

# A NOBEL CLASS REUNION

The Pugwash Conference returns to its Nova Scotia roots

IT'S EARLY afternoon and the tide is just going out at Pugwash, N.S., as Kathy Langille scans the horizon from the veranda of the white, century-old wooden home. "The perfect place to sit and think," says the lodge's custodian. Seagulls float above, while a lobster boat chugs back into port. The building's former owner, Cyrus Eaton, Pugwash's most famous native son and an industrialist who made two fortunes in the United States, used to sit here staring out to sea. He had more on his mind than profit margins; the sly multi-millionaire was also a humanitarian. At the height of the Cold War, he invited some of the world's most prominent thinkers and scientists to put their feet up in this out-of-the-way village (population 700, 110 km north of Halifax), and talk about nuclear disarmament. There must have been something about the tranquil, timeless view: that 1957 meeting fuelled an anti-war movement that, arguably, helped save the world. And 38 years later, the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs received the Nobel Peace Prize.

On July 20, the Pugwash Conference returns to the place where it was born for the first time in 44 years. The visit will be bittersweet for Joseph Rotblat, the 94-year-old British nuclear physicist who attended the historic inaugural session. "It's a bit lonely now," says the Polish-born scientist who shared the Nobel Prize with the conference. His anti-nuclear activism predates Pugwash: Rotblat is the last surviving signatory of a group, including Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, that issued a famous 1955 manifesto demanding governments from both sides of the Iron Curtain unite to renounce nuclear weapons.

That clarion call laid the groundwork for Pugwash. After it was issued, Eaton wrote



Rotblat (reading) attended the first event, hosted by Eaton (middle) in 1957

to Russell, offering to host and bankroll the first disarmament conference at his summer home. It was not as odd a pairing as it may have seemed at first glance. Eaton had studied theology and toyed with becoming a Baptist minister. He then made commerce his abiding faith under the tutelage of John D. Rockefeller, but never lost interest in academic discourse. "He was just as likely to go read a book of philosophy as a balance sheet," says Patrick Boyer, a former MP who is writing Eaton's biography.

A millionaire by 27, Eaton went broke during the Great Depression but then built another fortune in steel, coal, railways, utilities and a host of other businesses. All along, he kept an eye on the bigger picture: for years he invited academics from across the continent to his "Thinkers' Lodge" in Pugwash to consider the state of world affairs. Hosting an anti-nuclear meeting seemed like a natural next step. For one thing, Eaton, who died at age 95 in 1979, didn't share the capitalist world's aversion to the U.S.S.R.

Rotblat recalls being nervous en route to Pugwash for the first time, where the other 21 scientists—from the United States, Soviet Union, Japan, Britain, Canada, Australia, Austria, China, France and Poland—were

gathering. "It was quite a gamble," he recalls. "We were even divided in the West about the Cold War. We were worried the whole thing would end in disagreement." Instead, the participants agreed that preventing nuclear war was more important than politics or geography. Initially, Western power-brokers dismissed the group as a bunch of idealists unable to make a difference in the real world. But by 1959, the annual event had outgrown Pugwash—although smaller workshops continued to be held there over the years—and moved on to bigger centres where its behind-the-scenes lobbying, symposiums and conferences, according to the Nobel Prize presentation "kept the vision of a nuclear-free world alive."

Many of the 200 scientists registered for the 53rd Pugwash Conference will be seeing Thinkers' Lodge for the first time when the buses drive down Pugwash's Gaelic-signed streets. Not Giovanni Brenciaglia, Eaton's great-nephew, who was just 21 when he attended the 1959 session. Now 65, the retired nuclear physicist who lives in Huntsville, Ont., says he's looking forward to his return. "There's a feeling of accomplishment for all we've done," he says. "But also a sense of frustration that the threat of nuclear war still hangs over us." Which is precisely why the movement, nearly half a century later, continues to be relevant. ■