



SIR JOHN ABBOTT.

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THE LATE HON. SIR JOHN ABBOTT, K. C. M. G.

ON the 30th of October, 1893, Sir John Abbott, the successor of Sir John Macdonald in the Premiership of Canada, died after a lingering illness at his home in Montreal. Thus, within the short space of two years and a half, Canada has lost three of her most eminent public men. In 1891 Sir John Macdonald, her first Premier, and probably the most renowned of colonial statesmen, passed away; and he was soon followed by his great Liberal opponent, Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, who had been the Premier from 1873 to 1878.

John Joseph Caldwell Abbott was the eldest son of the late Rev. Joseph Abbott, the first Anglican incumbent of St. Andrews in the county of Argenteuil, Quebec, and was born at St. Andrews on the 12th day of March, 1821. He received his primary education in his native town, after completing which he entered McGill University, Montreal. In 1847 Mr. Abbott was called to the Bar of Quebec, then Lower Canada, and began the practice of his profession in Montreal, where in a short time he became a leading advocate. He began his political career as a Liberal, and it is well known that his name was signed to the famous annexation manifesto of 1849. That manifesto he himself afterwards described as "the outgrowth of an outburst of petulance in a small portion of the population of the province of Quebec, which is among the most loyal of the provinces of Canada." He was first returned to the Canadian Assembly by his native county in the general elections of 1857, and he continued to hold the seat until 1867. For a short time during this period he occupied the portfolio of Solicitor-General for Lower Canada.

Throughout his whole public career Mr. Abbott paid special attention to questions of commercial law, and he was regarded as one of the best commercial lawyers in Canada. While he was in the Canadian Assembly, he prepared the Insolvent Act of 1864, which he afterwards published in book form with copious and useful notes. He also prepared a Jury Law Consolidation Act for Lower Canada, besides a number of other useful statutes. In 1862 Mr. Abbott was made a Q. C., and the degree of D. C. L. was conferred upon him in 1867 by McGill University.

When the union of the Provinces was consummated in 1867, it was but natural that a public man who had distinguished himself so much in the old assembly should aspire to a seat in the new Parliament of Canada. He accordingly placed himself once more in the hands of his old constituents, and was elected to the House of Commons in 1867. He was re-elected for the same constituency in 1872 and 1874, but was unseated shortly after the latter election, and was not again successful in carrying the county until 1880. He was again elected in 1882. During his later years in the House of Commons he made few speeches. He was chairman for many years of the Committee of Banking and Commerce, — a position as responsible as a seat in the Cabinet, inasmuch as many of the most important matters coming before Parliament are referred to this committee for close investigation.

In May, 1887, Hon. Mr. Abbott was appointed a member of the Privy Council of Canada, and was translated to the Senate, where he became Government leader. He discharged the functions of that position

with great tact and ability, and his speeches in the Senate are among the ablest and most valuable published in the Canadian Hansard.

Upon the death in 1891 of Sir John Macdonald, who was for about twenty years Premier of Canada, the choice of a successor was practically confined to two of his lieutenants, — Sir John Thompson and Hon. Mr. Abbott. The name of Sir Charles Tupper was mentioned in connection with the vacant post, and it is believed that he was not averse to assuming the functions of leadership. But Sir Charles had been absent from Canada for several years, and the conditions had in the mean time so vastly changed that he was scarcely in the race at all. The great provinces of Quebec and Ontario were opposed to his leadership, and in the maritime provinces he probably could not secure a following except perhaps in New Brunswick. The question, therefore, was whether Sir John Thompson or Mr. Abbott would be chosen.

Under the British constitutional practice, which prevails in Canada as well as in the mother country, when the leader of a government dies in office his administration comes to an end, and the viceroy is free to choose whomsoever he will in the dominant party to form an administration. Shortly after Sir John Macdonald's death, the Governor-General summoned Sir John Thompson, and requested him to form a government. The latter had been the late Premier's right-hand man since 1885, but he was only forty-seven years of age, and had been only six years in the House. During those six years he was undoubtedly the principal spokesman of the party, both in the house and on the platform; yet with becoming modesty and generosity, he expressed a preference to remain in the ranks, and recommended Mr. Abbott to the Governor-General. Hon. Mr. Abbott responded to the summons, and formed an administration. This step was a great sacrifice for him. His health was not good;

and he had reached an age when quiet and retirement are most coveted. He, however, obeyed the call of duty, and discharged the arduous duties of first minister until November, 1892, when, unfortunately, his health obliged him to retire. In May, 1892, he was created a Knight Commander of the order of St. Michael and St. George.

When his death was announced a few weeks ago, the press of Canada, without distinction of party, united in extolling the ability and integrity of her great son. We will cull one flower from the wreath of merited panegyric. The "Toronto Empire" said: —

"Mother earth never took to her comforting breast a kindlier man than the late Sir John Abbott. They who had knowledge of his simplicity of manner, the purity of his mind, the geniality of his spirit, the wisdom of his words, will not soon forget him, and the memory will be forever associated with the rugged old face, seamed with many a line of care, and furrowed deep by Time's unrespecting finger. But there was n't a wrinkle on that brave old face that was n't a beauty, that did not make it stronger and more impressive. It was a lion face, and it expressed the lion will which made a grand but unavailing struggle against death."

While Sir John Abbott did not occupy the high office of Prime Minister of Canada for so long a period as his illustrious predecessor, and while he had not displayed the wonderful all-round ability of his gifted successor, his place on the roll of Canada's statesmen will always be an honorable one. He had not Sir John Macdonald's *bonhomie* and knowledge of human nature, but he was a better speaker and a more thorough administrator. He was a singularly methodical man of business; measures committed to his care received his best attention to the smallest detail; and the result of his public labors will continue to be of enduring value to his country.

L.F.X.