

# Boundless Optimism

Richard McBride's British Columbia

PATRICIA E. ROY

# Contents

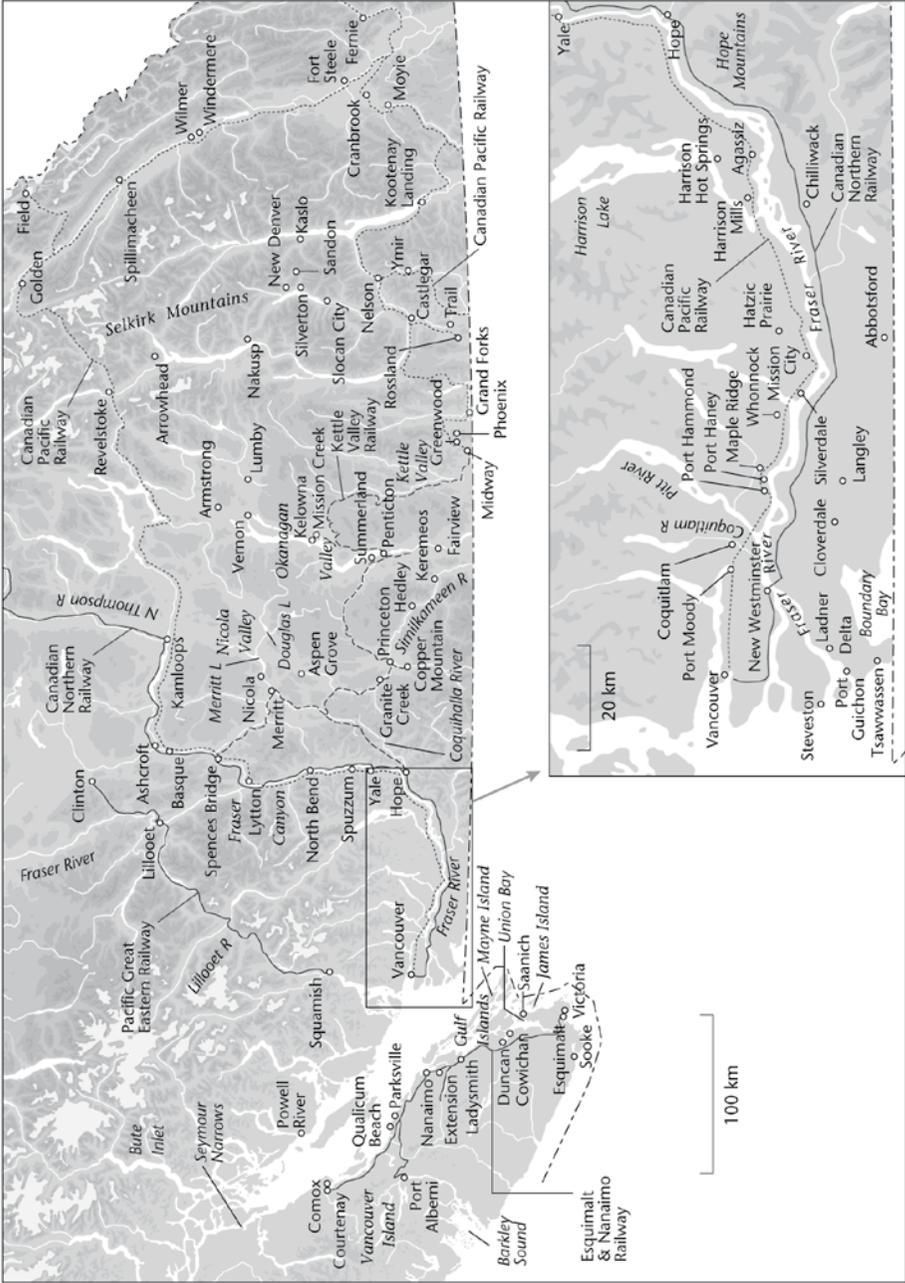
Illustrations / vi
Acknowledgments / xi
Introduction / i
1 A Young British Columbian in a Young British Columbia / 11
2 “Dewdney Dick”: In a Chaotic Legislature, 1898-1903 / 37
3 Establishing a Government, 1903-07 / 75
4 Toward a Wider Stage, 1907-09 / 119
5 Boundless Optimism, 1909-12 / 159
6 The Beginning of the End, 1912-14 / 209
7 Optimism Challenged, 1914-15 / 262
8 Respite in London / 300
Conclusion / 316
Epilogue / 321
Notes / 328
Note on Sources / 392
Index / 395

# Illustrations

- Map of British Columbia, c. 1915 / viii  
“The Belle of Canada” / 3  
“Glad-Hand Dick” / 9  
New Westminster Provincial Jail / 13  
British Columbia Penitentiary / 14  
McBride as a small boy / 17  
Richard and Margaret McBride / 32  
View of Atlin / 42  
McBride and acquaintances at Atlin / 44  
“Leader of Obstruction” / 63  
“The Mortgage on the Brain” / 98  
“Not Lost, but Gone Before” / 102  
“The Dog in the Manger Logger” / 105  
“Piqued” / 116  
“A Man Who Does Things” / 131  
The home on the Gorge / 132  
McBride’s daughters / 133  
McBride and friends on tour / 154

- “The Need of the Hour” / 162
- “Bowser is Willin” / 186
- BC dinner at the Savoy Hotel / 188
- Margaret McBride in her presentation gown / 189
- “Why Didn’t He Think of That Before?” / 191
- “A White Man’s Burden” / 194
- “Colossus of Roads” / 201
- McBride, Bowser, and Thomas Abriel at Nakusp / 204
- “Looted” / 216
- “Miners; Lives of Secondary Consideration” / 227
- Reception for McBride at Prince Rupert / 236
- McBride at Port Alberni / 238
- “Too Proud to Speak” / 245
- “A Timely Query” / 260
- HMS *Shearwater* and *CC1* and *CC2* / 263
- “The Crisis in B.C.” / 289
- “An Edifying Spectacle” / 301
- McBride leaving Victoria for the last time / 303
- “The Smoke of Our Sacrifice” / 305





British Columbia, c. 1915



# Acknowledgments

This biography began its life in 1958 as a term paper, “Sir Richard McBride as a Provincial Premier,” in Margaret Ormsby’s course on the history of Canada since 1867. She confirmed my interest in British Columbia history and took me on as both an honours and a PhD student. In 1958, I did not have the benefit of access to her *British Columbia: A History*, which was published a few days after the essay was due. The essay, however, introduced me to primary sources, notably the Charles Hibbert Tupper Papers in what was known as the Howay-Reid Room of the University of British Columbia Library. The essay also had the benefit of extremely thorough marking, although I was disappointed that the grade was only a B+. Several years later, I discovered that the anonymous marker was Brian R.D. Smith, who had been Ormsby’s research assistant and was then completing his master’s thesis on McBride.

Since then, I have explored many aspects of British Columbia’s history, particularly its railways and electrical utilities, its attitudes toward Asians, and its relations with the federal government. In all of those subjects, McBride had a role. Most of my research was done in British Columbia at the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia Library, the Library of the University of Victoria, the City of Vancouver Archives, the Legislative Library of British Columbia, and especially at the British Columbia Archives. So many archivists and librarians in the province have assisted me over the years – some of them without knowing it – that I cannot thank them individually. However, I do want to make one exception. Just as I received the readers’ reports with requests

for more on McBride's private life, Don Bourdon of the British Columbia Archives let me know that McBride's family had just transferred a small but important collection of his papers, including his diaries, to the archives. I am grateful to him for letting me use them before the archives' staff processed them and, of course, to McBride's descendants for preserving them and making them available to historians.

McBride was more than a provincial figure. Thus, I have benefited from the work of Library and Archives Canada for making the records of the leading political figures of his time so very accessible not only in Ottawa but also by a program that some years ago distributed microfilm copies of the Wilfrid Laurier Papers to major depositories across the country. At the Dalhousie University Archives, I learned of McBride's career as a law student, and at the Churchill Library at Cambridge University I found material on his Better Terms fight in London and on Canada's naval debate. To all the archivists and librarians who preserved the documents and made them available, thank you. Thanks are also due to several friends and fellow British Columbia historians who have shared snippets about McBride found in their own research. They will find specific thanks in the notes.

Although we don't agree on all points, I thank Robert A.J. McDonald of the University of British Columbia for kindly reading early drafts of several chapters and sharing with me his vast knowledge of BC political history. My colleagues at the University of Victoria, Hamar Foster and Wendy Wickwire, offered valuable comments on a draft of my article on McBride's Indian policy, a portion of which appears in this volume. Thank you too to the anonymous readers for UBC Press who forced me to think harder about McBride's imperial role. Although this meant extra work, the book is better for it.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to my editor, Darcy Cullen, and to her associates at UBC Press, especially Anna Eberhard Friedlander and Holly Keller, who shepherded the manuscript through the production process. Special thanks also go to Deborah Kerr, the copy editor, whose careful and thoughtful attention helped me to clarify some matters and made the text more readable, and to Dianne Tiefensee, who proofread the text.

# Boundless Optimism



# Introduction

*It is no mere dream of an enthusiast to see, in the not distant future, a province on the Pacific equal in population to the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, and – owing to its situation – a province of paramount importance to the Dominion and the Empire.*

– Richard McBride, “Introduction,” in  
*Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty,*  
Canada and Its Provinces

**R**ichard McBride was born in the colony of British Columbia on 15 December 1870, seven months before it became a Canadian province. He died at age forty-six in London, the heart of the British Empire. Throughout his life, the British connection remained strong – although he was a loyal Canadian, and above all, a British Columbian, he was also a keen imperialist. Ever the optimistic and steadfast believer in the prospects of his province, McBride wrote in 1913 that he believed British Columbia would soon be “a province of paramount importance to the Dominion and the Empire.” Through the lens of his biography, one can see how a recent colony and distant part of the empire viewed its relationships with London and with its new political centre, Ottawa. At the same time, his biography sheds light on a formative period of British Columbia’s history, when its population grew almost

exponentially, much of its modern infrastructure was laid, and the party system was introduced to the provincial Legislature.

McBride, like many Canadians of his time, was a staunch British imperialist and very much a part of what has been called the “British World.”<sup>1</sup> Although his parents were Irish immigrants, his father was from Northern Ireland and had served in the militia before emigrating to British North America. No doubt he instilled a respect for all things British in his children as he raised them in the Anglican faith. As a schoolboy and law student, Richard was exposed to British history.

Being a British imperialist at the turn of the twentieth century was a popular stance in English Canada, with the South African war strengthening “Canadian enthusiasm for the Empire.”<sup>2</sup> British Columbia was no exception to this inclination. In 1900, when the headlines featured news from South Africa, McBride was among the provincial legislators who unanimously resolved that “British Columbia is British, and we desire the Home Government and the Government of Canada to know that we, as an integral part of the British Empire can be depended upon to assist by men and means, to uphold our Empire.”<sup>3</sup> British Columbians boasted of their connection with the mother country. Although the Royal Navy had begun to withdraw from Esquimalt in 1906, its presence there was a visible reminder of the connection with Britain. Not surprisingly, cartoonists represented the province as an attractive young woman clad in a Union Jack skirt. To encourage the loyalty of young British Columbians, the Department of Education provided special lessons for schools on “Imperial Unity on Empire Day.”<sup>4</sup>

Massive immigration reinforced British sentiment. As early as 1873, the provincial agent-general in London was promoting immigration by such means as publishing “information for emigrants,” but not until McBride’s time in public life did Britons pour into British Columbia.<sup>5</sup> Whereas those born in Britain or its possessions numbered 31,982 in 1901, that number had risen to 116,529 by 1911, at which point they formed 34 percent of the province’s white population. And they were still coming. In the spring of 1913, the *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser* reported that large numbers of immigrants from the “old country” were arriving daily and that five hundred from England and Scotland had arrived in Vancouver during a single week.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, many of the Canadian-born, like McBride, were the offspring of British-born parents.<sup>7</sup>

Not only did British Columbia want British immigrants, but like other Canadian provinces, it sought and received British investment. Indeed, Canada was the main beneficiary of British capital exports between 1904



THE BELLE OF CANADA IMPRESSES THE WHOLE WORLD.

British Columbia was proud of its growth, its British heritage, and its Canadian identity. *Saturday Sunset*, 21 September 1907, cartoonist, N.H. Hawkins.

and 1914, much of which came to British Columbia.<sup>8</sup> McBride's era was the epitome of what has been called the "Anglobloom" that in many places in the British Empire drove the "Progress Industry" – "the massive activity generated by the process of migration itself, and by the rapid creation of infrastructure, notably transport infrastructure."<sup>9</sup> British investors put money into mining, forestry, and land companies. Bonds sold in London

financed most of the new railways, municipal utilities, and the British Columbia Electric Railway Company, which provided the street railway services as well as electricity and gas in Greater Vancouver and Victoria. After the pre-war boom collapsed in 1913, McBride increasingly spent time in London, endeavouring to raise money for the new railways and to negotiate franchises and fares with the BC Electric. British investors, including some who were personally associated with McBride, also speculated in BC real estate.

*The Week*, a local magazine, was only slightly exaggerating when in 1913 it declared, "There is not in Canada today a more truly British and Imperial statesman than Sir Richard McBride."<sup>10</sup> McBride's annual visits to London – some of them of an extended duration – began in 1907 when he first met such prominent Britons as Winston Churchill and the Canadian ex-patriate Hamar Greenwood. With his bonhomie, he easily formed personal as well as political friendships that strengthened his imperial sentiments. As early as 1902, he had spoken of imperial federation, a scheme that might have led to representation of the colonies in the British Parliament and common imperial tariff and defence policies; later he toyed with the idea of seeking a seat at Westminster. As the Anglo-German naval race accelerated, McBride's initial concern was the defence of British Columbia, but Churchill convinced him that a Canadian cash contribution to Britain's navy would be a more effective means of defence. In Canada, McBride argued so strenuously in favour of this that he was granted a knighthood, that imperial imprimatur so coveted by many colonial politicians. London became his refuge when scandal, failing health, fading popularity, and a declining economy made life in Victoria difficult.

Although he was a keen imperialist, McBride was also a loyal Canadian. In October 1913, he told Toronto's Empire Club that "we are true and loyal Canadians, and that we feel in our heart of hearts – that the best way to reach the superlative degree of loyalty of this kind is to be true and loyal Britishers as well."<sup>11</sup> Like a true colonial, he appealed to London when the federal government sought an amendment to the British North America Act, a British statute, to make an unsatisfactory response to his demand for Better Terms, a more generous federal subsidy, part of a "final and unalterable" settlement of dominion-provincial financial relations and when Ottawa disallowed provincial laws designed to halt Asian immigration. He was not alone among provincial premiers in seeking higher subsidies, but he argued that, because British Columbia's rugged topography scattered settlement and increased the cost of providing transportation facilities

and other services, the province had a unique claim on the nation. Yet, he was always a loyal Canadian.

His campaign for Better Terms made him a national figure. Some federal Conservatives urged him to come to Ottawa to succeed Robert L. Borden as leader of the Opposition. Once the federal Conservatives were elected in 1911, Borden invited him to join the cabinet. McBride had campaigned hard for the Conservatives in that election and fought reciprocity, a form of free trade with the United States, because of its possible economic impact on BC industries and his fear that it would endanger Canada's British connection. Paradoxically, he welcomed American investors in the forest industry.

McBride's first loyalty was to British Columbia, whose population was rapidly growing. With the construction and completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the population doubled from 50,000 in 1881 to 100,000 in 1891, almost doubled again during the 1890s, and more than doubled to almost 400,000 by 1911.<sup>12</sup> Throughout this time, the size of the Native population changed little, which encouraged McBride and others to seek to reallocate Indian reserves so that reserve land adjacent to cities could be made available for industrial development by the white newcomers. The province, however, was cosmopolitan, with Asians forming 7.8 percent of the population in 1911. Like their contemporaries elsewhere in Canada, in the United States, and in other British dominions, notably Australia and New Zealand, who wanted to keep their countries white, McBride and British Columbians firmly opposed Asian immigration. In addition, British Columbia had a variety of European immigrants, including members of the Russian-speaking Doukhobor sect who settled in the southeastern part of the province. McBride paid little attention to the Europeans, who generally had a low profile, but did have a royal commission investigate the Doukhobors.

As Michael Dawson noted in his study of tourism in the province, whereas much North American literature relating to modernity focuses on "the search for *order*," the evidence from British Columbia suggests that North Americans were equally determined to search for "*opportunity*."<sup>13</sup> McBride had incredibly good luck in the timing of his accession to office. The silver, lead, and zinc mines of the Kootenays and the copper mines of the Boundary District, which had boomed since the late 1890s, drew investors' attention to the province and contributed to provincial coffers. In the case of copper, for example, the province produced \$875,000 worth in 1898; by 1907, that figure was \$8.2 million.<sup>14</sup> The mining developments inspired demands for a railway to link the coast with the Kootenays.

Responding to them had put McBride's unstable predecessor governments deeply into debt for railway subsidies without providing a railway. Meanwhile, the tripling of the population of the Prairie provinces between 1901 and 1911 created an "almost insatiable" demand for BC lumber and lumber products, creating jobs and, through various lease and licence fees, contributing to the government's revenues.<sup>15</sup> McBride was keen to encourage development in these primary industries and agriculture, although, with some reason, critics accused his government of squandering provincial resources.

McBride would have recoiled at the label of liberal. Yet, his interests fit well into what Ian McKay has defined as the classic liberal order in Canada.<sup>16</sup> He encouraged industrial development and private investment, and he favoured a limited state that concerned itself mainly with preserving law and order, providing education and a few social services, maintaining a strong attachment to the British constitution, and protecting civil and political liberties but excluding some by race or gender from political debate. Nevertheless, as historian Robert McDonald has noted, in the case of British Columbia, working-class liberalism must be taken into account. Certainly, McBride was aware of this, particularly during his first administration when he relied on the support of two Socialist and one Labour member of the Legislature.<sup>17</sup> By 1909, Socialist/Labour members formed the official Opposition but with only two members. Although they traditionally won about 12 percent of the popular vote province-wide, their strength was largely confined to the mining regions of Vancouver Island and the Kootenays and to some areas in Vancouver, but the city was a single multi-member constituency, so left-wing voters had little chance of electing anyone. Although McBride worked with capitalists, notably William Mackenzie and Donald Mann, promoters of the Canadian Northern Railway, he never expected that the province would have to honour the bond guarantees it gave to the Canadian Northern and other railways. Moreover, he was sympathetic to the working man. Much of the limited legislation he introduced while serving as minister of mines in the Dunsmuir government was designed to improve the working conditions of the miners; it also annoyed some mine operators. A decade later, however, he had little sympathy for striking Vancouver Island coal miners.

McBride was fortunate in his mentors. He was the protege of Lieutenant-Governor Sir Henri Joly de Lotbinière, whom Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier specially selected to impose order on British Columbia's political chaos, which saw a lieutenant-governor dismissed and four different premiers in three years. Sir Henri deliberately chose McBride as

premier in 1903, required him to introduce party government, and carefully tutored him in the art of governance. With the help of a growing economy, McBride's first minister of finance, Robert Tatlow, put the provincial financial house in order, kept a tight rein on government projects, and forbade railway subsidies.

Once the province showed a surplus on its annual accounts, it was difficult to resist calls for more railways that would open new regions, keep American railways from draining off the trade of the mining districts, and compete with the Canadian Pacific Railway. That better transportation facilities were necessary was abundantly evident to McBride as his regular tours of the province often fell behind schedule because of gaps in the railway system and poor roads. Those journeys reflected and reinforced his awareness that British Columbia extended beyond its southwest corner. Thus, his railway plans included at least the promise of a railway line for many of its regions. With the benefit of the historian's twenty-twenty hindsight, it is clear that he was overly optimistic in believing that simply guaranteeing the bonds of new railway companies would produce new lines without any cost to provincial taxpayers. Although Tatlow and another cabinet minister, F.J. Fulton, thought his railway plans overly ambitious, and both resigned in 1909, few other British Columbians agreed; they showed their support by giving McBride and his Conservatives overwhelming majorities in the 1909 and 1912 elections. Nevertheless, the railways were eventually completed and still operate today, as do other provincial institutions that were created at the time, such as the University of British Columbia. Prosperity certainly aided McBride politically, but his personal attributes – good looks, a “glad hand,” and a genuine interest in people – helped him capture the public imagination in British Columbia. Shortly before he retired, the sometimes sycophantic journal *The Week* commented, “His commanding personality, his magnetism, and his tact, constitute him an ideal leader.”<sup>18</sup>

His travels through the province allowed him to exploit these assets. On his provincial tours and journeys abroad, Lawrence Macrae, his secretary, often accompanied him and sent dispatches to Conservative newspapers so that those who could not see McBride could read of his doings. As early as 1902, when McBride was only thirty-one, the *Victoria Times* commented, “Nature has done much to assist Mr. McBride, for it has endowed him with a fair presence and a mane of curly grey hair, which lends him a distinguished appearance. A fine flow of animal spirits, and an urbanity and good nature which nothing can disturb have also assisted him materially.” It noted that the chief complaint against him was “that

he is very young.”<sup>19</sup> Years later, people who had been children or young adults during the McBride era could not remember much detail about him apart from his handsome appearance.<sup>20</sup>

Although his striking physique lent credibility on the hustings, there was more to McBride than good looks. He paid attention to individual people. A legislative reporter observed that he never failed “to give credit to those of his colleagues or of his supporters who are associated with him in matters of public interest or enterprise.” It was said that he had a “little black book” in which he jotted down names, so that when he chanced to re-encounter a “Mrs. Jones,” he could then ask how her husband, Harry, was. He personally apologized to a Ladysmith widow for the “inconvenience and unpleasantness” caused by the visit of a provincial constable in 1915. The woman, who had suffered a stroke, had not fully paid for her farm. Of her three sons, one was a boy, another was in poor health, and the eldest was serving overseas. Due to a misunderstanding, she had not realized that the constable had come to assist in securing a separation allowance for her. McBride also had an uncanny ability to graciously treat those seeking favours. One story referred to a municipal delegation from South Vancouver who came to Victoria to meet McBride and William J. Bowser, his law school classmate, long-time attorney general, and source of problems at the end of his career. The members of the delegation left happy, but while taking the boat back to Vancouver, they began to write a report on their achievement and realized that they had heard nothing concrete. “Every time Dick would say he would do something, Bowser would turn them off. Dick was a ‘glad hander.’”<sup>21</sup> He was always polite. When visitors overstayed their welcome, he pressed a buzzer under his desk, which rang in a nearby office. The official there would telephone and ask “Relief?” McBride would answer, “Yes, I’ll be up in just a moment” and would apologize for having to leave to discuss an important matter in cabinet.<sup>22</sup>

As well as showing himself to the electorate and demonstrating his personal interest in it, McBride recognized the importance of patronage in keeping voters happy. Although concrete evidence of party funding is slim, ample material reveals that his government secured the good will of newspapers, the sole means of mass communication, by placing its advertising only with those that supported it. Evidence of the extent of McBride’s personal investments in newspapers is scanty, but at times he had shares in the *Revelstoke Mail-Herald* and the *New Westminster British Columbian*.<sup>23</sup>



“Glad Hand Dick” at work. McBride was friendly to all, including women, to whom he denied the right to vote. Royal BC Museum, BC Archives, D-05726.

From time to time, McBride endeavoured to influence editorial policy. When the usually friendly *Nelson Daily News* attacked his government in connection with the suspension of a local teacher, McBride advised its editor “to adopt a more amicable policy.” He did not desire “slavish

support,” since independent support was best, but he did not want attacks either.<sup>24</sup> As for the Liberal press, he declared at the 1914 Conservative convention that “the Grit papers of British Columbia were not fit to send back east because of the lugubrious character of their criticism of the government.”<sup>25</sup> Criticisms of his policies were never absent but became sharper and more frequent after the boom waned, funds to complete the railways or build a university campus became scarce, and local financial institutions failed.

McBride’s personality remained his strongest asset. As his great friend the *Colonist* newspaper observed in November 1914 near the end of his career, “His personality induces all who come in contact with him with a measure of the optimism that is peculiarly his own.”<sup>26</sup> The optimism that served him so well in good times was a major cause of his downfall. McBride was a super-salesman and promoter of his native province, but as his personal finances also demonstrated, he was a prodigal son.

Shortly before he resigned, McBride wrote to S.J. Gothard, a sometime labour activist and long-time friend. As well as illustrating that McBride’s friendships cut across political lines, the letter neatly summarized his political philosophy, which was that of a practical politician, not a political theorist: “For my own part, I have tried to do my little best and to serve the Province first and the party next. Possibly I may have attempted too much in the end, however, all of the policies I have espoused are bound to reflect creditably on the country.”<sup>27</sup> The pages that follow will assess that claim.

© UBC Press 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

---

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Roy, Patricia

Boundless optimism [electronic resource]: Richard McBride's British Columbia / Patricia E. Roy.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Electronic monograph.

Issued also in print format.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2390-6 (PDF). – ISBN 978-0-7748-2391-3 (EPUB)

1. McBride, Richard, Sir, 1870-1917. 2. Prime ministers – British Columbia – Biography. 3. British Columbia – History – 1871-1918. 4. British Columbia – Politics and government – 1903-1916. I. Title.

FC3824.M25R69

2012 971.1'03092

C2012-904166-1

---

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

*Frontispiece:* Richard McBride in his prime, c. 1915. Royal BC Museum, BC Archives, A-01410

UBC Press  
The University of British Columbia  
2029 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2  
[www.ubcpres.ca](http://www.ubcpres.ca)