

Tony Adamson: A life well lived

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Guest Column



Tony Adamson lived a long life, but the depth and range of his distinguished career could have filled several lifetimes.

Anthony Patrick Cawthra Adamson died at Toronto's Belmont House on May 3. He had suffered a stroke a few weeks earlier, after which his health rapidly deteriorated. He was 95.

He was a municipal politician,

renowned restoration architect, nationally recognized urban-planning expert, a popular professor, award-winning author and a champion of heritage, the arts and many social causes.

Born in Toronto in 1906, Dr. Adamson was the son of Colonel Agar Adamson and

Mabel Cawthra. The Cawthra family had a long history of land ownership in Toronto

Township, as Mississauga was known before 1968.

Despite his many travels, Adamson "felt deeply rooted in Toronto Township," says

longtime friend and fellow heritage conservationist Stephen Otto. "It was a feeling that

was quite sincere, and it contributed to his commitment to public service."

Adamson briefly attended elementary school in Port Credit, before moving overseas

with his parents. He attended a boarding school in England while his father saw action

in World War I as an officer with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and

while his mother led charitable initiatives in support of displaced Belgian children.

The family stayed in England after the war, and Adamson later studied architecture

and architectural history at Cambridge and London universities.

He married Augusta Bonnycastle in 1931. Shortly after an adventurous trans-

European honeymoon, the couple settled in Canada, on the family's lakelront property

(Grove Farm) near Port Credit, part of which is now preserved as the Adamson Estate.

Adamson had barely launched his architectural career before he contracted tubercu-

losis and had a close brush with death. It took him a decade to recuperate, much of it

spent in a comfortable Colorado sanatorium.

"His first forty years, with some exceptions, were not good years," Adamson's son

Adrian told mourners at the funeral. "Bad luck, bad timing had been his lot until then.

One blow after another had fallen on him, and he was saved time and again by Augusta."

Shortly after his return to Toronto Township in 1942, he set up shop as a planning

consultant, in partnership with the famous but somewhat eccentric Eugene Faludi.

He also took on teaching duties at the University of Toronto, initially in historical

architecture but was later instrumental in launching the university's urban-planning

programs. He also helped revive the moribund Town Planning Institute, which he went

on to head in 1951.

Adamson entered politics as a school trustee for Lakeview School Section 7 in 1944,

but he soon made a move to the municipal council.

He was reeve of the Township of Toronto in 1953-54, taking the reins after a year in

Europe studying city planning as part of a United Nations-sponsored project.

Prior to Adamson's election as reeve, there arose a strong movement for local reform.

Many residents were disgruntled with the municipality's haphazard development, virtu-

ally non-existent planning regulations and the growth-induced skyrocketing taxes.

Adamson initiated strict controls on residential development but worked to attract

industrial expansion to create a more favourable balance of assessment.

New zoning bylaws were introduced, and lot levies were imposed on the developers.

Although deciding not to seek reelection in 1954, Adamson remained interested in

local public affairs as chair of the township's public utilities commission.

He went on to become president of the Peel County Children's Aid Society in the mid-

1950s and later headed the Ontario Welfare Council and Peel's United Appeal. Adamson

was sharply critical of the alleged antiquated attitudes on welfare issues that prevailed

among members of the local elite. He pushed for more humane policies.

His interests soon took him farther afield. He worked for the St. Lawrence Parks

Commission, leading an effort to preserve historic buildings, many of which were relo-

cated and became Upper Canada Village in Morrisburg.

He likewise emphasized heritage and architecture as vice chair of the National

Capital Commission from 1959 to 1967.

Adamson chaired the Ontario Arts Council from 1969 to 1974, overseeing significant

growth in provincial support for the visual and performing arts.

He later served on the board of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, helping to co-ordi-

nate a major expansion in the agency's mandate.

He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1974. He also received honorary

doctorate degrees from Queen's University and the University of Windsor.

Adamson was predeceased in 1997 by his wife Augusta and in 1977 by his son Ingo.

He leaves sons Adrian and Jeremy, nephews Agar and Christopher, as well as several

grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Tony Urbaniak is a community journalist and author.