

J. KING GORDON 1900-1989

*On 24 February 1989
J. King Gordon –
distinguished journalist,
teacher, and international-
alist – died at the age of
eighty-nine.*



Benny Blitt

AN APPRECIATION BY CLYDE SANGER

*Clyde Sanger was King Gordon's
friend and colleague.*

WHEN AN EXTRAORDINARY PERSON DIES, ONE is tempted to echo the words Hamlet used about his father to his friend Horatio: "He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again." The temptation here is even stronger, because Horatio had just said: "I saw him once. He was a goodly King." But it would be a really sad prospect for Canada if we did not see the likes of King Gordon or Frank Scott and others of their generation again. Oh, how we need them!

What made King Gordon so special to so many people? A number of good thoughts were expressed at the memorial service to him in Ottawa. David MacDonald MP picked out the phrase "delighting in the truth" to describe "a life committed to exploring and confronting and revealing the truth." Precise, but never pedantic, a professor of ethics and a United Church minister who moved on to journalism, there was certainly joy and delight with him in clearly expressing important new ideas, and a rolling chuckle as he recalled tales of fine men from Father Jimmy Tompkins of Antigonish to Cookie Lavagetto and Dag Hammarskjöld – especially Hammarskjöld and Tommy Burns and all those UN peacekeeping men. King Gordon was the only person I have known who always carried a copy of the United Nations Charter in the pocket of his jacket. It seemed as important to him as the New Testament must have been to his famous father.

His brother-in-law, Humphrey Carver, spoke of the remarkable Gordon family – of King and his six sisters and his parents, and of his wife, Ruth, and their two children – and their "glowing and powerful bonds of affection." In this special kind of family love, he suggested, were the roots of all the friendships King made in many parts of the world. "For King, the distinguished internationalist, the expression 'The Family of Man' was not just a cliché."

And there was also the sense of belonging to a special place. His Gaelic-speaking grandfather, Daniel Gordon, came out from the Highlands as a Presbyterian minister to Glengarry in eastern Ontario and King wrote in 1984 that he had never quite lost the feeling that this was his native heath. But really his heart's home was in northwestern Ontario's Lake of the Woods, on their island called Birkencraig. It was there that his father, a moderator who led his Presbyterian church towards church union in 1925, did much of his writing under the pen-name of Ralph Connor; and it was there that King himself had what he called "a slight brush with the RCMP." In the summer of 1960 a police launch arrived (at a time when everyone was worrying about fishing licences) bearing a message that King was to get in touch with the UN. Three days later, instead of paddling his canoe on a tranquil Canadian lake, he was crossing the Congo River on a ferryboat on his way to grim adventures as a senior UN information officer.

IT ALL SOUNDS, DOESN'T IT, LIKE AN EXCITING LIFE lived from a privileged and secure base? So it was, to a degree; and, no doubt, these connections were often

helpful. But the point is that King Gordon used them to spread the seed of progressive ideas and to influence the thinking of policy-makers, rather than to gain some pinnacle of influence for himself. Nor can it be just coincidence that he was there at the creation of half a dozen political movements and international initiatives. When he received the Pearson Peace Medal in 1980, he told the folks in Rideau Hall, "I was just a witness and a reporter," and we all smiled at his modesty.

As a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in the 1920s, he did not belong to the Raleigh Club that listened to Lord Lugard and wondered how to patch up the Empire; instead he, Graham Spry, George Ferguson and others formed the "Oh Canada! Group" whose ideas were more in line with the future Statute of Westminster. His part in helping Frank Underhill draft the Regina Manifesto for the first convention of the CCF has been mentioned most hilariously in a memoir "Fifty Years On" by Eugene Forsey (*Saturday Night*, July 1983). And of course he was in at the birth of the United Nations, as managing editor of *The Nation* and then the CBC's first correspondent, until he joined the UN Secretariat in 1950. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the repatriation of 60,000 prisoners-of-war from the Soviet Union, the rehabilitation of Korea after a devastating war, peacekeeping in the Sinai, civil operations in the Congo – King had a hand (and more than just a scribe's hand) in them all.

PEEL OFF A LAYER OF HIS ABIDING FAITH IN THE WORTH of the United Nations and you come to the core of his conviction that, if they only combine their efforts, the middle powers can do so much to lead the world to sanity. They had combined at San Francisco to modify the draft of a Charter which the big powers had put together at Dumbarton Oaks, and King had seen them in action in the Sinai and in the Congo. Mike Pearson and Dag Hammarskjöld, reasonable but risk-taking men from middle powers, were his heroes. The Law of the Sea Conference was steered by lawyers from such middle-sized countries. King wrote often of Canada's role as a middle power and, a latter-day Ulysses, he set off across the oceans to add wise words to several Pacem in Maribus (Peace at Sea) conferences. "Come, my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a newer world."

At a Group of 78 gathering at Stoney Lake in 1985 he recalled a morning in wartime in the New York publishing house where he worked alongside the poet Stephen Vincent Benét, who came in exclaiming, "We must tear up all these flat maps." He also quoted Sonny Ramphal's comment, about the first photograph of Earth from space, that "The world is not only round, but whole." King talked on about the linkages, South and North, peacekeeping and the New International Order, human rights. But to him they were not linkages, they were parts of the whole. And King Gordon was, in every sense, a whole man. □