

John Leonard Darby

- Dr. Terrence M. Punch, CM

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It is always a pleasure to come to Pictou and a special honour to be invited to inaugurate a lecture series. This is both a good and a bad thing for a speaker, since, on the one hand, he gets to write on a blank page. He has no predecessor to measure up to, and the sky's the limit. On the other hand, though, it makes one feel responsible to strike the proper balance between being academic and being folksy, thereby perhaps setting a tone that future speakers will use as a guideline in preparing their presentations. I can only do my best to find that interesting spot, somewhere between Heaven and Earth.

I want to say at the outset that I knew almost nothing about John Leonard Darby, the man whose generosity makes the lecture series possible, other than that he was an architect and had an office in Bedford. I knew Bedford as the place we went as teenagers on weekends to enjoy chicken burgers. It was the pretty village at the head of Bedford Basin where my mother spent her teenage years, never knowing that their neighbour Captain Lewis was actually Peter Leacock, father of the famous Canadian author Stephen Leacock. All she knew about Lewis was that he had an English accent and liked to sail a small boat in the Basin. Well, that about matches my knowledge of John Darby when I was approached about giving this lecture.

Naturally, being a genealogist I felt obliged to seek out the man's antecedents and found that his father, Joseph Edward Darby was a bookkeeper (we'd probably say "accountant" now) who was born in Birmingham, England, the son of another Joseph Edwin Darby and his wife Harriet. The younger Joseph came out as a young man and married in September 1914 at New Glasgow, Marion Louise Fraser, a local woman, the daughter of Robert John and Isabell Fraser whose roots, as you may surmise, run back to Scotland. Since the Darby name did not proliferate locally, any relatives your benefactor may have in Pictou County must be through his mother and the Fraser connection. For all I know, some may be in the room this afternoon.

I should just mention that Derbyshire is not that far to the northeast of Birmingham, and that when people were first getting permanent surnames, one way of acquiring one was to be called after the place you came from. It is likely that a man from Derby moved to Birmingham centuries ago and was known as so-and-do “of Derby”, which in England they pronounce “Darby”.

What of John Leonard Darby himself? He attended McGill University with a degree in Architecture, which was his lifelong interest. He did take a break for a couple of years during World War Two to work with high explosives, then resumed his career and became president of the Nova Scotia Association of Architects for three years. One building of his design well known to me is the church hall of Wesley Memorial Church in central Halifax. He was an excellent draftsman. Mr. Darby was an active member of the Masonic Order, and was affiliated with The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of the Valley of Halifax, and a member of the Royal order of Scotland. He was active in the Anglican church at Bedford and had talents as a gardener and angler. He is buried at Abercrombie Cemetery, so he is home where his heart was. I'd like to begin my lecture with a salute to your generous patron. I hope this lecture series will serve to keep his memory alive in Pictou County.