

BOOKS

A life in letters

Sir Andrew Macphail: The Life and Legacy of a Canadian Man of Letters

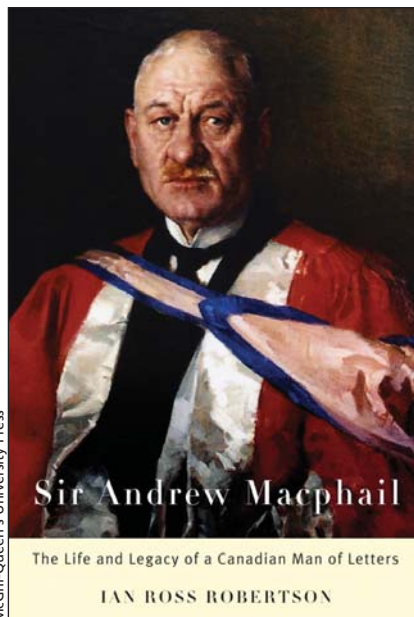
Ian Ross Robertson

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It would be a rare Canadian physician who could name the founding editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*: Andrew Macphail (1864–1938). The McGill University graduate was a physician and cultural analyst, whose career emphasis was centred on his widespread literary activities rather than on his professional-medical work. In Montréal, Quebec, Macphail was one of a group of Canadian Medical Association members who believed that the 47-year-old association needed a forum for recording its transactions and the clinical experiences of its members.

There was, in 1910, no Canada-wide medical journal, but for some years Macphail had been editing a good local publication, the *Montreal Medical Journal*. He offered to meld his journal into what became the *CMAJ*, thus relieving it of a potential rival. When the *Maritime Medical News* of Halifax, Nova Scotia followed Macphail's lead, the decision was made to begin publication of the national journal in 1911, with Macphail as editor.¹ The *CMAJ* appeared first as a monthly, and like many medical journals, had a shaky beginning. However, among other manoeuvres Macphail persuaded Sir William Osler to write a series of short articles, *Men and Books*, which began to appear in 1912.² Osler's name was magical and his early participation in the journal must have had a salutary effect on anyone contemplating submission of an article.

This fascinating tale is one of many engagingly recounted by Ian Ross Robertson in this first book-length



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study of Sir Andrew Macphail's life. In addition to being the founding editor of this journal, Macphail is renowned internationally as an essayist on important political, social and intellectual themes of his time.

Throughout the book, Robertson emphasizes that Macphail's life in medicine was, in his judgment, minor compared with his scholarly literary achievements. This decision reflects Robertson's personal interests, as is his privilege; however, this reviewer would have liked a somewhat heavier emphasis on Macphail's medical experiences, which were also seminal. He practised general medicine in Montréal toward the end of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century. He also taught at Bishop's Faculty of Medicine in Montréal, and was a significant figure in working out the amalgamation with McGill that took place early in the 1900s. He taught medical history to McGill medical students from 1907 to 1916 or so, and also chaired an informal group studying medical writing, a natural subject for such an experienced

editor. One of his students, H. Ernest MacDermot (who later became editor of *CMAJ*), recalled these historical lectures as being "delivered in a droning monotone."

During World War I, Macphail had a harrowing return to practical medicine for several months when he served on the front line with Field Ambulance No. 6. Toward the end of the war he was one of 3 medical officers who edited the short-lived *Bulletin of the Canadian Army Medical Corps*. Out of these experiences came the first of what was to have been a multivolume history of the war. But Macphail's work was criticized on several levels, including its over-emphasis on his personal experiences, some of these being attributed to other observers. The resulting controversy meant that no further volumes of history appeared until just before World War II.

On a personal level, Macphail had married a wealthy Montréal woman in 1893 and they had 2 children. Then, tragically, Mrs. Macphail died young in 1902. It was at about this time that Macphail ceased his medical practice. Indeed, there is little record of gainful employment after this time, suggesting that his wife's fortune had come to him. Certainly Macphail drew no compensation from his medical-journal editorships. "Gratuitous editorial work," MacDermot has pointed out, "was a tradition accepted without reservation."³ Nevertheless, Macphail was free to spend his time doing what he liked best.

And what Macphail liked best was to write. He wrote well. But he wrote little on medical topics. The essay was his forte, though he also published books, wrote drama and even an occasional poem. He became a prominent and arguably influential essayist specializing on questions of Canadian–British and Canadian–American relations. Issues of early 20th-century politics and economics, and social problems, such

as feminist ambitions in a patriarchal world, became some of the themes of his writing. In terms of philosophical approach, Macphail was an impassioned traditionalist.

Born and raised in rural Prince Edward Island in 1864, Macphail imbibed there an array of basic values that remained at the core of his thinking throughout his life. Before World War I, much of this philosophy was articulated in the pages of *The University Magazine*. This publication had been narrowly McGill-based, but when Macphail took over as editor in 1907, he involved the University of Toronto, solicited contributions from across Canada and paid his authors. The number of subscribers — although never large — also grew.

Macphail was also a major contributor. Many of his favourite subjects seem obscure now; it is significant that Robertson declares all these topics to be irrelevant to Macphail after World War I. Macphail “did not support gender equality, utilitarian education, or the social gospel — in fact, he opposed all 3 with

vigour.” Macphail expressed his beliefs on the position of women in the world with conviction and a singular lack of tact. Women were, he held, when compared with men, to be dependent, have lesser sensitivity and intelligence, “greater selfishness, unreflectiveness, lack of sympathy, and lack of a moral sense.” This may say something complimentary about women in Macphail’s rural Prince Edward Island background.

Yet that background became the inspiration for what has proven to be Macphail’s only lasting literary contribution: a book, *The Master’s Wife*, published posthumously by his children. It preserves an effective and moving description of early Prince Edward Island countryside life. As such it has achieved belated recognition, on the Island at least, as a valued cultural record. But that influence is local.

Robertson’s biographical summary of Macphail’s life has much to commend it. The author has captured well the organic connection between Macphail’s Island roots and his writing

career, a connection much dependent on frequent returns to the traditionalist homeland. It seems ironic that despite a long life devoted to debating serious Canadian cultural issues, Macphail’s most lasting memorial is the one you are now looking at: the *Canadian Medical Association Journal/Journal de L’Association Médicale Canadienne*.

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2. Golden RL, Roland CG. *Sir William Osler: an annotated bibliography with illustrations*. San Francisco (CA): Norman Publishing; 1988. p. 87.
3. MacDermot HE. The fiftieth anniversary of the association journal. *CMAJ* 1961;84:1–5.

Dr. Roland submitted this review in April 2009; he passed away on June 9, 2009 (*CMAJ* 2009;181[3]:181).