

Review

The rise of a boy called Moccasin Mouth

IT'S HARD to avoid the long shadow of Lord Beaverbrook, the legendary press baron who founded the Sunday Express, in the centre of Fredericton, the capital of the Canadian province where he grew up.

On one side of the city's Main Street is the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, which he founded, a gallery boasting the sort of masterpieces that would be the envy of a city 10 times the size.

Next door to it is the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel, the best place in town to stay, while just across the road is the Fredericton Playhouse, which was, you guessed it, paid for by his largesse. Indeed, the great man's shadow looms so large over New Brunswick's little capital that locals sometimes jokingly refer to it as Beaverbrookville.

A true force of nature, Beaverbrook was a millionaire by the time he was 25, a Knight of the Garter by 30 and a peer of the realm by the age of 38 and was soon the acknowledged First Lord of Fleet Street too. As if that wasn't enough, he went on to play a key role in both World Wars, helping to ensure eventual Allied victory.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some members of the upper classes, jealous of his success, took against a man they condescendingly branded a "pushy colonial upstart" while the author Evelyn Waugh reputedly based the Brideshead Revisited character Rex Mottram upon "that little Canadian adventurer". On the other hand, the mass of ordinary people had nothing but admiration for the colourful tycoon.

What shaped this most remarkable of individuals and just who was the man behind the myth? Born Max Aitken in Maple, Ontario, in 1879, he was one of six children of Scottish Presbyterian minister Alexander Aitken.

A year later his family moved to Newcastle, a town of 10,000 in New Brunswick (on Canada's Atlantic coast), the province he would always regard as his home.

It was a not altogether happy childhood. Laughs were few and far between in the austere manse where he grew up under the watchful eye of a father who "looked and sounded like God," historian John Copp tells me when we meet at Beaverbrook's old childhood home, which has been turned into a museum.

Max attended the nearby Harkins Academy. At 11, he published his own newspaper at school, showing an early love for the newspaper business. Typically, his God-fearing father did not approve of the venture.

Furthermore, to his father's disappointment, he was no great scholar, flunked his university exams and was obviously not cut out for a career in the church. "It seemed that he could do nothing to win his father's approval," says Copp.

In an act of rebellion against his strict Presbyterian upbringing, the teenage Max would go down to the River Miramichi with some of his friends and share a bottle of rum, says Darrell Mesheau, a specialist New Brunswick tour guide.

"He would also engage colourful local characters, be it woodsmen or Crimean War veterans, in



LOCAL HERO: Lord Beaverbrook cuts a cake in Newcastle, New Brunswick, in 1954, with two girls dressed as Express Crusaders, above; Max as a boy, circa 1890, below; and a portrait from 1960 taken by Lord Snowden, right



conversation and listen to their stories about the world," says writer David Adams Richards, who grew up just a few streets away.

However, what the young man might lack in academic prowess, he more than made up for in his get-up-and-go attitude to life. Dubbed "Moccasin Mouth" owing to the size of his mouth, both literally and metaphorically, at 15 he left school determined to make his way in the world, regardless of whether or not his teachers or father thought he would ever make a success of his life.

Taking a ferry from Newcastle to nearby Chatham, he spotted the owner of Tweedie's, a law firm, on a ferry and begged him for job. The lawyer was amused by the young man's nerve and gave him a position as a clerk.

While there he befriended Richard Bedford Bennett, a lawyer who would go on to become the

Conservative Prime Minister of Canada in the Thirties before retiring to Britain, and a man who became a substitute father figure.

"Throughout his life, Max displayed an eagerness to be accepted by older men and Bennett was the first, and arguably most important, father figure that he would seek out," says Richards.

AT 17 he ran Bennett's first political campaign, getting him elected to the provincial legislature and winning a powerful friend for life.

Soon afterwards Bennett headed west to the Prairies. Max followed, for a time helping to run a bowling alley before being drawn back to the Maritimes (Canada's Atlantic provinces), selling



Picture: SNOWDON

everything from insurance to typewriters. "He proved to be a natural salesman," says Copp.

Another chance meeting would then change his life. Travelling on a train to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Max found himself sitting opposite John Stairs, the owner of the city's Union Bank and one of the most powerful businessmen in the Maritimes.

Undaunted, Moccasin Mouth tried to sell the businessman a typewriter and, despite his failure to close this particular sale, Stairs recognised young Max as the real deal, says Richards: "The old man took a shine to him and hired him as his personal secretary and introduced him to the world of corporate enterprise."

Within a few months Max had the chance to prove himself when, as he put it in My Early Life, Stairs told him to "steal a bank". In other words, see if a rival bank could be

mother country, before or since. In 1916, the year he bought the Daily Express, he also helped put Lloyd George into 10 Downing Street and was made Minister of Information, in a bid to raise Allied morale during the First World War.

With the end of the conflict, he turned his attention back to his newspapers and the Sunday Express would go on to sell ever more copies, reaching a circulation high of 4.4 million. By 1936 the Daily Express had become the biggest-circulation daily newspaper in the world.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, Churchill made Max his Minister of Aircraft Production. Fighter and bomber production rocketed, helping the RAF triumph over the Luftwaffe and winning him the everlasting gratitude of the nation.

HOWEVER, for all his success, the fabulously wealthy tycoon never forgot his roots. In fact, he positively embraced them.

On being made a peer in 1917, he had taken the title Lord Beaverbrook after the local Beaver Brook, where he had gone fishing as a boy. He loved to regale world leaders with stories of his Canadian childhood. "If anything, his fondness for the province of his youth, which he would visit every Fall, only grew stronger with each passing year," says Copp.

In his latter years, he focused ever more energy on "giving something back" to the Canadian province in which he had grown up.

He built the Playhouse Theatre in Fredericton and provided lavish endowments for the city's university and also built an ice rink, library and community hall in Newcastle, New Brunswick. He also set up pension funds for the province's cash-strapped church ministers and paid for repairs to many churches. "Being the son of a manse, he always held the Church in high regard and half the churches in the province probably benefited from his generosity in some way," says Mesheau.

Perhaps most impressively, he funded the building of the lavish Beaverbrook Art Gallery, which boasts priceless works by such artists as Salvador Dali and Lucian Freud.

Touchingly, Beaverbrook never forgot his childhood friends in Newcastle and every month he would send "drinking cheques" to a handful of old buddies such as "Big Foot White", who he would see on his annual pilgrimages back home.

In the Fifties the province decided to honour the man who had given it so much and announced plans for a statue of him in Fredericton, with children contributing toward it cost.

On the press baron's death in 1964, aged 85, his ashes were placed in the plinth of a bust of him erected in Newcastle's town square, and hundreds of people gave the local boy-made-good a touching final send-off.

"The great thing about Beaverbrook, is that he never forgot his roots or the province and people that had made him the man he was," says Copp. "That's why he'll always be remembered here with such affection."



COLONIAL BEGINNINGS: Schoolboy Max (back row, second left) with fellow students at Harkins Academy in Newcastle, New Brunswick, in 1893

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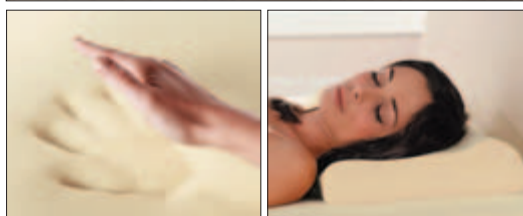
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