ARCHIBALD MacMECHAN¹

It is appropriate that a gathering of bibliographers and librarians - custodians of the printed word - should open with a tribute to Archibald MacMechan, who did so much to preserve the history and literature of this province, so rich in both, and to enhance them with the lustre of his own writing. He was himself a librarian, honorary, part-time, and non-professional it is true; none the less, for many of his forty-two years as Professor of English at Dalhousie he was the head of the University Library. Having been his junior colleague for ten years and followed him briefly, faint but pursuing, as Honorary Librarian and for over three decades as Head of the Department of English, I can testify to the good work that he did as both teacher and librarian while maintaining a steady output of scholarly research and excellent writing. His work for the Library was not, it is true, a vocation but rather a combination of self-sacrifice and self-defence, of the kind imposed in earlier days upon professors, usually of English, if books were to be gathered, housed and made accessible for teachers and students. He regarded his custody of books as a necessary incidental to reading and writing, and probably for this reason little if anything has been made of it by himself and others. The fact remains that he carried the responsibility for directing the growing library of a small but not unimportant university towards its present state of professional organization and equipment. His own researches into the history and especially the maritime history of his adopted province depended chiefly on the resources of the Nova Scotia Legislative Library in Halifax, which is still an important repository of MacMechiana. The Nova Scotia Archives were transferred to the present building on the Dalhousie Campus just before he retired from University teaching, and his friends had hoped for a fruitful period of research among its treasures. But it was not to be. Among the most interesting exhibits in the Archives are the models, moulds, and plans of ships in the MacMechan collection; but these museum pieces were less important in themselves than as a lure to the original documents - ships' logs, diaries, personal letters, minutes of council, dispatches, newspaper reports, from which he drew the stories by which he will be best and longest remembered. The word "stories" may be misleading: I was surprised to find two of his works, Red Snow on Grand Pré and Old Province Tales listed in an authoritative check-list under the heading

1. An address delivered to the Alumni of Dalhousie University in May 1962 and to the Bibliographical Society of Canada at its Annual Meeting in Halifax on June 8, 1964.

of "Fiction." Each chapter heading of these books, and others, is followed in the contents by its source, or sources. The Preface of Old Province Tales begins: "These true tales are drawn from the romantic past of Nova Scotia and have been studied from authentic documents." Introducing There Go The Ships, he wrote: "I offer ... a handful of true stories, chiefly adventures of Nova Scotia seamen. My aim is plain truth; 'romance' I avoid and abjure." Although he was in his generation probably the most finished and graceful Canadian writer of prose, especially in the field of the familiar essay, he was primarily a working scholar, with a scholar's sense of responsibility to his sources. He depended much upon libraries, and in turn he conferred an obligation upon them which should not be forgotten.

Archibald MacMechan was born in Ontario in 1862, and after taking his first degree in Arts at the University of Toronto went on to graduate studies in English at Johns Hopkins University. For more than forty years he brought distinction to Dalhousie as a teacher, a scholar, and a writer, and as a devoted admirer and chronicler of the University, of the old city of Halifax, and of the ancient Province of Nova Scotia. To all of these he came as a stranger, and all of them he made his own. He came to Dalhousie in 1889, and taught continuously until he retired in 1931. He died in harness in July 1933, while teaching Canadian literature, on the Dalhousie Campus, to the Nova Scotia Summer School.

It becomes characteristic, in retrospect, that he had hardly begun his teaching here before he began to collect material for a work on his predecessor, James De Mille, who taught English at Dalhousie from 1864 until his death in 1880. Planned as a book, Dr. MacMechan's careful notes finally saw print as a magazine article, in which he noted that after the lapse of a quarter of a century De Mille's old students wrote and spoke of him with deep affection and respect - an honour accorded to few, but one that was shared by Dr. MacMechan, who kept up a lifelong correspondence with many of his old students. Dr. MacMechan confirmed for English studies the real beginning of Dalhousie following the benefactions of George Munro. His teaching combined the enthusiasm of De Mille with the scholarship of W. J. Alexander who, after less than a decade at Dalhousie, brought distinction for many years to Toronto.

First, as a teacher, because it was first and foremost as a teacher that MacMechan thought of himself and that he would have wished to be remembered; single-handed for thirty years he taught English in its three major divisions: language, literature and composition, and taught it well, to all students in Arts and Science at Dalhousie. Arts and Science has multiplied perhaps five times

since then, the Department has grown by more than twice that, and the range of instruction is correspondingly greater; but the foundations were so truly laid, and the ground so well covered in essentials that MacMechan's students were able to reach high rank as scholars and move to high positions as teachers in the greatest universities. Of the students to whom advanced studies in English - or perhaps in any field of study - were a secondary consideration, an unattainable goal, or possibly a matter of indifference among the competing attractions of university life, none could sit under him without learning at least to respect great writing by the masters, and the virtue of practising good writing by all who use our language. One of the first and most distinguished pupils, Garnet Sedgwick, in a memorial tribute in The Dalhousie Review² attributes his influence to the impression of "a personality fused and harmonized into a work of art - just as ... he made a fine art of life.... His years were spent, consciously or unconsciously, in selecting his own proper materials and in passing things by that were not to the purpose." Though our interests, tastes and methods differed greatly, some of Dr. MacMechan's principles had their effect on my own understanding of literature, and on my presentation of two of the authors who became my special concern at Dalhousie, Milton and Carlyle. And so I would like, in all humility, to add myself to the long list of those who were influenced by Dr. MacMechan's undergraduate teaching. As a setter and marker of "themes" - for which I may some day be forgiven - I would like to pay a special tribute to his insistence on clear and precise composition. Both in and out of the special field of English, Dalhousie writing has been better than average, and much of the credit goes to the meticulous correction that was made over the characteristically neat but individual hieroglyph, "A.M.", with which Garnet Sedgwick headed his tribute.

In writing, MacMechan demanded, as he practised, clean, spare and accurate expression - "never the big word for the little thing" - order, balance, consistency. As in other interests, he had his idiosyncracies. When I once suggested a semi-colon he damned the offending spot with a curt "I never use it" and that was that. And if my first and only letter before I came to Dalhousie had chanced to include the phrase "in connection with," I would not have come at all. His grading of examinations, with which I sometimes helped, was at times original, and in the complicated apportionment of marks he eschewed fractions as he did the semi-colon, and worked only in decimals. But whether by arithmetic or by intuition, justice was done, and usually tempered with mercy.

A teacher must be judged not only by the generality of his students, but also, and professionally this is the acid test, by the

2. Dalhousie Review, XIII (1933-34) pp. 451-458.

select few who proceed to advanced work in his subject. Here again, Dalhousie has a good record for which MacMechan set by himself a standard that has called for the best efforts of his successors. I have mentioned Garnet Sedgwick, who came to Dalhousie in 1898, took Honours in Greek and English, went to Harvard for his Ph.D. and influenced the teaching of English in British Columbia for over forty years. To Harvard also he sent two students who remained as Professors: K.G.T. Webster, the medievalist whose special library is now one of the prized possessions of the Dalhousie Library, and John Tucker Murray, whose work on the Elizabethan dramatic companies is still the standard. Also in drama, Roy MacKenzie, better known for his pioneer work on Nova Scotia ballads, wrote a scholarly history of the English morality plays, and James W. Tupper, who recently endowed a post-graduate scholarship in English for Dalhousians going on to higher degrees elsewhere, became an authority on the drama of the Restoration. Moving from these examples to my own time, we shared, among others, Arthur Jewitt and Max MacOdrum, both of whom became university presidents as well as recognized scholars, Roy Wiles, now Head of English at McMaster and author of the standard Canadian guide to research-writing in the Humanities and the late Harold Wilson, who though he took only a pass B.A., obtained from MacMechan's last year (as I recall) of English 2 the passport to a course under Kittredge of Harvard that ultimately led him to a high place in Canadian scholarship.

The respect with which his students were received showed that Dr. MacMechan had the third distinguishing mark of a teacher and scholar: the approbation of his colleagues, which stemmed not more from the work of his pupils than from his own published works of scholarship.

Although his doctoral thesis at Johns Hopkins was written on "The Relation of Hans Sachs to the Decameron," he was best known for his editions of Carlyle. In his last course of lectures at Harvard in 1928 Professor Bliss Perry said: "When I began to teach Sartor Resartus the only fully edited text was that of Dr. MacMechan. After forty years, it is still the best," and after seventy years it is still in use at Dalhousie.

Besides Sartor Resartus, he edited a companion edition of Carlyle's Heroes and Hero Worship and also, besides an edition of the Essay on Burns, a selection of the poems of Tennyson, which recalls a shared enthusiasm for one of Tennyson's illustrators, the artist G. J. Sullivan. After he came to Dalhousie, however, MacMechan's private scholarship turned towards the history and especially the maritime history of Nova Scotia; for like many another landsman from the interior, he developed a passion for the sea. He compiled two volumes for the Nova Scotia Archives, and wrote

the volume on "The Winning of Responsible Government" in The Chronicles of Canada. The Nova Scotia Archives, in its modern fully equipped building came to the campus too soon before his death. In it he had hoped to do much research in his retirement. It houses his collection of ship plans, moulds, models and pictures, and his best stories, which combine accuracy with adventure, are those about the sea: of pirates and privateers, of courage and endurance, of the building of "The Great Ship," and of voyages to the South Seas. He could hardly escape an interest, in which personal enthusiasm and critical insight reached their climax, in the works of Herman Melville. When Moby Dick caused Melville to be "re-discovered" after almost fifty years of neglect, Dr. MacMechan, following closely after Clarke Russell, was one of the first to proclaim his genius in an article, "The Greatest Sea Story Ever Written," in the University Quarterly. Dr. V. L. O. Chittick, an Acadia graduate and author of the standard work on Haliburton, is still convinced that MacMechan was more than that; in a recent letter he wrote, "Here as elsewhere, Archie led the field." But MacMechan's love for the sea was given chiefly to Nova Scotia. In an essay on "The Vanity of Travel" he questioned the wisdom of leaving home and for most of his writing years, Nova Scotia - his "Ultima Thule" - gave him a happy home and a happy abundance of matter for the scholar and the man of letters. A series of books and his continuous weekly column for the Montreal Standard gave him an unquestioned place as dean of Canadian essayists in the first quarter or third of the century.

With so much knowledge and enthusiasm for Canada at large, and especially for this small corner so replete with beauty, with history, and with character, Dr. MacMechan, whether in print or in person, was the perfect guide; and I owe much to him for my own transformation, if I may claim these distinctions, into a Nova Scotian, a Haligonian, and a Dalhousian. Our first expedition together was a perfect introduction: he took me on the official boat that followed the schooner "Bluenose" in her triumphant series of international races. The finish of the race was celebrated by a visit to 72 Victoria Road, and a magnificent chowder provided by Mrs. MacMechan: the first of many visits to a charming and hospitable home. In walks around the Park, the Arm and the Bedford Basin, he led me to appreciate the brilliance of sea and sky, but also pointed out the charm of mist and silvery gray. (He was an early friend and admirer of Wallace McAskill, who excelled in soft tones and became known as the world's best marine photographer.) Of autumn colours he preferred the duller glow of underbrush to the scarlet and gold and bronze that caught the eye of the less observant, and above all in the Canadian woods, he admired the translucent fleeting veil that precedes the sudden bursting into green leaf in the spring. Among later expeditions I recall one into the woods near Stewiacke to discuss esoteric questions of timber, grains and the

proper use of the adze with Joseph Howe Waddell, who had begun as a shipwright whose special craft was the trimming of masts and spars, and who had finally retired inland to specialize in the making of flagstaffs. Most memorable of all was the journey, for which I was allowed to act as chauffeur, along the Noel Shore to Maitland, to get some personal details from descendants for the story of "The Great Ship." From this expedition I recall one of many incidents that remind me of the personality that helped to make and even to transcend the teacher, the man of letters, and the historian. Stopping for lunch, we drove to a barn beside a house whose occupants appeared to be away for the day. In a trice, the Doctor proved himself to be a real campaigner by putting up planks and trestles as tables and benches and setting out lunch with both skill and style. (On the way home, he cooked lamb chops over an open fire, and I have never tasted better.) When we were enjoying our meal and conversation as it might be at a University club or senior common room, the family from next door decided to investigate. Headed by father, a massive and imposing figure in overalls, and trailing from mother and the larger sons and daughters down to toddlers, they advanced in single file and with an inquiring if not threatening mien towards the trespassers. The Doctor continued with his meal and his observations on the beauty of the estuary of the Avon, and paid no attention to the interlopers - for so they clearly were to him - until he could see the whites of their eyes. Then he fixed the head of the procession with the famous eyeglasses on their black silk ribbon, and, making a neat and complete U-turn that would have done credit to a military band, the procession went into reverse and retired to its own premises. Luncheon continued without comment.

When we reached Maitland he gathered some first-hand details for his paper on "The Great Ship," which you may find in There Go the Ships, or in the selection of Tales of the Sea made by Thomas Raddall, who though not a student at Dalhousie, has done most to continue the work of a man whom he is proud to honour and whose influence he is glad to acknowledge. Since Raddall thought some comments of mine in a memorial article worth quoting in his introduction, one of them may be repeated here: "He had no patience with vulgarity and could not feel at home with people of petty or mercenary interests. But he had a true culture that placed him on terms of equal easy friendship with men whose work was dignified by hard struggle with the elements on land or sea. To accompany him on his rambles was to see another side of a man to whom every honourable aspect of life was interesting." In print, however, he had the scholar's reticence, and his subject, whether of men or incidents told its own story. Inevitably, his gift for prose, his scholarship, his knowledge and love for the province combined in books about his beloved Nova Scotia.

For Dalhousians there is interest in The Porter of Bagdad, his first book and The Life of a Little College, which is not all about Dalhousie, although the first essay provides the title. Besides his published works of history and scholarship there is one complete typescript, never published, that deserves special mention: The Halifax Disaster, an account of the great explosion of 1917, with the invariable combination of accurate knowledge and lucid prose that set its seal on everything he did. His typescript, in perfect shape for the printer and with carbons and supporting documents, is in the Treasure Room of the Dalhousie Library. Why it was never published, I cannot say: possibly because it had neither sensational journalism nor a parade of statistics or sociological jargon. He told his story, and told it well. I remember remarking, with some diffidence, having admired and enjoyed There Go the Ships and Old Province Tales and The Book of Ultima Thule, that I was especially impressed by the first book of his that I had read, Sagas of the Sea, possibly because it was my first by him and of Nova Scotia. He seemed pleased, and said that it represented most clearly what he had striven to do with the proud history of Nova Scotia's ships and sailors, finding the facts and stating them in the clearest and plainest terms. Raddall, who knows the sea as historian, writer and sailor, confirms this preference, and pays these writings the highest compliment when he says that discussion would be bootless: "Let them speak for themselves." They do.

From all of this, perhaps something of character and personality can be inferred, even if it is less than adequately expressed. It is almost too personal an appraisal for me to attempt, though I soon discovered how true were the words of Malcolm Wallace of Toronto whom I met on my way to Canada: "You are fortunate to make your first acquaintance with university teaching as a colleague of Dr. MacMechan; he is a scholar and a gentleman."

His personal standards - of dress, deportment, personal and family relations, like those of his writing and his scholarship - were of the highest: fastidious but not fussy; strict but not severe; dignified without ostentation.

More than most of our professors today, although many are closer than he to business and politics, he was a citizen of Halifax. Raddall speaks of "the erect and dignified figure with a grey torpedo beard, walking the streets of Halifax as if he had them to himself. As indeed he had." That is true of the historian, for whom the present did not exist as he saw "only the redcoats, the buckskin-clad ranger and tarry seamen of the eighteenth (century)." But few if any of the Dalhousie faculty have done so much for friendship and understanding between the best of town and the best of gown by hospitality offered with equal charm and generosity to both citizens and students.

Although his culture and his interests were often thought to be especially English, they were rather of New than of Old England, going back to and beyond Emerson, and attaching particularly to Harvard and the tradition of Norton, Barrett Wendell, Bliss Perry and Kittredge. His papers have more references to Harvard and Harvard men than to his own universities of Toronto and Johns Hopkins, and with admiration that suggests conscious or unconscious modelling, he devotes one of his most revealing papers on scholarship to "Child of the Ballads." Characteristically, he takes the erudition for granted, and makes us privy to the table-talk. He introduces us to the scholar's humanism, to the breadth rather than to the depth of his interest. Of Child's talk, he found the fittest comparison in "The Vicar," by one of his own favourite poets, W. M. Praed, easy, polished, urbane, and a clear influence on some of MacMechan's own verse. Without recollecting at the time that, as usual he was there before me, I applied the same verse to Dr. MacMechan himself in my own memorial tribute³ in 1934:

His talk was a stream which runs
With rapid change from rocks to roses.
It slipped from politics to puns,
It passed from Mahomet to Moses
Beginning with the laws that keep
The planets in their radiant courses,
And ending with some precept deep
For dressing eels and/or shoeing horses.

Beginning an address on Shakespeare's King John to the Humanities Association when it met at Dalhousie shortly after the second war, the late F. Millett Salter of the University of Alberta introduced his claim for more recognition of this comparatively neglected play by describing a lecture, given by Dr. MacMechan to sophomores at Dalhousie about thirty-five years before, in which once again he was ahead of the pack. With the tribute to critical insight from scholar to scholar went a more personal tribute from pupil to teacher, for which he found fitting words in those by Hamlet of his father:

He was a man, take him for all in all.
I shall not look upon his like again.

Then Salter could go on with his lecture. Such was the influence of Archibald MacMechan upon students in this College, in this Province, and in this City by the sea, that he loved, and loved to commemorate.

3. Ibid., XIII (1933-34) pp. 378-381.

It is not to be expected that everything produced in over forty years of authorship can be bound in hard covers, and even for the larger works, some now out of print, there will be an increasing number of readers who must be content with selection. Fortunately, an outstanding anthology of the sea stories had been made by Thomas Raddall, with an introduction that gives an excellent appreciation of this aspect of MacMechan's work. Perhaps, since he has quoted me, I may quote myself from the dust-jacket and leave the rest to Raddall:

"The best of Archie MacMechan's work will remain in his simple and gripping tales of the sea, gathered from the salty annals of Nova Scotia and related with the unpretentious skill of a master who knows how to make a real story tell itself."

The major publications on Canadian subjects are listed in the invaluable check-lists of Dr. Watters. Not to be captious, but because it is a real matter of criticism, I have already questioned his listing of two works as "Fiction." Dr. Watters gives a list of the Nova Scotia Chap-Books, but says that no library listed reports a complete set. I doubt if there is one; titles, numbers and even publishers are subject to change, and I am not sure if one or two were ever printed. But most of them were printed later in The Book of Ultima Thule or (the verse) in Late Harvest. Most of the work in progress - notes, typescripts, reprints of articles - is in Halifax, the greater part in the Dalhousie Library, which has the scrap-books going back to his first years as a professor. From a typewritten index to all but volume A, I believe that everything that achieved printing or reprinting will be found here. There are over 150 items listed, not counting the weekly columns of review and comment in Halifax and Montreal newspapers.

In spite of Dr. MacMechan's careful and systematic work, and his records of it, there are a few minor difficulties and problems to clear away. And there is one unpublished item at Dalhousie that is of major importance and calls for special mention. That is the report on the Halifax disaster, already mentioned. Some pages are typed on letterheads of the Halifax Disaster Commission, Archibald MacMechan, F.R.S.C., Director. The contents page lists twenty chapters and an epilogue. I have seen only nineteen chapters. These are ready for the printer, except for a few figures to be inserted and some slight typographical errors to be corrected. There are a few unimportant marginal notes by another hand, but there is no question, from internal evidence, that the writing is all MacMechan's. From

4. Thomas H. Raddall, Tales of the Sea. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947.

the clean state of the almost completed typescript, I have hopes - which unforeseen circumstances have delayed - of finding a complete earlier draft. Why such a report, carefully studied and ably written, should not have been carried through to publication may remain a mystery. Although he spoke to me of the explosion, and of another work on it, Dr. MacMechan never told me of his own writing on it. A letter in January, 1918, makes it clear that work was under way almost immediately after the disaster. Quite apart from its superior reporting and writing, this report on a major and even a unique disaster, which has been the subject of recent and less informed publication should be made available to scholars and students of history, sociology, and mass psychology, as well as to those seeking what MacMechan always gave, a true tale, plainly but enduringly told.

C. L. Bennet