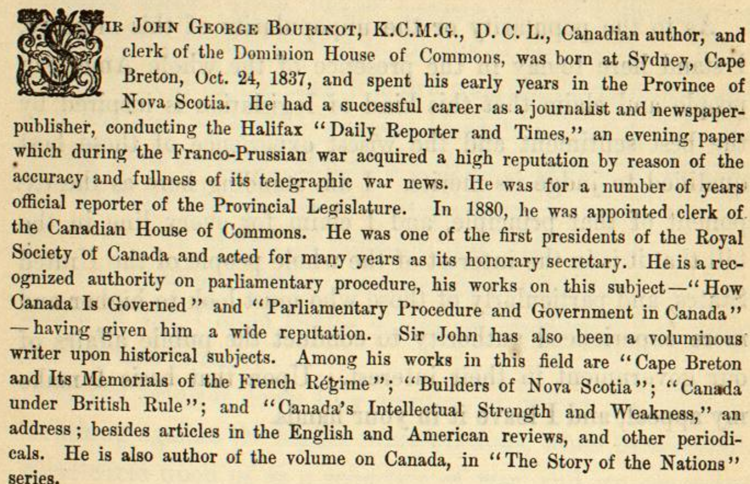
# SIR JOHN G. BOURINOT



Sir John George Bourinot, K.C.M.G., D. C. L., Canadian author, and clerk of the Dominion House of Commons, was born at Sydney, Cape Breton, Oct. 24, 1837, and spent his early years in the Province of Nova Scotia. He had a successful career as a journalist and newspaper-publisher, conducting the Halifax "Daily Reporter and Times," an evening paper which during the Franco-Prussian war acquired a high reputation by reason of the accuracy and fullness of its telegraphic war news. He was for a number of years official reporter of the Provincial Legislature. In 1880, he was appointed clerk of the Canadian House of Commons. He was one of the first presidents of the Royal Society of Canada and acted for many years as its honorary secretary. He is a recognized authority on parliamentary procedure, his works on this subject—"How Canada Is Governed" and "Parliamentary Procedure and Government in Canada"—having given him a wide reputation. Sir John has also been a voluminous writer upon historical subjects. Among his works in this field are "Cape Breton and Its Memorials of the French Régime"; "Builders of Nova Scotia"; "Canada under British Rule"; and "Canada's Intellectual Strength and Weakness," an address; besides articles in the English and American reviews, and other periodicals. He is also author of the volume on Canada, in "The Story of the Nations" series.

## EARLY CANADIAN LITERATURE

FROM AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CANADA, MAY, 1893

I CANNOT more appropriately commence this address than by a reference to an oration delivered seven years ago in the great hall of a famous university which stands beneath the stately elms of Cambridge, in the old "Bay State" of Massachusetts: a noble seat of learning in which Canadians take a deep interest, not only because some of their sons have completed their education within its walls, but because it represents that culture and scholarship which know no national lines of separation, but belong to the world's great federation of learning.

The orator was a man who, by his deep philosophy, his poetic genius, his broad patriotism, his love for England, her





great literature and history, had won himself a reputation not equalled in some respects by any other citizen of the United States of these later times.

In the course of a brilliant oration in honor of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of Harvard, James Russell Lowell took occasion to warn his audience against the tendency of a prosperous democracy "toward an overweening confidence in itself and its home-made methods, an overestimate of material success, and a corresponding indifference to the things of the mind."

He did not deny that wealth is a great fertilizer of civilization and of the arts that beautify it; that wealth is an excellent thing, since it means power, leisure, and liberty; "but these," he went on to say, "divorced from culture, that is, from intelligent purpose, become the very mockery of their own essence, not goods, but evils fatal to their possessor, and bring with them, like the Nibelungen hoard, a doom instead of a blessing."

"I am saddened," he continued, "when I see our success as a nation measured by the number of acres under tillage, or of bushels of wheat exported; for the real value of a country must be weighed in scales more delicate than the balance of trade. The garners of Sicily are empty now, but the bees from all climes still fetch honey from the tiny garden plot of Theocritus. On a map of the world you may cover Judæa with your thumb, Athens with a finger-tip, and neither of them figures in the Prices Current; but they still lord it in the thought and action of every civilized man. Did not Dante cover with his hood all that was Italy six hundred years ago? And if we go back a century, where was Germany outside of Weimar? Material success is good, but only as the necessary preliminary of better things. The

measure of a nation's true success is the amount it has contributed to the thought, the moral energy, the intellectual happiness, the spiritual hope and consolation of mankind."

These eloquently suggestive words, it must be remembered, were addressed by a great American author to an audience, made up of eminent scholars and writers, in the principal academic seat of that New England which has given birth to Emerson, Longfellow, Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, Hawthorne, Holmes, Parkman, and many others, representing the brightest thought and intellect of this continent. These writers were the product of the intellectual development of the many years that had passed since the pilgrims landed on the historic rock of Plymouth.

Yet, while Lowell could point to such a brilliant array of historians, essayists, poets, and novelists, as I have just named, as the latest results of New England culture, he felt compelled to utter a word of remonstrance against that spirit of materialism that was then, as now, abroad in the land, tending to stifle those generous intellectual aspirations which are best calculated to make a people truly happy and great.

Let us now apply these remarks of the eminent American poet and thinker to Canada—to ourselves, whose history is even older than that of New England; contemporaneous rather with that of Virginia, since Champlain landed on the heights of Quebec and laid the foundations of the ancient capital only a year after the English adventurers of the days of King James set their feet on the banks of the river named after that sovereign, and commenced the old town which has long since disappeared before the tides of the ocean that stretches away beyond the shores of the Old Dominion.

If we in Canada are open to the same charge of attaching too much importance to material things, are we able at the



same time to point to as notable achievements in literature as results of the three centuries that have nearly passed since the foundation of New France?

I do not suppose that the most patriotic Canadian, however ready to eulogize his own country, will make an effort to claim an equality with New England in this respect; but, if indeed we feel it necessary to offer any comparison that would do us justice, it would be with that Virginia whose history is contemporaneous with that of French Canada.

Statesmanship rather than letters has been the pride and ambition of the Old Dominion,—its brightest and highest achievement. Virginia has been the mother of great orators and great presidents, and her men of letters sink into insignificance alongside of those of New England. It may be said, too, of Canada, that her history in the days of the French régime, during the struggle for responsible government, as well as at the birth of confederation, gives us the names of men of statesmanlike designs and of patriotic purpose.

From the days of Champlain to the establishment of the Confederation Canada has had the services of men as eminent in their respective spheres, and as successful in the attainment of popular rights, in molding the educational and political institutions of the country, and in laying broad and deep the foundations of a new nationality across half a continent, as those great Virginians to whom the world is ever ready to pay its meed of respect. These Virginian statesmen won their fame in the large theatre of national achievement—in laying the basis of the most remarkable federal republic the world has ever seen; while Canadian public men have labored with equal earnestness and ability in that far less conspicuous and brilliant arena of colonial development the

eulogy of which has to be written in the histories of the future.

Let me now ask you to follow me for a short time while I review some of the most salient features of our intellectual progress since the days Canada entered on its career of competition in the civilization of this continent. So far there have been three well-defined eras of development in the country now known as the Dominion of Canada. First, there was the era of French Canadian occupation, which in many respects had its heroic and picturesque features. Then, after the cession of Canada to England, came that era of political and constitutional struggle for a larger measure of public liberty which ended in the establishment of responsible government about half a century ago.

Then we come to that era which dates from the Confederation of the Provinces—an era of which the first quarter of a century only has passed, of which the signs are still full of promise, despite the prediction of gloomy thinkers, if Canadians remain true to themselves and face the future with the same courage and confidence that have distinguished the past.

As I have just said, the days of the French régime were in a sense days of heroic endeavor, since we see in the vista of the past a small colony whose total population at no period exceeded eighty thousand souls, chiefly living on the banks of the St. Lawrence, between Quebec and Montreal, and contending against great odds for supremacy on the continent of America. The pen of Francis Parkman has given a vivid picture of those days when bold adventurers unlocked the secrets of this Canadian Dominion, pushed into the western wilderness, followed unknown rivers, and at last found a way to the waters of that southern gulf where Spain had



long before, in the days of Grijalva, Cortez, and Pineda, planted her flag and won treasures of gold and silver from an unhappy people who soon learned to curse the day when the white men came to the fair islands of the south and the rich country of Mexico.

In these days the world, with universal acclaim, has paid its tribute of admiration to the memory of a great discoverer who had the courage of his convictions and led the way to the unknown lands beyond the Azores and the Canaries. This present generation has forgiven him much in view of his heroism in facing the dangers of unknown seas and piercing their mysteries. His purpose was so great, and his success so conspicuous, that both have obscured his human weakness. In some respects he was wiser than the age in which he lived; in others he was the product of the greed and the superstition of that age; but we, who owe him so much, forget the frailty of the man in the sagacity of the discoverer.

As Canadians, however, now review the character of the great Genoese, and of his compeers and successors in the opening up of this continent, they must, with pride, come to the conclusion that none of these men can compare in nobility of purpose, in sincere devotion to God, king, and country, with Champlain, the sailor of Brouage, who became the founder of Quebec and the father of New France.

In the daring ventures of Marquette, Joliet, La Salle, and Tonty, in the stern purpose of Frontenac, in the far-reaching plans of La Galissonière, in the military genius of Montcalm, the historian of the present time has at his command the most attractive materials for his pen. But we cannot expect to find the signs of intellectual development among a people where there was not a single printing-press; where freedom of thought and action was repressed by a paternal absolutism;

where the struggle for life was very bitter up to the last hours of French supremacy in a country constantly exposed to the misfortunes of war, and too often neglected by a king who thought more of his mistresses than of his harrassed and patient subjects across the sea. Yet that memorable period —days of struggle in many ways—was the origin of a large amount of literature which we, in these times, find of the deepest interest and value from a historic point of view.

The English colonies of America cannot present us with any books which, for faithful narrative and simplicity of style, bear comparison with the admirable works of Champlain, explorer and historian, or with those of the genial and witty advocate, Marc Lescarbot, names that can never be forgotten on the picturesque heights of Quebec or on the banks of the beautiful basin of Annapolis. Is there a Canadian or American writer who is not under a deep debt of obligation to the clear-headed and industrious Jesuit traveller, Charlevoix, the Nestor of French-Canadian history?

The only historical writer that can at all surpass him in New England was the loyalist Governor Hutchinson, and he published his books at a later time, when the French dominion had disappeared with the fall of Quebec. To the works just mentioned we may add the books of Gabriel Sagard, and of Boucher, the governor of Three Rivers, and founder of a still eminent French-Canadian family; that remarkable collection of authentic historic narrative, known as the "Jesuit Relations;" even that tedious Latin compilation by Père du Creux, the useful narrative by La Potherie, the admirable account of Indian life and customs by the Jesuit Lafitau, and that now very rare historical account of the French colony, the "Établissement de la Foy dans la Nouvelle France," written by the Recollet Le Clercq, probably



aided by Frontenac. In these and other works, despite their diffuseness in some cases, we have a library of historical literature which, when supplemented by the great stores of official documents still preserved in the French archives, is of priceless value as a true and minute record of the times in which the authors lived, or which they described from the materials to which they alone had access. It may be said with truth that none of these writers were Canadians in the sense that they were born or educated in Canada, but still they were the product of the life, the hardships, and the realities of New France; it was from this country they drew the inspiration that gave vigor and color to their writings.

New England, as I have already said, never originated a class of writers who produced work of equal value, or indeed of equal literary merit. Religious and polemic controversy had the chief attraction for the gloomy, disputatious Puritan native of Massachusetts and the adjoining colonies. Cotton Mather was essentially a New-England creation, and if quantity were the criterion of literary merit he was the most distinguished author of his century; for it is said that indefatigable antiquarians have counted up the titles of nearly four hundred books and pamphlets by this industrious writer. His principal work, however, was the "Magnalia Christi Americana; or, Ecclesiastical History of New England from 1620 to 1698",—a large folio, remarkable as a curious collection of strange conceits, forced witticisms, and prolixity of narrative, in which the venturesome reader soon finds himself so irretrievably mystified and lost that he rises from the perusal with wonderment that so much learning as was evidently possessed by the author could be so used to bewilder the world of letters. The historical knowledge is literally choked up with verbiage and mannerisms. Even prosy Du

Creux becomes tolerable at times compared with the garrulous Puritan author.

Though books were rarely seen, and secular education was extremely defective as a rule throughout the French colony, yet at a very early period in its history remarkable opportunities were afforded for the education of a priesthood and the cult of the principles of the Roman Catholic religion among those classes who were able to avail themselves of the facilities offered by the Jesuit college which was founded at Quebec before even Harvard at Cambridge, or by the famous Great and Lesser Seminaries in the same place, in connection with which, in later times, rose the University with which is directly associated the name of the most famous bishop of the French régime.

The influence of such institutions was not simply in making Canada a most devoted daughter of that great Church which has ever exercised a paternal and even absolute care of its people, but also in discouraging a purely materialistic spirit and probably keeping alive a taste for letters among a very small class, especially the priests, who, in politics as in society, have been always a controlling element in the French Province. Evidences of some culture and intellectual aspirations in the social circles of the ancient capital attracted the surprise of travellers who visited the country before the close of the French dominion.

" Science and the fine arts," wrote Charlevoix, " have their turn, and conversation does not fail. The Canadians breathe from their birth an air of liberty which makes them very pleasant in the intercourse of life, and our language is nowhere more purely spoken."

La Galissonière, who was an associate member of the French Academy of Science, and the most highly cultured



governor ever sent out by France, spared no effort to encourage a systematic study of scientific pursuits in Canada. Dr. Michel Sarrazin, who was a practising physician in Quebec for nearly half a century, devoted himself most assiduously to the natural history of the colony, and made some valuable contributions to the French Academy, of which he was a correspondent.

The Swedish botanist, Peter Kalm, who visited America in the middle of the last century, was impressed with the liking for scientific study which he observed in the French colony. " I have found," he wrote, " that eminent persons, generally speaking, in this country, have much more taste for natural history and literature than in the English colonies, where the majority of people are entirely engrossed in making their fortune, while science is, as a rule, held in very light esteem."

Strange to say, he ignores in this passage the scientific labors of Franklin, Bartram, and others he had met in Pennsylvania. As a fact, such evidences of intellectual enlightment as Kalm and Charlevoix mentioned were entirely exceptional in the colony, and never showed themselves beyond the walls of Quebec or Montreal. The Province, as a whole, was in a state of mental sluggishness. The germs of intellectual life were necessarily dormant among the mass of the people, for they never could produce any rich fruition until they were freed from the spirit of absolutism which distinguished French supremacy, and were able to give full expression to the natural genius of their race under the inspiration of the liberal government of England in these later times.

Passing from the heroic days of Canada, which, if it could hardly, in the nature of things, originate a native literature,