

OBITUARIES

O. D. Skelton, 1878-1941

O. D. Skelton, whose sudden death ended the career of a distinguished scholar and great public servant, was one of the original members of the Canadian Political Science Association. He was its first secretary and a former president. His loss is a heavy one to many groups as to the whole country but it is felt with especial keenness by those from whose ranks he came.

Skelton was a man of many talents. Endowed with an acute and sensitive mind, he acquired by training and experience amazing powers of synthesis and balanced judgment. He was peculiarly a master of the written word. He was often slow and hesitating in speech, groping for the right words as he built up the structure of his thought or, in his characteristic way, set the evidence in array in a single sentence. But his pen ran swiftly and with a craftsman's sure precision, whether he was writing an article which should have been mailed the day before or drafting the report of a committee which had not yet made up its mind.

His early training was in literature. His father was a school-teacher and no doubt books were more important than gadgets in his home. As an undergraduate at Queen's, he took his M.A. in English and Latin in the days when Queen's gave an M.A. in Edinburgh style for achieving a First in Final Honours of two subjects. Cappon was at the height of his powers. His standards of style and knowledge were exacting, but whoever listened as he recited his touchstones of style and expounded the philosophies of Wordsworth, Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold learned something of a style stripped of rhetoric and irrelevance.

Following his graduation, Skelton returned to complete the Honour Course in Greek, principally as he said, because he wanted to sit under John Macnaughton. Apparently shy and diffident, Skelton always sought out a genuine personality with a fresh and revealing mind. There could be no greater contrast than that between such a turbulent master of exaggerated expression and Skelton with his supreme temperance and balance, but John Macnaughton was a living personality and Skelton was drawn to people who were alive and genuine. As of all things which touched him deeply, it was only in rare moments of intimacy that he would speak regretfully of having no leisure to re-read Sophocles and Euripides. (Characteristically, he was less reticent in his admiration for Ogden Nash.)

The session, 1900-1 found him a graduate student at Chicago, reading

Greek under Paul Shorey, another striking personality, who had forsaken Harvard's traditional philology for the unfenced prairie.

Thus equipped, and with some experience as a salesman of "stereopticon" photographs in England, he turned to literary journalism as assistant editor of *Booklover's Magazine*, remaining until it was taken over by Appleton's. Of his experience there I know nothing except that he retained two things: a liking for newspapermen and a tolerance of them, which in later life won him the affection and loyalty of the Press Gallery, and an unerring eye for typographical errors. It was a humiliating experience to have him, as he stood chatting by one's desk, pull out his pencil and mark a couple of errors in a galley proof which had just been painstakingly corrected.

From Philadelphia, he returned to Chicago in 1905 and for the next two years he was happily immersed in political science and economics. They were good years of which he often spoke fondly. He returned to academic work as a mature student with a knowledge and competence which had already been tested. Chicago had all the vitality of a new institution and what annoying requirements the graduate school imposed in those days he took in his stride. He was attracted to Veblen by the freshness and originality of his thought at the period when Veblen was at his best and to Davenport by his deep-cutting analysis. Economic theory as such, however, never attracted him. Charles Merriam had already demonstrated his originality in political science and set the direction of one of Skelton's interests. Still more powerful was the influence of his instructor and close friend, R. F. Hoxie, the most brilliant explorer in the fields of labour and socialism the United States has produced.

His first book, *Socialism, a Critical Analysis*, was fruit of his graduate study. It is a thoroughly scholarly work reviewing the whole literature of the subject and reducing it to an intelligible pattern. It is, however, an analysis and not a history or exegesis. It is too realistic in its knowledge of social movements to attract the zealots of the thirties but it remains the best single volume on its subject. An older scholar, Dr. James Bonar, who died the other day, apologized to a friend for having written the article on socialism in the ninth edition of the *Britannica*. It should, he said, have been written by Skelton who was now the authority in the English-speaking world.

Some doctor's dissertations achieve scholarship but few achieve the brilliance of style of Skelton's *Socialism*. It abounds in the characteristic Skeltonian sentence or paragraph with its concise balancing of evidence and its inevitable judgment. It is sprinkled with phrases which columnists would have loved to have written.

His next four books were in Canadian history and were written for

series which Robert Glasgow promoted. The *General Economic History*, written for "Canada and Its Provinces," was a much used book which for long had no competitor. Competently written, it does not reveal Skelton at his best. Working in a compartment planned by an editor, he lacked the freedom to synthesize and to bring all the relevant evidence together. *The Railway Builders* conceals accurate and original research in a deceptively popular guise. *The Day of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* was a popular forerunner of the official biography. *The Canadian Dominion*, written for the "Chronicles of America" series, though not purporting to be a complete history of Canada, is written in his best style and remains by far the best short history.

These were years of amazing productiveness. *The Canadian Dominion* in 1919 was followed by the massive *Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt* in 1920. In historical research and in the illumination shed on a formative period of Canadian history this is perhaps his most enduring book. Others of his books will be re-written with differing views and interest, but Galt, as the sturdy builder of much of the structure of Canadian business and government, will remain as Skelton drew him.

In 1921, his *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* was published. As early as 1910, Skelton had come into contact with Sir Wilfrid, for he had provided ammunition for the present Prime Minister and other supporters of reciprocity in the election of that year. Shortly afterward, he was chosen by Sir Wilfrid to write his biography. The task was an acceptable one. It carried with it the advantage of long conversations with Sir Wilfrid elaborating and explaining the documentary record, and of a more intimate study of the working of political institutions. The resulting volumes fully justified the choice for they combined a fair and sympathetic presentation of a great Canadian statesman with an important contribution to the political history of Canada. Published within two years of Laurier's death, the work ran the risks of all official biographies. No doubt future generations will wish to look at Laurier again, but there are few official biographies which surmounted their risks so successfully. The final chapters covering the distressing war years became the subject of some public controversy. Unquestionably, the chapters burn with a flaming loyalty, for loyalties of sometimes quite unsuspected fervour and a generosity which rebelled fiercely against all meanness and trickery were part of the essential spirit of O. D. Skelton. Nevertheless, there were no chapters on which he was more willing to stake his reputation nor on which he was more confident of the judgment of time.

The steady succession of books did not prevent his writing a number

of important articles on Canadian affairs. Reciprocity, Canadian autonomy in relation to most-favoured-nation treaties, and the bitterly disputed language issue were the subjects of balanced, liberal articles. During the war, when singularly little came from Canadian economists he published three sound and well-informed articles on public finance.

His contribution to the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* was written after he moved to Ottawa but was the result of earlier researches. Aside from his presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association and his anonymous contributions to state papers, almost the only publication of his Ottawa life was the four lectures published under the title, *Our Generation: Its Gains and Losses*. Here, again, particularly in the first two lectures, is the authentic Skelton. The wide sweeping synthesis, the amazing marshalling of the relevant, the revealing irony, and the balanced judgment, which no desire for certainties could bias, are a delight to any reader who knew him. The book deserves a much wider circulation among those who did not than he seemed willing to encourage.

From 1907 to 1924, Skelton's primary tasks were those of university teacher and, toward the end of the period, administrator. He left Queen's regretfully and, as he said, "after months of swithering." He realized, though did not fully admit, that Ottawa would give no time for writing and he liked the contact with young minds. More than anything what determined his choice was the realization that the work that offered itself was the work that he had prepared himself to do.

In his teaching, he devoted himself chiefly to political science while keeping touch with the elementary class in economics through his lectures on distribution and covering such marginal territory as socialism, labour problems, and, at times, public finance. Subjects such as constitutional law and comparative government he handled expertly and with a vital touch, but his courses in socialism, contemporary political thought, and national and imperial problems were his best. While not neglecting the classics, he saw that students came to know new books which broke fresh ground. Hobhouse, Graham Wallas, Veblen, H. N. Brailsford, Walter Lippmann, and Wells were turning up new points of view and he shared with his students the excitement of them. He did not necessarily lecture on them nor damn them by making them "prescribed reading." Merely a laughing reference to Wells's description of Sidney and Beatrice Webb meeting for the first time in the columns of the *Contemporary Review* was enough to send a student scurrying for *The New Machiavelli*.

Throughout most of his teaching career he offered alternating courses in national and imperial problems. These I remember as his most distinctive courses. There were no text-books; there was no expounding

of masters. Both student and teacher ranged widely in a joint exploration which was limited only by the bounds of the problems. The discipline was the discipline of the quest for knowledge. The subjects changed from year to year for they were never dead issues. The bilingual school question and the whole series of minority problems, immigration policy, tariffs and the British preference, reciprocity, Senate and electoral reform, provincial rights, imperial federation, national autonomy,—these are some remembered subjects.

Though he wrote little or nothing on imperial relations, their study absorbed a great deal of his time. Coming from an imperialist and Tory background to a University whose Principal was an ardent advocate of imperial federation, he converted himself to the nationalist position. Entering a university debate, he found to his dismay that he had been assigned the nationalist case. Depressed by the handicap, he, nevertheless, set to work with such effectiveness that he convinced both his audience and himself. He never lost either his conviction or his interest in the subject. There were days, now dimly remembered, when Skelton, John S. Ewart, and Henri Bourassa were bracketed as dangerous radicals. A radical he was, in the sense that his eye was on the problem and was not deflected by prepossessions or nervous fears. But at no time was there anything of the zealot in Skelton. No man subjected his mind more willingly to the discipline of realities; no man had a more practical view of human nature or was more opposed to sacrificing human liberty and human welfare to test a theory, even though the theory could be stated in equations of unequalled elegance. The imperialism of the Colonel Blimps amused him: the imperialism of those who would faint-heartedly yield to Downing Street the right of free men to form their own judgments, collided with his most profound convictions. He lived to see his ideas of Dominion status become the accepted ideas of the Commonwealth and his early "radicalism" the basis of policy for successive Prime Ministers. The substance of the Report of the Imperial Conference of 1926 was the subject-matter of his university lectures before the Great War.

As a teacher, Skelton was a man of subjects rather than methods. Spasmodically, he endeavoured to revise methods, to discourage the taking of copious notes, or to replace lectures by seminars. He never quite succeeded for he was always absorbed in the subject. His teaching years were his own formative years. He never reached the time when he dispensed truth; rather, he let his students participate in his own quest.

He tended to lecture as if composing an essay. The quality of the result, the ironic *obiter dicta*, and the flippant quotations prevented the

student from lapsing into passiveness, wise or unwise. There was no artifice, no setting up of false propositions to incite the student to tear them down. He treated immature intellects as if they were mature and gave them his best judgment frankly. More even than his wide-ranging knowledge, it was his objective marshalling of evidence and the obvious soundness of his judgment which impressed his students. At times, it was almost discouraging. Why look for the answer when one knew that Skelton had already reached it? One learned by a sort of contagion. The stimulus came from being able to follow the workings of a master mind. "The mark of a master," said Justice Holmes, "is that facts which before lay scattered in an inorganic mass, when he shoots through them the magnetic current of his thought, leap into an organic order, and live and bear fruit. . . . If you convince a man that another way of looking at things is more profound, another form of pleasure more subtle—if you really make him see it—the very nature of man is such that he will desire the profounder thought and the subtler joy."

With students as with colleagues, part of his power lay in his unflinching courtesy and thoughtfulness. Absent-minded in many things, he always remembered the worries and troubles of others. By kindness and unselfishness, he bound men to him in life-long loyalty.

Skelton had an extraordinarily generous belief in young people. He sometimes erred in judgment in over-rating their power. Perhaps the capacities, which he saw in them, they had not the characters to make effective. While such an attitude led to occasional errors, the appreciation of it was a powerful stimulus to the developing minds of students and junior staff. On the other hand, he was always quick to expose the fraud and kick the pedestal from beneath the feet of the *poseur*. Students soon learned that their cleverest subterfuges were transparent but the exposure never rankled. A student, aware of his lack of intimacy with Mill's *Liberty* produced a hasty red herring. He had taught school in the West and found dancing a compulsory part of the physical education curriculum. Did the professor think that conscientious objectors should be tolerated? "I think," said Skelton, "that we might allow Bible-reading as an alternative and direct our attention to John Stuart Mill." A vivacious damsel, with a bright eye and nimble tongue, saw disaster threatening her academic career. Noting the new Dean's sympathetic manner, she decided to try what is or was technically known as a "line." She was afraid she had made rather a mess of things; she had allowed herself too many social engagements; young men invited her here and there; she found it difficult to refuse; she needed the Dean's advice. "Well," said the Dean, pursing his lips, rubbing his eyebrows, and displaying the most ingenuous sympathy, "I don't know what I can suggest. You might try wearing a veil."

Of his work, as Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, this is not the time nor am I the person to write. It was work for which he had prepared himself over many years. The qualities that marked his teaching enabled him to recruit and develop an able and enthusiastic staff. His balanced mind, his ability to focus all relevant considerations on a problem, and his personality, so utterly devoid of self-seeking, quickly established him as an adviser whose range knew no limits. The anonymity of the Civil Service suited his temperament. He soon created the atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence in which alone he could work. He regretted the lack of leisure for reading and writing but he realized that, when one had made his choice, one paid his money. What pomp and circumstance Ottawa could afford did not interest him. Reluctantly he wore his tweed cap less often, but he made infrequent concessions to his silk topper. One was much more likely to find him in Bowles Lunch than in the Rideau Club. Official functions he avoided but an evening with friends, when the company was congenial and the talk good, was a pleasure to be seized whenever time permitted.

His place in Canadian history may be left for others to assign when the record has been made public. But whatever the record may disclose, we have known a great Canadian of capacious and humane mind, of profound insight, wise in counsel, who walked humbly and served, un-mindful of self, who believed passionately in human liberty, in tolerance, in the dignity of the individual, and in the pursuit of learning. Down the years, we shall remember.

[W. A. M.]

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Robert McQueen, 1896-1941

Economists all over Canada were terribly shocked by the death of Professor Robert McQueen in the tragic T.C.A. accident at Armstrong, Ontario, on February 6. He had an exceptionally large circle of friends to whom he was known as "Pete," a name that stuck to him from his undergraduate days. His passing leaves a void that will not be filled. He was in the full tide of his powers: head of the Department of Economics in the University of Manitoba, a Director of the Bank of Canada, a valued adviser to the provincial government and engaged in many other activities, all of which will suffer from the loss of his sound and forthright judgment.

Born at Edmonton, a son of the manse, he carried something of the moral urgency of his Presbyterian upbringing into his economic convictions. He came comparatively late in his academic career to his chosen field but his previous studies peculiarly fitted him for economics. After attending the Edmonton schools he entered the University of Alberta in 1913 in the Faculty of Applied Science. He completed the first two years in engineering and then transferred to the Faculty of Arts. Before completing his work for a degree he entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to begin the study of architecture. After repeated attempts to enlist he was accepted by the R.A.F. in April, 1918. On the close of the war he returned to the University of Alberta where he received his B.A. degree in 1919, and his M.A. degree in 1920. He was a lecturer in philosophy during 1920-1. McQueen shared deeply the general malaise and sense of futility common to many young people after the war. His work in philosophy, particularly his study of Hobhouse, fortified his native liberalism but he found his