

PEARSONS UP THE GATINEAU



Landon Pearson
The Pearson Centre for Progressive Policy
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In the autumn of 1928, Lester Bowles (Mike) Pearson, future Nobel Prize winner and Prime Minister of Canada, arrived in Ottawa with his wife, Maryon, their baby son (Geoffrey) and another (Patricia) on the way. Mike had just left life as a university professor in Toronto to join Canada's fledgling foreign service. From this point on, "the Gatineau" became part of their life story. It became part of my own story as well, following my marriage to Geoffrey Pearson in 1951, and the Gatineau still holds special meaning for our children and grandchildren. This is the story of the Pearsons in the Gatineau, a story which began all those years ago and which continues to this day.

Mike and Maryon's early excursions across the Ottawa River into Quebec and "up the Gatineau" were seasonal ones as neither was a skier. They spent summer afternoons with their children at the cottages of Mike's new colleagues at the Department of External Affairs and took autumn walks with friends in the hills. Even in those early days (as my father-in-law once told me) they hoped that one day they would have their own place in the Gatineau. Mike was the son of a Methodist minister who was moved every three or four years to a church in yet another small Ontario town, so Mike was always going to a new school and having to make new friends. Unlike Maryon, he had never known a summer cottage as he was growing up. Although Maryon's family had never owned one either they had often rented cottages at lakes near Winnipeg when she was a child, so the idea of a permanent place to retreat to to balance the vagaries of what they then expected to be a foreign service career, enchanted them both. However, they had to put that dream on hold in 1935 when Mike was posted to the Canadian High Commission in London and the family sailed for England.

The purchase of a cottage at Burnett in Chelsea (then West Hull), the occupation of the Prime Minister's country residence at Harrington Lake, and Mike's eventual burial at MacLaren Cemetery in Wakefield all lay in the future. It is clear though, that from his very first visit, the Gatineau had taken hold of Mike's imagination. Returning to London on his own after home leave in the summer of 1939 he sent frequent letters, full of affection and reassurance, to the family he had left behind in Canada. On October 1, 1940, during a brief pause in Blitz his longing to be with them in Ottawa overcame him and he wrote ;

"This is a lovely autumn morning. How wonderful it must be in the Gatineau now and how lonely I feel when I think how far away that is!"

A couple of weeks after writing this letter Mike became involved in the history of the Gatineau in quite a different way. After Westminster Hall was damaged in one of the nightly bombing raids a telegram was received in the High Commission marked "Secret and Most Immediate". Mr. Mackenzie King wanted a couple of stones from that historical building for his own "ruins" at Kingsmere and, somehow, in spite of his bemusement at the request, Mike managed to procure them and have them shipped back to Canada!

Mike's war letters to Maryon and his children are remarkable, vivid accounts of daily life during the Blitz that are full of admiration for the resilience of Londoners. The last one dates from early April, 1941 just before his return to Ottawa. His memoir records his pleasure at being back with his family and engaged in absorbing work in proximity to old and congenial friends and to the Gatineau. "For me it was a happy year" he wrote. "I played tennis in the summer with frequent forays up the Gatineau and to the fishing club." Fishing was one of Mike's many sporting passions and the club was the Five Lakes Fishing Club near Wakefield. In 1941, Mike was offered and took up a special diplomatic membership in the club that he resigned the following year when he left for another posting in Washington.

Mike was very active in Washington gaining the confidence of many significant people and on January 1, 1945 he became ambassador, the first career diplomat named as Canada's representative to the USA. As the War drew to a close the Allies began to plan for the future and Mike was naturally involved. He was an important Canadian delegate to the conference in San Francisco that drafted the Charter for the United Nations. The War ended, the Charter was signed and Mike's commitment to the future of the UN was sealed. Throughout his career he was fully engaged with the UN and it was there, in New York, that in November 1956 he helped to prevent the outbreak of a full-scale war by negotiating an end to the Suez crisis. For this, he was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize for Peace.

In 1946 Mike was summoned back from Washington to Ottawa to become Undersecretary of State (deputy minister) in the Department of External Affairs. Maryon, of course, returned with him. Two years later, in late August, 1948, Mike was persuaded by Louis St. Laurent, who had succeeded Mackenzie King as the leader of the Liberal Party and also as Prime Minister, to leave the civil service to become his Secretary of State for External Affairs (foreign minister). A seat was found for him in Algoma East, which he held successfully until he retired in 1968; the diplomat turned politician.

From now on Ottawa would be Mike and Maryon's permanent home and once again they began to think again of a place in the Gatineau. For the first couple of years after they came back from Washington they split the rental costs of a cottage overlooking Bell Lake near Masham with good friends Hume Wrong, a career diplomat in External Affairs, and his wife, Joyce. Later both Geoffrey and Patricia ("Patsy") remembered their parents renting a cottage across the Gatineau River from Kirk's Ferry. Mike's indomitable executive assistant, Mary MacDonald, loved to recount how she had had to row across on June 24, 1950 from her place in Tenaga to bring him the news of the outbreak of hostilities in Korea as they had no telephone.

My direct knowledge of the Pearson family in the Gatineau dates from the late summer of 1952 when Geoffrey and I sailed back to Canada from Oxford where we had spent the first seven months of our married life. I grew up in London, Ontario and met Geoffrey at the University of Toronto so Ottawa was new to me. We settled happily in Centretown as Geoffrey was initiated into his career at External Affairs and Ottawa, in spite of our numerous postings abroad, was the

place we thought of as home and has been my home ever since. As a skier I soon discovered the pleasures of the Gatineau and excursions in the spring and summer of 1953 reinforced my delight. In September of that year, before Geoffrey and I set off for our first posting to Paris, I wrote in my journal: “We spent the Labour Day week-end with the Pearsons at the Wrongs’ cottage in the Gatineau... the long heat wave [had] just broken and the weather was stimulating... we went for long walks in the hills and everything was golden; the air, the trees, the ground. The red will not come until the first frost but the gold has its own satisfying beauty and more than satisfying smell.” Nearly sixty years later I can still recall that smell and feel the crackling of the yellow leaves under my feet. A month later we sailed for France. The following spring (1954) Mike and Maryon finally had their cottage overlooking the Gatineau River at Burnett.

BURNETT I (1954-72)

The Pearsons loved the Burnett cottage from the time they first bought it, as a letter I wrote my mother-in-law from France in August 23, 1954 attests.

“We have thought of you all [Patsy, now married to Walter Hannah, must have been there at the time with her newborn son] up in the Gatineau this last little while with a certain envy. It would have been such fun to be up there with you – what pleasure you seem to get from it! I am sure only people with nasty journalistic minds ... would think “Mont St.Michel” an egoistic name...”

Well, they didn’t keep that name for long because by the time Geoffrey and I (and our three very small children) returned from Paris in 1957 the cottage was known as “Bref Repos”, a more accurate name in any case!

The property was acquired from a family named James who had owned cottages side by side on two adjoining lots for a number of years. The Pearsons bought the father’s cottage but his son, Fred, kept his. He remained our good neighbour for a long time until he moved elsewhere in the Gatineau and sold to Ken Lochhead, the distinguished artist and educator, and his wife Joanne.

On the south side of the James property line, looking down the river, were the remains of a cottage that had been built by the then Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Dr.G. S.B. Barton in the late 1930s. When it was struck by lightning in 1942 it was never rebuilt. Mike bought that property as well along with its romantic ruins to ensure his privacy. “Bref Repos” was now a very welcome retreat for the Pearson family during Mike’s busy years as Foreign Minister (1948-57). The Liberals were defeated in the federal general election of June,1957 at a time when Geoffrey and I were briefly home with our young family between two Paris postings. We made many visits to the cottage that summer and in December we were able to celebrate Mike’s Nobel Peace Prize. We also celebrated with them his election as Liberal leader in January 1958. Then came the disastrous (from our point of view) general election of April 1958 after which he

became Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons. He was, however, as busy as ever. We probably spent more time at Burnett during the summer of 1958 than Mike and Maryon did. We returned to Paris in September where Geoffrey was seconded to the NATO Secretariat for the next three years.

“Bref Repos” was a pleasant place to spend time in. The furniture that had come with the cottage was comfortable as all old cottage furniture usually is. It had a porch slider and rocking chairs and a day-bed on the porch where Mike could lie and read the newspaper while Maryon fussed in the kitchen. All they added were framed political cartoons and photographs of Mike with various dignitaries. There was also the occasional diplomatic gift (I remember a big African drum that, alas, was stolen one fall) and Maryon’s collection of sea-shells in a glass-covered coffee table.

When Mike was at the cottage he released his tensions by cutting the grass with a scythe like a golf club and whacking at the bushes. Occasionally he descended the steep path to the river to swim. He was not a strong swimmer but his children and grand children were (once the latter were old enough) and they loved running around the log-booms floating down the river (much to his dismay!). He would, however, put on a life-jacket and row them across the river to a little sandy islet that has long since been washed away. He and Maryon never stayed long but “Bref Repos” was clearly a haven for them as it was for us whenever we returned on home leave or were en route to our next posting. Once he became Prime Minister in 1963, the official summer residence at Harrington Lake became, of course, their country retreat. We and other family members continued to enjoy the cottage at Burnett (Geoffrey and I and our family were in Ottawa during most of those years).

Mike and Maryon returned to spend summer week-ends at Burnett upon his retirement in 1968. He remained a busy man. He travelled the world for the World Bank preparing “Partners in Development”, the significant report that set .07 as the percentage countries like Canada should devote to official development assistance (ODA). He was busy writing his memoirs and he was also the Chancellor of Carleton University with all that that entails. Geoffrey and I were in India during much of that time and when he came to New Delhi with the World Bank in 1971 he told me (but not Geoffrey) that his health was failing. When we came back to Ottawa in July 1972 he was too tired and ill to benefit from the cottage at Burnett and just before he died of cancer later that year, he transferred the ownership to us. After his death Maryon seem to lose interest in the place, perhaps because the cottage was now ours, perhaps because it held too many memories. We would bring her up but she was always anxious to return to her house in Ottawa. The magic was gone. She moved to Toronto in 1980 and died there in 1989 never having returned.

Harrington Lake

What a privilege it is for successive Canadian Prime Ministers to have access to that beautiful place! Maryon loved it. I think it was the place in the Gatineau that suited her best. It was not only a recognition of her husband's achievements but also a fine place to welcome their extended family and close friends. The Liberal Party returned to power after six years out of office in April 1963. By May Mike and Maryon were already at Harrington Lake. In a joint letter to us, dated May 27, while we were in Mexico on our latest posting, Maryon wrote;

“We are up at Harrington Lake and it's been a lovely day, warm and sunny, only the bugs to bother one and we have plenty of “Off”. The P.M. has now gone out fishing for the evening catch. He can't stay off the lake for more than an hour or two. They catch lots of bass. When Paul [their Hannah grandson] was here last weekend he caught five...or so he says. The trouble is what to do with them after they're caught.

“The cottage is quite big with six or seven bedrooms but very scantily furnished...There is a nice little sandy beach and a croquet lawn and lots of room to roam about.” And then Mike added later “I have abandoned the idyllic charms of Harrington Lake for the less idyllic business of government—but not, I hope, for long because that cottage, the peace, the water and the co-operative fish, is going to be a life-saver.”

I first saw Harrington Lake a year later, in June 1964, when Geoffrey and I drove back from Mexico with the youngest three of our five children, Anne, Michael and baby Patricia. Our older daughters, Hilary and Katharine, had flown back to Toronto to stay with my mother while we made the long drive. We were able to stay there for three or four weeks while our new house in Ottawa, which we had bought sight unseen, was being renovated. My in-laws would come up on week-ends and the atmosphere was very casual. There was only a farm gate across the road at the far end of the Meech Lake to unlatch and open and we all, even Mike, drove ourselves, he and Maryon in their Nash Rambler. There was no security nor was there any live-in staff. The caretakers, a brother and sister named Stanley and Dorothy Healey, lived in an old farmhouse at the edge of the property and loved all children. The main house was, and I am sure still is, a rambling wooden structure with big rooms and a large kitchen. It was great for hide-and-seek. Because of its spaciousness and facilities Harrington Lake was a place where Mike and Maryon, really for the first time, could bring their large family, children and grandchildren, of course, but also brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces and cousins together at the same time. Both of them felt very strongly about family and most of my memories of the place relate to family gatherings.

Mike was marvelous with young children, a veritable pied-piper. He would gather however many of them happened to be there in the morning and, clutching his walking stick, march them off into the woods. The rest of us would stay behind and drink our coffee and chat. Or else he would take them fishing. My niece, Barbara, has great memories of fishing with him and her brother Paul. “He named two bays after each of us” she recently wrote me “and I was thrilled to fish in Barbara's Bay! Grand-daddy had this magical ability to make me feel so

special! Another time the weather opened up a rare door and allowed us to skate the full length of that lake on a spectacularly sunny, cold, windless day. It was like skating on glass – and do you remember tobogganing down that big hill in front of the house?” Yes, I do. I also remember Mike roaring around on one of the early snowmobiles with at least two enchanted children screaming on the seat behind him. There were many other occasions when we were all together, one of the most memorable being a New Year’s Eve when both of their children and their growing families were present and Mike, in his Maple Leaf Tartan jacket, started dancing with a large stuffed sealskin Ookpik making the children laugh. The Hannah family, which now included children David and Robin as well as Barbara and Paul (though not yet John) captured this on a home movie which I saw with much pleasure not so long ago.

Harrington Lake was not just for relaxation with the family, of course, as Mike held occasional cabinet meetings there as well as other high level encounters at which, naturally, we were not present. During Centennial Year, 1967, when Canada was host to the world, some of the official lunches were held there to show off the beauties of the Gatineau to foreign visitors. The only time I remember security becoming an issue was when L.B. Johnson, the US president, arrived on May 24 and helicopters flew over to check the woods for possible threats. Mike writes amusingly about this occasion in his memoir.

“So I invited him to Harrington Lake. When I arrived ahead of the president the security people were all over the place, on row-boats and in the bushes with their walkie-talkies... I went into the house and up the stairs. At the top a hard-faced chap said “Who are you? Where are you going?” I replied “I live here and I am going to the bathroom”... Then the president arrived in his helicopter.”

In 1968 Mike retired and there were no more family visits to Harrington Lake. However, some years later, when I was in the Senate (1994-2005), I twice attended Liberal Caucus picnics on the grounds of the “official summer residence”. I enjoyed being on the lawns again and the house looked much the same from the outside but there were new docks and a fancy boathouse and the atmosphere was somehow much more formal than it had been in Mike’s day. The Pied Piper was gone.

Burnett II (1972 onwards)

If the magic of the Gatineau diminished for Maryon after Mike’s death, it only grew stronger for us. Our children were now adolescents and they loved the place. They swam and played and had their friends up. Geoffrey cut the grass with his father’s scythe and slashed away at the underbrush while I tried to manage the old fashioned kitchen for our many visitors. The only drawback was that the place was not winterized. This was soon to change.

In 1980, after Maryon moved to Toronto, Geoffrey and I left for Moscow where he had been named Canada’s Ambassador to the Soviet Union. We removed any valuables from the cottage and gave the keys to our children. They used it during the summer of 1981 but not too

often as only Hilary remained in Ottawa. However, at the end of October that year, Michael came up from Toronto with a friend and this is what I wrote in my journal on November 1st, All Saints Day.

“I guess all kinds of ghosts and evil spirits were abroad last night and some of them have gone up in smoke. About 10 this morning [it was 2am in Ottawa] a phone call from Hilary to tell us that [the cottage at] Burnett had just burned down. Michael had been up in the afternoon, lit a fire in the fireplace, pushed the embers to the back where he left them to burn themselves out and returned four hours later to find the firemen and the police there and the cottage gone. A call like that does wonders for clarifying one’s priorities. When Hilary said she had bad news I thought of people – property does not seem all that important compared to them. Actually, while mildly upset, I’m not terribly grieved. I’ve never felt the cottage was really mine anyway because it was full of Mrs. Pearson’s things. What I love about it is the site which is, after all, still there... I feel more badly for Michael than I do for the cottage. In fact I am already turning over in my mind the cottage I would really like with a proper deck to sit out on and nicer bedrooms. Between the mice and time things were getting pretty shabby...”

Hilary phoned back later that day after they had been up to inspect the damage. Neighbour Fred James had come up too. The fire was total but clean. “This presents us,” I wrote, “with a good opportunity to site the cottage better – perhaps to rebuild on the foundation of the other burnt house. Fred gave Hilary the name of a young architect at Kirk’s Ferry and I asked her to get hold of him...” In subsequent years I heard several accounts of the fire from those of my neighbours who were there. My journal entry about ghosts and spirits turned out to be more accurate than I knew as the whole volunteer fire crew had come dressed for a Halloween Party and that’s what Michael saw as he crested the hill and watched the last wall fall in!

Rod Dougherty designed us a fine house (with lightning rods installed on the roof at my insistence) and sited it so that we had views both up and down the river. By the time we returned from Moscow in 1983 it was nearly complete. The next year we had a screened-in porch, which we call the Gazanda, (combining “gazebo” and “verandah”) built on the old ruins. Since then it has been in constant use by our family. Daughter Anne was married there in a blue and silver sari surrounded by roses. There have been endless birthday parties for our twelve grandchildren. Geoffrey and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary at Burnett on a hot summer day in 2002. Later, alas, I oversaw two wakes. Geoffrey and I would move up in the spring and commute, when necessary, to Ottawa. He went down for a swim every morning each summer right up until the end of summer before he died. He played golf at Larrimac, and clipped the bushes while I gardened. We built a sandbox over the tile bed where the Pearson cottage had been, a big, deep sandbox that every child in the family has played in since it was constructed. We have had to refill it three times! The booms have long gone but the river still runs and the sunsets are as beautiful as ever.

MacLaren Cemetery

So now we come to the MacLaren Cemetery as four Pearsons already have, Mike in 1972, Maryon in 1989, Geoffrey and our daughter Katharine in 2008. MacLaren's is a country cemetery up above the town of Wakefield nestled into an outcrop of the Canadian Shield, the geological formation that gives the Gatineau so much of its character. It was established by the protestant English-speaking settlers of the area as the stone crosses and leaning markers of the older part of the cemetery attest. Granite and concrete slabs on plinths with smooth faces inscribed with names and dates and the occasional message mark later graves. Mike and Maryon have one of these. But as the cemetery has opened up and flowed down the hill there are more and more boulders like the one that marks the grave where Geoffrey and Katharine lie and where I will eventually join them. Ours is pink granite and I was told by a geologist I met there one day that it is 13 million years old. I am moved by the way these ancient rocks tie us to the land.

MacLaren's is a lovely place to visit. I go up in in the late spring once to see if the red tulips I planted on Mike's grave the previous fall have survived the squirrels (not always). I go up with the family in summer and am always touched by the tokens that have been left on Mike's gravestone, the pebbles for respect, the small maple leaf flags (after all it was Mike who gave us our distinctive flag), the ex-voto pins, the coins which I collect and give away. Once I even found a baseball in memory of his favorite sport. And I go back in the fall, when the oak trees on the ridge have turned bronze, in order to pull out the annuals and plant for spring.

That Mike chose to be buried at MacLaren's is the final proof of his love for the Gatineau. The story is that he and his External Affairs colleagues, Hume Wrong and Norman Robertson, came across the cemetery on one of their rambles and decided to be buried there. Hume was the first to go, dying much too young, in 1954. Norman was buried there in 1968. Another Canadian diplomat, Escott Reid, who died in 1999, lies nearby. Mike bought his gravesite in 1963 for \$30 so it was waiting for him on that late December day when we brought his body from Christ Church Cathedral in Ottawa. We drove slowly along Highway 105 and this is how Mike's nephew, Fred Pearson, described the scene in a letter to his parents:

“All along the way, in the freezing downpour, people stood by the roadside to pay their last respects. Children holding small flags, large flags in groups, men and women standing bareheaded at attention, old men saluting. I think that spoke more to the regard in which Uncle Lester was held by the Canadian people than anything that came before or could come after.”

When we arrived at MacLaren's eight Mounties carried the flag-draped coffin into the cemetery and the family followed behind. At the grave there was a brief ceremony, the Mounties carefully folded the flag and handed it solemnly to Maryon, the coffin was lowered and then we all left.

The Pearson grave has a modest marker and for a long time it was not easy to find. However, over the years various MPs and Senators insisted that a distinguished former Prime Minister deserved to be noted. In 1981, the Wakefield Legion Branch donated a flag pole and

raised the Maple Leaf flag. Then, in 1993 a small commemorative plaque was installed. Finally, under Prime Minister Chretien a memorial was designed by Parks Canada with Mike's photo and a proper citation written by Geoffrey. This now stands accompanied by the flag in a small circle outside the cemetery gate. Inside flag stones point the way to the grave. The memorial was unveiled on a fine June day in 2001 with Mr. Chretien in charge attended by a large gathering of family, old colleagues and local residents. But once the ceremony was over, the punch drunk, and the tent dismantled, the cemetery regained its peace.

Nowadays at least once a summer, when I have some young people with me to make sure I don't stumble, I take the path that leads down the hill from the memorial, skirts the lower edge of the cemetery and then winds its way up to the top of the ridge. There I can sit (slightly out of breath) on a rocky ledge and contemplate the view. First I look straight down on the cemetery itself, then at the Gatineau River as it descends to Ottawa. Finally, I look across the river towards Montreal and Quebec and think to myself "what a perfect place Mike and his distinguished colleagues chose to be buried in and how well it symbolizes their shared commitment to this great country and to our two founding peoples!" Then I carefully descend the trail on the other side through the oak trees and the fallen branches until I come out on the older edge of the cemetery and return once more to pay my respect to those great men and their loyal, outspoken and determined wives, and to my husband and our beloved daughter and think, with a feeling of privilege, that one day, in the not too distant future, I will be lying among them forever.