

The Life of Lord Strathcona

A Review of "The Life and Times of Lord Strathcona" by W. T. R. Preston

Written for *The Grain Growers' Guide* by "Ironquill"

SECOND ARTICLE

Biography is too often the art of setting up on a pedestal a monumental figure of heroic proportions and pose. The biographies of great men which are not of this character, but give the world the great men as they lived and moved and actually had their being as human beings among their fellow human beings are all too rare. Whatever else is to be said about W. T. R. Preston's book, the *Life and Times of Lord Strathcona*, it is very decidedly not a book of the former class.

Is it fairly to be characterized as a book entitled to take a place in the latter class? Does it tell the truth about the facts of Lord Strathcona's life? The answer which a fair-minded and competent critic would give would be in the affirmative. Indeed, Mr. Preston sets forth in his appendix documents of record in support of his statements. As to what he has written about Lord Strathcona's character and disposition, the answer to the question whether "there is naught extenuate, or aught set down in malice" is, of course, a more difficult one to answer. Mr. Preston had ample opportunity to study Lord Strathcona's personality, and it seems fair to say that what he has written in that regard has the accent of truth and sincerity. Mr. Preston has shown courage in writing and publishing such a book. He has done a real service to Canada, which it rests with all thoughtful and patriotic Canadians to make of advantage to our country by making the light thrown by the plain truth-telling in this book conduce to a better-informed, clearer-sighted public opinion, resolute that the lessons set forth in this laying bare of the career of Lord Strathcona shall not be lost.

Early Days

No previous book written by a Canadian has made such a stir in the world as this book, which relates the career of Donald Alexander Smith, who was born at Forres, in the Highlands of Scotland, on August 6, 1820, and died in London, as Baron Strathcona and Mt. Royal, High Commissioner for Canada, and one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the world, January 21, 1914, in his ninety-fourth year. He came out to Labrador as an eighteen-year-old youth in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, and roughed it on that bleak coast for thirteen years, from 1838 to 1851, and for the next ten years, in what is now Western Canada, rising in the service until he was appointed resident-governor of the company at Fort Garry, in 1869, exercising absolute sway over Rupert's Land, the area extending from Hudson Bay to the Rockies, which the company owned under the charter granted by Charles II.—an area greater than France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. He was then forty-nine years old.

The Financier

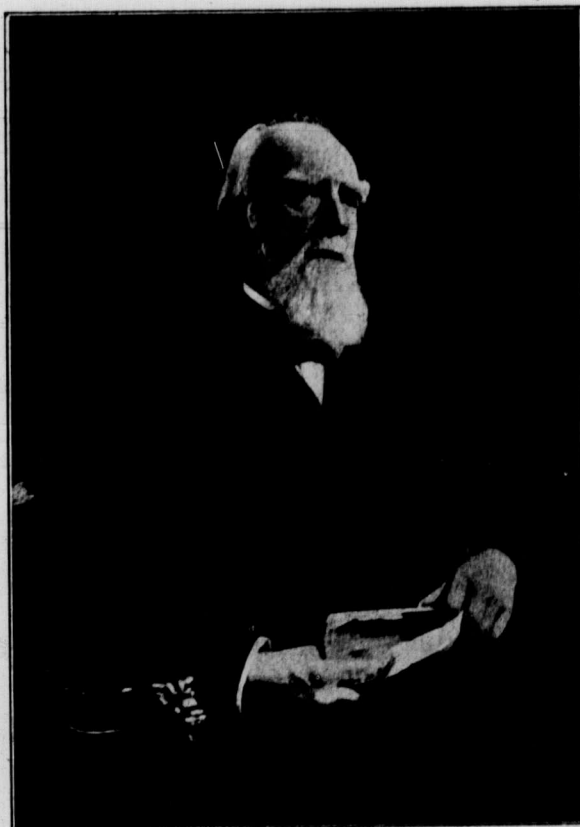
By that time he was already a man of wealth. While in Labrador he had secured the confidence of his fellow-employees in the service of the Hudson's Bay Co., and was entrusted by them with their earnings, having authority from them to draw their checks every month. He paid them three per cent. He thus came to have control of large sums of money, for that time. With great shrewdness, he invested it in the stock of the Bank of Montreal, an institution then in its infancy. When his fellow-employees desired to make any withdrawals of their money, he paid them out of his private means, and kept on constantly increasing his holdings of Bank of Montreal stock, until he became one of its largest shareholders, and eventually its president.

After he became resident-governor at Fort Garry (Winnipeg) history began

to be made rapidly. Canada bought Rupert's Land from the company for £300,000 and 1,120 acres in each township south of the Saskatchewan, as it came to be surveyed, and also certain specified areas around the company's posts. By some means the report reached London that, instead of these very favorable terms, the company was

able for its achievements, a career which extended over such an extraordinary length of years that Lord Strathcona, having outlived most of the associates of his middle life, saw the fruition of his far-sighted planning, it is possible to touch only upon the chief, outstanding points.

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LORD STRATHCONA

being forced out of its rights on very unfavorable terms; and the result was a panic among the scattered shareholders of the company, many of them widows and orphans of army and navy officers of limited means. Thru his secret agents in London, Donald A. Smith purchased all the Hudson's Bay stock that was offered. The thing was managed with the utmost secrecy, the prices running from £9 to £13 per share. In this way the future Lord Strathcona became the owner of a controlling interest in the Hudson's Bay Company.

"It is interesting to note," writes his biographer, that by 1911 the shares of the company were quoted on the London Stock Exchange at £130, an increase in value of over 1,300 per cent. In addition to this, however, between 1872 and 1911 the entire capital stock of the company was repaid to the shareholders in full six times in the form of special bonuses, exclusive of ordinary dividends. Others in his position and with his inspirations, perhaps, would have followed exactly the same course. But very many, whose worldly possessions were somewhat limited, learned only when it was too late that in parting hastily with their shares they had unconsciously assisted the chief officer of the company to realize the ambition of a lifetime."

But nearly half his lifetime was still before him, and he was to make greater hauls of golden fish from the waters of opportunity, and realize even greater ambitions than that of acquiring control of the Hudson's Bay Company. In this review of a career so remark-

able for its achievements, a career which extended over such an extraordinary length of years that Lord Strathcona, having outlived most of the associates of his middle life, saw the fruition of his far-sighted planning, it is possible to touch only upon the chief, outstanding points. Years before his death, he had be-

In Politics

In December, 1870, in the first election to the Legislature of the new province of Manitoba, Donald A. Smith was returned for Winnipeg. In March, 1871, after a very bitter contest, he was elected as one of the four representatives of Manitoba in the Dominion House of Commons, as member for Selkirk. And with this Mr. Preston, in his book, brings us to the beginning of Donald A. Smith's great railway schemings. He had seen how railway corporations in the United States were by the corruption of legislatures growing rapidly to enormous proportions, with vast areas of public land and huge grants of public money. He conceived the idea of securing a charter for the construction of a transcontinental railway across Canada. About the same time Sir Hugh Allan, in Montreal, had conceived the same idea. Both men were full of energy. They joined

forces, and in 1872 the first Canadian Pacific legislation was carried thru Parliament, just before the Dominion general elections in the same year, in which the Syndicate (the name by which the C.P.R. promoters were spoken of) furnished contributions to the campaign fund of the party led by Sir John A. Macdonald, totalling \$350,000. In the stress of the closing weeks of that election contest, Sir John A. Macdonald threw away caution and sent telegrams to Sir Hugh Allan, which were soon made public, including the famous one: "Send another ten thousand; it is the last time of asking."

The great Pacific scandal followed, which drove Sir John A. Macdonald from power, after he had carried the country in 1872. There was another general election in 1873, and the Liberal party came into power, with Alexander Mackenzie as Premier. The story of the part played by Donald A. Smith thru those exciting years and the decade succeeding is made absorbingly interesting by Mr. Preston, and so convincing, that we cannot but realize how great the measure of truth is in the opening sentences of his book:

"The most important figure in the public life of Canada since 1870, although not always in the public eye, has undoubtedly been Lord Strathcona. It was not until long after he had become an unseen power that the people began to realize his influence. For forty years his personality stands out in every political crisis in the Dominion. He has had far more to do with the defeats and victories of political parties since Confederation than all other influences combined. The manner in which he moulded the tone and character of the political life of the country, as well as its Parliamentary legislation, is unique. It cannot be said that his object was evident when he first appeared on the scene, although undoubtedly his own mind was clear about the end in view. So successfully did he control the leaders of political thought that immense fortunes were accumulated as the direct result of his influence in the Federal and Provincial Legislatures of the country. On many important occasions Parliament, without being aware of the fact, simply registered his decrees."

The C. P. R. Charter

Mr. Preston devotes some of the most interesting pages of his book to showing that the future Lord Strathcona endeavored to secure a new Canadian Pacific charter, the one granted by the Macdonald Government on the eve of the Dominion general elections in 1872 to the Syndicate, of which Sir Hugh Allan was the head, having been abrogated by Parliament after the change of government. He had entered Parliament as a Conservative; he now swung around into being one of the most influential supporters of the Liberal Government. But, as time wore on, he realized that Alexander Mackenzie was immovable in his determination that the Canadian Pacific railway should be Government-owned. "I will leave the Canadian Pacific railway as a heritage to my adopted country," was the final word of that fine old Scotchman, than whom an honest man, with higher ideals of patriotism and public service, has never filled the position of Premier of Canada.

Finding the Premier adamant, Donald A. Smith quietly laid his plans to bring about another change of government. Unable to change the Premier's decision, he determined to secure a change of Premier. By this time he had powerful associates ready to act with him. "It was not revealed until long after," writes Mr. Preston, "that these associates had firmly determined to support any government that would com-

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