

Canada's Voice

Canada's Voice

The Public Life
of John Wendell Holmes

ADAM CHAPNICK



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To Alana

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Preface

It is hard to imagine a person who embodied the ideals of postwar Canadian foreign policy more than John Wendell Holmes. From his tireless work ethic, to his fierce loyalty to family and friends, to his commitment to peaceful forms of conflict resolution, to his unyielding desire to make a difference in the world, he approached life and country in a way that would make citizens of any political stripe proud. As a boy growing up in early twentieth-century London, Ontario, he was a successful student, widely respected for his contributions inside and outside the classroom. After a brief career as a high school teacher and then administrator for the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA), he entered public life and quickly became an exceptional diplomat, recognized around the world for his thoughtfulness, humility, and dedication. At the age of fifty he returned to the CIIA, this time as its president and then director general, and he expanded the depth and breadth of published research on Canadian foreign relations exponentially. In the late 1960s, he added to his responsibilities a part-time professorship at the University of Toronto and evolved to become a brilliant teacher and mentor to countless future scholars and policy practitioners. Throughout this period, he was also internationally revered as an esteemed commentator on global politics. In his final years, he was as much a prophet as an analyst, boldly calling on the international community to pay greater attention to issues such as environmental degradation and the spread of pandemic diseases well before such ideas were common within the mainstream foreign policy discourse.

Those who knew him recall his wry sense of humour, the twinkle in his eye, and the genuine interest he took in them as people, regardless of age or pedigree. He was a calming presence, a confidence builder, and an inspiration. Through his public service, his teaching, his writing, and his friendships, he did more than any other man or woman of his generation to influence how Canadians saw themselves on the world stage. He played an equally crucial role in shaping the way that diplomats, scholars, and statespeople abroad understood Ottawa and its citizens. For students and practitioners of international affairs at home and around the world, he was Canada's voice.

Paradoxically, John Holmes was an immensely private man. "You should start your biography with an apology," said one former associate when I asked him about his memories. "John would have been upset if he'd known that someone was writing a book about him." Others disagreed, but the late Geoffrey Pearson was probably right. Holmes kept even his closest friends and family members at a certain distance, never revealing his whole self to any one of them at a given time. There were aspects of his life, both personal and professional, that he preferred to keep private, and this might well explain why, unlike so many of his contemporaries in the public service, he never published a complete memoir. It was as if the private John Holmes was a different man: he compartmentalized his feelings so effectively that his personal circumstances rarely had any obvious, meaningful impact on his public achievements. This book therefore does not explore his private life and activities in significant depth. Nonetheless, Holmes was also a professor trained in history. He believed in rigorous research, in exploring every side of a story, and in presenting the results in a balanced and even-handed manner. He would have understood that certain aspects of his personal experience, no matter how much he would have preferred they go undocumented, were indeed germane to an assessment of his public career, and he would have tolerated the retelling of the events surrounding his controversial departure from the Department of External Affairs.

As much as he is recalled today with affection, this biography does not seek to canonize John Holmes. Just as Canada has never been a perfect international citizen, Holmes was not a flawless human being. And, like his country, he, too, had secrets that he preferred to forget, or at least not to share. This story is nonetheless about a man who served Canada with distinction and who, in so doing, touched more lives than he ever could have imagined. No serious student of Canadian foreign policy, and of the way that Canadians see themselves in the world, can ignore his impact.

For much of the twentieth century, Canadians with an interest in global affairs chose well in allowing him to serve as their national conscience and international ambassador. His voice was theirs: when it was heard, and it was heard loudly and often, at home and overseas, they had every reason to feel proud.

I first contemplated a biography of Mr. Holmes as a doctoral candidate working on a history of Canada and the founding of the United Nations. It did not take long to recognize how important he had been not just to the story itself but also to the way that it has since been documented and remembered. He was an integral member of the cadre of civil servants who dominated the Canadian public arena during the nation's formative years as a world player. Once retired, he was the most prolific commentator on that period and on future directions in Canadian foreign policy. It was only later that I learned how many others he had affected through his teaching and mentorship, but this discovery was hardly surprising: it is difficult to open a leading textbook on Canadian external relations without coming across a dedication to John Holmes. Foreign policy experts who were not his students – and their numbers are limited – also almost inevitably knew him as a mentor or a colleague. I am too young to have met Mr. Holmes, and I can only imagine what it would have been like to discuss and share ideas with one of Canada's pre-eminent public intellectuals. It therefore is my hope that this work will be of interest not only to Mr. Holmes' living contemporaries and immediate successors but also to future generations of scholars, commentators, and public servants who face the tremendous challenge of continuing to question, explore, and attempt to improve the way that Canada and Canadians behave on the world stage. This book is not a step-by-step account of the history of Canadian external relations during John Holmes' most influential years. Rather, it is a story of how one man, working within and outside of the political process, forever changed the way that we understand Canada and its place in the world. At a time in the history of Canadian foreign policy when we lack the universally appealing heroic figures that were so prominent in the early Cold War era, it is worth reflecting on the qualities and contributions that made those individuals so memorable. John Holmes' life story allows us to do just that.

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Abbreviations

ACUNS	Academic Council on the United Nations System
ATIP	Access to Information and Privacy Act
BUA	Bishop's University Archives
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CCA	Carnegie Corporation Archives
CCF	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CIIA	Canadian Institute of International Affairs
CIS	Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto
CN	Canadian National (freight railroad)
CPY	Yugoslav Communist Party
CSIS	Canadian Security and Intelligence Services
CUSO	Canadian University Services Overseas
DC	John G. Diefenbaker Centre for the Study of Canada
<i>DCER</i>	<i>Documents on Canadian External Relations</i>
DEA	Department of External Affairs
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FSO	Foreign Service Officer
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IHR	Institute of Historical Research
IIA	International Institute of Agriculture
IJC	International Joint Commission
IPR	Institute of Pacific Relations
KGB	Committee for State Security (of the former Soviet Union)
LAC	Library and Archives Canada

LSR	League for Social Reconstruction
MAD	Mutual Assured Destruction
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDC	National Defence College
NORAD	North American Air Defence Command
OAS	Organization of American States
OC	Order of Canada
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PCO	Privy Council Office
PHP	post-hostilities problems
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PSC	Public Service Commission
RAC	Rockefeller Archive Center
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RIK	Ronald Ian King
SM	Medal of Service (of the Order of Canada)
SSEA	secretary of state for external affairs
U of T	University of Toronto
UBC	University of British Columbia
UN	United Nations (Organization)
UNA	United Nations Association
UNAEC	United Nations Atomic Energy Commission
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNOGIL	United Nations Observation Group in Lebanon
URA	University of Regina
USSEA	under-secretary of state for external affairs
UWOA	University of Western Ontario Archives
WIB	Wartime Information Board

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I

The Early Years

Halley's Comet can be seen from the earth once every seventy-five years. In 1910, it was at its most visible on 18 May. Exactly one month later, in a small London, Ontario, hospital, John Wendell Holmes was born with the mark of the comet on his back, or so his doctor, with a smile, liked to describe his birthmark. This playful optimism fit the family household. The father, Wendell Holmes, was the son of a minister. Reverend John Holmes, of English and Irish stock, had been ordained into the Bible Christian Church in 1871 and served there until it merged with the United Methodist Free Churches and the Methodist New Connexion to form the United Methodist Church in 1907. Eighteen years later, the Methodists joined with a number of others to form the United Church of Canada. The Reverend Holmes first worked in Prince Edward Island before moving to London, where his family settled. His wife was Jane (Jennie) Greenway, sister of Thomas, Manitoba's first Liberal premier and the family's first national celebrity.

The Holmeses believed in the social gospel. The children went to services every Sunday, after which they visited with their grandparents: their mother's side one week, and their father's the next. Wendell himself became one of London's great success stories, a book seller who began his career at the old Methodist Book Room (it later became Ryerson Press) and then went out on his own, selling his wares in corner stores and pharmacies. Over time, he was able to purchase three shops in southwestern Ontario. His achievements can be credited to his humility. He was skilful with his

customers, self-effacing, and socially conscious. When the Depression came and many of his patrons could no longer afford to indulge in the luxury of buying books, he lent out his stock as if he were running a library. He was also a consensus builder, famous for saying to his children, “Well, I’d like to hear the other fellow’s point of view.”¹

Wendell Holmes married Helen Morton. She was five years his junior and hailed from Ayrshire, Scotland. The second of eight children, Helen had moved with her stonemason father to Canada at the age of four in search of a better life. She was in many ways her husband’s opposite: reserved, emotionally remote, even difficult at times. It made sense that she filled the role of family disciplinarian, the undisputed matriarch. She “had a high and quick intelligence and intellectual curiosity, spent too much time on house-cleaning and too little time with the books she loved,” wrote her son several years after her death. Self-educated and a voracious reader, she kept her wit and quick tongue largely to herself. She was much less religious than her husband – “cleanliness for her was more important than godliness” – but believed nonetheless that people would be judged by the way they lived and how they treated others.² Together, she and her husband shared an allegiance to Canada’s Liberal Party, a commitment to their family, and a loyalty to the British Empire common to most in their town in the late nineteenth century.

There were four children. First came Helen (Buzz) in 1908. John, whom they immediately called Jack, arrived next in 1910, and the twins, Elizabeth and Isobel, followed two years later. They were a close family and grew larger through the addition of the Riddles, the Beers, and the Skinners. They bonded on the shores of Sauble Beach in the summers and then back in London over Christmas, when an extra effort was made to gather everyone together to sing, watch plays put on by the children, and compete in the famous Christmas musical quiz. Humour was rampant, as the Holmeses, and Jack in particular, had a penchant for espousing Holmes-spun wisdom through puns.

Jack himself was a curious child and was clearly his mother’s son. In his earliest years, he followed her around while reading from the endless supply of material that his father brought home from the shops. In spite of their lack of formal schooling, his parents seem to have passed on to him the habits of an absent-minded and captivated academic. It was normal for him to bump into his mother while walking through the house with a book in his hands. Later, when he received his first tape recorder, he also chased her with a microphone. “Oh, Jack, put that thing away,” she often said in loving anger. She was the only one who could speak to

him like that, the only member of the family clever enough to intimidate him just a bit. Over time, it became clear that he had acquired both his father's warmth and commitment to family and his mother's pure intelligence and emotional detachment. He was a man whom everyone felt they knew well until they thought about it and realized that, while they admired him immensely, they hardly knew him at all.³

Jack's parents loved to travel and shared an interest in world affairs, so it is not surprising that their son's first recorded memories come from the Great War. It was a regular topic of discussion at the dinner table, especially once Helen's younger brother Alec went overseas. When Alec was killed at the Somme in the autumn of 1916, Helen was crushed. It was one of the rare occasions when she wept in front of her children, and the sorrow she so obviously felt when she had to inform her younger sister of their brother's death that evening made Jack cry too.

Life in the Holmes household improved in 1917. Jack sang patriotic songs in school and watched with excitement as soldiers marched proudly in the streets. As a cadet, he was dismissed from class early one day in 1918 to celebrate after the Germans had been set back. Then, on 11 November, the war ended. The neighbourhood children sang "There are smiles that make us happy" and poured confetti down from the second floor of Wendell's shop during a victory parade. That night, Jack went with his father to Victoria Park, a fifteen-acre gathering place in the heart of downtown. There, they joined crowds across North America in watching the defeated Kaiser burn in effigy. Less than twenty years later, the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire would spearhead the construction of a cenotaph on that very spot. It was a haunting and disturbing experience for Jack. Along with Alec's death, it formed one of his most vivid memories of the First World War, an experience from which glamour had disappeared early on.⁴

He grew up in what he later described as a strict household. His parents were adamant that he succeed in school, and he did. London South Collegiate Institute had opened in an abandoned building across the street from Victoria Public School in 1922, and Jack was part of its second class. "We're here to win the day for the Garnet and Gray, and to London South we pledge allegiance now," the students could be heard reciting every morning. Jack flourished as a student; he was both popular and incredibly bright. He participated on the school's literary executive and edited the yearbook, the *Oracle*, in his second-to-last year. He was a leader among his peers, acting as a so-called pall-bearer when the students moved from their condemned school house into a new building not long before graduation,

and encouraging expressions of pride in both London South and the British Empire. “Why can we not in our mad rush of living to-day,” he wrote in the *Oracle* in 1927, “take time to honour the Empire to which all of us, whether we show it or not, are proud to be citizens. Let us not be persuaded into believing that it is smart to show no patriotism. It is in reality a very low form of discourtesy and, most of all, of ingratitude.”⁵ From the beginning, it seems, he used his voice to inspire and enlighten.

When he accepted the school’s senior public-speaking medal from his father – the award’s sponsor – he did so with pride. It was not the first time that London South had recognized his achievements. He had won an English prize the year before, along with the prestigious Confederation Medal. The latter was particularly special since it was presented to him by Edwin Pearson, a family friend and father of the diplomat who later became Jack’s idol and mentor.⁶

When he finished high school, there was no doubt of what would come next. Buzz was also highly intelligent, but Jack – who remained close with all of his sisters, but especially Buzz – was the man in the family, and it was he who was sent to university. It was a tell-tale sign of the times, and the spirit of these years influenced the way that Jack thought of his sisters for the rest of his life. Although he forever saw himself as responsible for their well-being, in reality, he needed Buzz, Elizabeth, and Isobel. He relied on them for comfort, support, and a sense of family that he would not have had otherwise since he never married. They were his shield from the outside world when he needed to escape, and they welcomed him lovingly whenever he returned from his studies and travels.

For his undergraduate schooling, there was only one place to go. The expanding University of Western Ontario was close to home. Led by President William Sherwood Fox, the university viewed high-quality teaching as its foremost obligation and was the obvious choice of most southern Ontarian undergraduates. It was 1928, the economy was good, Western was about to complete construction of the J.W. Little Memorial Stadium (a symbol of pride across the township), and Jack’s prospects were limitless.⁷ He became a part of the class of Arts ’32 and posed for his first school yearbook photo dressed sharply in a jacket and tie alongside five women and three other young men.⁸

The five-foot-ten, good-looking, brown-haired, brown-eyed youth embraced university life. He was elected class president and began eight months residence at one of the university’s newly established inter-faculty fraternities, Sigma Kappa Sigma, so that he could pledge the following year. The administration at Western insisted that acceptance into the

fraternity be dependent on high academic achievement, and Jack's freshman grades, largely firsts, two seconds, and a third in modern German literature, easily gained him admission. Now a member of one of the most respected clubs on campus, and exposed to the university's brightest from across the disciplines and faculties, Jack Holmes thrived. He continued in politics and was elected to the student administrative assembly. Prefect E.J. Wright credited its accomplishments that year, which included the establishment of the University Students' Commission – an undergraduate inter-faculty group – to “the splendid co-operation that existed, and the willingness to work that was so noticeable in the 1929-30 governing body.”⁹

Jack also found time to pursue his interest in theatre, performing the parts of Benedick in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Krogstad in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and, later, Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. The shows were collaborations between the Player's Club and the Hesperian Club on campus, both of which counted Jack among their members. He was on staff at the student newspaper, the *Gazette*, and even published the only issue of the *Hesperian*, Western's first literary magazine, all the while keeping up with his school work. Jack received all firsts in his second year, save a B in economics, and won Wyatt Scholarships in English and history for finishing at the top of his class in both of his major subjects.

The awards made it easier for him to ignore the economic crisis that was overtaking the Western world. The greatest depression of modern times was especially punishing to Canadians. Unemployment rates jumped from 5 percent to over 30 percent in just four years. The stock market collapsed and prices fell. Automobile production dropped by three-quarters, and drought and crop failures led to an agricultural crisis. As his father's business struggled, and families around him lost everything, Jack Holmes remained focused on his own personal development at the University of Western Ontario, comfortably entrenched in an academic bubble.

This all began to change in the fall of 1930 as he evolved from active member of the university community to genuine student leader. He became president of the Player's Club, expanded its membership, and, in its most productive month, produced three separate one-act performances. He remained involved with the Hesperians and took over as editor and “pen-pusher” of the *Gazette*. It was this last responsibility that engaged him the most. The year began controversially when, just days after he had secured prized advertisement dollars from the Grand Theatre, a group of young students, in the midst of Initiation Day, burst into the theatre without paying. Within hours, the proprietor had retracted his

financial commitment, leading the new editor to comment in one of his first columns: "Remember that still more than the actual money has been lost to the student body, we have lost the good-will and respect of one of that group who have done so much for us; namely the business men of London."¹⁰

In spite of his anger and clear disappointment, there was a professionalism to Jack's approach that garnered him respect among his peers. Within weeks, he was proposing to publish a new literary supplement, in the spirit of the now-defunct *Hesperian*. The literary magazine was produced as a Christmas issue, shortly before the editor took a two-month leave of absence. Although it appears that he was ill, his school work certainly did not suffer, and he did not provide an explanation in the paper for his departure.

At the end of the year, Jack wrote a summary of his *Gazette* experience for the university's yearbook, *Occidentalia*:

Pausing a moment in retrospection to review the epochal changes of a fast fleeting year, we experienced a gratifying sensation of satisfaction ... It was apparent that a policy of retrenchment at this time meant regression. Thus there blossomed forth from the snowy campus heights the spirit of the old *Gazette* in new resplendent raiment. Blown before the winds of progress, down the hill to oblivion, disappeared the little old paper. In its place there appeared the new University of Western Ontario *Gazette*, adopting for its slogan, "More than a newspaper" ...

The need for an undergraduate publication is indisputable. It furnishes the medium through which the initiated may learn that excellence of technique that will stand him in good stead in future years. There he may learn simplicity and precision of expression and that great necessity, namely, clear thinking.

We, who have had the privilege of serving the *Gazette* this year, have derived from our services, not merely intellectual and literary remuneration, but also a very keen sense of pleasure. May you, who are successors, fare likewise.

*To you we fling the torch,
Be yours to hold it high.¹¹*

As he was preparing to leave the *Gazette* and focus on his final year as an undergraduate, the administration at the university experienced both public success and fiscal turmoil. In 1931, for the first time a Western student

won a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship. In the midst of this great achievement, however, the Depression began to affect the school's bottom line. Grants from both the City of London and the Province of Ontario were reduced, and in 1932 faculty members were forced to accept a reduction in pay along with an increased workload. In spite of student demands for more learning space, plans for further expansion were delayed indefinitely.

Jack also finally felt the effects of the Depression personally. It is not clear whether it was the fault of his apparent incapacitation or his lack of involvement in university athletics, but, although he once again received Wyatt scholarships in English and history, he does not seem to have applied for a Rhodes. With that, he gave up his best chance for paid education abroad (and an ideal opportunity to avoid facing the economic crisis at home).

Jack was not yet certain of what he wanted to do for a living, and by the fall of 1931 he had begun to take journalism more seriously as a possible option. In 1930, on a whim, he mailed a copy of the *Hesperian* to the editor of the *Toronto Mail and Empire*, William Arthur Deacon. They had corresponded intermittently since then, and Jack began sending Deacon some of his own writing, including an essay on Walt Whitman. The editor was so impressed that he asked for three extra copies. One was for his friend, the playwright Merrill Denison. The others went to what he called "Whitmanians," one of whom had collected a wide assortment of relics and documents that had yet to be organized. Deacon thought that Jack might assemble the material into a book and offered to assist in the process. Although nothing came of the idea, Deacon's respect for the young student was beyond doubt: "Your considerable abilities are not narrow in focus," he wrote in April 1932, "and your personality and naturalness of manner positively charming. I am sure your life is going to be very successful and useful, whatever line of work you decide on."¹²

Another possible line was politics. In his third year, Jack wrote a number of academic essays on radicalism and revolution and their impact on British and French colonial policy. In a humorous "class prophesy" about his future, he was chided by fellow students Ruth Hayes and John Kevin O'Connor as the one most likely to be deported to Poland for having instigated communist riots.¹³ In 1932 he consulted Deacon – fast becoming a radical himself – about how he might direct his new focus. "Speaking of socialism," he wrote, "what do you think of the L.S.R.? ... I have become quite interested in Mr. Underhill's League for Social Reconstruction. I am not yet a confirmed socialist, but it is my distrust of my own ability to decide, rather than my dislike of any of the implications of that term that

keep me from being one. In the meanwhile I think that the very moderate Socialist Program of the L.S.R. and of Mr. Woodsworth would mean a tremendous political and economic progress in Canada as compared with the dithering planlessness of our two great parties.”¹⁴ Deacon expressed little confidence in the League, suggesting that it had come along too late to make a real difference in the world, and Jack’s interest in active socialism faded shortly thereafter.

Another man set him upon his future path. Arthur Garrett Dorland had a PhD from the University of Toronto and was the chair of the history department at Western. He was a Quaker, whose doctoral thesis had examined the history of the Society of Friends. He brought with him to his leadership position a progressive approach to conflict resolution and a special ability to inspire his students. His impact was formidable. Fifty years later, in a speech in honour of his accomplishments, Jack explained: “He injected into my enthusiasm the moral factor. I began to see the study of history as a key to peace and social change ... He taught me to see starkly enough the nature of conflict, the ills of our society, but they were to be regarded as remediable if I and others would do something about them.”¹⁵ Jack’s new goal, not all that incompatible with his progressive sympathies, was to give voice to history as a teacher. The classroom would be his forum to contribute to a more peaceful world. Dorland encouraged him to revitalize what had been known in 1926 as Western’s League of Nations Society. The group began meeting again in 1931 and passed resolutions calling on the countries of the world to voluntarily disarm and then use moral pressure to stall the expansion of fascism. The club, and the increasingly difficult depression, had made Dorland’s star pupil more serious and focused. In 1932, when eight students were elected to the Honour Society, recognizing invaluable service to the university in non-athletic capacities, it was *John*, not Jack, Holmes who accepted one of the commendations.

John Holmes won the University of Western Ontario’s gold medal in history in 1932 and was elected class valedictorian. For the first time that year, the spring convocation ceremony was held outdoors in the J.W. Little Memorial Stadium. On 27 May, close to 2,500 faculty, staff, graduates, and their families gathered and listened intently to a youth who was fast becoming a man. His speech was full of his ever-present wit, but it was also rather dreary. “Shall we be known as the depression class that started merrily off in the blast of a big boom, and crawled out on to the desert flatness of economic prostration?” he asked. He referred to what the often heralded British reformer and former prime minister William Ewart Gladstone had once called “the responsibilities of privilege,” urging

his colleagues to take seriously their obligation to give back to the society that had begat them a university education. “[The great Victorian poet] Matthew Arnold has taught us that the aim of all culture is to learn and propagate the best that has been said and thought in the world,” he said. “The world is sorely in need of culture in the year 1932, and we, who have spent four years preparing ourselves for the task of cultivating the world, must take ourselves a large share of the labour.” There were few job prospects for him and his classmates, he admitted. To face the world after graduation, they would have to be prepared for an adventure.¹⁶

Young John Holmes had already learned the importance of budgeting judiciously. The Depression had instilled a conscientiousness in him that bordered on frugality. Throughout his adult life, friends and co-workers who knew him well chided him about some of his older, ragged outfits, including one particular find at a sale in England at Marks and Spencer. The button-down shirt had been reduced because of a manufacturing error: the two sleeves were cuffed differently. No matter, explained Holmes to his office colleagues: if he wore a sweater over it, no one would notice. This is not to say that he was not generous with others: John Holmes dedicated a good portion of his life and some of his income to the care of his young nieces, Ann and Nancy Skinner, who lost their father at an early age. Apart from purchasing the latest audio equipment to play his always expanding collection of classical music, however, he generally had great difficulty spending money on himself.

He was more comfortable, and indeed successful, finding work in difficult times. Summers during his years at Western and throughout most of the 1930s were spent at the leading boys’ program in Canada, Camp Ahmek, working for a psychologist whose other responsibilities included serving as the director of character education at Pickering College, a private Ontario boys’ boarding school. Taylor Statten, a Methodist, was fast becoming a legendary figure in boys’ work. Known as “the Chief” to his colleagues and “Canada’s dean of campers”¹⁷ to historians of the period, he dedicated much of his life to providing character-building experiences for young Canadians. The stunning campground on Canoe Lake in what was called the Ahmek district of Ontario’s Algonquin Park inspired comparisons by former campers to the Land of Oz. As a counsellor, or perhaps a section director (it is not clear), John Holmes slept in Pansy Palace, a log building at the lake’s edge. He spent his days canoeing, swimming, and enjoying other aspects of camp craft. Ahmek also had a theatre capable of seating close to five hundred. How Holmes secured a position at such an elite program – a young Pierre Trudeau arrived in the late 1930s – is

unclear, but Statten was known, according to one long-time camper and staff member, for his “uncanny ability to spot potential leaders when they were very young and inexperienced and induce them to work on his team.”¹⁸

In 1932, Holmes applied for and was granted a University of Toronto (U of T) Alumni Federation War Memorial Fellowship to cover the costs of his Master of Arts training. In spite of the Depression, the U of T was expanding. Students like Holmes, wrote the university president in his end of year report, had come to appreciate “the value of education as a preparation and equipment for life.” It was the soundest investment in their future that they could make.¹⁹ In the fall of 1933, the U of T grew to over eight thousand students and the School of Graduate Studies increased by more than 10 percent to 731. Holmes was one of 232 MA candidates, thirty-six of whom were historians.

That September, he left home and settled in the recently built Emmanuel College residence. Not far away was Herbert Norman, the brilliant son of a missionary who had spent much of his childhood in Japan. The two became friends, and although their paths diverged, a decade later they resumed their friendship as colleagues in Canada’s Department of External Affairs (DEA).

In the classroom, Holmes’ focus moved from British colonial history to more distinctly Canadian and constitutional issues, and he continued to take French in conjunction with his regular course load. The result of his countless hours in the archives was a rather dry assessment of the state of border relations between Canada and the United States during the American Civil War. In retrospect, the study was more important for how it shaped his understanding of the world, and how he later communicated that understanding to others, than for its actual conclusions.²⁰ There were certain elements of foreign policy that could not be changed, he realized – like geography. Canada was a permanent neighbour of the United States, and this fact would forever play a significant role in its external relations. The United States would always occupy a greater part of the Canadian collective mind than the other way around, and its domestic concerns would have a perpetual effect on Canadian-American relations and on Washington’s commitment to global affairs. Dealings between the two North American countries were also inherently difficult. By nature, in sharing what amounted to an illogically constructed border, they should have been in perpetual conflict. The relationship therefore could never be taken for granted.²¹

From the time he arrived in Toronto, John Holmes had intended to use his MA to gain admission to the University of London, where he hoped to study colonial and imperial history. Having only just arrived at Emmanuel College, he immediately solicited William Sherwood Fox (still Western's president), Arthur Dorland, and the managing editor of the *London Free Press*, Arthur Ford, to serve as referees for an Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire War Memorial Postgraduate Overseas Scholarship. Their references were glowing. President Fox called him "one of the best students that have passed through our halls." Dorland added, "a natural student, a prolific and intelligent reader with a sound instinct for source material, which combined with a nice sense of style and ability to express himself, have made his work really distinguished." Ford, the father of Robert Ford, another future member of the DEA, noted that he was "one of the most brilliant and promising students it has been my good fortune to know . . . He is a young man of the highest character, cultured and literary in his tastes."²² All of their kind words were for naught. Holmes did not win, and in the summer of 1933 he found himself instead at the University of Western Ontario's newly established French-language summer school in the small Quebec town of Trois-Pistôles.

The program was eight weeks long and cost ten dollars, plus six dollars per week for room and board. Students were chosen from among the university's finest, along with select recent graduates. It is likely that when Holmes' application to study in London was rejected, President Fox offered him a space in the fledgling program. The school's progressive outlook suited its newest addition. The founders believed that by immersing themselves in francophone culture, and speaking only French, students could learn far more about Canada's other "founding nation" than they ever could in the classroom. Save a necessary course in phonetics, formal classes were shunned in favour of addresses (in French) on contemporary topics by prominent guests, including professors, journalists, and poets. Afternoons and evenings were spent interacting with the rest of the community in sport and through discussions in shops and markets. The students sang French-Canadian songs every day and, at times, had their activities broadcast on French radio through a station in Rimouski. It was an outstanding example of the benefits to be had through cooperation between the universities and the general public.

Forty years after the fact, Holmes reflected: "It was much more than the language that I learned . . . I was not just exposed to the culture of Quebec, I was happily enveloped in it. I not only learned to speak in French, I

learned to laugh in French and we did an enormous amount of that. The affection and esteem I acquired for the good citizens of Trois-Pistôles has remained and would certainly survive even political estrangement.”²³ The idea that cooperation was best achieved through dialogue, cultural interaction, and mutual understanding remained with him throughout his professional career.²⁴ Moreover, he realized, and would later regularly impress upon others, often it was the informal discussions or, in this case, the time outside of the classroom that played the most important role in resolving differences.

This strong progressive strain in his thinking, along with his previous connections with Arthur Dorland and Taylor Statten, made Pickering College, just north of Toronto in Newmarket, Ontario, a logical destination for the now twenty-three-year-old young man.²⁵ Pickering defined what might be termed radical Canadian civility in education in the 1930s. Founded as the Society of Friends’ boarding school in 1842, it was a Quaker College, whose board chairman, Sam Rogers, garnered acclaim for spearheading a \$60,000 campaign to create a mobile medical mission to support soldiers injured on both sides of the Spanish Civil War. Pacifist in nature, the institution aimed, in the words of its headmaster, Joe McCulley, “to produce cultured men who will so highly regard their civic responsibilities that they will wish to have a part in directing the changes of the future.”²⁶

McCulley – who went on to become deputy commissioner of penitentiaries and then the warden of Toronto’s Hart House – was an imposing man: blond, six-feet tall, a Rhodes Scholar, and on a mission to change education and to affect the state of the world. The radicalism, which would hardly have seemed strange to a graduate of Trois-Pistôles, came from his belief that, while tests and exams might measure efficiency in the classroom, the best learning often took place outside – literally. Pickering taught science by taking students into the wilderness with maps and compasses. It stressed the importance of the natural environment almost fifty years before others embraced the idea.

It was also distinctly Canadian. As McCulley explained, “The Canadian culture is not a transparent or trans-oceanic form. Our roots, indeed, go deep into the tradition and history of the British peoples, and certainly our institutions of government and politics are a direct outgrowth of the centuries old struggle for democratic and political forms and a judiciary that would be above reproach. Even these, however, had to be modified because of the peculiar conditions and circumstances of Canadian life.”²⁷ For him, Canada was a nation of immigrants: multicultural, tolerant, and

full of potential. Pickering was the first independent school in the province to break the colour bar, to accept Jews as residents, and to abolish the use of the cane as a form of punishment.

The lack of pretentiousness was impressive considering the pedigrees of the masters. There was, of course, McCulley, and Statten, the assistant headmaster who also taught at the University of Toronto. Another master was the author of the Province of Ontario's senior matriculation textbook. One later coordinated rehabilitation programs for the United Nations. T. Ronald Ide, the first chair and chief executive officer of TV Ontario, spent time at Pickering. All of these men used their prestige to bring guests such as J.S. Woodsworth and the former LSR president, Frank Underhill, to the college as speakers. None of them asked for anything in return.

The staff also included Charles Ritchie – remembered today as one of Canada's most celebrated diarists – still looking more like a student than a master at the age of twenty-four. Such youthfulness could be helpful as all teachers served as advisors and counsellors for Pickering boys. Ritchie, who later became one of the leading diplomats of his time, recalls self-deprecatingly: “The boys had a sort of cult for me, treating me as something between a mascot and their own freak, in some cases their friend.”²⁸

This close relationship encouraged open discussions and debate, and Pickering was criticized across the province for its embrace of political controversy. McCulley did not care: “Freedom,” he quoted from a principal at Manchester College in Oxford, “is a part we have to act. It is not a state that we rest in and enjoy. Your freedom lies, not in what you reject, but in what you accept, in what you affirm, in what you assert, and above all in what you create. The free man is first and foremost a creative man. He is a man whose best is always leading him on to a better.”²⁹ Both John and Jack Holmes fit in easily at Pickering College.

The 1932-33 academic year was to be Charles Ritchie's last, and the school therefore needed a new English teacher. With his progressive beliefs, his passion for education, and his boyish enthusiasm, Master Holmes was an ideal replacement. More personally, the only other option was to enter the book-selling business, and for that he had no real interest. He settled into his \$1,500 a year job in Newmarket (it was later raised to \$1,800), boarding in the residence and taking his meals with the students. It was above-average pay for the period, even without his accommodations. This made the new master more comfortable than many of his fellow Western graduates, and for that he was grateful. Holmes was at the time, in his own words, “a rather mushy kind of social democratic pacifist,” the perfect

addition to a school that struggled throughout the decade to rationalize its dedication to reasoned discussion as the ultimate form of conflict resolution with an increasingly violent and blood-thirsty German Reich. Five years later, he continued to be pained by the failure of diplomacy to arrest international aggression.³⁰

Perhaps it was Holmes' natural tendency towards indecision or maybe it was his uncertainty about his future – whatever the reason, the new master waffled between “John” and “Jack” while he was at Pickering. Regardless, the young English teacher quickly gained a reputation as a good person and a great instructor. Inside the classroom he was a harsh critic of poor grammar, but outside the classroom he encouraged his students to express themselves creatively through theatre. In Pickering's tradition, he led by example. Not only did he become the school's dramaturge and artistic director, in 1935 he also filled in as an actor on just forty-eight hours notice.

Students still recall Holmes' valiant attempts to puddle around in the craft shop, where he displayed no competence whatsoever, and his incessant puns. “We see then,” he wrote in the 1934 school yearbook, “that the public enemy number one, the man who castigates the punster, is nothing but a provincial-minded Anglo-Saxon seeking compensation for his own lack of wit. He is trying to dam one of the noblest streams of our culture by designating as ‘the lowest form of wit’ what is really the basic form of wit. It is a sad condition, something for every right-thinking person to ponder over.”³¹ He joined the students for a trip to the West Indies over Easter 1936 and tolerated the adolescent pranks that they played on him incessantly.

Although happy at Pickering, John Holmes was never entirely satisfied. He still thought of returning to school and still hoped to study in England. After half a decade of teaching and living frugally, he saved enough money to do so. In the spring of 1938, he requested and was granted a leave of absence to pursue doctoral studies at the University of London. He never intended to return but was conscious of keeping every option open. His departure was greeted with regret by everyone at the school. In “Going Holmes,” the editors of the school yearbook, the *Voyageur*, noted that when one student learned that Mr. Holmes was leaving, he wrote to his parents, “nothing short of a catastrophe has happened.” The writers could not have agreed more: “All we can look for therefore,” they explained, “is that the traditional solemnity of the British museum will be shattered, that ‘father’ Bunny Austin will be driven from Wimbledon, and Noel Coward will be toppled from his throne, all by the wit and skill of John W. Holmes. And to all these worthy enterprises we say ‘good luck,’ but come back.”³²

Holmes visited the college many times – his brother-in-law Harry Beer later became headmaster and Harry's son, Charles, is still heavily involved today – but his career as a high school teacher was over.

By late September, he was on a train through Quebec to a ship called the *Duchess of Athol* headed for Scotland. His stomach churned for much of the trip, and not only from sea-sickness – that had passed by the third day, replaced by fear of a world war. Adolf Hitler had already annexed Austria and was advocating the right of Czechoslovakia's Sudeten Germans to reunite with their brothers and sisters in greater Germany. The latter was an obvious attempt at a takeover, and while many Europeans feared the worst, the Western Allies were not yet prepared to fight. Instead, Britain's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, flew to Munich. Along with the leaders of Italy and France, he agreed to allow Hitler to take over the Sudetenland in exchange for a promise from the German chancellor to leave the rest of Czechoslovakia untouched. Together, Chamberlain declared, the Allies had made peace with honour, peace for our time.

The reaction on the ship was ecstatic. Holmes joined other students in raiding the first class section and celebrating with champagne. All the while, however, he retained a degree of his ever-present caution. He wrote home: "I haven't quite figured out yet whether Mr. Chamberlain is going to be right in the long run. All I know is that I am joining most hastily in the mass sigh of incredible relief."³³ There was for him still too great a possibility of war. Peace could be assured only when people had changed their ways of thinking. Sir Frederick Banting, the Canadian Nobel Prize winner and co-discoverer of insulin, who happened to be aboard the same ship, was more optimistic and less restrained. The students had to put him to sleep after he celebrated with too much enthusiasm. Banting later perished in an air disaster in Newfoundland while working as a liaison officer between the British and the Americans during the conflict.

Following a brief stay with family in Scotland, Holmes arrived at the University of London's King's College with mixed feelings. After touring the city's upscale West End, his romantic vision of an older, slower metropolis was replaced by an acknowledgment of the modernity of one of the largest industrialized centres in the world. It was not quite New York, and for this he was grateful – the hectic nature of that American city always left him slightly uncomfortable – but it took some adjusting before he was fully at ease.³⁴

Mary Greey, later Mary Graham, helped his transition. She was, he learned, a close friend of Lester Pearson, and their friendship was one of many that kept him happy and occupied over the next year. She recalls

Holmes as an outstanding dancer and a disarmingly charming companion who was comfortable in London's social scene. His light tweed jackets made him look like an Englishman, he loved the theatre, enjoyed long walks in England's delightful countryside, and fascinated young and old alike during intellectual discussions (often about history) over tea. He kept up-to-date on current events by reading vociferously (the London press as it was published and the *Globe and Mail* when it arrived in the post from his father). He wrote letters home every week, often more than once, and took an interest in the progress of his growing family. All the while, however, he kept his distance, sharing his time among various social circles and never getting close enough to any one person to begin a serious relationship.

At school, he planned to study with Vincent Harlow, a recent arrival from Oxford who had joined the Department of Imperial History. Professor Harlow immediately set his new student to work reading background material, delaying a decision on the focus of Holmes' thesis until he had a real sense of the young man's ability. The relationship, though civilized, was brief. When Harlow failed to arrive for class the following week, an apparently typical occurrence among some of the university's senior professors, Holmes entered into a fascinating discussion with one of his assistants. Within a matter of minutes, he had been convinced to transfer to University College where he could study under H. Hale Bellot, Commonwealth Professor of American History. Harlow took the decision well – he had too many students already – kept a space for Holmes in his seminar and even obtained for him an invitation to another in diplomatic history. Holmes set to work on a study of the relations of British North America and the West Indies with the United States during the American Civil War.³⁵

Unlike Harlow, Bellot had a clear plan for Holmes' time at University College. He was to spend two years in London fulfilling his residency requirement, doing research, and reaping the full benefits of the British postgraduate experience by reading, writing, and associating actively within the academic community. His study would draw heavily on newspaper accounts, public and private letters, and the limited secondary material available. Once the two years had passed, Holmes would return to North America to examine the Canadian and American records before coming back to London briefly for what was called his *viva voce*, or oral defence.

The schedule suited Holmes' tastes and interests. Bellot had given him the freedom to continue to indulge his journalistic fancy – he published in the literary supplement to the *Gazette* back at home and in the *London Free*

Press while he was away – and encouraged his activities with the Institute of Historical Research (IHR), a social hub for young London historians. Holmes co-founded a Commonwealth group within the IHR to discuss the future of the former empire. The participants were more progressive than were those of the Old Royal Empire Society. Their meetings provided a place for over twenty students from Bermuda, Ceylon, Jamaica, South Africa, India, and a number of other colonies and countries to socialize and learn about each other's history and culture in a friendly and supportive environment.³⁶

The students shared their collective disgust when they learned of the pogroms against German Jews that November. Holmes called them massacres in his letters home and privately condemned the rather casual British response. "This country, I am afraid," he wrote his sister Elizabeth, "has lost its nerve and its morale and only a complete cynicism and fatalism prevail. I'm glad I'm just visiting."³⁷ His idealism was nurtured in the Commonwealth Group, where British pretensions and frowning upon the lower classes were rejected as illiberal, snobbish, and heartless. Holmes' old Quaker mentors would have been welcome here, and he himself felt comfortable.

He returned to Canada for Christmas and spent what became a working holiday visiting with family and reading extensively at the Ontario Archives. When he was not deep into the newspapers of the 1860s, or setting the famous Christmas quiz, he was making plans for the rest of his doctoral experience. Money was short, and although he very much wanted to spend a year at Harvard, Yale, or Cornell completing the research for his dissertation, since none of these schools seemed able to offer him a fellowship, he considered a temporary return to Pickering. The school had made him a tempting offer, and its location just outside of Toronto would have allowed him to continue to pursue his studies, albeit more slowly. But Holmes did not want to live in Newmarket again, and he was not the type to make decisions based on money alone. Upon his arrival in London, he applied for a British Council Dominion Scholarship and set back to work on his thesis. "My single ambition," he wrote on his application, "is to return to Canada and resume teaching in either a secondary school or a university."³⁸

It was here in London in early 1939 that Holmes had his first experience as an expert on Canadian foreign policy. On behalf of the University College Historical Society, his friend and senior colleague, Robin Humphreys, invited him to give a lecture on Canada's international role. While Holmes liked to claim that he despised public speaking, his success in high school

and his comfort in the classroom demonstrated that he was a natural; and, indeed, he was quite at ease in front of an audience. The style of the talk characterized his approach to public lectures throughout the rest of his life and was one of the reasons that his voice was respected by Canadians of a variety of political inclinations. As he explained in a letter to his parents, he felt it best not to present his own viewpoint on the state of affairs; rather, he wrote, "I just tried to sum up Canada's traditional policy and then analyze the arguments for and against each of the possible policies we might follow in the future."³⁹ The forty-five-minute lecture provoked a spirited set of questions, which he answered with pleasure. Not long after, he accepted another invitation to speak, this time on the Empire and American foreign policy. His confidence growing, he submitted a long essay on lessons for Canada from the American Civil War to *Saturday Night*, a leading magazine at home. To his delight it was accepted, and that summer John Holmes made his public debut as a political commentator with the message that "the fundamental basis of liberal democracy is a belief in the ultimate power of reasonable persuasion rather than force."⁴⁰

Wendell and Helen Holmes were excited and proud of their son's success, but they were also worried. The situation in Europe seemed to be deteriorating, and he was too close to the danger. The younger Holmes was much less concerned, his faith in humanity having grown stronger thanks to his experience in the Commonwealth Group. "I don't think there is any need to worry in the immediate future," he wrote home on Valentine's Day. "Even the gloomiest pessimists here feel things will be all right for this year anyway ... I really think that Canada is probably suffering a reaction from the developing American panic ... Really I don't think there is any danger of a war while Mr. Chamberlain is in power, and there is very little chance of his going out of power without a heart attack."⁴¹ One month later, Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, and the philosophy of appeasement became a source of political embarrassment.

German aggression did not prevent Mr. and Mrs. Holmes from crossing the Atlantic to visit their son in the spring. It was a great experience for everyone, full of travel through the country, trips to the galleries and the theatre, and visits with new friends. Holmes' mother and father met his professors, spoke with his colleagues, and left confident that he was safe and content. The vacation was a pleasant break from reality for all. By the time the Holmes parents returned to Ontario, Hitler had made overtures to Italy's fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, and had initiated plans to take over Poland. In response, Britain and France accelerated their rearmament process in anticipation of a major war.

The chaos throughout Europe echoed in Holmes' personal life. Just weeks after Holmes' scholarship application was rejected, Professor Bellot informed him that he would be spending a term in the United States. Professor Humphreys would take over direct supervision until his return the following January.⁴² With no money, no supervisor, research to be done across the Atlantic, and Europe headed for war, it was time to think seriously about returning home. Holmes began the paperwork for study leave in Canada and spent July and August travelling across England and France. He was wandering through the Loire Valley when Hitler attacked Poland, and he managed to return to London just in time to pack up his things before the conflict escalated.

He arrived at his residence the day that Britain and France declared war, an event that effectively ended his career as a graduate student. "I shall never forget those 24 hours in London," he wrote home the next day. "Like everyone else I had almost no sleep. There was a group of boys at London House all feeling quite aimless, except the doctors who had jobs. In the morning I went to the bank and took the precaution of securing all my money ... in order to pass the time I helped all day packing sandbags. We finished this job at about 4.30 and then just sat down with nothing to do but wait for the first air raid."⁴³

Within days, the university had closed and Holmes left for neutral Ireland. Having all but given up on finishing his studies in London – the university itself was evacuating to Wales – he elected to make the best of what had become an extended holiday. He knew it was wrong to enjoy himself with war so close by, but Dublin was peaceful, the newspapers revealed little, and his future was uncertain. Thanks to Professor Bellot, he received a message from the vice-provost of Trinity College, University of Dublin, inviting him to continue his studies as a transfer student in Ireland, but it was too late.⁴⁴ He knew that he was coming home, and less than a week after the University of London accepted his leave application, he left Europe for New York. After a brief stop at the World's Fair he returned to Canada to contemplate his future. He had enjoyed his experience in England, but the troubling international situation made it clear that it was time to move on.

He reached London, Ontario, late enough to prevent a return to Pickering until the following year and settled back in his parents' house without a clear idea of what was to come. With little money, no job, and – perhaps because of the death of his uncle in the first war, maybe because of the pacifist influences of Pickering and the Commonwealth Group, or even possibly, as he later claimed, because of his poor eyesight – no serious

thoughts of joining the military, academic work was the obvious option. He spent most of the next few months at the University of Western Ontario, researching and writing in the library. If the war continued, he could always return to Pickering. Otherwise, there was still a faint chance that he could complete his PhD.⁴⁵

Eventually, he found a better option. The Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA) was founded in 1928 as a discussion forum for citizens interested in the Empire and world affairs. Under the leadership of the workaholic Escott Reid, by 1939 it had established branches across the country and was hosting a speakers series and study sessions to keep them active. Reid and Holmes shared similar cultural backgrounds. Both were educated, in part, overseas, and neither completed his final degree. The most significant difference between the two was in temperament. Holmes had strong views but abhorred conflict; Reid was inflammatory and often unwilling to compromise. Holmes' natural humility contrasted with Reid's arrogance. Both were idealistic, but while the former restrained his idealism (and his youthful commitment to socialism) just as he did his emotions, the latter's political views (he was initially socialist and neutralist) and perpetual emotional explosions (which continued throughout his career) made him intolerable to some of his colleagues and superiors.⁴⁶

Under Reid, the CIIA took its role in society seriously and promoted Canadian involvement in world affairs as widely as possible. After he resigned to join the DEA, the National Council of the CIIA decided to expand into the field of public education. "The greatest service we can render to our nation at a time like the present," wrote leading member Edgar J. Tarr just before the war began, "is to be an influence preventing the general development of a narrowness of national outlook which would make impossible an appreciation of the real causes of international rivalry and friction – a lack of understanding of which by Canadians would prevent Canada from playing its part, large or small, in unravelling the tangle of world affairs."⁴⁷ How it could do this without becoming a vehicle of government propaganda was not clear at first, but a \$9,000 grant spread over three years from the US philanthropic Carnegie Corporation (an American organization) made finding a solution a priority.

A committee, including the chair of the National Executive, J.M. Macdonnell; the chair of the Public Education Committee, C.S. MacInnes; and the national secretary, John Baldwin; began plans for a CIIA information service. They envisioned a drastically expanded library and a publication program directed at average Canadians. The Carnegie grant could fund acquisitions, publications, and a secretary to manage the project. As they

considered potential candidates, Baldwin thought of his former Camp Ahmek colleague, John Holmes. Holmes received an invitation to apply and did so immediately. A formal letter of resignation to Pickering followed shortly thereafter.⁴⁸

On 12 July 1940, John Holmes attended a CIIA National Executive Committee meeting at which he was introduced as the new information secretary. His salary of \$125 per month was considerably less than what he received at Pickering, but the job was exciting and allowed him to make a contribution to the war effort that was better suited to his attitude and temperament than was becoming a soldier. Forty-five years later, when he reflected on his decisions to join the CIIA and, later, the public service, he wrote: "In the traditional way I should say that I was bitterly disappointed and wanted to go to war, but I was not. I have no doubt that I was more useful to my country doing what I did, even if it was unheroic. Still I always recall what was said to me by my dear friend, Raleigh Parkin, who had survived War Number One ... 'I know, however, what it must be like to miss the great experience of your generation.' As a commentator it has left me partially paralyzed."⁴⁹

Holmes was added to the public education and research committees and was invited to attend the monthly gatherings of the National Council and National Executive. His first tasks included revitalizing the institute's library and founding a new, accessible publication series. Following in the tradition of his father, he took inventory, ordered new books, subscribed to a number of journals, and purchased a series of official publications. He also established a two-part clipping service, one focused on world affairs and the other on public opinion. Finally, he continued to distribute daily and weekly press releases to the more significant Canadian newspapers, expanding the scope of the practice to include the French-language media. The reputation of the institute's information service grew quickly, and American analysts studying world affairs added the CIIA to their list of resources.⁵⁰

Working closely with the chair of the public education committee, Terry MacDermot, Holmes also drafted "Bushels to Burn," the first volume of what has since become known as the *Behind the Headlines* series. It was published that September in conjunction with the Canadian Association for Adult Education. The essay focused on the massive wheat surplus that had been harvested in Canada on account of the war. "One thing is certain," Holmes wrote. "We cannot abandon the wheat-growers, the store-keepers and bankers and school-teachers who serve them, as well as the thousands of workers in the East who make farm-machinery and binder-twine. If

they cannot live on wheat, other provisions must be made for them ... All of Canada has prospered with wheat and all of Canada should share the costs in time of adversity.”⁵¹ By the fall, the CIIA had begun to distribute issues of the pamphlet across Ontario, charging ten cents per copy. At about the same time, Holmes commissioned the publication of a second set of essays for a democracy and citizenship series linked to a set of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) broadcasts called “Citizens All” as well as for the world affairs series published by Oxford University Press.⁵²

His salary was increased when he became the CIIA’s permanent information secretary in November, and by early 1941 he had settled into a comfortable, regular routine. With Escott Reid no longer involved, the CIIA had become a more moderate organization, perfectly suited to the new secretary’s views of the world. In May, Holmes co-authored another *Behind the Headlines* volume, “Dynamic Democracy.” His essay explored the temptation to use barbarism to combat the evils of Nazism, advocating resistance to any urges to abandon the ideals and philosophy that made democracy great. “Honesty must be the basis of all international relations and of the whole civilization for which Canada fights,” Holmes argued for not the last time. “Civilized countries must stand for fundamental principles greater than party policies, principles which can be fearlessly enunciated and upheld.” Canada’s future success hinged on the pursuit of the “middle way of democracy,” an approach to world affairs that required patience, faith, and dedication to common principles of decency. As Canadians began their profound transformation from inward-looking isolationists to engaged global contributors, Holmes’ commitment to an internationalism grounded in the realities of the world around him grew as well.⁵³

His hard work was noticed by his superiors. When National Secretary Baldwin accepted a position in the DEA, Holmes took his place on a temporary basis. A selection committee was then struck and offered the position to Fred Soward, an academic who would also find himself in the public service for much of the war. When Soward declined, the committee turned to Holmes. His attitude towards the opportunity was mixed. In a letter to his parents, he explained that the job was “generally looked upon as an entrée into some of the country’s best jobs and all the previous secretaries have moved on to big things. But,” he wrote,

I am faced with the momentous decision as to whether I want to move on to big things ... Ambition, I discover, is not an overwhelming motive in my case. I would gladly spend the rest of my life with my clippings and my

pamphlets, perhaps finding a less strenuous route to fame and fortune. I'm afraid I've reached a crucial point in my "career," and I don't like crucial points ... I am firmly convinced that the Institute is a very good thing and should go on, and, judging from the last year's financial and membership results, there are a lot of other Canadians who feel the same way. If only I could do my bit under some one else's direction.⁵⁴

His comments might not have been entirely truthful; rather, as he did before making most significant decisions, Holmes hesitated, clinging, if only for a moment, to a nostalgic vision of his allegedly simple, hassle-free past. It was a way for him to lower his expectations of what would come next, to eliminate any exuberance that might disrupt the progress his life had made to that point. In reality, the increased salary of \$2,600 per year, additional responsibilities in the shaping of Canadian public thinking about world affairs and international postwar reconstruction, and the two-year contract offered to him by the committee were all too attractive. Holmes agreed in October 1941 to become national secretary retroactive to 1 September.⁵⁵

Although his responsibilities increased, he did not neglect his commitment to research. True to his letter home, he continued to be involved in the institute's publications series, in applying for external funding, and in arranging for guest speakers. In December 1941 he initiated plans to secure a renewal of a multi-year \$20,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to support the CIIA's research program. The money paid for more than half of the institute's yearly expenses.

In January 1942, the CIIA played host to one of Canada's leading civil servants, Lester (Mike) Pearson. Wendell and Helen Holmes were family friends of the Pearsons, and their sons first met the summer before when Pearson passed through the CIIA office. Like Escott Reid, Pearson had a lot in common with John Holmes. Both grew up in houses that promoted the social gospel and were strongly committed to serving their country. Both preferred negotiation to conflict, and both handled themselves well in small groups, including the media. The most significant difference between them was ambition: Pearson naturally led from the front while Holmes was more comfortable facilitating from within.

Pearson's lecture was so stirring that Holmes attempted to arrange for its publication.⁵⁶ The negotiations were unsuccessful – as a civil servant, it was awkward for Pearson to allow his talk to be distributed publicly – but the conversations were hardly wasted. The two developed a degree of mutual admiration that served both of their futures well.

As Pearson's profile in the DEA grew, so too did Holmes' at the CIIA. The national secretary began a country-wide tour of the institute's branches in February, listening patiently to organizers' complaints and encouraging the studies of reconstruction that were taking place under the auspices of the fast-expanding CIIA nationwide. In spite of the war, membership increased from 1,190 in 1939 to 1370 in 1942. Holmes' travels, which took him east before he landed in British Columbia, exposed him to some of the country's leading public figures. As his reputation grew, his visits became more popular. Stories of his work at the institute eventually reached Chicago, where he was invited to speak at the Library of International Relations. Still the keeper of the CIIA library at heart, Holmes arranged an exchange of materials with the Illinois librarians.⁵⁷

He returned to find the internationalist and publicly focused vision of the CIIA, with its well-attended study conferences and roundtable discussions, becoming increasingly attractive to the national government. In September, Prime Minister Mackenzie King created the Wartime Information Board (WIB) with the goal of promoting Canada's global achievements and enhancing the national commitment to postwar internationalism. The WIB brought legitimacy to the CIIA's aims, and an inordinate number of government officials pledged to discuss the role of the smaller states in the future world order at Mount Tremblant that December. Tremblant had been chosen largely because this was to be a multicultural conference, with delegates from as far away as India planning to participate, and there were few prominent locations in Quebec that appeared willing to accommodate guests of what Holmes later called "various colours with different religious faiths."⁵⁸ The National Executive of the CIIA, which was sponsoring the conference through its affiliate, the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR), asked him to lead its delegation, offering him an exciting opportunity to speak to the most esteemed and well-connected audience he had ever faced.

At almost the same time, Holmes was solicited to help establish Canada's Wartime Prices and Trade Board in Washington. The body had been created just before the onset of the Second World War to help limit inflation and prevent the social unrest that had exploded at the end of the last major conflict. In the early years of the new war, the federal civil service expanded at an unprecedented rate, drawing extensively from Canada's relatively small academic elite. As one historian has noted, "The majority of the intellectual community, the needs of modern society, and the public mood all dictated that the state continue to expand its role and

that the expert adviser would be central to the expansion.”⁵⁹ With the help of Wynne Plumptre, who knew Holmes from his days at the University of Toronto, the chair of the board, the youthful and determined Donald Gordon, pursued Holmes aggressively, going so far as to invite him to Ottawa for a personal meeting and then privately negotiating his release from the CIIA with some of the organization’s executive. While in Ottawa, however, Holmes spoke with another professor he had met at the University of Toronto, George Glazebrook, who had recently been seconded from the university into the DEA. Glazebrook told him to delay responding to Gordon because external affairs was in the process of recruiting a number of talented academics as temporary wartime assistants, and he was near the top of the list of potential recruits.⁶⁰ Escott Reid, who had also spoken with him, concurred.

Not knowing what to do, Holmes wrote Lester Pearson. “Being considerably over age,” he explained, “I had not thought of applying to the Department for a position, and, because of my work at the institute, I was not hunting for a new post. But if I am to leave here, I want to make sure that I get into the most useful kind of service. My poor eyesight means that I can join the army only in some administrative capacity, and I think personally I can accomplish more in some civilian post. I have no illusions about my capacities and don’t want to suggest that I think I should be a particular blessing to any government agency, but with the present shortage of available persons, there seems to be a premium even on the dullest of us. When I say, therefore, that I should like to go wherever I am needed most, I hope you will understand that the statement is made with due modesty.”⁶¹ It was a typically Holmesian letter: cautious, modest, yet at the same time not without ambition. Certainly, he was nervous about this next step, but it appears that Holmes used these exchanges to make himself feel more comfortable with a decision that he had already made.

Pearson wrote back, noting that, although Holmes would make an excellent contribution to any government department, the best fit would be at the DEA.⁶² Since appointments took time, and Donald Gordon would not wait until Holmes received confirmation that there was a spot for him in Ottawa, Pearson personally contacted the under-secretary of state for external affairs, Norman Robertson, and asked that the process be expedited. The day that Pearson’s letter arrived, Robertson’s assistant, Saul Rae, requested that Holmes come to Ottawa for an interview with the Civil Service Commission. Along with two members of the commission, Holmes met for an hour with Robertson, his associate under-secretary,

Hume Wrong, and a number of other well-placed foreign service officers. Holmes made an excellent impression. Although there would be a position available, he was warned that civil service regulations stipulated that it would be temporary and that he would have to reapply if he wished to stay on after the war.

For Holmes, the restrictions acted as an incentive. Whether he would admit it or not, he felt most comfortable and indeed confident when he had a means of escape. "Frankly I am interested in a war job at the moment and not in a career," he wrote Pearson, knowing that since he had already been parachuted into the DEA, if he performed well he would be virtually guaranteed employment after the war.⁶³

On 14 October, about two weeks after his interview, Norman Robertson offered John Holmes the post of special wartime assistant. It came with a slight reduction in pay, from the \$2,600 that Holmes had been earning to \$2,520, the salary of a typical foreign service officer with two years of experience. Along with the letter went another to the CIIA asking for his release while acknowledging that Holmes might need to remain with the institute through the new year to attend the conference at Mount Tremblant and support the transition to a successor. Holmes received the contract from the DEA two days later and accepted ten days after that, with the caveat that he remain in Toronto until January. The CIIA's National Executive was informed of his resignation officially at a meeting in mid-November, and his appointment as special assistant was formalized on 2 December with a 1 January 1943 start date and provision for him to arrive a few weeks late, if necessary.⁶⁴

His experience at the IPR conference, his last major duty as the CIIA's national secretary, was mixed. The event solidified the commitment of all of Canada's major political parties to a more internationalist outlook in world affairs and set the stage for his subsequent work at the DEA. Less positively, the IPR's international membership included a number of communist sympathizers, some of whom fought with Holmes over whether the Japanese were really to blame for the attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor.⁶⁵ Their comments were noticed by the FBI, which was present at Tremblant, and there are references to John Holmes in its files.

Holmes did not forget the difficulties in Quebec, but he was on his way to Ottawa in January 1943, and he had left the CIIA in an enviable condition. Attendance at Tremblant had been record-breaking, and international interest and participation had reached unprecedented levels. His research committee published four books and three pamphlets in his final year, most of which were translated into French and distributed out of

Montreal. There were new links to the Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers' Federation. Membership had increased to 1,365. The Carnegie grant had been renewed, and a new \$20,000 Rockefeller grant to supplement it had been secured.⁶⁶ There was a new headquarters on Bloor Street, and morale at the institute was good. Finally, the new national secretary, Douglas MacLennan, was well suited to the position. John Holmes exited the CIIA with a genuine sense of accomplishment, personal momentum, and a bright future. He had already developed an outstanding network of friends and colleagues whose connections would contribute almost immediately to the expansion of the influence of his thinking about Canada and the world.