

## OBITUARY

*Wilfred Currier Keirstead, 1871-1944*

On June 12, 1871, Wilfred Currier Keirstead was born in the tiny hamlet of Cornhill, in Kings County, New Brunswick. Born into very ordinary circumstances, he was in many ways an extraordinary boy. Beset with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, he overcame what must have appeared to be an almost insurmountable barrier—the means of securing it. This country lad was destined to travel far afield to study under the great scholars of the day, and return to his native province to enrich it with his wisdom and knowledge. His long life was devoted to learning and imparting his knowledge to others. No man of his time has exerted a greater influence in New Brunswick's educational circles, and that influence has spread far beyond provincial boundaries. As a student of regional economic problems, he was instrumental in clarifying many issues for both the provincial and Dominion governments. Happily he lived to see many of his proposals incorporated into government policy. The fruits of his diligent scholarship will long survive him.

From the rural schools, armed with a rudimentary education, determination, and a deeply ingrained sense of moral values, he entered the provincial Normal School, then worked his way through the University of New Brunswick by preaching in the local churches. He was graduated at twenty-seven, already mature beyond his years, and ready to embark upon the great adventure that is the study of philosophy. Scholarships opened Bates College and Divinity School to him, and a University of Chicago fellowship made it possible for him to become a Doctor of Philosophy, *magna cum laude*. His years of work under John Dewey left a profound impression on him.

During two years of preaching in Rockford, Illinois, his work appears to have consisted of wide reading in philosophy, with particular reference to German thought of the day. His writing at this time was confined to a long list of book reviews of German philosophical works for the *American Journal of Theology*. His knowledge of the German language, acquired in so short a time, is an indication of his aptitude and diligence. It must have been during this period that his own personal philosophy was crystallized, for the decision was made to return to New Brunswick as a clergyman of the Baptist Church. Shortly afterwards, in 1908, he became Professor of Philosophy and Economics at the University of New Brunswick, where he remained until a few months before his death.

That he should have turned his back on a University of Chicago appointment, which meant a brilliant and well-rewarded future in the period when that institution was rapidly becoming one of America's great universities, was typical of the man. He felt that he could serve better in New Brunswick, and chose first to preach in a small-town Baptist church, and later to teach in what was then a university of 150 students for a salary of \$1,200. His contribution has probably been the greater for it. While his teaching precluded extensive publication, indisputably a loss to the world of letters, at the same time two generations of students have had their minds and their philosophy of life carefully moulded by this kindly scholar.

Dr. Keirstead was a philosopher by nature and training. He was a devoutly religious man, and his religion was made up of the kind of charity and tolerance that is real Christianity. The nature of his philosophy was such that he was impelled to the social sciences. It could not have been otherwise, for his passionate belief in social justice could not be confined to any one discipline. He was in the vanguard of Canadian liberalism, was possessed of deep-rooted convictions of right and wrong, and never hesitated to join battle with intolerance and reaction. In days when it was unfashionable to criticize the *status quo*, he wrote, "through the acquisition of natural resources, political privileges, credit facilities, patent rights or special knowledge, incomes are exacted that cannot be justified by individual merit or social expediency." His approach to the problem involved faith in man's ability to evolve a better social order. He was a pioneer in drafting social legislation in New Brunswick, and viewed each accomplishment as but another small link forged in the chain of progress.

Having brought the furies down upon his head, he would chuckle with delight at the reaction caused by his words. Mindless of his critics and of innuendo, he continued to instil in the minds of his students an understanding and appreciation of the basic problems attached to the social, political, and economic institutions of the day. Addressing the graduating class of the University shortly before the end, he said:

You are to take membership in our social institutions. They are good insofar as they are a medium for social cooperation and for the satisfaction of your common needs; but they are evil insofar as they are static and reactionary in a progressive society, and are used as fortresses of greed, exploitation and special privileges. What they need is, first of all, to undergo a searching analysis by social science, involving a clear discernment and unhesitating rejection of the evil in them and a reconstruction of the good into adequate instruments for a nobler social order.

The man's real stature can be known only by those who have been his students. Centre of the Arts Faculty in a small university for thirty-six years, practically every student passed through his classes. The range of subjects which he taught and his teaching load would appal a new generation of instructors. Yet his teaching was on a plane which few of us can ever achieve. He possessed a spiritual fire which seemed impervious to the lavish way in which it was expended. The search for truth was his passion, and he was a missionary in the sense that he was impelled to lead others in the quest.

The fields of philosophy, logic and ethics, psychology and sociology, economics, politics, and education all were unfolded before the raw and unlettered boys and girls who came to him for the most part with a background similar to his own. Perhaps most of them caught no more than a glimmering of the fruits of man's thoughts since they have been recorded. But many a student was led painstakingly, first along the well-trod paths, then to the greener fields that he somehow seemed to bring within reaching distance. To those, his teaching was carried into his home, where young philosophers and social scientists, over tea and cakes, could listen to the best talk in the town. His private library was ever in circulation among this small circle of budding scholars, many of whom have subsequently justified his faith in them.

The professor was exacting in his demands on his honour students, but his charity to the rank and file was a legend. It pained him to have a student fail, and he betimes let his imagination find extenuating circumstances under which to excuse a failure. He was sometimes the victim of sharp practice by students, and probably knew it. But he would rather have been fooled a dozen times than have been unjust once. Pretence was anathema, and some of us still remember how, with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle, he could deflate the bumpitiousness of youth, heady with the froth of a little learning.

Successful apprenticeship with Professor Keirstead invariably meant a fellowship or scholarship at Oxford or London, or at the great graduate schools of America. His recommendation meant a free passage to those verdant fields of postgraduate study.

His lectures were never doctrinaire, for orthodoxy was not one of his traits. His method of teaching was to appraise the problems critically, and explain how they had been approached by the great thinkers of the ages. I have never ceased to wonder at the man's versatility. A brilliantly conceived lecture on Kant, Hume, or Locke would be followed by a technical discussion of the maritime freight-rate structure, and then, perhaps, by a critical commentary on behaviourism. My notes of his lectures on labour problems, given in a day and at a place where the closed shop was considered ungodly, show the uncompromising point of view of a man who believed passionately in justice and in the rights of man. His lectures on Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Mill were never equalled by the men of international reputation under whom I later studied. A voracious yet critical reader, he was acquainted with the never-ending stream of literature in a dozen fields. His annotations on scores of government documents in the University Library indicate his contempt for the shoddy, and his shrewd detection of fallacy.

Despite the heavy demands made upon him by his university, he served the province and its municipalities in many capacities. From 1916 to 1919 he was provincial Administrator of the Federal Food Board. He was Chairman of the New Brunswick Commissions on Mothers' Allowances and Minimum Wage Legislation, President of the Fredericton Children's Aid Society, a member of the Social Service Board of the Maritime Baptist Convention. He prepared a study on behalf of the provincial government, making the case for the taking over of the Valley Railway (a provincial venture) by the federal government. His analysis of New Brunswick's need for increased federal subsidies resulted in a readjustment favourable to the province. He was the first writer to explore the field of taxation and public finance in New Brunswick.

Health impaired from so many years of ceaseless toil, his retirement last May saddened the university community. At a farewell dinner in the hallway of the old Arts Building which he first entered fifty years before, he was given a bound volume of letters from old students—statesmen and judges, preachers and laymen, men and women great and small—paying tribute to, and showing their affection for, this man who had given his best to them. To him this was far dearer than any of the material gifts that were or could have been bestowed upon him.

He delivered a spontaneous valedictory which unhappily was not recorded. Six months later, at noon on Sunday, November 5, 1944, he died.

To those of us whom he reared in his profession he has bequeathed, would we only accept it, a distaste for the astrologists of the social sciences and a request for honest scholarship. To his university he has left a tradition of devoted and diligent service, and a standard of pedagogy far removed from the idle mediocrity which so often bedevils our institutions of learning. The social sciences have benefited not so much from what he wrote as from the men and women whom he trained. [J.R.P.]

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