

Introduction

The origins of this journey began when I contacted Sedbergh and District History Society to find out if they knew anything about my ancestors. Up to this point my forebears had been a fairly ordinary, strong, bunch, mainly working in the cotton mills of Lancashire. To my surprise I discovered my four times great grand-father, one Richard Sutton, was a local legend. Several sources suggest he was the role model for Emily Brontë's Heathcliff. I was hooked.

Having delved into Richard's life, meeting local historians, visiting archives, reading academic papers and watching a half-hour documentary film which looks at Richard's story, I was left wondering if there were any more Suttons who might be interesting?

My research extended to Canada when I discovered William Sutton, Richard's youngest son, emigrated when he was 21 years old. Richard had inherited his fortune but William made his own (with a bit of a leg up from his father). He owned the first grist mill in Kincardine, Ontario followed by a sawmill and a quarter of the town. He later became the first sheriff of Bruce County, a post he held for 25 years until he was sacked. Now what was the story behind that?

William married Sarah Keyworth and they had six children. Two legends in one family was amazing but then I met their eldest child, William John, who became the brightest star of all. Will, as he was known by the family, moved to Vancouver Island when he was 18 years old. Through research I found local historian Ken Gibson of Tofino on the West coast of Vancouver Island. Ken threw down the gauntlet when he told me there was enough information about Will to fill a book and that many places had

been named after him. Thus began several years of intense research and here we are with *Will Sutton: The Forgotten Trail Breaker of Vancouver Island*.

Sutton Pass, Sutton Rock, Sutton Mill Creek, Sutton Boulders, and Sutton Limestones, can all be found on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. They are all named after my first cousin four times removed, William John Sutton. William John who? You will be forgiven for not knowing who he is, even if you live on Vancouver Island. He is a forgotten pioneer, but he was once well known.

A word about William and Will (William John). There has been confusion both in the past and present with regard to Will and his father, both being named William. Some have confused them (very easily done) so it was quite a job unpicking which piece of evidence belonged to which William. To make this clear I only use William for the father (sheriff) and Will or William John for his son. In the main, I use Will and only use William John for formal references.

Will Sutton S.B., E.M., F.R.G.S., was an Explorer, Timberman, Geologist, Assayer, Surveyor, Lecturer, and Promoter of Vancouver Island, British Columbia and stood twice in the provincial parliamentary elections.

By putting Will Sutton's life under a microscope we are forced to look colonialism in the face; it runs through the generations: Will's grandfather's inheritance emanated from the Sill sugar plantation in Jamaica; his father, like most pioneers, emigrated to Canada for a better life to exploit its resources; Will and his brother, James, capitalised on the demands of North American and European museums for artefacts and human remains by robbing the graves of First Nation people on Vancouver Island. They worked for Franz

Boas who then used his North West collection to challenge the scientific idea of a ‘pure race.’ How do we, in the 21st century, feel about the deeds of our forebears?

We enter the world of early logging, get to know about the dangers of running logs down Cowichan River, and how the sawmill was built on land that belonged to First Nation people. After Will’s cousin, Alfred, had been accidentally killed, the sawmill closed, Will took up the post of Government Assayer which is wonderfully described in an extract from *The Colonist*.

Will and his brother moved to Ucluelet and were amongst the first white settlers there; they built another sawmill and a store at what is now Port Albion and acquired several large timber leases. Still in pursuit of his own dream, William Sutton, with his two sons Will and James, established the Sutton Lumber Trading Company with a capital of \$100,000. James got involved with Wreck Bay placer gold, traded with the Nuu-chah-nulth and became the local Justice of the Peace – despite his earlier brush with the law over grave robbing.

In 1892 Will married Annie Fox who was seven years older than him and ran the family cutlery store in Victoria. Will was clearly not content just being a lumberman so again stood for election in the Cowichan-Alberni district (his first attempt was in 1887). He was unsuccessful but it seems it was a close run race.

On defeat in the election Will again turned to his first love, geology, and took up the post of lecturer at the Michigan School of Mines where he taught for five years and completed his degree in Mining Engineering. On returning to Vancouver Island he became consultant geologist to James Dunsmuir,

owner of the Wellington Colliery Company and the Esquimalt and Nainamo Railway, including the coal rights under much of Vancouver Island. It was Will's job to survey and prospect the area for coal, resulting in him geologically mapping a large part of Vancouver Island. He remained with the company when it was sold to the Canadian Pacific Railway and was still working for them at the time of his death, he was running a survey line for a road being built in Ucluelet.

From 1900 until his death in 1914, Will played a significant role in the movement promoting Vancouver Island to Canada and the rest of the world. He gave many fascinating lectures on the Island and its resources both in Victoria and, during a European trip in 1903, to the Manchester Geological and Mining Society. He achieved several powerful positions: Vice-President of the Canadian Mining Institute (1914) and chairman of its Western Branch; President of the Natural History Society (1912-13); Vice-President of the Vancouver Island Development League (1911); and was also a member of the Board of Trade. He was a founding member of the Astronomical Society, supporting the establishment of a well-equipped seismological station on the Island. Will was one of the first to call for tree conservation and better forest management, giving evidence at various enquiries as well as promoting the establishment of Strathcona Provincial Park. In order to open up the interior of the Island, Will pushed for a network of trails to be built, having already created one of 20 miles himself.

Will Sutton owned a unique collection of minerals, rocks and fossils and planned to retire to write up and publish his vast knowledge on the subject but died before this was achieved. He has been credited with the discovery of over 40 minerals in B.C. and his collection was purchased by the University of British Columbia in 1927 to form the basis of

the Geological Museum; examples are still on show at the Pacific Museum of Earth, Vancouver.

Piecing Will's life together has been like a jigsaw puzzle – a very difficult but exciting one, not knowing what was round the corner. If it were not for *The Colonist*, there would be no book. *The Colonist* not only provides continuity to Will's story but thanks to them we have records of many of his talks and achievements. Other, official, reports, provide more in-depth information on, for example, his inspections of mines; the representations he made to different committees; and the lecture he gave in Manchester.

There are no other books written about him nor any memoirs. The most comprehensive piece of writing is a one-and-a-half page memorial written by his friend, the Provincial Mineralogist, William Fleet Robertson. This gives a brief introduction to his life and points us in the direction of Will's education warranting contact with Trinity College School, Cornell University, Columbia School of Mines and Michigan School of Mines.

He is mentioned in a couple of secondary sources, one on early logging and another on grave robbing; as well as doctorates, one about forest conservation and the other about speculative mining. Family wills and a handful of other relevant documents can be found at the Royal British Columbia Museum Archive. It is thanks to the RBCM Archives that I was able to make contact with a descendant of Will's wife's family, Basil Fox, who not only supplied original family photographs but part of Annie Sutton's diary which has added poignancy to their family visits in 1903.

Will's love of geology and natural history took him all over Vancouver Island and British Columbia, as his

photograph album donated to the RBCM in 1933 testifies. This important album contains images which have never been made public before. There are photographs of Cowichan Lake and River; various mines and ghost towns on mainland B.C.; geological features; Queen Charlotte Islands; and several First Nation villages around Skeena River. Indeed, his photograph from Kitwanga has shown that the famous painting by Emily Carr, *Gitwangak* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, was painted at Skeena River and not Queen Charlotte Islands as has been suggested by its title for many years. The photographs provide glue to help set Will's exciting story within an historical context and help to bring it to life.

Why is this story being told? Put simply, Will Sutton descended from a fascinating family and led an intriguing life. He played an important role on Vancouver Island at the turn of the 20th century - a fact acknowledged in his lifetime but since forgotten. His name lives on in place names but no-one knows who he was – now you can find out.

The journey into Will's world reveals a time when close male friendships were common. There is no better example of this than the many heartfelt condolences from his comrades. *The Trail Breakers*, a poem written in celebration of Will's life, provides an evocative ending.

There is a tension, however, between celebrating the achievements of our ancestors whilst acknowledging that many of their actions were of their time and what we consider now to be downright racist. At times the Sutton story is an uncomfortable read but one which we must not brush under the carpet. We need to understand our colonial past in order to change the future.