

BLACK, WILLIAM ANDERSON II, magnate and politician; b. 9 October 1847 at Windsor NS, eldest child and only son of Samuel Gay Black and Sophia Wright; great-grandson of Rev. William Black (“Bishop Black”)* and great-nephew of Martin Gay Black*; m. 14 January 1875 Anne Bell (granddaughter of Hugh Bell*), and they had two sons and three daughters; d. 1 September 1934 in Halifax NS.¹

Though a farmer’s son from Windsor, William Anderson Black was born into Halifax’s Methodist mercantile elite. He was named for his grandfather, William Anderson Black (1788-1864), who like his brothers Martin Gay and Samuel became a leading Halifax merchant [see Benjamin Etter*]. Taking his early education at the public school in Windsor, William Anderson Black II proceeded to Nova Scotia’s exclusive Acacia Villa School [see Sir Frederick William Borden*, Sir Robert Laird BORDEN], a college preparatory school in Hortonville which offered “a practical business education to those who desire it.”² From there Black went on to Mount Allison Academy (Sackville NB), finally spending two years at King’s College Academy back home in Windsor.³ A bequest from his rich-as-Croesus paternal grandfather enabled Black about 1865 to move to Halifax, which for fifty years had been the centre of the family’s mercantile operations; tradition has it that Black walked from Windsor to the capital. There he became a clerk at Black Brothers and Company, the hardware store and ship chandlery founded by William Anderson Black. In a speech given many years later Black reminisced about his early career: “I came to Halifax in the 60s and served with the ship chandlery firm of Black Bros. & Co. for a number of years. At that time there were but three firms carrying on ship chandlery and hardware business combined in the city of Halifax, namely, Stairs, Son & Morrow [see William James Stairs*], Edward Albro & Co. and Black Bros. & Co. – there were other hardware firms.”⁴

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The shipping industry's ever-growing demand for supplies and equipment helped firms such as these recover from the depression of the 1870s. In 1875, taking with him Black Bros.' ship chandlery department which he ran, Black went into partnership with established ship chandler Robert Pickford. Beginning in the 1880s Pickford & Black moved from outfitting ships to owning and running a fleet of them. Its steamship line sailed the east coast as well as to the West Indies, carrying passengers, goods and the mails; the firm also did business as a shipping and marine underwriter insurance agent as well as customs and ship broker. Among its clients was Lloyds of London. The key to the success of Pickford & Black was vertical integration. Continually diversifying and expanding, it adapted rapidly and well to changes in both the business economic climate and seafaring technology – especially the transition from sail to steam. Merchandising in the form of ship chandlery disappeared only to be replaced by shipping which was in turn replaced by steamship services in the form of agency, brokerage and stevedoring. Though he was the junior partner, it was Black, twelve years younger than Pickford, whose vision and energy dominated the firm. Pickford & Black became an iconic company and brand – its distinctive flag with white diamond cartouche enclosing the initials “P&B” on a black background was instantly recognizable – which outclassed and outlasted most of its regional competitors. It survives to this day as F.K. Warren Limited marine agency [see Frank Kingston Warren*], another nineteenth-century Halifax concern.

The 1890s saw the first of Black's two excursions into electoral politics. Though a traditional conservative whose politics were bred in the bone, Black's decision to stand provincially in the general election of 1894 demands explanation. One wonders whether it might

not have been influenced by the memory and example of his grandfather and namesake, a mercantile grandee and “unyielding Conservative” who died when Black was seventeen. William Anderson Black was appointed a member of the Legislative Council⁵ in 1845 by Lieutenant-Governor Viscount Falkland [see Lucius Bentinck Cary*], an equally unyielding Conservative. In 1857 Black turned down an invitation from Joseph Howe* to join the Liberal government of Premier William Young* in a last-ditch effort to prevent its fall [see Sir Edward Kenny*].⁶ Two years later he was offered and accepted a post in the Conservative government of Premier James William Johnston.*

In 1894, however, the political situation was very different from what it had been in 1857; the Liberals had been solidly entrenched in government for twelve years. The Roman Catholic Speaker of the House, Michael Joseph Power*, who had held one of the three Halifax seats since 1882, was not thought to be in any danger, as city and county alike were solidly Liberal. Yet the election of 15 March 1894, in which leader of the opposition Charles Hazlitt Cahan* was defeated in his own constituency, saw the Conservatives gain three seats (one of which was Black’s) and reduce Premier William Stevens Fielding’s* majority in Halifax by 72 per cent. The election – Fielding’s last as premier – was important historically, as it was the first since 1867 in which neither the Catholic Liberal nor the Catholic Conservative candidate in Halifax was elected. The result may have been a bipartisan Protestant reaction against Roman Catholic episcopal interference in the politics of education in the city of Halifax, which had separate Catholic schools but not a separate school board. Political scientist J. Murray Beck, while acknowledging that Black was held in “general respect,” attributes his victory more to

“Protestant dislike of Archbishop [Cornelius] O’Brien’s* intervention in the Russell Street school affair.”⁷ Black the devout Methodist seems to have been drafted as a Protestant champion to resist ‘papal aggression’ in the form of interference in public affairs by the ultramontane Roman Catholic archbishop. The principal achievement of Black’s legislative career was to get himself elected. He spoke little during his three years in the House and did not reoffer in 1897; in the general election that year his seat reverted to the Liberals.

By the end of the nineteenth century both Black and Pickford & Black were flourishing and ranging far and wide. According to the Bell family historian, “At the time of the Klondike gold rush the Halifax shipping firm of Pickford and Black had sent one or more of their steamers round the Horn to the Pacific coast to ply between Vancouver and Skagway, and W. A. Black...went to Vancouver to manage the business and lived there with his family for some little time.” In 1900 Pickford & Black entered into an agreement with the Government of Canada to establish a steamship service between Canada and Demerara and Canada and Jamaica; its steamship line received a federal charter.⁸ When the imperial royal commission on trade relations between Canada and the West Indies [see William Steven Fielding] visited Halifax in October 1909 Black was among those witnesses giving evidence at length.⁹

By then Black was a leading member of eastern Canada’s business elite. He served as president of both the Halifax and the Maritime boards of trade and in later career would be most active in the financial services sector. He was president and chair of the board of Eastern Trust, founded in 1893 by his contemporary, friend and associate, John Fitzwilliam Stairs;* president of Eastern Canada Savings and Loan; and a promoter, founding director and president of

Maritime Life Assurance – now absorbed in Manulife. He was also a director of Brandram-Henderson, (paint manufacturers), Belding-Corticelli Limited and Fourth Canadian General Investment Trust. In 1921 Black joined a very exclusive club, succeeding elite Halifax lawyer Tecumseh Sherman Rogers on the board of the Royal Bank of Canada.

In December 1921 Black would have been appointed lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia had not Ottawa unwisely deferred the appointment until after the general election, which the Conservatives assumed they would win. Instead, the popular incumbent MacCallum Grant (a Liberal) received a second term. Two years later, however, Black returned to political life with a vengeance. In November 1923 Halifax's senior Liberal MP, Alexander Kenneth MacLean*, formerly a minister in Borden's Union Government, accepted a federal judgeship. This occasioned the second by-election in Halifax in as many years and both parties soon set about recruiting a candidate. Black was already the unofficial nominee of the Conservative Party when the convention met on 14 November to confirm the choice.¹⁰ His Liberal opponent, George Alfred Redmond, a wholesale flour and feed merchant in Halifax, had been one of the two Liberal candidates for Halifax in the general election of December 1917 who stood down in favour of the Unionists.

Black initially declined the invitation to run but changed his mind because no one else would. His willingness to spend his own money on the campaign was undoubtedly a factor. Some local Conservatives doubted the wisdom of fielding a candidate but leader of the opposition Arthur Meighen* insisted that the by-election be contested. Halifax was, and should have remained the safest Liberal seat in the country; no Conservative had been elected there

since Borden in 1911. To the consternation of all, by-election day, 5 December 1923, saw a Liberal majority of nearly 4,000 in the Halifax by-election of December 1922 [see Robert Emmett Finn*] become a Conservative majority of nearly 2,000. Black's victory was historic; not since John STANFIELD in 1907 had the Conservatives smashed the solid block of Liberal MPs in Nova Scotia. It made news and editorials in papers from Halifax to Vancouver, and as far afield as London.¹¹ Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King*, who diverted to Halifax en route home from the Imperial Economic Conference in London in order to make a campaign speech, was angry and chagrined enough to search out scapegoats among local Liberals. The Liberal Party and the King Government had suffered a serious loss of face.¹² A second by-election defeat in New Brunswick three weeks later [see Richard O'LEARY] turned the government's razor-thin majority into a minority.

Black's victory is easy to explain. He won not because the Maritime Rights regional protest movement was gaining ground as a popular cause meaningful to the electorate but because Halifax Liberals were badly divided between former Unionists like MacLean and former Laurier Liberals (who had not contested the federal general election of 1917 which the Unionists won by acclamation). The Liberals could not have fielded a weaker candidate, nor the Conservatives a stronger one. The more credible of the two triumphed in a by-election that was fought on issues but decided by personalities. MacLean had been an MP of the highest distinction, serving briefly as acting minister of finance in the Union Government in 1918 and only just failing to be appointed a member of the first King government in 1921. Halifax voters punished the Liberals for not fielding a candidate of MacLean's stature and prestige who was

worthy of their support. Though it is generally assumed that the key to Black's victory was regional disaffection and protest, the Maritime Rights movement had little or nothing to do with the result. It was a triumph less for the Conservative Party than for William Anderson Black, who was such a local eminence that he would undoubtedly have won had he stood as a Liberal. One may further assume that the size of his majority indicates that some Liberals had voted against party or not at all.

Black's maiden speech in the House of Commons on 18 March 1924 caused a stir. Casting himself as a disinterested volunteer, he asserted that he would not hesitate to oppose the leadership and policy of his own party if they ran contrary to the economic interests of Halifax, Nova Scotia and the Maritimes.¹³ Black was a very active parliamentarian. Issues of political economy were the order of the day and, having spent half a century in business, he was on familiar ground speaking to them. No Conservative MP had ever so engaged the hearts and minds of the voters of Halifax who first elected then re-elected Black in the general elections of 1925, 1926 and 1930 – in 1925 by a nearly 8,000 vote margin. Black could scarcely have been left out of Arthur Meighen's* cabinet in which he was Nova Scotia's representative; he became acting minister of marine and fisheries in June 1926 and minister of railways and canals in July. Black was hoping and expecting to be confirmed as minister of marine and fisheries,¹⁴ an area in which he was far more knowledgeable and experienced, but that post was not filled on a permanent basis [see Esioff-Léon Patenaude*]. Though he is known to have favoured Halifax over Saint John as the eastern terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and was on excellent terms with CPR president Sir Edward Beatty*, Black was not in his portfolio long enough to

make any significant impact. The government was defeated in the federal election of September 1926 and Meighen soon afterwards relinquished the party leadership.

Black apparently supported the candidacy of Charles Hazlitt Cahan MP at the Conservative leadership convention in Winnipeg in October 1927; if so, he might have blotted his copybook in the eyes of Meighen's successor, Richard Bedford Bennett*. As a former cabinet minister, nevertheless, Black remained prominent on the Opposition front bench and spoke frequently and forcefully especially to railway issues. Aged 83 in 1930 when the Conservatives returned to power, Black was perhaps too old for Cabinet, even had the new prime minister wanted to appoint him. Nova Scotia's place went instead to Conservative premier Edgar Nelson Rhodes* who, unlike Black, had not stood in the general election. His old portfolio, railways and canals, went to westerner Robert James Manion*. Denied resuming his portfolio, Black was keen to retire to the Senate but his overtures to Bennett went unrequited.¹⁵ Black remained an MP until his death, the oldest member of the House of Commons in Canada's history. Having suffered a stroke, Black was too ill to attend the 1934 parliamentary session. His iron constitution, however, kept him alive until a month shy of his 87th birthday in October 1934. No by-election was held to fill the vacancy created by Black's death, hard on the heels of which came the defeat of the Conservatives in four out of five federal by-elections in Ontario. This probably explains why Bennett would not risk losing a fifth seat to the resurgent Liberals. Two months before the general election of October 1935 Black's colleague, Felix Patrick Quinn MP*, was appointed to the Senate, leaving Halifax without representation in the House of Commons.

William Anderson Black was as unlikely a federal politician as he was an extremely successful one. In less than ten years he won election or re-election four times. A conservative by patrimony rather than by principle, he cared less for partisan politics than he cared about the economic consequences of government policy, regardless which party was in power in Ottawa. His nearly seventy years in business conferred on him a perspective as broad and deep as it was long; his was the voice of knowledge born of experience. Beginning as a retailer, Black developed into an entrepreneur and promoter and ended as a corporate financier. His base of operations remained throughout Pickford & Black, of which he became chair and president when Robert Pickford retired in 1911 and the firm was incorporated as a joint stock company: Pickford & Black, Limited. Sadly the family business went out of the family less than two years after Black's death. His surviving son Walter, who succeeded him, died prematurely in 1936 and control of the company passed to industrialist Ralph Pickard Bell* (Mrs Black's nephew).¹⁶

Nova Scotia's "Grand Old Man," as Black was affectionately and respectfully known, left an estate worth just under a half-million dollars, mostly in the form of securities. Historian Winthrop Pickard Bell* has left this engaging pen portrait of his uncle by marriage: "Uncle Will Black took an active interest in politics. ... He was a man of great energy who liked to have his own way in anything, but it was natural to him to be genial, and he could be an excellent host. He was a powerfully-built man, and one withered, or partly withered hand and arm never seemed seriously to impede his activities."¹⁷ Before retiring to a life of historical research and writing Bell was a university professor of philosophy. He would have admired that Black, whose shadow had never darkened the door of academe, not only served on the board of governors of Dalhousie

University from August 1920 until his death but also endowed the professorial chair of commerce – “with special reference to seaborne commerce.” Thus Black’s principal legacy was to provide intending businessmen of the rising generation with educational opportunities not otherwise available to them.

BARRY CAHILL

[William Anderson Black’s portrait, painted by British watercolourist Phyllis Chipperfield in 1924, is now in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Photocopies and microfilm of Black’s few extant papers are held by Nova Scotia Archives (NSA). The corporate records of Pickford & Black during Black’s 59-year association with the firm are not known to have survived – BC]

Halifax County Court of Probate (Halifax NS), Estate files no. 13555: William Anderson Black
 University of New Brunswick, Fredericton NB (Harriet Irving Library, University Archives and
 Special Collections), Richard Bedford Bennett papers

LAC MG 26 H, Sir Robert Laird Borden papers

LAC MG 26 I, Arthur Meighen papers

NSA MG 1, vol. 138, William Anderson Black papers (photocopies); William Anderson Black
 scrapbook (mfm)

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Canada and the West Indies (London, 1910)

Acadian Recorder (Halifax), 1875-1930

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Gazette (Montreal) 1923-1934)

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Allen Barry Robertson, "John Wesley's Nova Scotia Businessmen: Halifax Methodist

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Harry Piers, Master Goldsmiths and Silversmiths of Nova Scotia and Their Marks (Una B. Thomson and A. Matilda Strachan, eds.) (Halifax, 1948)

Eric W. Sager and Gerald E. Panting, Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914 (Montreal & Kingston, 1996 [1990])

John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, Canada, 1922-1939: Decades of Discord (Toronto, 1985)

“Triumphed After Many Trials: A Sketch of the Efforts of the Late Hon. W. A. Black in Relation to Trade and Steamship Connection Between Canada and the British West Indies,” Maritime Merchant (Halifax) 13 September 1934

W. John E. Williams, Ralph Pickard Bell: A Biography (Lockeport NS, 2000)

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1. Black's marriage and death are registered (see *Nova Scotia Vital Statistics Online*); his date of birth is confirmed by the death registration. Secondary sources tend to confuse Black with his grandfather and namesake, describing William Anderson Black II as the grandson, rather than great-grandson of Rev. William Black. While the William in "William Anderson" requires no explanation, the Anderson (not a family name) does. It is almost certainly attributable to Alexander Anderson, an employee of the Navy Yard in Halifax who was converted by Black's preaching in August 1786 and became a pillar of the Wesleyan society; see Matthew Richey, Memoir of the late Rev. William Black, Wesleyan Minister... (Halifax, 1839), pp. 155-6.
 2. Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, The History of Kings County (Belleville, 1972 [repr. of 1910 ed.]).
 3. "A Life of Service To His City And Province," Herald (Halifax) 22 December 1928.
 4. William Anderson Black II undated typescript; privately held.
 5. From 1838 to 1928 the unelected upper house of Nova Scotia's bicameral Legislature.
 6. J. Murray Beck, Joseph Howe, Volume II: The Briton Becomes Canadian, 1848-1873 (Kingston & Montreal, 1983), p. 117
 7. J. Murray Beck, Politics of Nova Scotia, Volume One: Nicholson-Fielding, 1710-1896 (Tantallon NS, 1985), p. 261.
 8. Canada Gazette (Ottawa)
 9. "The West Indies and Canada: The Royal Commission," Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1909 (Toronto, 1910), p. 170.
 10. "W.A. Black Was Nominated By Tories," Morning Chronicle (Halifax) 15 November 1923.
 11. "Canadian Sea Provinces / The Government Setback / Eastern Grievances," Times (London) 27 December 1923 ("In the by-election in Halifax the Government sustained a severe defeat").
 12. Ernest R. Forbes, The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism (Kingston & Montreal, 1979), pp. 125-8.
 13. Black's speech was carried verbatim by the Gazette (Montreal) 20 March 1924: "Government Has Not Kept Pledge, Says W.A. Black."
 14. William Anderson Black II typescript, Halifax, 30 August 1926, NSA William Anderson Black papers, MG 1, vol. 138, doc. 9(a).

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15. A letter from Black to Prime Minister Bennett soliciting a Senate appointment has disappeared. Between August 1931 and January 1934 there were four Senate vacancies in Nova Scotia, one of which went to William Henry Dennis*, proprietor and publisher of Halifax's Conservative organ, the Herald. Black's superior claims were altogether ignored.
16. "Halifax Waterfront Firm Changes Hands: Under New Control," Daily Star (Halifax) 29 July 1936.
17. Bell, Genealogical Study, 252.