JOHN HUMPHREY AND THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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By Alan Whitehorn, HistoryWire , 26 November, 2009



Eleanor Roosevelt with the Declaration of Human Rights

Article #1 All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights
Article #3 Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
Article #18 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
Article #19 Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

I often ask my politics students: "Who was John Humphrey?" Invariably, the response is a lack of awareness. I offer a clue by noting that during the twentieth century he was one of the world's most influential Canadians. Still no "eureka" moment for the students. Instead, they show embarrassment for not knowing about such an extraordinary Canadian. I augment their despair, when in noting Humphrey's birthplace of Hampton, I have to indicate that it is just northeast of Saint John, New Brunswick.

At this point, I offer a short impromptu history talk about the life and times of John Peters Humphrey. I focus on his pioneering role in the creation of the United Nations and his pivotal place in the drafting of one of its founding documents – The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Eleanor Roosevelt characterized this as the world's "Magna Carta," but I prefer to describe it as the charter of rights for each and every one of the billions of citizens of the globe. As such, the Universal Declaration is a key foundational principle in the construction of global governance and is important in this increasingly interdependent world. But to begin to understand our future, we need to know a bit about this Canadian's background and how he came to play such a key role.

Born on April 30, 1905 in Hampton, New Brunswick, Humphrey even as a child was confronted by enormous hardships; one arm was amputated at the age of six and both parents died before he was a teenager. It was an early life full of tragedy that would make him aware of the suffering in the world.

Educated at McGill University, Humphrey practiced law from 1929 to 1936 and then, acquiring a Masters in International Law, he became a member of the McGill Faculty of Law, until he was invited to become the first Director of the Human Rights Division of the UN. In such a strategic position, he was able to respond to the proposal for a global charter of human rights. The roots of the document rest in the transformative Four Freedoms Speech by American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941. That speech highlighted the need to transcend the suffering in the economic crisis of the 1930s and build a better and more secure world. That vision took on added urgency in the aftermath of the devastation of World War II. Eleanor Roosevelt, a strong supporter of her husband's initiative and serving as chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, invited John Humphrey to work on a preliminary draft of the UN document. He worked on a number of drafts in 1947.

The creation of the UN was the international community's second attempt at world governance following a world war. Each attempt was a quest for a more peaceful and just world. In creating the United Nations, some constitutional power and authority needed to be ceded to the international community. The UN would have more scope and power than the League of Nations. At the same time as the UN's executive and legislative structures were being assembled, two pillars of a world charter of rights were put into place. Many of the hopes of a post-war world rested upon the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. If the Convention on Genocide sought to punish the darkest side of the political realm—the attempt to obliterate another people—then the Declaration of Human Rights reflected the world's loftiest goals and idealistic aspirations of what could and should be. One document reflected our troubled past, while the other our cherished hopes for the future.

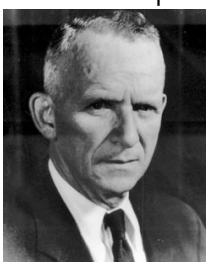
I, like my students, was late in discovering John Humphrey. My “eureka” moment came in 1998, while attending a performance at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. There in the NAC foyer was a wonderful display celebrating the 50th anniversary of the UN’s Declaration of December 10, 1948. There before my eyes, I could see the original drafts of this historic document. I was in wonder. Yet, the display kept alluding to a man about whom I knew so little, despite my having three university degrees. At that moment, I resolved to learn more about Humphrey and to do further research. After all, the Humphrey papers were located in Canada at the McGill University Archives.

Over the next decade, I began my odyssey to learn more and seek access to his papers. After a couple of preliminary trips, I put all of the pieces into place. In the spring of 2009, following a lecture on genocide I had given the night before, I went the next morning to the McGill Archives. The staff had prepared the historic files for my viewing. The archivist, wearing her white cotton gloves to protect the exceedingly valuable papers, showed me the first handwritten draft, now on fragile paper. She waited patiently for me to finish reading and then ever so gingerly turned the page. One page after another, a fascinating account was revealed. This was history unfolding before my eyes. I was mesmerized. The first draft was handwritten on various sizes of paper, while later drafts were printed on a manual typewriter, with penned edits of words and phrases. Six incredible drafts were

to be found, each reflecting the evolution of a foundational document and its planks. I have spent years doing archival research, but this was one of the most extraordinary moments in my life. I knew then that I had to do much more analysis and that the personal odyssey must continue.

Over the past several years, I had become aware of attempts to build a monument to the memory of John Humphrey and the Universal Declaration. Given that my wife is quite used to working holidays, she barely raised her eyebrows when I suggested that I wanted to spend a research day this summer at Hampton, a town barely on most tourist maps. And so, on a rainy day in July, while on the drive from Moncton to Saint John, we pulled off the main highway and headed straight for the Tourist Information Office in Hampton. I was told I was in luck as the Director of the "Hampton John Peters Humphrey Foundation" was there across the street in the central park, showing the inspirational monument that had been completed earlier in the year. I dashed to the park. There I learned about the combined efforts of Humphrey's family, Hampton townsfolk, artists, human rights activists and philanthropists to build a fitting statue and fountain in the park. It would be part of their efforts to offer tribute to an extraordinary Canadian and the Universal Declaration itself, but also to educate people, young and old, about human rights.

In the middle of the central park is a monument of stone and wood. Dominating are two sandstone megaliths. One has a small hole in the centre, where like a mountain spring, life-sustaining water gently cascades down. The other massive block of stone has articles 1, 3, 18, and 19 of the Universal Declaration boldly carved onto its surface. Clause one is in English, clause three is in Maliseet-Passamaquoddy, clause eighteen is in French and clause nineteen is in Mi'Kmaq. Together they form a wonderful testament to the multilingual and multi-cultural heritage of Canada. Around the stone monument is a semi-circular bench with a carved figure of an older Humphrey reading a book, beside him Humphrey as a child. It is a wonderful mirror-like bridging of the ages and a joint message of wisdom and hope.



John Humphrey died in March 14, 1995 and is buried in Hampton. He served all of humanity with great dedication and enormous vision. His legacy lives on in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Canadians and citizens of the world should be grateful and proud and can visit his birthplace and the memorial park. And when doing so, they should pause and reflect upon our times and the persons who made this a better world. They should also ask: "What is still to be done?"

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