

Heritage Warrior

by *Daphne Sleigh*, author of *The Man who Saved Vancouver: Major James Skitt Matthews*

OF ALL THE REMARKABLE CHARACTERS who took the stage in the civic life of 20th-century Vancouver, Major James Skitt Matthews was one of the most colourful—and also one of the most significant. Some have called him “the city’s saviour.” A saviour? Yes, in the sense that it was Matthews who saved the city’s history from oblivion; saved it when no one else was taking action; saved it in the face of apathy, indifference and outright opposition. The great achievement of his life was his triumph in founding the City Archives of Vancouver, which opened officially in 1933.

Matthews came out of nowhere when he landed in Vancouver in 1898, a youth of twenty with no money, no contacts and no obvious prospects. He was born in Wales, but when he was nine his parents emigrated to New Zealand with the idea of running a large sheep farm. Many things went wrong for them; they uprooted again and sailed for South America, leaving the teenage James behind to fend for himself. He quickly found consolation in the form of pretty little Maud Boscawen, and soon the couple were secretly engaged. Since her aristocratic father had always disapproved so strongly of young James, life in New Zealand seemed out of the question. James headed for North America, sent for Maud as soon as he was able, and they married in Vancouver in 1899.

In Vancouver he soon found a steady job with Imperial Oil, rising from the junior position of clerk to that of an accountant and sales manager. But his passionate interest outside his working hours was his life in the militia. He joined the Duke of Connaught’s Own Rifles in 1904, and this became his great enthusiasm—the parades, the camps, and above all, the history and tradition of the regiment. He swiftly acquired the position of regimental historian, and this was the beginning of his other life as an archivist and compulsive collector.

Gradually he amassed an unwieldy accumulation of antiquities and “relics,” as he liked to call them. He did not restrict himself to documentary records, for he was attracted to any item of historical interest, and since he was collecting for the regiment as well as himself, it also included old military uniforms, badges, weapons, and so forth.

Opposite

Major James S. Matthews poses proudly in his Duke of Connaught uniform. The “Major” served as the City of Vancouver’s archivist from 1933 until his death in 1970 at the age of 92.

Below

A bronze sculpture of the Major’s beloved wife, Emily, along with one of the old warrior himself, Major Matthews, are on display in the city’s archives.



With the First World War his enjoyable times in the Beatty Street Drill Hall were soon transformed into the harsh reality of frontline warfare. He enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and in the last months of the Battle of the Somme he received a severe head injury, which left him permanently deaf in one ear. His active service was over. He returned home, but on the day of his arrival Maud told him she was leaving him for another man.

After the divorce James married again to Emily Edwardes, a nurse who had served courageously overseas in the war. This was to be a most compatible marriage, in which Emily gave James all the affection and support which this prickly character so badly needed.

But the 1920s were troubling times for James. One of the great sorrows of his life was the loss of his much loved youngest son, Hugh, who met sudden death in an elevator accident at the office where he worked for the Robertson-Goodson Co. Ltd. in 1922. This was a traumatic bereavement for James. He began to experience a sense of emptiness in his career. He had left Imperial Oil after the war and was now trying various forms of commercial enterprise, but with little feeling of fulfilment. Suddenly an idea came to him: he would turn his leisure pursuit of collecting into a serious avocation.

First he offered to set up a Vancouver archives as a branch of the Provincial Archives in Victoria, but the provincial budget would not allow of this. He had to settle for starting out informally as an unpaid amateur archivist, working in a shabby attic of the Vancouver Public Library. It took four years of heavy networking before he could finally steamroller the Vancouver City Council into creating an archives department and appointing him as a salaried city archivist. Only the powerful personality of Major Matthews could have achieved such a result at the height of the Great Depression.

Once ensconced in City Hall, he presided over the Archives like a benevolent dictator, doing exactly as he pleased, ignoring his budget, commissioning photos and paintings, making up the rules as he went along. He irritated the bureaucrats, but the public loved his forthright style, and he also had the affectionate support of many high-ranking civic leaders, who understood the value of his work. He worked with a consuming energy, often writing up his histories until far into the night. If it were not for Major Matthews we would not have the seven volumes of Early Vancouver, the interviews with Chief Khatsahlano or the map of historic native sites. We would not



The Robertson-Goodson Co. Ltd., a plumbing supply facility located on Beatty Street south of the Sun Tower and immediately north of the Beatty Street Drill Hall, was the scene of the tragic elevator accident that claimed the life of the Major's son Hugh.

have the hundreds of documents, photos, paintings and plans that constitute the Matthews Collection which researchers consult to this day.

Councils came and went; but Matthews stayed firm, whether he offended authority or not. Efforts to induce him to retire, once he was over eighty, proved useless. He died at the age of ninety-two, still the City Archivist of Vancouver, in charge of his beloved archives.