

# In any role, Mike Pearson was never other than himself

By Norman Smith

(Mr. Smith recently retired as editor of the Ottawa Journal.)

So Mike has gone.

But he would not want us to mourn very long. He cared more about beginnings than endings, about looking ahead. His centenary year speeches wanted us to build rather than dwell on the romance of the log-chute days. The flag he flew for us was to unify Canadians for the future though he too honored history and tradition.

Now that the nation has so movingly paid its tribute to the man and leader, I think he would like us to remember the fun he had along the way, the light touch he had in a heavy world.

In 1937-8 in London this sympathetic, cheerful man tried to guide me through the pitfalls of reporting British and Commonwealth politics, sometimes on a golf course in the rain and he swinging as with a baseball bat.

Since then at the UN, in Russia, the Far East and at home I've seen him under great pressure but rarely if ever out of sorts and never other than himself.

One time in New York amid a serious UN crisis I asked if at night he puzzled over what he would do next day if such and such a thing happened in the debate.

"Gosh no, if I did I wouldn't sleep!" I think he meant it.

Another memory is his going to a ball game in New York when he had just got off a plane from a delicate UN mission abroad. I had imagined he would have closeted himself to write his report:

"No, I am too darn sure right now of what the solution is and that's no way to examine a real problem."

I think only once I saw him angry. The Russians had been wasting time for days in a vital debate in the UN's first committee, of which he was chairman. Suddenly the old

athlete, soldier and crusading son of a Methodist minister took over from diplomat Pearson: he not only slugged his gavel on the desk but stood up to get more height and weight into it.

Years later, after Khrushchev had taken off his shoe to beat his desk in the UN Assembly, I reminded Mike of his own gavel-crashing:

"Ah yes," he twinkled, "but I was chairman of the committee, he was just chairman of all the Russias."

Speaking of Russia, I was lucky enough to go in there with his party in 1955 when the curtain was opaque. What an eight days he lived and never cried "uncle!" Not only East and West met but night and day. It was vigorous politics and vodka, but I was told by those in on the talks that our foreign minister remained robust and cool.

Enroute out of there for Singapore our plane paused in 112 degrees of wet heat at Basra. There in the unlikely setting of the date palms and muddy water of the Euphrates this stout Canadian told of the final meeting with Khrushchev at his summer house on the Black Sea.

"What are you doing in NATO?" the Russian premier had demanded, almost before the introductions had been completed.

Mr. Pearson decided if this was to be the language of the summer house he should use it. He pitched back: "If Russia does not like NATO she must remember she created it by making the United Nations a laughing stock."

This reminded me of a Russian delegate to the UN saying of Mike: "He is clearly a reactionary but a very able one." When I told Mr. Pearson of that he chuckled and cried out as if in pain: "That's two of the most insulting compliments I've ever had!"

But let's get back to Canada, and some random glimpses of the style of his phrase and thrust.

When he was Opposition leader:

"The good Opposition leader in a good democracy doesn't go around looking for belts so he may hit below them, or, on the other hand, looking for a parade merely to head it."

It was also before he was in power when he used to pass on, approvingly, Dean Acheson's maxim that "policy should bubble up from the people, not trickle down from the bureaucracy." (It didn't always work up that way, even when Mike came to power).

In February of 1987 I had two long talks with him in his study, devoted largely to my general question of what could be done to improve what seemed to be a creaking Parliament. He agreed the process had run down and I wrote two articles of his views on that, but here let's savor just this characteristic Pearson simile: "Some parliamentary procedures have become sacred cows and there is nothing more difficult to streamline than a sacred cow."

On Canadians:

"The last thing we should do is shut ourselves up in our provinces; indeed, in our own country, or our own continent."

On unity:

"A destiny that takes Quebec outside Canada means, simply and starkly, the end of Canada; the end of our forefathers' dream, and of our dream. Let us not deceive ourselves. It could happen here; separation and break-up. There are some — on each extreme of narrowness and bigotry — who would make it happen. And there is the great mass of good grey men and women in the middle who, by their indifference, could let it happen."

On personal challenge:

"If we are losing confidence it can't be in the country but in ourselves and our ability to deal with the problems of today."

He looks at youth:

"Youth doesn't see institutions such as government and Parliament and big business changing as quickly as technology, and so they are worried and off balance."

The last word shows the athlete's desire for poise. He doesn't say youth is wrong or selfish or slothful; he says they are off balance — and the inference is left that the stuffiness or contentment of adult Canada is in part to blame.

Mike had a great affinity for youth. It was sad he was robbed of one more Christmas with his wife and children and grandchildren: he loved children. "My difficulty," he said in 1968 when making his farewell address to the Liberal party, "my difficulty is that as I get older I refuse to feel older, or at times even act my age. I have grandchildren whom I embarrass and exhaust. This is disconcerting."

There was some disappointment in Mr. Pearson's mostly Liberal appointments to the Senate. He gave one reply to this in an interview with CP in May of 1968 by telling of a very distinguished surgeon he had invited to join the Senate. It seems the surgeon answered:

"What would I do in the Senate, I'm a surgeon? I would waste my time up there. What do they do in the Senate that I could do as well as what I am doing?"

That reply took me back to a long walk we had one evening when he wanted to get away from the UN corridors. There had been rumors he might enter the cabinet. He raised the subject, saying he had decided not to. He felt he could do more good for Canada and maybe the UN and world peace by "staying in a work I think I really know. Perhaps I am vain but I suspect my influence in international affairs is stronger as a working diplomat than it would be as a politician. Probably at home too. I would become just one of many members of cabinet but as the responsible adviser on foreign affairs the deputy-minister has a special wallop. Besides, I'd be no good in politics, have always steered clear of them."

Well, perhaps that was not the time to enter politics, but there came a time, and millions of Canadians are glad there came a

time. Yet he never quite got free of the complex, for he told CP, in talking of the disastrous move he made in the Commons on his first day as leader of the opposition, "I think my basic disadvantage in those days, and it remained to some extent right to the end, was that I hadn't gone through the political mill."

CP pressed on: "How did you measure up to your own standards since you became leader?"

"Well, no man, I hope, ever completely measures up to his own standards, unless they are too low. . ."

Well, then, what were the qualities of this man? They were varied, sometimes contradictory — always his own.

A man with a legion of friends and yet perhaps relatively few very close friends, for aside from his wife, he marched alone.

A man too soft sometimes to dismiss inadequate cabinet colleagues and yet willing to grasp such nettles as a new flag, bilingualism and unification of the armed forces.

A man whose procrastination sometimes worsened the crises when they did come; yet he made crises productive of lasting reforms: such as the UN peace force that came out of the Suez war — and his building on the growing Canadian willingness to understand Quebec that came out of the earlier separatist outbreaks.

A man whose judgment was said to be largely from intuition — but an intuition surely composed less of hunch than wide experience in public service, in compromise, in diplomacy, in perception of the public's will before the public was aware of it.

A man whose "intuition" was linked always with hard work, for apart from watching sport he spent most of his "leisure" hours with briefcases and pen — perhaps to a fault. The "happy warrior" was also a shirt-sleeved student until he died.

A man of contradictions, too, for though he was the Nobel peace-maker he would plunge into a fight with righteous indignation and

even joy. "Don't be downhearted in the thick of battle," he once said, "it is the place where all good men would wish to be."

Retirement was to him only a relative word. He kept hard at work. I hope I won't offend good taste by quoting two sentences related to his retirement, from among many letters I have cherished over the years.

Nine months after resigning the prime ministership he ended one letter: "As for me and my 'retirement' ca marche; or, as Mar-yon would put it, 'What retirement?'"

Just a few days after my leaving the Journal editorship owing to a health problem, I received (Sept. 5, 1972) a most generous hand-written letter closing with the hope "we may have more opportunities to see each other now, especially if I decide to retire myself."

But more recent, and after the last fatal return of his malady had set in, was this letter sent to the President of the Canadian Club of Ottawa which the president, Eric Morse, has permitted me to use:

Dear Eric:

I am indeed sorry that I am not able to address the men's Canadian Club in December — it is something I would have enjoyed doing. If I am well and strong on my return from the South I will be glad to address the Club at that time.

With warm regards, yours sincerely,

L. B. Pearson

How say farewell to a man like that?

Reporters still savor his very last sentence to the press conference in which he announced he had asked to be replaced as Liberal leader. With a wisp of sentiment in his voice but still a twinkle in his eye, he said: "Well, goodbye; c'est la vie."

As Dr. Arthur Moore said in the cathedral last Sunday, that grey, raining day in Canadian history:

"He saw his life as a trusteeship and not his own to be grasped selfishly."

Nov. 28, 1972