

Portrait of Norman Robertson

By Douglas LePan

One of Norman Robertson's favourite quotations was the remark by Dr Johnson that: "In lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath". There have been many lapidary inscriptions about him – at his death, when he retired from the diplomatic service, when he left London at the end of his second term as Canadian High Commissioner there, when he received an honorary degree from Cambridge. I have composed a few such inscriptions about him myself. But the purpose of this essay is rather different. It is intended to be more intimate and personal. And I certainly regard myself as being upon oath!

What has been recorded memorially about him is that he was superbly intelligent; that he was highly literate; that, over and above that, he had a brooding humanity and compassion that he could use to inter-fuse imaginatively and illumine almost any issue in international affairs, and particularly any economic issue; that he could command a seemingly inexhaustible fund of political and economic device. All that is true, I believe – profoundly true. But behind the impressive, almost marmoreal, presence so commemorated was to be found a remarkable creature who was more human, more fallible, more various than those generalizations, accurate though they are, would suggest. Whenever I think of Norman Robertson (and I often do), I think of him striding up and down in his vast office overlooking Trafalgar Square, excited with some new idea or some possible solution to an apparently intractable problem, combining in his talk fragments of economic analysis with literary allusion in a unique and sometimes nebulous mixture, stopping only to spit into his handkerchief from his already ravaged lungs, and then resuming the chase, while I tagged along behind; both literally and figuratively, trying as best I could to keep up – esteemed partly for myself, I think, but perhaps even more because I was not entirely thrown off the scent either by the economic analysis or by the literary allusions. Or I think of him in a series of informal meetings we held in 1947 and 1948 with Sir Stafford Cripps, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and with a few of his senior officials. Norman would

mix the dry martinis himself, very strong dry martinis, and I would pass them about. The conversation would continue over dinner and for hour after hour afterwards. And then, when it was over and the guests had departed, Norman would suggest very gently (for by this time, at least, he wrote very little himself) that I should prepare a memorandum of the conversation in the morning. I would leave the hotel in a haze shot through with something like panic and would almost collapse as I was met by the cold night air blowing across Hyde Park. Or I think of him sitting relaxed, and Buddha-like, and with a brow as bare and broad as Shakespeare's in the Droeshout engraving, in his office down the hallway in the East Block when he was Secretary to the Cabinet and Clerk of the Privy Council and I was Mr Pearson's Special Assistant and I would come to consult him on some issue that was arising in Cabinet, or some problem that was perplexing the Department, or some subject that Mr Pearson was intending to deal with in public; and he would as often as not come up with a solution from the wealth of his experience and reading, and in the process would unobtrusively instruct me in how principle and shrewdness were both required in the formation of policy and how enthusiasm needed to be tempered by knowledge of the political situation and the political possibilities. Any conversation with him became almost inevitably part of one's continuing education in the art of policy-making in a democracy.

Political masters

To write of Norman Robertson's relations with his political masters – with ministers and with political parties, that is – would take not one essay but several. But there are some matters that I should like to set straight.

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*Dry martinis
conversation
and memoranda*