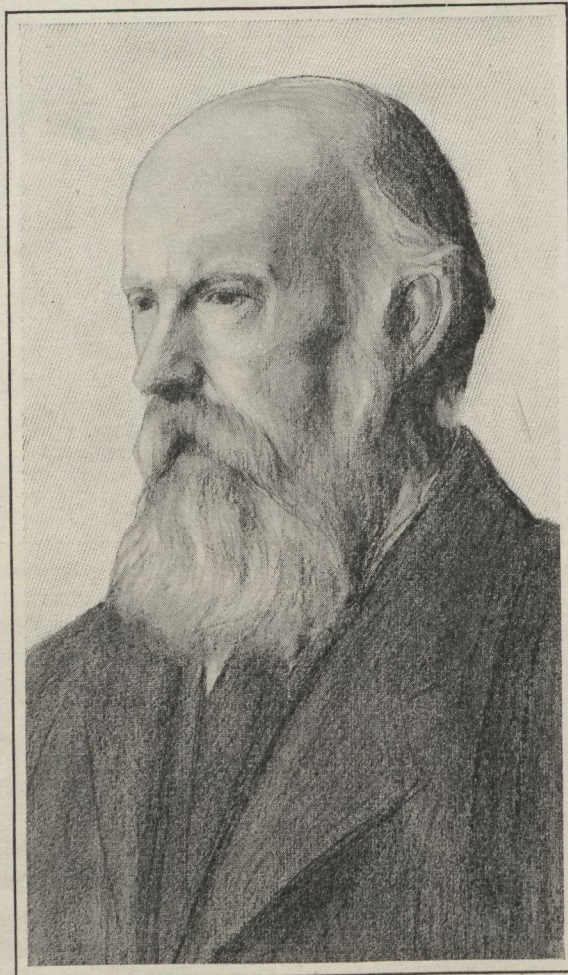
He may be set down as our most savant-like prosecutor of research. In the interval between the beginning and the end of the 400,000-word work on poverty and wealth in Russia, the professor's hair has grown considerably longer than it was when William Cruikshank, R.C.A., Canadian painter, did his portrait. He has become somewhat stooped, and there is a grey lustre in his beard. Never mind. A man does but one big thing a lifetime—if any. Mavor may not make enough in royalties out of his *Economics of Russia* to pay for the clothes he has worn out in writing it, let alone the paper and the ink and the salaries of Russian secretaries whom he brought to this country while he was himself acquiring facility with the Slav tongue. But a book like that resembles poetry and virtue—in being its own exceeding great reward. Because a man professes political economy is no reason why he should practise it, even though he is a Scotchman. But when he can produce a work in his own department as monumental as this 400,000-word mass of research literature, he doesn't need to care what became of the money. These books will not be found in Sunday-school libraries, neither will they be taken home by the pink lady from the public library. They are the only work of that sort and scope in any language, and the English language—as spoken in Canada—has the honour of being the original vehicle. The first translation will be into Russian. It is to be hoped that the Czar will take a month off for the purpose of reading it, and that the copy he gets will be one with the author's autograph. One thing certain, it contains things that none of the Russian professors know. And the brain of the author is a compendium of Slav economics such as no other brain in the world contains. The late Laurence Irving, when he was in Canada last, spent a day with Mavor and told the writer afterwards that in all his own three years at the Russian Foreign Office before he went on the stage, he had failed to get information which Mavor had corralled for the 400,000-word book.

LEST you should think that James Mavor, M.A., is merely a professor of political economy, consider the mutabilities of his intellect. If you should see him by the light of a full moon he looks as though he might have taught Adam Smith the wealth of nations and Noah how to re-establish civilization on a basis of political science after the Ark stranded on Mt. Ararat. Mavor has been so busy acquiring knowledge that he has never had time to bother about academic pedigrees. He is what might be called a plutocrat of pure culture. He never seems to know when he has had enough. When other professors are sleeping the sleep of conventional toil, Mavor is here, there or somewhere else, under almost any kind of circumstances that happen to come along, beguiling himself with draughts at the Pierian spring, of which mankind are advised to drink deep, or not at all, on the principle that "a little learning is a dangerous thing." It may be a new phase of political economy, a set of etchings, a novelty in plays, another chapter of his monumental history, a colony of immigrants, an exhibition of handicrafts or a Punch and Judy show. It may be mid-afternoon or two hours past midnight. It may be cakes and coffee or a bowl of solemn and portentous punch. It may be a congress of wise-

acres or a company of merry-making amateurs. The time, the place and the occasion are all of equal moment to Prof. Mavor, who may look as though he got his degree from the Sphinx at the time the Pyramids were built, but when it comes to having a real human time according to the doctrines of



About the time Prof. Mavor started to write "*An Economic History of Russia*," William Cruikshank, R.C.A., painted his portrait in Toronto.



And when the last proofs of the 400,000-word work had been corrected, seventeen years later, F. Lessore, a French sculptor, made this charcoal sketch of the Professor.

Epicurus tempered by stoicism is among the first to arrive and the last to go home.

The last time I set eyes on Mavor he was at a Punch and Judy show among an audience of children; and he was having almost as much fun as the

four-year-old who crept up on the stage right to the edge of the Punch tabernacle. He knew just when Punch was born and all the differences between the old and the modern Punch. He was obviously delighted and as sorry when it was over as any of the children. But of course the drama is one of the things which Mavor has studied; and from Ibsen to Punch and Judy he is more or less of an authority on the stage.

Naturally you come to compare him at once to our other most distinguished exponent of political economy in Canada—Prof. Stephen Leacock, of McGill. A public debate between Mavor and Leacock on the subject, "Resolved, that the man who makes two blades of hair grow on an ostrich egg where none grew for the past seven years is the greatest enemy to the high cost of living," should be a better cure for the blues than any burlesque show ever put on the boards. I doubt if Mavor has ever read many of Leacock's books of cultivated and iridescent josh, genus literature, species, humouresque. I am morally sure that Leacock will never wade through Mavor's *Economics of Russia*; or if he does it will be either on a bet or to get material for another nonsense novel.

Both these political economists practise the division of labour by the method of multiplication. Hundreds of people read Leacock's levities who don't know that he ever saw the inside of the department of political economy at McGill. Hundreds have listened to Mavor discourse on various subjects who never imagined he would write the *Economics of Russia*. But of course the wisest man that ever lived wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. Professor Mavor also believes in the complete democracy of knowledge. He looks as though he could thrive in a cloister as an ivy clings to a wall. He acts as though he had a roving commission to find out a little of everything—anywhere. Observe him on a torrid July day in a grey seersucker coat and a Bermudan brown duck helmet, rampaging through the crowd on a hot street, passing all the ice-cream restaurants at five miles an hour. In his dry Scotch physique there is an indestructible, unconquerable energy. He travels at top speed, shuffling remorselessly along through the aimless crowd as a man with a purpose.

Yet if anybody with an inquiring mind should halt the Professor at a street-corner, he might take part in a dialogue worthy of Plato. Mavor is always ready to discourse. He talks as rapidly as he walks. His voice has a smooth, seductive twang. He chooses his words with a swift certainty that if the man he is talking to doesn't get his drift, somebody else will. Corot, the great French painter, is said to have painted the same thing in a hundred different ways. Mavor goes him one better. He is able to talk on any one of a hundred themes equally well, and he always manages to keep somebody interested.

HE is the undoubted simon-pure professor. Mavor never talks like a politician or a preacher. He is never conscious of himself in a pose. He burrows into the minutiae of any given subject with the cultivated gusto of a gourmet at a French déjeuner extraordinary. He is never reserved. He carries no pomp of taciturn and superior knowledge. If a young man would like to know, the professor is willing to enlighten him. If a given company of people are engaged discussing anything under the sun, it may be that Mavor has a thing to say quite unthought of by anybody else. Nine-tenths of those present may not agree with him. That is Mavor's opportunity. He prefers the offside. Opinions were made to differ. And if there is perfect unanimity of opinion, Mavor rises to create a diversion by a novel method of treating the same subject from a totally different angle quite impossible to any one else in the room.

Hence, Professor Mavor is a fresh illumination of that much-bedevilled entity known as personality, which nowadays seems to be referred to with about as much discretion as face powder and for much the same purpose. He is an unmistakable personality. There is no one in the University of Toronto, or McGill, or Queen's, or Manitoba, or Saskatchewan, or Alberta, enough like him to establish more than a remote affinity. And Mavor at the same time accomplishes the unobvious by always conducting himself as a perfect gentleman. His courtesy is as remarkable as his versatility. The want-knower may be a coal-heaver or a servant, a child or a government: Mavor is forever urbanely anxious to practise all the amenities of conversation in telling what he knows.

There is one quality of some allegedly great minds that no one has any recollection of the Professor ever exhibiting in any of his multifarious intercourse with mankind. He seems never to ask any questions. He has nothing in common with either Kipling or Socrates. He appears to have done all that in camera, alone among his books or with some sphinx of whose taciturnity he knows the combination. He comes to you armed cap-a-pie with

(Concluded on page 19.)