

CANADIAN CHANCERIES AND RESIDENCES ABROAD

MacDonald House in London, England

Our chancery in London is steeped in history. From 1880, when Sir Alexander Galt enthusiastically set off to fulfill his "10 year dream" of becoming Canada's first High Commissioner to London (only to return 2 years later greatly disappointed), until today, 17 High Commissioners have already left their mark in London. (Fascinating reading for those who enjoy "people" articles, is the book published by Canada House entitled *Canada in London, an Unofficial Glimpse of Canada's Sixteen High Commissioners*, which relates amusing anecdotes and offers insights into the personal lives of the High Commissioners).

In terms of the building itself, it was while George Drew was High Commissioner in 1959 that it was leased from the Americans. The choice of the name, however, caused some concern and is amusingly described in the book as follows:

"The building needed a name. Drew had received letters from Ottawa complaining that the place was consistently described as the 'former U.S. Embassy' and to counteract this, something Canadian was required immediately. A committee considered several alternatives such as The Maple Leaf Building, and the Canadian Beaver Building, but their first choice was Sir John A. MacDonald House, a choice fortified by the knowledge that the centenary of Canadian Confederation would be at hand in 1967.

Prime Minister Diefenbaker agreed, and

Drew ordered the largest possible Canadian flag to fly from the old American mast.

The new building's name was later shortened to MacDonald House after the High Commissioner learned that the staff was jocularly calling it something else. Drew was trying concurrently to obtain the licence plate CAN 1 for his official car. He abandoned the struggle when he heard that the new Canadian building was nicknamed 'the John' and, as he told his staff, it would not have been in Canada's best interests to have his car called 'the Can'."

Thus, in 1959, MacDonald House became the chancery for the Canadian High Commission, yet the High Commissioners continued to work out of Canada House. As Charles Ritchie said, "It was suggested (in 1959) that I move to MacDonald House, but I wouldn't. Even as a child I knew about Canada House." It wasn't until 1971, when Jake Warren was High Commissioner, that the office was moved to MacDonald House, where most of the staff was then located. His successor, Paul Martin, however, continued to hold important meetings every Thursday at Canada House in what he called the "great office". "The location of the desk was the same as when I first saw it 50 years ago and frankly I never really did expect to be using it. Some people in Ottawa have twice suggested that we sell this building and I said 'over my dead body'. It's the best piece of real estate in the world."

With regard to the official residence, it was

Norman Robertson (the first career diplomat), frustrated by being unable to find suitable accommodation, who suggested (in 1946) that the Canadian government purchase a permanent residence. A large palace was offered on "Millionaires Row", Kensington Palace Gardens, for a mere \$200 000 Canadian, but it was refused. Instead he found a 250 year old Regency house at number 12 Upper Brooke Street, which has served as the official residence for the past 32 years. As of this December 1984, however, the official residence and the chancery will both be located on the same property — at MacDonald House on Grosvenor Square. In March 1984, construction began to adapt and refurbish part of the main floor and the north-west side of the building to incorporate the official residence.

MacDonald House renovations

Sections of MacDonald House were built in the 1920's, the core area was added in 1938 and since that time no major renovations have been done to the building. Thus, from a security, fire and operational point of view, MacDonald House was deficient. While a study was being done to determine what would be required to bring the building up to adequate standards, the question of incorporating the official residence into it was raised. As the lease on 12 Upper Brooke Street was due to expire in September 1985, and as it was "exorbitant" to renew, it was decided that it would be economically more sound to pay the \$750 000 for renovations and incorporate the residence into MacDonald House.

Thus, number 1 Grosvenor Square will be the entrance to the chancery and number 3 will lead to the official residence. The ground floor of the residence will be representational with three large reception rooms — an oval room, an ante-room and a reception hall — plus a cloakroom, washrooms, dining room and large kitchen. The first floor will be a self contained residence with 6 bedrooms, 4 washrooms, a laundry room, a small dining room and small kitchen.

At the same time, work is proceeding on the chancery to include a new alarm system, a sprinkler system, new wiring, plumbing and heating plus new interior decorating throughout. Judging from photos of refurbishments already done by the British architectural firm that has been hired, when completed, in January 1986, MacDonald House will be a tastefully decorated, very impressive chancery as well as an official residence.

