



EARL GREY SCHOOL
340 COCKBURN STREET NORTH

Historical Buildings Committee

June 30, 1980

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Manitoba's education system churned through a great deal of change in the first two decades of this century. The country itself was undergoing fundamental changes induced by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who followed the cry of free land. These settlers, many of whom spoke no English, poured into the west at a time when Canadian's pride in their role in the British Empire reached its peak. The sense of Empire pervaded Canadian institutions and there was open admiration for and adoption of British methods.

Manitobans had traditionally placed a strong emphasis on the education of their young people, in part because of the values of the early Scottish Presbyterian settlers. Both private and public schools had received a great deal of attention during the School Question of 1891, and interest in the education system was sustained over the years by the new problems facing the schools; the digestion and assimilation of the thousands of new Canadian students.

Western societies were in the throes of an enlightenment, of which free education and women's suffrage were integral parts. Both the vote for women and a sound education of all children were seen as a panacea for the monstrous ills plaguing the industrialized societies. The British Minister of Education spoke of his faith in the education process:

[Education] enables men and women to escape from the oppression of a difficult and sometimes sordid life into regions of pure enjoyment: it dispels the hideous clouds of class suspicion, and softens the asperities of faction...This view of education is an end in itself as one of the constituent elements of human happiness.¹

Sharing this view of progress, and a definite concept of Empire, was James Bertram Mitchell, Winnipeg's Architect and Commissioner of School Buildings and Supplies from 1892 to 1928. J.B. Mitchell was born in Gananoque, Ontario, the son of Scottish immigrants. He joined the Canadian militia as a teenager to fight in the Fenian raids and then left the military in 1870 for training in architecture at the Montreal Art Institute.² In 1873, Sir John A. Macdonald's government created the

North West Mounted Police, forerunners of the RCMP, to give the west a permanent peace-keeping force and to formalize Canada's claim to the north-west. J.B. Mitchell signed up immediately, at the age of 21, and was a member of the first famous march of the NWMP across the prairie west.³

In the summer of 1874, men, horses, cattle and equipment moved across the prairies in one long line, reaching destinations in Fort Edmonton and Fort Whoop-up with a tattered troop and half-starved animals. Treaties were signed with the Indians on behalf of the "great white mother" and the foundations of Empire were solidly laid.⁴ It was an exciting time for the young men, and certainly a formative experience for Mitchell.

He left the service in 1877 to live in Manitoba. The troops had passed through Winnipeg in 1874, and Mitchell had marked it as a chance for opportunity. In 1888, J.B. Mitchell was elected to the City School Board and four years later, he was appointed as the Architect and Commissioner of School Buildings. In this capacity, he designed or supervised the construction of 48 school buildings worth over \$8,000,000 when he resigned in 1928.⁵ His best designs include the old St. John's and Kelvin high schools, Dufferin, Somerset, Norquay, Greenway, Isbister, LaVerendrye, King Edward, Lord Selkirk and Earl Grey schools.⁶

In these ventures, Mitchell was guided and supported by a like-minded partner, Dr. Daniel McIntyre, the Superintendent of Schools. A sincere and earnest educator, McIntyre repeatedly stressed the need for a fundamental and universal education of all young Canadians.⁷ Illiteracy and anarchy went hand in hand, and it was the duty of the government to provide the best for its schools. He preached to a province that was young, vigorous and vibrant and the public's response to the superintendent's prompting was generally positive. As a result, J.B. Mitchell was given a broad mandate and the results were quite distinctive. Winnipeg grew to receive national recognition for the quality of its school system and for its large number of well-constructed school buildings.⁸ Progress in the rural areas followed, but of course the schools were not designed by Mitchell.

J.B. Mitchell took his public office seriously, and did a great deal of comparative research on other school systems in the United States and Britain.⁹ He saw children as a raw resource, and schools as

a medium for training those who were soon to guide the destiny of the country. It was to everyone's advantage to develop the physical and intellectual potential of all children, naturally at the taxpayer's expense. Moreover (and in keeping with the popular view) he likened children to delicate flowers that could be nurtured through proper heating, ventilation, sanitation and ample sunlight; the physical environment over which man, through the use of technology, now had complete control.

The expense which attended the building of such environment was a sacrifice Canadians should make willingly. In Mitchell's own words

There is nothing too good for the children, and it should be known, appreciated, and remembered by every parent in this Dominion that education is more important than good streets, roads or sidewalks, and more public money should be spent to thoroughly equip the children for the battle of life, than is now being devoted for that purpose.¹⁰

J.B. Mitchell retired from the School Board in 1929. During World War I, he had fought with the 100th Winnipeg Grenadiers in the rank of Colonel. When he died in 1945, he was the only surviving member of the original NWMP force. In 1956, J.B. Mitchell School was opened in his honour and from the opening ceremonies we can gauge the impact of the man's legacy in Winnipeg. On the platform for the event were the Chairman of the School Board, the Minister of Education, the Superintendent of Schools, the Mayor, the Assistant Commissioner of the RCMP, the Commanding Officer of the Grenadiers, Senator John Haig and Mrs. J.B. Mitchell.¹¹

Earl Grey School, designed by J.B. Mitchell, was constructed in 1914. It is a massive three-storey brick structure with a raised foundation and a dormered attic. It was named for Canada's governor-general, Earl Grey, a popular man who held the office from 1904 to 1911 and gave his name to several trophies and awards across the country. The design of the school, like most of Mitchell's other schools, is not original but rather loosely based on the British example of the Board School. These were a large series of massive red brick buildings erected throughout England from 1870 to 1900, all more or less of a similar design and layout. The public schools were also carried in a time

of educational enlightenment and the style itself captured the imagination of the public and became an immediately recognizable symbol of this "enlightenment".¹² Pioneered by such architects as Basil Champneys and E.R. Robson, the distinctive style came to be known as 'Queen Anne'. The schools were generally three storeys high in order to maximize the site and provide for a school-ground. They featured Flemish gables for the dormers with small-paned sashes. Decoration was kept to a minimum cost by means of "pilaster strips, raised panels of brickwork, and colour contrasts between brown stock bricks, red brick dressings, and white woodwork; round arched arcades...and the occasional extravagance was a panel of ornament in moulded brick or terracotta", the date and initials of the school board.¹³ An H-shaped plan was preferred to maximize natural daylight and provide for cross-ventilation. The buildings were handsome, solid and gave the impression of great stability. Earl Grey School, as most of Mitchell's other designs, was identical to this description.

Non-matching towers, Flemish gables with tiny lights, arched entrances and light wells, and H-shape and contrasted brick and stone combine in an eclectic collage of styles. Under a small pediment on each tower are stone emblems inscribed "The Maple Leaf our Emblem Dear" and "God Save Our Gracious King". The effect of the style is the same as the Board Schools in England: a symbol of stability and enlightenment.

Earl Grey Elementary School set out to bring this symbol to life. Under the direction of its ambitious principal, J.S. Little, the school developed some innovative programs and special departments. Particular emphasis had been given to training in practical work, in "home-making" for the girls and industrial shops for the boys in an effort to link the academic exercises of the classroom to the concrete endeavours of life.¹⁴ Many of the farm children had found the curriculum irrelevant and may have only reached Grade Four or Five when they reached the legal age for compulsory school attendance. The war had created a labour shortage that also swayed children from the schools. Indeed, three-quarters of the children in the schools were under the age of 14 and it became so bad that by 1916, 94.1% of all pupils were in elementary school with only 5.9% in the high schools.¹⁵

In an effort to bridge that gap, a new arrangement of grades was proposed so that elementary school would include grades one to six, junior high include grades seven, eight and nine and senior high up to grade twelve. This new junior high would offer the students some adoptive areas of study, give them more specialized attention and generally maintain their interest in higher education. Earl Grey School was chosen for this experiment and became the first junior high school in Canada in 1919.

The experiment was clearly a success and in 1920-21, several more junior high school classes were instituted in Winnipeg,¹⁶ and within ten years, the system was used across the country.

There continued to be an elementary school in Earl Grey, but the younger children were separated in wing from the junior high. An integral part of the junior high experiment was the use of rotating classes so specialized facilities were in use throughout the day. The students moved to an Art Room, a History Room and a Literature Room, all with specialized equipment.¹⁶

Earl Grey School made a special name for itself in the field of history, drama, sports and music. One of the teachers helped to establish Manitoba's Annual Music Festival, and the school had received awards for its choral work. Several former students have become quite prominent in various fields. Earl Grey at one time boasted both signatures on Canadian dollar bills, were signed by its former students, James E. Coyne, former governor of the Bank of Canada and Robert E. Beattie, the deputy governor.¹⁷

The area around the school developed as a middle class area in the decade of 1910. It has remained a vibrant area, with a large influx of ethnic groups over the last 30 years. A new gymnasium has been added to the west end of the school and there is a full city block of open community club around the school.

Footnotes--

1. Quoted in "Report of the Deputy Minister and Superintendent of Education", Department of Education, 1916-17, p. 17.
2. K.M. Haig Colonel J.B. Mitchell, For Whom a Winnipeg School is named, published by Mrs. J.B. Mitchell, 1957, p. 3.
3. Winnipeg Telegram, 30 November, 1912.
4. Carlyle Allison "The Corner Cupboard", Tribune 14 December, 1957.
5. Haig, op. cit., p. 26.
6. "Winnipeg's School Building" Construction, November, 1909, p. 64-69. Also, Construction, November 1910, p. 86.
7. See reports to the Department of Education Sessional Papers, in particular 1918-19.
8. "Winnipeg's School Building", op. cit., p. 65.
9. Loc. cit.
10. Ibid., p. 67.
11. "The J.B. Mitchell School" Free Press, 11 October, 1956.
12. Mark Girouard Sweetness and Light The 'Queen Anne' Movement 1860-1900 Oxford Press, 1977, p. 64.
13. Ibid., p. 69.
14. "Report of Dr. Daniel McIntyre", Department of Education, Sessional Papers 1916, p. 247.
15. Ibid., 1916-17, p. 11.
16. George Florence "Canada's First Junior High School (A Centennial Memory Among Winnipeggers), n.d., vertical files, Provincial Library.
17. "Fort Rouge Through the Years" Souvenir Booklet, Winnipeg 1974, p. 10.

APPENDIX A

The building permit for Earl Grey School. Permit #2244 July 3, 1914, for a school on the west side of Fleet between Helen [now Cockburn] and Garwood.

Architect: J.B. Mitchell
Builder: W.M. Scott and Co.
114' frontage to a depth of 164'
Cost of \$7,559.00
90 cords of stone
1,000,000 bricks
9,000 superficial square yards of plaster
1,000 cubic yards of concrete
Concrete joists on a concrete slab.

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Plate 1 – Earl Grey School, the main entrance, east façade, ca.1938. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – Earl Grey School group with Oldfield, Kirby and Gardner Shield, June 10, 1931. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection #1576.)

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Plate 3 – Taken from the roof of Earl Grey School in 1915. The area is developing with large, frame houses. A greenhouse can be seen in the centre from the days when the area was a pasture (arrow). (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)