

LIDLAW, GEORGE, grain merchant, forwarder, and railway promoter; b. 28 Feb. 1828 in Sutherland (now part of Highland), Scotland, son of George Laidlaw; m. in June 1858 Ann Middleton of Toronto, Canada West, and they had five sons and three daughters; d. 6 Aug. 1889 near Coboconk, Ont.

George Laidlaw's youth indicates an adventurous and anti-establishment spirit: law studies in Edinburgh abandoned in favour of joining the rebels of Don Carlos in Spain, participation in the Mexican-American War of 1848, and an expedition to the goldfields of California a year later. After returning to Scotland for five years the young man who journeyed to Canada in 1855 was rather more subdued. He arrived in Toronto during a wave of prosperity and obtained a position as wheat buyer in the firm of Gooderham and Worts, grain merchants and distillers. By 1865, despite seven years of economic instability, he had established his own forwarding firm.

It was through the grain trade that Laidlaw became familiar with the shortcomings of the Ontario inland transport system. In 1867 he published two pamphlets setting forth his views. In the first, *Reports & letters on light narrow gauge railways*, Laidlaw advocated cheaper railway lines, built to the narrow gauge of 3'6", compared with the provincial gauge of 5'6", and proposed construction by means of a system of small contracts let to local residents, each for the grading and laying of a few miles of track. He further visualized using indentured immigrant labourers, who would pay for their passage from overseas and for grants of land by building the railways. He predicted that a narrow gauge railway, built and fully equipped for 60 per cent of current railway construction costs, would serve for 50 years.

In the second pamphlet, *Cheap railways*, Laidlaw suggested using narrow gauge track for the construction of two lines. The Toronto, Grey and Bruce was to run northwest from Toronto to Orangeville and Lake Huron, with a branch to Owen Sound; the Toronto and Nipissing was to follow a course northeast from Toronto to Markham and the Kawartha lakes region to a point on Lake Nipissing. "Your summer sky is darkened with the smoke of burning money," Laidlaw reminded residents of regions to be served by the lines. While trees were being burned in remote corners of the province, Toronto residents were victims of monopolistic rates for firewood. Time and time again Laidlaw urged that new railway charters should prohibit excessive charges for the transport of firewood. Laidlaw also levelled a volley at the Grand Trunk and the Northern, for carrying American traffic in bond across Ontario at rates lower than those charged for local Ontario traffic.

The two proposed railways provided a focus for anti-Grand Trunk sentiment, thereby appealing to Torontonians as well as to isolated settlers. Breaking the cordwood monopoly would reduce fuel prices, and the Toronto, Grey and Bruce could possibly divert bonded traffic, destined for international markets, from the Erie Canal system to the St Lawrence system. Both developments would enhance Toronto's position as a metropolitan centre, and influential businessmen, including George Gooderham*, James Gooderham WORTS, and John Gordon, endorsed Laidlaw's proposals. Until he broke with the Grits he had a close ally in George Brown*; the *Globe* called Laidlaw a prophet and was quick to publish excerpts from "the vigorous pamphlet" as well as letters written by him.

During 1867 and 1868 Laidlaw stumped untiringly on behalf of the companies and in 1868 statutes creating the Toronto, Grey and Bruce Railway Company and the Toronto and Nipissing Railway Company were passed by the Ontario legislature. Both charters provided for the carriage of firewood at low, fixed rates, and stipulated that no foreign traffic could be charged less than traffic in the corresponding local product.

The sod-turning ceremonies for both lines took place in October 1869 at intermediate points, Weston and Cannington. South of those points the routes remained in doubt and access to downtown Toronto became the single most pressing problem for the lines throughout the 1870s. Access to the Toronto harbour was essential if the Toronto, Grey and Bruce was ever to be an alternative route for American bonded traffic. Although both it and the Toronto and Nipissing did reach the harbour by 1873, they were away from the centre of the city, so that the easy exchange of rollingstock and the sharing of repair facilities was prevented.

The narrow gauge lines effectively broke the firewood monopoly and contributed significantly to the growth of Toronto in the 1870s. Not surprisingly, Grand Trunk officials were critical of the narrow gauge concept, and friction between Laidlaw and Frederic William Cumberland, managing director of the Northern Railway, was severe for many years. Locked into a power struggle for control of the hinterland of Toronto, these rival groups showed a hint

of unity only when the ascendancy of Toronto was threatened by an outside interest, such as the Wellington, Grey and Bruce Railway, of Guelph and Hamilton.

Laidlaw did not take part in the construction of the two lines but transferred his attention to the Fenelon Falls region where in 1870–71 the Toronto and Nipissing was being constructed. He proposed a colonization scheme in which a railway, running north from the Toronto and Nipissing, would be built by indentured immigrants who would be paid in land along the route. However, the plan failed to gain favour with the provincial legislature and the Fenelon Falls railway and settlement scheme never materialized. But Laidlaw could not put the idea of building north into the Precambrian shield out of his mind. His observation, that land 200 miles north of Lake Nipissing was certain to be good agriculturally because it was no farther north than the English Channel, is naïve by modern assessments, but commanded serious attention a century ago. In addition to opening the area for settlement Laidlaw also hoped to provide a link between Toronto and the transcontinental railway, then being discussed in parliament, which appeared likely to pass through the Nipissing region. Thus, in 1872, with the support of Toronto businessmen, Laidlaw became president of the Victoria Railway, an extension of the Toronto and Nipissing, from Lindsay to the upper Ottawa River valley. Track reached the town of Haliburton in 1878 but went no farther, and the line became a mineral and timber carrier. Laidlaw had given up active participation in the Victoria in 1876 and his dream of Toronto as the eastern terminus of the Pacific railway faded. But two colleagues, James Ross* and George Stephen*, whose first taste of railway building was on the Victoria, later achieved prominence with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company of 1881.

The Credit Valley Railway, incorporated in February 1871, was yet another Laidlaw scheme. The line was to run from Toronto westward to St Thomas, with branches through the Credit River valley to local termini at Orangeville and Elora. Laidlaw's relationship with the Credit Valley Railway differed from those with his other railway enterprises in that he stayed with it through construction and remained its president for ten years. Through the mid 1870s he conducted rural fund-raising campaigns and lobbied in Ottawa and London, England. In London, in 1877, he floated a bond issue at the height of the depression, despite alleged efforts by the Grand Trunk to subvert the attempt; the success won for him the accolade, "The Prince of Bonus Hunters."

The construction of the Credit Valley was, however, a continuing tale of frustration and setback. In 1874 the province had decided upon 4'8 1/2" as the standard railway gauge for Ontario, and made its adoption a condition of financial support. Thus the cost-saving features espoused by Laidlaw were lost. The increased expenses came at a time of declining prosperity and local contractors could not undertake the big projects. Finally, there was the continuing thorny issue of access to downtown Toronto, where Laidlaw pressed "with dogged resolution" against the Grand Trunk and then against the city council in 1879–80. In 1883, two years after Laidlaw gave up the struggle, the Credit Valley finally found its way through Toronto, but on an alignment two miles inland along what was then the fringe of the city.

Laidlaw's frustration with the Toronto situation and his rebuff by city officials no doubt contributed to one last railway scheme. In 1880 he presented his idea for a system of railways – the Credit Valley, the Toronto, Grey and Bruce, and the Northern, plus a new line between Toronto and Ottawa – to join with a north shore route linking Quebec, Montreal, and Ottawa as a rival to the Grand Trunk. In this plan, Toronto would share the role of Canada's major city with Montreal. The proposed system (excluding the Northern) eventually became the base of the CPR in southern Ontario but Laidlaw was not involved.

Laidlaw retired from his railway career in 1881. Vicissitudes and heart trouble had taken their toll, and his alleged secret ambition to be a gentleman farmer was also said to have influenced him. In 1871 he had bought several thousand acres of land in Bexley Township, on Balsam Lake. This land was traversed by the Toronto and Nipissing line, and undoubtedly served as a source of wood for Toronto. During the 1880s he raised beef cattle and enjoyed his retirement.

He was a visionary more than a businessman. Even his fund-raising activities convey the impression of an energetic man caught up in his dreams of a prosperous agricultural yeomanry, of a city in its ascendancy, and of a nation gaining control over its territory. The Toronto, Grey and Bruce and the Toronto and Nipissing were both converted to standard gauge within ten years, long before the 50 years Laidlaw had predicted. Far from being technically ill-conceived, these lines as built were admirably suited to a pioneering nation with little capital. Standard gauge drew them into an integrated rail network in the 1880s and demonstrated their continuing importance as traffic grew. Speeches and fund raising by Laidlaw produced 500 miles of railway radiating from Toronto. When he retired his

achievements were unrecognized, although acknowledgement did come later. He appears not to have made money from his ventures, and George Stephen had to help him in 1883 when he experienced personal financial difficulty. Obituaries describe Laidlaw as modest, unassuming, and scrupulously honest. He was "far and away the boldest railway promoter," "life and soul" of the Toronto railway movement, and by all appearances the catalyst in a crucial period in the growth of Toronto and her hinterland.

[THOMAS F. MCILWRAITH](#)

George Laidlaw was the author of *Cheap railways: a letter to the people of Bruce and Grey, showing the advantages, practicability and cost of a cheap railway from Toronto through these counties . . .* (Toronto, 1867), and commented on *Reports & letters on light narrow gauge railways . . .* by Charles Fox *et al.* (Toronto, 1867), which he compiled.

AO, MU 20, Laidlaw to J. C. Bailey, 9 Dec. 1874; 30 May, 9 Aug. 1876; 16 April, 6, 8, 11, 15 Sept. 1877; 28 March, 17 May, 9, 17, 26 June 1879. *Evening Telegram* (Toronto), 7 Aug. 1889. *Globe*, February–July 1867, May 1869, March 1871, September 1879, February–March 1880, 8 Aug. 1889. *Toronto World*, 14 June, 8, 9 Aug. 1889. Masters, *Rise of Toronto*, 64, 75, 110–14, 149. Alfred Price, "George Laidlaw – pioneer railway builder," *Canadian Magazine*, 68 (July–December 1927), no. 6: 21–23, 34–37.