

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	The Quest / 11
CHAPTER 1	Halifax / 15
CHAPTER 2	Westward / 25
CHAPTER 3	The Transformation / 35
CHAPTER 4	The Transition / 45
CHAPTER 5	Victoria: Business Strategies / 53
CHAPTER 6	The Newspaperman / 61
CHAPTER 7	Entering the Political Arena / 73
CHAPTER 8	The Great Campaigner: Triumphs and Disappointments / 99
CHAPTER 9	A Summing Up / 141

Notes / 153

Select Bibliography / 161

About the Author / 165

Index / 167

INTRODUCTION

The Quest

At his interment in Victoria's Ross Bay Cemetery, the coffin was bare. There was no eulogy, no music and only a meagre gathering of mourners. John Helmcken, his long-time adversary, called the event "a mockery of honour." Never again, he wrote, "would a man be laid away in the cold-blooded fashion in which he was consigned to the grave by a people who owed him so much."¹

Helmcken was writing of Amor De Cosmos, the man who had played a critical, if controversial role in the union of Vancouver Island with mainland British Columbia and had campaigned hard and, in the end, successfully, for the new province's entry into Confederation. His had been the most

THE DE COSMOS ENIGMA

insistent voice and the most persuasive pen in the long struggle for responsible government, first in the colony and then in the province, which he served as its second premier. He represented Victoria in the House of Commons for more than a decade.

He played a distinct, if captious, part in the tangled web of Canadian railway politics. He fought those who favoured annexation by the United States and, while American interests were diverted by the Civil War, he advocated the purchase of Alaska from the Russians in a move that would have changed the geopolitics of North America. He foresaw Britain and Canada joined together in a Commonwealth. He argued that Canadian governors general should be Canadians.

He was one of the first of a still unending line of critics calling for the abolition, or at least, the restructuring, of the Senate, and he tried, clumsily, to modernize the divorce laws. It was a packed and productive, combative and contentious public life. Yet when his will was probated, his occupation was simply listed as “retired journalist, etc,” and the last memories that many of his contemporaries had of him were of the derangement of his final, sad years.

Today he is remembered for the part he played in the creation of the province of British Columbia, for taking the province into Confederation and for becoming (in George Woodcock’s words) the man most responsible for the fact that Canada “eventually did stretch from ocean even unto ocean.”² What we remember of the man himself, however, is often blurred. More precisely, De Cosmos remains an enigma. While his political life can be traced in some detail, almost

Introduction: The Quest

nothing is known of the personality behind the public performance. On his relations with his family, his bachelorhood, his social, sexual, literary and sporting interests, the record is silent. No personal papers exist and the newspapers, notes, diaries and other preserved papers of the time reveal nothing of his private hours. Access to the inner man is blocked. As the historian Robert Kendrick put it, “the vital core of his personality continues to elude us.”³

The course of De Cosmos’ early years in Nova Scotia can be followed in vague outline. After that, from a short note his brother penned in later life, we are able to trace the route he followed when he crossed the continent to the American west, and we are given a hint of his California years. But these are no more than signposts along the way. The moving figure appears only in outline. When he enters political life in British Columbia he comes into sharper focus, as his actions are a matter of public record. There remains little, however, to tell us what manner of man lay behind these actions, and today’s writers often settle for saying simply that he was eccentric.

What spurred this Halifax warehouse clerk to set off for the goldfields of California and, almost immediately on arrival there, petition the state’s lawmakers to change his name from William Alexander Smith to Amor De Cosmos? And how did he acquire the vocabulary, the professional skill and the wealth of literary allusion to become an instantly successful newspaper editor and — when he was on form — an indefatigable political actor and a fearless dissenter? And what drove him, in the end, insane?



THE DE COSMOS ENIGMA

I had long been intrigued by the elusiveness of the man, and some years ago set out to find answers to some of these questions. I visited Windsor, Nova Scotia, where he was born, Halifax, where he spent his early breadwinning years, as well as Sacramento, Placerville, Oroville and El Dorado, California, where he went in search of a new life and a fortune. I spent time in the Public Archives of British Columbia and the City of Victoria Archives, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg and the National Public Archives in Ottawa, and I read what others had written about him. The result was that, fascinating as the material is, there was little on which an authentic "life" could be built.

Out of frustration with the lack of detail grew the idea of using what I had seen and read to look behind the major events in his life in order to see if, in this way, I could uncover more of his personality. In the words of the first provincial archivist, quoted in the epigraph on the opening page, another comment had caught my attention. "Facts, statistics, official documents — in fact the entire category of archivist lore — can only in themselves convey an imperfect impression of what they relate to."

What follows then is a possible interpretation of how he came to change his name as well as a study of his life as businessman, journalist and politician, the aim of both being to reach a closer understanding of why historians and others have described him as an enigma.

And the place to start is Nova Scotia.