
Fiftieth Anniversary of the 1939 Royal Visit

J. William Galbraith

In 1939 King George VI became the first reigning monarch to visit Canada when he and Queen Elizabeth spent a month touring the country from one coast to another. The tour succeeded in every way, including the King's expressed desire to give his "Canadian people a deeper conception of their unity as a nation". The constitutional significance of the 1939 Royal Visit is sometimes lost among the mass of emotional memories associated with the tour. This article looks at the importance of the visit for Canada's development into a fully sovereign independent nation.

Memories of the Royal Visit in the spring of 1939 are cherished because of the unprecedented excitement and activity created by the first visit to Canada by a reigning monarch. They are cherished also because of the joyful relief the visit provided from the barrage of foreboding news from Europe, of Hitler's bellicosity. In the 50 years that have elapsed, the country has grown into a mature, sovereign nation. The 1939 Royal Visit acted as a catalyst in that growth.

The Governor-General at the time, Lord Tweedsmuir, was a great admirer of Canada and an active promoter of developing Canadian pride and patriotism. As John Buchan, the well-known writer, he was the first non-peer to be appointed Governor-General of Canada. (He was granted a peerage by King George V shortly after his Vice-regal appointment in March, 1935). He knew the country well, having been a visitor in the 1920s and travelling widely since becoming Governor-General. He believed a Canadian's first loyalty should be to Canada and to Canada's King, not to the Empire. This opinion confronted the imperialist perspective

that pervaded much of Canadian thinking at the time. The imperialists could not conceive of Canada as anything but subordinate to the Empire.

The idea of the visit originated with Tweedsmuir, according to his friends, in a book published after his death in February, 1940. The official historian of the Royal Visit, Gustave Lanctot, who was also Dominion Archivist, recorded that the visit was apparently first suggested in early 1937, soon after the Duke of York acceded to the throne following Edward VIII's abdication. In the official account of the visit Lanctot explains that the "idea probably grew out of the knowledge that at his coming Coronation, George VI was to assume the additional title of King of Canada". The official invitation was presented by Prime Minister Mackenzie King while he was in London for the Coronation in May 1937.

The title "King of Canada" reflected Canada's sovereign status within the British Empire which derived from the Imperial Conference of 1926 and the 1931 *Statute of Westminster*. Therefore, the King would not act for Canada as King of the "mother country", Great Britain, but as King of Canada. Tweedsmuir's desire was to put the *Statute of Westminster* into practice, and that meant Canadians should "see their King performing royal functions, supported by his Canadian ministers". It meant having the King, and Queen,

J. William Galbraith is an Information Officer with the federal government.

in Canada to perform those functions; the images on the coins and postage stamps resolving themselves into a real King and Queen.

“No one realized more profoundly than he did the real meaning of the *Statute of Westminster*” according to one of Tweedsmuir’s friends, Leonard Brockington. Before Tweedsmuir could begin to fulfil his wish, he had to secure



Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General from 1935-40. (National Archives of Canada C-8507)

a positive reply to the invitation, which in fact remained unanswered for over a year. From the time of delivery of the official invitation, the project consumed more and more of Tweedsmuir’s thoughts and activities. At the end of June, 1938, after receiving honorary degrees from Harvard and Yale universities, he sailed to England for a holiday where he pursued the invitation with “the persistence of a horse-leech”, as his letters to Mackenzie King reveal.

“The important question for me is, of course, the King’s visit to Canada” he wrote to the Prime Minister in mid-July from Elsfeld Manor, the Buchan home near Oxford. The visit could only be provisionally arranged, however, because of the tense situation in Europe, which bubbled with diplomatic activity, in reaction to Hitler’s designs for Europe. The events on the continent occupied much of the British government’s attention and was reported on in detail by Tweedsmuir in his correspondence to Mackenzie King. Even amidst these major concerns, Lord Tweedsmuir still found the King’s Private Secretary, Sir Alexander Hardinge, “all for it” and, after a preliminary discussion with the King, Hardinge reported that His Majesty was very sympathetic to the idea of the visit. Tweedsmuir also found both the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and his Foreign

Secretary, Lord Halifax, “very strong about the importance of the thing”. Although an answer was not forthcoming for some time yet, Tweedsmuir was confident that it would work out all right, “as soon as I got Neville on my side ... for the King was most sympathetic.”

Rather than returning later that summer as scheduled, Lord Tweedsmuir was granted sanction from the King to extend his stay away from Canada and remained in the United Kingdom to take a recommended rest cure. His rest at Ruthin Castle in Wales in no way put him off the trail of pursuing the invitation. He continued his efforts, repeating in his correspondence to Mackenzie King, how His Majesty was sympathetic to the idea of the visit. The Canadian Prime Minister also hoped for an affirmative answer and, if not exhibiting the same enthusiasm, replied to his Governor-General’s optimism that he believed the visit would be “very much all to the good.”

By the time he finally sailed for Canada from Liverpool on October 1st, Tweedsmuir had secured the long awaited reply. Upon his return to Canada, and over the coming winter, the planning of the tour was to consume much of his time and energy. The delicate task for Tweedsmuir, and the Canadian Government, was “how to translate the *Statute of Westminster* into the actualities of a tour”, according to biographer J.A. Smith, “since this was the first visit of a reigning monarch to a Dominion, and precedents were being made.”

“ Amidst all the colour and excitement that Their Majesties’ presence produced, there are certain events that stand out for their constitutional significance of putting into practice the 1931 Statute, enhancing the relatively new Canadian sovereignty. ”

King George VI and Queen Elizabeth arrived aboard the Empress of Australia at Wolfe’s Cove, Quebec in the morning of May 17, two days late due to dense fog and ice at sea. Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe, attired in their gold-braided Windsor uniforms as Privy Councillors, greeted Their Majesties. From the Cove, they motored along flag-lined streets, thronging with thousands of the King’s Canadian subjects on their way to the historic Citadel, secondary residence of the Governor-General. There the Prime Minister, in his capacity as Secretary of State for External Affairs, presented His Majesty with the recommendation that he approve the appointment of Daniel C. Roper as “Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States of

America.” The King signed the document in the top left-hand corner, executing his first official duty as King of Canada.

Two days later, in the study of Rideau Hall the Governor-General’s and the monarch’s official Canadian residence, Mr. C. Roper personally presented to the King his credentials that normally would have been delivered to the Governor-General. In the official history, Gustave Lanctot had set the context for this unprecedented ceremony by his dramatic description of the significance of the King’s and Queen’s arrival: “When Their Majesties walked into their Canadian residence, the *Statute of Westminster* had assumed full reality: the King of Canada had come home.”

“The King’s personal acceptance of Mr. Roper’s credentials was but one of the significant events that occurred on May 19, making it the most important day of the tour in terms of fulfilling Tweedsmuir’s special objective for the visit.”

Following a private lunch with the Governor-General and Lady Tweedsmuir, the King and Queen travelled with a mounted escort of the Princess Louise Dragoons to Parliament Hill where the political world of Canada waited for the “greatest royal function of all” to occur — the granting of royal assent. Nine bills were to be presented to His Majesty for assent.

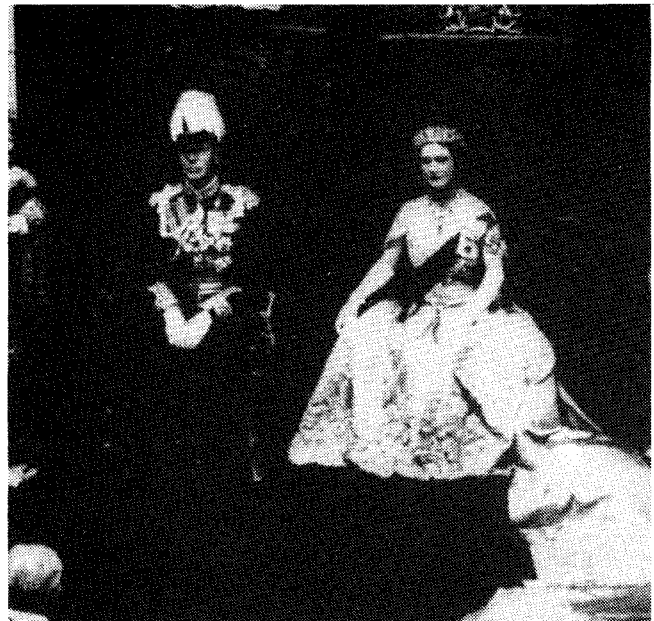
Lanctot’s description of the ceremony captures the mood and significance of that event: “...slowly, with a solemnity born of the dignity of centuries-old pageantry, mingling historic and present significance, the procession came to the foot of the throne... thereupon, (with everyone seated) the Clerk of the Senate ... bowed to the King, and holding the Bills aloft in sight of the King said in both English and French: ‘His Majesty doth assent to these Bills’ and His Majesty made an inclination of the head indicating assent.” One local newspaper described the scene as “breath-taking in its grandeur.” “No ceremony could more completely symbolize the free and equal association of the nations of the Commonwealth” stated the King in his speech following the granting of assent.

Lady Tweedsmuir was in attendance at this historic ceremony but the Governor-General was not. The official history of the tour makes a special point of noting the absence. He waited at Government House, determined that the visit should be “Canada’s show” and that he should remain in the background during the trip. His view was that while the King of Canada was present, “I cease to exist as Viceroy, and retain only a shadowy legal existence as

Governor-General in Council.” Even though he remained the King’s representative there was obviously no need for him to be present while the King was there. The “niceties of the situation ... suggested Lord Tweedsmuir’s absence” according to the *Ottawa Evening Citizen*. The Governor-General, in large part the author of this precedent-setting trip, thus did not witness one of the most significant events in Canadian constitutional history that he had helped plan.

Their Majesties left the Parliament Buildings accompanied by the cheers of thousands of people waiting outside. They returned to Government House for a brief rest and a “quiet tea”.

Later that afternoon, the Prime Minister presented to His Majesty two treaties for ratification, the implementing legislation to which he had given assent only a few hours earlier. Both were agreements with the United States: a Trade Agreement signed in Washington the previous November; and a Convention regarding the boundary waters of the Rainy Lake district, in northwestern Ontario, signed the previous September in Ottawa. In order for this event to take place, however, the Canadian Parliament had had to pass special legislation.



His Majesty King George VI gives Royal Assent to bills, in the Senate Chamber, on May 19, 1939.
(National Archives of Canada C-33278)

In a confidential letter to his Minister of Justice, Ernest Lapointe, dated December 10, 1938, Mackenzie King had set out certain issues he thought advisable for the law officers of the Crown to consider, “in view of the intended visit of His Majesty to Canada, next summer.” The most important of the issues he had pondered was “the constitutional position of

His Majesty, while in the Dominion, with respect to all matters of State.”

The law officers' response, given in a detailed letter signed by Lapointe and dated December 16, stated that the King “can do any act in respect of the Executive Government of Canada that is now done by the Governor-General, other than acts prescribed by statute to be performed by the latter as *persona designata*.” However, there were some royal functions that had not yet been delegated to the Governor-General by his Commission and Instructions and that were normally performed by the King in England. These included the issue of full powers and instruments of ratification, exequaturs to Consuls and the issue of letters of credence. If the King were called upon to perform an act during the visit such as the issuing of an instrument of ratification for a Canadian treaty, legal difficulties could arise concerning the use of the Great Seal of Canada, symbol of the Sovereign's authority imprinted onto documents such as treaties.

If the King ratified a Canadian treaty, the Great Seal of the United Kingdom would normally be used. However, if the King, as King of Canada, were to ratify a treaty under the Great Seal of Canada, the Justice Department opinion indicated that “it would seem to be necessary to secure the enactment by the Parliament of Canada of appropriate legislation to authorize (its) use ... for such purposes.” Lapointe proffered the opinion that the Parliament of Canada would be competent to pass such legislation and thereby replace the requirement for the Great Seal of the United Kingdom on such documents. His opinion was accepted and Parliament passed *The Seals Act of 1939*.

That Act allowed the King to ratify these international agreements under the Great Seal of Canada instead of the Great Seal of the United Kingdom. It was another step in this country's political maturity; at once, an event symbolizing Canadian independence and continuing loyalty to the Crown. In the words of the tour's official historian, “a new official procedure was established, which asserted and recognized Canada's equality of political status within the British Empire.”

This legislation, a direct result of the prospect of the King's visit, added to the sovereign status already granted to Canada by the *Statute of Westminster*. It allowed Canada to put her stamp, as it were, on her international relations. It also allowed greater scope in planning for the visit and therefore in translating the *Statute of Westminster* into reality.

These three special ceremonies that day contributed to a growing sense of Canadianism. They breathed life into the *Statute of Westminster*. But they were not the only events of the visit to make such a contribution.

At a solemn ceremony two days later, May 21, Canadian national feeling received another boost, if in a more subtle fashion to those grand constitutional occasions of the 19th.

King George VI unveiled “The Response”, the national memorial, in Ottawa, to Canada's Great War dead. The drive along the crowd-lined streets from Rideau Hall to the memorial site was typical of Canadians' response to the presence of their King and Queen. At the memorial, after “God Save The King”, the bands played “O'Canada” and His Majesty remained at the salute. He was following the precedent set by Edward VIII at the Vimy Memorial in July, 1936. The tour's official historian commented that this royal recognition virtually raised the status of “O'Canada” to that of the Dominion's national song; although it was not until the country's centennial year, 1967, that it was approved by Parliament as the National Anthem, and not officially adopted until passage of the *National Anthem Act* in 1980. Their Majesties remained longer than planned among the flood of people, talking with war veterans and endearing themselves more than ever to their Canadian subjects. They then returned to their official Canadian residence to prepare for their departure from Ottawa.

When the King and Queen once again boarded the specially prepared, blue, silver and gold royal train that would be their home for the next several weeks, they left an excited city. The most significant royal functions had been executed personally by the King of Canada, leaving their legacy to a growing, sovereign nation. The Prime Minister continued to accompany His Majesty as his senior Canadian adviser. The Governor-General left to go fishing in Quebec, only being informed of the tour's progress by telegrams sent to him by the Prime Minister. It was as he wished, a direct relationship blossoming between the King of Canada and his people.

When the royal train pulled into Toronto on May 22, the Prime Minister presented to the King and Queen the Lieutenant-Governor and Mrs. Matthews, the Premier and Mrs. Hepburn, and the Mayor of Toronto and Mrs. Day. It was a scene often to be repeated during the tour. However, had not Mackenzie King turned his ever watchful political eye to certain matters concerning the Lieutenant-Governors, at about the same time that he had been pondering the constitutional ramifications of the Sovereign's visit, the receptions may well have been different. Protocol and the 1923 Revised Table of Precedence presented a problem. Though it may not have had the constitutional import of the Great Seal issue, it was nonetheless of concern to Mackenzie King the politician and did reflect the federal character of the country.

The Table of Precedence lists the highest positions in the government in order of rank or authority. The Table had been revised in 1923 and published in the *Canada Gazette* of December 22 that year. This revision moved the Lieutenant-Governors up to second place, after the Governor-General, replacing the “Senior Officer Commanding His Majesty's Troops within the Dominion.”



King George VI and Queen Elizabeth arrived at Quebec on May 17, 1939 and were greeted by Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe, resplendent in their Windsor uniforms.

(National Archives of Canada C-61621)

That change was made on the recommendation of the Prime Minister — Mackenzie King, who was then in his third year as head of Government. As the Table existed in 1938 then, the Prime Minister followed the Lieutenant-Governors.

Correspondence between the Prime Minister's office, the Governor-General's Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs toward the end of 1938, recorded the issue and decision of an amendment to the 1923 Revised Table of Precedence. "One of the reasons why the amendment is considered desirable at the present time", explained the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Dr. O.D. Skelton, in a note to the Governor-General's Secretary, Shuldham Redfern, "is, that in connection with the visit of Their Majesties to Canada, it is desired to emphasize the national aspect of the occasion."

The Secretary of State, Fernand Rinfret, was working on a general revision to the Revised Table of 1923. Whether this particular amendment was proposed separately or as part of the general revision made little difference, according to Redfern, since the Governor-General would "seek His Majesty's approval without delay".

When the proposal was being prepared for submission to His Majesty, Skelton concurred with Redfern's suggestion that the reason cited for the amendment should be made "in the first instance, on its general merits, but to follow this up with an intimation of the special desirability in view of the visit of Their Majesties." In the first week of December, the Governor-General approved the recommendation that the amendment go forward to the King. His Secretary then sent a coded telegram to the King's Private Secretary, submitting the Canadian Government's request that His Majesty approve the amendments to the 1923 Revised Table of Precedence. The official view given in the telegram was that the objective of the amendment was to "place Prime Minister more in accordance with his national position and ahead of

Lieutenant-Governors who are appointed by the Government of Canada and whose status is provincial." It may well be that Mackenzie King felt that the Lieutenant-Governors, and hence the provinces, had been finally put in their place. As with the Great Seal issue, the prospect of the King of Canada's visit resulted in action being taken by the Government, this time to reflect more accurately the desired constitutional evolution of the nation.

By the time Their Majesties left the shores of Nova Scotia at the end of their tour on June 15, there was no doubt that Canadian sovereignty and national feeling had been given a great boost. This memorable and precedent-setting visit not only allowed Canadians to see *their* King performing royal functions in respect of the Government of Canada, it was also felt beyond Canada's borders, especially in England, where the visit, in all its constitutional meaning, had given Canada a heightened status not conceded to her up to that time. Some of these developments may have occurred at some future point in time but the 1939 Royal Visit was the catalyst in making them happen sooner, and in a very dramatic, real way, in the person of His Majesty King George VI. The heightened sense of pride and patriotism raised by the visit was also a fortuitous and timely gift for a nation that would be at war only three months later.

The memories of the 1939 Royal Visit, the excitement, the colour, the relief from gloomy news in Europe, "will endure for generations until (that day's) youngest child dies a centenarian" proclaims one beautiful souvenir publication. The legacy of that first visit to Canada by her reigning monarch will endure even longer. We celebrate 1867 as the year of our country's birth. But if we think of a State as a sovereign entity, acting independently in the world, then 1931 and the *Statute of Westminster* may be a more realistic date to celebrate, and the King's visit of 1939 helped to make the 1931 Statute a reality. ■