

*Saw himself
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rather than
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available and was put to effective use at a later turn of the wheel.

Nor, it must be admitted, was he ideally endowed for the representational functions of a head of mission. It was a prerogative of the Under-Secretary in his time – and it may still be today – to be able to call for his own personnel file and see what it contained. When Norman Robertson called for his own file, he discovered in it, he once told me, a report on him by Vincent Massey during his first, brief foreign posting, as a Third Secretary in the Canadian Legation in Washington in 1929. Vincent Massey had some pleasant things to say about his intelligence and conscientiousness, but added that he had found him “a little uncouth”. Since I know that Vincent Massey sometimes also found me “a little uncouth”, I am not too shaken by that revelation. But perhaps it may be used as a pointer to some of the characteristics of his personal style as a diplomat, most of which I found deeply congenial but which may have been attended by some disadvantages. He never paid so much attention to his clothes as many diplomats consider indispensable. He preferred to call himself a civil servant, rather than a diplomat, as I have mentioned. He substituted for a black homburg a softer black hat with a broad brim turned down in front. These were slight things, but they were marks of his fundamental modesty and seriousness and of his desire not to be cut off from ordinary people and not to let his sympathy for them atrophy. I suspect, though, that it may be in the same recesses of his being that one should look for the explanation of why he was such an ineffective public speaker. And that is putting it mildly. At the University of Toronto the speech he gave there after receiving an honorary degree is still remembered as little less than a disaster.

He was also a very poor administrator. That fact is so notorious that I think I need do no more than provide a few good-natured illustrations of it so as to bring it into clear relief. When I was serving under him in London, I sometimes became mildly exasperated by the length of time it seemed to take for my draft dispatches to secure either his approval or correction. I confided my sense of frustration in his secretary, and she counselled me to be patient. She explained that each night she changed the order of the files and papers in the boxes on his desk, so that I could be sure that in due course my drafts would come to the top. So it always turned out. But I sometimes thought that the work of the mission would probably have come to a dead stop if Miss Fleming had ever neglected her nightly task of rotating the compost-heap.

My other illustration is a little macabre. When Norman died in July 1968, he was buried with very considerable circumstance from the Anglican Cathedral in Ottawa, in spite of his having been all his adult life a sceptic and unbeliever. Most of the arrangements were made, and admirably made, by Arnold Heeney, who was a devout Anglican and whose great forte had always been administration and execution. After the service at the graveside was over in the little hillside cemetery at Wakefield, there was a relaxation of tension, as there often naturally is after a funeral, and I remember there was a good deal of laughing and joking, as well as reminiscing, in the car I was in as we drove back down to the highway. I remember that Arnold made us all roar with laughter when he said: “Today has been so typical of the relations between Norman and me; he was always involved in the big issues, while I came along behind to look after the nuts and bolts!” No, Norman was never very good at attending to the nuts and bolts. I sometimes think that it may have been a nemesis on the Department that, after having been for so long under-administered under Norman Robertson, it now seems to my view to have become so laboriously over-administered.

But it is time to return to the lapidary sentences with which I began. He was a man of capacious intellect. He was full of enthusiasm, and ingenuity, and humanity. He could interpenetrate economic categories with surprising flashes of insight and imagination. He was widely and scrupulously literate.

And he was all those things while at the same time retaining and nourishing some saving grains of cynicism. It was he who first made me acquainted with the remark made to his son by Count Oxenstierna, Queen Christina of Sweden's chancellor: “My son, you will never know with what little wisdom the world is governed”. He also told me that, once, when he had been attending a meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers in London with Mackenzie King (it must have been in 1944, I think), he was standing with his back to the wall in the Cabinet Room in Downing Street to let the prime ministers file out, when Churchill stopped in front of him and remarked without pretext or sequel: “You seem to have been taking a very cynical interest in these proceedings, young man”. A remark as shrewd, I think, as it certainly was startling.

Norman Robertson no doubt had his faults. I have mentioned some of them; others I have at least hinted at. But, if you infer from what I have said that I loved the man only this side idolatry, you will not be mistaken.