

7-1-1931

# Ian Maclaren

Ben Hur Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Wilson, Ben H. "Ian Maclaren." *The Palimpsest* 12 (1931), 273-286.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol12/iss7/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## Ian Maclaren

During the decade from 1890 to 1900, there was no more popular lecturer and writer in America than John Watson, whose published works appeared under the nom de plume, "Ian Maclaren", Ian being the Gaelic for John and Maclaren the family name of his mother. In the domain of literature Ian Maclaren is recognized as one of the best interpreters of Scotch life and character. A typical Scotch Highlander, born at Manningtree on November 3, 1850, he was educated at Edinburgh and at Tübingen and became a minister of the Free Church, holding several important pastorates including the Sefton Park Presbyterian Church in Liverpool.

His earliest literary work, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (1894), brought him instant fame. The book was widely read and much discussed, both in his own country and in America. It passed through many editions totaling upwards of several hundred thousand copies. *The Days of Auld Lang Syne* and *A Doctor of the Old School* appeared the following year, and were received with the same popular acclaim. In all, Maclaren published more than a score of volumes of varying degrees of excellence, but after 1896 his fame rested chiefly upon his genius as a public speaker, rather than upon his literary ability.

Upon his first triumphant tour of the United States between October 1 and December 16, 1896, his American manager, Major J. B. Pond, declared that he "saw more happy faces while accompanying him than any other man was ever privileged to see in the same length of time. During this period Dr. Watson had ninety-six" audiences all as large as could be "crowded into the largest public halls in the principal cities of the United States and Canada." With "intermingled laughter and tears, like sunshine making the rain radiant", they listened spellbound.

According to Major Pond, John Watson was at that time a "tall, straight, square-shouldered, deep-chested man of middle age, with a large, compact, round, and well-balanced head, thinly thatched with brown and greyish hair, well-moulded refined features that bear the impress of kindly shrewdness, intellectual sagacity, and spiritual clearness, tempered, too, with a mingled sense of keen humour and grave dignity." Mrs. Watson, a "frail, little body, with black hair and eyes", the mother of his four sons, accompanied him throughout his American tours, at times, even, when the exertion taxed her strength to the utmost, amounting to little short of hardship.

It is probable that Watson would never have been more than the pastor of a well-to-do congregation in Liverpool had it not been for the influence of one man. For many years he had been intimately acquainted

with Robertson Nicoll, the editor of the *British Weekly* and *The Bookman*. Nicoll, who had a keen appreciation of literary ability, discovered latent qualities of genius in the Scottish minister, which he determined should be developed. His success was even greater than he had anticipated and events leading up to Dr. Watson's first American tour moved with phenomenal rapidity.

The immediate occasion of this first visit in 1896 was an invitation to deliver the Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching at Yale, whereupon the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity was conferred upon him. These lectures were published under the title of *The Cure of Souls*. This task being fulfilled he was free to undertake his lecture tour under the direction of Major Pond, thus combining a business venture, which proved to be profitable beyond all expectations, with his thoroughly enjoyable tour of America. Shall we say that this was a bit of shrewd business sagacity?

Dr. Watson's introduction to the American public at large occurred upon the evening of October 12th, when he lectured before an audience at the Academy of Music in Brooklyn. Thence his itinerary took him on a circuitous route through many of the leading cities of eastern United States and Canada into the Middle West where he lectured at Chicago, Madison, Minneapolis, Des Moines, Galesburg, and other places.

In Minneapolis, Mrs. Watson fell ill with a severe

cold and he went on to Des Moines alone. The weather was extremely disagreeable, though the sleeping car was fairly comfortable. During the day a cold, sleety rain developed, which later changed to a gale "so severe as to impede the progress of the train", much to the astonishment and irritation of the Doctor.

All day he "travelled over the boundless prairie, thickly dotted with frail frame houses that appeared hardly able to withstand the gale." This was his first view of real prairie country, "and it was a great surprise to him." There was no dining car on the train and no lunchrooms along the line, so that he was compelled to go without food all day. Moreover, the train continually lost time, until Dr. Watson feared that he would have to lecture without his supper.

It was after eight o'clock on October 30th when he arrived at the hotel in Des Moines, and the clerk informed him that the dining room had just closed for the evening. But the Doctor hurried to the dining room and made a loud noise on the door, which was opened by "a man in an evening dress" who proved to be the head waiter.

"I want some food immediately", said Dr. Watson. The man stood as though paralyzed.

"I must have some food right away", the Doctor repeated, and rushed by the man to a table where the remains of the dinner of the last comers had not yet been removed. Hastily he began to eat while the head

waiter attempted to stop him. But Dr. Watson kept right on. He managed to get part of a meal, and hurried out with the waiter still expostulating at his heels.

It was almost nine o'clock when he arrived at Foster's Opera House, according to the *Des Moines Leader*. "At five minutes before nine o'clock the lecturer came around the flies. During the long wait the audience was entertained with a violin solo and a piano solo. An impromptu choir on the stage started 'America', and four verses were sung. Then came 'Annie Laurie', and it was during the singing of that that Dr. Watson took his seat. 'How appropriate', every one said to his neighbor, and the tedium of the long delay was forgotten. It was a gathering of which any person might be proud, and evinced extraordinary interest concerning the new star in the literary firmament, unknown except in his clerical capacity two years ago."

The president of the Woman's Club, under whose auspices the lecture was given, introduced the speaker with a very few words of eulogy. "The long-anticipated hour has come", she said, and Dr. Watson stood up before the audience. No one could convey a reproach so delicately as a woman, he declared. When he heard the words, "long-anticipated hour" combined with what was complimentary, it reminded him of his childhood days when medicine was administered in

sweets. "Only the other day", he continued, "I was congratulating myself on never being late, either for pulpit or platform, but now the boast has come home to me, as such things usually do."

For two hours that "seemed like so many minutes" he spoke "easily, simply, effectively" to a "large and highly entertained audience" on the subject of "Some Scottish Traits". His "strong individuality as a great and eloquent Nonconformist preacher was merged into his character as the delightful but virile Scotch story teller." After the lecture he read some selections from *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*. The audience was so charmed by the story that at the end every one sat perfectly silent and the Doctor, much moved by such a tribute, pronounced a benediction.

At eleven-thirty the lecturer was again aboard the train en route to Galesburg. At eight the next morning he arrived at Rock Island where he was compelled to "lay over" until two-forty in the afternoon. Nevertheless the pause proved to be a delightful wait. He and Major Pond "took a carriage and drove about the town, visiting the United States Arsenal, where arms and war equipments are manufactured. Through the politeness of the commanding officer Colonel Buffington, Dr. Watson was most graciously entertained all the forenoon."

John Finley, President of Knox College, accompanied the guest of the College from Rock Island in

the private car of the superintendent of the railroad. At Galesburg they were met by the college students, both "male and female", who turned out en masse to meet Ian Maclaren at the station. Behind a band and surrounded by students, their "carriage was escorted to President Finley's house." At the lecture that evening, which was to help establish a fund for the Abraham Lincoln Memorial to Art and Science, he was greeted with a typical western college yell "given with a vigor that could not be excelled for volume." It was one of the most hearty receptions he had in America.

From Galesburg Dr. Watson's route continued eastward, his popularity all the while increasing until by the time he reached Washington he was fairly lionized. At the capital he was the guest of President and Mrs. Cleveland at a luncheon attended also by the Secretary of State and others. "The President engaged seats for himself and his family, and the entire party attended Dr. Watson's lecture that evening."

On Wednesday, December 16th, at noon, Dr. and Mrs. Watson sailed for home on the *Majestic*, after refusing an offer of \$24,000 for twelve additional weeks of lecturing. The profits of his tour had exceeded \$35,000, for a period of ten weeks. Both he and Mrs. Watson appeared little the worse for their strenuous experience in America, despite the fact that a friend in Liverpool had cautioned that "Watson,



poor fellow, is not strong. He has had severe hemorrhages." On the contrary, he impressed Major Pond as being athletic, "with the power of endurance of a gladiator".

He returned to America for a second tour, again under the direction of Major Pond, beginning on February 19th and ending in May, 1899. His itinerary on this occasion, mainly in the Far West, up and down the Pacific Coast, was accomplished with much the same success as before. The only extraordinary incident was his narrow escape from injury in a bad train wreck in western Kansas.

Upon his return to England, ill health overtook him and during the winter of 1901 he sojourned in Egypt with the hope of recuperation. His old time vigor and strength was not regained, however, and eventually he was compelled to relinquish his pastorate in Liverpool, as his ministerial duties, coupled with the large amount of time he was devoting to lecturing and writing, proved too arduous for his failing health. In January, 1907, he accepted, on what proved to be the eve of his death, the presidency of the National Free Church Council, and was nominated for the Principalship of Westminster College, Cambridge, in succession to Dr. Oswald Dykes.

On January 30, 1907, at the invitation of the Western Theological Seminary at Pittsburgh, Dr. and Mrs. Watson once more set sail for New York, this time

aboard the *Baltic*, to undertake a third lecture tour of America. At farewell time, the home folks were unusually solicitous as to Dr. Watson's welfare. To some of his fellow passengers it appeared as though he was suffering from exhaustion and strain, while to others he seemed as buoyant as ever. Upon arriving in this country his time was not entirely booked, and he accepted many additional pulpit and platform invitations, much to the anxiety of his friends.

Besides lecturing in Boston, New York, and Pittsburgh, he delivered a course of lectures on the "Religious Condition of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century" at Haverford College, and accepted an invitation to deliver the Cole Lectures of Vanderbilt University at Nashville. Thereafter he filled various engagements throughout the East before undertaking a tour into Canada toward the close of March, traveling as far west as Winnipeg, thence into Montana, North Dakota, and Iowa on what proved to be an exceptionally tedious and arduous journey.

While crossing the western plains he became ill with what seemed to be an ordinary sore throat. His indisposition did not prevent him, however, from proceeding to Valley City, North Dakota, where he was booked for his next lecture. Although not well when he arrived he exhibited his usual equanimity and patience. On reaching the hotel he found that no room had been reserved for him and that the place

was full to overflowing. Finally he found lodging in the hospitable home of William McKinney. In relating his experience to his friends he explained, "Why the clerk just said, 'You see, we don't take in tramps here. You're not in our class at all.'"

On Saturday evening, April 20th, he lectured, and on Sunday he preached at a union service held in the Armory Opera House. Jacob was the topic for his discourse, and his remarks made a very deep impression. This was the last sermon he ever preached.

Dr. Watson's next appearance was to have been the final number of the college lecture course at Iowa Wesleyan University. On the evening of April 22nd, Professor E. E. Lymer, the faculty member of the lecture course committee, received a message requesting him to meet the lecturer at the midnight train. Upon his arrival, Dr. Watson, accompanied by Mrs. Watson, was taken at once to the Brazelton Hotel. He appeared to be very ill. A physician was called who diagnosed the ailment as an acute attack of tonsillitis. Although the fever was very high, there were apparently no other alarming symptoms. The lecture, which was scheduled for April 23rd, was postponed indefinitely.

At first Dr. Watson seemed to improve, but later quinsy and other complications developed. He was informed that he should do nothing for at least three weeks. Although he suffered greatly from insomnia,

he cherished the hope that he might still recover sufficient strength to continue with his tour. He was especially concerned about the lectures at Nashville.

On May 3rd Mrs. Watson wrote: "This loathsome catarrh is now slowly departing by way of the ears. All this leaves him very weak. He is only now sitting up in his room for a few hours." His progress was but temporary, however, and his condition continually alternated between better and worse. Every possible attention was given him. The kindly townfolk were deeply solicitous of the welfare of their distinguished guest, rendering freely such comfort or assistance as was within their power. Due to his condition, few visitors were permitted, aside from Dr. Lymer and Judge James D. Smyth who was presiding over the district court and staying at the hotel during the time. The Judge was especially attentive and a strong friendship sprang up between the two men.

On Sunday he again seemed better, "though swelling of the limbs and rheumatic pains indicated that the blood was becoming infected." That day he received a message from Andrew Carnegie, and in the evening he dictated a reply: "Thanks for your inquiry." This was his last message. He soon fell into a deep sleep. Toward morning he spoke once or twice to his physician and then passed into a coma from which he never regained consciousness. When the doctor returned Monday morning he perceived at once that the crisis

was at hand, and two other physicians were hastily summoned. It was too late, however, and at a quarter past eleven o'clock on May 6, 1907, John Watson, the noted Scotch divine, died in the presence of his wife, who had been his constant companion. Though he was more than three thousand miles from home, he could not have died in a more friendly community.

The startling news of the death of Ian Maclaren travelled quickly throughout the college community, and indeed almost as quickly throughout the entire English-speaking world. It would be impossible to describe adequately the universal sorrow caused by his passing, and volumes might be filled with the tributes from the pulpit and the press. Particularly keen was this sorrow at Mount Pleasant. While the body lay in state, many of the students and citizens passed silently by the casket to gaze upon the face of him whom they had known but had not heard.

Simple but impressive memorial services were held by the faculty and students at the regular chapel hour on the morning of May 8th, for it was on this day just after midnight that "the Doctor's last journey" was begun. While the train was pulling in, the college bell "told our sadness and sorrow, and that of her who so sore bereft was to make the long journey as the guardian of her beloved dead." The old bell tolled off the years of his life — fifty-seven strokes. His body was placed on the train by men of the Senior Class serving

as pall-bearers while Dr. Lymer quietly handed Mrs. Watson flowers as a token of sympathy from the faculty and students. At the same time a student cornetist from an upper room of the chapel building wherein the Doctor was to have lectured, through opened windows, let float upon the still night air the soothing strains of "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

After the death, Judge Smyth dismissed court so that he might personally look after Mrs. Watson until she reached friends in New York. Sailing from New York on the eleventh, Mrs. Watson arrived in Liverpool without experiencing any untoward event. The community in which Dr. Watson labored for so many years would be satisfied with nothing but a public funeral. The Lord Mayor came forward with the proposal, and his proffered plans were willingly accepted.

It was felt, as Sir Edward Russell said, "that Dr. Watson's death was not merely a personal loss, but that it made a great gap in the social structure." At the funeral which occurred on May 27th a "great and worthy tribute of grief" was paid by the city to the dead minister, and the number of mourners and spectators exceeded sixty thousand. The funeral cortege was accompanied by a regiment of the Liverpool Scottish Volunteers, of whom Dr. Watson was the chaplain, to Smithdown Cemetery, where his remains were laid at rest. A portrait, painted by Robert Morrison

of Liverpool, hangs in the Guild Room of Sefton Park Church.

At Mount Pleasant there yet remains a consciousness of the tragic event. The impression left by the death of so great a soul in that community makes a tradition, especially in college circles, the influence of which is doubtless felt in the lives of many students. The Class of 1907 presented a set of sixteen volumes of Dr. Watson's works to the college library, and during the commencement season in June the Senior Class planted a root of English ivy which grows luxuriantly against the east wall of old Main Hall. At its foot was placed a small marble tablet appropriately inscribed to the memory of Ian Maclaren.

BEN HUR WILSON