You know particulars, I believe, no living man but myself could have laid open to you of bygone misrule and peculation, from which the proprietors and their interests have suffered; you know the inane stupidity of the cry for 'free land', and you know the parties, not tenants, who have most loudly, and for their own private sinister ends, raised and re-echoed it, ad nauseam.

This bitter tirade from Robert Bruce Stewart to Lieutenant Governor W. F. C. Robinson, written at the close of 1873, came near the end of a long struggle. The largest resident proprietor on Prince Edward Island, owning more than 67,000 acres, Robert Bruce was forced to sell the majority of his land in 1875 to the Prince Edward Island government. He fought against this moment nearly all his life. He had struggled against vast odds, against reality itself, hoping to keep alive the Stewart vision inherited from his father. This dream encompassed hopes for a large, landed proprietorship of great prestige and wealth. It proved an Old World dream, inappropriately transplanted in a New World and a new age.

From the beginning, it was obvious that this grand vision was flawed by the whole milieu on Prince Edward Island. Surrounded by colonies and states where freehold tenure proved the norm, the Island's leasehold tenure system appeared anachronistic from the outset. Unlike the faraway absentee proprietors, however, Robert Bruce lived and worked for 29 years on the Island as a resident landlord.

Why did Robert Bruce fight so bitterly for a system so obviously inappropriate to his surroundings? To better understand the nature and intensity of the struggle that consumed Robert Bruce Stewart, it is necessary to examine his life and the forces that molded it. Understanding R. B. Stewart is essential to understanding the hidden complexity of the Land Question on Prince Edward Island.

### The Twig Is Bent

Robert Bruce Stewart was born in London in 1813, the first and only child of David and Martha Mann Hill Stewart. It was a disturbing time for the Britain into which Robert Bruce was born. A generation of warfare had wracked Europe. At home, both the agrarian and industrial revolutions were well underway, and by 1813, were transforming the face of Britain.

Born in modest circumstances in Loch Katrine, Scotland, David Stewart had parlayed his training as a land surveyor into a successful career as a land agent. By 1813, he resided in the fashionable neighbourhood of Great Russell Street. His home there served as a headquarters for the Stewart business. The household included David’s bachelor brother Robert, who acted as his partner.

Robert Bruce led a sheltered and, perhaps, lonely childhood in the quiet company of this small family on 94 Great Russell. Tutored by his mother and uncle, he proved an apt student. However, when Robert Bruce was only six years old, his father rewarded him with the gift of a book. It seems a strange choice for so young a child, Conversations on Political Economy. The inscription read in part: "This book is presented to Robert Bruce Stewart for his great attentions to his instructions given him by his mama and uncle. He can now read this and most other books in the English Language although only 6 years and 8 months old."

The solitary child developed a keen interest in animals, keeping many pets. Magpies, cock pheasants, thrushes, rabbits, and squirrels were all, apparently, allowed the run of his house. Writing for The Field Naturalist years later, he would remark, "I have not met with any bird in whom kind treatment would not give rise to tameness and affection." For the rest of his life, he could never understand why this principle, when applied to his tenants, never worked.

After a brief stint at Harrow School, Middlesex, a prestigious public school
for the sons of the wealthy, Robert Bruce returned home to Great Russell Street in 1828, where he continued his studies independently. Botany and zoology appear to have been his favorite subjects. After seven years of research, he even published a book in 1835 on the linnaean arrangement of plants, *Outlines of Botany*.

During these years, Robert Bruce spent his time learning more than just the arts and sciences. He was also in training for his future profession, that of managing large estates. But, unlike David Stewart, it was hoped that Robert Bruce would someday own the estate that he managed. His father had begun planning for this day even before his son was born.

**The Rights of Property**

Land agents like David Stewart naturally identified more with the traditional values of the landed gentry than they did with the emerging mercantile forces in Britain. Moreover, they tended to view success in the same terms. The ownership of large tracts remained to agents like Stewart the major source of both wealth and social prestige. Propelled by his empathy with the values of the landed gentry, along with a desire to secure for future generations his newly acquired wealth and status, David Stewart turned his attention across the Atlantic in search of a large landholding.

As early as 1809, David Stewart began purchasing land in the tiny colony of Prince Edward Island. Gradually, the Stewarts increased their holdings there. By the 1830s, they had purchased Lots 7, 10, 12, and 30, as well as parts of Lots 27, 46, and 47. They now owned a large estate scattered across the Island.

Prince Edward Island proved more suitable to David Stewart's needs than any other property he might have purchased in the New World. After its acquisition from France in 1763, the Island had been surveyed into 67 townships or lots, which were granted by the Crown in 1767 to a group of petitioners claiming the King's favour.

*They also owned Lennox Island, which they later sold to the Aboriginal Society as a home for the Micmac Indians.

**Pressured by an over-extended economy in the wake of the Seven Year's War, government officials attached two major conditions to the grants. First, the proprietors were to populate their land within ten years with foreign-born Protestants on a ratio of one to every 200 hundred acres. Second, grantees were to pay to the Crown annual quit rents of between £20 and £60 per township. The intent was to make the new colony self-financing. The effect was to establish a proprietary system modeled on the great landed estates of England and Ireland. The landholding and administrative arrangements were an anachronism repeated nowhere else in British North America after 1750.**

That the arrangement proved tremendously appealing to David Stewart is understandable. Yet, by the time he began purchasing land in Prince Edward Island, serious flaws had developed in the system. From the outset, the landlords did not or could not fulfill the original terms of their grants. The

**Professor J. M. Bumsted pursues the consequences of this system in a series of articles in *The Island Magazine*, particularly, in Issues 6, 8, and 9.**
for land, then, when a broader suffrage was established in the 1830s, the competition for votes.
Through the course of the long struggle, both father and son employed the same tactics against the enemies of property. The ultimate arbiter of colonial affairs was the British government. So, the Stewarts petitioned the Colonial Office in London in defense of their interests. They encouraged other Island proprietors to do the same. This tactic led to another, that of promoting unity of action among the proprietors, especially in fighting against adverse local legislation.
The third technique employed by the Stewarts in defense of the whole proprietary system proved more subtle. The Stewarts went out of their way to appear as benevolent and paternalistic landlords. An excellent example of this tactic occurs in a letter from Robert Stewart to the family agent on the Island. Robert quotes his brother David as saying:

"You may write to Mr. Lawson to select any one tenant whom he may please to proceed against [for arrears of rent], if he thinks it advisable to do so; ...I trust one such example will be sufficient and all that is required is that Mr. Lawson should select a tenant of whom he may be sure of success, and if driven to this unpleasant and distressing alternative, after all the kindness and indulgence which I have shown to these people. I wish to make an example of one in order to save the others. This, even this is to me most distressing but I cannot help it [it], the rights of property must be supported.'"

The just and fair landlord, Robert Bruce would play that role until the end, no matter how inappropriately.

The Resident Proprietor
The Stewarts' plea for a united front among proprietors introduced them to many individuals involved in Island affairs. One such contact resulted in a liaison that securely tied Robert Bruce's future to that of Prince Edward Island. Through business with Island merchant, George Birnie, Robert Bruce met and married Birnie's daughter. Helen Birnie was the granddaughter of "Hellfire Jack" Stewart, a prominent and controversial figure in the Island's early history. They were married in London on June 27, 1838. Robert Bruce was 25, Helen Birnie, 23.

Troubles on the Island abounded for the London Stewarts during the 1830s and '40s. Frequent litigation over disputed ownership made tenure uncertain and regular payment of rent even less so. Valuable lumber was flagrantly looted from Stewart property. Population grew, increasing not just the number of tenants but also the number of illegal, non-rent-paying squatters. Dealing across long distances with unreliable agents only compounded those problems. Meanwhile, control of the Island Legislature fell into the hands of the radical Escheat faction, which passed a number of acts openly or implicitly penalizing the large proprietors.**

As landlords trying to cope with these problems at a distance, the Stewarts must have sensed they were getting nowhere. Meanwhile, the tide of change in Britain gathered strength, and the centre of social and economic power continued to shift away from landed interests to the merchants and manufacturers in towns and cities. For a young man with the future before him, it was a difficult time. Pushed from behind, and pulled from in front, Robert Bruce Stewart made the fateful decision to move to Prince Edward Island.***

On August 29, 1846, Robert Bruce, his wife, and their five children embarked for Halifax aboard the Acadia, replete with 100 packages including a piano. They arrived in Charlottetown in mid-October on the packet Rover. Once settled into the small colonial capital, Robert Bruce launched into the manifold tasks of land management and the preoccupation with landholding which persisted for the rest of his life.

Politics and Property
As a moving gift, David Stewart gave his son Lots 27 and 30, while Robert Bruce held power of attorney on the remainder of the Island estate. On his father's death in 1852, Robert Bruce would inherit the entire family property. As a resident proprietor, Robert Bruce developed a pattern in dealing with tenants and squatters. First, he con-

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*There was no relation with Robert Bruce's family. For more on "Hellfire Jack" and his family, see J. M.球星的 "The Stewart Family and the Origins of Political Conflict on Prince Edward Island," The Island Magazine, 9(Spring-Summer, 1981).

**For more on the Escheat movement and its leader, see Harry Bagois, "William Cooper of Sailor's Hope," 7 (Fall-Winter, 1979).

***One catalyst may have been the death that January of Uncle Robert Stewart, David's partner.
fronted residents on his land with a call for acquiescence, recognition of his title, and dutiful payment of rent. If this proved ineffective, as it often did, writs and visits from the Sheriff followed.

Things did not go smoothly for Robert Bruce. Caught between defiant tenants and antagonistic officials, he felt ignominious and unjustly treated. In the tradition of his father and uncle, Stewart began an ongoing correspondence with the Colonial Office in London. He maintained that correspondence until he lost his land in 1875. His letters or petitions were at once self-righteous, pleading, despairing, and, often, sarcastic. But they also contained methodical arguments, full of well-researched statistics and reference to historical rights and precedents. All of his submissions had one thing in common: a dogged defense of the rights of property.

The granting of Responsible Government in January, 1851 ushered in a new political era on Prince Edward Island. Island governments would henceforth be formed from, and responsible to, the majority party in the elected Assembly. It was a change that Stewart opposed and feared. To him it meant a weakening of the crucial British tie and the Colonial Office link.

Robert Bruce met the issue head on. He requested that the Lieutenant Governor appoint him to the Island's Legislative Council. Had his request been granted, the rest of Robert Bruce's life might have unfolded quite differently. A seat on the Legislative Council would have provided him with a more realistic forum in which to present his arguments. It might have brought him in more immediate contact with the political realities that surrounded him. Perhaps he would have accommodated himself more readily to the changes affecting his environment. But the Colonial Office turned down his request, and the door to the political arena slammed permanently shut for Stewart.

The failure to win appointment to the Legislative Council marked the last opportunity Robert Bruce had to redress constructively his grievances. His rigid stance concerning the rights of landed property made him too unpopular among Island farmers to ever contest an election. They voted for persons promising freehold tenure, not for those opposed to it. After his bid for a seat on the Council failed, all chance for Robert Bruce to entertain the dialogue of argument and contention faded. Instead, he was chained to a monologue of complaint. His only avenue of expression remained the roundabout method of petitioning the Home Government.

A steady flow of legislation soon emanated from the new Reform government of George Coles. Much of it was aimed at Stewart and his fellow landholders. Coles's program included the short-term easing of the tenants' lot at the expense of the proprietors and gradual purchase of the great estates. Robert Bruce met each new Act with a dissenter's testimonial to the Colonial Office. For him it was a crusade for the rights of property.

The centrepiece of the Coles Government's attempt to purchase the proprietors' vast landholdings was the Land Purchase Act of 1853. It empowered government to buy up estates exceeding 1,000 acres and re-sell the land to tenants and squatters in small parcels no larger than 300 acres. Lack of funds and the bill's non-compulsory nature would ultimately blunt its effectiveness. Nevertheless, Stewart was outraged. He challenged the Act because it forced proprietors to forego all arrears in rent and to sell their land (he claimed) at one third its true value.

Such was the role which Stewart found himself playing as the '50s progressed, perpetually in opposition to a government which he felt deliberately discriminated against the rights of property. The Island Legislators were nettled enough to put on record in 1856 a protest against the proprietorial lobbyists, "who, though unable to command attention in the Local Legislature, nevertheless seek to counteract its decisions at the Colonial Office." Much has been written about the presumed influence of the landlords' lobby in blocking all attempts at land reform on Prince Edward Island. Recently, however, historians have called into question its actual effectiveness. Certainly, Robert Bruce Stewart had far more defeats than victories in the years immediately following Responsible Government. Of the six acts he opposed during his first decade on the Island, only two were refused Royal Assent. Even in their rejection, it is difficult to gauge the influence of proprietorial protests on a British government already deeply committed to the sanctity of private property.

In all of his arguments, Stewart stressed that tenants on Prince Edward Island were far better off than those in Great Britain. They enjoyed longer leases, lower rents, less taxes, and far fewer conditions on their tenure. He could never understand that most Island farmers were not comparing their situation with the Old World; they were measuring it against the freehold tenure in neighbouring New World colonies. While Robert Bruce felt government had gone too far, many felt it had not gone far enough.

The Great Land Commission

Pressure for the liquidation of leasehold tenure continued mounting on Prince Edward Island throughout the 1850s. In 1859, the House of Assembly (now controlled by the Tories) proposed that the Imperial government appoint a responsible person to negotiate with proprietors. The aim was to reduce
vulnerability of tenants and to introduce measures that would enable the
tenant to acquire leasehold freehold. After consulting with some of
the proprietors, particularly the Island's greatest landlord, Samuel
Cunard, the Colonial Secretary proposed a
three-man Commission, representing
the Queen, the proprietors, and the
House of Assembly. Feeling confident
about a favourable result, some pro-
prieters agreed that the results of the
Commission should be binding. The
Island House of Assembly appointed
the great Nova Scotia reformer, Joseph
Howe as its representative; John Ham-
ilton Gray of New Brunswick was
named by the Crown; and J. W. Ritchie
of Halifax represented the proprietors.
During 1860, the Commission traversed
the colony, taking testimony from con-
cerned Islanders.
Although Stewart himself never tes-
tified before the Commission (indeed,
he opposed it from the start), several of
his tenants were called to the stand.
The majority were not what Robert
Bruce would have considered exemplary
 tenants, all being far along in arrears
or squatters rejecting his title alto-
gether. There is the first record of tes-
timony by his dissatisfied tenants, and
for them, Robert Bruce was hardly the
fair and just man he portrayed himself
to be. Witnesses spoke of Stewart, while
not legally distrainting tenants, resor-
ting to such pressure as tearing down
the house of one tenant, taking the roof
off that of another, and turning out an
old man.
There was, for example, the case of
an old squatter named Carragher, who
had lived for at least 18 years in Lot 30
without taking a lease because, he
claimed, he heard Stewart had no clear
title to the township. The sheriff
brought him into the hearing straight
from jail, "his head bound by a hand-
kerchief and looking very unwell".
Extremely poor, not even owning a
coat, Carragher had been arrested
without warning the previous night for
arrears of £39 and taken by the sheriff to
Stewart for acknowledgment. Robert
Bruce would not relent, stating, the
sheriff testified, "if the man had no
property, he would have to go to jail."
Commissioner Howe indignantly ex-
claimed, "I never knew of a person who
is in such deep poverty being treated in
this manner... He may have an agree-
ment, or he may not, but a person in his
misery and misfortunes to be dragged
here under real or assumed debt! It is a
fearful evidence of the wretchedness of
the tenant's system." If Stewart had
decided to make an example of Carr-
agher, he had made a poor and rather
inhumane choice.
No doubt, Robert Bruce was upset
and indignant at these proceedings.
His protests were rejected, however,
and throughout the hearings he became
the black shadow, referred to indirectly
and often. By his rigidity, Stewart set
himself up to his opponents as a sym-
bol of all that was wrong with the
leasehold system. And although Robert
Bruce might have been, as he claimed,
just and fair to those tenants who lived
within the system, it appears he could
be harsh and inhumane to those who
refused to recognize his rules of landed
rights.
To the painful surprise of many pro-
prieters, the Land Commission's
recommendations, submitted in 1861,
proved generally favourable to the ten-
ants. The Commission suggested that
every tenant should be given a chance to
purchase the land he then lived upon,
that the British government should
provide a loan of £100,000 to assist
the Island government in buying back
the proprietors' lands, and that legisla-
tion should be passed compelling the
proprietors to sell.
The great expectations aroused by
the Land Commission came to naught.
Even those proprietors who had previ-
ously agreed to make its recommendations
binding repudiated the Commis-
sion's findings, and all attempts by
the Island government to legislate
compulsory sale of the great estates
were refused Royal Assent. Some pro-
prieters were willing to sell property
to their tenants, but they customarily set
prices so high that the tenants could
not afford to purchase their farms
anyway. Robert Bruce refused to par-
ticipate even in this concession, nor did
most other proprietors.
The Commission's failure aroused
tremendous anger and frustration
among the tenants, who wanted a
right to own their farms. Agitation
in the countryside increased. Dis-
trust of politicians as well as landlords
grew. In 1863, the Tenant League was
formed, its members sworn to resist
the payment of rents. If a tenant was
convicted for non-payment, the members
sought to prevent occupation of the vic-
tim's home by anyone else. Although
likely a coincidence, it proved true to
Stewart's confrontational nature that
he would move that very year right into
his enemies' midst.
The Laird of Strathgartney
In spite of increasing struggles and
tensions, Robert Bruce had continued
building his anachronistic vision of an
Old World, grand country estate on
Prince Edward Island. In 1863, he
moved his large family (now including
nine children) 16 miles from Charlotte-
town to an ample new home on Lot 30.
The location was superb. Near the top
of one of the Island's highest hills, it
overlooked finely wooded country and
afforded an exceptional view of the
Northumberland Strait. Forever proud
of his Scottish heritage, he named his
estate Strathgartney, after a place

*"Take Warning": this note, written in Gaelic, was found nailed to the front gate at Strathgartney on the morning of September 23, 1856 at the height of the Tenant League agitation.*
along the northern shore of his father's birthplace, Loch Katrine.

As his own father had done, Robert Bruce began to train his sons in the family business. After the move to Strathgartney, both Robert Bruce Jr. and James Farrer Stewart increasingly assisted their father in the management of his estate. By 1870, Robert Bruce Jr. was in charge of Lot 30 and the eastern lots, while James managed the western townships.

The only surviving portrayal of Robert Bruce from this period comes from artist Robert Harris. While working as a surveyor during the mid-1860s, Harris was hired by Stewart to survey certain areas on his estate. Years later, Harris described the Laird of Strathgartney to the Montreal Pen and Pencil Club: "He was a tall, grave man always clad in black and wearing a huge stiff black stock." After describing Strathgartney, Harris went on: "Here he lived in the style somewhat of a highland laird as befitted the staunch old Jacobite that he was.... After breakfast he had his piper, whose Saxon words were scant, give us a good skirl, and fine old slogans sounded echoing in the hills and glens about the house." Harris was struck by the incongruity of Stewart's hopes to transplant himself as a member of the English landed society in the New World: "A strange thing, it seemed, to come across fine pictures and books in a country place which was in some respects a wilderness."

Harris also witnessed a brush between Robert Bruce and some disgruntled tenants. In company with Robert Bruce Sr. and Jr. and six of Stewart's tenants, he travelled to the Green Road to assess various squatters' holdings as a first step towards bringing proceedings against them. Before completing the job, the survey party found themselves confronted by an angry crowd of squatters. "The squatters," Harris noted, "on their part looked on all surveyors as devils incarnate, being harbingers of evil, threatening disturbance of quiet possession...." The confrontation almost turned bloody when the leader of the squatters threatened to strike Harris over the head with his stake. At the last moment, he thought better of it and merely, "showered imprecations on our heads, damning the proprietors, the law, and the magistrates." The surveying party withdrew. "A bitter retreat it was for Mr. S.," Harris recalled. "We'll run the line through here yet, he said, 'if we have to bring fifty men and half a dozen pipers to do it.'"

In his account, Harris also alludes to the psychological abuse he underwent at the subsequent trial for siding with Robert Bruce: "It was like going in as an elephant and coming out as a microbe. The very atmosphere of the stuffy court room was described by the opening counsel as having been further polluted by the character of our evidence."

Life at Strathgartney proved demanding in many ways for Robert Bruce. Writing in 1865 to John Richardson, a London friend, he complained of various hindrances, "resolving themselves
into the three heads of anxiety, indigestion and business, all intimately connected with each other.” Reminiscent of his earlier interests in botany, he described with pride his indoor garden of primroses, geraniums, myrtle and orange, and regretted his lack of a well-managed outdoor garden, citing insufficient time, money and skilled hands. He did plant some fruit trees but as one might have predicted, most of the apples were stolen by neighbours.

The same April, 1868 letter to Richardson contained some revealing political commentary. In it, Robert Bruce compared democracy to an ever hungry shark. Referring to the views of Lord Dufferin, a liberal British politician, he wrote, “He is for altering some of those old Maxims of Common Law which favor the Landlord; — he is, in fact, for reversing them: this is dangerous work; in these times, when mob Law is becoming supreme.” To Stewart, change of any sort seemed dangerous.

The Wrongs of Property

As he faced the 1870s, Stewart must have known change was inevitable. Already, in 1867, neighbouring Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had joined the Canadian Confederation. Prince Edward Island was holding out for various concessions, among them the promise of a large loan to buy out resisting landlords like Stewart. By 1873, 457,260 acres, one third of all Island land, had been purchased by the government under the Land Purchase Act of 1853. Although almost half of this acreage came from sale of the late Samuel Cunard’s estate, a fair number of other landlords had decided to sell voluntarily before the issue was forced. Not so Robert Bruce Stewart. He clung tenaciously to the vision of landed proprietorship which had begun sixty years before with his father’s first purchase of Island lands.

On July 1, 1873, Prince Edward Island entered Confederation. One of the terms of agreement called for a special loan of $800,000 to settle the Land Question. The Island government now possessed the capital to buy out the proprietors.

The feared legislation took form as a new Land Purchase Act in April, 1874. As expected, it called for compulsory sale of all holdings over 1,000 acres. The price would be set by a three man commission. Expectations ran high among the tenants, but furious protests from the remaining proprietors flooded the Governor General’s office in Ottawa. No doubt, many of them were orchestrated by Robert Bruce. Early in January, 1875, the Act was disallowed and the proprietors heaved a collective sigh of relief.

However, if the proprietors felt the danger had abated, they were badly mistaken. Bristling over the rejection, the Island Assembly passed a revised, even harsher, Land Purchase Act just three months later. A strongly worded preamble recounted the tenants’ grievances and countered the proprietors’ protests. Sales were now made compulsory for all holdings over 500 acres. This time the Governor General caught everyone by surprise, granting Royal Assent within a month. Without further delay, the Land Purchase Act went into effect. On July 20, 1875, Robert Bruce Stewart became the first proprietor to be notified that the Government planned to purchase his lands. His hearing was set to begin on August 16, 1875.

The Land Commission formed quickly. The Governor General, Lord Dufferin, selected the distinguished English administrator, Hugh Childers as his representative. The Island government chose Conservative Assemblyman, Dr. John Jenkins. The third Commissioner varied according to the wishes of each proprietor. Robert Bruce picked R. G. Haliburton to be his Commissioner, as did the majority of the proprietors.

On August 27, 1875, the Land Commission Court began hearing the case of Robert Bruce Stewart. Consistent with past behavior, Robert Bruce formally recorded at the outset his “solemn protest” against the Land Purchase Act. “I protest against it as an unconstitutional Act,” he wrote, “a violation of my rights and liberty as a British subject; and a breach of faith by the British Government, in so far as they permit or sanction it.” He used his testimony as a public platform to recount his past grievances and denounce the government’s long campaign against the rights of property.

The hearing was acrimonious. As he had during the 1860 Commission, Stewart became the representative proprietor, the scapegoat, because he was the most visible and extreme opponent of land reform. The government lawyers fought for the lowest possible price, which could then be passed on to tenants buying their farms from the government. To that end, they focused on every physical flaw in Stewart’s property, emphasizing the swamps, the wilderness lands and the infertile soil. Their witnesses expanded on the tenants’ many improvements. Called into court, certain squatters testified that they had lived on their fenced-in property for twenty years or more, thus earning title, and the court resolved not to pay Stewart for those lands. Ruthlessly, the government lawyers challenged Stewart’s title, belittled the paucity of his records, and implied that those he did offer as evidence had been falsified.

For their part, Stewart and his attorney, E. J. Hodgson, dwelt on Robert Bruce’s basic belief that benevolence from the landlord justified the landed proprietor’s claim to property, and introduced evidence of Stewart’s leniency. Special consideration for Robert Bruce arose out of his unique circumstances as a large resident proprietor. Hodgson argued. Unlike James Yeo and other resident proprietors, Robert Bruce never turned to commercial interests to increase his earnings. His distaste for commerce perhaps grew from lessons learned on Great Russell Street, where, he, his father, and uncle had watched the power of the commercial world slowly chip away at the hegemony of landed interests. Commercial interests were, no doubt, viewed as unwanted competition. Therefore, Robert Bruce never joined the ranks of Island shipbuilders, never operated a store for his tenants, or engaged in any money-making ventures outside managing his estate. His sole goal in life remaining the landed proprietor of a grand estate. As Robert Bruce himself exclaimed, “I may include in the cost the labor of my heart and soul for twenty-nine years.”

Stewart also made much of the disappointment of not being able to pass on his estate to his children. By this time his two eldest sons managed nearly the entire estate. Yet, only within the last year had Robert Bruce attempted to settle approximately 4,000 acres of his property on them. The conveyances were so hastily and poorly executed that the amount and location of the land involved remained unclear.

It remained to be seen whose reasoning the Commissioners would follow. The first announcement of awards to the proprietors became public on September 6, 1875. It proved the final blow for Robert Bruce Stewart. In contrast to the $240,000 he had asked for, he received only $76,500. It was the lowest per acre award. The conveyances to his children were not allowed.

Robert Bruce responded in the same manner he had always employed: he petitioned the Colonial Office. In a short, satirical memorial to the Earl of Carnarvon, Stewart focused on what he felt to be the cruel unfairness of the award.

Carnarvon’s response contained the last irony in the story of Stewart’s proprietorship. The Earl politely routed Stewart’s memorial to its proper destination, the Canadian Governor Gen-
eral, but there would be no redress. By 1876, times had changed in Britain as well as on Prince Edward Island. While the landed elite still held commanding positions in government, the source of their support lay with the commercial interests. In an address to the House of Lords in 1875, Carnarvon remarked: “The Imperial Government having become weary of collecting rents and supporting evictions in Ireland, can hardly do for the landlords in Prince Edward Island what has ceased to be popular or practicable at home.”

Stewart refused to give up but his legal appeals only delayed the inevitable. In February, 1876, Robert Bruce surrendered ownership of all but 500 acres of his vast estate. His dream of a great landed estate was over.

Estrangement

In the wake of his defeat before the Land Commission, Stewart endured a year of terrible turmoil. By the end of 1876, he found himself totally estranged from his children. He would remain so for the rest of his life.

One can only speculate about what caused the differences between Robert Bruce and his family. Perhaps the feud was sparked by the tremendous pressures emanating from the Land Commission hearings and the disposition of the Stewart estate. Another source of friction was more personal in nature. Robert Bruce’s wife, Helen Birnie Stewart, had passed away on August 19, 1871, leaving him suddenly alone after 33 years of marriage. Five years later, on December 7, 1876 he married Harriet Amelia Mayne. From this point, the break between Robert Bruce and his children became complete.

An elaborate marriage contract arranged for the division of Stewart’s estate between his children and new wife. The contract, so carefully decent and equitable to all involved, proved suggestive of past Robert Bruce Stewart behavior. Always just and fair within the law, he expected his family, as he had his former tenants, to react to his fairness as did the wild pets of his youth, with “tameness and affection”.

When they did not, he fought back in a familiar way, by full recourse to the law. At one point, Stewart even had the sheriff seize part of his eldest son’s livestock and farm equipment. Bad feelings and bickering over personal property continued until April, 1879, when a Charlottetown attorney was hired to ascertain the right of possession to all articles at Strathgartney. Deciding on items as small as a silver butter knife, he finally divided the property.

After the split with his family in 1876, Robert Bruce never again set foot on his beloved Strathgartney. His son, Robert Bruce Jr. continued to live and farm on the estate. Robert Bruce Sr.

*His estate was valued at this time at more than $100,000, a considerable amount for someone residing in a colonial society. Obviously, his complaints about the Land Commission’s low award were based more on principle than need.

The End of the Dream

Stewart died on May 9, 1884. The obituary in the Daily Patriot read:

Mr. Stewart has, for many years, occupied a place among the prominent gentlemen of our province. Since his large estates were purchased by the Government, his name has not figured so extensively in public documents as formerly; but on account of the high family to which he belonged, his means and his scholarly attainments, his decease leaves a blank in our community which cannot be easily filled.

The Stewart dream of a grand estate in the New World was never meant to be. The larger forces of social and political change on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as Robert Bruce’s own personality, led inevitably to his defeat.

The Stewarts entered the world of landed interests by acquiring and attempting to develop property just as the fortunes of large landowners in Britain commenced to decline. Eager and newly arrived in London from the Scottish Highlands, David Stewart came late to the scene. Already, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to overturn British class structure and political priorities. As he sank his fate further into the red Island soil, the Reform Movement in Britain quickened. While Robert Bruce attempted to consolidate this island base, commercial forces began to hold sway over British politics and colonial policy.

Just as the Stewart family remained isolated from forces of change moving through British life, they seemed peculiarly blind to the political and social nature of the New World. All around them, immigrants were carving out freehold farms. Tenants, wanting freehold farms, could vote. Politicians desiring these votes attacked the proprietary system, leaving landed interests with scant political base.

Surprisingly, but understandably, Stewart never engaged in any significant commercial enterprise on the Island. This further isolated him and deprived him of the opportunity to establish any local dialogue or to acquire additional influence.

Robert Bruce Stewart took to Prince Edward Island personality traits hardly conducive to the successful attainment of his dream. He was a rigid traditionalist in an age of reform. When forces

"Glorious news for the tenantry" meant an end to Robert Bruce Stewart’s dream of an Old World grand estate on Prince Edward Island.
were clearly massing against him, he pursued his course in an almost Quixotic fashion. He persisted with old allegiances and could make no new alliances of a substantive sort. Isolated and embittered, he died largely alienated even from his own family. In a larger sense, Robert Bruce, with his stubborn ideas of land acquisition and landed rights, along with his paternalism, embodied many characteristics that led the British Empire into its tumultuous decline in the 20th century.

In the end, the Stewart family founded upon the twin shoals of change in Britain and the essential realities of the New World. Their fate was bound up with the Land Question. Thus, their decline highlighted the end of a unique venture in British North American colonial policy.

Sources

This article derives from a thesis on Robert Bruce Stewart written to complete my Masters degree in Canadian History at York University in 1983. A research paper invariably raises many questions which cannot be examined within the scope of the text and leads towards areas yet to be studied. So it is with my work on R. B. Stewart.

In contrast to the paucity of secondary sources relating to Island history, primary sources are relatively abundant, although they are unevenly distributed, leaving unfortunate gaps. For example, while there exists fairly ample material on Robert Bruce Stewart’s life during the 1850s, there is a large gap for the early and later ’60s. An indispensable source has been an array of public documents. These include Colonial Office Records (CO 226) and Abstracts of proceedings of the Land Commission courts in 1860 and 1875. Valuable insights into Robert Bruce’s character and perspective were gleaned from the Journal of the Legislative Council, 1856 (Appendix 1). Secondary details were discovered in period newspapers. For a complete listing of all my sources, one may consult my thesis, located at the Robertson Library, University of PEI.

The Stewart Letter Book, consisting of over 1,000 business letters dealing with the early Island activities of David and Robert Stewart, remains an invaluable source yet to be explored in depth. It could provide insights into attitudes that guided the absentee proprietors and the problems they faced. In his diary, Robert Bruce Stewart, Jr. once mentioned that his father never discarded a single letter in his life. These letters were probably left with Miss Mayne, his second wife, as virtually none of his personal papers remain with the Stewart family. Such material may yet be uncovered. Another totally unexploited resource remains oral history. Along with a relatively strong oral tradition on the Island, there are surviving relatives of Stewart and former employees of Strathgartney homestead. They might be able to clarify gaps, such as Robert Bruce’s relationships with his father-in-law, George Birnie, and his second wife.

A particular deficiency in Island history is the lack of economic analysis of the Land Question. A detailed study of rent rolls might provide some measure for judging the relative success or failure of a proprietor. An economic approach might also allow comparison of Island proprietors with American and British landowners.

Finally, I must give a special thank you to Dr. T. W. Stewart, Ottawa, who allowed me full access to family documents.