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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Distinguished Career Of Islander Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON

SIR ROBERT FALCONER, K.C.M.G. was born in Charlottetown February 10, 1867, and died in Toronto November 5, 1943. This distinguished son of this province was termed educator, writer and lecturer by his biographer.

Thanks to my friend Chief Justice Thane A. Campbell, I have a few specific items on this man who served so brilliantly in the academic world.

Sir Robert served as principal of Pine Hill College, Halifax from 1904 until 1907 – he joined the Pine Hill staff in 1892. Then he went on to greater challenges as principal of the University of Toronto, a post he filled with distinction from 1907 until 1932.

James S. Thomson, then dean of the faculty of divinity, McGill University and a former principal of Pine Hill Divinity Hall, Halifax was the guest speaker at Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown, July 25, 1950 when a tablet was unveiled to commemorate the birthplace of the distinguished son of Prince Edward Island.

Dr. Thomson recalled in imagination the scene at Edinburg University some 65 years previously, when five young Maritime students were in attendance, one of them a Robert Falconer.

Political Interest Keen

THOMSON GOT in an interesting reference to historic times in Canada when he recalled that 1867, the year in which Robert Falconer was born, was a stirring time when political debate was the staple diet of every home in . . . Prince Edward Island, as in the two sister provinces.

The five Maritime lads “lived through all this with open ears and receptive minds. They must have felt the stimulus of the outward events that provided a lively background for the imagination and the dreams of youth. A new nation was in process, daughter of a mighty mother, destined within their lifetime to become a name and a power in all the earth.”

Thomson, philosophizing a bit about the influence of the environment on a man, said in part:

“Modern psychology confirms ancient wisdom concerning the permanent influence of the earliest years. The place of our birth, even more the kind of a home into which we come, our first social environment and spiritual climate all leave an indelible impression on the course of life. In all of these Robert Falconer was a fortunate child.”

A glimpse of life in Prince Edward Island at the time of Confederation is visible in the word picture Dr. Thomson painted. Here it is in part:

A Pioneer Land

“IT WAS still a pioneer land, but already rich in heritage and tradition. Life was not primitive, but it was elemental. People lived close to the soil and to the sea, where they

were inevitably exposed to those forces of nature on which we all must depend ultimately for feed, sustenance and communication.

“There was no intervening veil of artificiality that so isolated modern life from what is simple and sincere. Above all, there was the powerful and persistent influence of a deeply religious faith. The home, the church and the school were the chief institutions of common life and all these were rich for young Robert Falconer.”

Then a word of the innate ability of the man to whom the Historic Sites and Monuments Board – Chief Justice Campbell is a member – was erecting the tablet.

“Outward environment alone cannot account for the production of worthy character and achievement. Circumstances must meet with adequate response in native ability and intellectual promise, and in this respect young Falconer was equally fortunate. Encouraged and stimulated by the influence of home, he set his mind to the life of scholarship and the vocation of the ministry.”

Church Mothered Education

THOMSON ON that occasion, 18 years ago, recalled that “religion was the originating force for most educational advance. The Church was the mother of college and university, and only at a later stage did the State enter upon the scene.”

Glancing back at those early beginnings of the country we now call Canada, Thomson noted the various facets of the struggle for eventual independence, of a struggle to break the bonds of colonialism.

“The growing needs of a young country in process of rapid expansion demanded education in science and training for the professions. Moreover unless Canada was to remain in a position of intellectual tutelage, emancipation from cultural colonialism was as necessary as political self-government. There were therefore the claims of post-graduate education to be met.”

That, noted Mr. Thomson, created a dilemma for the more churches. They were eager to retain a place in the higher education of youth, and yet the new and insistent demands were beyond their capacity.

In this manner did Thomson lead into the organization and development of the University of Toronto where Sir Robert, the man they were honoring at Prince of Wales College that night, took over as principal, a post which he had filled as he shared in directing the growth of that institution of learning.

“Once more,” he noted with due recognition, “the Maritime Provinces fulfilled what appears to be part of their historic destiny by providing the man who was matched for the task.

Falconer “became the personal embodiment of the University, maintaining goodwill, inspiring co-operation, defending the freedom of the institution against political intrusion, until he won the respect, confidence and ultimately something akin to veneration from all those who came under his influence.

Tremendous Contribution

“THUS WITH the growing demands of his task, he grew into an academic statesman, under whose hand the university expanded to meet the changing needs of rapidly changing times.

“It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of what had been worked out in the University of Toronto. All the new young institutions turned there for a model of what could be accomplished in blending together the essential elements of academic freedom and public support, without partisan political control.

“Everywhere”, Dr. Thomson said, “the president (Sir Robert) was advisor, guide and friend. It is not too much to claim that, thus, he became the pioneer of university expansion in this present century.”

“It is well”, Dr. Thomson observed, “that the name of Sir Robert Falconer should be kept alive in this city of his birth.”