

A Review of an Old Friend's Biography. Memoirs of Huge Keenleyside 1898 - 1992

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I didn't know him well, but in the 1970's Hugh Keenleyside and I spent some time together.

That came about because in the late 1960's fund raising walks for international causes had become all the rage! Oxfam, the English charity popularized them as Miles for millions events and I volunteered to help our London, Ontario crew put on ours.

University of Western Ontario historian Professor Ian Steele was Chair of the local Oxfam Committee and our walk chairman and was assisted by volunteers from several other international aid organizations, I was the new volunteer and happy to assist. I ended up succeeding Ian as walk chairman for a couple of years and then was elected to be a member of the Oxfam Canada Board of Directors and became Vice Chairman.

In the same era, an official Miles for Millions organization sprang up to encourage and support walks across Canada. Because of my work as a walk organizer and a business forms designer, I was asked to meet the Miles for Millions organizers in Ottawa to show them how to tighten up their accounting to reduce theft.

When I was elected to the Oxfam Board, Hugh Keenleyside was Chairman and I knew almost nothing about him. He was from British Columbia and was a dignified handsome man just over seventy. I sensed he was a man of interest but had no idea of his background. I worked with him for several years in the early *seventies* and it was not until recently that I learned just how significant his life had been.

He published his memoirs in two volumes in 1981 and 2 and I received them as a gift some decades ago but set them aside and have just now read them. The Memoirs are detailed notes from what had to be an extensive daily diary in which he recorded events from the important and historical to his thoughts about people and policies. The language at times is slightly dated, but his judgements are timeless. The first volume covers from his birth on July 7, 1898 when his parents lived at Danforth and Greenwood avenues in East Toronto until the beginning of World War Two.

In World War One, Hugh volunteered for the army and as he wrote was '...being prepared for war, to kill people much like ourselves.' He joined the Tank corps but had never seen a tank. The war ended shortly after he arrived in Europe and I believe he returned home having never seen a tank. He went back to school, earned a Master's degree at the newly opened University of British Columbia and began to teach history. A few years later in 1929, he joined the Canadian Department of External Affairs and was posted the same year to Japan to assist in opening a new Canadian embassy and he remained there until 1936. Shortly after his arrival, Japan attacked Manchuria, a part of China on the mainland. His

memoir has pages of perceptive analysis of Japan as it became more and more intolerant in the period before it attacked Pearl Harbor.

In Japan Hugh met and wrote kindly about a surprising number of Canadian missionaries, no doubt a sign of the times, they were there primarily doing work like medicine.

In 1936 he returned to Canada and was assigned the job of planning for and then travelling with, King George and Queen Elizabeth (the parents of current Elizabeth II) on their private train for a month long trip across Canada. The King had just become King on his brother's abdication.

The second volume continues through the tragic events of the Second World War, the creation of the United Nations and up until the late seventies. Hugh had many senior roles in the Canadian government. In 1941, he was appointed Assistant Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs. The Canadian Prime Minister is served by a Cabinet of about 35 Ministers who are selected from the elected members of Parliament to manage the various government departments; Finance, Health, Foreign Affairs, etc. Each of those departments is run day to day by an undersecretary or Deputy Minister, that's the person who truly runs the department and does the work. Hugh had that job in External affairs and then later sought for and got the job as the Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources which he had from 1950 to 1958.

From 1944 to 1947, he was the Canadian Ambassador to Mexico. Next he served for 8 years as the director general of the United Nations' Technical Assistance Administration. Then from 1959 to 1962, he was the chairman of the British Columbia Power Commission and co-chairman at the British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority from 1962 to 1969. There is a dam on the Columbia River named after him.

Hugh died in 1992 at the age of 94. I learned from his memoir that there were so many issues on which we had similar experiences or saw the world alike that it was no wonder we got along so well.

For example, the memoirs are not short of comments about economics and most are not kind. He wrote about the complete lack of useful ideas from economists to deal with the 1929 depression. Hugh knew it was foolish and cruel to waste a generation of human energy, hope and ideas to idleness and drudgery as society did. The only economist he wrote kindly of was John Kenneth Galbraith and on that choice I totally agree with him.

The YMCAs and Hugh's involvement in them is mentioned often. It appears that the Y of the day was a respected service organization, more than a fitness club and certainly not the more evangelical version I see in Tennessee today. In this regard, he mentions Murray Ross a name I'm familiar with because my father knew him. When Dad was in his early twenties, he worked teaching business men's fitness at the west end 'Y' and Murray Ross was there. In 1959 when I enrolled in newly opened York University, it was Murray Ross who was president. And in the 1970's I was one of the founding directors of the Whitby YM -YWCA. The town had a problem with teenagers with time on their hands and no place to go to blow off steam or to hang out, so a few of us got together and started a Y which continues to this day.

The few years Hugh and I worked together were immensely significant in my life but not important enough in his to be mentioned in his memoirs. Here is where we overlapped.

When I joined the board of Oxfam Canada it was being managed by a retired priest, Jack Shea who was the Executive Director. He was a sensitive man but from my recollection suffering from burnout, or it was possibly frustration from a lot of turmoil the well-meaning board had created. He was replaced by Jacques Jobin^[1]* who led an ongoing transition to make Oxfam Canada an independent branch of the English parent while at the same time separating our Quebec colleagues into their own branch. Jacques and the various committees needed ongoing guidance from the Board which our quarterly Board Meetings couldn't provide and as a result one of Hugh or I was needed regularly in the Ottawa office. Because he was in BC and I was in Ontario, it was more practical for that role to fall to me and Hugh and I had developed a close understanding so that it worked. We would often meet when he was passing through Toronto at the Guild Inn in Scarborough. That in itself was interesting.

During the forties the Inn was a happening place, a residence for artists with studios, stables, food gardens, chickens and cows; a country inn on 500 acres on the shore of Lake Ontario. By the time we met it was fading, but my guess is Hugh still preferred it because it must have held great memories. It was there he taught me etiquette at the diplomatic level; that you could drink clear soups by lifting the bowl in two hands, or the wisdom of wearing blue blazers and gray flannels because you could go anywhere from black tie to business casual and also, the tip to always travel with a small flask of your favorite alcohol in case you get in late or unexpected. He was a treat to work with and learn from.

We, Hugh, his wife Catherine together with my wife Mary and our eleven year old daughter Carrie and I went to a meeting of the International Oxfams in England in 1974. OXFAM began life as the Oxford Committee for famine relief in 1942 to send aid to people in Greece starving because of a naval blockade in the Second World War. By the seventies there were several national Oxfam's; the parent in the UK, Canada, Belgium, the United States, and Quebec.

We met in a 13'th century manor house which the Quakers ran as a Retreat House - Charney Manor. Oxfam has had many volunteers with Quaker affiliation including Leslie Kirkley who was then executive director and chaired our meetings. The meetings were run on what I assumed were Quaker principles; there was an agenda but no votes. After a period of discussion, whenever the Chair felt it appropriate, he would comment. If he sensed agreement, he would say something like, "I think we agree we would like to ...". And if he heard no objection we would move on. If he sensed conflict (as on more than one occasion) he interjected with "I do believe it's time for tea ...". Tea usually came with side conversations but if there was still not agreement when we reconvened, the item would be deferred. On occasion, it was deferred to the pub.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Hugh's devotion to Katherine, his wife and partner of 58 years. She is mentioned throughout the two volumes. We saw how much he adored her as Hugh drove us on a sightseeing trip around Oxford. He was driving and teasing her and she asked him to stop. "Oh, I'm just pulling your leg my dear, because you have such lovely legs."

I could not have wished for a better mentor.

*

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email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Note

[1] Jacques and I continue to communicate and he sends my comments to his son who is working in the Canadian Embassy in Moscow.

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