

LIFE AND TIMES OF A GREAT CANADIAN

PEYTON V. LYON, 1921-2011

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I count it a great privilege to share with you some reflections on the life and times of Peyton Lyon – a dear friend and colleague whom Mary and I have had the good fortune of knowing for 63 years. My focus will be on a few milestones marking the course of Peyton's remarkable career.

WAR ON THREE CONTINENTS

The first is "How Peyton won the war". This is the title of his fascinating wartime memoir as Flight-Lieutenant and Observer in the RCAF. In his opening paragraph, he writes with typical modesty and dramatic impact that:

In my five years in uniform, I never saw a German; the only aircraft my crew destroyed were 3 of our own; the only city we bombed was Glasgow; the guns that fired our way were the guns of Gibraltar. . . . All in all, it may seem surprising that I wasn't awarded the [German] Iron Cross.

Needless to say, there was much more to his war. A highlight for Peyton was his two-year posting with Coastal Command in Sierra Leone, during which he became "very attached to West Africa and its people". Yet, it was while operating out of there that he met disaster, from which he was fortunate to emerge alive.

In November 1942, while on routine convoy patrol out over the South Atlantic off West Africa, his plane crashed into the sea. A careless mechanic servicing the plane had filled an oil tank with liquid soap. Of immediate concern were the six depth charges on board, any one of which could cripple or sink a submarine. Though none had been set safe, five of them failed to detonate. Equally miraculous, the 6th one did, producing a powerful explosion that shattered the sinking aircraft and catapulted the crew trapped inside into the ocean. Regrettably, two died. As Peyton explained later, "We [were] saved by one of our own depth charges."

Also, released by the explosion was a small severely-damaged rubber dinghy, which the survivors climbed aboard – ahead of the sharks. Keeping it afloat and inflated took imaginative measures and strong lungs. As Peyton bragged afterwards: "Then, as now, I had a good supply of hot air".

So far, so good. Still, prospects remained bleak. They were far from land, with no means of communication, and shark fins circling their precarious craft. Yet, once again, chance intervened: a plane did enter the area, spotted the tiny dinghy, and signaled for help, which arrived in due course.

The story did not end there. Once ashore, the pilot of the rescue plane claimed Peyton for his crew on the grounds that finders are keepers. Then, following the war, both the rescuer (George Johnson, who became a celebrated poet) and the rescued ended up spending most of their careers as professorial colleagues at Carleton University.

In June 1945, Peyton—by then a navigation course instructor at Boundary Bay in BC—was awarded *The King's Commendation for Services in the Air*. According to the citation, since Flight Lieutenant Lyon's arrival at the Base, he had

worked incessantly for its betterment. He is outstanding in his lecturing and organizing ability in carrying out his duties. . . . He utilizes every spare moment to carry out research work and has put forward many excellent suggestions which have been incorporated, giving marked improvement of navigational results. His conscientious application to his work has . . . inspired all concerned to greater effort.

Peyton consistently brushed aside the Award as of little importance, arguing that only acts of bravery deserved to be rewarded. Yet, its significance lies in its portrayal of him in his early twenties with precisely those qualities and capabilities that characterized his later life.

EDUCATION

On discharge, Peyton enrolled in the University of Manitoba, an opportunity denied to him before the war. He proved to be an outstanding student, a popular student President and a formidable international debater, qualities that contributed to the award of a Rhodes Scholarship in 1949.

Meanwhile, Peyton – in his capacity as Vice-President for Western Canada of the University Liberal Federation – attended the 1948 Liberal Convention meeting in Ottawa to choose a successor to Mackenzie King. There, his knowledge of Manitoba party politics in particular, and his feel for the political process were put to good use. Observing Peyton in action was a revelation. His proudest moment was heading a procession to Laurier House, and holding high the torch that Mackenzie King lit for him. I would not have been greatly surprised, if Peyton had opted for a political career.

The essence of the Oxford system has been the weekly tutorial. Peyton's tutor was the memorable Isaiah Berlin, noted for his brilliance and bizarre behaviour. Berlin might appear for a tutorial in his pyjamas, or choose to conduct it from his bed. Once, when the phone rang in the middle of proceedings, Berlin told Peyton to carry on reading while he dealt with the call. Peyton did as he was told, cheered by the thought that only part of his essay would now be subjected to the customary bruising criticism. He proved wrong. Berlin hadn't missed a word Peyton had read!

After acquiring his degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, Peyton proceeded to a D.Phil., though not in International Relations as might have been expected. He chose instead to study Henri de St. Simon, an 18th century French philosopher. On his return to Canada, a paper entitled "*Saint-Simon and the Origins of Scientism and Historicism*" was presented to the annual conference of the Canadian Political Science Association in June 1959 and published in the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* in 1961.

YOUNG DIPLOMAT

The award of an Oxford doctorate brought to an end Peyton's formal education. He now faced the need to settle on a career. He chose the Foreign Service. Norman Robertson, then High Commissioner to London, conducted the interview. Among the questions Peyton was asked was whether he would serve Canadian wines to foreign dignitaries. He answered correctly with a "No", and was accepted into External Affairs. There is much to reflect on concerning Peyton's career in External Affairs in the 1950s. Two very different events in which he played a part are touched on here.

On the lighter side was the visit to Ottawa of Paul Hasluck, Australia's distinguished foreign minister. From the first, one thing after another went wrong. The final blow came when he asked to hold a press conference.

It so happened that the media were totally absorbed in the Gerda Munsinger sex-security scandal, and no news outlet could be coaxed to turn up. In desperation, George Cowley, never one to give up, rounded up a corps of junior FSOs, equipped them with pencils and pads and primed them with suitable questions to ask. Peyton was one of the "reporters", but felt his disguise was inadequate. In an effort to salvage what little of Canada's reputation remained, he procured an historic green celluloid eyeshade and rolled up his shirtsleeves with garters to hold them in place. All proved in vain. The Australians were not amused.

Much of his six years of service were taken up with German issues. For three years, he was Political Officer in Bonn and, on his return in 1958, was assigned the German desk.

While there, he was drawn into close, even clandestine collaboration with Norman Robertson exploring the case for formal recognition of the Soviet-sponsored East German regime. As Peyton explained:

On Robertson's instruction, and under his close guidance,

I drafted a study of the probable consequences of the recognition of the Oder-Neisse frontier and the East German regime.

As a result, both emerged as firm but silent advocates. With the Berlin Crisis then at a peak, it was hoped that a bold initiative would ease the "German Problem", itself central to any cooling in Cold War relations.

This was high politics, and absolute secrecy was essential. Any hint of partition would have provoked outrage (and swift response) in Bonn and NATO as well as from Prime Minister Diefenbaker (who when he was leaked the story, concluded that a "commie" must have penetrated the Department).

By the late 1950s, Peyton appeared to have acquired a reputation as an effective officer, likely destined for a long and productive career. How then, can we account for his seemingly sudden action in 1959, in accepting a professorship of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario and, later, at Carleton University?

Peyton did mention to me, on one occasion, that he feared that, with the number of able colleagues in Foreign Affairs with greater seniority, the best he could reasonably expect by way of an end of career appointment might be as a lowly Ambassador to Ecuador.

A more immediate consideration may have been the availability of a position at UWO. Peyton was sounded out concerning his interest and, in due course, an offer was extended. Part of the appeal of academic life was almost certainly the prospect of greater freedom from bureaucratic restraint.

Peyton was frustrated with the failure of the Department to act on its own enlightened policies. On occasion, he was similarly critical of the overly cautious attitude of the Middle East Discussion Group and the Group of 78. His misgivings were summed up in his provocative 1960 Macleans article entitled "Canada is becoming a Mouse that Roars".

Peyton was particularly disappointed with Robertson's reluctance to follow up on their proposal for recognizing East Germany, preferring instead to attempt to sell the idea to Washington first. Accordingly, shortly after leaving Foreign Affairs, he published the

essence of the joint paper under his own name. It was a source of great personal satisfaction that their blueprint for bringing East Germany into the fold was basically that adopted in the subsequent dramatic reversal of Bonn's policy, thus entitling Peyton to claim some small share in changing history.

THE MATURE SCHOLAR

Time does not allow adequate tribute to Peyton for the 28 years he devoted to teaching and publication. This amounted to nearly half his life up to the time of retirement. Four aspects, however, compel at least brief mention:

- The first is the immense contribution his background in Foreign Affairs and his wide contacts made to his effective teaching.
- Secondly, Peyton's timely arrival at Carleton in 1965, shortly after the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs was launched, and his appointment to its Board and Executive Committee, enabled him to play a constructive role in establishing NPSIA on sound foundations for future growth.
- Peyton authored an impressive list of books, chapters, and articles primarily on Canadian foreign policy, US relations, especially free trade, the Middle East, NATO and Europe. Of special significance is his government-commissioned report on *Loyalties of E. Herbert Norman* (1990).
- Finally, Peyton took an exceptional personal interest in his students, their studies and their welfare. Many remained friends following graduation and beyond. Moreover, for several years, he conducted groups of his students on study tours of New York and the UN.

COLONEL BY

Peyton retired from Carleton in 1987, after 22 years of distinguished service. Then, in 2005, he moved into the Colonel By Retirement Residence, where he spent his last years, still surprisingly active. Although effectively confined to the premises except for medical visits, he continued to benefit from regular visits from friends. Also, while *Letters to the Editor* were now less frequent, he took pride in having completed and distributed widely what proved to be his final publication, *Canada's Israel Lobby*.

Within the Colonel By community, Peyton quickly earned a prominent and respected place. His open door and inviting sign to *Peyton Place*, conveyed a clear welcoming

message. A bridge player himself, he sought to enlist the interest of others. A similar attempt to organize a speaker's series on current affairs found little support.

In an effort to enliven and brighten residence life, Peyton, as was his custom, set out boldly to improve conditions at Colonel By. One of his "campaigns", as he called them, sought to improve the selection of paintings adorning the walls in the building.

In a letter to me a few years ago, Peyton rejoiced in his success in bringing

colour into our grey lives. Every time I spot a bright garment, I congratulate the wearer on joining the 'Colour Club'. . . The [dining] room is [now] really quite a bit brighter.

A major disappointment was the limited response to his efforts "to mix the sexes at the dining tables". Peyton's hope was to raise the level of conversation, though he may also have had reasons of his own for favouring the change. Old men, he wrote, "are mostly bores and don't talk." As for women, he acknowledged that due to his poor hearing, "I don't know what [they] are saying, but at least their lips are moving."

It has been a great journey together with Peyton these past 63 years. It will be a long time before we meet another the likes of him.