



Portrait of the Month: September Revd. John Watson (1850-1907)

by an unknown artist

Raised £10,000 to fund Westminster College as it moved to Cambridge –
and was a bestselling author, whose books about rural Scotland were described by the
retired Prime Minister Gladstone as selling 'like wild fire'.



John Watson, Convenor of the College Committee, by an unknown artist
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A staunch Scotsman, John Watson was born 1850 in Manningtree, Sussex – but only because his father was working in London and the southeast in the Civil Service. The family moved back to Scotland when Watson was still a child and he grew up at Perth and Stirling, before studying at Edinburgh University (where he was in the same English class as Robert Louis Stevenson, of *Treasure Island* fame – and though Watson doesn't remember ever speaking to him, he recalls in *The British Monthly* (August 1905) that the whole class would cheer when Stevenson walked in!).

Watson studied for ministry at New College and was licenced to preach in the Free Church in 1874. After a year in Edinburgh, he moved to a rural ministry in Logiealmond, in Perthshire, for 2 years; and then to Glasgow for 3 years; before accepting a call in 1880 to Sefton Park,

in Liverpool – described as “the Presbyterian Cathedral of England” (*British Monthly*, August 1905). In his twenty-five years at Sefton Park, Watson accomplished an amazing series of developments for the church: he added over 500 people to the roll of communicants, organised 3 Sunday schools teaching 1200 children, founded two daughter churches, poured time into mission work, raised £125,000 for local societies, sat on the School Board, and set up a scheme for poor city children to have country holidays.

However, under the pen name Ian Maclaren, Watson also found fame as the bestselling author of a set of books set in the rural Scottish community of ‘Drumtochty’ – modelled on his time in Logiealmond. *The Presbyterian* of 1896 quotes Mr Gladstone (who had only recently stepped down as Prime Minister) as saying Maclaren’s first book, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*, sold “like wild fire”. The *British Weekly* says 100,000 copies sold, and that Watson toured America and Canada in 1896 to promote his work. You can read [lan Maclaren’s books](#) online, as part of the Gutenberg Project.

Wearing a clerical collar, seated behind a desk and surrounded by books and papers, John Watson was the convener of the Westminster College Committee from 1892 to 1901, and was one of the leading proponents of the move of the College from London to Cambridge. Six weeks before the college was due to open, £10,000 was still needed to pay for it, and Watson undertook a whirlwind fundraising campaign, addressing meetings and congregations across England about the need for an educated ministry. He raised £16,000 and the building was opened debt-free.

Portrait by an unknown artist.

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Helen Weller, Archivist
2021

Bibliography and Further Reading:

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Westminster College Cambridge 1899, ed. A Halliday Douglas (PCE: London, 1900)

“Our Portrait Gallery” in *The Presbyterian* No.466, 27th Jan 1893; and an update from *The Presbyterian*, 1896

“Rev. John Watson. D.D. (“Ian Maclaren”): A Biographical Sketch” in *The British Monthly*, August 1905

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