

# Family <sup>and</sup> Friends the Motive <sup>for</sup> Migration

Scottish Architects in Canada 1880 - 1914

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*Holly Kinnear graduated from the University of St. Andrews in 1998 with a M.A, which she followed a year later with a M.Litt. Abandoning the East Neuk and its fishing villages, she chose to reside in two metropolises for the duration of her PhD: Edinburgh and Montreal. As well as changing the small for the grand, she also turned her back on the domestic architecture of the eighteenth century, choosing instead the turn of the twentieth century and the imperial consequences of the migration of Scottish architects to Canada.*

One of the questions that is most intriguing when studying architects who emigrated are the reasons for their move. Their work may almost be considered secondary to this question, especially to someone as curious about people as she is about the iconography of architecture; after all the buildings would not exist if the man had not decided to leave his home and start a new life across the Atlantic. In this article some of the reasons surrounding the move from Scotland to Canada will be examined. Straight away it must be emphasised that few people actually sit down to record why they make any decisions, therefore most of this article is the result of considered thought and conjecture.

The imperialism that underpins the joint history of Scotland and Canada is certainly important to understanding the links between the two countries, however this tie merely helps explain Canada as the destination of choice for the immigrant Scottish architect rather than the motive for migrating. So what could have influenced architects to leave their mother country? The architects that form the main focus of this study are men who are recorded as having left Scotland between 1880 and 1914. They do not form a large group, a rather meagre forty-six in fact. They are however the only men that have come to light in the process of investigation, it is possible that there are many more that have remained either undetected or insufficiently documented.

From an examination of the chronology of the migration of architects from Scotland to Canada it is quite clear that there is a definite distinction between the last two decades of the nineteenth-century and the first two of the new century; for the men whose date of migration is known, forty, 88%, arrived in Canada between 1900 and 1914. Of this 88%, 65% emigrated in the first decade of the twentieth century, and 35% in the following five years. These figures tally with the general trends seen in the national figures for the period, suggesting a commonality of motives rather than specificity to architecture.<sup>1</sup> In 1880, total migration from Britain to Canada accounted for only 9% of the total outward movement; by 1900 this had slightly risen to 11; in 1905 the percentage had made a staggering rise to 31%, further increasing to 39% by 1910.

It is interesting to note that in the last decades of the nineteenth-century less than a third of British migrants chose a 'white' Dominion as their destination preferring instead the United States of America. In the first ten years of the new century however, almost half were sailing to the settler colonies - the peak of this migration was immediately prior to the Great War - and it was Canada that received the 'largest slice of cake'.<sup>2</sup> Recent research has shown that the clearest indicator seems to be an imperialist philosophy that argued for emigration as the most rewarding mode of expansion for the country because it allowed exploitation of natural resources, thus reaping economic benefits, and it helped to secure the empire, helping to 'maintain a predominantly British sentiment'.<sup>3</sup> Consequently state-aided emigration increased, and it may have been this aid, tied to other issues such as lack of employment opportunities, friends and family connections, that may have encouraged the young, newly trained architects to emigrate to Canada. This notion of maintaining 'Britishness' may appear to have been a Victorian ideology of the nineteenth-century but in 1909 there was a proposition made by a Canadian newspaper editor that British immigration to Canada had to be maintained. At the turn of a new century, which saw the death of a much-revered monarch, it is very likely that there was a need and a desire to try and maintain a legacy from the past to ensure a continuity of events rather than viewing the new century and new reign as an opportunity for rebirth and renewal. In a speech delivered at the First Imperial Press Conference in 1909, Sir Hugh Graham, editor of the *Montreal Star*, declared that:

It is nothing new to say that Canada is the keystone of the Imperial arch. If the keystone were to fall the arch would be in peril. The steadfastness of Canada in this position depends upon the sentiment of the majority of her people. Today that majority is overwhelmingly British ... but the immigration of foreigners is threatening that majority.<sup>4</sup>

A similar sentiment was also voiced by one of the most prominent Scottish architects of the period, Robert S Lorimer. In a letter to a friend in Montreal he implored his friend to 'send us some men. What better experience for an imaginative young Canadian than to come to Edinburgh for a few years and mop up the traditions.'<sup>5</sup> The message is clear: the young Canadians should be designing in imitation of the mothercountry!

In his discussion of encouraged emigration Thompson develops his point to discuss the personality of migration and he notices three main demographic groups: single women, children and ex-servicemen, three groups with obvious benefits to the colonies, as well as clear disadvantages to the motherland. What is significant in terms of this paper is that the architects do not fit into any of these brackets. So, perhaps they were not explicitly encouraged to emigrate. It is at this point that perhaps economics and employment are more easily raised, i.e. the lack of architectural work in Scotland, but also significant is the Victorian self-help mentality, an ideology that is strikingly similar to the Scottish Calvinist work-ethic: man must make his own luck, and this comes through effort and hard-work. It is perhaps the realisation that to succeed they had to move away and find new opportunities that propelled the young architects onto ships and onwards to British North America. These are general observations about migration that are insightful and helpful in proffering ideas

but if the focus is narrowed it becomes easier to paint a picture of the personality of the architectural migrant who left Scotland to settle in Canada and his reasons for doing so.

In 1883 the Edinburgh-trained architect, Andrew Thomas Taylor, opened an office in Montreal, having left his partner, George Gordon, in charge of their London one. Their decision to expand their practice outside Britain may have had economic roots: they may have believed there were more opportunities abroad than at home and in the event the Canadian office did prove much more prosperous than the London office, but they were always careful to advertise the two offices as part of the same partnership and company. During his early years in Montreal Taylor sent designs of his Canadian projects to the English main architectural journals. This clearly served as advertising, but it also underlined the colonial extension of the firm and the relationship that Taylor believed should be maintained between Britain and her colonies, or perhaps an opinion that Britain ignored her dominions too easily. This is also demonstrated in his belief that the Royal Institute of British Architects should have a greater presence in Canada. In a letter dated 15<sup>th</sup> January 1890, Taylor wrote to the Secretary of the Royal Institute, inquiring 'whether you have any representatives here or not. Should there not be one in the great Dominion?'<sup>6</sup>

The choice of Canada, but more specifically Montreal, as the location of Taylor and Gordon's 'colonial' office seems to have been made on the basis of Taylor's family connections there. His uncle was George Drummond, a wealthy member of Montreal's Anglo-Scot community. In 1883, Drummond was Director of the Bank of Montreal, a company that became an important patron of Taylor and Gordon from the very start of their Canadian venture. Taylor also quickly received domestic commissions from his extended family in Montreal and also from McGill University, whose main benefactors included Taylor's cousins. Thus filial connections were clearly important to some of the men who emigrated from Scotland to Canada. Taylor is the only example with known connections in Canada, although there are examples of men who moved with their families to the 'great Dominion'. In these circumstances, it may be that the family already had links in Canada, or that the move was a result of family responsibility rather than a professional desire for expansion.

Another motive that could have been influential, which is linked to this filial suggestion, is friendship. In the case of the three McDonald Professors of Architecture at McGill University friendships played an important part in the process of appointment. The Principal of McGill University during the period of the appointments of Stewart H Capper, Percy E Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair was Principal Peterson, whose close friend was the Professor of Fine Art at the University of Edinburgh, George Baldwin Brown. When seeking to appoint a Professor of Architecture Peterson applied to his friend in Edinburgh for recommendations. In a letter written to Peterson on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1903, Baldwin Brown sympathises over the loss of Capper, but is able to immediately suggest a possible candidate for the Chair:

Dear Peterson,  
I am sorry you are losing Capper, but I suppose the attraction of the Old Country proved too strong for him. It does not seem easy to fill posts of this kind, as the younger generation of architects in this country at any rate, take little interest in the historical and theoretical side of architecture, and are all for the practical and 'up to date'. One very clever young fellow, an MA of Edinburgh and distinguished in his professional studies, consulted me about going in for Manchester [the post that Capper resigned from McGill to accept], but I rather dissuaded him as I thought his professional course too promising. He might feel drawn towards Montreal and I can sound him in the matter.

This 'clever young fellow' was Percy Nobbs who in the event did succeed to the vacated chair. Following in this path, Nobbs later recommended his friend Ramsay Traquair as his own successor. Upon his decision to resign the Chair of Architecture, Nobbs wrote to Traquair's mother informing her of the upcoming vacancy and recommended that her son, and his friend, should apply for the post. In a reply to Nobbs, dated 5<sup>th</sup> August 1912, Traquair opens the correspondence with the following: 'My mother has shown me your letter suggesting that I might apply for your Chair at McGill University. It is very kind of you to suggest'.<sup>7</sup>

Connections, be they personal or professional, certainly seem to be the greatest influence on migration to Canada from Scotland. A former assistant of Capper's, Francis Foster, emigrated to Montreal in 1908. Capper was settled in

Manchester by this date, but is it possible that he advised Foster on his choice of country and city? Similarly, Andrew Sharp, a former assistant of the Glasgow architect John James Burnet seems to have benefited from personal links between Scotland and Canada. His first employer in Montreal, Robert Findlay, was also an ex-employee of Burnet and Son. Was this a mere coincidence? Connections of a similar kind can be traced throughout the men and the decades: two assistants in the Montreal practice of Edward & William S Maxwell, Alexander Wright and James Roxburgh Smith, had been classmates at Glasgow School of Art and had also worked in the office of Clark and Bell in Glasgow, arriving in the Canadian metropolis in 1903 and 1904 respectively. Similarly, Andrew Martin followed Andrew Sharp to Montreal in 1901, and like Sharp had worked for Burnet and Campbell. On this occasion they did not work in the same Canadian practice, but the Burnet bond does raise some interesting questions. When examining the group of men closely, it becomes increasingly probable that friendships formed at home may have been the greatest factor that inspired young architects to leave Scotland; it would have been possible after all for friends to find positions for one another. It is perhaps significant that sixteen of these architects were all graduates of the Glasgow School of Art, and many would have been classmates: seven architects who emigrated to Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century were contemporaries at the school of art. The availability of work must have been a serious consideration too however.

There is little surviving evidence distinguishing between the architects who went to Canada to take-up positions and those who travelled in optimistic hope of finding work when they arrived. It is believed that Alfred Lochhead accepted a position as an assistant in the Montreal office of Ross and MacDonald whilst still in Glasgow.<sup>9</sup> It is also recorded that William Ferguson immigrated to Toronto after being offered a position by the Toronto architect John Lyle.<sup>10</sup> Similarly in 1900 Andrew Sharp was employed as head assistant in the office of Robert Findlay, and it seems unlikely that such a senior position would become conveniently vacant upon Sharp's arrival, suggesting that some prior arrangements had been made. There is certainly some evidence to suggest that a few of the architects may have moved to take up confirmed contracts. For some this was clearly a significant factor, demonstrating that not all Scots are the adventurous entrepreneurs some history books would have us believe.

It is evident from Traquair's letters to Nobbs that he was becoming increasingly frustrated with the position in Edinburgh but it is equally explicit that these frustrations were not enough to incite thoughts of migration. In one letter he mentions that he 'may be asked to take charge of the Architectural School here next year. This is not a very good job, not enough in it but I should feel bound to accept unless I had very good prospects elsewhere.'<sup>11</sup> Traquair was clearly not one of the adventurous, entrepreneurial Scots and that he only made the move once his position as Professor of Architecture was confirmed. There were, however, those men who did seem to travel with an optimistic hope of employment rather than a promise of a job. One architect records that he left Glasgow in June 1906 and twelve days later arrived in Montreal, finding a position in the office of Ross & MacFarlane soon after.<sup>12</sup>

This step may seem like a venture into the unknown, but the architect in question, T D Rankin, was a graduate of the Glasgow School of Art and as already mentioned quite a high proportion of the men who travelled from Scotland to Canada post-1900 were all trained at the Art School. Therefore, it is likely that Rankin left Glasgow filled with optimistic hope of finding a job having heard of the success of fellow alumni.

This brief, cursory glimpse into the group of men who moved from Scotland to Canada does indicate that friendships, first and foremost, seemed to propel thoughts of migration in the minds of these young architects. This personal hue to the architectural connections between the two countries is interesting, at least to the author, because it gives a different dimension to the concept of imperialism and the activities of Empire. Yes, it was because of the imperial relationship between the two countries that such connections existed but what is intriguing is that in this case the migration of these men appears to have been based upon friendship rather than independent decisions made by individuals or as part of an imperialist policy from Whitehall.

#### NOTES

1. For a discussion of the general trends of migration from Britain to other countries, as well as the figures referred to in this article see chapter 6, 'Populating the Empire: Overseas Migration', in A Thompson, *Imperial Britain. The Empire in British Politics c.1880-1932*, Harlow, 2000, pp. 133-156

2. *ibid.* p.136
3. *ibid.* p.136
4. Quoted from T. H. Hardman, *A Parliament of the Press. The First Imperial Press Conference, 1909*, p.226, cited in A. Thompson, *Imperial Britain, 2000*, p.138
5. Letter from R S Lorimer to P E Nobbs, 19<sup>th</sup> August 1909, McGill University, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, Percy E Nobbs Archive, Box 13: Private Correspondence, File F13-7, R S Lorimer Correspondence 1904-1924
6. Letter from Andrew T Taylor to William White, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1890, Royal Institute of British Architects, LC/31/1/15
7. Principal Peterson Papers, RG2, C22, 2221D (68) - Faculty of Architecture 1903-1913, McGill University, University Archives
8. Letter from Ramsay Traquair to Percy Nobbs, 5<sup>th</sup> August, 1912, McGill University, John Bland Canadian Architecture Centre, Percy E Nobbs Archives, McGill University Correspondence, Box 6, File B6-3
9. I am grateful to Professor David Walker for this information. Professor Walker was a personal friend of Alfred Lochhead and on occasion they discussed his time in Canada.
10. Ferguson's partner, James Govan, noted in his obituary of his colleague that he went to Canada 'at the invitation of the late John M Lyle, FRAIC, Toronto.' J. Govan, 'William Moncreiff Ferguson' in *Journal of the RAIC*, Vol. 33, No. 6, June 1956, p.241
11. Letter from Ramsay Traquair to Percy Nobbs, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1912, McGill University, John Bland Canadian Architecture Centre, Percy E Nobbs Archives, Box 6 McGill University Correspondence, File B6-3
12. *Memoirs of T D Rankin*, January 1952, p. 1, National Archives of Canada, Archives of Public Works, MG30 B115