

At the San Francisco Conference 1945

by Charles Ritchie

*The United Nations was founded at San Francisco in 1945. Canada was represented by a strong delegation, one member of which was Charles Ritchie, who later became Canada's ambassador to the United Nations. He is now retired, lives mostly in Ottawa, and along the way published bits from the diary he kept. What follows are some of his entries made at San Francisco, as found in *The Siren Years*, the winner of the Governor General's Award for 1974. It was published by Mac-Millan of Canada, whom *International Perspectives* thanks for permission to reprint this excerpt.*

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On the train *en route* to San Francisco. (We were on our way to the San Francisco Conference, which was to open in the Opera House there on 25 April and set up the machinery of the United Nations. I was an adviser to the Canadian delegation.) Luncheon with Mackenzie King and was charmed by the fat little conjurer with his flickering, shifty eyes and appliqué smile. He has eyes that can look like grey stones or can shine with amusement or film with sentiment. He chats away incessantly — he seems very pleased with himself, delightfully so, pleased with his own cleverness and with his own survival. He talked of the "fun" of parliamentary tactics which cannot, he added regretfully, be so freely indulged in time of war. He talked of the conscription crisis and said that when it was viewed from the historical point of view its most significant feature would seem to be that the French-Canadian Ministers remained in the Government. That is what saved Canada's unity. I irritated him by remarking that our troops must be thoroughly tired by now. He replied, "They have had two months' rest," (*when?* I should like to know) and said, "I knew during the recruitment crisis that they were due for that rest but this I could not reveal."

He described Roosevelt's funeral at Hyde Park naturally and effectively, the silence in the garden and the rightness of the ceremony. He spoke affectionately but not over-sentimentally of Roosevelt himself, adding, "When I last saw him I felt the end might come at any moment. When any subject came up about which he had a complex of worry he collapsed completely. When they called me from the White House to tell me of his death I did not even

go to the telephone. I knew what had happened without being told."

Talking of Mussolini he said, "A remarkably finely-shaped head — the head of a Caesar — deep-set eyes full of intelligence. He did a lot of good — cleaned up a lot of corruption, but he had too much power for too long. They worship false gods in Europe — that is the trouble — Europe is too full of pictures of Napoleon and statues of the Caesars."

26 April 1945. *San Francisco.*

The San Francisco Conference. San Francisco is as lively as a circus — the setting and the audience are much more amusing than the Conference performance. No one can resist the attraction of the town and the cheerfulness of the its inhabitants. Nowhere could have been found in the world which is more of a contrast to the battered cities and tired people of Europe. The shock which I felt on arriving in the normality of Ottawa after England is nothing compared with what one would have felt coming from blacked-out London, Paris or Moscow to this holiday city. The Bay is a beautiful background, the sun shines perpetually, the streets are thronged, there are American sailors everywhere with their girls and this somehow adds to the musical comedy atmosphere. You expect them at any moment to break into song and dance, and the illusion is heightened because every shop and café wafts light music from thousands of radios. Colours too are of circus brightness, the flamboyant advertisements, the flags of all the Conference nations, the brilliant yellow taxis. This seems a technicolor world glossy with cheerful self-assurance. The people are full of curiosity about the Conference delegates. They crowd around them like the friendly, innocent Indians who crowded around the Spanish adventurers when they came to America and gaped at their armour and took their strings of coloured beads for real. The delegates are less picturesque than they should be to justify so much curiosity. There are the inevitable Arabs and some Indians in turbans who are worth the price of admission, and the Saudi Arabian prince who gleams like Valentino, but in general the delegates are just so many men in business suits with circular Conference pins in their buttonholes making them look as if they were here for the Elks' Convention. The exceptions are the Russians — they have stolen the show. People are impressed, excited, mystified and nervous about the Russians. Groups of wooden-looking peasant