

# CHARLES MACDONALD, M. A.

FOR MEMORY

J. W. LOGAN

LET us go back to the year 1846. In that year we find Charles Macdonald, son of a builder in Aberdeen granite, entered as a freshman in King's College of Aberdeen University at the age of eighteen. He contributed to the College journal, was foremost in the debating society, and the champion wrestler of his college. Classics and Mathematics were his favourite studies. He graduated in 1850, winning the Hutton Prize, which at that time was given "to the most distinguished scholar at the termination of the Arts Curriculum". He was licensed to be a minister of the Presbyterian Church in the spring of 1856, but preferred teaching to preaching, and held a position in the Aberdeen Grammar School for several years, combining with his duties there the duties also of chaplain in his former college. It was in 1863 that he came to Halifax, being nominated by the Presbyterian Church to their Chair of Mathematics in Dalhousie University, and there he laboured with the faithfulness and great fame that all old Dalhousians well know until five days before his death from pneumonia on the 11th of March, 1901.

The Edinburgh *Scotsman*, speaking of him, quoted a reference to him made by the Chairman at a recent University Club dinner in London. He said that Macdonald was not only the most brilliant scholar of his year but the most brilliant scholar of his time. Such was the man whom we had as teacher and friend here in our midst for the long space of thirty-eight years.

Professor Gordon MacGregor, of honoured memory with Dalhousians, who held the Chair of Physics at Dalhousie for many years before going to Edinburgh University to the like position there, speaking of the association here of Johnson and Macdonald said: "It was full of importance for the future of Dalhousie that two such professors as Johnson and Macdonald should have been secured at the outset for the Chairs of Classics and Mathematics. These being the fundamental subjects of the curriculum, any defective treatment of either would have marred the future of the college. But, though men of very different

were rendered more fruitful by the intimate friendship between them, that the present standing of the college is for the most part to be ascribed."

Let me go back now to the time of my own college days in the early "nineties" of the last century, and speak briefly of Professor Maedonald as a teacher. He had an original and inimitable method of investing mathematical problems with a strange, new interest, which they had never had for me before. I recall him as he stood before his class by the blackboard, now working with his right hand, and now changing his position and working with his left hand, if that gave the class a better view of his work. Now he pauses for a few seconds to interject some illuminating analogy, some comment half to himself, half to the class, and again it may be some reproof, subtle and not soothing, to an unfortunate disturber of the routine of the class-room.

Here are a few of these "asides", taken from the note-book of some Boswell of his Class. "*Some of us, it would seem, are not improving in accuracy of diction.*" "*It's a splay method of speech ye have, it's not gude.*" "*Take the 4 out of bondage to the surd.*" "*Use the first equation as a sort of sledge-hammer to break up the others.*" Now some noise, not helpful to him, comes from the backseat—"Eh! there's nobody more tolerant of fun than myself when it's an evidence of genius, or less so when it is guided by stupidity." Now he is returning an exercise: "Eh! Your work was well set down, *what there was of it,*" and so on for many more examples, if my space permitted.

"Dannie" Murray, his successor in the Chair of Mathematics, said of him:

"All his efforts were directed towards developing in his students clearness of thought, accuracy of expression, self-reliance and true manliness, in a word to converting unformed and inexperienced boys into thoughtful and responsible members of society."

In 1882 he married the eldest daughter of the Hon. W. J. Stairs, but only a year of a happy married life was granted to him. She died after little more than a year, shortly after the birth of his son, who died a few years ago, after returning from overseas service in the War of 1914-1918.

the chief part. After a short and simple service, the body was carried to Camp Hill Cemetery, like Browning's grammarian, on the shoulders of twelve students, marching in two relays of six each. The students who had this coveted honour were: D. E. Ross, R. Bohner, E. R. Faulkner, J. Ross Miller, L. H. Cumming, J. Malcolm, E. M. Flemming, M. A. Lindsay, N. Macdonald, J. Corston, M. J. McPherson, and G. H. Sedgewick. A perpetual monument to his memory is the Macdonald Memorial Library, erected in 1912 largely from funds contributed by his former students. Very appropriately might we inscribe on the east wall of the spacious reading-room of the library beside his portrait: *If you seek his monument, look around you.*

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