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"In Memoriam: Sir Robert Falconer"

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# IN MEMORIAM: Sir Robert Falconer

By  
A. VIBERT DOUGLAS

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IT WAS in the Fellows' Garden of Magdalene College, Cambridge, that I first met Sir Robert Falconer. The British Universities Conference was meeting in Cambridge that summer of 1921, and distinguished university men from all parts of the Empire were gathered there. I was working all through that long vacation in the Cavendish Laboratory and, knowing several of the Canadian delegates,—Dr. F. D. Adams, Dr. H. M. Tory, Professor William Caldwell, Sir Arthur Currie,—found myself included in some of the Conference functions. At the garden party given by the Master of Magdalene, a college founded in 1542, I was introduced to Sir Robert Falconer, whose kindly courtesy, beautiful voice and diction, and cordial friendliness impressed me immediately. He and his son were the guests of the Master of Trinity, Sir Joseph Thomson. He spoke of the rich experience of living in that historic college, the Master's Lodge of which is a Royal Residence on occasions, and so many rooms of which are even more famous because of the undergraduates who once inhabited them—Isaac Newton, Macaulay, Thackeray, Tennyson, Whewell. He spoke of his host—J. J. to all who knew him—one of the great men of Cambridge, kindly, whimsical, and full of anecdote and reminiscence. He spoke of the beauty of "the Backs," where the little river Cam runs through the College grounds; but it appeared that he had never been on the Cam, had never seen the Colleges from a punt or canoe on this lovely stream that wanders past eight ancient colleges and under nine bridges in a three-quarter mile stretch.

It so happened that I had hired a canoe for the entire summer and was in the habit of spending an hour or more almost every evening paddling up and down the Cam, so I knew and loved every yard of the way from Chesterton Road locks to the Mill Pool. Sir Robert welcomed the idea of coming to tea on the following Sunday and then paddling up through "the Backs;" and so it was that three of Canada's great educators—Sir Robert, Dr. Tory and Dr. Adams—forgathered on a hot summer day in student "digs" on the Chesterton Road opposite Jesus Green.

Of these three outstanding Canadian-born educators, two are gone from us. Different in many ways as these men were, they have had much in common. Throughout the last half century, each has poured out his energies unstintingly upon Canadian youth

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and upon Canadian institutions of learning and research. Each has had unswerving faith in Canada; each had a vision of its future and of the essential part that education must play in developing a strong, healthy awareness of national and of international relationships and responsibilities. One has been a pioneer all his years, carrying higher education to British Columbia, to Alberta, and in 1918 to the Canadian Army overseas. He was the driving force in establishing the National Research Laboratories; and now in these latter years, he has been the chief motive power in establishing and launching the latest educational venture, Carleton College. The other two have added lustre to Canadian scholarship, one in the humanities and religion, one in science and the history of science; and they accomplished this while carrying heavy administrative tasks, one as President of the University of Toronto, the other as Professor, Dean, Acting-Principal and Vice-Principal of McGill University. All three have been men of high Christian character, of great intellectual integrity, of strong simple faith in spiritual values and spiritual revelation,—to all three might be applied some words written recently by Principal Malcolm W. Wallace and Dr. W. R. Taylor in their tributes to Sir Robert: "There are those who never cease to grow," whose religion "acquired by assent must be re-won by an effort of the mind and will," whose passion it is "to understand more clearly the enigma of life," "who by sheer power of personal worth keep strong our faith in moral and spiritual values."

After tea on that hot, quiet Sunday afternoon, we walked over to Crowe's Boat-house. Sir Robert was interested to hear about old Crowe and his son. The latter was unable to enlist in 1914 because of severe deafness, but the father, though over age, got himself accepted and served in the Army until a fall led to a broken limb and his discharge. He had then returned to his boat-house, his punts and canoes. Great was his satisfaction in his own army record and his pride in the position of trust held by his son, who had become technician in the Cavendish under Sir Ernest Rutherford, preparing for him and for all of us who worked in his laboratory the sources of radio-active discharge which were needed in our work.

Sir Robert took his place in the centre of the canoe, his son took the stern paddle, I the bow paddle, and we set off upstream, past the ivy-clad walls of Magdalene, with its memories of Pepys who contributed towards a new library and bequeathed to the College all his own books and his red oak bookcases. Passing

under Magdalene Street bridge, we came to the narrow part of the river flowing between the walls of the old and new buildings of St. John's College. These buildings are connected by the covered arched bridge known as the Bridge of Sighs. Beyond this the view of the next two bends of the river opens up with ivied walls, college buildings, towers and turrets on the left, and grey stone bridges giving access to the green lawns, lovely trees, weeping willows and flower gardens on the right. We talked of some of the sons of this college—William Wordsworth, Matthew Prior, Samuel Butler, Sir John Herschel, William Wilberforce, Henry Martyn—as we paddled under St. John's Bridge and on between the green lawns of Trinity College where the arcades and Grecian stateliness of Sir Christopher Wren's Library held our gaze. Then skirting the walls of Trinity Hall which had nurtured Lord Howard of Effingham, and Clare College with its greystone bridge, we approached the lawns and gardens of King's College, whose stately chapel rises to the glory of God and as a monument to two Kings of England,—Henry VI, who founded the College and planned the erection of the Chapel and Henry VII, who provided the funds for its completion. We passed under King's Bridge, watched undergraduates sitting on the river bank as they fed the ducks that frequent that stretch of the river, viewed the buildings of St. Catherine's College and then paddled along by the red brick walls of Queens', and under its wooden "mathematical bridge" whose every timber is set tangential to the curve which it and all its fellows envelop. Here one inevitably thinks of Erasmus, who held the chair of Greek at this College about 1510, and so as we paddled on into the mill pool, the talk was of reformation by restatement as opposed to reformation by revolution.

Beyond Silver Street bridge, a sharp turn to starboard brought us into a dark, narrow bit of the river between a wooded island and the walled garden of Lady Darwin, widow of Sir George of Trinity College, the son of Charles Darwin of Christ's. Over the stone retaining wall, hung the silvery olive green leaves of sweet lavender and, from the canoe, one could always pluck a fragrant blossom or two in passing.

The fragrance of sweet lavender—this perhaps is as good a metaphor as any, when recalling memories of that Sabbath afternoon, twenty-two years ago. The years that followed brought further happy contacts on a few occasions,—tea in Sir Robert's own garden when the British Association held its 1924 meeting in Toronto, and some friendly gatherings at times of conferences. I think, too, of a masterly address at the McGill Union on the League of Nations, of a scholarly and inspiring address at a meeting of the Bible Society in Montreal, and of the charm, grace and sincerity of his vote of thanks to Dr. G. S. Brett after the latter had delivered his presidential address some years ago to Section II of the Royal Society of Canada. I have long thought that, as a speaker, Sir Robert had no peer in this country. The music of his voice, the polish and balance of his sentences (so well described as "distinguished English"), the quality of his thought, and the conviction that lay behind all he said—this combination is all too rare.

It was a book by the late Master of Magdalene, Dr. A. C. Benson, which brought to my attention the words of a chapter-heading in the Book of Proverbs, "a sincere and kind familiarity with wisdom." This phrase seems right and fitting, and comes unsought into my mind as I venture to pay this tribute to the memory of Sir Robert Falconer.

