

# SIR JOHN WILLISON

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IN this country the journalist who does not aim at public life by seeking a seat in parliament or the legislature, and who contents himself with his professional duties, attains distinction slowly. It was the lot of Sir John Willison, however, to win a commanding place early in his career. He possessed the enduring quality in mind and in character. When a mere lad he set out to cultivate a definite ambition by worthy means and, keeping in view the things that are right as well as the things that are expedient, he found the path to success easier than he expected. A country boy, in the County of Huron, Ontario, with a rural school education, and the necessity of making his own way, he faced the obstacles which so often deter youth from advancement. Those who knew him at this period declare that he was industrious, fond of reading, careful in his habits, and keenly interested in public affairs. From these beginnings, and with this endowment, proceeded the powerful and experienced journalist who was known and respected from one end of the Dominion to the other, and far beyond it, and whose death is now deplored as a distinct national loss.

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The Willison family belonged to that element in the Conservative party who resented the Pacific Scandal of 1873 and Sir John Macdonald's connection with it. So young Willison naturally associated himself with the Liberal cause under Brown, Mackenzie and Blake. It was purer politics, better government, honourable methods of party politics that always attracted him, rather than rigid adherence to a side. On discovering that good men were not all in one group, he developed the tolerant spirit and the broad outlook which made *The Globe* under his editorship so influential and distinguished. It was a risky step when he took it, but the press of Canada has never receded from the political independence which he made the standard of sound journalism. When Sir Joseph Flavelle, an enlightened man, founded *The News*, it is certain that Willison gave no thought to the political estrangements that might flow from a changed relationship. As *The News* passed under his sole control, he had slowly if steadily associated himself with the Conservatives. His views on national policy, the expansion of

every part of Canada, and the maintenance of the Imperial connection made him content with the alliance—providing he remained the master of his fate and the captain of his soul. Toronto with six daily newspapers was an over-worked field; so, laying aside an impossible task, he devoted the last ten years of his life to *The Times*, to public speaking, and to the establishment of *Willison's Monthly*, which, with his son's aid, he lifted in a brief space to a position of importance.

In the usually accepted sense of the term, Sir John Willison was not a party man at all. More than once he found himself in conflict with the organized forces that are prone to control policy and to dictate to political leaders. The editor who was prepared to appeal to the intelligence and reason of democracy was hampered, not helped, by bosses who, in his view, exercised a malign influence. But never neutral in opinion on any large issue, and never a Mr. Facing-Both-Ways, he accepted conditions which he could not alter, and into any cause he advocated the whole weight of his energies was thrown. To the equipment of the capable journalist he added two qualities not often found in the same person: an acute—almost uncanny—insight into current opinion, and the courage that rises in a crisis. He was, therefore, a formidable antagonist and a pillar of strength in the storm. So men of all sorts sought his counsel in an emergency, trusting to his balanced judgment, his unique experience and his incorruptible integrity. There is scarcely a parallel in the political annals of Canada to the silent authority he wielded in politics, in social legislation and in constitutional discussion. The statesman who heeded his advice seldom travelled the road to defeat, and never with dishonour. Willison, as Canon Cody quoted in his moving and eloquent funeral address, was “always on the side of the angels.” His conscience was active at every juncture; if it led him to champion unpopular opinions and to defend the weaker side, he faced harsh criticism and even abuse with serene temper and a genial stoicism. He resolutely declined a party nomination because it would place a yoke on his shoulders and commit him to unborn compromises which might, it is true, be right and needful, but might equally be wrong and shameful. He determined to be free to choose when the moment for choice came. To the honest and zealous “ward heeler” such a man was incomprehensible; when half-comprehended, he was a thoroughly uncomfortable and dangerous person. But this would not be the verdict of Mowat and Whitney, of Laurier or Borden.

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In the early days he had attended the temperance lodges which sprang up in the Ontario villages and were schools of oratory for the youths of that period. There he learned to speak fluently, while he was acquiring the art of clear thinking and gathering together that great body of information afterwards turned to such good account. The self-education of such a lad is in itself a profitable subject for reflection. Like others then denied the advantage of facilities now open to everyone, Willison would sometimes regret that he had missed university training. But in his writings and his addresses on every conceivable topic there was no observable lack of academic finish, and he invariably followed the plan of Goldwin Smith who wrote, rewrote, and corrected his articles with meticulous care. He was a painstaking editor and a competent critic of manner and style in the hurry of performance inseparable from daily journalism. His achievements were in all important respects the result of unwearied labour, undertaken with enthusiasm, and carried out faithfully to the desired end. The books that he published were but a tiny part of the literary work done during forty years. His *Recollections* reflected his philosophy of life, and could have been composed only by a man of tolerant opinions, scholarly tastes and the finest impulses. To the infinite sense of fun which marked so much of his writing and speaking, there was rarely added the note of sarcasm, and restrained irony was the weapon employed when he had to be severe. Apply this temperament and these accomplishments to the study and solution of the practical problems of the day, and you have a fair picture of the place which Sir John Willison made for himself in the estimation of the community. That he broke down finally from continuous over-work which was too heavy a draft upon even a fine constitution and life-long abstemiousness, is manifest. He had lived the allotted span, as we are accustomed to say, but not the span which observance of the laws of health appoints for the splendid vitality of such a man. Yet is not this the common lot of the working journalist who keeps the faith, and is not lured aside by the love of ease or the passion for material gain? He works till he drops.

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No service performed by Sir John Willison deserves more gratitude than the broad national outlook which he cultivated for himself and encouraged in others. Quite unaffectedly a Canadian, as well as an Imperialist, he regarded the Nova Scotian and the British Columbian with an equal share of brotherly affection, and was sure that the greatness of the Dominion would rest upon hearty

co-operation, mutual consideration and good feeling among the various provinces. His expressed opinion of the people of the Maritime Provinces, after several visits, was that no finer existed anywhere; and when the claims of the East had been fully explained, he was a convinced champion of their validity. The British Empire early took hold of his imagination, and this feeling grew with the years. Not long ago he circled the globe on his tour to Australia, sailing from Vancouver across the Pacific and returning by the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal, and the sight of the flag at so many and such various outposts of British rule, as he has related, stirred his emotions to their depths. Looking beyond the present, he could see a permanent purpose in the partnership. He was of the exalted company of those who dream dreams and see visions,—and we are assured that where there is no vision the people perish.