

## John Wesley Dafoe

### Loyalist Forebears:

- John Ernst Dafoe of New York Province
- Daniel Dafoe of Hosseck, Rensselaer, New York Province

John W. Dafoe was born March 8th 1866 in Combermere, Thurlow Township, Ontario to Calvin John Dafoe and Mary Ann Elcombe. He attended school in Arnprior and at age fifteen took a teaching position in a one-room rural school.

His career in journalism began in 1883 at age seventeen when he became a cub-reporter at the Montreal Herald. In 1884 the Herald sent him to Ottawa as parliamentary representative. Thus began his life-long interest in politics.

In 1885 Dafoe became founding editor of The Ottawa Evening Journal and in 1886 moved to Winnipeg as editor of The Manitoba Free Press, a position he would hold until 1892, when he returned to Montreal to work for first The Montreal Daily, and then The Montreal Star.

In 1901 Clifford Sifton, Federal Minister of the Interior, bought the Manitoba Free Press. It had long been his major critic and he intended to stifle its criticism. He renamed it The Winnipeg Free Press and enticed Dafoe to return to Winnipeg to serve as editor. Dafoe would hold that position for the rest of his life.

During Dafoe's tenure The Winnipeg Free Press would become the most outstanding daily newspaper in Western Canada and one of the most influential in the country. Dafoe was the most highly regarded English language journalist in Canada and possibly North America. He was never tempted to enter politics but his influence on the politics of the inter-war years was profound.

A fellow journalist described John W. Dafoe as a "shaggy, big, strong man" of abstemious Methodist habits. He was also a man willing to take chances: he hired the free-lance journalist E. Cora Hind as an agricultural reporter at a time when women were usually relegated to the social pages. She would become the most respected agricultural journalist in North America.

Dafoe attended The Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 as a journalist representing Canada, and thereafter was frequently invited to take part in many international conferences, including The Carnegie Conferences on US-Canadian Relations and International Peace.

In 1934 Dafoe was invited to give a series of lectures at Columbia University. These were published under the title *Canada: An American Nation*, which remained on University curricula for years.

Dafoe was a great admirer of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and while generally a supporter of liberalism and free trade, he was not dogmatic. During WWI he supported Borden's Union Government and conscription. He wrote a critical analysis of Laurier's career, *Laurier: A Study in Canadian Politics*, in which he presented Laurier as a "mixture of Machiavelli and Sir Galahad".

Dafoe served as chancellor of the University of Manitoba from 1934 to 1944, a period of significant change for the University during which many faculties were consolidated on the Fort Garry campus.

Dafoe married Alice Parmalee in 1890. Several of his children and grandchildren would make contributions to Winnipeg. His son Edwin Elcombe Dafoe served as editor of *The Winnipeg Free Press* and his daughter Elizabeth Dafoe served as Chief Librarian at the University of Manitoba for decades. Grandsons served as editors of *The Globe and Mail* and *Beaver Magazine*.

John W. Dafoe had many admirers. A dinner in his honour at the Royal Alexandra Hotel in November 1943 was attended by some 500 people. His speech was broadcast live on the CBC. In that same year *Fortune Magazine* had called him "The Greatest Canadian".

Dafoe died in January of 1944 and is buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Winnipeg.

Dafoe Road is named for him as is the John W. Dafoe Prize for books on Canadian issues.  
Sources:

- The Canadian Encyclopedia website
- The Manitoba Historical Society website
- *Manitoba History: 125 years of the Winnipeg Press club*, No. 70, Fall 2012
- Quebec History website
- Wikipedia

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