

ARMY BIOGRAPHY

THE FIRST “CHIEF OF LAND STAFF” — LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR EDWARD SELBY SMYTH, KCMG

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Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Selby Smyth, KCMG, was a British officer who served first as Adjutant-General and then later General Officer Commanding the Canadian Militia from 1874 to 1880. Despite his British heritage, he is recognized as the first post-Confederation commander of the Canadian Army.

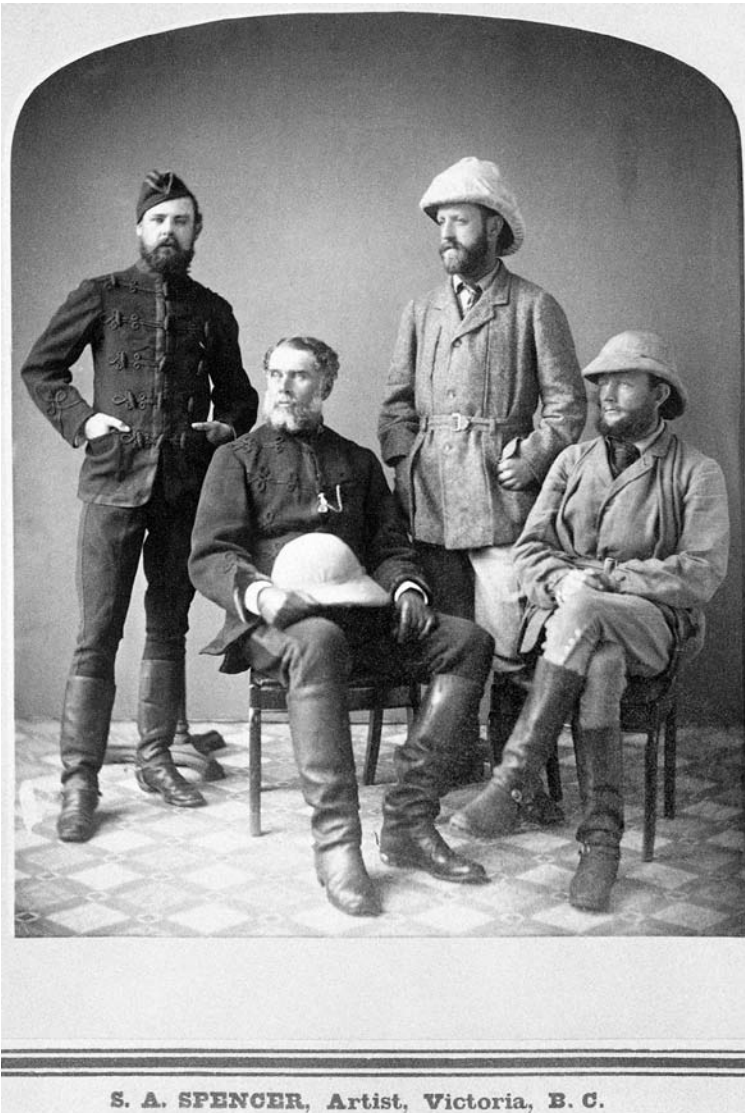
Born in Belfast, Ireland, on 31 March 1819, Selby Smyth was educated at Chiswick, Middlesex, and Putney College, Surrey. He entered the British Army on 26 January 1841, and was appointed an ensign by purchase with the 2nd Queen’s Royal Regiment. Serving with his regiment in India, he was the Brigade Major to the Forces in the Southern Concan and Sawant Warree country during the Campaign of 1844 and 1845, where he saw considerable action with his unit. Again by purchase, he became a Captain on 4 August 1848, and was appointed Adjutant of the battalion and Aide-de-Camp to Major-General Sir Guy Campbell.

Smyth accompanied his regiment to South Africa on the outbreak of the Kaffir War in 1850. He served with distinction during the campaign and was mentioned in General Orders for his conduct in command of a column in action at Fish River Bush. Smyth also commanded one of the detached columns at the battle of Berea, where again he displayed exceptional command and earned himself a brevet majority. Following the war, Smyth served first as Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General, Cape of Good Hope, from May 1853 to March 1855, and then as Deputy Quartermaster-General at the Cape until June 1861.

In 1860 he was detached from his regiment and appointed Inspector-General of Militia in Ireland, a post he held for six years. In 1867, while the flying columns he had organized against the Fenian political movement were at work, he was selected to act as Adjutant-General of the Army in Ireland, and was simultaneously made a Special Magistrate for the County and City of Dublin, to use troops independently in case of rebellion. In March 1868 he was promoted to the rank of Major-General, and in 1870 was made General Officer in Command of the Forces in Mauritius, in the southern Indian Ocean. While there, he acted twice as Governor during 1870 and 1871.

In the years immediately following Confederation, Canada’s defence remained a shared responsibility between British regular forces and Canadian militia. As such, overall command of land forces rested with a senior British officer, usually appointed by England and with Ottawa’s consensus. At first, however, it was difficult to secure a suitable officer, and many shorter temporary appointments were made while the situation persisted. In November 1873, the newly elected Canadian government again pressed the Governor-General for the appointment of a British general officer to command the militia in Canada. Lieutenant-Colonel Walker Powell had been the Acting Adjutant General since August, but he was a Canadian militia officer and therefore technically disqualified from being considered for the appointment at the time.

Much debate went back and forth between London and Ottawa over possible choices for the command. Yet, once the terms of the appointment were finally agreed to through the Colonial Office and the War Office, a decision was quickly made. On 1 October 1874,



Lieutenant-General Edward Selby Smyth, seated, left

Edward Selby Smyth was appointed by the Duke of Cambridge, commander-in-chief of the British Army, to the command of the Militia of Canada. It was a position he held for six years, making him not only the first but also one of the longest serving commanders of the post-Confederation Canadian Army.

Smyth arrived in Canada and immediately set to work. The Canadian militia he was assuming command of in 1874 was already an experienced and rapidly evolving force. Large portions of the army had been engaged in active border security since the mid-1860s, had repulsed two serious raids into Canada by the Irish Republican Army in 1866 and 1870, and had undertaken a long-range expeditionary campaign to the Red River also in 1870. In addition to these engagements, the army remained a *de facto* police force, along with the newly created North West Mounted Police (NWMP), and was routinely engaged with aiding the civil power to keep the peace across the nascent dominion. Finally, the Government of



No. 220. MAJOR GENERAL E SELBY SMYTH.
FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY TOPLEY.

Major-General Edward Selby Smyth

Canada had already taken its first steps towards establishing its own permanent force; Canadian regular army artillery batteries were formed in 1871, and discussions were already underway on the proposed creation of a military college at Kingston.

In 1875, Selby Smyth began an 18,000 kilometre tour across the country to British Columbia to inspect the NWMP, as well as several militia units stationed across the Northwest Territory. It was a long, arduous journey across largely undeveloped country, but Smyth revelled in his duties and the adventure of it. At the same time, he appreciated the growing security concerns along the Red River and Saskatchewan River districts, and needed to see the situation for himself.

Smyth also understood well the military's part in creating stability and security at home until a domestic police force could evolve to assume these roles entirely. In July 1878, he received the thanks of the Governor-General for the discretion displayed in holding the City of Montreal in military occupation upon the anticipation of riots, which it was believed were forestalled by the presence and conduct of his troops. Smyth was later promoted as a reward for meritorious and distinguished services, with a handsome stipend complementing his already considerable private assets. Soldiering in Canada proved both lucrative and professionally rewarding.

Overall, Selby Smyth was well-received by the Canadian Government and the Militia, noticed by example when he was made President of the Dominion of Canada Artillery Association. Upon completion of his tenure at GOC in Canada in 1877, Queen Victoria made him a Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG).

After leaving Canada, Selby Smyth returned to England where he later became the 'Colonel' of the 72nd Regiment of Foot in 1881. The following year he was promoted to Major General, and he went on to serve as Colonel of the Antrim Artillery in 1891. He became Colonel of The Queen's Regiment on 29 August 1893, and died peacefully in England on 22 September 1896.

Further Reading

To learn more about the Canadian Army's first commander, the following sources may be consulted through further reading:

Order in Council—Appointing Major-General Edward Selby Smyth to Command the Canadian Militia, 1875. LAC RG 6-A-1, vol. 21, file no. 604.

Orders in Council—Appointments of Major-General Edward S. Smyth, Major-General Rich, G.A. Luard and Colonel Fred D. Middleton as generals commanding the Militia of Canada. LAC RG 6-A-1, vol. 96, file no. 666.

Report to Privy Council, 10th September 1874, appointing Major General Selby Smyth to the command of the Militia. LAC RG 9-II-A-1, vol. 66, file no. 413.

Canadian Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of Eminent and Self-Made Men, Ontario Volume. Chicago and Toronto: American Biographical Publishing Company, 1880.

Editorial. "General Sir Edward Selby Smyth, K.C.M.G." *Canadian Defence Quarterly*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (July 1928).

Morton, Desmond. *Ministers and Generals: Politics and the Canadian Militia, 1868-1904*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970. Chapter 2: Selby Smyth.

Preston, R.A. *Canada and "Imperial Defence"*. 1967.

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