

THOMAS HUSTON MACBRIDE

# THE PALIMPSEST

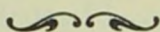
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XV

ISSUED IN MAY 1934

NO. 5

COPYRIGHT 1934 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



## The Man

In the summer of 1854, a buckboard was trailing along the roads from Tennessee to Indiana, across Indiana and Illinois, to the Mississippi River. In this wagon were a man and woman with four children, the oldest a boy of six years, the youngest a baby six weeks old. In the rush of settlers westward, the creaking of ox wagons, and the plump, plump of horses' feet in the dust or mud of the dirt roads neither the vehicle nor its occupants attracted attention; it was only one more wagon bound for Iowa.

Yet in the movements of this migrating family centered a story far more important than the search of a man for a farm. The father, a man in his early thirties, was James Bovard McBride, descendant of several generations of Scotch-Irish teachers and preachers. His father had established a Presbyterian academy at Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, and he himself was a graduate of

a Presbyterian theological seminary. Having been ordained to preach in 1847, James McBride went into eastern Tennessee, taking with him as his bride, Sarah, the daughter of Thomas Huston.

The oldest child of this couple was a boy, born at Rogersville, Tennessee, on July 31, 1848. They named him Thomas Huston for his maternal grandfather.

The border States between the free and slave areas were hotbeds of strife in those days and James Bovard McBride, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian that he was, did not trim his sails or lie quietly in the harbor of abstract theories until the storm had passed. To him slavery was wrong, and like the prophets of old he made known his message of condemnation. It was no more popular than those of Elijah, of Israel. His congregation, outraged by his attacks on a cherished institution, finally served notice on their minister that if he did not leave he would be driven from the community by violence. Hence the buckboard headed for Iowa — the first free State in the Louisiana Purchase.

Crossing the Mississippi River at Burlington, the family made their way into southeastern Iowa where the Reverend McBride selected a farm near Salem in Henry County. But the prairie of Iowa did not satisfy the soul of this Presbyterian minis-

ter. By 1857 he was preaching at New London and for the remainder of his long life he served churches in various Iowa towns.

During the years in the new home the McBride children, six in all, lived the usual pioneer life, but always with the background of education, culture, and religion. There were homely tasks for the oldest boy — farm work, wood to chop, and later odd jobs of lathing and carpentering. Nor was life all work. Around the home lay the prairie, with its waving grass, its multi-colored flowers, its thousands of brightly plumaged birds. In the winter there was the drifting snow. Prairie fires made the horizon luminous with danger. All this made a deep impression on the mind of the beauty-loving boy.

And formal education was not neglected in this pioneer home. How could it be in the presence of James and Sarah McBride? By the time Thomas — Huston he was often called — was five years old he had learned to read. He attended one of the newly organized country schools in that pioneer land, and long afterwards — in 1897 — he wrote the story of the building of the first schoolhouse, and many years after that he included the story in his reminiscent volume *In Cabins and Sod-Houses*. For the most part, however, it appears that the home must have provided much of

the education which formed the basis for his cultural development.

His parents, hoping perhaps that this first-born son would carry on the traditions of the family and enter the ministry, and certainly believing in the importance of a cultural education, encouraged the boy to plan for college. Even in those days Thomas Huston McBride attracted attention because of his unusual mind and character. At fourteen, it is said, he was substituting as a teacher of Latin, and while still in his teens he was a teacher in the country schools. With the assistance of his parents he found it possible to attend Lenox College at Hopkinton, Iowa, where he met Samuel Calvin, a self-educated scientist, who was teaching natural science at the college. Later McBride went to Monmouth College, at Monmouth, Illinois, graduating in 1869 at the age of twenty-one. During one interval he taught school in a French community near Nauvoo, where he learned to speak French. In 1873 he received the M. A. degree from Monmouth, and in 1891 he was for half a year a student at the University of Bonn. Indeed, it was characteristic of the man that his mind was ever on the move.

In college his interest turned to literature and languages. Perhaps as an economic stepping-stone to a literary career, perhaps because teach-

ing appealed to him, the autumn of 1870 found Thomas H. McBride instructor in mathematics and modern languages at Lenox College.

There he remained eight years and there he met Harriet Diffenderfer, a student at the college, who became his wife on December 31, 1875. In the summers he continued his study of science with Samuel Calvin, the two young men taking long trips together.

It was not surprising, then, that when Calvin came to the State University of Iowa in 1874 as Professor of Natural Science, he should have found a place in the same field for his associate. In September, 1878, Thomas Huston McBride came to Iowa City as Assistant Professor of Natural Science. He was then just past thirty years of age. The *University Reporter* for October, 1878, in announcing the arrival of this man who was to become in the next fifty years perhaps the most loved and revered member of the faculty, merely remarked: "Prof. McBride is very satisfactorily spoken of by those reciting to him."

From this time until his death in Seattle, Washington, on March 27, 1934, Thomas Huston Macbride was an integral part of the State University of Iowa. His name, be it noted, changed its spelling meanwhile — about 1895 in the *University Catalogue* — a reversion to the older Scotch form.

The age of science was just beginning when Calvin and Macbride began their partnership at the University. Gradually they enlarged and then divided the field of natural science, always keeping in touch with each other's work, always close friends until the death of Dr. Calvin in 1911. Calvin, the sterner character of the two, preferred geology; Macbride, gentler, more beauty-loving, chose the field of plants, to specialize in the microscopic slime moulds. In the fall of 1883 he became Professor of Botany and Systematic Zoology, and six years later another division made him Professor of Botany. In 1902 he was made head of the Department of Botany. From 1887 until 1893 he served as secretary of the faculty.

When President John G. Bowman resigned on March 21, 1914, the Board of Education turned to the man who had the respect and love of all who knew the University, and on March 27th named Thomas Huston Macbride Acting President of the University to take office on April 1st. In the following September his title was changed from Acting President to President.

"Not a man on the university faculty knows Iowa so well as President Macbride", declared an editorial in the *Clinton Herald*. "He knows its people as well as he knows its flowers and its trees. He understands their needs, and under-

standing that, he knows the mission of the university.

"President Macbride will work harmoniously with the faculty. He is already the idol of the entire body of alumni, and has the profoundest respect of the students."

But the office of President of a State University is an exacting and strenuous position, not especially attractive to a man of scientific and philosophic bent. At the close of the academic year in 1916, President Macbride, then sixty-eight, resigned the presidency and became President Emeritus.

After his retirement, President Macbride divided his time between Iowa City, where his presence was always a benediction to the University, and Seattle, where he could be near his son, Philip D. Macbride, and his daughter, Miss Jean Macbride. His wife, Harriet Diffenderfer Macbride, died on May 28, 1927. Two daughters — Elizabeth and Ruth — had died in infancy.

The fifty years and more which Professor Macbride spent on the University campus brought honors as well as responsibilities. Lenox College gave him an honorary Ph. D. degree in 1895. His alma mater, Monmouth College, bestowed the LL. D. degree in 1914, and Coe College duplicated this degree in 1915. In 1928 the State Uni-



versity of Iowa celebrated the completion of Dr. Macbride's fifty years of service to the University by adding its LL. D. degree. He was then almost eighty years of age, of medium height, heavy-set, but still active. The coal black hair and beard of fifty years before was snowy white, but to look into his kindly, keen hazel eyes was to know that the spirit of this man was not old, that life to him was still an adventure.

It was, of course, inevitable that a man of Professor Macbride's scholarship and social instincts should find a place in the many organizations intended to promote the activities in which he was interested. A long list of scientific societies follows his name in *Who's Who*. He was a member of both Sigma Xi and Phi Beta Kappa, a Mason, and an active member of the Presbyterian Church.

As a teacher Professor Macbride was a rare combination of scientist, philosopher, and friend. Under his magic touch botany became, not a dead science devoted to analysis, but a door swinging open to a garden where all the plants from the tall oaks to the mould on a crust of bread carried on their amazing and beautiful existence. His conception of education was broader than science. It might be, he said, "either physical, and look to bodily strength; or vocational, for business; or cul-

tural, for culture; or religious, for faith and duty."

In his busy life as a teacher and a scientist, Dr. Macbride did not forget that he was a citizen. His love of beauty and his knowledge of plant life early made him an advocate of parks — local, county, and State. As early as 1895 Professor Macbride wrote an appeal for "County Parks" asking that land be set aside in rural areas for public use. Ten years later he was elected a member of the first park board in Iowa City.

When the Iowa Park and Forestry Association was organized in 1901 he became its first president. In the president's address delivered at the meeting in December, 1902, Dr. Macbride expressed something of his love of the outdoors when he said: "There are thousands of us who love Nature for her own sake; who rejoice in the trees and streams because they are beautiful, because they attract us away from all that is sordid and petty and mean, and lead us to more quiet and peaceful thoughts, to the love of living."

Appreciation of the loveliness of the natural scenery of Iowa and his wish to preserve it for others made Professor Macbride an advocate of conservation, not as a sportsman or on a commercial basis, but as a man of vision who wished to leave a worthy heritage for the people of the future Iowa. It was this dream of making Iowans

conscious of the beauty of their State, as well as his interest in scientific research relating to Iowa, which led him to give so much time and money to the founding and promotion of the Lakeside Laboratory at Lake Okoboji.

Professor Macbride never lost his interest in literature. His familiarity with several foreign languages grew ever more intimate. That he might have been a poet is evident from the beauty of his prose and from his knowledge of the works of the great writers. A marvelous memory enabled him to call to mind, apparently at will, some poet's words to fit almost any occasion. Indeed, he sometimes wrote poetry, though not often for publication.

His prose, however, lacked only the form of verse. "In the lowlands, under the general name of slough-grass, sedges covered thousands of acres with a mantle of deepest green, whose lustrous sheen went waving in the breath of summer like the rolling of the tropic sea", he wrote for the *Iowa Historical Record* in 1895. "In moister meadows the *Habenaria*, the green fringed orchid, waved its creamy spikes and the wild lilies tossed their fiery cups. Everywhere *Lobelias* sprang and in the swamps wild parsnip stood in forests and hemlock filled the air with odors rank. Later in the year the composites took the field completely.

The sunflowers spread their cloth of gold, the torches of *Liatris* flared, the compass plant marked with edge-set leaves the meridian of the prairie and lifted its tall stems distilling resin."

This love of beauty was, indeed, one of the most pronounced characteristics of Dr. Macbride. He knew and loved good music, art, poetry, all the things which make life fine. He knew the woodlands, the lakes, the native prairie sod of Iowa as a scientist, but he loved them as an artist and a poet.

Nor was the interest of Professor Macbride limited to nature. Always he was counted as one who loved his fellowmen. His courtesy was un-failing, even in routine class work. Students were people to him, friends. His memory for the names and faces of those with whom he was associated was phenomenal. In the earlier days and even in the middle years of the University's growth, it is said he knew every student on the campus by name. He was kind to them in their perplexities and his interest followed them into their lives outside the campus. "When we lost what was then our youngest child", wrote a former student, "the letter Dr. Macbride wrote us with his own hand is one of the few we elected to keep always." Said a member of the Department of Botany, "I have known Professor Macbride for

fifty-six years, and in those years I have never heard him say an unkind thing."

The Greek culture, which Dr. Macbride admired, made beauty — accuracy, proportion, and balance — the keystone of life. This he himself possessed, but this alone does not explain his personality. He carried through life a vision of the splendor of God and man's duty to God and his fellowmen. In his career as a scientist there was, apparently, no conflict between the facts of science and the revelations of God. Perhaps this was because his scientific knowledge was an outgrowth of his own study and thought, not a shoot grafted upon an immature mind. His religion was optimistic, kindly; his faith serene and confident.

From the day in 1854 when the six-year-old lad crossed the Mississippi River on the ferry at Burlington until March 27, 1934, Thomas Huston Macbride was an asset to Iowa. He was a cultured scholar, a renowned scientist, an effective orator, an inspiring teacher, a beloved friend, a patriotic citizen, a true gentleman, a devoted husband and father — a real Christian.

RUTH A. GALLAHER