

THE HONOURABLE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN PEARSON, K.C.

AN APPRECIATION

By T. G. MACKENZIE

JUST under one hundred years ago, on April 6, 1856, Benjamin Franklin Pearson was born in the little village of Masstown in Colchester County, on the north shore of Cobequid Bay, a village which derived its name from the fact that it had been the site of the Mass Hall where in earlier years the French Acadian settlers of the Cobegat or Cobequit region had been wont to assemble.

His father was Frederic M. Pearson, a merchant who carried on an importing and selling business in Masstown, and operated a ship-yard at near-by Red Head, in the days when the building and sailing of wooden square-riggers was still a profitable undertaking, when every small harbour in Nova Scotia boasted at least one bustling ship-yard. In fact, when it reluctantly was drawn into Confederation in 1867, this little province stood seventh in the whole world in point of sea-going tonnage. Frederic M. however found time to devote to the less-rewarding business of party politics, was an ardent disciple of Joseph Howe, and represented his native Colchester in the Dominion Parliament in 1870-72. In later years he moved in to Truro town, and carried on a wholesale business there.

Frederic M. was a son of John Pearson, and a grandson of Colonel Thomas Pearson, a man who had fought in the Carolinas on the losing side in the Revolutionary War of the rebellious British colonies, and came to Nova Scotia in 1784, after its termination, when he was given a grant of virgin forested land at Rawdon in Hants Co. He shortly left that bleak prospect and removed to Truro, one of the very few United Empire Loyalists who settled in that zone. Most of the early British arrivals in the latter region, originally of Lowland Scottish stock, had come from Ulster, Ireland, via New England, some twenty-three years earlier. Colonel Thomas in time became influential in this small colonial community, and represented Truro Township in the provincial House of Assembly from 1806 to 1811.

The early history of Colonel Thomas easily rates a separate paragraph. He has usually and inaccurately been described as a British officer who came out to Florida, and married there before removing to Nova Scotia. Actually, he was born in South Carolina, the son of John Pearson (1706-1775), a crown surveyor and resident of South Carolina, who is credited by the Society for

Colonial Wars with having built the first British-American fort on the Tennessee River in the year 1750. When John Pearson died in 1775, just before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, he owned a 300-acre plantation in District Ninety Six. His young son Thomas was among the first to join the Royal Militia under Colonel Fletcher. He became a Captain, a Major, and finally a Colonel in the loyalist forces. After the defeat of the regular British forces in the Carolinas, he retreated to East Florida in 1783, where he fell sick of a fever, and was fully expected to die. Florida had meantime been reverted to the Spanish Crown under the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, and religious liberties were thereafter denied to the Protestants resident there. Accordingly, when he had recovered his health sufficiently to travel, Colonel Thomas and his young wife Martha abandoned Florida and embarked for Nova Scotia. His widowed mother, Mary Raiford Pearson, with her younger children, remained behind on the family plantation in Camden District, Fairfield County, in South Carolina, where she died in 1798.

Many years later, in 1851, the Honourable Joseph Howe during a visit to England had occasion to refer to the four Howe brothers who had earlier fled from persecution in England to establish new homes in the southern British colonies in America. He then stated: "Their descendants number thousands, and are scattered from Maine to California. My father was the only descendant of that stock who, at the Revolution, adhered to the side of England." The children of Colonel Thomas Pearson, who left family, friends, and plantation behind when he fled from South Carolina, could well have been pardoned if they had made a similar boast.

It was in 1872, one year before the death which came so quickly on the heels of his appointment as Lieutenant Governor of his native province, that the Honorable Joseph Howe wrote feelingly in a letter to a personal friend: "I have an abiding faith that long after I have passed away the rising generation, full of generous impulses and not distracted by the cross lights which flash around us now, will recognize the earnestness and sincerity with which I strove to elevate and improve Nova Scotia."

Just forty years later, in 1912, the Honorable Benjamin Franklin Pearson, himself an ardent admirer and disciple of Joseph Howe like his father before him, and then on his own death-bed, could if he so wished have spoken of his efforts on behalf of Nova Scotia in somewhat similar terms. For what Howe accomplished for his native province in one generation in the political field, his disciple Pearson in a subsequent generation

strove to accomplish in the industrial and economic.

As a boy, young Pearson attended the public school in Mass-town. At the age of fifteen he was sent to Pictou Academy, where he studied under Dr. Herbert Bayne and Dr. J. J. Macenzie, both outstanding educationalists. In 1872 he entered Dalhousie College, but returned to Truro before graduation to assist his father in his mercantile business. Even as a boy his interest in politics and economics was keen. He took up the study of law in Truro, and opened an office there. In 1877 he married Julia Reading in Truro, and four years later removed to Halifax and entered legal practice in the broader field open to him in the provincial capital. He continued to reside in Halifax until his death early in 1912. He was then only 55 years of age.

During his early years in Halifax he was an active member of the Liberal organization. In the practice of law he was for a time an associate of Robert L. Borden of Grand Pre, an attorney two years his senior, who became in after years the distinguished Conservative Prime Minister of Canada, but who was then, along with young Pearson, a member in good standing in the local Liberal organization in Halifax.

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B. F. was endowed with keen creative genius, a genius for the organization, promotion, and development of latent natural resources. The Halifax of that day however offered little scope or opportunity for the exercise of such talents. The Maritimers have always been notoriously conservative in financial matters, and the monied families traditionally placed their investments in bonds and in sound bank stocks. It was only in 1891, ten years after he arrived in Halifax, that a chance encounter opened for him a wider prospect.

Dr. F. S. Pearson, an American electrical engineer in the employ of the Honorable Henry M. Whitney of Boston, put into Halifax Harbour while on a summer cruise in his yacht. His mail was by mistake delivered to B. F., and thus was established a contact and a durable friendship which resulted in bringing into corporate being many important undertakings both in Nova Scotia and abroad. At that very time B. F. was working on a plan for the consolidation of the coal mines of Cape Breton, which he tentatively discussed with F. S. When his project later took definite shape he proceeded to Boston, was introduced by F. S. to Mr. Whitney, and secured the latter's support and approval. He then journeyed to London to negotiate with the G.M.A. - the General Mining Association - who were owners of many of the more desirable areas. While in London he was curtly

advised that Mr. Whitney had withdrawn his financial support because of the short term of the proposed lease from the Government of Nova Scotia. He returned to Halifax and after great difficulty was able to secure a longer lease, acceptable to Whitney and the latter's financial associates. Thus it was due to his patient courage and tenacity that the Dominion Coal Company came into being, in replacement of a number of small, struggling, and poorly-financed predecessors.

It was in 1895 that Mr. Pearson directed his attention to securing a better tramway system for the City of Halifax. The old horse-cars were then outmoded and the operating company was in serious financial difficulty. At a meeting of Halifax capitalists, convoked by Thomas Fyshe of the Bank of Nova Scotia, only \$30,000 was subscribed for the proposed electric tramway company, although H. M. Whitney was present and personally endorsed the scheme. B. F. finally had to go to Montreal and Boston to secure the needed capital, and in the end set up a company which has since proved highly profitable for its shareholders. Mr. Pearson however had to assume much of the indebtedness of the old horse-car company for his personal account, before he could secure all the capital needed for the new electrical undertaking.

There followed a long series of conferences, journeys and negotiations which led up to the formation of the Dominion Iron and Steel Co., then and now the most important industrial enterprise in the province, which became possible only through Mr. Pearson's ability to interest American capitalists, which in its turn was due to confidence arising from the energy and rectitude with which he had conducted his previous negotiations with them.

B. F. was also the pioneer among Canadian captains of industry in setting up light and power companies in Latin America. His influence was felt in Cuba and in Jamaica. He organized the Trinidad Electric Co. and sat on its board for many years. Together with Dr. F. S. Pearson he promoted the Sao Paulo Light and Power Co., in Brazil, a company later merged into Brazilian Traction in 1912; it was entirely as a result of B. F.'s successful efforts in interesting the great contracting firm of Mackenzie and Mann, of Toronto, in that highly profitable predecessor company that Brazilian Traction, the largest public-utility enterprise in Latin America, is today a Canadian company with its head office in Toronto.

He was active, again in conjunction with Dr. F. S., in promoting and financing the Mexican Light and Power Company,

which today serves Mexico City and the Federal District of Mexico. He it was who induced the Hon. C. H. Cahan to go from Halifax to Mexico City as the company's chief executive there. It was in relation to this company's affairs that the two Pearsons eventually agreed to disagree. F. S. had a consuming ambition to build greater and ever greater corporate structures, which is indeed the aim and objective of many modern impresarios. Tramway operations were not yet at that time the heavy liabilities they afterwards became, and F. S. wished to lease Mexican Light to Mexican Tramways, the latter being a company then controlled in Europe. Unfortunately for the Canadian shareholders of the former company, he was successful. B. F. himself told me the story. He said he broke with F. S. in 1907 because the latter "wished to pile Ossa upon Pelion".

Where B. F. blazed the pioneering trail, sustained only by his own broad vision and creative genius, many able and ambitious Maritimers have followed in his steps in later years. Among others were Sir James Dunn, the genius of Algoma Steel, who received his early legal training in Mr. Pearson's office in Halifax; and Lord Beaverbrook, famed publisher and financier, who once wrote that his first lessons in corporate finance were learned from the Honorable John F. Stairs and the Honorable B. F. Pearson.

After withdrawing from Mexican Light and Power he had the power possibilities of the State of Chihuahua, in northern Mexico, investigated by a former chief engineer of the C.P.R., and organized the Mexican Northern Power Co., in which Samuel Brookfield of Halifax also was interested, an undertaking with which I first became connected as its General Manager in 1914, more than two years after his death.

At home, he collaborated with Sir Frederick Fraser in the reorganization of telephone facilities in Nova Scotia, resulting in the formation of the Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Co. Together with Frank P. Jones of the Canada Cement Co., he set up the first company ever to mine iron ore on the Orinoco River in Venezuela. For many years he was associated with Matthew Lodge and others in developing the small gas and oil field near Moncton. And he was prominent in the formation of the North West Arm Land Co., which once owned the section of suburban Halifax known as Marlborough Woods.

His interests were legion. But let it not be thought that his activities were solely in corporate finance. His flair was always for creation and not at all in the dull routine of operation. In fact, no sooner did he see a company successfully floated and

financed, that he was prone to hock his own block of its securities, before they had appreciated in value, in order to enter into some new and alluring prospect. He once told me that he "always had a lot of bull pups", meaning young enterprises which had not yet reached the profitable stage. And often he was called on to "bail out" investors in some of his companies which for some reason did not realize the fond hopes of their sponsors.

W. C. Milner relates one such incident which came to his personal attention. He says that a business acquaintance came to Mr. Pearson's office one morning and told him that through some recent unfortunate transaction he had lost his entire fortune. He then proceeded to remind Mr. Pearson that some time previously he had invested \$15,000 in one of the latter's unsuccessful promotions, which B. F. had recommended to him as promising. There was here no question of legal responsibility. But Milner says that Mr. Pearson did not waste words. He sat down, wrote out a check for the full amount, and immediately handed it over, greatly to the recipient's surprise and delight.

His ever-active mind found a fitting and congenial outlet in journalism. When he acquired *The Morning Chronicle*, a paper established many years earlier by his idol Joseph Howe, he devoted a number of publications to advertising and promoting the undeveloped resources of Nova Scotia. He was immensely pleased with the fact that he controlled the paper Joseph Howe had originated. By an odd circumstance he was to acquire Howe's birth-place as well. Among his other activities he had sponsored a gas-manufacturing plant on the shores of the North West Arm, and the Francklyn family at near-by "Emscote" had complained about the fumes from the gas plant. So to settle the dispute he acquired "Emscote", and found himself the proud possessor of a historic property and a home built on the very site of the "pleasant cottage" where Joseph Howe had been born in 1804.

In his later years, in 1909, he took keen delight in financing, through *The Chronicle Publishing Co.*, the publication in two volumes of a new and complete edition of "The Speeches and Public Letters of Joseph Howe", edited by Joseph A. Chisholm, K.C., - later Sir Joseph Chisholm, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia - in the preparation of which his youngest daughter, a Master of Arts of McGill University, ably assisted.

Nor was politics neglected. In the family tradition of his father Frederic and his great grandfather Colonel Thomas, he represented his native county of Colchester in the local legislature, became a minister without portfolio in the cabinet of his

close friend George H. Murray, and there used his great influence in securing the authorization and founding in 1908 of The Nova Scotia Technical College.

During his lifetime a fitting tribute was paid by John W. Regan, in his "Sketches and Traditions of the Northwest Arm." Regan wrote: "As a promoter of numerous enterprises he has conferred great benefit upon the province, but in an unobtrusive way. He took a leading part in organizing the Halifax Street Railway and the Nova Scotia Telephone Co. He interested H. M. Whitney, of Boston, in Cape Breton coal and brought about the establishment of those giant industries, Dominion Coal and Dominion Steel. Mr. Pearson is identified with a score of other useful enterprises. He is the principal owner of the Halifax "Chronicle", St. John "Sun" and Glace Bay "Gazette", and has many warm personal friends."

The key-note in Regan's tribute as quoted is the word "unobtrusive". Not only had Mr. Pearson never sought the limelight of publicity; he consciously avoided it. He chose rather to work quietly behind the scenes as he found that procedure to be usually more effective. Thus only his intimate friends fully appreciated the scope of his numerous activities, and his deep devotion to ideals. He sincerely believed that a good name was rather to be chosen than great riches, and he lived that belief. Although he died a comparatively poor man, so far as worldly goods were concerned, many others have enjoyed a richer and fuller existence because of him.

He left one son and three daughters. G. Frederic was trained in the law like his father, but like him was more interested in rendering public service than in the practice of his profession. He was honorary president of the Nova Scotia Good Roads Association: chairman of the Massachusetts-Halifax Health Commission which did so much for Halifax after the great explosion during the First World War; for years he was Chairman of the Board of Governors of Dalhousie University, and in collaboration with President Stanley Mackenzie did yeoman service in establishing the new Dalhousie at Studley. As president of the Provincial Liberal Association, he used his influence to induce the late lamented Angus L. MacDonald to abandon a professorial career for a political one. He laboured long and earnestly to unite the small struggling colleges in the Maritimes into one financially strong central university at Halifax, but sectional pride and denominational tradition defeated all his efforts, and only Kings College came in.

Like his father before him, he was cradled in the Howe tradi-

tion of public service. It was through him that the first relief ship went to Belgium from this country after the outbreak of war in 1914, for which signal service he was decorated by the Belgian Government. With his close friend the Honorable J. L. Ralston, he had much to do with the recruiting and organization of the famous Nova Scotia Highland Brigade in 1916. In the following year he served in Halifax as Chairman of the Civil Reconstruction Committee. At his untimely death in 1938, the Montreal Gazette referred to him over an warm editorial eulogy as "Lawyer, Publisher, Patriot."

B. F.'s eldest daughter married the Honorable F. B. McCurdy, who took time off from a prosperous stock-brokerage business to enter the political arena in the election campaign of 1911, and later became a valued member of Sir Robert Borden's Conservative government in Ottawa. His second daughter married the writer, and accompanied him on his various engineering activities on three continents. The youngest daughter, after a brilliant course at McGill University, died early, supposedly as a result of the administration of contaminated vaccine.

A man of catholic tastes, a broad outlook, an open hand, and manifold activities, B. F., as his contemporaries always called him, left behind a vast host of true friends and devoted admirers. Although trained in the law, he chose always by preference the path of compromise and peaceful conciliation. He was magnanimous in his judgment of both political and business opponents. Tolerance and greatness of heart were perhaps his outstanding traits, and he detested strife and sectional jealousy. He had a keen relish for good literature, but he enjoyed even more his human contacts, his family, his friends, and the trees and bright flowers which surrounded and enriched the home he loved so well. His kindly consideration for others less fortunately situated was proverbial. When his body at length lay at rest, and many came to pay their last respects to the departed, one who asked permission to do so was the poor charwoman who for years had been accustomed to cleaning up at Mr. Pearson's office. With tears in her eyes, she gazed long and lovingly on the face of the dead, as she softly whispered "*You never tracked across my wet floors with your muddy feet.*"