

**John Sutherland Black, M.A., LL.D. By Dr W. B. Laikie.**

JOHN SUTHERLAND BLACK was born at Dunnikier, Kirkcaldy, on 4th July 1846. His father, the Rev. James Black, was minister at Kirkcaldy of the Original Secession Church, a body which joined the Free Church in 1852.

Black received his education at the Burgh School of Kirkcaldy, of which he was first prizeman, and at the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated M.A., attaining distinction as Gold Medallist in Logic and in Moral Philosophy. In after years he received from the University the honorary degree of LL.D. As his original intention was to become a Minister of the Free Church, Black entered the New College, Edinburgh, in which he gained the Cunningham Fellowship. He also studied at Tübingen and Göttingen. He was licensed as a probationer of the Free Church in 1869. In that year the Spanish Evangelical Society, of which Sir Henry Moncreiff was president, appointed him to be professor in a college at Seville, which had been founded by the Society for the training of students for the evangelical ministry in Spain. Before proceeding to his appointment, Black was ordained by the Free Church Presbytery of Kirkcaldy in December 1869.

Owing to the opposition of the Spanish Government, the Seville College was closed in less than two years, and Black returned to Scotland about the beginning of 1872.

For some time he did active clerical work, which included an assistantship in Aberdeen. He became intimately connected with a group of younger ministers of the Church who were deeply interested in the study of Biblical criticism. Among them was Robertson Smith, who had been his fellow student at the New College. Black became Robertson Smith's *fidus Achates*, his counsellor and confidant, through all the troubles which ended in Smith's deposition from his Aberdeen professorship in 1881.

Black was essentially a scholar rather than a man of action. Profoundly interested in religion and theology, he felt his vocation lay rather in the study than in the pulpit, and he gradually gave up clerical work, eventually dropping the prefix "Rev."

In 1878 he became assistant editor of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 9th edition, until its completion in 1889. In 1894, at the dying wish of Robertson Smith, he became joint-editor with Dr Cheyne of the *Encyclo-*

*pædia Biblica*, the avowed exponent of advanced theological views and the higher criticism. This work was completed in 1903. While on active literary work he had three places of residence—London, Edinburgh, and Cambridge—until the death of Robertson Smith. After the completion of the *Biblica*, Edinburgh became his home.

Black gave much of his time to the Royal Society, which he joined in 1884; he served as a Member of Council from 1891-1894 and from 1916-1918, and as Honorary Librarian from 1906-1916. Although he contributed no papers to the Society, he rendered inestimable service in rearranging the library when the Society removed to its new premises in George Street.

While in Edinburgh he turned his attention, among other things, to astronomy, and along with the late Dr James Hunter, F.R.S.E., he organised and fitted out an expedition to observe the total solar eclipse of 1905 from the island of Majorca. He paid two visits to the island—the first to construct a temporary observatory fitted up with a large telescope borrowed from the Astronomer Royal. His equipment included a kinematic outfit—a novelty in those days. His luck was disastrous. Rain came on as the eclipse began, and the observation was a complete failure. One outcome of this interest was the resuscitation for a few years of an old organisation, the Edinburgh Astronomical Institution.

Black remained in Edinburgh until the death of his friends, Professor Chrystal and Sir John Murray, which, with the retirement of Principal Alexander Whyte, caused a blank in his intimate circle. He spent the last few years in London, and there, in a nursing-home, he died on 20th February 1923.

Black was a charming companion; his remarkable knowledge on almost every subject was ever at the service of his friends, and to converse with him was a veritable education. He did not write much, even in his Encyclopædias. Two books he has left behind him—a biography of Robertson Smith, written in collaboration with Sir George Chrystal, the son of his old friend the Professor, and a little book entitled *Dante: Illustrations and Notes*, in which the illustrations are by Mrs Traquair. Black was an enthusiastic Dante scholar, and the notes of this little book form a model of scholarship and condensation. He has also left an unpublished manuscript "What I Owe to Dante," which it is hoped will some day see the light. When his last illness overtook him he was engaged on a biography of his lifelong friend, Dr Alexander Whyte.