

Rutherford House: the history and

story by Kevin Law

On the edge of campus, nestled in among several large, stately trees, stands a proud but modest looking mansion. In 1915, its formal name was Achnacarry, so named after the ancestral home of clan Cameron in Scotland. Today, it is better known as Rutherford House.

Many students on campus are unaware of Rutherford House, what it is and what it has to offer. Admission is free, a good reason in itself to visit this beautiful brick house, but Rutherford House also has a historically significant atmosphere that could be described as mystical.

Pass through the front doors and you immediately leave 1989. Once entered into the main foyer, you will enter the Edwardian age of 1915. A rising oak staircase is symmetrically placed in the middle of the hall. Two passageways on either side, and the large foyer entrance, are exquisitely finished in rich, dark oak panelling, illuminated by the soft light of library style turquoise lamp shades. The effect is moody, tranquil, and otherworldly.

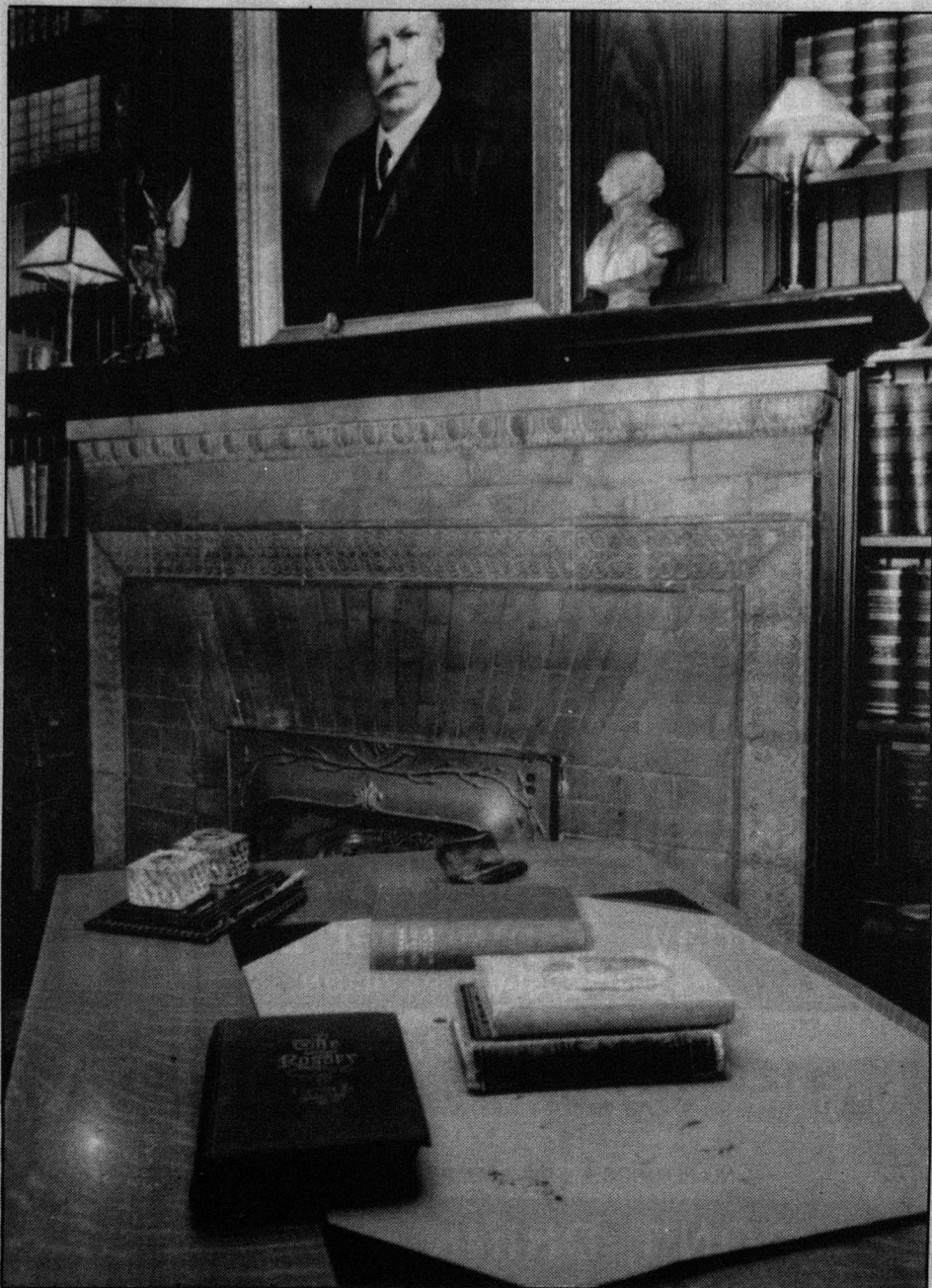
Dr. Alexander Cameron Rutherford initially came to Edmonton to set up a lucrative law practice (he was the only lawyer in town). He eventually joined the Liberal party and was

elected Alberta's first premier. One of his major goals was to establish a university for the province. Circa 1906, he initiated legislation for the creation of a university, promising his cabinet he would select a site south of the North Saskatchewan river. He did select a site south of the river, but not in Calgary as many had hoped. Rutherford selected the then rural site of Strathcona for the campus, and purchased an adjoining 1.3 acre estate for the location of his future home.

Rutherford's choice for the university site fractured his cabinet; many of his own MPs felt betrayed. The rift never healed, and in 1910 Rutherford resigned as premier. The year following, Rutherford and his family moved into their new home. As founder of the new institution, Rutherford was elected to the University Senate, and appointed to the King's Council.

Rutherford House itself was so elaborate in its Jacobethan style that it established a new standard in domestic architecture, symbolizing the end of the pioneer style in Alberta. The house is now restored to its original 1915 condition. In fact, all furniture and artifacts are very exact because, according to Derek Brenneis, senior interpretative officer for the house, Rutherford's daughter

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Hazel was consulted on the originality of renovations and furniture placement. When walking through the house, the quiet sense of Edwardian atmosphere is partially established by a collage of original and period furniture, artwork, and artifacts.

Rutherford House was a residence built for large scale entertaining. Dr. Rutherford maintained an open door policy for campus

A stained glass skylight above the oak stairwell lends an air of distinction to the second floor.

students, and every year the entire graduating class would gather for Founder's Day tea. Graduates would gather at the home for tea and an informal address by Rutherford, who later extended the tradition to include a tree planting on the University grounds.

Evening dining was a central aspect of entertaining guests in Edwardian society, and Rutherford's dining room was obviously built with many people in mind, for it is uncommonly large, the largest in the house. The elegance of the oak panelling and burgundy colored walls strikes you upon entering the room. Burgundy velvet drapes within a large bow window add to the room's refinement.

Derek Brenneis, himself dressed in a period suit complete with starched collar and bow tie, paints a provocative portrait of an Edwardian dinner party. After dinner, male and female guests would separate into two rooms, for a strict set of Edwardian social rules prevailed. Women adorned to the parlour, men to the library. Because the house held such a key position in Strathcona's social and academic life, important issues of the day would have been discussed at length. World War I was an important topic, as was the women's suffrage movement and prohibition. The social graces also meant one never crossed one's legs while seated, and hand gestures in conversation were subdued and kept to a minimum.

Brenneis also notes that the house is actually built in two parts: the more ostentatious entertaining front half of the house, and the more practical backroom kitchen and laundry half where only service staff were allowed to go. Upon entering the kitchen, the heady, spicy aroma of freshly baked Welsh cakes permeates the air.

"If you were a gentleman, you would have never come back here in 1915," says staff interpreter Karen Walton. She is dressed in a floral print period dress and speaks with a noticeable Cockney accent. She is making the Welsh cakes herself on a large nickel-plated cast iron stove, "a most modern stove and oven for the time." The stove is wood heated, and Karen opens a creaking door to stoke the orange blazing embers inside. The house, she tells me, also had electricity and hot running water, amenities that were the envy of many an Edmonton household.

Continuing the tour, Brenneis shows me the parlour where the ladies retired after