

# ESSAYIST, EDITOR, & PHYSICIAN

*The Career of Sir Andrew Macphail, 1864-1938*

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**S**IR ANDREW MACPHAIL, described shortly after his death in 1938, as “the most eminent Canadian literary figure of his generation,”<sup>1</sup> has been relegated to undeserved obscurity by contemporary Canada. More surprising still, is his neglect by the medical profession. In the years separating the fame of Osler from that of Banting and Best, Macphail, as founding editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, was one of Canada’s most widely known physicians. His books and essays were commented upon in newspapers and periodicals not only in Canada, but in Great Britain and the United States as well. He was in many respects a twentieth-century renaissance man, having been at various times a school teacher, journalist, physician, playwright, editor, soldier, author and professor. Such a remarkable career did not pass unnoticed by his contemporaries. In recognition of his wartime service he was knighted in 1918, while his intellectual achievements were rewarded by membership in the Royal Society of Canada, an honorary doctorate from McGill University, the Quebec government prize for literature in 1928, and the prestigious Lorne Pierce Medal of the Royal Society of Canada for outstanding contributions to literature in 1930. In view of these accomplishments, the following pages present a brief review of Macphail’s career and his contributions to both Canadian literature and the medical profession.

John Andrew Macphail was born at Orwell, Prince Edward Island, in 1864. It was here on the family farm that many of his later ideas — a preference for rural rather than urban life, a respect for thrift and manual labour, and an absolute insistence on the responsibility of the individual for his own welfare — took root. Here, too, his fascination with the Bible was encouraged at the local Church of Scotland and he began his first explorations into literature with the works of Swift, Macaulay, and Shakespeare. Despite his later affection for Orwell, he soon realized that “the school was the open door of escape,” and in 1880 accepted a scholarship to Prince of Wales College in Prince Edward Island.

Macphail spent two years at the College studying languages, mathematics, and "infantry foot-drill" under a veteran of the Indian mutiny. Following in his father's footsteps, he accepted a teaching appointment at the Fanning Grammar School in Malpeque. The teacher he considered primarily a disciplinarian whose role was to ensure that natural aptitude advanced while those with less ability abandoned futile academic pursuits. Two years of such supervisory work seemed to him dull and unrewarding, but he had accumulated sufficient savings to continue his education. It was in the fall of 1885 that Macphail began his life-long association with McGill University.

During his undergraduate years, formal studies were often neglected in favour of voracious reading. Arnold, Ruskin, Bagehot, and Pater were among his favourites and Macphail soon discovered that "the danger of reading is that it engenders the desire to write." He wrote frequent reviews and articles for the *Montreal Gazette* and became the accredited *Chicago Times* correspondent. Though this compulsion to write consigned him to "the large middle average" of his class he received a Bachelor of Arts in 1888 and three years later — despite the fact that, as he phrased it, "even my professional studies were perfunctory" — a medical degree.

Armed with \$1,200 saved from his journalistic efforts and a reporting contract from an American newspaper syndicate, Macphail embarked on a trip around the world. Late in 1891, he arrived in England to work at the London Hospital. A year later, "a lean and broken wretch," he received the Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. Returning to Montreal he was appointed Professor of the Diseases of Children at Bishop's Medical College in 1893 and in 1895 became a consulting pathologist at the Western and Verdun Hospitals. These appointments, combined with private practice, attracted Macphail's full attention for almost a decade.<sup>2</sup>

Already, however, he had begun to formulate the philosophy which would animate most of his subsequent literary career. These views were eventually summarized in his "History of the Idea of Evolution," which appeared in the *Dalhousie Review* in 1925, a reworking of an address to the McGill Biological Society earlier that year. Four years later, a revised version appeared as "Evolution and Life" in the *Annals of Medical History*. Finally, in 1934, the *Montreal Herald* printed a synopsis of the argument under the heading, "I Believe, This is My Credo, My Philosophy of Life."<sup>3</sup> What were the essential elements in the belief structure?

Macphail's philosophy was born of what he referred to as "the principle debate of the nineteenth century," the confrontation between science and religion. "Those alone who passed through the period," he continued, "can understand the havoc wrought in the minds of men. The fabric of their dearest belief appeared to be dissolving." By 1905, however, he was convinced that it was generally recog-

nized that the conflict had been "a figment of the theological imagination." The force behind this transformation was the writing of Hegel and the German idealists.<sup>4</sup> Two highly significant assertions emerged. First, the gradual process of evolution could be interpreted as a slow, but intentional act of creation by God. Secondly, when the motivating force for evolution was considered divine, the process of natural selection was no longer a mere brutish struggle, but rather, represented the survival of the morally fit. Macphail phrased this synthesis in the following terms:

*Life is the final expression of the universal Will. That is the inner meaning of evolution . . . Giraffes and men who tried to live without conformity to . . . that Will, have come to a bad end . . . By this universal formula of the emergence of the universal Will, every problem in biology is solved.*<sup>5</sup>

Such was his eclectic view of life. It borrowed heavily from nineteenth-century scientists such as Darwin and Huxley, from the American transcendentalist Emerson, and from German idealism filtered through British thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle and the theologian, Edward Caird. Nor was this synthesis of religion and science unique, for William Henry Drummond in England or Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbot in the United States popularized the incorporation of evolution into traditional faith.<sup>6</sup> What was remarkable was the consistency with which his social philosophy adhered to these underlying assumptions. In education, for example, the teacher acted largely as a disciplinarian to supervise the natural ascent of the bright and the gradual withdrawal of the less talented. Society as a whole was naturally arranged in a hierarchy with the morally and intellectually fit as its leaders and the lower orders, according to capacity, arranged below. Efforts at uplifting these lower orders were misguided, for their position was in accord with the dictates of nature, or, as he phrased it, "a species, when true to itself, however humble, is admirable." Similarly, the emancipation of women denied the role evolution had allotted them; better, he felt, that they should "live in subordination to their essential idea." The industrialization of Canada was a process which was, for Macphail, a rejection of Canada's natural agrarian character and thus doomed to failure. Attempts to erect tariff barriers would similarly fail for ignoring the principle of free trade which allowed each nation to assume its natural economic role. Finally, attempts to sever the Imperial tie, by denying Canada's natural link with the venerable British tradition, would result in the type of political chaos which characterized the United States. Whenever a nation or an individual attempted to deny the role allotted by nature, disaster was a certain consequence.<sup>7</sup>

This philosophy found its way into Macphail's attitude towards medicine. While at Malpeque he had resolved, for reasons never made explicit in personal or published sources and despite his strong interest in philosophy, to become a

physician rather than a minister. In his own mind the alternatives were less distinct than might appear, for as he later wrote, "religion and medicine have arisen out of the same protoplasm." Indeed, medicine was a profession devoted entirely to the selfless service of man, the reward for which he believed was personal salvation.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his professional life, Macphail never ceased to emphasize this moral dimension to the physician's career.

Success in the practice of medicine, as in all human activities, depended on the degree to which the practitioner acted in harmony with the dictates of nature. In fact, in most cases, patients "will recover if they are left alone." The modern emphasis on specialization and research was, therefore, at odds with the essence of medicine. This trend was particularly regrettable in the medical schools, where,

in these days, when a student must be converted into a physiologist, a physicist, a chemist, a biologist, a pharmacologist and an electrician, there is not time to make a physician of him. That consummation can only come after he has gone into the world of sickness and suffering, unless his mind is so bemused, his instincts so dulled, his sympathy so blunted by the long process of education in those sciences, that he is forever excluded from the art of medicine.

Rather than esoteric specialization, the true physician relied on a sound knowledge of anatomy and an open, honest spirit. Inevitably, intellect and reason would fail where instinct alone would prevail for, in the final analysis, "medicine is less a science than an art." In broader terms, the physician's primary role was to assist nature — a reflection of the Will — in healing the infirm. These views were neither simplistic nor homeopathic; rather, they grew from a profound, philosophical commitment to the principles of evolutionary idealism.<sup>9</sup>

IT WAS ON THIS BASIS that Macphail continued his medical practice in Montreal for a dozen years in relative tranquility. But the year 1907 proved to be one of change. The first major event was his appointment to the Chair of the History of Medicine at McGill. This position allowed him to combine a career in medicine with the reading of philosophy and history he found so essential. Though he remained in this position until 1938, it appears that in later years his lectures were not always well attended and he himself wrote, as early as 1920, that "the business of being a professor has fallen sadly." Nevertheless, the post was ideally suited to his temperament and interests.<sup>10</sup>

The second significant event of 1907 was Macphail's installation as editor of the newly founded *University Magazine*, a quarterly journal of politics and literature sponsored by Dalhousie, McGill, and Toronto Universities. Its contributors included Rudyard Kipling, several cabinet ministers, many Canadian academics, and literary figures such as Stephen Leacock and Marjorie Pickthall. Macphail

believed the journal existed to give advice to government and the reading public for, while academics “merely stand and watch,” it “is only a bystander who can direct a game.” Macphail’s own frequent articles and his strong editorial hand seldom left doubt as to the magazine’s viewpoint. Unfortunately, subscriptions never exceeded the 1912 level of 5,300, financial problems (despite Macphail’s own generous contributions) were always present, and the publisher was never entirely satisfactory. The journal stopped publication in 1920 and Macphail himself had ceased to edit five years earlier. Yet, as Governor General Lord Grey noted, during its time it was “the best periodical published in Canada.” And while its circulation was limited in numbers, its contents were frequently quoted and reviewed in London, Boston, Montreal, and Toronto. Though it was soon followed by journals such as the *Dalhousie Review* and the *Canadian Forum*, the quality of the *University Magazine* under Macphail’s editorship has seldom been surpassed in Canadian academic publication.<sup>11</sup>

The year 1907 was important to Macphail for yet another reason: the campaign to found a journal by the Canadian Medical Association at last neared success. At the annual meeting in Montreal, Macphail argued that without a journal to express its views and record its proceedings the Association would have little impact. Despite opposing views, the newly adopted constitution included a clause urging the publication of a journal. At the 1910 annual meeting the report of the Executive Council suggesting immediate steps to found a journal was adopted and Andrew Macphail was appointed the first editor. The *Montreal Medical Journal*, of which Macphail had been editor since 1903, was acquired by the Association and the *Maritime Medical News* agreed to terminate its 22 years of publication so as to allow the new C.M.A. publication a wider scope. With a strong editor and the elimination of some competing periodicals, the *Journal* set out to establish itself as “a medium for the expression of all that is best in Canadian Medicine.”

The *Journal* appeared in 1911, but the preceding year had seen extensive effort by Macphail and other interested physicians. George Morang and Company was chosen as the publisher (possibly because he already published Macphail’s *University Magazine*), the terms of acquiring the *Montreal Medical Journal Co.* were finalized, and 900 initial subscribers were secured. Throughout 1911 Macphail gave freely of his own time and held clerical expenditures to a mere \$125 monthly. Yet problems soon appeared. Most damaging was the delay in publishing the first five issues in 1912. Though Morang attempted to blame Macphail, the real difficulty arose from the publisher’s poor credit and the resulting necessity of paying printing costs in advance. Legal proceedings resulted in a C.M.A. victory, but Morang’s precarious finances continued to cause the *Journal* problems. The publisher apparently appropriated subscription fees to which he was not entitled and refused to issue reprints as the expense was

not mentioned in the contract. More serious was the publisher's irresponsible control of advertising. Though the contract prohibited the inclusion of advertisements which would not be appropriate for "a high class medical journal" such as the *British Medical Journal* or the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Morang exercised an arbitrary selection. He "refused to withdraw a full page advertisement of an alleged remedy for diabetes . . . manufactured . . . in Winnipeg, and widely advertised in the lay press." The A.M.A. had investigated the compound and advised the C.M.A. that it was simply "an aqueous solution of plant extractives with a small amount of sodium salicylate and sodium chloride." Apparently, because the product was advertised in the *Lancet*, the C.M.A. was unable legally to force its exclusion.

Despite these initial difficulties, as well as a dispute with the influential Toronto Academy of Medicine concerning one of Macphail's editorials which criticized their membership policies, the *C.M.A.J.* rapidly established itself. In 1913, for the first time, the *Journal* showed a profit — \$214.97 — sufficient to liquidate the previous deficit. Subscriptions increased by 60 per cent over the 1911 level and accounted for about  $\frac{1}{5}$  of Canada's 7,500 physicians. Finally, Macphail was in the enviable position of having to refuse many contributions because of a lack of space — a situation which suggested to the optimistic Executive Council that "a fortnightly or weekly journal is indicated." Unfortunately, with the outbreak of the First World War, Macphail's forceful and aggressive editorship came to an end. Yet in the first half decade of its existence he had guided the *Journal* through a variety of difficulties to which a less experienced editor might well have succumbed.<sup>12</sup>

Macphail spent the war years in Europe with the Sixth Field Ambulance and served with distinction at a number of battles including Vimy Ridge. How he secured an overseas posting at the age of 50, after an initial commission as an equestrian instructor in Canada, remains obscure. But many of his cherished nineteenth-century beliefs must have been left, along with the body of his close friend, the poet John McCrae, in the muddy fields of France. Though he seldom wrote of personal matters, glimpses of Macphail's own experience can be gained from his history of the military medical services. He quotes with an appreciation doubtless born of shared misery, the words from a Canadian medical officer's diary in 1915:

October 28 — Cold rain, so cold and so wetting; the earth is turned to black grease. November 3 . . . 75 patients were admitted, not sick, but exhausted and in the last extreme of misery; . . . November 7 — A whole battalion went sick and was withdrawn; five days is more than men can endure.

From Val Cartier Camp in Canada to the front lines, rain and mud defined army life.

The traditional ravages of troops at war — typhoid, dysentery, lice, and venereal diseases — were joined by newer maladies — shell shock and poison gas. The former Macphail viewed with distinct suspicion, sensing many malingerers for every legitimate case. But trauma remained the primary concern.

Twelve surgeons worked by day and twelve by night at twelve tables. The supply of cases never ended . . . At the height of the action, the officer in command worked 72 hours without sleep. . . .

Under constant threat of shelling and often evacuated at the last minute, the “field ambulance service was a dangerous one,” Macphail asserted, and their members accounted for a portion of the casualties. And casualties were staggering. At Passchendaele, 3,130 Canadians were killed, 12,076 wounded and 947 went missing. While only 11.4 per cent of the Canadian wounded (themselves 34.59 per cent of all troops) died of their wounds, the carnage and pain were almost indescribable. In fact, Macphail concluded, “It became atrocious and had best not be spoken of even in a history of military medicine.”<sup>13</sup> Such scenes must surely have had a profound influence on Macphail and his view of the world.

Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that when he returned from Europe in 1918, at the age of 54, it was to a world with which he no longer seemed at ease. Certainly, his literary efforts continued and included his controversial and critical study of the Canadian forces medical services which condemned the minister of militia, Sir Sam Hughes, as well as his devastating but internationally acclaimed collection of biographies, including that of Lawrence of Arabia.<sup>14</sup> But his editorial days were over. Except for a well publicized trip to Russia (where the orderliness of collective farming and absence of industrial disputes impressed him), his time was spent in Montreal teaching medical history or reading Orwell, writing, and musing. Much of this musing seems to have focused on the decline of western civilization after the Great War. “The World does seem different,” he complained to a friend in 1926, adding later that “a great epoch has as usual ended in disaster.”<sup>15</sup> Universities were becoming Americanized and technical; literary standards declined; the British Empire — an institution dear to Macphail — was “crashing into the abyss of chaos”; economic liberalism was in disrepute; and democracy, as he had always predicted, had proven itself unable to deal with modern political complexities. With his values obsolete and his society apparently decaying, he concluded: “The social fabric is falling. The old are left in gloomy isolation.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Macphail is more fortunate than many of his generation. For his contributions to Canadian literature and to the medical profession, history will rescue him from the isolation he so disliked.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Stevenson, “Sir Andrew Macphail,” *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, 16 (1939), p. 210. Other useful assessments include: Pelham Edgar, “Sir Andrew Macphail,

- 1864-1938," *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Series 3, vol. 33 (1938) 147-49, and "Sir Andrew Macphail," *Queen's Quarterly*, 54 (1947), 8-22; Stephen Leacock, "Andrew Macphail," *Queen's Quarterly*, 45 (1938), 445-52; Archibald MacMechan, "Andrew Macphail," in J. W. Cunliffe and A. H. Thorndike, eds., *The Warner Library: The World's Best Literature* (New York: Warner Library, 1917); C. F. Martin, "Andrew Macphail," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 39 (1938), 508-09.
- <sup>2</sup> A more detailed review of Macphail's literary career may be found in S. E. D. Shortt, *The Search for An Ideal: Six Canadian Intellectuals and their Convictions in an Age of Transition, 1890-1930* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), Chapter 2. Biographical details are from Andrew Macphail, *The Master's Wife* (Montreal: privately printed, 1939).
- <sup>3</sup> Andrew Macphail, "A History of the Idea of Evolution," *Dalhousie Review*, 5 (1925), 22-32; "Evolution and Life," *Annals of Medical History*, New Series, 1 (1929), 553-61; "I Believe, This is My Credo, My Philosophy of Life," *Montreal Herald* (10 December 1934).
- <sup>4</sup> These concepts are explicit in "A History of the Idea of Evolution"; "John Wesley" in *Essays in Puritanism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 275-339; "The Attainment of Consideration," *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1902), 1612-14; "Women in Democracy," *University Magazine*, 19 (1920), 1-14.
- <sup>5</sup> "A History of the Idea of Evolution," p. 30.
- <sup>6</sup> Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 36-38, 144-54; Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1967), pp. 24-30; Paul Boller, *American Thought in Transition: The Impact of Evolutionary Naturalism, 1865-1900* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), pp. 22-46.
- <sup>7</sup> See *The Search for an Ideal*, chapter 2, section III.
- <sup>8</sup> See Andrew Macphail, "The Education of Graduates," Manuscript in the Sir Andrew Macphail Papers privately held in Montreal; and "The Attainment of Consideration."
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Macphail, "The Medical Student," Manuscript in the Sir Andrew Macphail Papers; "The Healing of a Wound," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 30 (1934), 669-74; "An Address on the Sources of Modern Medicine," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 28 (1933), 239-46; and "The Attainment of Consideration."
- <sup>10</sup> E. A. Collard, "Voices from the Past," *McGill News*, 53 (1972), 25; Public Archives of Canada, Sir Arthur Currie Papers, Alexander Macphail to Currie (27 May 1920), containing a letter from Andrew Macphail dated 24 May 1920.
- <sup>11</sup> For a more detailed account see *The Search for an Ideal*, pp. 16-19.
- <sup>12</sup> Information on Macphail's role in the early years of the *C.M.A.J.* is taken from *The Canadian Medical Association Minute Book General Meetings, 1907-1925* and *The Canadian Medical Association, Minutes Executive Council, 1908-1927*, both of which are located in the Archives of the Canadian Medical Association, Ottawa. See also H. E. MacDermot, *History of the Canadian Medical Association, 1867-1921* (Toronto: Murray Printing Co.), 1935.
- <sup>13</sup> Andrew Macphail, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-19: The Medical Services* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1925), pp. 55-56, 91, 101, 105, 136.



- <sup>14</sup> *The Medical Services; Three Persons* (London: John Murray, 1929).
- <sup>15</sup> Dalhousie University Archives, Archibald McKeller MacMechan Papers, Andrew Macphail to MacMechan (4 April 1926); Andrew Macphail, "The Immigrant," *University Magazine*, 19 (1920), 133-62.
- <sup>16</sup> Sir Arthur Currie Papers, Alexander Macphail to Currie (27 May 1920); MacMechan Papers, Macphail to MacMechan (23 January 1923); Andrew Macphail, "John McCrae: An Essay in Character," in John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields and Other Poems* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1919), p. 86; "Women in Democracy"; Macphail Papers, Macphail to Lord Beaverbrook (23 October 1930); Andrew Macphail, "Art in Democracy," *Dalhousie Review*, 4 (1924), 172-80.



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- "As Others See Us," *University Magazine*, 9, no. 2 (1910), 165-75.
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- "The Old School," *Saturday Night*, 53, no. 9 (1938), 5.
- "The Patience of England," *University Magazine*, 6, no. 3 (1907), 281-90.
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- "Unto the Church," *University Magazine*, 12, no. 2 (1913), 348-64.
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## ART OBJECTS FOR AN INNER LANDSCAPE:

*douglas barbour*

bare prairie  
the wheat everywhere a rich gold  
sky cloudless & pristine blue

there is a promise here  
& here emerges from the horizon  
a skywriter