

# In Conversation With...

by Sara Mattinson

## John Eaton

The wind is raging around the Great Room in Thinkers' Lodge. As waves pound the point of land where the building sits at the mouth of the Pugwash harbour, the room's massive, floor to ceiling window taunts the weather to do its worst. Yet not even a draught is felt in this nearly-two hundred year old house. The man sitting in an armchair by the window is responsible for the warmth and loveliness of not only this room but the whole house.

"A lot of people assume I've been coming to Thinkers' Lodge all of my life or that this was the summer home for my family," John Eaton says. "I'd never been here before 2005."

John's grandfather is Cyrus Eaton, the man who would make Pugwash world famous for peace. Despite being born (in 1883) and raised in Pugwash Junction, Cyrus built his family's summer home in Deep Cove on Mahone Bay, so when John thinks of Nova Scotia, that place comes to mind, not Pugwash.

It was wanting to follow in the footsteps of an uncle who was a minister that Cyrus Eaton ended up in Cleveland in 1905 where he found his true calling in business and built an empire out of utilities, steel, and railroads. When fire ravaged the village of Pugwash in the late 1920's, Cyrus returned to clean up the waterfront, build the seawall, and buy the Pineo estate (which in 1955, became Thinkers' Lodge). Through an act of the legislature, the non-profit organization, Pugwash Park Commission, was created in 1929; the bylaws require that two of the three commissioners should be members of the Eaton family.

In 2005, John received a call to join the Pugwash Park Commission.

"I said, That sounds interesting, so they sent me a package of information. I felt I owed it to myself to educate myself about this. At that time, I had lived in California for more than 25 years."

John was born and raised in the United States, where the shadow of his commanding, energetic and intelligent grandfather threw a longer, darker shadow.

"As I became a little more aware as I got older, one of the things that was inescapable was that in the United States, my grandfather was very controversial," John says. "He was an advocate of talking to the people you disagree with. He felt we should



**FEELING THE TUG OF HISTORY** - John Eaton stands against a mural of a photograph that wallpapers a large wall inside the refurbished Thinkers' Lodge in Pugwash. In the foreground, to the left of John, is his grandfather, Cyrus Eaton, who hosted the first Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs in 1957.

(Mattinson)

be talking to the leaders of the Soviet Union, to the leaders of Eastern Europe, and China, and then after 1959, to the leaders of Cuba. It was rather easy to paint Cyrus Eaton as some kind of Communist sympathizer, if not worse. You couldn't avoid that, living in Ohio. You couldn't avoid being teased by your classmates, you couldn't avoid seeing a billboard that said, 'Cyrus Eaton, go back to Russia where you belong'. It was something you grew up with."

So where was John in 1957 when his grandfather hosted the first Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs at Thinkers' Lodge in Pugwash, Nova Scotia?

"In 1957, I would have been 9 years old. While my grandfather would have been here, I was probably down in Deep Cove, completely oblivious to what was going on. We didn't have radio or television down there and I certainly wasn't reading the newspapers. I was busy being a kid, fishing off the end of the dock and playing capture the flag."

So that phone call in 2005 came as a bit of a surprise because, he says, "I knew Thinkers' Lodge still existed but I didn't know how it was run."

John agreed to join the Commission because he "felt the tug of family, the tug of history. I owed it to myself to contribute. Then I got up here and I was a little bit shocked at the physical shape of the lodge. Never having been here, I didn't know what to expect. But I should have known better. You can tell from the weather right now that this is a building that has to deal with the elements."

What surprised John most was meeting locals who told him they'd never been inside the lodge; it was assumed to be "off-limits". John knew that had to change as they moved forward. For the past three years, the Commission has worked on the restoration of Thinkers' Lodge, aiming to have it completed for the official opening of the lodge as a Parks Canada National Historic Site.

John is quick to point out that Thinkers' Lodge isn't going to be off-limits to the public.

"The challenge is to tell the story without overwhelming the place. The intention is not to turn it into a museum; the intention is to be continually in use for workshops and seminars and conferences. The hope is not only to build on the legacy of Thinkers' Lodge but to help the economy of the north shore and the village of Pugwash," he says.

Like all commissioners, John is a volunteer. He calls the past three years, during which the entire Thinkers' Lodge has been fixed up, overhauled and upgraded, a labour of love.

"This place is going to be here for years to come. The legacy will be here. That [restoration] was the first step and now the goal is: Do you think we can hold an event that will be as famous as the one in 1957? Probably not but it's important to remember that if they ever get rid of nuclear weapons and they need to find some place where that movement started, in terms of physical places in the world, this is it.

"We want Thinkers' Lodge to be an inspiration to people who perhaps don't realize 'big things can happen in small places'," John says.

As the conversation winds down, the wind is still beating futilely against the window, kept out by the solid walls, a new furnace, and the inspirational power of peace.

