

# A COLLEGE JUBILEE

**M**AN, said Sir Thomas Browne in his magnificent fashion, "man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes and pompous in the grave, solemnising natiivities and deaths with equal lustre"; solemnising too, shall we add, jubilees, that sort of nativity that confers an extra lustre on men and institutions. The universities of the old world celebrate their five hundredth and eight hundredth anniversaries; even in the new world Harvard has had its tercentennial, and Princeton lately an orgy over its double centenary; we in New Zealand must be content with a fifty-year span when we rejoice.

It was fifty years ago, on April 17, 1899, that Professor John Brown, fresh from Glasgow, but now for a fortnight an inhabitant of Wellington, that rather crude colonial capital, gave his inaugural lecture on the classics in education, and Victoria College was really launched on its peculiar and not uneventful career. Cautious Brown and his colleagues—expansive, laughter-loving Mackenzie, high-spirited Easterfield, brilliant and debonair Maclaurin—could not foresee the future, so they hoped for the best, buckled down to their Latin and Greek and English and Chemistry and Mathematics with a will, and believed in the college they had founded as intensely, probably, as most of the rather old (but none the less romantic) students who saw their dream of higher education come true. What days they were! What enthusiasm, in the borrowed rooms of Girls' High School and old Technical School buildings; what high-falutin' ideals and limitless gas about fellowship and learning, what intellectual insobriety!

For this was a sort of spring after a long, long winter of discontent. Wellington, lagging well behind the other

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colonial centres, and through no self-made sacrifice, had at last got a university college—without a habitation, without even a site, it is true, but a university college of its own; and a university, the youth remembered, is not buildings, not endowments, not fellows' gardens and ivy on immemorial walls, but men and women. They went ahead. And now, at the end of fifty years, what have we got to look back on? What has Victoria College meant to the community, to its students, to the world?

[T has been a singular place. It was not rooted in any belief in the virtues of education maintained by the citizens of Wellington, those tough commercial men. The province was not founded by scholars and gentlemen—and of course there were advantages as well as disadvantages in this. But the great advocate of university education in the capital, the virtual founder of the college, was Robert Stout, a Shetlander and Otago man, who came to the capital primarily as a politician. His own bills were thwarted in the legislature, and, curiously enough, it was Seddon who passed the Victoria College Act of 1897—Seddon, back from his Queen's Diamond Jubilee, with a Cambridge LL.D.; Seddon, seconded by Jock McKenzie, the Minister of Agriculture who believed that what this country needed was not more education but more control of land and more hard work. Seddon had been suddenly smitten with his idea—he would found a college, a Victoria College, to commemorate the occasion on which he had so recently assisted, and he would found a poor man's college,

a democratic as well as a loyal manifesto, with low fees and scholarships from the primary schools, that would make the older colleges, the haunts of riches and snobbery (so he implied) sit up and take notice. College endowments, adequate finance, adequate housing, were the last things that Seddon thought of—"it would all come right in the end," he told his despairing suppliants, from time to time; and marching with magnificent indignation over Stout and his other critics, he passed his bill and pressed down this queer diadem on the brow of his Queen.

**W**HAT would the Queen think of it if after fifty years she could study its history? One trembles. For Victoria College has never been, precisely, a Victorian institution. One would not say that it has been constantly and heavily improper, but certainly it has hardly fought, as a general rule, for the proprieties. The Queen would often have been puzzled, and she would have rarely derived amusement from these creatures of her ghostly majesty. When students have written odes and sonnets to their mistress, it has been to a different Victoria, a starchy-eyed, star-crowned maid on the heights, a Pallas, a Minerva, a Clio, a Melpomene all in one, whose empire has not ranged over continent and sea, but over the spirit and the mind. She is a Queen whose regality would not have fitted into Buckingham Palace. But she has never had a palace of any sort in which to expand herself, in which (to quote one of her early worshippers) to "trail her robe of unimagined dyes" (she was Science as well as Arts); the buildings, as they spread up Salamanca Road, on the heights, on their bed of clay, were never palatial, and any robe trailed therein would certainly have been trodden on, not without curses.

Indeed the college, this anomalous tribute to the virtues of the Queen-Empress, has remained a Poor Relation. For most of its life it has been a poor relation among the other university institutions of New Zealand; and while it has been catching up over the last 10 years, it is still, as universities go elsewhere, a very poor relation. It has commemorated not so much Queen Victoria as her subject Mr. Wilkins Micawber; and while it has never displayed quite the exuberant vitality, the noble fortitude, of that great man, yet its head has never been long bowed by misfortune, or by disappointed expectations, or by failure to hear, as the fancy robe of unimagined dyes has swept past, the chink of ha'pence. There has been desperately canny financing from the start, munificent gestures have been ruled out; but the college has continued to exist.

[T has continued to exist; and it has had one capacity beyond all riches—the capacity to call forth affection from a continuous stream of students. Behind the lectures, behind the japes and *jeux d'esprit* that has so often affronted Respectable People, there has been this sort of personal feeling, this odd but not fantastic warmth, this sense of life lived in common in a particular way, which

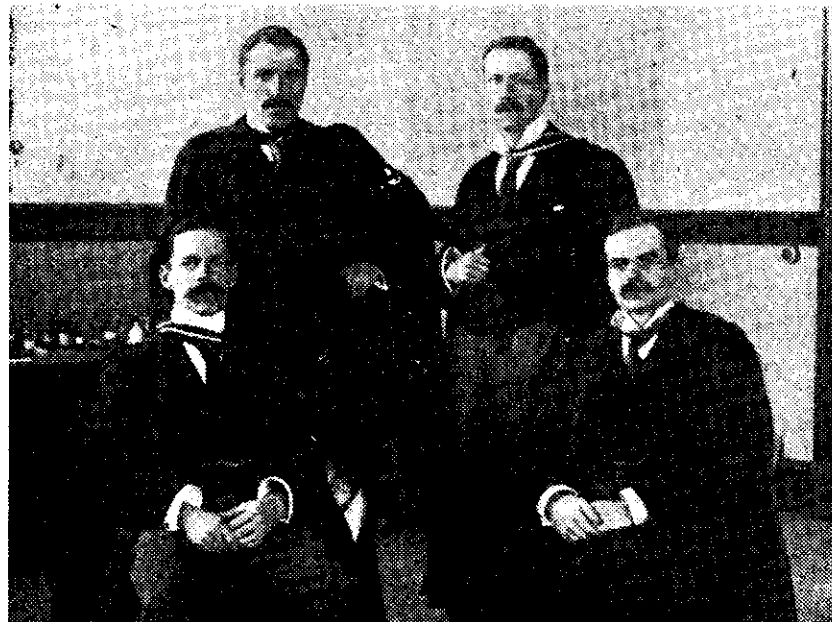


Turnbull Library photograph  
**RICHARD JOHN SEDDON**  
"It would all come right in the end"

has meant not merely mechanical existence, not merely teaching to a programme and learning by rote, but something that has affected the heart as well as the mind. It is a thing more noticeable at some times than at others, but it has never quite gone even at the worst of times, under the impact of war or depression, and it is a thing that has touched staff as well as students and given them some corporate being. Nothing could exceed the unhappiness, the underlying as well as explicit dissension, of some university institutions; it has been the happiness of Victoria to have escaped that. There have been fierce and mighty arguments, terrific onslaughts, colossal defiances, battles that baffle description; yet above it all, behind it all, pervading it all, the rag-clad *alma mater* who has also been, somehow, a pure and snowy-breasted maid (see early college poets) has stood for wisdom and understanding and a measure of disinterested love.

**H**OW rich the college has been in personality! It has not, one must admit, numbered very many scholars of real renown among its teachers, but it has had first-rate teachers and some good scholars. It has had, anyhow for brief periods, the brilliant Maclaurin, the profound Salmond; it had Laby, who made Australian science what it is to-day, it had Picken and Sommerville. What would it have been without Kirk and von Zedlitz, so diverse in their origins, so alike in their breadth of mind and their sense of honour and their comprehension, so alike and yet so different in their wit, so tolerant and so independent; both great teachers of men and women. They were among the great personalities, but so also were the four foundation professors; and what a study of a quite different sort there is in Maurice Richmond, the conscience-driven teacher of law! One takes their names almost at random, yet with a sort of logic, because they stand out; but there are others, still teaching, to whose minds and ways one could devote long and rewarding examination. There have been the lecturers, there have been the students; rich, rich has been the harvest of their personality too; though if one began to mention students' names, from 1899 on, one would be sunk within an

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**THE FIRST PROFESSORIAL BOARD**—Back: Hugh Mackenzie (English); Thomas Hill Easterfield (Chemistry and Physics), later Sir Thomas Easterfield, Director of the Cawthron Institute. Front: Richard Cockburn Maclaurin (Mathematics), later president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and scientific adviser to the President during World War I; John Brown (Classics), later Sir John Rankine Brown.