John Humphrey
1906 - 1995

John Humphrey was for 20 years (1946-66) director of the Human Rights Division of the United Nations and is considered the principal author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1948. He wrote a 400-page background paper for the Universal Declaration and then its first draft, which thereupon went through revisions at the hands of an eight-person drafting committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. There was also a British draft complete with enforcement measures, but the committee put it aside and worked on Humphrey’s draft of 48 articles and Mrs. Roosevelt later referred to the Declaration as “the Magna Carta of Mankind”.

Born in Hampton, New Brunswick, John Humphrey had a tough childhood. His father died before John was one year old, and his mother when he was 11. His left arm was amputated when he was six because of a severe burn. Undeterred, he studied law at McGill University (where he earned four degrees) and international law at the University of
Paris. He practised law in Montreal until 1936, when he was appointed Lecturer in Roman Law at McGill. In 1946 he became Professor of Roman Law and was invited to become Dean of the Faculty of Law but, the same year, was asked to set up the UN Human Rights Division in New York.

After the adoption of the *Universal Declaration*, Humphrey and his UN colleagues prepared two international covenants on human rights to give binding legal effect to the rights proclaimed in the Declaration. These — the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights together with the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights — were eventually adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in December 1966.

Dr. Humphrey then returned to McGill University to serve as Professor of Law and Political Science until 1971. He devoted himself to human rights teaching and advocacy, including seeking compensation from Japan for the Canadian Hong Kong veterans and Korean ‘comfort’ women. He was the founding president of the Canadian section of the International Commission of Jurists, and he helped establish Amnesty International Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission. The Montreal-based International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (now simply Rights and Democracy) established the annual $25,000 John Humphrey Freedom Award. He was named to the Order of Canada in 1974.