

Cyrus S. Eaton–The Man

Sowing Seeds for Nobel Peace Prize (1883-1979)

The village of Pugwash, Nova Scotia, became a world-famous community because a business tycoon, born there in 1883, volunteered funds and hosted a group of 22 scientists from around the world at his Pugwash summer home in 1957. The host was Cyrus S. Eaton, one of North America's most successful businessmen, but controversial because of his friendship with Russian and Cuban Communist leaders.

Eaton became the sponsor of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs when British philosopher Bertrand Russell encouraged a meeting of scientists from around the world to speak out on the proliferation of the atomic bomb. Funds were needed to make such a meeting possible. When a proposal to meet in India fell through, Russell had two other options: to accept an offer made by Aristotle Onassis, the Greek shipping magnate, or one by Cyrus Eaton, the Cleveland businessman who had already held a number of conferences at his summer home in Pugwash. Russell chose Eaton's offer to pay travel expenses and host the event.

After a three-day meeting in July 1957 that brought together scientists from the U.S.A., China, Russia, Great Britain, France, and several other countries, the name Pugwash was adopted in the title for future conferences with Eaton readily agreeing to sponsor a second session the following year at Lac Beauport, Quebec.

Eaton's willingness to bankroll such a conference stemmed from a lifelong interest in being in the company of intellectuals. The fifth of nine children born to a farmer and general store owner in Pugwash, he studied to be a minister at McMaster University (then located in Toronto), graduated in philosophy in 1905, and moved to Cleveland, Ohio.

His association with Cleveland started in 1901 when young Cyrus visited his uncle Charles, a Baptist minister there, and met one of the parishioners, John D. Rockefeller Sr. Eaton spent his summer vacations working at Rockefeller's estate and returned to Cleveland upon graduation. By 1906, however, he decided that being a Baptist minister was too restricting for his interests. Rockefeller offered him full-time employment. An early assignment was to placate property owners whose lawns were being torn up by the East Ohio Gas Company.

In 1907, Eaton married a Cleveland girl and managed to get a loan from a neighbour to buy utilities franchises in western Canada. These he later organized into the Canadian Gas and Electric Corporation. By 1912, he was a millionaire.

Before World War I, he bought a substantial interest in Otis and Company, one of the largest investment bankers and stockbrokers outside of New York, and, during the 1920s, “he was into everything, buying, selling, swapping, maneuvering, manipulating. His touch was of the purist gold,” wrote E.J. Kahn Jr. in a two-part article in *New Yorker* magazine in 1977. His innumerable holding companies owned utilities, steel mills, a major portion of Goodyear Tire, and numerous other businesses until the crash of 1929 virtually wiped him out.

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, however, from his offices in Cleveland's Tower Building Eaton sold, bought, traded, and swapped his way back into America's business establishment, eventually adding railroads, coal mines, and the Steep Rock Iron Mines of Ontario to his acquisitions. His interest in world affairs also grew. It became his custom to invite people from the academic world to spend their vacations at his various residences in either Canada or the United States not only to enjoy sporting activities but also to engage in stimulating discussions of world affairs.

By the early 1950s, these earlier vacation sessions had turned into conferences at his Pugwash home and this led to Russell's choice of Pugwash for the first meeting of scientists.

After a second conference with Eaton's backing was held in Lac Beauport in 1958, Austria played host to a third later that year, and another was held in Baden, Germany, in 1959 before Eaton sponsored a fifth at Pugwash, also in 1959. By then, however, Eaton's outspoken views on *detente* with Russia and his controversial relationship with Nikita Khrushchev – they exchanged gifts and Eaton was given the red carpet treatment when he visited Moscow in 1958 – led the scientists to consider his sponsorship a liability.



In 1957, at the height of the Cold War, Bertrand Russell invited Canadian tycoon Cyrus Eaton to organize a conference bringing together, from East to West, scientists, scholars, and public figures whose collective desire was to diminish the part played by nuclear arms in international politics. A strong advocate for friendly relations with the communist world, the multi-millionaire industrialist Eaton not only agreed to bankroll the conference but offered his summer home in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, to act as an ongoing international base for discussions on nuclear and other security issues. In 1995, this same conference, which traces its origins to a 1955 anti-war manifesto signed, among others, by Albert Einstein, shared the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize with noted British physicist Joseph Rotblat, member of the 1957 Pugwash Conference originally hosted by Cyrus Eaton in a fishing village in Nova Scotia. [Photo, courtesy John Severt Photography]

In 1960, when Eaton was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize, this prompted Lord Russell to write to British physicist Joseph Rotblat, coordinator of the Pugwash conferences, "I trust your thoughts about Cyrus have remained Christian." They did, for Eaton attended many future meetings as a guest, no doubt in part because of his close association with political leaders in the United States, Russia, and other capitals on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

As early as the 1920s he was Herbert Hoover's guest at the White House on several occasions, and his White House connections continued when he openly opposed an Ohio lawyer who sought the Democratic nomination against Roosevelt in 1932. Roosevelt later enlisted Eaton's aid to explore such things as Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn's opposition to the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway. Eaton also publicly backed Roosevelt's bid for a third term and claims he was one of the intermediaries responsible for the lend-lease arrangement that provided 50 old U.S. destroyers to Great Britain in 1940. When Harry Truman became president in 1945 Eaton had known Truman for more than two decades and had supported his bid for reelection in 1948.

By the 1950s, however, his outspoken support for *detente* with Russia and his friendship with Krushchev and other Russian leaders and his vocal criticisms of such agencies at home as the FBI and the CIA prompted angry outbursts from the press, politicians, and the public in the U.S. despite his assurances that he was a staunch capitalist and not a supporter of Communist doctrine.

Although Eaton's career centred in Cleveland and he became an American citizen in 1913, his ties with Canada remained strong. As early as 1929 he generously supported the town of Pugwash when a fire destroyed much of the village and later he established a farm at Upper Blandford, Nova Scotia, where he made a point of spending a month each summer with his grandchildren without their parents. The month was devoted to participating with the children from age two and up in everything from household chores to spotting birds and identifying trees (it was claimed he knew the names of every bird and tree in North America), to riding horses and picnicing – one of his favourite year-round pastimes.

Eaton's hospitality was also cited in Lord Russell's autobiography when he attributed some of the success of the Pugwash Conference group to the fact that the scientists were able to get to know each other as human beings as well as scientists. "This most remarkable, important characteristic," he wrote, "was in large part made possible by the astute understanding by Cyrus Eaton of the situation and what we wished to accomplish and by his tactful hospitality."

Eaton, who achieved the ambition of being the oldest living board member of the University of Chicago, was also the recipient of nine honorary degrees: four from Canadian universities including Dalhousie and Acadia of his native Nova Scotia, two from U.S. institutions, and three from universities in Bulgaria, Budapest, and Prague. The capitalist from Nova Scotia did not, however, achieve the goal of living to be 100, falling short of that mark by four years.

In 1995, 16 years after Eaton's death in 1979, and 35 years after he had won the Lenin Peace Prize, the Pugwash Conference shared the prestigious Nobel Prize with Joseph Rotblat, the last surviving scientist of the original 11 who had, in 1957, co-founded "the thinkers' conferences" bankrolled by a Bluenoser.

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