

David Davidson. By **George Barclay, M.A.**

(Read June 6, 1892.)

The late Mr David Davidson was an Edinburgh man on both sides of the house,—his father being the Rev. Dr Davidson of Muirhouse, minister of the Tron Church, and his mother a sister of Lord Cockburn. He was born at No. 8 Heriot Row, 20th May 1808, and received his early education at the High School, completing it afterwards in England. Having chosen a business life as his career, he was at the age of 17 “apprenticed” to one of the great Leith firms of those days, whose offices it was a pretty costly favour to be admitted to (the “apprentice fee” running as high as £200 to £300), with the result, in Mr Davidson’s case, that the “fee” had not been paid a couple of months when the great crash of 1825 occurred, which involved his employers, as well as many other Leith firms, in hopeless financial troubles, and eventual ruin. It was a hard school for the young apprentice, but it probably helped to give him the quiet self-possession and courage in face of difficulties which characterised him through life. And there were still harder times to follow. While yet in his teens, Mr Davidson started on an independent business career; but the shadow of the great collapse of 1825 lay heavy over Leith for many years; his undertakings did not prove fortunate, and after struggling on throughout the thirties at home, Mr Davidson was led in 1842 to seek a new field in Canada. He had married in 1834 Frances, daughter of Mr James Pillans, a well-known Leith merchant; with her and three children he now sailed, July 1842, for Montreal, where he assumed the managership of the Bank of British North America, a post which he afterwards exchanged for that of the Bank of Montreal, remaining at the head of that important institution until he was recalled to Edinburgh to take the management of the Bank of Scotland. Mr Davidson was fortunate in the time of his arrival in Canada, and his career there was a pleasant and successful one throughout. Montreal fifty years ago was a very different place from the great city of to-day. It was a comparatively small community and primitive life which Mr Davidson found there in

1842 ;—giving readier opportunity for close personal relations, and greater prominence to individual exertions for the commonweal, while the few were still acting as pioneers to the many that were to follow. In this society Mr Davidson soon began to take an active part. In public he interested himself in many philanthropic, and very specially in educational, institutions. With the assistance of his uncle, Lord Cockburn, he was the means of securing for the High School of Montreal such a staff of teachers from Scotland as soon raised it to the eminent position as a school which it to this day maintains ; and he took a keen interest in the advancement of the M'Gill University, now a very important seat of learning in the colony. The "Davidson Gold Medal" has for many years been the highest prize in the High School of Montreal. And in private, Mr Davidson found abundant opportunities for the gratification of his constant desire to be helpful in alleviating the troubles and promoting the interests of those around him. It is pleasant to record that when, after twenty-seven years' absence, Mr Davidson's death was announced in Montreal, his son there received the most touching proofs how his name and memory were, both on public and private grounds, still "freshly remembered." There were many who could tell of acts of kindness which had been the saving or making of them and theirs ; and there were still some old friends who remembered pleasant days in the little summer retreat near the city, which Mr Davidson had reclaimed from the waste, and with the aid of his wife's taste and skill had gradually converted into a little paradise of lawn and trees and flowers. No wonder, then, that Mr Davidson too always looked back on his twenty years' life in Canada with affectionate interest and satisfaction. It came to a close in 1862, when, as already mentioned, he was recalled to Edinburgh to take the management, as "Treasurer," of the Bank of Scotland. Thenceforward, during nearly twenty years, Mr Davidson's was a well-known personality in Edinburgh and Edinburgh life. Already past middle age, of large frame, strongly-marked features (very noticeably resembling Wordsworth's), and leisurely gait, his whole bearing was one of quiet dignity, to which his gravely simple manner and deliberate low-voiced speech gave additional relief. As head of the premier Scotch Bank, and Chairman of the Associated Banks, Mr Davidson now devoted himself not only to the successful

management of the Bank of Scotland, but also to forwarding and safeguarding the common interests of all the Scotch banks in the many questions which arose in connection with the great extension of their business, including their settlement in London, during the period of his tenure of office. And when the great crisis caused by the failure of the City of Glasgow Bank occurred in 1878, Mr Davidson was able to render such service to the banks, and to the *people* of Scotland, as should always be gratefully remembered. Not altogether taken by surprise, Mr Davidson and his colleagues had made some preparation for the impending crash; but when it did come, in more hideous form than any had deemed possible, if a panic with more widespread disaster was averted, they who best know the details of those anxious days will probably be the readiest to admit, how much it was to the ability, calmness, and courage in council of Mr Davidson, that the result was due. The strain, however, proved too great for a man of 70. Mr Davidson's health soon after gave way; and though a holiday of some months partially restored it, a return to the hard work, and anxiety involved in bank management, was deemed inadvisable, and in 1879 Mr Davidson resigned his position as Treasurer of the Bank of Scotland. During his stay in Edinburgh, Mr Davidson took little or no part in public matters *proper*; interesting himself, however, in various concerns of public usefulness, specially in "Donaldson's" and the "Longmore" Hospitals, and in the "Walker Trust," in the development of which he did yeoman's service. Outside the bank his only business interest was in the "North British and Mercantile Insurance Company." Of this institution, Mr Davidson had been a Director for many years in Edinburgh, and when he now left Scotland and settled in London, he was in 1880 elected "Chairman of the General Court of Directors," a position which he filled with much acceptance and warm recognition of his services to the Company, till his death. It gave him sufficient occupation without overwork, and had the advantage of bringing him down once a year at least to Edinburgh. At Somerset Lodge, Wimbledon, Mr and Mrs Davidson passed the remainder of their days. Mrs Davidson though for years an invalid, under the unwearied and utterly self-forgetting tendance of her husband, survived till 23rd February 1891; and it was only after fifty-seven years of married life, that

death for a little time severed a union of the most singular perfectness and mutual devotion. Mr Davidson bore the blow after the manner of his nature ; seemed as months went by to be even somewhat regaining strength and cheerfulness ; but the *hold* of life was gone, and a slight chill sufficed to carry him off on the 30th October of the same year (1891), with mental powers quite unimpaired, and a physical constitution still vigorous enough to have prolonged his life under other circumstances for years to come. Mr Davidson was 84 when he died in 1891 ; and as his father was born in 1745, their joint lives covered the somewhat remarkable space of 146 years. Besides his professional acquirements in matters of banking and finance, Mr Davidson had a widespread knowledge of men and things, derived from much reading as well as personal experience, and there were few subjects on which he could not either converse, or, at least, intelligently enjoy conversation. He was never much of a sportsman, though in early days he might be seen among those who some sixty years ago followed Mr Hepburn's hounds at Karswell, and in Canada he indulged in occasional fishing excursions, when his friend Dr Campbell, the well-known physician of Montreal, was his usual companion. But after his return to this country, his interest in sport consisted almost entirely in seeing it enjoyed in summer quarters by his sons. Mr Davidson's pleasures throughout life were mainly those of his home—a *country* home wherever possible. His family affections were of the deepest and most unselfish ; and more and more as life advanced, he found his happiness in ministering to the happiness of his wife and children. Three sons and one daughter survive him. Mr Davidson became a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1867.