

James Cox Aikins
1823 - 1904
Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba



Manitoba

A Research Report of
Historic Resources Branch
Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism

May 1980

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Suggested bibliographic format:

Manitoba Historic Resources Branch 1980. *James Cox Aikins, 1823-1904: Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba*. Research Report, Historic Resources Branch; Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism. 11 pages.

During his term as Manitoba's fourth Lieutenant-Governor, James Cox Aikins witnessed what was perhaps one of the most formative and dramatic stages of the province's development. Although much of his life was spent in southern Ontario, finding success within the ranks of the Conservative party, his brief gubernatorial career spanned a transitional period in Manitoba's history where the last traces of the old Red River era were scraped away and replaced with a commercially aggressive, democratically oriented society.¹ This new Manitoba society actively pursued its aspirations and soon became involved in a legendary struggle with the federal government over the disallowance of provincial railway legislation. Yet despite his proximity to this controversy, Aikins appears to have provided little input into the situation. Unlike his predecessors, he performed in a constitutional manner whereby the provincial legislature could function on its own initiative. In effect, Aikins' lieutenant-governorship was symbolic of a new level of political maturity in Manitoba.

Born on March 30, 1823 in the township of Toronto, J.C. Aikins was the eldest son of James Aikins, an immigrant from Monaghan County, Ireland.² Although the Aikins family had originally been Presbyterian, in the wilds of Upper Canada they became enthusiastic exponents of Methodism.³ Amidst this evangelical spirit young Aikins received his early education and laboured on the family farm.⁴ At the age of fifteen he was sent to the Upper Canada Academy (later Victoria College) in Cobourg where he made his first contact with such later notables as William McDougall and (Col.) J.S. Dennis.⁵ After graduating in 1843 as a 'merit student', Aikins acquired a farm in Peel County.⁶ Two years later he married Mary Elizabeth Somerset, a local yeoman's daughter.⁷ The couple soon had eight children and the oldest, (Sir) James A.M. Aikins, would also eventually become a lieutenant-governor of Manitoba.

Active within the local Methodist community, Aikins was offered the 'independent reform' nomination for the Peel County riding in 1851. This offer he declined, but when it was repeated in 1854 he found occasion to accept and was subsequently elected to Canada's Legislative Assembly.⁸ Within this capacity, he consistently voiced support for legislation promoting public improvements.⁹ In the 1861 election campaign Aikins lost his seat but was subsequently elected to the Legislative Council for the Home district the following year.¹⁰

During this pre-Confederation phase of his parliamentary career, Aikins was generally regarded as a supporter of the 'Clear Grit' or Liberal party. His first vote in the Legislative Assembly in 1854 had been placed against Conservative George Cartier's appointment as speaker of the house.¹¹ Also, this staunch reformer found it impossible to support the proposed Confederation of British North America and placed his vote in the Council accordingly.¹² Nevertheless, with his appointment to the Senate by royal proclamation 1867, much of Aikins' anti-Conservative stance appears to have dissipated. On November 16, 1869 he entered the Macdonald government's cabinet as a minister without portfolio and in the following month he replaced William McDougall as the Secretary of State and Registrar General.¹³ This appointment gave Aikins his first major contact with the newly acquired lands of the Canadian West.

Within his capacity as Secretary of State, Senator Aikins had the dubious distinction of preparing the Public Lands Act of 1872. In this task he was assisted by his old school mate, Colonel John S.

Dennis, the Surveyor-General.¹⁴ Although this legislation provided the West with a system of land settlement, it was too closely modelled on its American counterpart and failed to take into consideration the special needs of prairie agriculture.¹⁵ The Secretary of State also advised Manitoba's then Lieutenant-Governor, Alexander Morris, on the interpretation of various native land claims contained within the Manitoba Act.¹⁶ In addition, Aikins was responsible for the organization for the Dominion Lands bureau which later became the Department of the Interior.¹⁷ It was later rumoured that he had used this position to acquire 5000 acres of government land in the West.¹⁸ However, with the Pacific Railway Scandal in 1873, the Macdonald government resigned and Aikins was temporarily forced out of the mainstream of political life.

When the Conservative party was electorally resurrected in 1878, Senator Aikins resumed his former cabinet position as Secretary of State and also experienced a corresponding surge in upward social mobility. His position within the Methodist community rose with the appointment as the vice-president of the Ottawa Auxiliary Bible Society while a chairmanship of the Manitoba and Northwest Loan Company and the presidency of the Union fire Insurance Company signalled the beginnings of a corporate elite status.¹⁹ Even the Canadian Parliamentary Companion of 1879 finally recognized Aikins as a member of the Conservative Party.²⁰ Indeed, it appears that the one time 'independent reformer' now considered himself expert enough to instruct Macdonald on the proper operation of the party's patronage apparatus.²¹ He also found himself accused of practicing nepotism within his department.²²

In the cabinet shuffle of November 8, 1880, Aikins was removed as Secretary of State and transferred to the portfolio of Inland Revenue. With this appointment the senator became a focal point for routine charges or corruption within the department.²³ But when in March, 1882 the Toronto Globe linked the Minister of Inland Revenue with the leakage of a number of government secrets,²⁴ it appears as if Macdonald could tolerate the senator no longer. Aikins would have to be moved out of the way, but not at the expense of offending such a long standing government supporter or, more importantly, the large Methodist vote he carried for the party.²⁵

The solution to this problem seemed to require the promotion of Aikins to a more prestigious, but less damaging, position. Macdonald had found in the past that lieutenant-governorships made a "valuable ... pasturage for unwanted federal cabinet ministers" and this case would be no exception.²⁶ In the spring of 1882, the Prime Minister convinced Aikins to resign his cabinet and senate positions for an appointment as the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba and Keewatin. The senator was very reluctant to accept the 'promotion' and only did so after Macdonald gave his assurance that a senate seat would be found for him upon his return to the East.²⁷ On September 22 the appointment was announced and on December 2 Aikins was given the oath of office in Winnipeg.²⁸

All in all, Aikins' appointment proved to be a popular move for everyone concerned. Macdonald had obviously found a means of ridding himself of a needless political handicap. After overcoming his initial reservations, Aikins found the people of Manitoba "intelligent" and even much preferable to those of Ontario.²⁹ But of far greater importance, the appointment was generally applauded by the people of the province. Aikins' gubernatorial predecessor, Joseph Cauchon, had never received

much popular support³⁰ and when in 1879 he successfully obstructed an attempt to abolish the printing of government documents in French, his local notoriety was assured.³¹ As such, it was not surprising that a new lieutenant-governor was welcomed with open arms. The local authorities also looked with favor upon his “cool judgement” and temperance principles.³²

Aikins’ Lieutenant-Governorship coincided with one of the most interesting phases of Manitoba’s development. The Ontario settlers who had arrived during the previous decade assumed the dominant position in the province and within this group arose an aggressive commercial spirit seeking to break its provincial confines and pursue wider aspirations.³³ Unfortunately, these designs were severely contained by the nature of Manitoba’s relationship with the federal government. Denied control over its public lands, the province was handicapped in its endeavours to encourage local development. More specifically, the infamous monopoly clause of the federal government’s contract with the Canadian Pacific Railway syndicate, whereby the Canadian West could not be provided with a competing railway system from the United States, raised serious doubts about Manitoba’s future prosperity. Despite this restriction, the province believed its ultimate success was dependent upon competing systems and, as early as 1881, the provincial legislature began to charter railways in violation of the monopoly clause.³⁴ This legislation was subsequently disallowed by the federal government. Later, with the final collapse of the Winnipeg land boom in 1883, and the beginning of popular agitation against the discriminatory freight rates on the Canadian Pacific Railway lines, the continued maintenance of the monopoly clause became the focal pint of Manitoba’s grievances. When the federal government refused to abolish the monopoly clause, a grandiose constitutional struggle ensued between it and the province whereby a steady steam of railway charters were legislated and subsequently disallowed.

As Manitoba’s Lieutenant-Governor, it would appear that Aikins should have been actively engaged in the federal-provincial controversy. Although officially the head of the province, the lieutenant-governorship was a federal appointment and considered an agency for the preservation of federal interests.³⁵ Indeed, the two major weapons of the gubernatorial arsenal – the withholding of assent and reservation – were designed to obstruct unwanted provincial legislation.³⁶ However, at no time during the disallowance dispute did Aikins utilize these powers.

Whether or not the Lieutenant-Governor had been inclined to interfere with such matters, it is evident that he was under strict instructions to abstain from any active involvement. Sometime before Aikins received his appointment, the proper role of a lieutenant-governor within the federal-provincial relationship had received considerable attention from the Privy Council and it was eventually decided to discourage the exercise of any federal interference at that level.³⁷ Before receiving his oath of office, Aikins was instructed by the Privy Council that under almost no circumstance was he to reserve any provincial legislation unless instructed to do so by the Governor-General-in-Council.³⁸ Thus, in 1887 when Macdonald began to encourage him to take direct action with the province, Aikins refused and claimed that he did not wish to cause “any unpleasantness”.³⁹ When in response to this stance Macdonald accused the Lieutenant-Governor of not performing his duties,⁴⁰ Aikins tried to initiate a compromise between the two sides.⁴¹ But these backroom negotiations collapsed and he took no further action.

Aikins' lack of interference in the province's legislative activities marked a definite shift away from Manitoba's gubernatorial tradition. The province's first two lieutenant-governors, Adams G. Archibald and Alexander Morris, were in reality the only sources of governmental authority for quite some time. Although Morris did implement the machinery for responsible government in the province, his successor, Joseph Cauchon, saw fit to exercise his authority when the Manitoba legislature passed bills he felt to be unconstitutional. But by 1882 Manitoba had politically matured to the extent where it no longer required paternal supervision⁴² and the Privy Council's instructions concerning legislative interference on the part of the lieutenant-governor clearly illustrate the federal government's recognition of this fact. As such, Aikins had little choice but to perform his duties in a constitutional manner.

Removed from active participation in the political sphere, Lieutenant-Governor Aikins became somewhat of a social figure. Unlike the misanthropic Cauchon, who rarely ventured from his residence,⁴³ Aikins and his wife were immediately engaged to participate in such local functions as provincial exhibitions and the like.⁴⁴ This shift in the lieutenant-governor's role away from that of an active political participant to a social functionary was signified with the completion of the new gubernatorial residence in the fall of 1883. Whereas his predecessors had resided in the old Governor's mansion at Fort Garry, the traditional centre of government, Aikins was the first lieutenant-governor to occupy the 'Government House' on Kennedy Street. Indeed, he and his wife furnished the new residence with \$15,000 from the federal government⁴⁵ and soon entertained lavishly. An annual New Year's ball was instituted and Mrs. Aikins held numerous afternoon receptions.⁴⁶ Much to the chagrin of some of the old 'habitues', Aikins' abstinence principles caused these activities to be held without the usual consumption of liquor.⁴⁷

The Lieutenant-Governor also became engaged in the promotion of other local activities. As early as 1884 he urged the creation of an agricultural college in the province⁴⁸ and later he became a member of the board of Wesley College.⁴⁹ In 1887 he headed the Manitoba fundraising committee for the Imperial Institute — an organization for encouraging industrial and commercial activities throughout the British Empire.⁵⁰ He also supported various local clubs and organizations.

Although his term in office was scheduled to expire in October, 1884, it was decided that Aikins should remain Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba an additional nine months to avoid the inconvenience of a winter move back to the East.⁵¹ Thus, it was not until July 1, 1888 that he finally completed his duties and passed the position on to John Schultz. Aikins believed that he had performed his gubernatorial responsibilities well and, more importantly, the province agreed with him.⁵²

After returning to Toronto, Aikins pursued his business interests while waiting for the promised re-appointment to the Senate. During this period he became the president of the Trusts Corporation of Ontario and was not above soliciting the Prime Minister for the federal government's financial support.⁵³ Nevertheless, most of his time appears to have been spent with the collection of delinquent farm mortgages owing to the Manitoba and Northwestern Loan Company.⁵⁴ In 1892 he was awarded an honorary doctor of laws degree from Victoria College.⁵⁵

Finally, on January 7, 1896, Aikins' long awaited re-appointment to the Senate was obtained. This seemed to mark the beginning of another brief period of upward mobility for the now aging senator. Over the two years following the appointment, Aikins obtained directorships in the Freehold Loan and Savings Company, the Loan and Deposit Company, and the Ontario Bank.⁵⁶ He also became the president of the Methodist Social Union of Toronto and vice-president of both the Ontario Prohibitionary Alliance and the Dominion Alliance.⁵⁷ Over his remaining years, he occasionally acted as treasurer of various missionary societies.

After a lengthy illness, Senator Aikins died on August 8, 1904 at the age of eighty-one.

Notes

1. According to Morton, the period between 1881 and 1888 represents the final destruction of the remnants of Red River society and the "triumph of Ontario Democracy" ushering in the new Manitoba identity. See: W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 2nd ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 223-33.
2. W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 4th ed., (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978), p. 5.
3. "Hon. James Cox Aikins", *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, September 24, 1882, p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2; George Bryce, *A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People*, (Winnipeg: Canada History Company, 1906), p. 333; Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
5. "The Lieutenant Governor", *Winnipeg Sun*, December 24, 1883. Manitoba Legislative Library, Vertical File – J. C. Aikins.
6. Manitoba Library Association, *Pioneers and Early Citizens of Manitoba: A Directory of Manitoba Biography*, (Winnipeg: Peguis, 1971), p. 3; "Hon. James Cox Aikins", *op. cit.*, p. 2.
7. "Hon. James Cox Aikins", *op. cit.*, p. 2.
8. H. J. Morgan, *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time*, (Toronto: William Briggs, 1898), p.10.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 10; "Hon. James Cox Aikins", *op. cit.*, p. 2.
10. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
11. "The Lieutenant-Governor", *op. cit.*, n.p.
12. Although various secondary references report Aikins to be a supporter of Confederation and his obituary in the *Free Press* goes as far as to promote him as "instrumental in the Confederation movement", the parliamentary debates disclose that he voted against the main motion for Confederation. See: "Senator Aikins Passes Away", *Manitoba Free Press*, August 8, 1904, p.

8; Canada, *Parliamentary Debates on the Subject of the Confederation of the British North American Provinces*, Quebec: Hunter, Rose and Company, 1865, p. 346.

13. Canadian Parliamentary Companion, 1897, p. 55.
14. “The Lieutenant-Governor”, *op. cit.*, n.d.
15. Chester Martin, “*Dominion Lands*” Policy, L. H. Thomas, ed., Carlton Library Series, no. 69, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), pp. 140-1; L. G. Thomas, “Associations and Communications”, Canada Historical Association, *Annual Papers*, 1973, p. 8.
16. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG 12 B1, Alexander Morris Papers, Lieutenant-Governor’s Collection, 1872-77, Numerous letters between Morris and Aikins concerning native land claims. See: Morris to Aikins, March 7, 1873 and Aikins to Morris, March 8, 1873.
17. *Canadian Parliamentary Companion*, 1897, p. 55.
18. *Ottawa Free Press*, April 8, 1881 in PAM, MG 12 D5, J. C. Aikins, Scrapbook, 1880-7. This newspaper clipping quotes the *Winnipeg Times* in stating that, before the fall of the Macdonald government, a Senator who was also a member of the cabinet was supposed to have used his position to secure 5000 acres of government land in the West. At this time, only two of the cabinet ministers were senate members – Aikins and Alexander Campbell. As Secretary of State, Aikins was in a much more likely position to acquire such lands than Campbell, the Postmaster General. Also, the fact that in later years he used his association with Macdonald to solicit government contracts and that the otherwise insignificant newspaper clipping was saved in his personal scrapbook make Aikins to be the most likely candidate for the rumored land deal.
19. *Canadian Parliamentary Companion and Annual Register*, 1879, p. 104.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Until this time, Aikins had been referred to as a Liberal despite his ten year association with the Macdonald government.
21. Public Archives of Canada, MG 26A, Sir John A. Macdonald Papers, VI 86, Aikins to Macdonald, November 1, 1880, 77325.
22. *Ibid.*, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, April 2, 1879, 77239. Aikins had been accused of obtaining special timber rights for his son.
23. J. C. Aikins, Scrapbook, 1880-7, Various clippings are presented here accusing the department of faulty weights and measures and the Minister with incompetence.
24. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, March 5, 1882, 77401-6.

25. *Ibid.*, V186, Griffin to Macdonald, June 15, 1882, 77420. Griffin reported that the opposition press was presenting Aikins' appointment as a "sacrifice" in order to turn the Methodist vote against the Conservatives.
26. John T. Saywell, *The Office of Lieutenant-Governor: A Study in Canadian Government and Politics*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 23.
27. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, May 20, 1882, 77414-5.
28. "The New Governor", *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, December 8, 1882, Supplement.
29. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, December 30, 1882, 77435-6. 39 F.H. Schofield, *The Story of Manitoba, Volume 1*, (Winnipeg: S.J. Clark, 1913), p. 328.
31. J. A. Jackson, *The Centennial History of Manitoba*, (Winnipeg: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), pp. 138-9.
32. "Hon. James Cox Aikins", *op. cit.*, p. 2; Shath Square, "Lieutenant-governors of Manitoba: Part Four", *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 22, 1971, Legislative Library Vertical File — J. C. Aikins.
33. Morton, *op. cit.*, pp. 222 & 227.
34. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
35. R. MacGregor Dawson & W.F. Dawson, *Democratic Government in Canada*, 4th ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 124; Saywell, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
36. Dawson & Dawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-5.
37. Saywell, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-10.
38. PAM MG 12 D1, J.C. Aikins, Correspondence with the Dominion, Copy of a Report of a Committee of the Honourable the Privy Council, November 27, 1882.
39. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, August 5, 1887, 77494.
40. Macdonald to Aikins, September 15, 1887, cited in Saywell, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
41. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, September 27, 1887, 77496-7.
42. F. A. Milligan, "The Lieutenant-Governorship in Manitoba, 1870-1882", M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1948, p. 4.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

44. "Provincial Exhibition", Times, October 2, 1883, in J. C. Aikins, Scrapbook, 1880-7; "Local and Provincial", *Manitoba Weekly Free Press*, December 8, 1882, p. 3.
45. J. C. Aikins, Correspondence with the Dominion, Langevin to Aikins, July 3, 1883.
46. J. C. Aikins, Scrapbook, 1880-7, the various accounts of Aikins' balls and receptions are interesting for their detailed accounts of clothing, meals, etc. Also, it is interesting to note that although the social columns seemed to be filled with numerous events at Government House, John O'Donnell recalls that the Aikins entertained "very little". John H. O'Donnell, *Manitoba As I Saw It, From 1869 to 1909*, (Winnipeg: Clark Bros., 1909), p. 82.
47. "The Lieutenant-Governor", *op. cit.*, n.p.
48. Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 286..
49. "Senator Aikins Passes Away", *op. cit.*, p. 8.
50. J. C. Aikins, Correspondence with the Dominion, Able to Aikins, October 14, 1887.
51. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, September 25, 1887, 77496.
52. *Ibid.*, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, July 4, 1888, 77523; Bryce, *op. cit.*, p. 335; O'Donnell, *op. cit.*, p. 82; "Senator Aikins Passes Away", *op. cit.*, p. 8.
53. Macdonald Papers, V186, Aikins to Macdonald, November 7, 1889, 77532.
54. PAM MG 12 D5, J.C. Aikins, Unmarked Letterbook. The entire correspondence from 1889 to 1891 was concerned with encouraging debtors to resume interest payments on farm mortgages.
55. H. J. Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 10; these new positions were not recorded in the Parliamentary Companion for 1897.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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