

ELUSIVE

THE POLITICAL VOCATION OF JOHN NAPIER TURNER

DESTINY

PAUL LITT



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FOREWORD

By John English

John Turner came of political age in the 1950s when Canada's finest historians wrote great political biographies. Donald Creighton's biography of John A. Macdonald framed the central debates about Canadian identity at Canada's creation and in the confident 1950s. Creighton's Macdonald found its superb counterpart in J.M.S. Careless's brilliant biography of Macdonald's longtime liberal antagonist and brief collaborator George Brown. The two biographies express the spirit of their time, the fundamental debate about how individual character shapes the circumstances of national experience.

Academic historians moved suddenly away from political biography during the rebellions of the sixties. Political biographies were, after all, about "great men," as Thomas Carlyle had declared in the mid-nineteenth century. And like the Victorian age, they suddenly seemed fusty remnants, like wing-tipped collars, waistcoats, spats, and spittoons. History was to be written "from the bottom up," and the excluded became the proper study of the proper historical mind as social history became the dominant school for aspiring historians. Simultaneously, and not coincidentally, the celebrated French Annales School argued for the irrelevance of political leadership in the *longue durée* of historical change. Kings and courts were mere flotsam and jetsam on the endless oceans of history. Michel Foucault, more fashionable than Marx in the seventies, argued for resistance against the processes of the state, thereby steering historians toward madness, prisons,

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and rebellion. These intellectual arguments were cogent in a period when the women's movement found its voice, when the European colonies broke the chains of empire, and when students shunned academic gowns and glory.

John Turner is the George Brown of his political times – a giant. Unlike Brown, Turner did become prime minister, albeit briefly, and fortunately he has lived much longer than the murdered Brown. But, like Brown, Turner deeply affected the central debates of Canadian political life for more than a generation. Paul Litt's fine biography argues conclusively that Turner represented a well-defined current within Canadian Liberalism that left a deep imprint upon Canadian politics during the seventies and eighties.

For John Turner, the Liberalism of Mackenzie King and C.D. Howe was bred in the bone. His mother, Phyllis, was an outstanding public servant, an economist whose rare female voice was heard in the corridors of economic power during the challenges of depression and war, when Canadians turned to Ottawa for leadership. In his youth in Ottawa, Turner encountered Canadians dedicated to making the state an instrument for economic revival and, after September 1939, for fighting a world war. There were worthy and hard-won victories in both battles. King, Howe, Claxton, Martin, Ilsley, Pearson, and St. Laurent were more than names to Turner; they represented the best of a powerful political tradition of which he, because of his beliefs, exceptional ability, and personal charisma, became a distinguished part.

Elusive Destiny portrays an exceptional athlete, scholar, lawyer, businessman, and politician. Of these pursuits, John Turner would later argue that the last was the highest calling, one that was wrongly and dangerously depreciated in the second half of the twentieth century. As minister of justice, Turner knew that his reform of the Criminal Code profoundly affected the way Canadians lived their lives. As minister of finance, his careful stewardship of the nation's finances during the turbulent years of the OPEC oil embargo, the world food crisis, and the breakup of the Bretton Woods system maintained Canadian economic balance through the most difficult economic circumstances since the Great Depression.

Turner's political presence lingered after he returned to private life in 1975. Paul Litt has written a political biography that does not dwell upon

Turner's personal life but rather concentrates on Turner's public career. Still, Litt recognizes that an examination of Turner's beliefs and life before and beyond politics is essential to understanding political motivation. Through Litt's careful scholarship and perceptive prose we come to know John Turner and what "made him run," to use a cliché of his political times. When Pierre Trudeau resigned in 1984, as Canada stumbled out of a deep recession, Turner became Liberal leader and then, briefly, prime minister. Defeated badly in the 1984 general election, Turner stayed on to fight another campaign. It was his finest hour.

Leading a divided party, haunted by memories of old feuds, Turner confronted Brian Mulroney on the issue of free trade. He lost the election, but his evocative warning that Canadians had built a nation from sea to sea to sea, which Brian Mulroney weakened with the stroke of a pen, is an image that has lingered with Canadians. His powerful words drew upon his experience of the confident Canada of his youth as well as the wariness of a too close relationship with our great neighbour. A good friend of influential Americans such as George Schultz, Turner knew that American national interest would trump agreements and close the border. What happened after 9/11 was no surprise to Turner.

Elusive Destiny captures Turner's eloquence and passion in the historic political battles of the late eighties exceedingly well. He makes a strong case for Turner's hesitations about the trade agreement with the United States and shares Turner's view that the agreement was not "free trade" and that the United States Congress would never relinquish American sovereignty over trade or, as Canadians learned later, over security. More controversially, Litt takes Turner's side in the Meech Lake debate, strongly arguing that Pierre Trudeau was unfair to his successor in his vitriolic opposition to Meech. Many Liberals will disagree, but all readers will understand the basis of Turner's position and the depth of his convictions.

In a different time, John Turner's biography, with its profound relevance to contemporary debates about Liberalism, nationalism, and Canada in the world, would have been published earlier. Unfortunately, as Turner has eloquently warned, Canadians have become too indifferent to their political history and traditions. Ultimately, memory forms consciousness and provides the understanding that gives meaning to our common life. Biography

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particularly illuminates choices: how leaders developed, how differences festered, and how personal relationships influenced decisions. While historians still rightly shun Carlyle, events have persuaded many that the role of the individual in effecting historical change can be decisive. The end of the Cold War, for example, is difficult to explain without reference to Mikhail Gorbachev, an almost accidental successor to Soviet leadership after the deaths of others in power. Moreover, those historians who minimized the role of Stalin and emphasized local circumstances in the terror that transformed the Soviet Union were forced to revise their judgments when archives revealed his personal hand in thousands of executions. And for better and worse, all agree that Mao fundamentally changed China.

In Britain, after a brief pause, biography is flourishing again, even in academic circles. Martin Gilbert's monumental biography of Churchill has chugged on for decades, while major writers such as Antonia Fraser, the politician Roy Jenkins, and Robert Skidelsky have had great popular success. German and French bookstores are now crammed with outstanding biographies of major and minor political leaders. In the United States, the tide turned in the nineties as academics and others turned to the Founding Fathers and, especially, to Abraham Lincoln, while television has been especially kind with history and biography channels.

Canadians, however, have not been served as well. The major historical project of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was *Canada: A People's History*, whose title clearly and correctly indicates that the focus was on "ordinary" Canadians not on the political elites. As the general editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*, I have discovered that it is often extremely difficult to find authors to write biographies of prominent political figures. The C.D. Howe Foundation gave a generous grant that permitted us to publish biographies of prominent Canadians, including C.D. Howe, but we are still trying to find appropriate writers for other important politicians.

This volume, written with the cooperation of John Turner and supported by the Howe Foundation, reveals how important academic biographies based upon scrupulous research on Canada's major political leaders can be. One hopes that the University of British Columbia Press will publish many future political biographies of this quality. When Lester Pearson read

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Creighton's Macdonald in the early fifties, he wrote his former colleague in the History Department of the University of Toronto and told him that the biography illuminated what Macdonald meant and what Canada had become. John Turner's story similarly tells us so much about what we were and how his political generation shaped the nation we know today.

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INTRODUCTION

THE RIGHT MAN AT THE WRONG TIME

The studio was in a nondescript building in suburban Ottawa, but the stage was national. Three men in suits faced the cameras and the questions of journalists. In the middle was Brian Mulroney, the Progressive Conservative prime minister, looking sleek and smug; on the right, Ed Broadbent, the leader of the New Democratic Party, exuding earnest determination; and to the left, John Turner, the Liberal leader, keyed up and champing at the bit. It was the leaders' debate in the 1988 Canadian general election. The three had been sparring for over an hour, with some spirited exchanges but no decisive blows.

This was a critical moment for John Napier Turner. He had stumbled during the leaders' debate in 1984; some thought it had cost him the election. Now he was trying to rally a party disheartened by four years in opposition. The Liberals had started the 1988 election campaign riven by factionalism and intrigue, squabbling over major issues of the day and disheartened by the prospect of remaining out of power. In the opening weeks of the campaign, they fell to third place in the polls. Pundits were predicting they would soon follow the British Liberal Party into political oblivion.

Turner opposed the free-trade deal that Mulroney had signed with the United States, but his message had not been getting through to Canadians. Now came the wake-up call. Late in the debate Turner listed a number of flaws in the agreement and asked the prime minister why he had accepted

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them. Mulroney deflected the question. Turner went back at him. Ignoring the old adage that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, Mulroney launched into pious finger wagging about how his ancestors had helped build Canada. Turner again brought him back on topic and forced the issue in one eloquent outburst:

We built a country east and west and north. We built it on an infrastructure that deliberately resisted the continental pressure of the United States. For 120 years we've done it. With one signature of a pen, you've reversed that, thrown us into the north-south influence of the United States and will reduce us, I am sure, to a colony of the United States, because when the economic levers go, the political independence is sure to follow.¹

Turner had driven his point home vividly and passionately. He had done it in one memorable sound bite, and the media ran with it. The clip led on the television news, aired repeatedly on radio, and was printed verbatim in newspapers. Turner came across as forceful and driven by conviction, in marked contrast to the dissembling Mulroney. The polls showed the Liberals surging ahead of the Tories. John Turner was back.

But not for long. Having lost this round on the free-trade issue itself, the Tories retaliated by attacking the messenger. They impugned Turner's character; he wasn't a true patriot, really – he was just trying to save his own political skin. An advertising blitz by the Conservatives branded him a liar. Business interests poured money into commercials that predicted job losses and economic decline if the deal were rejected. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce mobilized its members nationwide, and prominent figures at home and abroad were recruited to undermine Turner's credibility. Under this assault, the Liberal rally faltered – and the Tories won their second consecutive majority government.

A few months later, Turner announced that he was stepping down as Liberal leader. Though electoral victory had eluded him, he could at least take some satisfaction that, after leading the Liberals to the brink of extinction, he had restored them as a viable species. In 1993 his party would return to power for another thirteen years.

Character, or rather, voters' perceptions of character – the target of the Tories' late campaign advertising blitz in 1988 – is critical to any politician's success. People want to be able to trust their leader. For voters disoriented by a swirling wash of issues and information, focusing on character has the virtue of simplicity. Since the mid-twentieth century, they have been able to decide whether they like and trust politicians from what they see of them on television.

John Turner's generation was the last to grow up before television. His middle-class upbringing in pre-war Ottawa was shaped by family, school, and the Catholic Church. They imbued residual Victorian values of duty, honour, and public service, then cast him into an exemplary role in a rapidly changing modern world. Turner played by the rules and excelled. He won a Rhodes Scholarship in the late 1940s, became a successful lawyer in Montreal in the 1950s, a rising star of national politics in the 1960s, and a powerful Cabinet minister in the 1970s. His resignation as minister of finance in 1975 was a serious blow to the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau. Everyone said he was simply biding his time, waiting for the next step; some day, some day soon, he would be prime minister.

The prediction came true in 1984, when Turner won the Liberal leadership and succeeded Trudeau. Then fate played a cruel trick. It allowed him to live his dream for seventy-nine days before snatching it away and dangling it just beyond reach for four long years. The 1988 election was Turner's last chance at power. He came agonizingly close, but close doesn't count in politics. What had gone wrong?

You have to be lucky in politics, and luck, more often than not, means simply being the right person in the right place at the right time. Turner's timing was off in three critical ways. When he first went to Parliament in 1962, he seemed the perfect representative of the youthful, urban, bicultural, and cosmopolitan Canada that was emerging in the post-war period. Fluently bilingual, handsome, an Oxford graduate and Olympic-calibre athlete with connections in the West, the Maritimes, and Quebec, he was the model of a smart, contemporary politician in the mould of President John F. Kennedy. Then came the cultural revolution of the mid-1960s, which injected into mainstream politics a potent desire for change. Politicians responded by implementing social democratic policies and

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striving to appear in tune with the restive spirit of the era. Turner advocated reforms and tried to be hip, but the image of the man in the grey flannel suit lingered. He lost the 1968 Liberal leadership to Pierre Trudeau, whose nonconformist image played perfectly to the cultural moment.

Canada seemed to be coming of age during the heady days of the Centennial and Expo 67, and the social justice ethos of the sixties would remain influential long after the events of the decade faded in memory. Turner encountered it again when he returned to politics in 1984 and found his concerns about mounting government deficits interpreted as a mean-spirited moral failing. Fiscal responsibility would not again become a desirable trait in a Canadian politician until after he retired from public life in 1993.

The second case of bad timing, not unrelated to the first, was the concurrence of Turner's and Trudeau's careers. The effect of Trudeau's candidacy on Turner's leadership prospects in 1968 was bad enough, but Trudeau's political longevity was worse. John Turner was thought to be a bit young for the leadership in 1968, but in the 1970s he was in his political prime. If an older candidate had won in 1968, or if Trudeau had lost an election and resigned as leader in the early to mid-1970s, the timing would have been just right. As it was, by the time Turner inherited the leadership, the Liberals had been in power under Trudeau for so long that voters wanted a change. To make things worse, the longer Trudeau stayed in office, the more his leadership was questioned. As ever more pundits suggested he should resign in favour of Turner, Trudeau increasingly resented his rival. Eventually, he so loathed Turner that he actively sabotaged his leadership campaign and his short time as prime minister.

The rise of television was the third and decisive timing factor in Turner's career. Kennedy's ascension to the US presidency in 1961 and Trudeau's rapid political rise in 1968 both exemplified the power of charisma in the television age. Political leaders were now expected to project star quality, and politics became another arena of celebrity popular culture. John Turner was not a natural television performer. This weakness was not critical in his early political career, but when he returned to national politics in 1984, he was subjected to a new level of scrutiny. Now in late middle age, he was still photogenic: tall and well built, with silver hair and patrician looks. Yet on videotape he came across as too "hot" in a medium Marshall McLuhan

famously described as “cool.”² Viewers saw him as tense and uncomfortable, and they knew from their favourite television shows that characters who looked ill at ease were hiding dark secrets or unsavoury motives.

Journalist Ron Graham tried to delve into the Turner psyche to explain his image issues in a profile written during the 1984 Liberal leadership campaign:

His personality is a methodically achieved balance between his obsessive fears of failing or making a mistake and his heroic conceits about his ability to influence people and get things done. His fears are tested constantly by his ambition, his assumption of superiority, and the expectations of others; but any arrogance is checked at once by his insecurity, his sensitivity to criticism, and the humility ingrained by his Roman Catholic faith.

Graham likened Turner to a circus performer executing “a high-wire act of balance, determination, and cautious progress above the abyss of conflict, failure, or eternal damnation.”³

Despite its supercilious exaggeration, Graham’s observation was revealing. John Turner had good reason to be tense. From a young age he had constantly been pushed ahead and pulled in different directions by the expectations and demands of others. He was eager to please and more than capable. He had been raised by a single mother who had high standards – and he had measured up. Teachers expected a lot from him – and he shone. His friends were awed by his accomplishments and predicted great things – and he obliged. Supporters in business and politics invested in his future – and he delivered. With every accomplishment, the bar was set higher. The *oblige* was part and parcel of the *noblesse*. He was public property, a national resource, his private self battened below the hatches, accessible only to God and, schedule permitting, John Turner himself.

Turner’s leadership style reflected his accommodating personality. He emulated Mackenzie King and Lester Pearson, two of his political heroes, in practising a classic conciliatory style of Canadian politics. It involved consulting, communicating, consensus building, and compromising to continually balance competing interests. His political philosophy was also a product of tension, in this case between the claims of social conscience

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and fiscal responsibility. He believed that government had a role to play in promoting social justice through welfare programs, yet should do only as much as it could afford. This approach placed him squarely in the centre of the political spectrum – the place where the votes lay, in both the Liberal Party and the electorate as a whole. When Turner's position was at odds with that of the Liberal Party, it was usually because he believed that the party had veered too far right or left. Invariably, he steered back toward the centre.

Accommodation was not a style that came naturally to Pierre Trudeau. Famous for his independence and self-assurance – some called it arrogance – he was seen as a leader who would strike out boldly in the direction he wanted to go and expect the country to follow him. The differences between Turner and Trudeau offered an instructive study in contrasting leadership styles, yet working together, they proved remarkably effective. Trudeau inspired Canadians with his principled causes, but often it was Turner who made them work, whether by calming Western premiers' fears about the *Official Languages Act* or energy policy, representing Canada's interests to the White House, or trying to get labour and business to work together.

On one key issue, however, they were at odds. For Trudeau, Quebec had to be treated as a province like all the others. Making concessions to Quebec nationalism would sap the foundation of Canadian federalism, perhaps even destroy the country. For Turner, Quebec was obviously unique, and constitutional arrangements to accommodate its needs would strengthen rather than weaken Canada. This difference between them could not be reconciled, and it came to a head in 1987 over the Meech Lake Accord. The Liberal Party was torn apart over the issue and would not heal for decades.

The tension at Turner's core may have short-circuited his prime-time image, yet for most of his long political career it drove him from one success to another. He produced under pressure. More than any other Canadian politician, he translated the spirit of the 1960s into substantial changes to the laws of the land. He was a central player in the French-English issues that dominated the era, negotiating with the provinces to implement bilingualism and constitutional change. As minister of justice, he played a major role in the 1970 October Crisis. He went on to be minister of finance during the economic crises of the early 1970s that signalled the end of the

Keynesian consensus that had attended post-war prosperity. In subsequent years his economic thinking reflected how influential policy-makers responded to the flux of the postmodern economy.

Turner's glorious opposition to free trade during the 1988 election offered Canadians an alternative to wholesale continental integration. He lost that battle but won an enduring place in history by making the case for a more independent Canada. The leading anglophone Liberal of the late twentieth century, John Turner deserves to be remembered for more than the frustrations he encountered in the final chapter of his career. His destiny was elusive; his legacy, substantial.

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PART 1
LIBERAL APPRENTICE, 1929-68

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THE MAKING OF AN EXTROVERT

In the 1930s, Canada's national capital was still a work in progress. The Parliament Buildings presided majestically over the landscape from a bluff above the Ottawa River, surrounded by manicured lawns and statues of statesmen, yet signs of a rough lumber town intruded in the background. On Parliament Hill, muffled sounds could be heard from the mills upstream at the Chaudière Rapids, and chemical odours wafted on the riverside breeze. On their way home from work, politicians and public servants skirted the working-class enclaves of LeBreton Flats and Lower Town. A half century earlier, Ottawa had been dismissed as "a sub-arctic lumber village converted by royal mandate into a political cockpit."¹ There was still truth in the gibe.

In the fall of 1933, during the bleakest days of the Great Depression, a twenty-nine-year-old widow rented a small apartment in downtown Ottawa. Phyllis Turner had come to Ottawa for a trial position with the Tariff Board, a new government agency. Though a place wasn't guaranteed, she had four-year-old John and two-year-old Brenda in tow, all the way from British Columbia. Come what may, she was determined to succeed in Ottawa.

She got the job, and within a few months the Turners moved into a rented duplex at 132 Daly Avenue in the Sandy Hill neighbourhood where John would grow up. The area was popular with public servants because it was close to their offices downtown. Although working-class Ottawa had distinct Irish Catholic and French Canadian Catholic neighbourhoods,

in Sandy Hill more prosperous citizens of differing religious and cultural backgrounds lived side by side. One of the city's older residential areas, it was bounded by the Rideau Canal to the west and the Rideau River to the east. There was a mix of housing, from small frame cottages and brick row houses to handsome stone mansions on large lots. A few low-rise apartment blocks had been built along Laurier and King Edward Avenues, its major thoroughfares. Only the spires of its churches – United, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, and Catholic – rose over the trees that lined the streets.

The Turners' new home was on the west side of Sandy Hill, around the corner from an Anglican church that had been attended by John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister. A few blocks away stood Laurier House, once the residence of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier and occupied since by Liberal leader William Lyon Mackenzie King. He had been replaced as prime minister three years earlier by Conservative R.B. Bennett. Catholic landmarks were prominent in some of the choicest riverside locations – colleges, seminaries, and the University of Ottawa, where Irish and French Catholics jostled for control.

Ottawa's ethnic and religious divisions were also evident in its schools. There were English-language non-denominational public schools (effectively Protestant) and Catholic schools run in both English and French by separate school boards.² Phyllis Turner transcended these divisions by sending her son to the Ottawa Normal Model School. Staffed by able teachers who trained student teachers in their classrooms, it was considered to be a cut above the average public school. John quickly revealed himself to be an excellent student with a competitive bent. He consistently placed at the top of his class, so he was pushed ahead, skipping grade four.³ His determination showed on the playing field as well. When he was in grade six, he entered the 100-, 220-, and 440-yard runs as well as the broad jump at his school track meet. He won each event and collected the boys' trophy for all-round athlete.

Phyllis Turner appreciated the importance of education. Born Phyllis Gregory, the daughter of a mining-hoist engineer in Rossland, British Columbia, she had made her own way in the world through academic ability. She was the only one of the four children in her family to go to university. In 1921 she enrolled in the Department of Economics, Sociology, and Political Science at the University of British Columbia, then located

in downtown Vancouver. Unlike most educated women of her day, Phyllis Gregory did not choose one of the helping professions; nor did she accept a subordinate role, such as secretary, in the white-collar workforce. Instead, she went on to graduate school at Bryn Mawr, a prestigious women's college just outside Philadelphia, where she won a scholarship to study economics and politics.⁴ After graduating with a master's degree in the spring of 1927, she entered the Bryn Mawr doctoral program, again on scholarship. She spent the first semester of the 1927–28 academic year in England, studying at the London School of Economics, then travelled to Germany to do research for her thesis.⁵

Back in England, she met Leonard Turner, a lanky, good-looking Englishman who, subsidized by proceeds from his family's import-export firm, styled himself a gentleman of "independent means." Phyllis left her studies to become a wife and mother, and the couple settled in the suburbs of southwest London. Their first child, John Napier Wyndham Turner, was born in Richmond, Surrey (now part of London), on June 7, 1929. A second son, Michael, followed, but died as an infant. Then a daughter, Brenda, was born on August 20, 1931. By this time Leonard was experiencing thyroid problems. Doctors performed a thyroidectomy, an experimental treatment that only made things worse. He died of acute broncho-pneumonia on November 18, 1932. He was only twenty-eight.⁶

Phyllis Turner was left widowed with no means of supporting her family. Not long before, she had been a promising young academic riding a string of accomplishments; now she was an unemployed single mother far from home in the middle of the Depression. She decided to return to Rossland, British Columbia, and stay with her parents. The ship and train journey became one of John's earliest memories. "Gosh, it was exciting," he recalled – "the train crews and the porters, and the dining-car waiters ... going across those trestles on the old Kettle Valley line."⁷ For his mother it was an adventure fraught with anxiety. The experience of being left suddenly alone in the world, with pressing responsibilities and few resources, was seared into her consciousness. She endured months of uncertainty before she found her feet again in Ottawa. As time passed, she would volunteer only the scantest facts about her brief marriage. Some things just weren't talked about, and Leonard Turner became one of them. She put her past behind her and created a mystery.

Single mothers with professional careers were unusual in Ottawa in the 1930s. Many women had gone to work for the government during the First World War, but once the soldiers returned, policies changed to ensure that men were hired and promoted into the best jobs. Phyllis Turner was exempt only because society recognized that as head of a household she needed to work to support her family. She hired a Scottish housekeeper to manage domestic duties and supervise the children while she was away.⁸

Smart, charming, and attractive, she quickly became well known in Ottawa. She liked to entertain colleagues at home, playing the piano and leading singalongs. Walter Gordon, later finance minister under Lester Pearson, remembered her as “bright and very good-looking – everyone just swarmed about her.”⁹ Her circle of friends included Norman Robertson, a fellow student at UBC who, in 1941, would be appointed undersecretary of state in the Department of External Affairs; Graham Towers, governor of the Bank of Canada; and Hugh Keenleyside, a diplomat who became secretary to the Canadian section of the Permanent Joint Board of Defence during the war. “As we grew older we knew she was something special, because of the people who used to come home to dinner or to a cocktail party,” Turner remembered.¹⁰ One of her admirers was R.B. Bennett, who was prime minister until 1935, when King returned to power. The Turners had a Rhone springer spaniel named Blue. When John took him out to nearby Strathcona Park, he often ran into King, walking his dog, Pat, and both humans and canines would exchange greetings.

Phyllis Turner and her friends were absorbed by the great public issues of the day, including the challenge of the state’s response to the Depression. In the Turner living room, the merits of the New Deal were debated and leading political figures dissected and lampooned. In retrospect, Turner recognized that “it certainly made me more at ease with public issues, because I had heard them discussed at home, and at a high level.”¹¹ Canada’s federal civil service was one of the best in the world in those years. “They shared a belief that public service was a civic virtue,” Jack Granatstein observed of the Ottawa mandarins. “They felt a duty to serve their country and its people.”¹² Senior public servants like Turner’s mother had deep sympathies and close ties with the Liberals, who would remain in power until 1957, throughout John Turner’s late childhood and young adulthood.

In 1938 the Turners moved to 434 Daly Avenue, a detached house at the east end of Sandy Hill. Here they lived for seven years – it was the house the Turner children would remember as their childhood home. Their mother worked long hours but spent much of her free time with them. On Sundays in good weather, they often went on a picnic.

A childhood friend of the Turner children remembered that their mother was nice but “quite a disciplinarian.”¹³ “She wasn’t domineering or oppressive,” Brenda explained, “but Mummy believed in striving for excellence. Not for fame or money or ambition – which is rather déclassé, isn’t it – but for excellence.”¹⁴ “She had a thing about … doing one’s duty and she pushed him hard,” recalled another friend.¹⁵ If John got anything less than an A on his report card, she would want to know why.¹⁶ “She knew John was bright and she always expected it of us,” Brenda recalled. “If you’ve been given talents, given gifts, use them.”¹⁷

Use them – and give thanks to God. The Turners attended 9:00 a.m. mass at the neighbourhood parish of St. Joseph’s every Sunday except during Lent, when they went daily at 7:30 a.m.¹⁸ The children grew up in a world where hard work and good conduct, plus a little luck, could bring comfort and security. But nothing was certain. Around town were many examples of less fortunate families that had fallen on hard times, and “there but for the grace of God go I” was often the message from the pulpit. It was a Snakes and Ladders moral universe in which industry and rectitude could elevate you to success, but indolence or immorality could send you sliding down into poverty or disgrace. You could get ahead if you made all the right moves, but disaster was always just a misstep away.

Because public service jobs were relatively secure, Ottawa’s middle class was less affected by the Depression than its equivalent in other cities. Salaries remained stable while prices deflated. John was kept busy after school with figure-skating classes and piano lessons, but there was plenty of time left over to hang around with the neighbourhood kids and explore the city. Like others his age, he grew up listening to radio shows such as *Amos ’n’ Andy*, following the Dionne quintuplets, and watching *The Wizard of Oz* and other Technicolor spectacles at the local movie theatre. The dime fiction of his youth featured gumshoes and cowboys, tough-guy role models personified by Humphrey Bogart on the big screen. Some summers the

family took the train west to visit Phyllis's parents and siblings. From the age of seven, however, Turner enjoyed stints at Camp Temagami, a camp for boys run by outdoorsman A.L. Cochrane, the physical education instructor at Upper Canada College in Toronto.¹⁹ There he learned canoeing, swimming, and wilderness survival. While John was at camp, his mother and sister holidayed in the Gatineau Hills, north of Ottawa. Norman Robertson introduced Phyllis Turner to his friend Lester Pearson, and she ended up renting a summer cottage next door to the Pearsons on the Gatineau River, near Wakefield.

Turner had plenty of male role models at camp, at church, and among his mother's colleagues in the public service.²⁰ None of them, however, could substitute for a father. Nor did his mother invoke the memory of the missing father as part of her parenting. With no paternal figure, real or imagined, in the household, Turner compensated by romanticizing masculine society. In time he would instinctively adopt a locker-room persona in male company, making more of being "one of the boys" than he might have if he had experienced the demystifying example of a father close at hand in his childhood.

The young John Turner learned to divide the world into distinct spheres in which he played different roles. There was the domestic sphere, a feminine realm characterized by its moral tone, where his mother held absolute sway and rules were strict. The same morality applied in the public sphere, which at this stage in his life consisted primarily of church and school. In this wider context, being from a single-parent household made him different. Those who grew up with their family status assured could afford to treat bourgeois pieties cavalierly, but John felt he had to measure up. He proved himself through outward action and accomplishment. The pressure to perform meant that the private sphere of what he really thought and felt was rarely displayed. Yet he developed an ironic awareness of the contingency of the social norms he was following. In this regard the masculine sphere took on even greater significance because it acknowledged the baser aspects of human nature and offered a realistic corrective to the hypocrisy of public morality.

By 1939 Phyllis Turner had worked her way up to the position of chief research economist for the Tariff Board. When the Second World War broke out, she was swept up in the war effort, putting in long hours, including

weekends and holidays. She was seconded to the Wartime Prices and Trade Board (WPTB), which managed the supply and distribution of food, fuel, and other essentials. There she became the senior woman in the federal public service. Her title – “oils and fats administrator” – was hardly glamorous, but her job was critical to the war effort. Glycerine, a component of fat, was a key ingredient in explosives, and she often had to come up with substitutes for other products that were critical to wartime production but unavailable under wartime conditions. Her staff grew rapidly, and she was increasingly involved in negotiations with the Allies, travelling frequently to Washington.²¹

For her schoolboy son, the war was a distant concern of the adult world.²² In 1940, when he turned eleven and was going into grade eight, the Normal School was taken over by the government for wartime purposes, so Phyllis Turner sent him to Ashbury College, a private boys’ school in the fashionable suburban neighbourhood of Rockcliffe Park. He continued to excel and displayed a similar competitiveness in extracurricular activities. He won the junior debating cup, continued to run track, and played soccer, cricket, and hockey. When he was twelve he ran the 100-yard dash in just over eleven seconds. He also won the junior school’s 220- and 440-yard race as well as the hurdles championship and was awarded the trophy for best all-round student.

At Ashbury, Turner was accelerated another grade, which made him two years younger than most of his classmates. As a result, he was finishing grade ten when he turned fourteen in June 1943. At that point his mother decided to send him to St. Patrick’s College, a local Catholic high school. The parish priest at St. Joseph’s, Father Joseph Birch, was a friend, and he convinced her that John should have a Catholic intellectual and spiritual formation.²³ He probably thought the Turner boy a good candidate for the priesthood. Birch’s order, the Oblates, was always on the lookout for new recruits, and in John it saw a smart lad from a good family, spirited but tractable, with a keen sense of duty.

St. Patrick’s occupied a five-storey collegiate Gothic building facing the Rideau Canal, south of Sandy Hill. Plucked from the private-school fraternity of Ashbury, John was thrown into a bear-pit of boys from up and down the Ottawa Valley. One of his classmates remembers him showing up the first day in a sports jacket, tie, and short flannel pants. The last item

of apparel provoked the ridicule of the tougher kids. “Any pomposity was knocked out of anyone,” Turner later recalled.²⁴ The St. Pat’s boys got into the usual kinds of trouble. Dodging the prefect of discipline to sneak a smoke in the washroom was considered good sport. For those caught breaking the rules, the penalty was “visible, physical, and brief.” John learned math both in class and from the poker and craps games one of the students ran in an unused corner of the building. “It was a typical boys’ school,” he remembered, “rough and it was hard but it was also fun. You had very firm guidelines. You knew what was expected of you. You knew what would happen if you didn’t deliver. So you knew exactly where you stood.”²⁵

Turner adapted quickly to his new environment, his competitive streak as strong as ever. He was the smallest kid in his grade but held his own in schoolyard scuffles. His marks continued to be outstanding – he scored in the nineties, while the next best student had an average in the eighties. He became editor of the school newspaper, the *Patrician*, which the students nicknamed “the Perdition.” He also joined the debating team. Public speaking came naturally to him – in fact, his self-confidence grew to the point where he became something of a showboat.²⁶ In athletics, the focus was on team sports. Turner played on the hockey team, which went to the Memorial Cup quarter-finals for three consecutive years.²⁷ He also played centre on the football team. In May 1945, his last year at St. Pat’s, the school held a track-and-field meet. Running against seventeen-year-olds, Turner cleaned up in the 100-, 220-, 440-, and 880-yard races. He then won the broad jump and was on his way to run the mile when he collapsed from exhaustion. At the end of the year, he won the Governor General’s Award for all-round excellence.

The Oblate priests who taught at St. Patrick’s made a lasting impression on the boys. Sometimes called the “rural Jesuits,” the Oblates were an intellectually rigorous teaching order.²⁸ Unlike Protestant clergy, whose role in children’s lives was often limited to a weekly appearance in the pulpit, they presided daily over classroom and extracurricular activities. Most were Irish Catholics, but some had been educated in England and steeped in the tradition of English Catholicism. John Grace, one of Turner’s classmates, recalled that they “nurtured us in a classical curriculum. They enlivened English and history and religion by connecting these subjects

to contemporary political and religious controversies in England as well as Canada ... It was a big, exciting world they opened up for us.”²⁹ Grace and Turner came to identify with the English Catholic tradition and its intellectual heroes Cardinal John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, and Hilaire Belloc.³⁰ Given the need to know and explain their exceptional status as Catholics in a majority Protestant society, these defenders of the Catholic faith had particular relevance for them.³¹ The young John Turner took seriously his responsibility to be a good representative of his faith.

In the economic dislocation following the Depression, the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church had special relevance. The priests taught Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* (On new things), in which he criticized the abuses of capitalism and emphasized the state’s responsibility for the poor and the weak. They supplemented it with Pope Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (In the fortieth year), which aimed at “reconstruction of the social order,” calling on Catholics to contribute to the common good by taking action locally and personally. These teachings made an impression on Turner. Concerned that their star pupil’s accomplishments might go to his head, the priests drilled into him St. Augustine’s dictum that man’s gifts were given by the grace of God, and the scriptural injunction “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”³² He would continue to cite some variation of this guiding principle throughout his life.

When Turner was almost sixteen, his Ottawa childhood ended. His mother always had many male admirers in the capital, and during the war she began seeing businessman Frank Ross. He was a “dollar-a-year man,” one of the captains of industry who had volunteered their services to their country during the wartime crisis. Most were recruited by C.D. Howe, the minister of munitions and supply, to help run the wartime economy. A Scot by birth, Ross had become wealthy through shipbuilding, metal fabricating, and manufacturing interests in New Brunswick and British Columbia. The couple put off marriage, waiting until their wartime services were no longer vital to their country, and finally wed in April 1945. They moved to Vancouver, where Ross had his head office, and settled into 4899 Belmont Avenue in the exclusive neighbourhood of West Point Grey. It was a sprawling mansion with an indoor swimming pool and extensive

grounds. Located northeast of the endowment lands of UBC, which had relocated nearby in the mid-1920s, it commanded a stunning view over Burrard Inlet and across English Bay to downtown Vancouver.

Over that summer, Turner moved from Ottawa to Vancouver, from middle class to wealthy, and from man of the house to his stepfather's son. He was also a precocious sixteen-year-old who was moving out into the world. His new semi-independent status was reflected in his accommodation – a separate suite above the garage. He spent the academic year 1945-46 at the University of British Columbia, coping with his courses and acclimating to the new social scene. The number of students there exploded from three thousand to ten thousand after the war, and the university scrambled to absorb the unexpected growth. Once again Turner found himself among an older peer group – the first-year cohort of eighteen-year-olds was already being supplemented by veterans in their twenties, men and women mature beyond their years after the experience of military service.

Turner had his own motorcycle that he rode to campus. “I used to love really juicing that thing up along Marine Drive, just really opening her up,” he recalled.³³ He was rushed by the Beta Theta Pi fraternity, which was dismissed by one outsider as a collection of “brains, squares and wimps.”³⁴ Here he found companionship to replace faraway friends and the attentions of his mother, now a society matron preoccupied with charity work and entertaining.³⁵ The fraternity often held chapter meetings or hosted a sorority at his house. These get-togethers frequently featured a barbecue and dancing, or a singalong, with Turner at the piano.³⁶ His newfound affluence allowed him to build up a collection of jazz records, which he also played for his friends.

Frank Ross did not become the father John had never known. He did not presume to play that role; nor did Turner desire it. He always called him “Mr. Ross.” Their relationship was correct and respectful, with the kinds of tensions to be expected when a teenager is tentatively asserting his independence within the ambit of a powerful older male. Ross nevertheless provided a model of a successful urbane businessman who worked and lived hard. He left for the office early each day, broke for lunch at his club, and, after handling routine administrative matters, returned home with friends or business associates for drinks, where they often killed the

better part of a bottle of Scotch during the cocktail hour. Dinner, he theorized, absorbed the alcohol. Discussions at the supper table could get testy if John disagreed with his stepfather's point of view.

By the time he entered second year, Turner had decided to major in political science. His favourite professor was economist Henry Angus, who had dazzled him when he lectured in one of his classes as a last-minute replacement. In response to a student's question, Angus delivered an analysis of the 1945 United Nations Charter that climaxed with a compelling conclusion precisely as class time ran out. Then in his mid-fifties, Angus had taught Turner's mother twenty years earlier and was pleased to discover in her son "a good general attitude, intellectual ability, skill in sports, a sense of public service, and a commitment to his fellows."³⁷

That year Turner also began to write for the sports section of the university newspaper, the *Ubysssey*, as "Chick," a nickname bestowed on him by a friend. One of his heroes was Pierre Berton, who had written for the same paper a few years before, and he thought he might follow in his footsteps. As associate sports editor, he reported on the fortunes of UBC's teams. He soon graduated to writing a column, "Chalk Talk with Chick." Inspired by Damon Runyon's streetwise writing style and aided by a handy thesaurus, Turner used obscure synonyms for everyday terms wherever possible, lurching between slang and mock high diction. His subjects did not merely put on their running shoes, they donned scampers; instead of walking, they ambled or strode; when they met, they exchanged felicitations. Swimming became "a torrid display of frenzied nautical muscular rhythm." Hemingway he was not. "It was all quite marvelous," his editor recalled, "though God knows if anyone actually understood it."³⁸ When his description of a pennant-seeking team being "out to cop the gonfalon" was challenged by other *Ubysssey* staff, Turner explained that a gonfalon was a banner suspended perpendicularly at medieval jousts, and the editor cleared the copy.

In his second year Turner also went out for the university track-and-field team. Daily training soon rounded him into form, and he began turning in some fast times: ten seconds flat in the 100-yard dash and twenty-two seconds in the 220. He was a powerful runner who exploded out of the blocks and burst down the track. "He was determined and ran almost the way he talked, sort of staccato," observed Robert Osborne, UBC's director

of physical education.³⁹ His times made him the university's sprint star. In 1947 UBC captured the Pacific Northwest Conference title when the relay team he was on won the final event. The province funded a team to go to the Dominion Track and Field Championships in Edmonton that June, and Turner was appointed captain. He won the 100 and the 220, then entered the 440 but was talked out of it by Lloyd Percival, the coach of the Ontario team, on the pretext that he was pushing himself too hard.

In the summers, Frank Ross arranged jobs for his stepson at one of his plants. One day Ross went missing with a friend, department store magnate Colonel Victor Spencer, on a jaunt to Spencer's summer retreat near Lytton, at the northern end of the rugged Fraser Canyon. Turner, just eighteen, was dispatched to find them. He drove up and followed the cliffside road until he came to a spot where the guardrail had been broken, and from there he spotted their car. It had gone over the edge, careened down the embankment, and smashed into a large rock that prevented it from plunging into the river. Turner backtracked to the nearest service station and returned with two tow trucks. The rescuers scrambled down the mountainside on ropes. They found the two men inside the car, still drinking, and annoyed that they hadn't been rescued sooner. "What took you so god-damned long?" Ross demanded.⁴⁰

Turner continued to go to Camp Temagami as a counsellor during his summer vacation. Sometimes he joined his family at Ross's farm near St. Andrews, New Brunswick. It had a stone farmhouse that overlooked the St. Croix River as it flowed into Passamaquoddy Bay. When Ross was there, he met with his cronies in the backroom of the local general store. Some of them were locals; others were summer residents, including the powerful federal Cabinet minister C.D. Howe and business magnates Sir James Dunn and E.P. Taylor. Turner would tag along as they drank coffee, smoked, and chatted about public affairs, solving the world's problems in their own informal parliament of common sense.

John Dobson, a summer friend, remembers that Turner got to know all the farmers, fishermen, and shopkeepers in the area.⁴¹ He had a particularly valuable acquaintance in the bellboy at the local hotel, who informed him whenever eligible young ladies checked in. Girls – how to meet them, get a date, find the right one – were increasingly on his mind. Dating was relatively innocent and chaste among middle-class youth at the time.

Although it was possible to get serious and go steady, it was just as common to play the field. Turner worried about getting into a long-term relationship because he had yet to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. The Oblates had encouraged him to be a priest, and he still considered this a possibility. Like many other young Catholic men of his generation, he was attracted by the ascetic ideal of dedicating himself to a life of spirituality and service – but it remained a romantic notion rather than a deliberate course of action.

By his third year, Turner the sports columnist and track star cut quite a swath on campus. He was a public figure, and he liked it. His time was spent not in intimate soul-searching talks with kindred spirits but in purposeful action, be it social, athletic, or academic. The adolescent social imperative was to move with the crowd:

On weekends there were parties at White Rock or Crescent Beach. Bogart and Spencer Tracy filled the drive-in screen. There were parties and dancing. The Vagabond Lover, Rudy Vallee, visited the campus to croon his big hit, Whiffenpoof. On weekends at the Commodore, the frenzied university crowd bopped to the rhythm of the Big Bands. The Duke, the Count, Louis Armstrong and Vancouver's Dal Richards were 1940s rock stars.⁴²

Turner had the confidence to bridge the yawning divide between the young undergraduates and the veterans. The older group advertised their worldly experience by growing moustaches, smoking pipes, and wearing tweed jackets with elbow patches. They had an informal organization called the Joker Club that was generally hostile to fraternities and other establishment institutions. Turner, though an underage frat boy, managed to ingratiate himself with this older crowd. Classmates marvelled at the social dexterity this required.⁴³ “Chick always had the quip, the gag, that would break everybody up,” explained one friend, “and he was good at introducing it when people were arguing over some kind of problem.”⁴⁴ His skills were recognized when, the following year, he was elected to the position of Student Council coordinator of activities. It was a social position, but in winning it he learned that his social skills could be translated into elected office. “John Turner was something out of a Scott Fitzgerald novel,” recalled

a classmate. “He had a lightness of touch and style. He carried a gold glow around his head.”⁴⁵

Turner’s athletic ability came to the attention of an eccentric character named Major H.B. Morris Kinley. At one time Kinley had been a political organizer, but he had always coached track and field as well. Under Kinley’s tutelage, Turner learned how to improve his starts, how to run loose in the middle of the race, and how to finish. He began to sprint in world-class times, clocking 9.7 seconds for the 100-yard dash.⁴⁶ It looked as though he would win the Canadian championship in both the 100 and the 220 yards again that year. Just before the championships, however, he foolishly competed in a local meet that pitted his Point Grey parish against a downtown parish. That race may have cost him a record, because he ran only a 10-second 100. In the 220, however, he redeemed himself, winning in 22.5 seconds. With this victory, he won the right to attend the Canadian trials for the 1948 Olympics.

One night in February 1948, Turner was driving home from a football game in Bellingham, Washington, with his date and another couple. As they passed over a level crossing on Arbutus Street in Vancouver, a train appeared out of the heavy fog. “We were lucky we were only hit in the front of the car and not in midship,” Turner recalled. “I saw this light coming out of nowhere and was able to turn and roll with the train as it hit us.”⁴⁷ The train was not moving rapidly, but it still drove the car a hundred feet down the track. Turner’s left knee was smashed. Surgeons were able to piece it back together, but his leg muscles atrophied as he waited for the bone to heal. By the time he could run again, it was too late to train for the Olympic trials in Vancouver that June. He showed up anyway and gave it a shot, but his knee gave way and he collapsed on the track.

In his fourth year, 1948-49, Turner continued his hectic schedule of sports, journalism, extracurricular activities, socializing, and academics. His position on the Student Council, which involved running orientation, made him the “czar of freshmen,” reported the *Ubyssy*, “the man responsible for outlandish regalia for opening week.”⁴⁸ The UBC track team competed in the Evergreen competition that year, a tougher test than the Pacific Northwest Conference. Despite his injury, Turner tied the meet record in the 100 yards and finished second in the 220.⁴⁹ To complete the requirements for his honours BA in political science, he chose to write his

undergraduate thesis on the Senate of Canada. He pronounced the Senate an archaic embarrassment that should be reformed or abolished. It was an impressive piece of work for a nineteen-year-old, grounded in solid research and informed by analysis that appreciated both liberal democratic ideals and *realpolitik*.⁵⁰

With fourth year winding down, the question of what to do next loomed large. The priesthood was still on his mind, but he remained uncertain. He applied to Dalhousie Law School and Harvard, hoping especially to get into the American university. Law school, he calculated, was a good interim plan. Even if he never became a lawyer, it would still be a sound grounding for other pursuits. Then Henry Angus suggested he stand for a Rhodes Scholarship. He was the type of well-rounded student that Cecil Rhodes had in mind when he endowed the award. “Turner really had everything in those days,” recalled classmate Peter Worthington. “He was good looking. He was terribly clever. He was a great athlete.”⁵¹ There was one Rhodes scholar for each province, except for Ontario and Quebec, which had two each. Turner beat out the fifty other competitors in British Columbia in 1949. Acknowledging his achievement, the *Uyssey* wrote that its departing sports columnist “rolls sportsmanship, scholarship and leadership, the three-fold Rhodes ideal, into a handsome package that has made him undoubtedly the university’s most popular student.”⁵²

Turner had arrived at UBC with a lot going for him. He made the most of it and was rewarded handsomely. Some of his fellow students would later insinuate that he had always been on the make – dating the right girls but never getting into sexual or romantic entanglements, popularizing a rum concoction called Moose Milk but never letting partying interfere with his studies, putting together an impossible combination of popularity and achievement both in the classroom and on the sports field. Such assessments were not untainted by envy. A more generous classmate recalled, “The strange thing was he managed to beat everyone else ... and seem[ed] to have everything going for him, with rich parents and big home, and still be considered a good guy. That took some doing at university in those days. But he got away with it because he was just genuinely a nice person.”⁵³

Turner chose to attend Magdalen, one of the oldest and most distinguished of Oxford colleges. There, for the first time, he found himself in a group where he wasn’t the best scholar or even the top athlete. He was awed

by the poise of the British students, especially by their spontaneous eloquence. His nationality and his education clearly relegated him to a second-tier starting position. He spent a good deal of his first year assessing whether he could achieve a first-class honours degree and, if so, whether it was worth it. That meant weighing the psychological cost of trying and perhaps failing against the enticing alternative of enjoying everything Oxford had to offer and expecting no more than a second.

The two principal figures on the academic side of the equation were his tutors, J.H.C. Morris and Rupert Cross. Turner studied jurisprudence with Morris, an expert in the conflict of law, a field concerned with reconciling differences between national legal regimes in international commerce. Cross, though blind since childhood, had become an authority on the law of evidence. While studying under these men, Turner was also expected to attend lectures on subjects related to his field to ensure that he would pass his exams.

While keeping his tutors happy, Turner was soon pursuing his usual smorgasbord of extracurricular activities. As a member of the Newman Society, a Catholic student organization, he often breakfasted after Sunday mass with the Reverend Ronald Knox. Like his friends G.K. Chesterton and Evelyn Waugh, Knox was a literary figure who had converted to Catholicism. A noted stylist, he had written extensively and brilliantly on apologetics and had recently published a book on the importance of tempering spiritual enthusiasm with the rigour of doctrine. At these breakfasts, Knox presided over an informal question and answer session on current church issues. He provided Turner and his friends with a role model rooted in a Catholic tradition at the university that went back more than a century to John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement.

Turner played squash regularly, rugger occasionally, and captained the Magdalen College cross-country team. He also joined the Oxford Track and Field Club and won a blue in track. In his first year, the captain was Roger Bannister – later the first man to break the four-minute mile; in his third, it was Chris Chataway, another great distance runner. Turner became friends with both. He also chummed around with Malcolm Fraser, a future prime minister of Australia. Fraser owned an Aston Martin, and Turner became his co-driver at rallies. “I don’t think we ever finished a race,” he

recalled. “We’d meet a couple of girls somewhere, and you know ...”⁵⁴ He went to shows in London and attended sports events, sometimes with dates and sometimes with groups of fellow students. He was “candid, brilliant, witty and sharp, a social animal, who loved people and put them at ease, often by poking fun at himself,” recalled an acquaintance of the time.⁵⁵

On school breaks, Turner travelled around northern Europe, spending most of his time in France because he knew more girls there and was trying to learn the language. His letters home to his sister featured romantic possibilities, complications, and intrigues above all else. By the end of his first year, his wide range of extracurricular activities, both social and athletic, indicated that he had decided to enjoy Oxford and settle for a second.

He still took his law studies seriously. He served as secretary of the Oxford Law Society and represented Oxford against Cambridge at the Moot Court, appearing in mock trials before some of the era’s great judges, including Justice Denning (“the most radical lawyer on the Court of Appeal,” he noted approvingly).⁵⁶ Turner passed his bachelor of arts in jurisprudence after two years at Oxford with a second, scoring high in that range because he performed strongly in the oral component of the exams. He then had his Rhodes Scholarship extended for the academic year 1951-52 so he could take his bachelor of civil law. As his exams approached, he joked to his sister, “I know all my examiners, which is not a bad start, and I may be able to float past on sherry.”⁵⁷

Canada’s Amateur Athletic Union nominated Turner to run the 100- and 200-metre races at the 1952 Summer Olympic Games in Helsinki. He was led to believe that the times he posted in England would be accepted and that he would not need to return to run in the trials for the Canadian Olympic team in Hamilton, but the Canadian Olympic Association refused to recognize the English results. If it had, Turner would have been on the team. Although he did not get to run, he went to Helsinki anyway to watch his friends Bannister and Chataway perform.

He was, meanwhile, no closer to deciding on a career. He laid out his thoughts in a letter to his sister:

I have been worrying about the future lately, wondering just what to do with myself. I am singularly lacking in confidence in myself, and am

almost afraid to meet the competition of the world ... I have the helpless feeling that after six years of university I am still a stark boor. What I'd like to do best would be to knock around Europe for a year or two and repair some of the more obvious gaps in my education: philosophy and literature. Then there's always the call of the priesthood, and I am going to have to make up my mind to give it a try within the next year or two ... I am thoroughly unsatisfied with myself.⁵⁸

The young John Turner evidently felt the same trepidations as others in the same position in life. Yet he kept his self-doubt to himself and was never paralyzed by it. He continued to take comfort in the distractions of his social life; the same letter provided his sister with an annotated list of his fifteen favourite female companions. The next few months were a continuing social whirl, spiced with gossip about romance or the possibility of romance among a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. When his mother visited Oxford, "checking over some of my feminine friends," he noted that "the shrewder of them were immediately aware of Mom's own shrewdness."⁵⁹

In the fall of 1952, Turner went to London to study for his bar exam. He moved to Paris in the spring of 1953 while awaiting the results and enrolled at the University of Paris to study under the renowned law professor Henri Battifol for a doctorate in private international law.⁶⁰ "He went to mass every morning," remembers an acquaintance, "then took some lovely girl out every night."⁶¹ Brenda was also in Paris, ostensibly to get a master's degree but mainly to travel and learn some French. The siblings, close during childhood but separated for long periods through adolescence, now had a chance to spend time together. John took Brenda on a tour of France in the summer of 1953 with an itinerary organized around visiting all the French girls he knew. She later visited Oxford with him and dated some of his friends.⁶²

In the late summer of 1953, Turner returned to London to be called to the bar at Gray's Inn. Back home, Frank Ross was beginning to worry that his stepson was becoming too fond of a sybaritic student lifestyle. He wrote, "You've had a good run, you know. When are you going to come back and get to work?"⁶³ Turner took the hint and booked passage home to Canada.

Whatever lay ahead, he seemed most likely to succeed. People looked up to him, told him he was gifted, and predicted great things. The more he accomplished, the more was expected. “If he can’t be Prime Minister, he can always be Pope,” his mother once joked to his sister.⁶⁴ It was funny because it was so preposterous, yet plausible.

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