
CHAPTER XXVI

A SCOTTISH EMPIRE-BUILDER—LORD STRATHCONA

IN our last chapter we dealt with authors of the Canadian West. We are in the habit of classing them as men of thought. While Scotland has produced a full quota of men and women of this class, the land of brown heath has probably been even more celebrated for its men of action, as our frequent portraiture has already shown. Along with such men as Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Lord Selkirk, and Sir George Simpson we may class Lord Strathcona. It was by no accident that Donald Alexander Smith, the Lord Strathcona of subsequent years, became a fur trader and a prominent Factor in the Hudson's Bay Company and Rupert's Land. He was related to Peter and Cuthbert Grant on his father, Alexander Smith's, side and on his mother's side to the famous brothers John and James Stuart, of the North-West Fur Company, of whom we have written. Donald Smith was born in Forres, in Morayshire, in 1820, and received a good education for the time. Filled with the tales of the fur trade told by his relations on their return

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to Scotland, and possessed with visions of future greatness, at the age of eighteen he emigrated to the land of the Aurora Borealis, and was sent from Montreal very soon after to spend a generation of time on the shores of Hudson Bay. At Moose Factory and elsewhere, but more especially on the rugged coast of Labrador—a school for the cultivation of the hardy virtues of the fur trader, the explorer, and the daring man of the sea—he spent the years of his apprenticeship. The inhospitable shore of Labrador, as described in some measure by Cortereal or Cabot, had lost few of its terrors in the nineteenth century, during more than thirty years of which young Smith grew to be a clerk, a Chief Trader, and in 1863 a Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company. His recitals, heard by the writer from his own lips, tell of terribly dangerous and wearisome journeys along the inhospitable coast of Labrador. The frozen coast, the exposure to privation, to hunger and the prospect of miserable starvation, the danger of a boisterous sea and the terrors of, at many points, an uninhabited shore, the uncertainty of Indian and Eskimo intrigue, the cold shoulder shown by many narrow-minded Moravians of the coast, and the difficulties of carrying on successful trade when the fishing was poor and the scattered people were in miserable poverty—all joined to make a life not to be measured by mere seasons of time, but by years dragged out by recollections of anxieties, disappointments, and human misery.

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Nevertheless, the Hudson's Bay Company was solvent and the Bank of Montreal was good, so that, as was the case when a young man of fair education as a clerk turned out well and had fairly rapid promotion, Donald A. Smith, on his recall from a service of more than thirty years to take a prominent place as Chief Factor in Montreal, found awaiting him the savings of such a lifetime amounting to, say, £10,000—a very modest recompense for the years of strenuous toil and exposure on the shores of Hudson Bay and Labrador, which we may speak of as a district extending from Moose Factory to Rigolette. The Chief Factor of little more than five years' standing was expecting to follow out the even tenor of his way in the staid old Hudson's Bay Company House at Montreal, for the Honourable Company from its house in Lime Street, London, to Montreal, Fort Garry, Red River, and Fort Chipewyan, on Lake Athabasca, was a marvellous example of what routine may come to with a history of two hundred years behind it. This was Chief Factor Smith's prospect as he sat in the Hudson's Bay Company offices, Montreal, expecting to do as all other Chief Factors had done, and by and by be carried to Mount Royal Cemetery and lie under the granite with "Requiescat in pace" written above him. But this was not to be with this Scotsman of middle age who had come from Labrador.

The sudden outbreak of the Riel Rebellion on the Red River in the autumn of 1869 startled

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all Canada. The hope of Canada of being able to advance British power and Canadian interest on the prairies of the far west was for a time beclouded. The Dominion Government had acted with a singular want of shrewdness and comprehension. They had even gone on without examining the rights of the residents of Red River Settlement or of the Hudson's Bay Company's officers and retired servants. Ordinary humanity and consideration had been neglected. But to have Fort Garry in the hands of a rebellious band of natives and to have Canadians in prison under the British flag, without being guilty of crime or any pretence at trial, was intolerable. The Hudson's Bay Company Governor at Fort Garry was sick and helpless, the Selkirk settlers were impotent, and the Canadians were not numerous on the banks of Red River. It was plainly through the Hudson's Bay Company that the Dominion Government must act and gain time to restore peace and dispatch an expedition to preserve order. Chief Factor Donald A. Smith, though he had never been west of Lake Superior, and had but lately been recalled to Montreal, was the only one in sight who could act at once. Accordingly he was appointed Commissioner and dispatched immediately to the scene of rebellion. On November 2, 1869, Riel and a band of one hundred French half-breeds had occupied Fort Garry entirely unopposed by the Hudson's Bay Company, and in a few weeks his body of insurgents in the fort had become four or five

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times as strong. There was no telegraph line nearer than St. Paul, Minnesota, some 450 miles from Fort Garry. By the most rapid transit which the Company could supply Mr. Smith was carried from St. Paul, whither he had gone from Montreal by rail, and reached Fort Garry on December 27th. He took up his abode in the office of the Company, contiguous to the residence of the sick Governor, William McTavish. These were within the walls of Fort Garry, and south of them in the other buildings of the fort were quartered Riel and his horde of followers, while in one of the buildings were some seventy Canadians held as prisoners and being subjected to many indignities. Riel was now in an awkward dilemma. The Hudson's Bay Company with its hereditary power influencing the minds even of Riel's followers, who had always been dependants of the Company, could not be disregarded. The situation was a curious one.

Riel, the Rebel leader, and claiming to be Provisional President, was housed in the same enclosure with the Governor of Assiniboia and with Commissioner Smith, representing both the Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Government. Riel sought to induce Mr. Smith to recognise his government as provisional, but the Commissioner avoided this. Moreover, the United States had its eye upon the situation, and it is well known that there was a plentiful sum of money in St. Paul to help any movement to secure Rupert's Land for the United States.

Commissioner Smith had acted with great

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courage and shrewdness. His Commission he had himself left at the boundary-line, 49° N., in Canadian hands. Riel was anxious to see the Commission, and offered to send for it to Pembina, on the boundary-line. This offer Mr. Smith refused. A band of loyal half-breeds were sent, however, and obtained it for the Commissioner, although Riel sought to get it from them. However, Mr. Smith obtained and kept his Commission until he could present it to a mass meeting of the people of Red River. This meeting—one thousand strong—was held in the open air at Fort Garry with the temperature at twenty below zero. The meeting decided to send delegates from the people, and the Commissioner settled down quietly to undermine Riel and his crew. This he did with leading people of Red River Settlement. Movements and counter-movements were made, which we need not recite, but some prisoners were discharged, others were seized, until the most monstrous and startling event took place on March 4, 1870, when Thomas Scott, a Canadian, was publicly executed by Riel's direction near Fort Garry. This fiendish act was the beginning of the end for Riel. Canada was roused to its centre to avenge the murder, and, as it is the case when war breaks out between two countries that ambassadors retire, Commissioner Smith refused to remain any longer in the country, but returned post haste to Canada. After a time Col. Wolseley's expedition came up from Canada by way of Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods, when Donald

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A. Smith, coming back from Montreal, joined the expedition, and in August arrived with it in Fort Garry, to see the ignominious flight of Riel, Lepine, and O'Donoghue, the disreputable trio who had been fattening at the Hudson's Bay Company's expense in Fort Garry.

After the organisation of Manitoba, Mr. Donald A. Smith took up his abode in his residence at Silver Heights, six miles west of Fort Garry, and for years was in charge of Hudson's Bay Company concerns in Winnipeg. On the first election for local representatives Mr. Smith was elected Member for Winnipeg, and then for a number of years was representative of Selkirk, the Metropolitan constituency of Manitoba, in the Parliament of the Dominion. He had much to do with the beginnings of the City of Winnipeg. In the year 1879 Mr. Smith ceased to be a Western representative, and was after some time chosen as Member for West Montreal. Since that time he has ceased to be a resident of Manitoba, much to the regret of the people generally, and especially of his old friends in the province.

But the most remarkable period of the life of Donald A. Smith had yet to come.

His residence in Manitoba, with its impassable roads lying between Winnipeg and Silver Heights, over which the Commissioner had to be driven daily for several years, impressed him with the fact that better means of transport were imperative. The writer remembers Commissioner Smith saying to him in these desolate years of the

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seventies, "railways and not ordinary roads" are the only means for our obtaining reasonable transport here. Hence it was that we saw the unusual spectacle of a man approaching the age of sixty undertaking the, to him, entirely new project of building railways.

The patriotic part taken by him in defeating the Macdonald Government on its railway policy in 1872 on account of the "Pacific Scandal," which was a despicable plot to buy up the electorate of Canada, no doubt made Donald Smith more anxious to secure by fair and open means the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The Mackenzie Government, which came in in 1873, was bound to supply facilities to Manitoba. They, however, gave up, for the time being, the whole scheme of pushing on the railway from Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean, and undertook to supply first railway connection between St. Paul and Winnipeg. This involved two undertakings, first to complete the partially built railway from St. Paul to Red River and then down to the International Boundary-line, and, second, to build a line from the Boundary-line to Winnipeg. Hoping that the American section would be built, the Mackenzie Government in 1874 proceeded with vigour to build sixty miles or more and had the greater part of it graded. In the following year the Mackenzie Government proceeded to build the railway from Fort William, on Lake Superior, to Winnipeg, and began to build it from the Winnipeg end as well. As the latter portion was of

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heavy rock-work, many parts of which would take time, the people demanded the connection by way of the United States. The matter was urged with Western fervour. The Canadian section was practically completed, but the American section lagged. Minnesotan expectations had all been thrown out of joint by the Indian massacre of 1862, and it took many years to restore confidence. The partially built railway was incomplete and some sixty miles remained to be built. Moreover, the company was bankrupt and the bondholders, who lived chiefly in Holland, had reached the end of their tether. All seemed hopeless, and though the clamour of Manitoba was great yet nothing seemed possible to be done toward remedying the case.

Then came the stroke of genius that seized the minds of four men: Donald A. Smith, his cousin, George Stephen, R. B. Angus, then of Montreal, and James J. Hill, a Canadian native, but a leader of trade in St. Paul, Minnesota. It is not certain in whose fertile brain the bright idea first flashed of buying up the St. Paul and Manitoba Railway. Certain it is that three of the four of these men, who could perform exploits, were Scotsmen of Montreal. True, delay took place from 1874 to 1878, but the plan was conceived of buying out the stock of the Dutch bondholders. This was done, and the stock was obtained, it is said, at from 7 to 50 cents upon the dollar. And now came the point when the courage and skill of Donald A. Smith showed itself. He was influential

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in the Bank of Montreal, and had the backing of the great Hudson's Bay Company. Bonds to the extent of eight millions of dollars were placed upon the New York Money Market; they were taken up and the St. Paul and Manitoba Company was lifted out of its state of collapse, the missing link was built, the Government completed the Manitoba end, the means of running the railway had been secured, and on December 3, 1878, the last spike was driven and Manitoba, albeit through the United States, became connected by railway with the outside world. Colossal fortunes were realised by these daring and far-seeing men, and who shall say that their pluck and energy did not richly deserve the reward which they received?

But the Mackenzie Government did not rise to the conception of what might be done for Western Canada. Their policy of the "amphibious route" by portage, wagon, and boat from Fort William to Winnipeg proved cumbrous, discouraging, and inefficient, although they proceeded with the line of railway from each terminal at Winnipeg and Fort William. For this they deserve credit. But their policy had not the ring of confidence which Canada from ocean to ocean seemed to demand. The failure to grasp the lofty conception required had much to do with their defeat.

As the Macdonald Government had planned to build the railway by a company in 1872, they now on their return to power revived their former scheme. And now the question was: The man and the capital? Flushed with the success of their

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Minnesota venture, the Scottish Syndicate of Montreal, with J. J. Hill now so intimately concerned, and one or two Montreal men added, broached the vast project of building a railway not only from Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean, but also of completing it from Fort William along Lake Superior and on to Montreal. Undoubtedly of this combination Donald A. Smith was the brain. To the writer he has stated that several times in the history of their great enterprise the clouds were lowering and it seemed as if all might be swept away, but Scottish firmness and optimism, backed up by the help of the Dominion Government, saw them through, and it was a red-letter day indeed when, five years before the contract time for the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the last spike was driven by Sir Donald Smith and the first train from Montreal to Vancouver passed through Winnipeg on Dominion Day, 1886, amid the loud acclaims of the people. Henceforth the future of Winnipeg was secured, and the iron bond of the railway served to bind together the hitherto separated provinces of the Dominion.

A man of sixty-six might well be excused from attempting great enterprises ; but ten years later, at the great age of seventy-six, Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, whom his Sovereign had honoured with a peerage, became Canadian High Commissioner in London. He has filled this post with the greatest distinction. His princely generosity, his friendliness for Canadians of every type, but especially his attentiveness to his old Scottish

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associates of Red River Settlement, have bespoken a warm heart and a most fraternal disposition. His great benevolence to educational institutions and hospitals has been most marked, and his generosity and public interest have led to his being "doctored" by all the great Universities of Canada and the Motherland. But Scotsmen are almost invariably patriots. The spirit of the undaunted Wallace and the liberator of his country, Robert Bruce, has taken possession of the Scottish nation. It was, then, a marvellous exemplification of this patriotic feeling when in the South African War, at the time of the Empire's need, this Scotsman gained the name of an "Empire Builder" when he offered her Majesty Queen Victoria to equip and send out at his own expense a mounted regiment of Canadian soldiers. The noble offer was graciously accepted, and a thrill of satisfaction went through every Scotsman's bosom that one of their race should be able to do such a thing, and despite the characteristic of "economy" so often charged against the Scotsman, should generously pour forth a million and a half of dollars to meet the whole expense.

Lord Strathcona presents the remarkable picture of a man whose greatest distinctions have come after he had reached the age of fifty. No doubt a sound Scottish body was the fitting habitation for the sane and genial spirit which inhabited it, and this was cultivated by an abstemious and regular life, in which morality, self-control, and religion have been marked

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features. Blood will tell, and the blood of the Grants and Stuarts is no weak or worn-out flood with which to begin the life of trader, diplomatist, financier, syndicator, business man, educator, benefactor, and patriot.