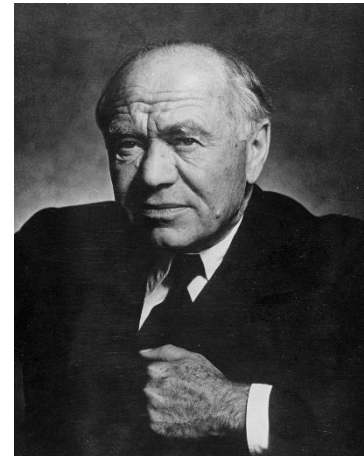


ONE OF THE GREAT MEN OF FLEET STREET

Ewart John Robertson (1892-1960)

In the course of a 1913-14 business trip back to Canada, Sir William Maxwell 'Max' Aitken (1879-1964), soon to become Lord Beaverbrook¹, fell into conversation with, and was much impressed by, a Galt, Ontario², hotel bell-boy, Ewart John Robertson. Little suspecting, perhaps, that he would ever see Robertson again, Aitken offered the 22-year-old a job, should he ever find himself in London, England.

Max Aitken, the man who would shape Robertson's life, was born at Maple, Ontario³, but moved with his parents and nine siblings to Newcastle, New Brunswick in 1880. At the age of 13 he set up a school newspaper and was soon the local correspondent for the *St. John Daily Star*. Having failed the Dalhousie University entrance examination, at age 16 he moved to Chatham, New Brunswick, where he worked as local correspondent for the *Montreal Star* while selling insurance and bonds. Within a few years Aitken became a junior partner in the Royal Securities Corporation. In 1900 he made his way to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and, becoming General Manager of Royal Securities, engineered a number of successful business deals and bank mergers. In 1904 Aitken acquired control of the company, moved its headquarters to Montreal and developed business interests in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Publishing remained close to his heart, however, and he started a weekly magazine, the *Canadian Century* in 1910, invested in the *Montreal Herald*, and tried, but failed, to acquire the *Montreal Gazette*. In 1907 he founded the Montreal Engineering Company, in 1909 founded the Calgary Power Company Limited, and in a few years acquired a number of small regional cement plants across Canada and amalgamated them into Canada Cement. Well before his 30th birthday, Max Aitken was a very very rich man.



*Lord Beaverbrook
Max Aitken, 1879-1964*

In 1910, while raising funds for a steel company venture, Aitken visited England and decided to move to London. He was friends with New Brunswick native Andrew Bonar Law, the only Canadian to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and later the same year was, himself, elected to British House of Commons. While serving as a member of parliament, Aitken began to build a British newspaper empire. In 1911, he invested in the failing *Daily Express* and soon gained control of another London evening paper, *The Globe*. In the same year he was knighted by King George V. When Aitken met hotel porter Robertson, he was back in Canada liquidating most of his Canadian investments and completing his move to England.

¹ 1st Baron Beaverbrook.

² Another version of the story, by Collie Knox (1899-1977), places the meeting at the Queen's Hotel, Montreal.

³ Near Vaughan & Richmond Hill, north of Toronto.

Ewart John Robertson was born August 19, 1892 at Lanark, Ontario, the eldest of six children⁴ born to Robert William Robertson (1865-1933) and Mary Barrie (1865-1934). Known as 'E.J.' or 'Robbie', he was educated at Lanark's Primary and Continuation School and, when he met Aitken, was working as a bell-hop to fund his studies at the University of Toronto.

Robertson graduated with a Bachelor's degree in 1914 but still listed his occupation as 'student' when he enlisted in the army at Toronto on February 22, 1915. Posted as a Private to the 19th Canadian Infantry Battalion (4th Infantry Brigade, 2nd Division, Canadian Expeditionary Force) he arrived in England in mid-May 1915 and reached France on September 14, 1915.

Four months later, while serving near La Clayette, Robertson fell ill with kidney stones and was hospitalized in France and England from mid-January through mid-March 1916. While undergoing treatment at London, Robertson re-connected with Max Aitken and it was arranged that, when Robertson was discharged from hospital, he would be sent "*on command for duty at Sir M. Aitken's office*".⁵

In January 1916 the Canadian Government had placed Aitken in charge of creating the Canadian War Records Office (CWRO) and the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF) in London. Aitken established those institutions with his own money but did so while serving at the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Canadian Army. Aitken had apparently used his military rank to pluck Robertson from the regular army and have him assigned, initially, as 'Superintendent's Clerk' at the CWRO.⁶ In keeping with Aitken's regard for him, and with his expanding responsibilities, on July 27, 1916 Robertson was promoted to Acting Sergeant and then, on December 13th, commissioned a Temporary Honorary Lieutenant in the Canadian Army.

Robertson was again briefly in hospital in June 1916 for treatment of syphilis and, a few months later, in mid-August 1916, was re-admitted to hospital, diagnosed with Cerebral Meningitis. By the end of 1916 Robertson was dangerously ill. On December 6th the Lanark Era reported;

*The following cablegram from the records office was received by Mr. R. W. Robertson. "55095, Sergt. Ewart J. Robertson, 19th Battalion, now Canadian War Records, condition improved, not yet out of danger, in Fulham Military Hospital, Hammersmith". Private advices have also been received confirming the first report that Ewart was ill with spinal meningitis.*⁷

Through the early months of 1917 Robertson improved, however. He was discharged as fit for duty in March 1917 and returned to his duties at the CWRO.

⁴ His siblings were Edith Craig (1895-1984), Claire Elizabeth (b.1897), Jean McLaren (b.1900), and Robert Barry (b.1902).

⁵ Orders of April 7, 1916.

⁶ Aitken's intervention seems to have pre-empted Robertson's nomination to a Cadet Battalion for an 18-week officers' training course.

⁷ Robertson's *Ottawa Citizen* obituary says that he was wounded while serving in WWI, but it seems more likely that this refers to his having contracted meningitis.

Although Max Aitken was in official command of the CWRO and CWMF, he continued to pursue his own entrepreneurial and political activities. In November 1916 he took controlling interest of the *Daily Express*, while simultaneously serving as a member of parliament, and then, from February 1918, Minister of Information and a Privy Counsellor until his resignation due to ill health in October 1918.

From the time he joined the CWRO in 1916, and then, from May 1918, when he worked at its office in France, E. J. Robertson assumed ever increasing levels of responsibility ensuring that the CWRO and CWMF successfully publicized Canada's role in the war, in Canadian and British newspapers, and gathered and created records documenting that effort. Photographers, filmmakers, and artists were sent to the front. The official war art program alone employed 120 artists who created nearly 1,000 works of art. Several of the painters were future members of the Group of Seven; A.Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley, and Arthur Lismer. Many examples of the CWRO/CWMF output are now in the collection of the Canadian War Museum at Ottawa.



'A Copse, Evening', by A.Y. Jackson (1918)
Canadian War Museum Collection

Ill health continued to plague Robertson. From July through September 1918 he was back in hospital, receiving treatment for suspected Typhoid Fever. In April 1919 he was again treated for syphilis, and then hospitalized at London from July until he was invalided home to Canada via *HMAT Aruguay* in August 1919. When he was admitted to Kingston General Hospital records show that he was “50 lbs underweight” and suffering from “*insomnia, vomiting, anorexia, and a rash*”. Doctors noted that the illness appeared to have begun in June 1919, three days after a sixth injection of ‘Salvarsan’⁸, a medication for the treatment of syphilis. On November 8, 1919 the medical officer at Kingston recommended “*discharge as medically unfit with pensionable disability ... Nervous debility*”.⁹



In January 1917 Max Aitken received a peerage and became 1st Baron Beaverbrook. When the war ended Lord Beaverbrook concentrated his energy and investments on the media and would soon be more commonly known as the ‘Baron of Fleet Street’. Through his flagship *Daily Express*, purchased in 1916, he launched the *Sunday Express* in 1918, bought the *London Evening Standard* in 1923, acquired the *Glasgow Evening Citizen* in 1928 and, in the same year, launched the *Scottish Daily Express*.

After his discharge, E. J. Robertson joined Beaverbrook on Fleet Street. Just as he had managed much of Beaverbrook’s initiative at the CWRO/CWMF, Robertson became the steady management hand on the tiller of Beaverbrook’s expanding media empire. He joined the *Daily Express* in 1919, was appointed *Daily Express* manager in 1924, then Managing Director, and, in 1948, Chairman of the Board of Beaverbrook Newspapers Limited.

E. J. Robertson married Dorothy Kettle, at St. James Parish, Piccadilly, London, in 1922. They were the parents of three children; John R. (b.1924), Pamela (b.1926) and Prudence (b.c1928).

⁸ Aka Arspenamine or Compound 606

⁹ Although his official discharge certificate cites discharge simply as part of general demobilization.

During the Second World War Beaverbrook's attention turned once again to national affairs and management of his publishing empire was left largely in the hands of E. J. Robertson. While Beaverbrook successively served as Minister of Aircraft Production, Minister of Supply, Minister of War Production, Lord Privy Seal, and head of the Anglo-American Combined Raw Materials Board from 1942 to 1945, Robertson saw his newspapers safely through the blitz and the material and labor shortages of the war. In 1919 the circulation of the *Daily Express* had been less than 40,000 a day; at the outbreak of WWII it sold more than 2,330,000 copies a day, after the war the *Daily Express* emerged to become the largest-selling newspaper in the world, with a circulation of 3,706,000.

Collie Knox (1899-1977), a columnist for the competing *Daily Mail*, who knew Robertson well, described him as

.... cool-headed, clear-brained, utterly unpanicky and a wizard of sagacity. He is one of the few men who have been able to handle Lord Beaverbrook without kid gloves. His quiet progress through the office and his unspectacular way of getting everything done with the minimum of fuss won him general respect. He is not a talker but is always courteous and ready to listen. Not even an increasing circulation can send his circulation up. His pulse is steady through triumph and disaster. He must surely be one of Beaverbrook's best gambles. Was ever a man who had a truer or saner sense of values?¹⁰

Beaverbrook would later say that he “*carried the Daily Express to greatness with the aid of a bell-hop [Robertson] and a piano-tuner [long serving Daily Express Editor, Beverley Baxter, another Canadian and former piano salesman]*”.

Beaverbrook would outlive the bell-hop who contributed so much to building and sustaining his media empire. Ewart John Robertson suffered a stroke in 1955, retired from Beaverbrook Newspapers Limited in 1958, and died, aged 68 years, on May 5, 1960, at The Hopps, Charlwood, Surrey, England. Beaverbrook, aged 85 years, died four years later in Surrey, England.

Max Aitken Jr., Beaverbrook's heir and Robertson's successor as board chairman, remembered Robertson in an obituary published in the company's flagship paper, the *Daily Express*.

Robbie, as we affectionately called him, was Chairman ... during the critical, formative years of the Daily Express, Sunday Express and Evening Standard ... except for my father, Robbie made by far the biggest contribution towards the success of our newspapers ... His kindness, his farsightedness, and wisdom led us through bad times and good ones.

¹⁰ *It Might Have Been You*, by Collie Knox (1938).

... He was one of the great men of Fleet Street and will be remembered as such ... a man who did not court popularity. At first many must have thought that he fought shy of the intimacies, he had a shell that seemed severe and even cold ... but what a wealth of humanity and warmth lay below! And how much warmth he brought into the harsh world of affairs! ...

He was far more than the supremely able and upright man he seemed to be; far more than the steely captain of industry, dedicated to the interest of the great concern of which he was executive head ... He had humour, and a fanatical patriotism. And the admiration which he emitted at once from good judges of character and talent soon became affection. This was a great human being.

- **Ron W. Shaw (2017)**