

Episode 9 – 525 Years in the Pursuit of Truth: A New History of The University of Aberdeen

Transcript

[00:00:02] This podcast has brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Professor Michael Brown [00:00:10] Hello and welcome to the latest installment of five hundred twenty five Years in the Pursuit of Truth, a new history of the University of Aberdeen, I'm Professor Michael Brown. On this occasion, it gives me great pleasure to be able to introduce Dr Andrew Dilley. Dr Dilley is a senior lecturer in history at the University and is the author of Finance, Politics and Imperialism Australia, Canada and the City of London, circa 1896 to 1914. He's currently writing a study of a remarkable clan imperial institution, the Federation of Commonwealth Chambers of Commerce, using it to reexamine the culture, politics and economics of the British Empire and the Commonwealth from 1886 through to 1975. Dr Dilley has also been engaged about debates about the nature of the British world, with recent articles appearing in the historical journal and the Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth history. This topic today is Lord Strathcona 1820 to 1914, the first Baron Strathcona and Mount Royal who was appointed chancellor of the University of Aberdeen in 1897, Strathcona's Imperial career, culminating in his appointment as Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and office, which he held from 1896 to 1914. Having previously been a successful businessman who not only founded the Canadian Pacific Railway, but was the commissioner, governor and principal shareholder of the Hudson Bay Company and was the president of the Bank of Montreal and in exploring his life, career and its connection to the University. Dr Dilley's lecture contributes to the consideration of legacies of empire in and beyond the University today and emphasizing the need to take account of the multifaceted venture of the empire itself.

Dr Andrew Dilley [00:01:57] Our story starts in 1906, when Aberdeen hosted what was claimed to be Scotland's biggest banquets, the occasion was the completed renovation of Marischal College of a delayed quartercentenary of the University of Aberdeen's foundation. King Edward the seventh would open the new college, and every inch of the city was to be decorated with bunting and flowers. Guests comprising representatives of leading academic institutions and other public figures had been invited from across the globe. Soon, the acceptance list grew so long, but embarrassingly, it would be impossible for the university to enable all those involved in the celebrations to dine together. At this point for University's Chancellor stepped in, offering to pay for a banquet of two and a half thousand guests. No venue in the city could house such a number and so a temporary dining hall was erected off Gallowgate. The Chancellor engaged London firm Lyons and Co. to provide a seven course meal accompanied by sherry, hock, champagne, claret, port, liqueurs, mineral water, cigars and cigarettes. Amongst the most exotic dishes offered was a soup that required 90 turtles weighing 6000lbs to be transported from the West Indies. For dinner service included 64000 knives, forks and spoons, 12000 glasses and 24000 plates, weighing a total of 40 to 50 tonnes. About 600 staff, mostly French and Swiss, traveled up from London with this enormous feast on a special train that required two locomotives to pull. The banquet cost for Chancellor, an astonishing eight and a half thousand pounds, a figure better understood when it's borne in mind for the rest of the four days of celebrations cost the University £3,800 and the city £6,300 approximately. The chancellor who funded this culinary extravaganza was not only Scots born, but also a North-easterner. His name was Donald Alexander Smith, recently elevated to the peerage in 1897 as Lord Strathcona of Glencoe and Mount Royal, Smith had been born in Forres in

1820. He spent most of his life in Canada rising through the fur trade to become a leading figure in late 19th century Montreal's business, political and social establishment. He returned to Britain in 1896 as Canadian high commissioner, essentially Canada's quasi-ambassador in the United Kingdom. He was one of a number of North-easterners who in the 19th century migrated and made good on the expanding frontiers of the British Empire. For University of Aberdeen benefited more from his munificence than one night of haute cuisine. He donated £25,000 towards the reconstruction of Marischal College in 1906 and a further £10000 pounds in 1910 to endow the University's chair in agriculture. For a total of £43,500 would equate to £1.7million in 2019 prices correcting simply for inflation. His donations to the University of Aberdeen significant though they were only a small part of his philanthropic activity in the North-east of Scotland, across the rest of Scotland and indeed across the rest of Britain and Canada.

[00:05:15] Strathcona connections to the University, began tempestuously with his election as rector in 1899, his candidacy was advanced by Lord Aberdeen, a former governor general of Canada, an acquaintance of Strathcona and a unionist. Now, most of Scottish University Rectoral elections then saw contests political contests between Liberal and Conservative Unionist candidates. Yet despite his connections to the Canadian Conservative Party, Strathcona as high commissioner was meant to stand above politics, certainly above British politics. And indeed, he served a Liberal government in Canada. Hence, his candidacy was pitched as nonpartisan. Nonetheless, this was seen by Aberdeen's liberals and Aberdeen's liberal students as a unionist coup. And they persuaded the liberal politician and the future foreign secretary, Edward Grey, to stand against Strathcona, inviting him by telegram while he was visiting Glasgow. This led to something of a clash in the press. Strathcona supporters exemplified and given voice, for example, in the Aberdeen Journal, thought the Liberals' action was entirely inappropriate and emphasized that Strathcona was both a Buchan man and a major philanthropist. His opponents though, again, whose voices can be found in the pages of the old student newspaper Alma Mater, alleged he was a financial wire puller and that the affair was a grubby fix in pursuit of cash, which had departed from usual practice in rectoral elections. Sensing a controversy that could only damage his political career, Grey very soon pulled out. It was, of course, awkward that his action had implied the Canadian High Commissioner was indeed aligned with in British politics that withdrawal and to turn saw liberal students protesting loudly, not least outside of the offices of the Aberdeen Journal on Union Street, leading to arrests, and counterclaims in the press of police excess and student disgrace. When Strathcona was inducted into office, a further clash took place, rather complicatedly morphing from a fight between supporters of Strathcona and Grey supporters into a confrontation between a united phalanx of students and members of the town. Aberdeen of a turn of a 20th century was nothing, if not a lively place.

[00:07:54] This controversy turned not on Strathcona's election, but rather on the way his rectorship had suspended usual politics within the union and seemingly had done so for pecuniary gain. The student newspaper Alma Mater, which had given voice to his critics, soon sang his praises, not least as he funded the recruitment of a cavalry regiment in the Canadian north west to fight for the British in the second Anglo-Boer War in South Africa. Equally Strathcona's brief rival as rector, the liberal students' Choice Edward Gray, sat in the imperialist wing of the Liberal Party and was fully supportive of that war, unlike many of his colleagues. The controversy around Strathcona's appointment had died down by the time he assumed the chancellorship in 1903, then favoured over another Scot made good in the Americas, Andrew Carnegie.

[00:08:54] As for University of Aberdeen, in the 21st century and indeed civil society in Britain more broadly reconsiders the significance of its many connections to Empire, the imperial origins of Strathcona's wealth becomes of much greater interest. To this end I'd like to track back in this podcast and sketch the career of Donald Smith, a.k.a. Lord Strathcona, from his birth in Forres through his rise in the Hudson's Bay Company and then in Montreal business down to his final role as Canadian High Commissioner. Doing so makes us think more deeply about the nature of the myriad connections the University of North East of Scotland more generally have to the multifaceted entity that was the British Empire. His career highlights, crucially, that Empire was not a homogenous entity. As we shall see, his wealth and status came precisely through deft exploitation of a position at the heart of a transition, a transition from a fur trading empire through to a settlement empire and what became Canada.

[00:10:07] Donald Alexander Smith was born in a small, flood prone cottage by Mossett Burn in Forres in August 1820. His parents were petty, bourgeoisie, perhaps even middle class. This is not a tale of rags to riches, but a middle class to magnate. His father, Alexander Smith, was a descendant of George Smith, a wealthy merchant from Knockando his mother, Barbara Smith, nee Stuart, was descended from the grants of Strathspey. Of her brothers several headed to the North American fur trade, another joined the army and several had headed east. Such global sojournings were not uncommon in the early 19th century, when people were one of the region's principal exports.

[00:10:54] Smith was the third of four children who survived into adulthood. He was educated at the Anderson Institution, a charitable foundation erected in 1824 to instruct the children of Forres. As Donald came of age in the 1830s, the question of his likely career arose, University was not to be for him. His brother John had already enrolled at the University of Aberdeen to study medicine, and like many of the university's alumni, proceeded to join the army as a military service surgeon, later serving in China, India and Australasia. Donald, however, was earmarked for the world of business, something which required no degree in the 19th century. In 1836, his uncle, John Stewart, returned to Forres briefly as offered to secure Donald a clerkship at the Hudson's Bay Company in London, or else an opening in Canada. Thus, on the 14 April 1848, Smith set out for London and after completing a 1770 mile journey on foot to Aberdeen, caught a coastal schooner to the capital of the United Kingdom. He briefly resided there before leaving for Canada on the 16 May 1848, where he joined the Hudson's Bay Company after an interview with another Scot, Governor George Simpson, a rare English-speaking fan of Napoleon Bonaparte. Thus, he entered the fur trade.

[00:12:28] The fur trade in North America had emerged rapidly following the discovery of a continent by Europeans in the 16th century. By the 1830s, the trade in the northern half of the continent was dominated by the London managed Hudson's Bay Company, which had successfully taken over its Scottish run and Montreal based rival for North Western Company in 1821. Fur trading relied on close, if unequal relationships with native peoples across a vast swathe of a North American continent, indigenous groups would trap furs and transport them through rivers and lakes by canoes to trading posts dotted across North America, where they would be exchanged for a shifting array of goods, including axes, beads, blankets, buttons, caps, hats, guns, tobacco and although officially banned alcohol. For trading posts and sales, were isolated with often small and diverse populations and cultures forming. The first were normally destined for Europe, but could also find their way by land or sea to China, where they were traded for tea and other luxuries in a market often impervious to the fruits of European industry. Smith entered the

eastern end of his complex fur trading world in 1838 he was rapidly sent to two outposts in northern Quebec. Then, in 1848, he was appointed chief factor manager of the Trading Post at Esquimaux Bay in Labrador. These postings were often tough. One of his first nation's guides died en route to Esquimaux Bay. He suffered snow blindness in northern Quebec and once told Lady Aberdeen that "the midges of Labrador would vanquish men who would flee no other foe". His early impressions of First Nations in Canada were derogatory, he wrote to his mother. "I think you would have to travel the whole world over to find a greater contrast to the Scotch than these same Indians. If civilization consists in frugality of foresight, then the Montagnais are far worse than dogs". Smith's attitudes seemingly soften though of his time in Esquimaux Bay, and he later recalled "People speak of solitude in Labrador. It wasn't a solitude for me. I knew everyone there from the oldest white traders and fishermen to the youngest Indian hunters and Eskimo and even their dogs".

[00:14:55] His marriage was to typify his immersion into the old and often hybridized world at the fur trade. His wife to be Isabella, was the daughter of Smith's superior, the London born chief trader Richard Hardistry. Hardistry's wife had been of mixed indigenous and Scottish parentage. In 1851 Isabella had married, probably been married, probably by her father to another trader, James Grant, and bore him a son, but Grant and Isabella soon separated and soon after Smith and Isabella married. The couple were married in 1853 by Smith himself, and a year later, Isabella gave birth to their only daughter. Smith was to marry Isabella twice more. Once in a ceremony, he conducted himself in 1859 and finally in a further ceremony in 1896 at the Windsor Hotel in New York just prior to his elevation to the peerage. Both these ceremonies were prompted by doubts over Smith's marital status though Donald always maintained that his original marriage had been legal by the practices of Esquimaux Bay and in Scottish common law in later life. As Smith rose in Montreal and London high society, his wife, Isabella, faced racist prejudice from the sort of elites of the time. She was called a 'hobby doddy squaw' and 'Our Lady of the Snows' by London high society. Smith used threats of libel to remove references of her and her indigenous ancestry from several biographies.

[00:16:36] When Smith crossed the Atlantic in 1838 British North America remained a disunited assemblage of colonies with unsettled boundaries with the United States. However by 1867 boundaries settled, the colonies east of the great lakes were united as what became known as the Dominion of Canada. The territories of the Hudson's Bay Company were purchased by the new Dominion in 1869, bringing a vast swathe of territory west of the Great Lakes under its orbit. And in 1897, British Columbia joined the new confederation with the promise of a railway line that would connect it to the East. Smith was a prominent supporter of the purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company lands by Canada, having long been aware of declining fortunes of the fur trade and increasingly convinced of the potential wealth to be gained from settling the West.

[00:17:26] This political reconfiguration was a direct challenge to the status quo in the vast domain of Hudson's Bay Company, and in response in 1869 the Metis of the Red River in Manitoba rose in protest. The Metis were an interesting group they were form of the descendants of mixed heritage French and native Canadian who had kind of formed a sort of distinctive hybridized culture and who lived in a vast, vast area in modern Manitoba around the Red River, led by Louis Riel, they protested against the transfer of their territories to Canada, fearing for their interests would be swamped by accelerated white settlement. In 1869, Smith was sent on his first trip to the West by the Canadian Prime Minister, John A. MacDonal, officially to negotiate with Riel unofficially to create a pro Canadian party that would contain and weaken Metis resistance. Smith succeeded after

his mission, which quelled the Red River revolt, helped quell the Red River revolt. At least Smith became the newly formed province of Manitoba's first representative in the Canadian parliament in 1871.

[00:18:48] Smith's role as agent of a Canadian state reflected his dramatic social, political and economic rise of his time within Montreal and Canadian society. In 1862 he had been appointed a chief factor in Labrador. And then in 1868, he moved to Montreal, permanently becoming head of the Hudson Bay Company's trading department. In 1889, he was to become the governor of a company and presided over a metamorphosis from a fur trading outfit to a chain of department stores serving Canada's burgeoning cities, something it remains today. In 1866, he acquired shares in the Bank of Montreal, the linchpin of Montreal finance, and in 1887 he was to become the bank's president. This placed him right at the heart of a cluster of central Canadian businesses, industries and financial institutions, which, in collaboration with Canadian politicians, were to pioneer the transformation of all of Canada into a united Dominion.

[00:19:57] Central to this project of creating a single Canada was the construction of transcontinental railways, and it was the construction of these transcontinental railways that was to dominate the next phase of Smith's life and to cement his rising fortune. Canada, as it existed in 1867 remained sparsely populated relative to the United States and thinly spread out across the northern frontiers of the great republic to the south. For Canadian politicians and businessmen if Canada was to become a distinctive entity and a distinctive entity within the British Empire, some means was required to weld the Dominion together, to weld the country together and at the same time to prevent it being sucked into a continental orbit by the much larger society to the south. Railways were central to this vision of Canadian nationalism, and it was a vision of Canadian nationalism that also is deeply bound up with and justified by adherence to British imperialism. It was the distinction between allegiance to the crown, on the one hand, and the republicanism of their neighbors to the south, that defined and explained what the differences between Anglophone Canada and its rivals in the United States. Thus, a project formulated not without controversy to build a great railway connecting east, central and eastern Canada to the Pacific. This railway was to act as a corridor through which settlers would pour into the prairies, creating a vast belt, producing wheat and other agricultural product products for export back to Europe and particularly to Britain, and also create markets for central Canada's emerging industrial base. This project was to be realised in the early 20th century and described by then as the "last best west". It meant an end to the old world of the fur trade. Smith became central to the practical realization of this vision for construction of the great Canadian Pacific Railway His partner was another north eastern Scot, George Stephen, a cousin of Smith's who had been born in Dufftown in 1831, began his career in Aberdeen as a draper before moving to Montreal. Their first foray into the railway business through the construction in the late 1870s of the highly profitable St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba railway, which brought railway connections to Manitoba from the American midwest.

[00:22:57] Following this success, though, they pushed the great project of a transcontinental railway and negotiated a contract with the Canadian government to construct a new line. This was not a case of private enterprise going it alone. The government pledged generous support, including 25 million acres of land, which could then be subsequently sold to settlers, 25 million dollars in cash, and 700 miles of completed lines. The construction of the railway overseen by the engineer Sir Sandford Fleming. Smith and Stephen were given 10 years to construct the line, but they only did it in five, seeking to get line paying profits as quickly as possible. Fleming cut costs and

erected the line at breakneck speed, in the process employing 17000 Chinese laborers. The financing of the project, though, was not easy. Smith and Stephen put their personal fortunes on the line. By 1884, even this proved insufficient, and in 1885 they obtained an agreement from the Canadian government to issue a further 35 million dollars worth of stock. 20 million dollars worth of that stock was to be guaranteed by the Canadian government itself. Of 15 million dollars or three million pounds was issued in London by Lord Revelstoke, the head of the merchant bank Barings. With this loan Smith and Stephen were able to complete the line. The role of a British banker in forging the Canadian state can be seen today if one goes to Mount Revelstoke, the mountain that renamed in his honor in the Canadian Rockies. Finances secure, Fleming completed for line. On the 7 November 1885 in British Columbia, Smith drove last spoke of the Canadian Pacific Railway. On his return from Winnipeg he received a telegram from Queen Victoria praising an act of great importance to the whole empire. A knighthood soon followed, and then in 1897, a peerage. The CPR was billed as a great imperial asset, a highway that would connect Britain to East Asia, to India and to the antipodes, and enable a further projection of British power, influence and empire into these regions. However, the immediate impact was to cement the dominance of settler colonialism within the north west prairies. Before it was even completed in 1885 Louis Riel and the Metis, now located in Saskatchewan, again rose in protest against the coming changes and the increasing levels of settlement. And at the same time, the First Nations of Cree and Assiniboine also rose against the Canadian state. Whereas the Red River Rising's of 1868 had taken two years to quell, this time using CPJR Canadian militia were rapidly transported West and defeated Riel and his allies and the First Nations. Riel was executed for treason.

[00:26:26] So by the 1890s, Smith possessed a vast personal wealth with houses in Montreal and Winnipeg. He was a member of Canadian parliament. By then, he'd also become an active philanthropist, giving generously to schools and medical foundations. And he was particularly generous in the cause of women's education. He first donated to a girls school in Montreal, the Trafalgar Institute, and then provided funding for McGill University to endow the first two separate classes of women who are known as the Donalds. In 1896, he followed this up with \$1.3 million worth of endowments to found the Royal Victoria College as a permanent female college.

[00:27:16] The completion of the CPR did not instantly transform the Canadian prairies. Fewer settlers arrived than anticipated, and it was rectifying this that dominated the last phase of Smith's life. In 1896, he was appointed as Canadian high commissioner in London. A year later, he became Lord Strathcona. Now, on paper, the main role of High Commissioner was to liaise with the colonial office and through that with the broader British government. However, Smith had a much larger unofficial role as high commissioner. He was to promote migration and investment in Canada to Britain across the United Kingdom. He presided over a network of migration agents and continued advertising, which placed the potential of Canada the potential of the so-called "last best west" before potential British migrants, not least in Scotland. At the same time, he managed and promoted Canada within the City of London, seeking to attract further investment, which would realize the vision of a transcontinental settler dominion. He became the living embodiment of Canada in London, and even though age 76 was described by the Victorian journalist, W.T. Stead, thus: "In the vigour, youthful freshness, that massive head crowned by glistening snows, I seem to see the dominion of Canada incarnate and in his language I heard the Canadian creed of hope, self-confidence and loyalty." And it is in this role as high commissioner, which Strathcona occupied until his death in 1914, that we re-encounter him at the University of Aberdeen. It was while occupying this role that he was elected as rector. On election as rector, Strathcona

addressed the University's students on the theme of imperialism and unity. Skating over the stramash surrounding his accession to office, he offered students a story of empire that centered on the realization and growth of the self-governing settler colonies. Thus, he told the students, "We know what the empire is. We know it consists of a galaxy of nations, all subject to one sovereign. I'm proud of one flag and yet not bound so closely together in regard to matters of a practical nature as they are in sentiment and loyalty." It was a vision, in other words, of the growth of a set of what was often called by late Victorian thinkers, Greater Britain, a cluster of settler and largely British speaking colonies of the mother country Britain. It was a vision of empire which had little, if anything, to say about other portions of the British Empire. It had little to say on India, the Raj. It had nothing to say on the West Indies, not even to celebrate the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. The partition of Africa, when Strathcona talked about it was mentioned only really to note the deployment of forces from Greater Britain in support of British conquests, whether that was in Australian forces fighting with Lord Kitchener in the Sudan in 1898 over much larger contingents of Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians who in 1900 were fighting with the British against the Afrikaners in South Africa. It was also a vision of empire that ignored the indigenous populations within the settler societies that were central to it. The settler colonialism in under were were other words, but underpinned the emergence of this galaxy of free nations, as Strathcona put it, were ignored. In all of this Strathcona was simply to go with the grain of late Victorian and Edwardian ideas of empire, which turned and centered very much on this of empire of sameness, on the white settler colonies, and as far as there was a conversation and a controversy regarding these colonies, it all turned on how best they would be continuing continually bound to Britain. How best to cement the connections within Greater Britain was one of the great political questions of late Victorian and Edwardian imperial politics. As Canadian High Commissioner, of course, Strathcona was in an interested party. He was the leading one of the leading salesmen within the United Kingdom of Greater Britain. His job was to promote this vision and to realize it. In all of this Strathcona's discussion before the university students 100 years ago or so admitted his own experience. It admitted particularly the transition from that hybrid world at the fur trade through to the creation of a settler confederation, that lay at the heart of both state formation in Canada but it created the possibility of Greater Britain and his own rising wealth and prestige.

[00:32:38] The University of Aberdeen, like so many in Scotland and Britain, benefited from these changes from wealth acquired on the front frontiers of empire and from settlements and its attendant displacement, tracing the origins of Strathcona's wealth should remind us of the multifaceted nature of empire. It was a shift from fur to grain, from the age of sail and canoe to rail and steam. that lay at the heart of the story here, that lay at the heart of the acquisition of wealth that benefited the University and reshaped the built environment of Aberdeen. Scots, along with others, exploited the opportunity available both in the world of fur and the world of settlement. These opportunities came with different relationships with indigenous peoples, and the consequences of those relationships and changes still work themselves out within Canadian politics to this day. Much attention has recently been devoted, and rightly, to the connections of British civil society to slavery in the new world. But there were other connections to other worlds of empire that ought not to be forgotten. Each has its own very different story. These stories are rarely easy, but they defy easy generalization.

[00:34:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.