



Photo: Karsh, Ottawa

OBITUARY

R. C. Wallace (1881-1955)

By the death of Dr. Robert Charles Wallace on 30 January 1955, the Arctic Institute of North America lost more than its Executive Director. The staff and the Governors lost a warm friend. The north lost one who knew it well and who had served it faithfully in a variety of ways during his forty-five years in Canada. So well and so affectionately was he known as "Wallace of Queen's" that his links with the north of Canada were somewhat naturally overshadowed in the minds of many of his friends. To some it seemed strange that, after his distinguished service to Queen's University, and at a time in life when many men would have cast all official duties aside, he willingly accepted the invitation to serve the Arctic Institute in its senior administrative post. But those who knew him well were not surprised nor were they in any doubt that what was supposed to be a "half-time job" was to be for him a labour of love upon which no time limit could be imposed.

He was a native of the Orkney Islands and a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, coming to Canada in 1910. In his native town of Kirkwall stands the ancient Cathedral Church of St. Magnus. And in a quiet corner of that old stone church is the tomb of another Orkneyman, another graduate of Edinburgh, a man who left an indelible mark upon the arctic lands of Canada—the tomb of John Rae. Dr. Wallace has himself told of the close links between the Orkneys, and Kirkwall in particular, and the Canadian North, mainly through the many men there recruited for the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, and because of the many years during which Stromness was the last port of call for the Company's ships on their voyages to the northwest. In a most revealing paper written but a few months before his death,¹ Dr. Wallace told how "as a boy (he) often contemplated that rugged figure (on the tomb), conveying as it did something of the indomitable vigour which characterized the man." Small wonder that those boyhood impressions should have persisted throughout his life, giving to him a love for the North-land which his duties most fortunately permitted him to exercise in good measure.

His first eight years in Canada were spent in Winnipeg, at the University of Manitoba where he was head of the Department of Geology from 1912 onwards. In 1918 he was appointed by the provincial government as Commissioner of Northern Manitoba and he held this post for three years, while on leave of absence from his duties at the University. With his wife and young family he moved up to The Pas in December 1918, and they stayed in that northern outpost until the summer of 1921. As Commissioner he represented his government in connection with almost every branch of northern life. He served as coroner, superintendent of police, mining recorder, and in many other ways. In addition to these many and varied duties, he found time to travel throughout the entire northern part of the province, including the shores of Hudson Bay. It is true that this was not in the Arctic but all who know the north will know well that the life led by the Wallaces at The Pas those many years ago differed but little from the living in points farther to the north and yet but little more isolated.

His original appointment as Commissioner was for two years but the University granted him an additional year's leave of absence before confronting him with the inevitable choice between continuing his northern work and returning to his academic duties. The decision could not have been an easy one for him to make. One can well imagine that, despite the personal reasons that must have been involved,

¹"Rae of the Arctic", *The Beaver*, Outfit 284, pp. 28-33, March 1954.

it was to a large extent a resolving of the conflict between his love of the north and his Scottish instincts regarding education. Education won and the whole of Canada reaped the benefit but his love for the north remained, to find expression again in his final years through his service with the Arctic Institute.

His distinguished career in education is well known. His work as President of the University of Alberta from 1928 to 1936, and as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University from 1936 to 1951 left an imprint upon Canada that will long remain. His influence for good upon the minds and characters of the innumerable young Canadians who were his students is a tale now locked away in grateful hearts throughout this land and far beyond. It is no figure of speech to say "his students", for his lectures to all first-year undergraduates at Queen's showed what manner of man this was, his most private Sunday morning visits to students in hospital being some measure of his innate kindness.

The honours that came his way and that he so justly earned were many; they will be duly recorded in the official publications. There must have been few Canadians of his stature who carried their honours so lightly. His clear eye was as boylike and his enthusiasm as infectious, his hair just as tousled and his gestures just as youthful when the writer last saw him as they were on a happy day almost twenty years ago when he had the privilege of being the first addition appointed by Wallace of Queen's to his new staff at Kingston.

This was the man who gave up the quiet of his retirement to be the Executive Director of the Arctic Institute—as well as many other things, such as Advisor to the Ontario Department of Education, for his love for education remained paramount. He served the Institute well, almost too well for he was indefatigable in his efforts to promote this service agency for the north. He inspired the staff, he encouraged the Governors and his missionary zeal for increased scientific work in the north was transmitted to many.

Now that he has gone, regret must be widespread that he wrote relatively little. If asked, he would have said that he was too busy with people. But what he did write brings the warmth of his personality to the printed word in a quite uncanny way. So it was that, when his passing was announced, so many of his friends were reading, or had just read, a strangely moving testimony published in the *Queens' Quarterly*¹ which will long be a treasure to many. Here are words from this paper, words that tell so much of the man to whom the Arctic Institute of North America now records its great indebtedness and profound respect: "What does matter is that the human mind is not confined to the things that today are and tomorrow are gone. What does matter is that the sense of the eternal informs our doing and our thinking, that the horizon does not limit our vision, that our mind's eye can pierce beyond the things of sense into the infinity of time and of space, that we rest in the assurance that underneath are the everlasting arms."

R. F. LEGGET

¹R. C. Wallace. 1955. "As I look back—some random thoughts". *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 61, pp. 490-7.