John Holmes 1910-1988

John Holmes was born in London, Ontario. His whole career was devoted as a diplomat, author and teacher to the developing of Canada’s foreign policy. He spanned four decades of involvement with the United Nations. He was at the first session of the General Assembly, in London in January 1946, and wrote: “I was in the back row as an adviser to the Canadian delegation, full of awe and hope and anxiety, the mood of the times.” And he was back as an observer at the 40th session, and added: “It is easy to be discouraged, but one can find grounds for optimism in the remarkable extension since 1946 of international law and regulation through the vast network of committees and sub-committees. Most of them, of course, are quite useless, but enough of them are so successful that we are unaware of them and take their good works for granted.”

In 1943 he joined the Department of External Affairs, and was at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco and served on the mission during Canada’s first period (1948-9) on the
Security Council. He was also closely involved with UN affairs during seven years (1953-60) as assistant under-secretary of state in External Affairs. Earlier he had served in both London and Moscow, and helped steer Canada through the turbulent times of the Cold War. He was a senior figure in what has been called, whether myth or fact, “the golden age of Canadian diplomacy.”

After being national secretary of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs 1941-3, and setting up its program of publications and research, he returned as its director-general from 1960 to 1973. This overlapped with years (1971-81) as professor of international relations at Glendon College, and during that time he poured his life’s experience into the two-volume work, *The Shaping of Peace: Canada in the Search for the World Order 1943-57*, which is widely considered an indispensable resource book about the true extent of Canada’s influence in the post-1945 world. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1969.

Tom Axworthy, former principal secretary to Prime Minister Trudeau, has said that Holmes “represented all that was civilized, elegant and creative in Canadian diplomacy.” Keith Spicer, a colleague at Glendon College, claimed that Holmes “in his discreet but brilliant way, led two generations of Canadians to believe that they could make a difference in the world.”