

CHAPTER XV

OBITUARY

IT was on Sunday morning, November 19th, 1899, that Sir William Dawson completed his earthly career, passing away in the most peaceful manner, after several days of partial unconsciousness. On the day following, a special meeting was convened at the University, and attended by the Governors, the Principal, the Teaching Staff, and Students, when the following addresses were given.

Principal Peterson, after reading the Ninetieth Psalm, spoke as follows:—

“ Since we met in our various class rooms last week, a great and good life has been brought to its appointed end. Sir William Dawson had considerably overpassed the span of life of which the Psalmist speaks: it was ‘by reason of strength’ that it was for him well-nigh fourscore years. Ever since he assumed the principalship in November 1855,—that is for a period of exactly forty-four years,—he has been the most prominent

figure connected with this University. The last six years of his life—since 1893—have been spent, it is true, in retirement from active work, but he has been with us in spirit all this time. Many of us know how closely, and with what a fatherly interest, he has followed all our later history. And now his life has closed, in great physical weakness, but happily unaccompanied by distress or suffering:

‘Of no distemper, of no blast he died,
But fell like autumn fruit that mellow’d long.’

“ Busy, active and strenuous all his days, he must have chafed, I fancy, during recent years under a growing sense of uselessness,—almost an impatience at being laid aside from work, which had been to him so long the very breath of life; yet none ever said with more simple, child-like resignation, ‘Thy way, not mine!’ For such a painless passing out of life, no note of sorrow need be struck. There is no sting in a death like his; the grave is not his conqueror. Rather has death been swallowed up in victory,—the victory of a full and complete life, marked by earnest endeavour, untiring industry, continuous devotion and self-sacrifice, together with

an abiding and ever-present sense of dependence on the will of Heaven. His work was done, to quote the puritan poet's noble line, 'As ever in his great task-master's eye;' and never for a moment did he waver in his feeling of personal responsibility to a personal God. Others will speak to you of his record as a scientific man. I shall permit myself only to say, that few can have an adequate idea of the power and forcefulness revealed in the mere fact, that one who had so onerous a part to play as a college head, should have been able to keep up scientific work at all. A weaker nature would have exhausted itself in the problems of administration.

"He, himself, has left it on record, in his paper entitled, 'Thirty-eight years of McGill,' that these years were 'filled with anxieties and cares, and with continuous and almost unremitting labour.' There are on my library table at the present time, three volumes, in which three college presidents may be said to have summed up the life-work it has been given them to do, for the institutions with which they were severally connected,—Caird of Glasgow, Eliot of Harvard, and Gilman of Johns Hopkins. The first was a massive intellect which, in the security of a long-estab-

lished university system, delighted to deal, in a series of addresses to the Glasgow students, with such subjects as the unity and progressiveness of the sciences, the study of history, the study of art, and the place in human development, of Erasmus and Galileo, Bacon, Hume, and Bishop Butler. The two American presidents have lived more in the concrete, and they have put on record, their attitude to, and their methods of dealing with, the various problems they have had to face in the educational world in which their work has been done. Alongside their memorial volumes, I like to place a still more unpretending collection of 'Educational Papers,' which Sir William Dawson circulated among his friends. They mark the various stages, full of struggle and stress at every point, of his college administration, and they form a record of what he was able to accomplish,—apart from his work as a geologist,—in the sphere of education, for the High School and the Normal School of this city, for the schools of the province, and above all for McGill itself, which he found in 1855 a mere college, with eighty students, and which he raised to the level of a great university, with over a thousand.

"Not even in his well-earned retirement could he permit himself to be idle. To me, one of the most touching sights, in the first year of my arrival here, was the indomitable perseverance with which, every day, the well-known figure of the old Principal would make its way, bag in hand, across the campus to the museum he loved so well, there to work for a time, among the valuable collections which the University owes to his zeal, industry and devotion. It was in 1841, that he published his first scientific paper, and the activity which began then was continued down to the Thursday in the week before his death, when, some reference to the mining industry of this country, suggested to him that once more, with failing hand and wearied brain, he should put pen to paper on the subject of the 'Gold of Ophir.' And now he has entered into his rest,—affectionately tended to the last by the gentle care of a devoted and heroic wife, and solaced by the presence of a distinguished son, and loving daughter. The world had no power to hold him any more. His work was done, and his spirit yearned to pass beyond all earthly bounds.

"He is gone, and we shall see his living face no more. But, teachers and students alike,

may have ever with them the inspiration of his noble life, and the stimulus of his high example. What he was to those who were so long his colleagues, I leave others on this occasion to set before us: my closing words to the students of McGill must be the expression of a confident hope, that the record of Sir William's life and work, will always be an abiding memory in this place. If you will bear it about with you in your hearts, not only will you be kept from lip service, slackness, half-heartedness in your daily duties,—and from the graver faults of youth, at which his noble soul would have revolted, from dishonesty, sensuality and impurity in every form,—but you will be able, each in his sphere, to realise more fully the ideal of goodness and truth, so that at the last, you too may hear the voices whispering, as they have now spoken to him,—'Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'"

Dr. Craik, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, said,—“that since the death of Sir William Dawson, the feeling uppermost in his mind was one of deep personal loss. He was one of those who had attended the inaugural lecture of Sir William, as well as the whole of his first course of lectures on botany and

zoology. He had only graduated the year before, and it was in the following year that he was officially appointed to a position on the teaching staff of the College, so that Sir William formed a connecting link between those two important events in his life. Ever since that time, his relations with Sir William had been constant and intimate, and he had ever looked on his Principal with mingled feelings of love and reverence. At the time of his first appearance in McGill, it was hard to detect the latent powers that lay in Sir William, and it was not until he had overcome many of the difficulties that lay in his path, that it was realised that a great man was in their midst. He did for McGill what perhaps no other man could have done,—he saved its very existence. The incubus of inertia had long settled upon it so heavily, that nothing but herculean efforts, such as Sir William put forth, could have lifted it.

“Sir William Dawson accomplished as much good by his example as by his precept. He was not a man to carp and preach at those under him, or to constantly remind a man of his faults, but his example was ever one worthy of following, and his life was a living sermon. He possessed in a rare degree the

power to get the best possible work out of his assistants. Never in his life had he seen Sir William's equal as a teacher. He had such a clear and forceful way of arranging and stating his facts and knowledge, that it was impossible for any one to listen to one of his lectures without getting the best possible idea of the subject in question. He was a man of most lovable disposition, and if he had one fault it was his too tender and loving heart.”

Professor Cox said:—“You have heard from some who have been his friends and fellow-workers what they have found it in them to say of Sir William Dawson; and now it is my privilege to add a few words as one who came to know him later in life.

“We are conscious, that already, six generations of students have passed through this University, to whom he was no more than a name, and we would fain use these precious moments to call up before you some vivid and personal impression of the man. But how poor are words as substitutes for the personal touch! It is easy to say that he was a scholar of distinguished—almost encyclopædic—learning; that in science he attained the very highest honours; and that he

made McGill,—nay, it would be truer to say that for thirty-eight years he was McGill. True, he found a group of benefactors, such as surely no man ever before had at his beck and call,—men who possessed not only the means, but the far-sighted public spirit to employ these for great ends, under his guidance; he had able and faithful colleagues, some of whom are with us still; and, perhaps best of all, he had many, many hundreds of students, who so far knew how to profit by his teaching and example, that they have spread the fame of McGill broadcast over the land. To the world at large, which loves always to crystallise its ideas round a man, McGill was Sir William Dawson, and Sir William Dawson was McGill.

“But, though we have been proud to remember that he was probably the greatest palæontologist this continent has produced, and have felt our hearts swell with gratitude to him as the father of McGill, it is not of this that we have been chiefly thinking since yesterday, and wish to remind you to-day. It is the gracious personality of the man. When I passed yesterday evening, and saw the flag at half-mast, drooping mournfully in the dim light, I thought of the thousands of times

the familiar figure had entered through the portals below. There is not a corner of this building that fancy does not associate with that figure, from this hall, where he has conducted so many public ceremonies of the University, to the east wing, where, in the old days, the cheerful lights at night used to assure us that the head and heart of McGill was busily at work.

“His personality impressed strangers at first sight. Quite lately, the deep sympathy he always felt for the weak and the oppressed, led him to take a characteristically keen interest in the poor Doukhobors; and when a venerable member of the Society of Friends, who had made many journeys on their behalf, paid me a visit, I begged him to call on Sir William, and give him an account of them. He came back presently to thank me, with his face strangely illumined, and said, ‘I have seen William Dawson, and we have been very near the gates of heaven.’

“The first thing to strike a newcomer, was a courtesy, so marked that you might call it courtliness. It was so real, because it was based on such genuine consideration for all. You might see him explaining some simple matter to a child, or go to him with some

trivial difficulty, and you felt sure that his great powers were as freely at your service, as if he were presiding at the councils of the University, and shaping its policy. What dignity he lent to our public ceremonies! The peculiar gesture with which he 'capped' the graduating class at the granting of degrees, has often struck me as conveying at one motion, a patent of knight-errantry and a benediction.

"Next, you felt the native power of the man. I have never met a finer instance of the mailed hand in the velvet glove. He had all the qualities of the great statesman; breadth of view, combined with grasp of detail; foresight, that makes the record of his life read like the written fulfilment of the plans of his youth; insight, that led him straight to the kernel of any difficulty; swift decision to deal with emergencies great and small as they arose; patience and tireless industry, and method, that enabled him to make the most of his work. He was a born ruler, a born teacher, a born investigator. Any one of these gifts is exceptional; the combination of two of them is unusual; but to find all three united in one man is rare indeed. And withal there was refinement and distinc-

tion,—the keen edge of the finely-tempered steel.

"But, after all, to use Walt Whitman's rugged phrase, 'That which enables a man to stand with aplomb before his fellow-men is character.'

"The pre-eminent note of Sir William's character was, to my mind, his singleness of purpose, his simplicity. How incredibly far-off all meanness and baseness seemed from him. You might disagree with him, or think him masterful, but, as well grasp the poles and draw them together, as try to associate pettiness or self-seeking with him. In the pursuit of objects he thought worthy, he disdained no task, however trivial,—spared no sacrifice. And was there really anything in which Sir William was not interested? He seemed to catch the full zest of life as it passed, and let nothing find him blunted or dull, or weary. In Pater's beautiful words:—'To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.'

"In one word, he was fit to be the example of the thousands of young men who frequent a university. That is a word of solemn import, to us who are set in posts of authority,

to be your guides, and to you, on whom is laid the responsibility of choosing the best that is in us to give you, and rejecting all wherein we fail.

"We are met to celebrate, with proud grief, if you will, the safe conclusion of a noble and glorious life, which has now been sealed with the everlasting sleep. Hereafter nothing can harm it, nor any tarnish come near it. He, who for eighty years so strenuously maintained its lofty tenor, has inherited rest. But in this university, the memory of it will be our sacred and inviolable possession. There will doubtless be outward memorials, but better even than these splendid piles of dead stone about us, will be the living witnesses, who have drunk of his spirit, and illustrate it in their own lives. In a world of poor ideals, ambitions taken up at random and followed unstably, the value of one such concrete instance of a life, well planned and well lived, devoted to high ends, is beyond price. When the loss of such a leader, shakes us for a moment out of the dull routine of habit, we do well to pause and consider, 'Have we chosen well?' We think perhaps of great fortune and the statesman's power, and these are good so far as they bring opportunity for service; of

literary fame or scientific renown,—who shall decry them in these halls?—of a profession faithfully and successfully followed—there is no better life-work for most of us.

"But, when the end comes, shall we be satisfied? Listen to his own words, in the farewell University Lecture:—'My life at McGill has been fraught with the happiness which results from conscious effort in a worthy cause.'

"I say again, that Sir William Dawson was fit to be an example set before the young men of a university. But if I stopped there, knowing the devout faith by which he lived, he would rightly hold me guilty of treason to all that he held most dear. Many of us in this room could not see eye to eye with him on matters of dogma, but this we know, that the example on which he modelled his life is the highest and best that has been vouchsafed to men; and if he attained excellence worthy of our imitation, it was because, first and last, he sought to make his life a type of Christ."

From amongst the numerous obituary notices which appeared in scientific and educational journals, as well as in the daily press, a few extracts have been selected, and will be reproduced here, as being typical

of the sentiments expressed by many writers, in many places and ways:—

The *Times* of November 20, 1899, contains the following:—

“Sir William Dawson was a presbyterian of the old school, and strongly opposed to all theories of the evolution of man from brute ancestors, nor would he allow anything more than a very moderate antiquity for the species. He held that there is no adequate reason for attributing the so-called ‘Neolithic’ man to any time older than that of the early eastern empires, or say, 2000 or 3000 B.C., while he thought the time required for a Palæolithic man, need not be more than twenty or thirty centuries in addition, man having thus made an abrupt appearance in full perfection, not more than six or eight thousand years ago. The study of geology, too, he would have emancipated from the control of ‘bald metaphysical conceptions,’ and above all, delivered from that materialistic infidelity which, by robbing nature of the spiritual element, and of its presiding divinity, makes science dry, barren, and repulsive, diminishes its educational value, and even renders it less efficient for the purposes of practical research.

“In his geological work, he was always interested more in the history of life than in mere rocks and minerals, and would probably, for that reason, have considered his most important contribution to scientific knowledge to be the discovery of a form of organic life in the Laurentian rocks. His conclusions, however, were not universally accepted, and the controversy respecting *Eozoon Canadense*, as he named the organism which he described in 1865, can scarcely be regarded as completely closed even now.

“Personally, Sir William Dawson was a man of much quiet geniality, gentle, even deferential in manner, but decided in opinion and firm in action.”

In the *Educational Review for the Atlantic Provinces of Canada*, (December 1899), Dr. A. H. Mackay says:—

“In no part of Canada has the career of Sir William Dawson been more closely followed than in the provinces by the sea, for he was born here, he was inspired with the spirit of scientific research here, and his earliest educational and scientific efforts were made here; nor did he forget us when he left us for a wider field of labour. His life will continue to be an inspiration to many,

as the tide of years flows on, but this skeleton sketch cannot be expected to reveal its spiritual influence. The hand of the skilful biographer will, no doubt, soon give us a glimpse of the living, active and conquering man, showing what has been done by one man in the past, and what therefore can be done by men in the future. . . .

"As an evolutionist, Sir William Dawson did not go to the extreme doctrines of most scientific men of the present day. He believed in the geological evolution of the earth from a primitive created condition, and his exposition of the evolution described in the first chapter of Genesis, is a very interesting feature of his book 'The Origin of the World.' He believed, also, in the evolution of varietal forms in animal and vegetable life, but he did not believe in the spontaneous evolution of nothing into atoms and force, nor in the evolution of dead matter into living forms. He says, under the heading, 'True Evolutions and False,' that, 'the term evolution need not in itself be a bugbear on theological grounds. The Bible writers would, I presume, have had no objection to it if understood to mean the development of the plans of the Creator in nature.' While

theological writers rightly refer to him as the great champion of the Bible against infidel scientists, they create a very wrong impression, if they imply that he maintained the prevalent notions of the orthodox theologians of the beginning of the century."

In the *Canada Educational Monthly*, for January 1900, Professor C. W. Colby, M.A., concludes thus:—

"A sketch of Sir William Dawson, which deals only with the leading facts and results of his life, must necessarily seem rather barren, for he had strong characteristics. Much might be written about his personal traits, and the skill with which he transacted business. He had tact in combination with a firm grasp of affairs, and his courage in facing difficulties would have well befitted a statesman. He had the constructive instinct, and his brain teemed with projects for the promotion of the aims which he had at heart. Yet, where no principle seemed at stake, he would willingly go half-way in bridging over objections and differences. Perhaps, his most striking quality was seriousness and depth of conviction. Religious thoughts and utterances formed part of his daily life, and his example has been quoted as an illustration from

many a pulpit. No one ever retired from the absorbing occupation of an active life with more dignity, or more resignation. In his farewell words to McGill he said:—'My connection with this university has been filled with anxieties, and almost unremitting labour.' Still nothing but failing health could have driven him from his post. Those, who for years, watched his strenuous and honourable career must have found satisfaction in the circumstances of its close. They could have wished for him no greater reward, than the peace of mind and the happy surroundings which were his to the last."

Professor Frank D. Adams, who contributed notices to the *American Journal of Science*, to *Science*, and to the *Journal of Geology*, says in the last-named journal:—

"Sir William had a courteous, or rather a courtly, manner, based on a genuine consideration for all. He was respected and beloved by all who knew him, and especially endeared himself to all who studied under him. The pre-eminent note of his character was simplicity, and singleness of purpose. His loss will be felt, especially in the institution with which he was long connected, but his name has been perpetuated in con-

nection with the geological department of the University by the establishment of a second chair in geology, to be known as the Dawson Chair, which has just been endowed by Sir William Macdonald,"

Principal MacVicar, D.D., LL.D., writing in *The (Canadian) Westminster*, says:—

"Sir William Dawson's name will always hold a foremost place in any fairly written history of educational and Christian work in Canada. Having for nearly forty years enjoyed the privilege of his friendship, it is to me a pleasure to trace some features of his career, and noble character, which more than justify this claim. . . . He was a man of singular versatility and diligence. Those who met him daily, know with what ease and readiness he could turn his mind to almost any subject. It was this power, combined with watchfulness to redeem the time, to fill up every passing moment with useful activity, in a word his genuine love of work, that made his knowledge almost encyclopædic. . . .

"He was a fervent believer in Christian missions. For many years his Bible class on Sunday afternoons, in the Y.M.C.A. Hall, was attended by hundreds of old and young.

"There was no religious or philanthropic

cause in favour of which his voice was not heard, and no platform of an evangelical kind on which he was not heartily welcome. As president of the Evangelical Alliance, and of the Bible Society in Montreal, he did more than can be told to extend the blessings of Christianity."

"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them."—REV. xiv. 13.

DEGREES, TITLES, MEMBERSHIPS,
ETC.

M.A. (Edin.), 1856; LL.D. (Edin.), 1884.
LL.D. (McGill), 1857.
D.C.L. (Bishop's College), 1881.
Superintendent of Education, Nova Scotia, 1850.
Fellow, Geological Society of London, 1854.
Principal, McGill University, 1855.
Fellow, Royal Society, London, 1862.
Lyell Medal of Geological Society, 1881.
First President, Royal Society of Canada, 1882.
Created C.M.G., 1882.
President, American Association, 1882-83.
Created Knight Bachelor, 1884.
President, British Association, 1886.
President, Geological Society of America, 1893.
Hon. President, Natural History Society of Montreal.
Vice-President, British and Foreign Bible Society.
President, Montreal Auxiliary Bible Society.
Fellow, Academy of Arts and Sciences, Boston.
Fellow, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.
Fellow, Geological Society of America.
Associate, Académie Internationale de Géographie Botanique.
Hon. Fellow, Edinburgh Geological Society.