

Prologue

to

L.D.: Mayor Louis Taylor and the Rise of Vancouver

One evening in February 1939, a reporter for the *Daily Province* newspaper came across Louis Taylor sitting alone in the lobby of the old Hotel Vancouver. It was after a political meeting at which the former prime minister of Canada, R.B. Bennett, had been the featured speaker. Bennett was retiring to England, where he would live out the rest of his life, and he had come to the West Coast to say his goodbyes. Louis Taylor was out of place at such a Conservative gathering. At eighty-two years of age, he was still embroiled in local politics where he was known for his progressive policies. Some even called him a socialist, others said he was a crook; whatever, he was the furthest thing from a Conservative. But Taylor had come along to say hello to R.B., whom he knew from his days as the city's mayor. As the reporter approached, he saw that Taylor was holding a small autograph book, and as they fell into conversation the old man showed off his collection of signatures gathered from celebrities met during a long career in public life. "In a casual way he began to yarn," said the reporter, whose name was Ronald Kenvyn, and who started to think that he might have a story.

Kenvyn suggested to Taylor, who had been mayor of Vancouver more times than anyone before or since, that the veteran politician allow him to write his "reminiscences." "Do you think they might be of interest?" Taylor asked coyly, and together they embarked on a sixteen-part series of articles which appeared in the *Province* between February 27 and March 16, 1939. In a modest way, Kenvyn became the old man's Boswell. His articles, which cover Taylor's early days in Vancouver as well as his ten years as a newspaper publisher and his eleven years as mayor, are the closest thing there is to an autobiography of Vancouver's most successful local politician.

Readers of the series in the *Province* would not have needed any introduction to Louis Denison Taylor. To most of them it must have seemed like he had been around forever. His eight terms as mayor spanned three decades of the city's history. When he arrived from Chicago in 1896, Vancouver, population barely 20,000, was still rebuilding atop the ashes of the disastrous fire that had occurred ten years earlier. Forty years later the population had grown to 250,000 people, making it the third largest city in Canada, and the tiny milltown on Burrard Inlet had become a major seaport, the economic engine of an entire province. The international airport, amalgamation of Vancouver with Point Grey and South Vancouver, the eight-hour day for civic employees, a juvenile court, the city's first planning commission, industrial development in False Creek: these were some of the initiatives that Taylor had championed during his years in government. Vancouver had grown up under his care. For many voters, their feisty mayor, with his trademark red

tie (he asked to be buried in it when he died) and the ubiquitous cigar clenched in his fist, was as emblematic of the city as Stanley Park or the North Shore mountains. As Ronald Kenvyn put it, Taylor “has certainly carved a deep niche for himself in the hall of municipal fame.” And he wasn’t finished quite yet. At the time that Kenvyn’s articles appeared, it had been four years since the old warhorse had occupied the mayor’s chair, but nine months later he would run for election again, gaining just one percent of the vote and finishing dead last. It would be his final attempt at public office.

For such a successful politician, Taylor cut an unremarkable figure in person. He was short and slight, with a grey-flecked moustache and, as he grew older, fewer and fewer strands of hair scraped across the top of a balding head. Photographs show that aside from the red tie, his usual costume consisted of a pair of round, owlsh glasses, a heavy three-piece suit, and a pair of stout leather shoes cut above the ankle. People who met him were surprised at how softspoken he was, which contrasted so dramatically with the combative politician they knew from the election platform. He had the appearance and manner of a kindly school teacher, or the bank clerk that he had been in his younger days. To everyone, friend and foe alike, he was known simply as L.D. (Denison was his mother’s maiden name.) But Taylor was no milquetoast, as his political opponents learned at their cost. He was the outspoken friend of the average voter and the implacable enemy of large corporations and other vested interests. Any campaign in which he took part was guaranteed to be a contentious one. He loved to conjure up dark intrigues by unnamed conspirators who, he charged, opposed him because he stood for the common man. As mayor, L.D. did not sit on his hands. He wanted to accomplish things, to make a difference to the city. As a result, he was never far from controversy.

Readers with long memories would have found it ironic that the Province chose to publish his reminiscences. It was the Province, after all, that had carried on a bitter war of words with L.D. over the years, opposing him in every election and doing its best to dig up fresh scandals to scuttle his chances. Questionable land deals, police corruption, extortion of favours, pandering to the city’s underworld: all these charges and more clung to L.D.’s reputation like the smell of cheap perfume. But everyone loves a fighter and, like the city he governed, L.D. was notorious for rising from the ashes. If he won more elections than any other mayor in the history of the city, he also lost more. Sixteen to be exact: once for license commissioner, four times for alderman, and eleven times for mayor. But he always bounced back, refusing to take no for an answer. Sixteen months before his death, when he was eighty-six years old, he announced that he was going to run in the next general election in Britain as a candidate for the World-Wide Political Party, an obscure group dedicated to bringing world peace by doing away with political partisanship. In the end good sense prevailed (or maybe it was poor health) and

he did not run, but even in his eighties he still had the fire in his belly. And his tenacity went beyond politics. Three times he almost died. Once, on a trip down the Parsnip River in northern B.C., his boat overturned and he had to be pulled from the freezing water. At another time, he was struck in the head by a whirling propeller at the Vancouver airport and the newspapers actually declared him dead. And then, in the summer of 1931, he was hospitalized with a mysterious ailment and had to take a sabbatical from the mayor's job while he recovered. Even when they were voting against him, Vancouverites found it difficult not to admire L.D.'s gumption.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I was born the year after Taylor died and grew up in the city he had governed for so long. Yet I did not hear his name mentioned even once until I was in my thirties. That was the first thing that intrigued me about L.D. Despite the fact that he was Vancouver's most successful politician, he is mostly forgotten in the city. There is no monument with his name on it, no biography or statue. The only landmarks are a short street at the edge of Chinatown and, because he was a supporter of the creation of Garibaldi Provincial Park, a dilapidated hikers' cabin in the alpine meadows below the Black Tusk. When I asked oldtimers about him, the most they could recall was the red tie and the cigar. The "deep niche" Kenvyn thought L.D. had carved for himself in the municipal hall of fame was empty. I wondered why. When I came across the series of articles in the Province, my interest was further roused. As presented by Kenvyn, L.D. had an appealing lack of pomposity. There was a sly twinkle to the stories he told. What's more, he was a mayor who had been proud to identify with the city's workers and to promote policies that would improve their lives. He seemed to represent a radical history that had been suppressed, or at least forgotten. At the same time, and just as appealingly, he was obviously skating around the truth of his own life. Like most autobiographies, L.D.'s was revealing for what he left out. To begin with, his account of why he came to Vancouver did not sound plausible. What about his wife and children? Where did they fit into the story? And why was he so neglected by a city he served for so long? I became seduced by the secrets that I suspected were there to be discovered.

When I set out on the trail of Louis Taylor, I discovered that a full biography was impossible. Too little is known of his private life, especially the half of it that he lived before he came to Vancouver. As far as anyone knew, there were no private papers surviving in libraries or archives, no letters, diaries, or scrapbooks. Still, he lived much of his life in the public eye, as both politician and publisher. This part could be reconstructed with some thoroughness. Furthermore, his career encompassed so much of the history of Vancouver, more than four decades from the time he arrived until his final

defeat at the polls, that he seemed to offer a unique window through which to view the evolution of the city during its first fifty years. So I decided to undertake a “life and times”: a book as much about Vancouver as it would be about Louis Denison Taylor.

This didn't mean that I didn't want to find out as much as I could about the man himself, however, and to this end I attempted to contact surviving members of his family. I knew that he had had two sons. Both of them lived in the United States and both had come up to Vancouver for their father's funeral. I tracked down the death certificate of the eldest son, Ted, who died in Los Angeles in 1963. This document listed Mrs. Mary Werbel as an informant about the deceased. Suspecting that this might be Ted's daughter – that is, L.D.'s granddaughter – I wrote to the California department of motor vehicles requesting her address, but the department refused to give out the information and the trail went cold. Time passed. Then one evening my home telephone rang and a voice at the end of the line identified himself as Roy Werbel calling from California. Roy was phoning to tell me that his mother Mary, by then deceased herself, was indeed Louis Taylor's granddaughter. Unknown to me, the motor vehicles office had forwarded my letter to her. She had not been interested in my project, but Roy was. He told me that he had grown up hearing stories about his great-grandfather, the “Red” mayor of Vancouver, and would love to be of help. It turned out that Roy was keeper of the family archive, dozens of boxes of material assembled by Ted who, Roy said, had been something of a packrat. Twenty of the boxes related to L.D.

When I went down to California to sift through the material, I discovered that the boxes contained a mass of dusty newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, photographs, mementoes and, most importantly, family correspondence. Thanks to these documents and the stories Roy told me about his great-grandfather, I went from knowing almost nothing about L.D.'s private life to knowing enough to fill a soap opera. Bigamy, embezzlement, drug abuse: it turned out that Louis Taylor was not only Vancouver's longest-serving mayor, but also by far its most “colourful.”

I had enough to begin.

Copyright © 2004 by Daniel Francis
dan@danielfrancis.ca