

CHAPTER XIV

CLOSING YEARS

THE years, from 1886 to 1892, were principally occupied with steady college work, increased in magnitude and anxiety by the addition of classes for women, under the Donalda endowment, and by the new professorships, buildings, and appliances due to the benefactions of Sir William McDonald and of Mr. Thomas Workman. I was thus obliged, in great measure, to intermit my original scientific work. I may mention, however, researches leading to the discovery of interesting fossil sponges in the Upper Cambrian rocks of the lower St. Lawrence.¹ I was also able to keep up my studies of the fossil plants of the Cretaceous and Tertiary of the North-West Provinces of Canada, and have placed in the hands of Professor D. P. Penhallow some undescribed

¹ For a popular account of these discoveries, first made by Dr. B. J. Harrington, see "Salient Points in the Science of the Earth," Hodder & Stoughton, London. Full descriptions and figures will be found in the Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada.

specimens throwing additional light on the Devonian flora of Scotland, Canada, and the United States, as well as material relating to the Pleistocene age in Canada,—which, as I have long ago partially shown, is not wholly "glacial," but contains many plants of the temperate and cold-temperate periods, showing alternations of somewhat mild with cold stages,—depending probably on unequal or differential elevation and subsidence. I also collected, in a little illustrated volume, my papers on the Pleistocene of Canada, under the name of "The Canadian Ice Age."

Up to 1892, or to my seventy-second year, I felt strong and well, and was not aware of any failure in energy. In September of that year, a break in the work of my life was caused by severe illness. I had come up from our cottage at Little Métis, to begin the preparations for the session, as usual, early in September, but was recalled to Métis by the serious illness of my wife, and stayed there with her until she was sufficiently convalescent to return with me to Montreal. It pleased God to restore her, so that she was able to resume her ordinary duties. Soon after, and consequent on exhausting labour, anxiety as to college matters,—then in some respects critical,

—and unusually warm and sultry weather, I was prostrated by pneumonia, which confined me to the house for two months; and was finally ordered by my medical advisers to betake myself to the South to escape the Canadian winter.

I left Montreal with my wife early in December, and we took up our abode for some time at Savannah, where the air, at that season, was balmy and summer-like, and were transported into a region of live-oaks, magnolias, palmettos, and camelias. We spent a few weeks very pleasantly, interested in the many novel aspects of southern life and nature, and in exploring all the environs of that beautiful city. In January, the weather became colder, and we fled, in company with our friends Mr. and Mrs. Finley, farther south to St. Augustine, where again we found a summer temperature, and a still further accession of southern features, in the orange groves, true palms, and many new and interesting forms of animal life on land and in the sea,—not the least curious being the quaint little land-crabs of the islands near St. Augustine. In February, we took leave with some regret of St. Augustine, and made our next sojourn on the beautiful ridge of Summerville, near Augusta, a charming winter re-

sort. Thence, as the weather became warmer, we removed to Ashville, on the mountains of North Carolina, where we met some Canadian friends, and enjoyed delightful air and scenery. From Ashville we went north to Washington, where we found the American Academy in session, and met many scientific friends. There also, at an entertainment given by Sir Julian and Lady Pauncefote, on the occasion of Sir Julian's elevation to the rank of Ambassador for Great Britain, we had an opportunity of seeing the greater part of the diplomatic corps at that time in Washington,—a most picturesque and interesting gathering. Our next stopping place was Baltimore, where we spent a day under the guidance of our old friend Dr. William Osler, and of the president, Dr. Gilman, in visiting the Johns Hopkins University. We then moved northward by way of New York, where we saw some of our friends connected with Columbia College, and returning to Montreal, met with a reception from the students, too enthusiastic for so old and worn-out a worker, but not the less gratifying.

When about to leave Montreal, on my journey to the South, in December, I addressed the following letter to the students:—

"DEAR YOUNG FRIENDS,—I had hoped, in the present session, to be among you as usual, doing what I could, officially and personally, for your welfare, but was suddenly stricken down by a dangerous illness. In this, I recognised the hand of my Heavenly Father, doing all things for the best, and warning me that my years of active usefulness are approaching their close, and that it is time to put off my armour, and assume the peaceful garb of age, in which perhaps I may yet be spared to be of some service in the world.

"For the time being, I must be separated from the work that has always been to me a pleasure, and you will excuse me for addressing to you a few words, on topics which seem to me of highest moment to you as students. I may group these under the word 'Loyalty,' a word which we borrow, with many others, from the French, though we have the synonym 'leal,' which if not indigenous, has at least been fully naturalised both in English and Scottish. These words are directly associated with the idea of law and obligation, and with the trite, though true, adage, that we who would command must first learn to obey.

"I need scarcely remind you of that loyalty

which we owe to the sovereign lady the Queen, and to the great Empire over which she rules. I have had frequent occasion to note the fact, that this sentiment is strong in the rising generation of Canadians, and nowhere more so than in McGill. It is indeed not merely a sentiment, though, even in a time which boasts of being practical and utilitarian, the feelings of the heart count for something: it is based also on the rational appreciation of the benefits of a rule, which, while allowing the greatest freedom of individual action, secures equal rights and protection for all.

"We are, every one of us I hope, loyal to our University, and to the University as a whole, not merely to any particular faculty of it. McGill has endeavoured, more than most universities, carefully to adapt its teaching to the actual wants and needs of the student, whether in the matter of that general academical learning which makes the educated man, or of that special training which fits the graduate for taking his place, creditably, in the highest walks of professional life. To this, I think, its success has been largely due. Yet, with all the breadth and the elasticity of our system, we cannot per-

fectly meet every case, and there are still desiderata, the want of which is most deeply felt by those engaged in the management of the University. Our course, however, has been onward and upward, and it may be truly said that no session has passed in which something has not been added to our means of usefulness. The future, indeed, has endless possibilities, and there will be ample scope for improvement,—and perhaps also for occasional complaints,—when the youngest students of to-day have grown to be grey-haired seniors. You have good cause, notwithstanding, to be proud of your University, and to cherish feelings of affection and gratitude to the wise and good men, who, amid many difficulties, have brought it to its present position, and are still urging it onward.

“You should be loyal to the ideal of the student. You are a chosen and special band of men and women, selected out of the mass, to attain to a higher standing than your fellows, in those acquirements which make life noble and useful. It is not for you to join in the follies of frivolous pleasure-seekers, or to sacrifice the true culture of your minds and hearts to the mere pursuit of gain. Your

aims are higher, and require isolation from the outer world, and self-denial, in the hope that what you are now sowing and planting, will bear good fruit in all your future lives. Live up to this ideal, and bear in mind that self-control, and the habits of mind which it implies, are of themselves worth more than all the sacrifices you make.

“Be loyal to the memories of home. I regret very much that McGill cannot at present offer to its students such temporary homes as college halls could supply. The time for this is coming, I hope soon. But most of you have those at home who look on your residence here with solicitude and longing, who will rejoice in your successes, and perhaps be heartbroken should any evil befall you. It is customary to say that young people at college are removed from the restraints of home and its influences for good. But this need not be. To the truly loyal, absence should make these influences more powerful, and the thought of those who are watching you with loving hearts, in distant homes, should be a strong impelling motive in the student's life.

“Next to home is heaven, and, let me now add, loyalty to Him who reigns there, and

to the Captain of our salvation made perfect through suffering for us. Many of you, I know, are earnest Christians and growing in spiritual life, as you advance in learning. To those who are not, let me say,—read, as a serious study, the life of Jesus Christ as given in the Gospels. Read it in the light of His own sayings, that, ‘He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many,’ and that, ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.’ Read of His life as the Man of Sorrows, of His agony in Gethsemane, of His death on the Cross,—crushed not merely by physical agony, but by the weight of our iniquities,—and you may then judge, if there is any obligation so great as that under which we lie to Him, any loyal service so blessed as that of the Saviour. The gate may be strait, and we may have to leave some things outside, but it is held open lovingly by the pierced hand of our Redeemer, and it leads through a happy and fruitful life to eternal joys,—to that land which the Scottish poet, whose religious ideal was so much higher than his own life, or the current theology of his time,

calls the ‘land o’ the leal.’ That happy country is near to me, but I hope separated from you by a long, useful, and happy life; but, let us all alike look forward to meeting beyond the River of Death, in that promised land where He reigns, who said, ‘Him that confesseth Me before men, will I confess before My Father that is in heaven.’

“In the meantime, you remain here to pursue useful work; I go to seek restored health elsewhere, and can only remember you in my prayers. Let us hope, that when the winter is passed we may meet once more, and that I may be able to congratulate you on well-merited success, not merely in regard to the prizes and honours which few can obtain, but in that abiding education of the mind and heart, which McGill offers to all her studious children without exception.”

During the closing exercises of the college and of the Normal School, in the spring of 1893, I was able to resume, to some extent, my duties as principal, and at the Arts Convocation on April 29th, at which I was in time to be present, I concluded the session with the following address:—

“After a long, and in many respects agreeable and profitable, sojourn in the sunny

south, I rejoice and thank God once more to be able to take my place in McGill, and to greet the old familiar faces, of the city and of the land I love; and my pleasure is enhanced by the cordial welcome of colleagues and friends, and not least by the warm greeting of the undergraduates,—a reception which renews my youth. It has been a source of much gratification to me to learn, from time to time, of the continued prosperity of the University, and of the golden showers that kind friends have been pouring into her lap. To-day, at the close of one of the most successful sessions of the University, it seems as if its governors and officers had entered into a conspiracy to prove how well they can get on without a principal. I know, however, how much of care and labour the sudden breakdown of my health last autumn, has occasioned to the vice-principal, Dr. Johnson, and to the other officers of the University, and we owe sincere thanks to them for the cheerful and able manner in which extra duties have been discharged. It is also satisfactory to note, that this University is now in a position in which the absence or removal of no one man can do it substantial injury.

“It is true that the liberal gifts by which this session has been signalised, have not fallen so much on the central faculty of the University represented here to-day as on the professional faculties. We must not, however, forget the opening of that magnificent abode provided by Sir Wm. C. McDonald for our department of physical science, and the new University library, founded by the liberality of Mr. Peter Redpath, which is to be formally opened in October. Both of these large additions belong to the Faculty of Arts, the college proper, in which resides all our teaching in pure science and philosophy, as well as in literature; and while we, and all friends of education, rejoice in the prosperity and extension of the professional faculties, we shall still more rejoice, when it comes to the turn of the Faculty of Arts to be raised above its present penury, and to have its staff augmented, up to the needs of the time.

“It must be noticed here, that the growing specialisation of literary, philosophic, and scientific subjects, has obliged the universities of the mother country, and of the United States, to divide and subdivide these subjects in a manner unheard of in former times. In

the new University of Chicago, endowed by one of the millionaires of that city, I find the subjects covered by our Logan Chair of Geology, divided into nine, each represented by a separate man, and some of these men, amongst the best in America in their several specialties. Other chairs are treated in like manner. We, in McGill, are far at present from such subdivision. But, when we think of this, we cannot fail to be astonished at the good work done by our small staff, each member of it, burdened with work which might well be divided amongst several chairs, and in some cases very imperfectly supplied with means and appliances. Viewing the matter in this way, and in connection with the small economies we have been obliged to practise, the friends of education should hold our working men, in the Faculty of Arts, in no small respect and esteem. In my absence these matters have occupied much of my thought.

"Referring to the report for the past session as presented by the vice-principal, the fact that we have had more than a thousand students actually attending lectures, that the Faculty of Arts has had 347 students, and that at this and the previous meetings of

convocation, we have conferred 135 degrees, (forty-two of them in Arts), constitutes a proud record for a Canadian university. I note, with especial pleasure in this regard, the success of our efforts for the higher education of women, as evidenced by the large number of students and graduates, and by the high standing they have attained.

"In the annual report, the vice-principal has ably treated the seeming paradox, that McGill, while receiving so great benefactions, continues to be so poor. The work established by the old Board of Governors, consisted mainly of the primary essentials of a liberal education, and to these the McGill endowment and subsequent benefactions, up to recent years, were devoted. The later benefactions have been largely for the establishment of new work, or for the extension of special departments. Hence, the older and more general work, always slenderly endowed, has remained unaided, and has even had larger demands made on it by each succeeding benefaction.

"Thus, some departments are practically impoverished, and greater stress of work laid on them, while others are enriched. It would seem that 'the heavy end of the log,'

as well as the shorter levers, belong at present to the older and purely academical branches. We have, however, been accustomed to this in McGill, and, like the schoolboy, out at elbows, have not been concerned, knowing that the sight of the bare skin would be sure to produce either a patch or a new coat. There has always been, on the part of our governors and benefactors, that good generalship, which can see that one part of our educational army cannot be unduly advanced, or another allowed to be beaten back, without danger of defeat, and we may be sure that a similar policy will prevail in the future. To the graduates of to-day, I may say, we have full confidence that you will sustain the honour of the University, and will regard the education you have received as a sacred trust, of which you are the stewards, and which is to be used for the good of all, for the advancements of your country, and for the glory of God."

Although restored in general health, on my return to Montreal it was very evident to me, that I had not recovered my former vigour, and, acting on the urgent advice of my medical attendants, I therefore decided

to place my resignation in the hands of the Board of Governors, and accordingly submitted to them the following letter on the 26th of May, 1893:—

"To the Board of Royal Institution, Governors of McGill College:—

"Gentlemen,—It has become my painful duty to-day to tender to you my resignation of the offices of Principal, and Professor of Geology and Natural History, which I have held for so many years;—this resignation to take effect at the end of the present educational year in July, or at any earlier date that may be convenient to the Board.

"Referring to my letter of March last to the Chancellor, I have, since that time, used every means in my power towards the restoration of my health, and have consulted my medical advisers, to whom, (and especially to Drs. Craik, Stewart, and Blackader), I am under the deepest obligation, for their unremitting care and kindness. The result is,—and this coincides with my own impression,—that, at my advanced age, and in consideration of the symptoms still remaining as consequences of my recent illness, I cannot hope for such restoration of health as would

render it safe for myself, or expedient in the interests of the University, that I should resume my official work.

"I beg to assure the Board that I have arrived at this conclusion with extreme regret, and am resigned to it only in the belief that it is the will of God, and that it will tend to the best interests of the University in the future. Even in the most favourable circumstances, I could only hope to hold the reins of government for a short time, and but feebly, while the present enlarged and advancing condition of our affairs requires a strong and firm hand, and watchful guidance.

"I need not say, that I shall have much pleasure in doing anything in my power, to strengthen the hands of my successor, and to promote the interests of the University in an unofficial way. I shall also be glad to retain some connection with the University as Emeritus Principal and Professor, and, if desired by the Board, as a Governors' fellow. In these relations, I shall at all times be at the service of the Board, for any aid which it may be in my power to render, without interference with the rights or duties of others.

"I am, however, very desirous of devoting as much as possible of my remaining time and

strength to the preparation, arrangement, and description of the collections which I have placed in the Peter Redpath Museum, with a view to increasing their scientific and educational value, and of completing my own life-work in Canadian geology. I have been prevented hitherto from attaining these ends by the pressure of other duties. For this reason, I desire to retain the position of an honorary curator,—stipulated for when I presented my collections,—and to have the temporary use of a room in the museum for the prosecution of the work.

"Since my return, I have, with the aid of the vice-principal and the acting-secretary, been endeavouring to finish what remains of the work of last session, and to make preparation for that of the next. This I hope will be completed before the June meeting of the Board, and in the meantime I would ask the Board to authorise one of its members to act in regard to what remains to be done, as to vacating my office, and college residence.

"I have further, to tender to the members of the Board my most sincere thanks for the interest which they have ever manifested in my work, and for their kindness to myself and to Lady Dawson,—more especially in my

recent illness ; also to the vice-principal, and to the deans and professors of the several faculties, for the readiness and efficiency with which they have discharged extra duties imposed on them by my absence.

“In conclusion, while profoundly grateful for the measure of success which has attended my administration of the affairs of the University, and especially for the absence of those disorders which have marred the success of so many colleges, I would not wish that my educational views and aspirations should be measured by our present attainments. The ultimate objects to be secured, by combining all the elements of success present in our time and country, have been steadily kept in view from the first, and have been presented in many forms to our friends and to the public. Much has been attained, but much still remains to be accomplished, especially with reference to the purely educational or academical faculty, which, in the present stage of Canadian society, demands more than any other, generous support. Means for this have hitherto been deficient, and much precious time and energy have been wasted in the inevitable struggle to maintain the ground already gained. It has been my earnest prayer, that

I might be permitted to carry out in the case of McGill, my ideal of a complete and symmetrical university suited to this country, and particularly to the English population of this province. It has pleased God to deny me this satisfaction ; but I entertain the firm belief that good foundations have been laid, which will not be disturbed, but will be built on and carried to full completion, by the energy, care, and judgment of my immediate successors. I remain, Your obedient servant,

“J. WILLIAM DAWSON.”

Having thus brought to a close my official connection with the University, my wife and I repaired to our cottage at Little Métis for the summer, and prepared later to take up our abode, in a small house on University Street, within easy reach of the college museum and library,—since I still hoped to spend some years in the study of God’s wondrous works, as well as of His Word.

The spring of 1896 recalled my wife and myself to England, to be present at the marriage of our youngest son, Rankine, to Miss Gloranna M. Coats, which took place in June, in St. Michael’s Church, Chester Square, London, S.W. As I felt that this must be

my last visit to Britain, I endeavoured to make the most of it, and was present at the great conference in celebration of the Jubilee of the Evangelical Alliance, in Exeter Hall, and at Mildmay Park. In London, I attended meetings of the Royal Society, Victoria Institute, and Geological Society. I went, too, with a party of friends to the Keswick Conference for the year, from which I took a day to visit Mr. R. Kidston of Stirling, and to discuss with him some points of mutual interest, respecting Carboniferous plants, on which he is one of the best authorities. I was also persuaded to remain over for the meeting of the British Association in Liverpool, in September, at which I had an opportunity of illustrating to a large meeting of geologists the structure of *Eozoön*.

We returned to Montreal in October. I enjoyed this expedition to England, but fear that it told on my little remaining strength, and prepared the way for the partial paralysis, which attacked me in the summer and autumn of 1897, preventing me from attending the meeting of the Royal Society of Canada, held in Halifax in that year, and the meeting of the British Association in Toronto,—and which has left me, since then, an invalid,

awaiting the moment when my Heavenly Father shall call me home, and occupying the time which He may give me in this world, mainly with spiritual, rather than with worldly affairs.