The Gordons
Portraits in Philanthropy

by CHARLES FORAN
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INTENSELY CANADIAN and casually cosmopolitan is how I would characterize the Gordons. In a country as complex as Canada, it is not a description that is self-evident. But the Canada they represent is the one to which I have always wished to belong. It is the one that Canadians understand viscerally — those Canadians who love, respect, and want to serve Canada’s best interests. This Canada is one that is not a partisan political one, but a country that understands how best to keep one’s history, geography and economy in an honest, spiritual and aesthetic balance.

My feelings about Walter and Elizabeth Gordon are coloured by the fact that I knew them and was tremendously influenced by them: their way of life, their beliefs, their tastes and their judgement. I believe that the country they lived for and personified is one that requires careful nurturing and personal commitment from each of its citizens. What Walter Gordon worked for in politics, Elizabeth Gordon in living her life to the full culturally and artistically, and Duncan Gordon with his business acumen, gave meaning to the values of Canada at its best.

I met the Gordons when I was 25. They had a most profound impression on me. Liz Gordon, with her beautiful Lily Jarmon hats, her piercing glance, and her sense of humour; Walter Gordon, with his deceptively gentle demeanour, his intense quiet intelligence and frequently wicked irony — they were a formidable presence, alone or as a couple. Together with his brother Duncan Gordon, they created The Gordon Foundation, which at first was a kind of mom-and-pop operation, run by themselves in a casual
manner and favouring projects which all three of them held dear: Walter, his economic and public policy projects; Liz, her artistic ones; and Duncan, his interest in health.

The Gordons always embodied something that went beyond political and cultural beliefs, but involved a kind of sacrifice of their private lives. I can only surmise that they did this willingly because they thought it was worthwhile. It was never Liz’s choice to go and live in Ottawa as the wife of a cabinet minister. Walter’s two stints in Ottawa — the first as a dollar-a-year man during the Second World War, and then as a much-beleaguered member of Lester Pearson’s Cabinet in the ’60s, were not comfortable for them. But they gritted their teeth because they believed in our country. For them, it was simply the right thing to do.

The beautiful bespoke clothes, the lovely houses and furnishings, could not hide what they were at their core and very being. Profoundly Canadian, they understood that Canada needed to be helped to become the best of what it could be: independent, decent, fair—and with style.

It was said of Walter that he was “a traitor to his class,” because he did not behave as a member of the Family Compact. He had gone to all the right schools and entered the family accounting firm, which was classically Bay Street. But his vision for Canada took him far from the strictured preoccupations of that street and those corridors. Walter and Liz were different. The people they gathered around them were artists, writers, gardeners, friends and relatives, who had originally come from other countries to Canada. At their table you met a professor of Italian next to a Hungarian art historian, next to Robertson Davies, next to somebody teaching at St. Michael’s College, next to an old school friend of Liz’s who now lived in New York. Their hospitality did not often include the Bay Street crowd. I have no idea what Walter was like when he was in business, but I certainly never thought of him as a businessman, nor did I think of Liz Gordon as a businessman’s wife.

They had made a sacrifice of their personal lives by going into politics. Walter took direct positions when he could have sat out simply as a power behind the scenes and an owner of various businesses. Instead, he plunged right into the fire. With a terrible baptism in
1963, when as finance minister his budget had to be withdrawn, he came to understand that he could not effect political change as quickly and directly as perhaps he had always thought he could. For this compassionate, humorous and wise couple, it must have been a terrible and searing experience. It meant that they went through a painful period with their lifetime friend Mike Pearson, whose ideals of a Canada as a generous, respected middle power they shared. Walter would then go his own way because of his commitment to the things in which he believed.

While he was a member of Pearson’s cabinet, he said that the Vietnam War could not be justified morally or strategically. He was someone with power speaking truth to others with power. He was speaking with his conscience, as he always would. This element of thinking about peace and disarmament is now fostered by Kyra (Gordon) Montagu in the work of the Foundation. His brief, six-year, blazing-star trail in political life has marked us forever. When he realized that he couldn’t do what he wanted through the direct action of politics, he continued his need to develop an economic strategy to keep Canada independent by drawing around him economists like Mel Watkins, Abe Rotstein, and thinkers like Franklyn Griffiths, encouraging their writings and their conferences.

Canada’s independence was of foremost importance to him. He saw us not as anyone’s colony, but as a country able to take its place in the world using its own resources—both human and natural. I remember the Committee for an Independent Canada, which he founded and of which I was an original member. The Committee rented a plane and we went to the North in the early 1970s so I was fortunate to see the North for the first time
in the company of the Gordons — the North which became so important to The Gordon Foundation, and to Jane (Gordon) Glassco’s passion and imagination. I remember how Liz pointed out how astonishing the pingos looked — those curious, volcano-like bubbles that mark the North. On that trip there were people like the filmmaker Christopher Chapman, publishers Jack McClelland and Mel Hurtig, author Peter Newman — all of us buoyed up by the dream and ideal of Walter Gordon’s vision.

The work of the Foundation has continued, always, with this impetus behind it and with the idea that there would always be something that we knew was Canada — a country that had its own unique history. A country with resources that must be exploited by itself on its own terms. A country that had welcomed immigrants while acknowledging its basis in the Aboriginal peoples. All of this the Foundation was determined to continue. John Gordon had continued the interest in public education, because the Foundation has recognized that this is the basis of our democratic society and the basis from which we can create an egalitarian place. When I think of the Gordons I think that they started with something that could be managed around a kitchen table. They understood that it would grow, but it started with the three of them and their ideas.

There is an ancient Latin proverb that says “only the educated are free;” this principle was important for their Foundation to promulgate. So, of course, they were involved in the Akitsiraq Law School, which was a collaboration between the University of Victoria and Nunavut Arctic College to graduate the first lawyers out of Nunavut. This project, supported by The Gordon Foundation, helped to place education at the centre of northern development, and helped in every way to highlight the fact that Aboriginal peoples have helped to illuminate the ideas of community justice, holistic education, and environmental responsibility. Everything that The Gordon Foundation has done has been practical and serviceable. It has been part of the world which Walter, Elizabeth and Duncan Gordon knew could happen as a result of their individual actions.

The Gordon Foundation, with its dynamic personal input from all the members of the Gordon family and inspired by the three originals—Walter, Elizabeth and Duncan—has
been practical and visionary. Like the people of good will of whom Pablo Neruda spoke in his Nobel acceptance speech, they knew that only “with a burning patience can we conquer the splendid City which will give light, justice, and dignity to all mankind. In this way, the song will not have been sung in vain.” The Gordon Foundation has been showing us how much burning patience can accomplish.

_The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson was the 26th Governor General of Canada, from 1999-2005._
“FOR THE PRIME MINISTER,” wrote the *Globe and Mail*, “the trouble with that speech of Walter Gordon’s about Vietnam is that a lot of people were going to agree with it.” The *Toronto Star* felt even more strongly. “We hope that instead of demanding Mr. Gordon’s resignation, Mr. Pearson and the cabinet come around to his position.”

Air strikes by the United States against the Vietcong were causing diplomatic and moral unease in Ottawa, the winter and spring of 1967. But if Prime Minister Mike Pearson was expressing cautious worry about the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, his friend and cabinet member Walter Gordon, well known for his strident views on American power and influence, was not. Gordon had informed the PM of his intention to speak on the matter in Toronto, and Pearson had good reason to suspect those views would be strong.

Sure enough, on May 13 Gordon triggered the second-biggest crisis of his short political career. He told a Toronto gathering of professional women that the United States had become embroiled in a civil war in Vietnam, one that “cannot be justified on either moral or strategic grounds.” After outlining the four grave dangers of the Vietnam situation for Canada, Gordon closed with a plea for the U.S. to stop the bombing. Otherwise, he said,
“we must be prepared to share the responsibility for those whose policies and actions are destroying a poor but determined people.”

This was not quiet diplomacy, not the path favored by either Lester Pearson or, more emphatically, senior minister Paul Martin Sr. This was a minister stepping outside his brief to speak from his conscience, regardless of the consequences.

In his memoirs, Walter Gordon acknowledged that he knowingly put his head in the career noose. Four days after his Vietnam speech, a special cabinet meeting was called. The prime minister, he noted, “was tired and very critical of me,” and made clear to the press that his friend had been taken to task for speaking out. Interestingly, while Gordon read through the more than 1200 letters he received from Canadians supporting his position on the war, the government found its footing as a critic of the bombing of Vietnam. His stance quietly became policy.

Minister Gordon debated resigning over the Vietnam speech in May 1967. Though he lasted another year, he felt out of sympathy with his colleagues during the difficult final months. A unique, blazing political career ended in 1968. With one of Canada’s most unusual political figures returning at age 62 to the small conglomerate of family businesses in Toronto, Walter Gordon, radical liberal politician, was no more.

Coming out so forcefully against the U.S. engagement with Vietnam was only the most obvious marker of the difference between Gordon and most politicians, even those with the natural liberal affinities of a Mike Pearson. Three weeks before his resignation, he tabled the 400-page Report on the Structure of Canadian Industry. The report, put together by a task force headed by University of Toronto
professor Mel Watkins, hoped to influence Canadian legislation across a range of foreign investment policies. It hoped, in short, to battle the same economic windmill that had almost caused Minister of Finance Walter Gordon’s political downfall in 1963, when several of his key budget proposals, in equal parts ambitious and aggressive in their intent to halt the erosion of Canadian economic independence by discouraging foreign investment, caused an uproar, and had to be withdrawn.

With the *Report on the Structure of Canadian Industry*, his nationalist principles once again found little support inside his own government. For a second time, Gordon failed to persuade. And unlike with his position on Vietnam, there would be no eventual validation of a brave, unpopular stance. He had to know it by the end — Walter Gordon would need to find another way to have an impact on a treasured, and for him, burning issue: how to ensure that Canada, faced continually with economic and cultural paths that, to quote the subtitle of one of his own books, offered varying “independence or colonial status” options, chose the more difficult but progressive route.

The report, along with his stance on Vietnam, confirmed what many had long believed — the patrician Gordon was Canada’s most surprising and elusive radical, alongside the fast emerging and more charismatic Pierre Elliott Trudeau. He seemed almost in disguise. On the surface, Walter Gordon had the education and social rank, addresses and demeanor of Toronto’s establishment, the largely Anglo-Saxon businessmen who ruled the city from offices on Bay Street and houses in Rosedale, their politics predictably status quo. With her fashion flair and abiding passion for the arts, Elizabeth Gordon had the glamour; with his grey suits and neat moustache, his air of thoughtfulness and reputation for integrity, her husband possessed a quiet authority.

Both the Gordon home at 22 Chestnut Park in Rosedale and their country place an hour
northwest of the city, dubbed Seldom Seen, saw regular, happy gatherings of interesting people, usually for sociable dinners, sometimes for intimate conversations in Walter’s library. On a Thursday, it might be painters invited by Liz; on a Friday, journalists from the *Toronto Star* encouraged by Walter. Academics from the University of Toronto, including venerable senior figures such as diplomat and Trinity College Provost George Ignatieff and rising stars like chemist John Polanyi, were regulars at both houses.

If Walter Gordon needed help on a commission he’d been tasked with putting together, or simply wanted to support a project, he could contact a Mel Watkins or Abraham Rotstein or Franklyn Griffith at the U of T, often via Massey College, where Gordon was a Senior Fellow, or else get on the phone with economist John Kenneth Galbraith at Harvard. Galbraith had done a lot of advising over the course of his long career, including of Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and, most recently, Lyndon Johnson. Mixing Galbraith with Polanyi with Douglas LePan, the poet, diplomat and later professor who directed research for the 1957 Royal Commission on Canada’s Economic Prospects (better known as the “Gordon Commission”), wasn’t unusual. He always made sure to surround himself with interesting, sometimes unexpected people, his own younger brother Duncan frequently among them.

By 1968, in short, Walter and Liz Gordon were a formidable couple with a network of active and influential friends. Their children, Kyra, Jane and John, were now young adults, and the years of commuting to Ottawa, and periods of actually living there, abiding its then limited, insular society, were behind them. They liked to travel, usually with friends, and had already been the guest of Mao Zedong in China. They also liked being in Toronto. Between Liz at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and Walter at Massey College, York University, or the York or University Clubs, the Gordons were finding
much to be involved with and support in the city, and finally had the time and energy to do it. As important, they also now had a private foundation, set up just three years earlier by the couple along with Duncan, to give money to people and projects they believed worthy. For Walter Gordon, the Foundation would soon serve, in effect, as his own ongoing Royal Commission, forever identifying problems and proposing solutions to how to make Canada safer and stronger alike.

The Gordon family were golden in Toronto, and had been for a generation. Harry Duncan Lockhart Gordon, son of an immigrant from Scotland, had founded a successful accountancy house, Clarkson & Gordon, early in the century. The product of an elite education, first at Upper Canada College (UCC) in Toronto then the Royal Military College (RMC) in Kingston, Harry Gordon went to war in 1916, commanding the 4th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles. Colonel Gordon had already married well, to Kathleen Cassels, daughter of another Scots immigrant, and fathered five children. His eldest, Walter, born 1906, and two other children, actually travelled to England as a family for WWI, a vestige of a 19th-century custom allowing officers to bring their families nearby to the battlefields.

Walter’s early unhappy experience of English public schools may have shaped his nationalism, notable for its distance from both the colonial legacy of England and the cultural and economic proximity of the United States. Back in Canada, the son followed the father’s educational path. UCC also was succeeded by RMC, and by age 16 Walter had graduated the military college, as much a success in athletics as academics. A career in the family business opened to him. He apprenticed with Clarkson, Gordon & Dilworth as a teenager and qualified as a chartered accountant in his early twenties. In 1932 he married
Elizabeth Counsell, a tall, striking woman from a prominent Hamilton family. Elizabeth’s bon-vivant lawyer father was a friend of Stephen Leacock and her mother the offspring of the lawyer who drafted the Boundary Waters Treaty.

Not yet thirty, Walter Gordon had only to do as expected and life would comfortably unfold. Walter and Elizabeth soon bought a home in leafy, stately Rosedale, and started their own family: Kyra, born in 1936; Jane, born in 1939, and John, born in 1946. The Great Depression was everywhere evident in Toronto, and among the daily sights were lineups of unemployed men outside homes known to dispense free meals. Elizabeth Gordon arrived to the marriage with a strong social conscience, and Walter, serving as a junior on government commissions into industry that had retained the family firm, Clarkson, Gordon & Dilworth to assist, gained insight into the often crude, self-serving workings of power. He met a young Mike Pearson and developed views on the need for strong, compassionate government. He didn’t seem to worry over upsetting the same privilege that had birthed him.

Then came another global conflict. The son of an officer, Walter longed to serve, as his father had done. His brothers Duncan and Hugh fought in Europe, and Elizabeth’s brother, John Counsell, was evacuated from Dieppe. But a lifelong struggle with gout denied Walter Gordon entry into the military. He contributed instead by joining the Department of Finance, working on the complicated issue of wartime tax agreements. That involved moving to Ottawa, his first taste of public service, and of the sleepy capital. Shortly after the war, he balanced running the family business — he’d been a partner since 1935 — with taking active roles in two key 1950s Royal Commissions, and in helping put together the 1958 Liberal platform. Out of the experiences came strident conclusions about American impact on the Canadian economy. As well, Gordon saw up close the helplessness of crippled local economies, such as the fishing industry in the Maritimes, and became so worried about the societal effects of unemployment he published a book, Troubled Canada, about these realities.

Though perhaps better suited as a behind-the-scenes influencer, via commissions or
books, Gordon entered Parliament in 1962 as member for the west-end Toronto riding of Davenport. So began the six blustery years that made him a hero to some, a misguided maverick to others, and cost him his friendship with Mike Pearson.

Who was the “real” Walter Gordon? A management consultant dabbling in politics or a politician from a strong business background with a practical approach to problem solving at the highest level? Or something still more singular — a wealthy man with a deep sense of justice, a liberal social conscience and high degree of intellectual curiosity? His mild, slightly aloof manner and ingrained code of civility, of never drawing attention to himself or his deeds, didn’t help clarify these questions. Not even a 395-page memoir could draw him out: A Political Memoir, published by Gordon from the rear-view political mirror of 1977, could have been revealing. But the book, too, is too mild and modest, decent and fair-minded, for its own good. Gentle Patriot, a political biography of Gordon already published earlier by Denis Smith, captured the enigma.

Walter and Elizabeth’s oldest child, Kyra, raised in a house busy with people from the world of politics and the arts, courtesy of her mother’s passion for mentoring painters and sculptors and collecting contemporary Canadian art, had no doubt about her father’s true allegiances.

“I wasn’t raised in a business family,” Kyra says. “I think beyond my sister’s father-in-law I never met another businessman. Economics interested my father. Academics interested him. And he was not a great hero to the business community.”

When the Gordons decided to start a private foundation in 1965, there wasn’t much by way of local models. In the U.S., the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations had long been a force in American philanthropic life. Even the model behind the model —
massive private fortunes put towards helping improve society — was largely alien to mid-twentieth-century Canada. Statist at heart, believing our taxes were plenty high enough to cover most social welfare ground, that earlier version of the country assumed both that governments took care of the poor and, anyways, we didn’t produce that kind of private wealth.

Tom Axworthy knew Walter Gordon, and has an inkling why he co-founded The Gordon Foundation in 1965. “Walter himself began to think about how to continue pushing for things he believed in outside the context of government,” Axworthy says. “He’d been a part of a very progressive government, but he’d also had a whole bunch of fights with his political allies. Nothing had been easy going. The Liberal government got Medicare through, for instance, but people forget now how much of a battle it was: Finance kept coming back trying to delay it. There was a tremendous rear-guard action against something as fundamental to liberal values as Medicare.”

At the outset, The Gordon Foundation was a kitchen-table operation. Literally: twice a year Walter, Duncan and Elizabeth would gather, a secretary from the office on hand, and decide who and what to support. No notes were taken and records were simple: cheques issued and cheques cashed. Elizabeth had only agreed to join the “board” on condition she be allowed to fund artists and arts-related projects, and Duncan, now the effective head of the family holding company, and far more a pure businessman than his brother, focused his contributions on the Hospital for Sick Children in downtown Toronto. But beginning in earnest in the late 1960s, Walter Gordon indeed “pushed for things” he believed in, ideas and ideals going far back in his life, in some cases to the Depression. He put his money and influence where his commission work and political career had previously gone.

Starting in 1972, and right up until his death in 1987, the Foundation funded with vigor projects supporting the ideal of Canadian economic and cultural sovereignty. It also openly tilted centre to centre-left in the causes it felt most strongly about. The project list is a Who’s-Who of the nationalism era. The Committee for an Independent Canada, the
Association for Report on Confederation, the small but influential magazine *The Canadian Forum*, the Association for Canadian Studies, the Canadian Broadcasting League, the True North Strong & Free Inquiry Society, and the Coalition against Free Trade all benefited, usually in the form of grants. Not all these groups and causes lasted, or were necessarily meant to, beyond the urgency of the cause that had inspired them. But some did. In 1985, Walter Gordon pitched in to help establish the Council of Canadians, soon the country’s highest profile social action organization, with 60 chapters and vigorous campaigns for clean water, fair trade, green energy, public health care, and a vibrant democracy.

Peace and disarmament causes rivaled for his philanthropic attention, a concern cemented by his outspokenness about the Vietnam War and encouraged by his involvement with a dynamic group of academics at the University of Toronto. He did like academics, in particular the more socially and politically engaged ones, and with his friend Robertson Davies serving as Master at Massey College, felt at ease in the university setting. Again, the list of groups supported by the Foundation reveals many of the key Canadian initiatives from the era of Cold War politics and nuclear anxiety. Gordon supported the Canadian Pugwash Group, the Canadian Centre for Arms Control and Disarmament, the Canadian Centre for Peace and Security, along with the Centre for International Studies at U of T, now known as the Munk School of Global Affairs. Walter Gordon also assisted Scientists for Peace, Amnesty International, Physicians for Social Responsibility, to name just a few, and his foundation later established a program of its own.

Nobel laureate John Polanyi, a regular at Gordon dinner parties both in the city and the country, sought and gained support for several of his own initiatives, most notably the May 1978 Pugwash Symposium, held at Trinity College, U of T, and the book *The*
Dangers of Nuclear War, co-edited with Franklyn Griffiths, that emerged from it. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau wrote a foreword for the book, and attended the conference. So did Walter Gordon. Typically, Polanyi recalls, his friend was happy to sit in the audience and attend a dinner with the PM, but otherwise preferred to go unremarked. “Don’t bother acknowledging my involvement in it. I’d rather you didn’t,” John Polanyi recalls Gordon telling him. He ignored the request. “I found him very attractive,” he says, “very easy to talk to, sympathetic and a terrific listener. He seemed to be absorbing things and making up his own mind, without regard as to whether his position would improve or undermine his status at the York Club.”

Before he even met Walter Gordon, the late Abe Rotstein had identified the same class defiance and stubborn individualism. Reviewing an earlier book by Gordon, A Choice for Canada: Independence or Colonial Status, in a 1966 issue of The Canadian Forum, the young political scientist mused on the role of the “social reformer” who hailed from affluence. Not overly praiseworthy of the particulars of A Choice for Canada, Rotstein nonetheless lauded its author in general. “Beneath Walter Gordon’s stand-offish style and his clouded political career,” he wrote, “there remains at an intuitive level, I believe, the soundest political instinct of any of our public figures.” In 1966, of course, Gordon was still a controversial cabinet minister in Ottawa; later, he and Rotstein would become good friends, and would work together on several projects around economic sovereignty and nationalism. One, the Committee for an Independent Canada, also brought in the editor and author Peter C. Newman and Adrienne Clarkson.

“The Foundation in its early incarnation was a kind of slush fund or emergency fund for good people who showed up and needed a little money,” Rotstein recalled. “Walter would tell his secretary, ‘Write so-and-so a cheque for such-and-such.’ It was very personal, ad-hoc kind of support.” But Rotstein was also a key player in a more concerted Foundation
effort, the Canadian Institute for Economic Policy, set up in Ottawa in the late 1970s to explore an effective progressive tradition in monetary policy for Canada. “We had a Board of Governors, we had an office in Ottawa. It was a major thing.” During its brief lifetime, the institute issued thirty studies, each a kind of “monograph on a whole range of Canadian economic policies.” And how was it funded? “Walter, entirely,” Rotstein admitted.

In 1976, friends gathered to celebrate Walter Gordon’s 70th birthday. The event, hosted by Toronto Star publisher Beland Honderich and held at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto, was formal and fancy, the guests a roll call of leaders of industry, politics and the arts. And yet, in his views, politics and philanthropy, the man at the centre of the celebration fit into no easy category of class or political allegiance. By being true only to his own values, Walter Gordon established a high mark for the purpose and integrity of The Gordon Foundation, a level his children would strive to match.
“ART WAS ELIZABETH’S REAL, true love,” Adrienne Clarkson recalls. “She was obsessed with seeing art.” The former Governor General first met Elizabeth at a dinner party hosted by her daughter, Jane (Gordon) Glassco, in 1963. For the much younger Clarkson, the wife of prominent Liberal politician Walter Gordon was a force of nature: statuesque and dressed in black, she was a formidable presence in any room. Clarkson recalls having never met anyone like Elizabeth, or Liz, Gordon.

As co-founder of the family foundation with her husband and brother-in-law, Elizabeth Gordon more-or-less demanded philanthropic attention for the arts, or else. She got her way, though never as much as she hoped, and for the remaining decades of her life contributed financially by methods visible and invisible to both individual artists, and the civic culture of galleries and museums. She was friend and mentor, fundraiser and leader. Her personal fund outside of the work of the Foundation provided support for a widening network of such friends in need, along with any other colleagues and community members who found themselves in difficult circumstances. Never was there any expectation of public acknowledgement or even thanks. Nor was this “charity” offered out of a sense of pity or duty. Always there was the desire, the fundamental
principle of helping admired causes or individuals in need. The Elizabeth L. Gordon Art Program at the foundation is her ongoing legacy, allowing public galleries to expand their collections.

Adrienne Clarkson is only one among many who believes Elizabeth Gordon would have made a brilliant curator or museum director. Instead, born into affluence and married into the same, she was a child of late divorce that still hurt her deeply, who became the loving and supportive spouse of a political titan and mother to her and Walter’s three children. Elizabeth Gordon was equally an unfailing patron and friend to women artists, whose own struggles with finances, men, and simple survival rarely failed to touch her. As was the family rule, she disliked attracting attention to her work, and only wanted to help. As in The Gordon Foundation’s early years, that help was largely informal and ad hoc, born out of the nexus of strong personalities and values alike.

She was born a Counsell in 1908, a name that meant something in turn-of-the-century Hamilton. Her father was Jack Counsell, barrister, idealist, bon vivant and friend to, among others, the author and academic Stephen Leacock. Jack Counsell came from a line of prominent Hamiltonians; the family claimed deep roots in the industrial Ontario city fifty miles around the western curve of Lake Ontario from Toronto. Elizabeth’s mother, Marjorie, could boast her own pedigree as a daughter of Sir John Gibbons, QC, a barrister in London, Ontario best known for his contribution to framing the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, still in place more than 100 years after its conception. That treaty created the International Joint Commission to ensure that “waters flowing across the boundary shall not be polluted on either side,” a goal that

The Gordon Foundation later took up through its support of the Program on Water
Issues at the University of Toronto. Elizabeth was the eldest, followed by a brother, John, and a sister, Jane. A childhood in the bustling city ended first with Liz being sent to boarding school in Québec and then to England, after the marriage of her parents ended and her mother relocated to Paris.

Liz Counsell grew tall — 5’ 10” by the time she was 13 — and dealt with any potential awkwardness in her physique by developing an air of elegance and fashion. Friends recall how, later in life, she embraced her height by saying, “Now that I’m 40, I have to stand up really straight and just make the most of being as tall as I am.” Time spent in the museums and galleries of Europe to study art refined her tastes early on, while coping with divorce formed an independent spirit and strong set of priorities. Liz attended private school in England and had her share of adventures skiing, hiking, and being hosted by the families of classmates from across northern Europe. Rather than return home upon graduation, she went to Paris for two years, living with a French family and enrolling in sculpture classes. In the French capital she met more artists, who became teachers and friends. Her mother and sister joined her there, and the advances of handsome Frenchmen were delightedly spurned. It was good to be young in Paris.

Regardless, Liz Counsell settled in Toronto as a young adult, keen, it seemed, to make her life in the arts. Following her example in France, she sought the company of local artists for both friendship and instruction, most notably the sculptors Frances Loring and Florence Wyle. Transplanted Americans who had first set up in the Bohemia of New York’s Greenwich Village, the couple emigrated north during the First World War, establishing a studio in an old church in the mid-town neighborhood of Moore Park, a
charming, ramshackle operation filled with art and cats. Everything about “The Girls,” as Loring and Wyle were known affectionately, was a challenge, if not an affront, to the conservative mores, in equal parts dour and dull, of the “Belfast of Canada,” as Toronto was then called. But Liz Counsell (a Hamiltonian by birth and disposition, a subtle distinction) wasn’t affronted. On the contrary, she was delighted, preferring from an early age the company, and perhaps the spirit, of artists over other, more familiar social types.

Frances Loring and Florence Wyle spearheaded the neoclassical sculpture movement in Canada, ushering in a phase of monumentalism, and many of their pieces remain on display in Ottawa and Toronto, most happily in a public sculpture garden near their former home. “The evolution toward the fuller consciousness of beauty is slow,” Loring would say later in life, “but once it has captured your soul, nothing else will do.”

Early in 1932 Elizabeth Counsell was introduced to Walter Lockhart Gordon. He had the pedigree — Upper Canada College and the Royal Military College — and was already a junior accountant in his father’s accounting firm, Clarkson & Gordon. But did he have enough personality for the high-spirited Counsell girl? (Her sister Jane married Bud Drury, later a federal cabinet minister.) Asked by Walter if she would marry him, Elizabeth responded, “I’ll marry you if we can go to Angkor Wat for our honeymoon.” The request was unusual, to say the least — few North Americans were even aware of the legendary Khmer temple city nestled in the jungles of northern Cambodia. Liz probably gained her knowledge in France, then still the colonial overlord in Indochina, with the rehabilitation of the “lost” masterpiece of Angkor a cultural priority. Although the trip to Cambodia didn’t happen for the Gordons for decades, many others did, including to Mao’s China and all over
Europe, and a tone was set. Liz Counsell, soon to be Gordon, sought out beauty and culture and expected her spouse to understand, and respect, her need. That he did so, despite his own minimal interest in visual art, was testament to a profound marriage, where friendship, respect and mutual support was the rule.

Domestic life curtailed her own attempts at sculpture. The Gordons settled eventually into 22 Chestnut Park in Rosedale, where the children were born: Kyra in 1936, Jane in 1939, John in 1946. World War II intruded, and the family was not spared. Asked to work for the Department of Finance in Ottawa, Walter took his wife and two children along, the first of two disagreeable stays for Liz in the sleepy capital where, as she later put it, she faced the grim prospect of having the same uninteresting people to dinner night after night, week after week, while Parliament was in session.

Her return to the house in Toronto, however, was fraught; her beloved brother John, badly wounded at Dieppe, was eventually airlifted back to Canada, convalescing in Christie St. Hospital in Toronto. Once sufficiently recovered, he was moved into 22 Chestnut Park, along with his wife and a nurse. An early paraplegic survivor, John Counsell went on to co-found Lyndhurst Lodge, dedicated to improving the lives of victims of spinal cord injuries.

With the war finally over and her husband back in Toronto as well, Elizabeth threw herself once more into the art scene. Her intent, later formalized in early philanthropic efforts of The Gordon Foundation, was to serve as both patron and, in a sense, indirect curatorial influence on museum and gallery acquisitions. One sustaining focus was on redressing the neglect of women artists, few of whom could even dream of earning a living through their work. The other, easier ambition was to place more contemporary...
world art in public collections. An introduction by Miss Loring and Miss Wylde resulted in a galvanizing friendship with Martin Baldwin. Admired as an architect, Baldwin was considered a visionary in his field, best known for his 1928 collaboration on Concourse Building, a quiet art deco masterpiece in the city’s financial district. He eventually went on to become a driving force in the evolution of the Art Gallery of Toronto (AGT) into the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), serving as its director from 1948 to 1961. In Martin Baldwin, Elizabeth Gordon recognized another kindred spirit — someone who cared about art in all its forms and who had the ambition to nudge Toronto out of its slumber.

The town, and its artists, needed supporters with elbows. The first-ever exclusive auction of Canadian art was held at Castle Frank only in 1947. Liz Gordon accepted Baldwin’s invitation onto the newish Women’s Committee at the Art Gallery not long afterwards. Their debut purchase was a piece by the young French expressionist Bernard Buffet. It was followed by acquisitions of Swiss surrealist Paul Klee, French cubist Fernand Leger, and the German-American expressionist Lyonel Feininger. All were young, active artists and immersed in dynamic European art movements. All were a mild, welcome shock to Toronto sensibilities. By 1956, the President’s Report for the AGT would report the success of this flourish of international acquisitions: “Mrs. Walter Gordon took up the cudgels and launched the first sale. The growth of this idea mushroomed in an extraordinary manner.”

In addition to the Women’s Committee, Elizabeth Gordon also sat on the Exhibition Committee of the AGT (1955), the Purchase Fund Committee (1949-50), and the AGO Council (1956-63), precursor of the Board of Governors. For decades she cut a swath through the leading public art institution in Ontario, and not only for high-profile work, or her striking appearance, in particular her flair for monumental hats, uniquely beautiful and designed for her personally by Stratford costume designer Lily Jamon. “The Hat Lady,” as Liz Gordon was
affectionately known by many at the AGO, also helped set up education programs for volunteers. This less glamorous work eventually extended to smaller galleries across the province, where she funded efforts to improve both collections and overall knowledge about art and artists.

She had strong tastes and passionate views, and wasn’t afraid to share them. “As you’re walking down the hall,” Briony Glassco recalls of visiting galleries and museums with her grandmother, “she’d bark at people, ‘That painting is two inches too high! That’s in the wrong room. What is that doing there?’” She’d also suggest to curators and acquisition committees what to buy, and help with the purchase. “She was not a quiet person,” Briony says with admiration.

Though the Women’s Committee spearheaded the purchase of international art for the gallery for a key period, it never managed to exert the positive influence on the careers of female Canadian artists that Liz Gordon and many others would have wished. As a result, when Walter and Duncan Gordon raised the idea of a family foundation with her in 1965, she likely saw this as the best chance to make a real difference. She struck a deal with the brothers: she would approve their choices for funding, whatever their selections, if they’d do the same for her efforts — i.e., the arts. For the next twenty-plus years The Gordon Foundation “board” consisted of Walter, Duncan, and Elizabeth, plus the family firm’s secretary, who kept basic records of the annual Christmas “meeting” at 22 Chestnut Park and issued the cheques. Again, the amounts, while generous, were never quite as much as she’d have liked, but the support was widespread and ongoing. It took many forms: commissions for bus station designs, helping museums purchase sculptures, strong-arming friends as well as galleries to buy art by women, or simple discreet funding with no strings attached. The first Gordon Foundation arts grant was made in 1969 to,
appropriately enough, the AGO. That would be followed by contributions to the Shaw Festival and Tarragon Theatre, as well as the Toronto Dance Theatre. “Official” Foundation support, however, was forever outpaced by more private backing, courtesy of Elizabeth, of artists and institutions she believed in, and wished to see thrive.

In the early 1970s, the adult Gordon children were added as Foundation trustees, albeit with minimum actual involvement. “We didn’t feel we had great responsibility,” Kyra Montagu remembers, “but we went to the meetings. And a lot of the grants in the early days were either straight grants to Sick Kids Hospital, straight grants to some art project or gallery, or to publish some books by thinkers our father wanted to support.”

Although they did not expect it, the second generation would later have their own chance to exert influence. For the moment, their larger-than-life parents and sweet, thoughtful uncle held sway. They were loving parents, but Elizabeth and Walter Gordon weren’t necessarily attentive to the mundane dimensions of bringing up their children. At 22 Chestnut Park, Kyra, Jane and John were raised by live-in nannies, a not-uncommon practice among the wealthy. In 1946, the year John was born, the Gordons found a country property near Schomberg, northwest of Toronto. It included a lake and eventually two houses, which the couple dubbed, with bemused reference to their children, “Seldom Seen” and ”Seldom Heard.” The smaller second house, in fact, was built to comfortably shelter the Gordon grandchildren — at a silent remove.

The importance of the country property for Walter Gordon, as a place to gather friends and allies for extended strategy sessions and do the necessary hard thinking away from the bustle of Toronto, was evident. In fact, Seldom Seen soon became, and would remain, the centre of Gordon family life, a magic destination for the kids and, later, those grandchildren. And Liz, too, though a natural urbanite, thrived there. Restoring the house
and landscaping the gardens provided her a fresh creative outlet. Managing the house even teased out a modest domestic strain in her character. She embraced good food enough to inspire a “Seldom Seen Cookbook” of favourites, notable for their abundant use of butter, cream, and wine.

A much higher-profile stint in Ottawa in the 1960s, as the wife of the radical Minister of Finance in Lester B. Pearson’s Liberal government, proved Ottawa no more endearing to her, and in their post-political life the Gordons divided their time between Toronto and the countryside. Travel remained a great pleasure, and if every trip wasn’t as intrepid as their 1959 foray to Communist China, where Chairman Mao himself hosted a dinner, most trips were to fascinating and beautiful places.

For Elizabeth, the travel was about art, beauty, and friendship; for Walter, it was often to learn about the politics and economies of different regions. But she supported his difficult political work, despite the discomfort his status as a “traitor to his class” could cause in the clubs and living rooms of Toronto friends. Affinities abounded between Elizabeth’s passionate promotion of Canadian art and the political vision and will that Walter saw as necessary for the country’s prosperity, if not actual survival, as a truly independent, non-colonial society. Though visually sophisticated as a couple – he in his double-breasted business suits, she in her outrageous hats — they were good friends and loyal mutual supporters, the stuff of a long, happy marriage. “Liz was the elegant one and incredibly humble about her own talents,” Adrienne Clarkson says. “And she derived a sense of strength from his quiet resolve and wonderful sense of humor.”

Liz Gordon outlasted her beloved husband by seven years. In the final decade before her
death in 1994, she refocused her philanthropy towards the city of Toronto itself. She had co-founded with friends a group called “Exploring Toronto” and worked closely with the mayor on developing a competition to design better bus shelters. She also kept up with the gallery scene, lending the usual discreet hand to artists and curators. Even a frail and ill Liz Gordon remained a force, causing a stir with each entrance into a public space. She was genuinely interested in creative people. She never traded in gossip — but she enjoyed it. She valued humor and wit enormously. Elizabeth had presence and stature to the very end, and was mourned by family and friends and the many more she had touched, via her generosity and determination.

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**Oxtail Stew**  
*“Le Hochepot De Queue De Boeuf”*  
(Clementine in the Kitchen)

- **Oxtail joints (4 to 8 per person)**
- 1/4 lb butter/margarine
- 4 onions
- 3 carrots
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1/2 cup Brandy
- 1/2 bottle dry white wine
- 3+ cups bouillon
- Bouquet garni
- 1/2 lb mushrooms
- 1/8 cup diced fat bacon
- 12 small onions

Soak oxtail joints in cold water for several hours. Wipe dry.
Brown meat in butter with 4 onions and 3 carrots chopped coarsely.

When meat is brown, add 2 crushed cloves garlic. Cover for 2 minutes and then add 1/2 cup brandy. Light it and let it burn for a moment.

Then add 1/2 bottle wine and enough bouillon to cover meat. Add salt, pepper, bouquet garni.

Cook slowly (325) for 3 hours with cover on.

Saute in butter 1/2 lb mushrooms, a handful of diced bacon, and 1 doz. small onions. Add meat to this.

Pour over all the strained cooking liquid from which fat has been removed. Cover and cook for one hour more in slow oven.

The meat should be soft and the sauce somewhat thickened and smooth.
Duncan Gordon

SOMETIME IN THE 1960s, members of the extended Gordon family assembled an ancestral tree to help Harry Duncan Lockhart Gordon, then in his nineties, with his memoirs. The roots arced back to 13th-century Scotland. According to the chart, Sir Adam de Gordon acquired the “lands of Kenmure and Lochinvar” in 1297, and likely built the castle on the island of Lochinvar, the family seat for centuries. His descendants acquired further land and fought in various wars, but seemed based largely in Scotland until 1625, when Robert Gordon obtained the charter for the “barony of Galloway” in Nova Scotia. One of his sons, also called Robert, joined his father in the New World adventure, while the other, called John, backed Charles I in his bid for the English crown. For this he was raised to the peerage.

Tumultuous times followed, and Charles lost his head to Oliver Cromwell in 1649. “Sir John Gordon of Lochinvar, 2nd baronet,” appeared to survive the upheaval, but a descendent, called William, the 6th Viscount of Kenmure, did not escape perilous politics. He was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1716.

The early interest in the colonies across the Atlantic, typical of the intrepid Scottish appetite for the New World, didn’t initially stick with the Gordons, who remained in the
lowlands, their castle now at Kenmure. Only in the 19th century did the family assert a similar wanderlust. But it was as much for other colonial projects — India and Africa — as the older outpost of Canada. Among the Victorian ancestors of Walter and Duncan Gordon were several who travelled the Empire, often in uniform. By the mid-20th century, Kenmure Castle would be derelict, a category-B pile that can still be viewed by driving to The Glenkins, nearby the town of New Galloway, about an hour south from Glasgow.

Gordon men were major-generals in the Indian army and majors in the 13th Hussars, fighting in the Boer War and German West Africa. World War I, in particular, saw the clan serving with the Allies from both sides of the Atlantic. In Canada, William Henry Lockhart Gordon, having emigrated from Scotland in 1868 with a Cambridge degree and law training from Inns of Court, settled in Toronto. He fathered nine children, the first being Harry Duncan Lockhart Gordon. Four of his boys served in the Great War. The youngest, Leslie, died a sergeant major in 1915 leading a charge in Belgium. Lt. Maitland Gordon, born 1882, was wounded three times, the third injury fatal. Molyneux Gordon, also a lieutenant, was injured while training with the Mississauga Cavalry. He survived and later started a family.

The oldest Gordon-at-war, Harry, ended up commanding the 4th Battalion Canadian Mounted Rifles in Belgium in 1916, his own wife and oldest children in tow, as was the custom. He was awarded a DSO (Distinguished Service Officer) and retired back to the accountancy firm, Clarkson, Gordon & Dilworth, which he had co-founded in 1913 at the outset of conflagration that nearly destroyed a generation of European and Empire men.

Col. Gordon, as many people knew him, lived to 71, long enough to observe still another World War engulf another generation, including his own sons. Walter, his eldest, could not serve because of a medical condition, but Hugh and Duncan did. Hugh Gordon, a flying officer with the RCAF, was killed on duty in 1940. The youngest child born to Kathleen and Col. Harry Gordon, Duncan was 25 when the war broke out. In keeping with the family tradition, now many generations old, Duncan served with distinction,
rising to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. He was awarded the Member of the British Empire (MBE) medal. Interestingly, being left behind in Canada during the First World War as a small child with his sister Kitty (only the eldest children, Walter, Isabelle and Hugh, had traveled with their mother and father, a separation lasting several years) may have formed his character with greater force than anything he experienced on the battlefield. As the Toronto novelist Timothy Findley understood, what happens to humans embroiled in conflict can never simply be the result of the “war.” The correct phrasing is always “the wars,” in recognition of how consequences and scars are spread amongst those implicated.

The Second World War certainly never left Duncan Gordon, or his family. First, there was the death of his older brother Hugh, who left behind two sons, one of whom he never met. Then there was his sister-in-law’s brother John Counsell, left a paraplegic from the failed raid on Dieppe. He lived at 22 Chestnut Park with Walter and Elizabeth for many years, and later lived at the King Edward Hotel.

Of all the attributes ascribed to Duncan Gordon — modesty, generosity and warmth, a gently patrician manner — the most telling may be those aligning with his family’s tradition of military service. Efficiency and discipline, the capacity for strategic thinking, are core qualities of the successful officer. His nephew Scott Griffin called him “effective in his business acumen and passionate in his philanthropic interests.” Among The Gordon Foundation founders, Walter Gordon had the vision, profile and ambition to change hearts and minds about core societal issues. Elizabeth Gordon was driven by art and artists. But in the temperament of quiet Duncan Gordon, a handsome, dapper man who shunned the limelight, could be found the key, and often missing ingredient to the
multi-generational survival of any family venture — the ability to build something up, nurture it, and then let it go. He didn’t only ensure The Gordon Foundation would survive the natural lifespans of its founders; he provided the terms that would allow the organization to thrive under the next generation.

Duncan was very good at business, running both Clarkson Gordon, the auditing firm, once Walter became involved in politics, and Woods Gordon, the management consulting firm, which rose to the top in Canada on its commitment to research and education. Duncan also chaired the board of a separate family business, Canadian Corporate Management (CCM), where the serious profits were earned. At the family firm he oversaw a huge staff, especially after the 1973 merger with Ernst & Young. Among the thousand employees in the Toronto office was John Gordon, the youngest child of Walter and Elizabeth. Duncan loved his nieces and nephews, and doted on them. In a 2014 interview, John recalls his uncle displaying both strategic thinking, most notably when he transitioned the firm from transactional to analytical auditing, then a radical approach, and a gift for managing people. “How do you keep all the guys who work for you so happy?” John asked him. “I’ve got a special system,” Duncan answered. “I manage my staff by walking around.”

“He was a fabulous listener,” John Gordon recalled. “Visiting him in his office was like visiting with a Chinese monk. He had this huge firm to run but he was always Zen, peaceful and quiet.”

Duncan Gordon never married. In another life, he told his nephew, he would have
wanted a wife and children. In this life, he showered attention and generosity on those around him, and those he could help at a practical level, especially children. John Gordon considered him an important mentor. Peter Gordon, who lost his father Hugh to World War II, thought of Duncan as a substitute parent. He and his brother, also called Hugh, were regular visitors to their grandfather and Duncan’s home, and when Hugh was also tragically killed, at age 20, Peter’s uncle went to extraordinary lengths to comfort him. Jane (Gordon) Glassco confessed to loving Duncan above all other extended family members.

Duncan’s own sister Kitty, who married Anthony Griffin in 1937 and likewise lived through the proverbial “wars” (Anthony served with distinction as a commander in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve) had five children. The eldest, Scott, didn’t get to know his Uncle Duncan well. But Ann Griffin, later Ann McCall, a well-known artist, remembered him being the first to arrive at her debut Toronto show, and the first to buy a painting, which he hung proudly in the front hall of his elegant home in the mid-town neighborhood of Rathnelly.

As a young man, Ian Griffin was taken by his uncle to his fishing club north of Toronto for fishing, food, and conversations about everything from the best flies for trout to how to proceed in business and politics. A Calgarian for decades, Ian recalled with special fondness a late-in-life visit from Duncan. They fished the Bow River together, and Duncan had brilliant success using only dry flies. All the Griffin children, along with dozens of other family members and friends, benefited from significant cash distributions in his will. For Scott, then with a young family and carrying significant debt on his business, a gift of $50,000 from Uncle Duncan made a huge difference.

That was his private generosity. As a co-founder of The Gordon Foundation with his
brother and sister-in-law, Duncan was equally attentive and resolute in his public philanthropy. Health care remained the focus. Under his direction, the Foundation supported a wide array of initiatives and institutions, including the Canadian Institute of Child Heath, St. John Ambulance, several hospitals in Toronto and Montreal, the National Mental Health Fund, the Canadian Paraplegic Association, Hospice King and Casey House. But his lifelong devotion, both as a donor and volunteer, was to the Hospital for Sick Children. Founded in 1875, SickKids, as it is better known, had long been a Toronto institution, its reputation for care of the most vulnerable cemented by the 1937 polio epidemic, when it produced more than 3000 braces and splints in a few weeks. It moved to its present location at 555 University Avenue in 1951, around the time Duncan Gordon began his long service. Starting as a Trustee in 1956, he served on the board for 28 years, acting as chair from 1973 to 1984.

More than a board member, Duncan was a trusted and engaged “civilian” at SickKids, deeply interested in daily life in the hospital. His nephew John Gordon remembered how he knew all the doctors personally, and seemed to enjoy being in the wards, chatting with patients and staff, delighting in new medical procedures and equipment. “SickKids was Duncan’s baby,” John Gordon said simply.

A dinner held in autumn 1984 at the Toronto Club celebrated his decades of involvement. “I thank him for giving so much of his time, for providing excellent advice and invaluable support,” the hospital chief wrote in a newsletter. “We are going to miss Mr. Gordon’s active participation, but are delighted to know that he will continue to be involved in the forthcoming capital campaign.”

That capital campaign eventually produced a celebrated patient care wing, the glass-roofed Atrium. It opened in 1993. Duncan Gordon succumbed to kidney failure in fall
1987. But in his final days he did, in effect, both provide the necessary capital and trigger the expansion for a project much closer to home — The Gordon Foundation. The children of Walter and Liz, though now accomplished adults, still had little influence on the Foundation, aside from rubber stamping decisions made by their parents and uncle. Nor was there adequate funding to envision a professional path forward. For Kyra, Jane and John, this was frustrating.

John Gordon remembered twilight conversations with Duncan about the situation. It was well known that, while Walter and Elizabeth were affluent, Duncan had been the “real” businessman, and had both ensured his brother did well by the family enterprises and acquired serious personal wealth for himself. How he might eventually disperse that wealth was less known. “It was never clear, at least initially, whether he would leave his money to the SickKids or something else, but there was no plan for the Foundation to grow” John said in a 2014 interview. “But his thinking was that things set up for an eternity become old and stale.” Duncan did share one thought with his nephew. “If I do leave my money to the Foundation,” he said, “I’m not going to tell all of you what to do because I have no idea what is going to happen in the world five, 10 or certainly 20 years from now. I wouldn’t want the Foundation saddled with following my wishes for decades when they may have no current value.” No strings would be attached, he inferred — if that was indeed his decision.

The year 1987 proved critical for the Gordon family. First, Walter Gordon died in the spring at age 81. Then Duncan, his junior by seven years, took seriously ill. Surprisingly, he entered the hospital in the fall without having drafted a written will. When a doctor suggested he delay no longer in making one, he complied. Sure enough, Duncan had
finally made up his mind, and bequeathed the bulk of personal fortune to The Gordon Foundation without any stipulations regarding how the money would be spent. By private foundation standards, the figure, an endowment of between $25 and $30 million, was solid, if not extravagant. But its effects were monumental.

In his generosity and vision, Duncan Gordon may have displayed another consequence of being raised inside “the wars.” Emerging from World War II was a generation accustomed to large, decisive decisions and their consequences. In the opinion of Tom Axworthy, longtime friend to The Gordon Foundation and its current President and CEO, Duncan’s success was consistent with that ethos, as well as his own private mantra that “every generation should decide what’s important to them.” In Duncan Gordon’s quiet competence as a businessman and philanthropist, closely tied to his ability to lead by listening, lay the groundwork for the Foundation’s successes into the new century.
FOR KYRA (GORDON) MONTAGU, oldest child of Walter and Elizabeth Gordon, the key to successful programs is first discovering, and then finding ways to work with, extraordinary people. Take the early days of rethinking The Gordon Foundation. “You collect smart people for advice who know about the subject,” she says of the 1980s, when the second generation of Gordons — Kyra, Jane and John — began examining their family’s philanthropic project. “And then you find the people you really want to listen to.”

Although a resident of the United States for the last half-century, Kyra believes this quality of individual is more likely to reside in the country of her birth. “Canada has been really lucky until now, because the kinds of people who get passionate about what ought to happen are otherwise not self-serving.” She lists all the individuals who helped her and her siblings transform the Foundation from an informal mechanism for supporting good causes into an influential, broad-based organization capable of long-range thinking as well as researching and designing major projects that will have significant impact.

The list of collaborators is generous. Kyra Montagu, now 79, is every inch a Gordon, disavowing praise for accomplishments and deflecting attention onto others. Northern leaders such as Mary Simon, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Barry Stuart, Joanne Barnaby, Mark
Wedge, Tony Penikett, and Rosemarie Kuptana come quickly to mind. So do influential thinkers from her father’s circle, including Alex MacIntosh, John Evans, Franklyn Griffith, John Polanyi and George Ignatieff, whose work on disarmament evolved into the Foundation’s interest in creating an Arctic Council.

Finally, there are the individuals inside The Gordon Foundation who have driven the agenda. Kyra is happy to cite Christine Lee, an important early CEO. Lee initiated the policy of taking the board on an annual visit to a part of Canada where they had a project, to see how people actually lived. She also worked creatively with experienced specialists, such as Janice Gross Stein and Adele Hurley of the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, to create the Program on Water Issues (POWI), a landmark water protection initiative for the past twenty years. Kyra likewise names Patrick Johnson and James Stauch, along with important board chairs, most notably John Evans, Hugh Segal, and Karen Hanna. “Leadership is always critical,” Kyra says, “to gathering others to the cause.”

Bookending the emergence of the professional Foundation in the 1980s and its 50th anniversary mark in 2015 is Tom Axworthy, who took over as President and CEO in 2009. Tom’s involvement with the Gordon family, and shared vision for the country, dates back almost five decades, to Walter Gordon’s political career. While still in his early twenties, Axworthy, a native of Winnipeg who eventually received a PhD from Queen’s University in Kingston, worked as an assistant on a task force led by Walter Gordon, then President of the Privy Council. Over the course of a long and distinguished career, Axworthy helped repatriate the Canadian Constitution as a
principal secretary to Pierre Trudeau, taught at Harvard University, and ran the Charles R. Bronfman Foundation in Montreal. He remained friends with Walter Gordon throughout, and when the family began discussing how to give their philanthropic efforts more impact, they sought his advice again.

Axworthy recalls the early days, and the lack of Canadian models for what the Gordons hoped to achieve. “The idea of foundations which are to be organized and strategic as opposed to trying to ameliorate symptoms of problems came at least a generation later to Canada,” he says. Most wealthy people simply gave donations to hospital boards and universities. The notion of “using private fortunes to improve societies” was still fairly new.

That is what the second generation Gordons especially wanted: to use the Foundation to improve society. Axworthy and others, whose own interests already lay with addressing the challenges of the North, helped them to think about how to create an organization with practical programs and effective mechanisms for grant-making. Jane, John and Kyra all had their own notions, and Kyra admits “we didn’t always find each other easy to get along with.” A professional mediator was brought in, and with Duncan Gordon’s unexpected legacy funds suddenly allowing for big dreams, in short order there was an office, first shared with the Donner Foundation, a staff, and a board that, though initially weighted in favor of family members, soon included many prominent Canadians who were similarly “passionate about what ought to happen.”

As with the Walter/Elizabeth/Duncan split, there were three programs, each bearing the imprint of a personal priority: education (John), the North (Jane), and human security (Kyra). With Kyra, who chaired the board from 1988-98, the focus would shortly evolve into Northern self-governance and environmental sustainability in order to increase long-range security. The project that would come to most define the Foundation in the public eye — promoting the concept, and then supporting the creation, of a new international organization called the Arctic Council — would be underway.

Born in 1936, Kyra Gordon grew up in Rosedale. 22 Chestnut Park was the Gordon home
and “Seldom Seen” the family weekend destination. There were public and later private schools with Quaker socialists-in-waiting roommates. There was, from the start, the quiet radicalism developed first during her father’s spells in Ottawa, first overseeing commission work and later as one of Mike Pearson’s new team in the role of Minister of Finance. Soon enough, the Gordon drive to create an independent Canada wasn’t so quiet; it was loud, and not always welcome, even inside Liberal circles.

As the eldest child, and perhaps the most naturally studious, Kyra followed her father’s lead. She attended Radcliffe College, shortly before it merged with Harvard, only because “my father had generously funded a U.S. education, which he didn’t believe in, because he loved me.” The “deal” was that she would return to Canada and contribute. She did, with a French husband, Jean (Coco) Montagu, and for two years worked in Toronto, most notably a stint as a producer for the CBC. But eventually the Montagus settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Coco started the first of many technology companies and Kyra worked with artists and museums, most prominently as President’s Chair of the Boston Children’s Museum, a venerable institution with a century-old mandate to engage children in an appreciation of the world and help start them off in a life-long love of learning. Then, while in her sixties Kyra changed direction and trained, and now practises, as a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. The couple raised two sons, Sasha and Dominic.

Though Kyra was back in Boston long before The Gordon Foundation officially launched, she’d already had an education in how her father approached causes that he held dear.
She was also learning, via her own professional experiences, how to lead. As a teenager, she watched Walter Gordon chair the Royal Commission on Canada’s Economic Prospects, and noted how it’s two reports, in 1956 and ‘57, both expressing concern at foreign ownership in the resource sector, laid the thematic groundwork for both his political career and philanthropy.

“It was an earth-shaking shift for my father to get out in the world on that level and really look at problems,” she remembers of the commission’s field work, the basis for Gordon’s 1961 book *Troubled Canada*. “They took it very seriously and they went from coast to coast, and they truly empathized with the consequences of job loss and the economy on the fishing industry in the Maritimes, for instance.” Young Kyra also noted how the Commission seemed made up of a “passionate group of people.” Some of those principles — getting out to where people lived and talking to them, finding the right individuals — would later guide The Gordon Foundation under her leadership.

In Boston, too, the Montagus were active in the anti-Vietnam and disarmament movements. “They knew everybody,” Tom Axworthy says of attending dinner parties in Cambridge during his days as a Harvard professor. “Great collections of fascinating people. Kyra is quite analytical. She’s very smart, and has wonderful questions and is very current with all kinds of things.” Viewing Canadian issues through an American lens may even have helped her with the Foundation work, Axworthy believes.

Even from the United States, her father’s post-political preoccupations were never far from her mind. Kyra appreciated the chance to become more directly involved in the family’s philanthropic efforts, albeit only modestly at the start. She and her three siblings were added as Foundation trustees in the early 1970s, and began attending the meetings, welcoming those early discussions between Walter Gordon and Tom Axworthy. The deaths in 1987, first of Walter and then of Duncan, demanded a more active involvement. Thanks to Duncan’s financial legacy, the second generation of Gordons, now all in their middle-years, suddenly had both the means to carry on, and the mandate to evolve the Foundation in dynamic new directions.
“I’d been to Alaska and the Yukon, but I hadn’t been to the Arctic as we know it,” Kyra says of her experiences before the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) conference she attended with Jane in 1987. “Just the tourist version.” Soon she was well beyond being a tourist, becoming instead a committed player in supporting change there. With the Cold War ending, initiatives that would have seemed impossible a few years earlier were now within reason. In 1987, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev called for a “zone of peace” in the Arctic. Barely 12 months later The Gordon Foundation was organizing an Arctic Security Project, dedicated, as Kyra saw it then, to encouraging the “development of a Canadian security and demilitarization policy for the Arctic which is successfully integrated with related social, scientific, environmental, developmental, legal and other Canadian Arctic policy goals.” For a small foundation, that was a tall ambition; the thinking was not so much “be big” as ”take risks” and “commit to the long-term,” already hallmarks of the new Gordon approach.

To a remarkable degree, they succeeded. Or better, the Foundation funded projects and supported individuals who created the Arctic Council panel, co-chaired by Rosemarie Kuptana of the ICC and University of Toronto professor Franklyn Griffiths, then leading a group of scientists seeking to engage the Russians in peaceful pursuits. From the outset, the Gordons insisted that indigenous peoples be central to the process and the outcome. Going by the emerging governing principles, the intent was to empower northerners to lead and participate in every aspect of their own lives and destinies. Eventually, indigenous organizations would be enshrined as Permanent Participants in the council.

Griffiths, who’d had a study on northern foreign policy funded by the Foundation back in 1979, came to the family’s attention again in 1985 when he published a newspaper op-ed questioning the implications of the U.S. government not asking permission from Canada to send the USCGC Polar Sea through the Northwest Passage. With the Arctic Council panel, Professor Griffiths saw the opportunity for southerners to “think more about the people of the region, including the regions outside Canada.” The North was “being polluted, it was being militarized, the people there — fellow Canadian citizens — were not being well-treated.” What The Gordon Foundation did by pressing for a Council was to
help “give voice to northerners, not only to Inuit but to Dene and others.” He only wishes they’d paid more attention to establishing a genuine North-South dialogue, so that the views of northerners and southerners could have better meshed.

In 1996, Kyra Montagu flew to Ottawa to witness the signing of the declaration creating the Arctic Council. Representatives of eight Arctic states attended, and the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs thanked “the co-chairs of the Arctic Council panel set up in 1990, and the members of the panel for their efforts that laid out the ground work for this day.” Mary Simon, a member of the steering committee, was later named Canada’s Circumpolar Ambassador. But Tom Axworthy, Kyra believes, deserves most credit. “Tom crafted the notion of the Arctic Council,” she says. “Tom, along with Terry Fenge, Mary Simon, John Lamb, Franklyn and Rosemarie. They helped conceptualize it. They were able to see it as an institutional opportunity for Canada to take a leadership role.”

The Arctic Council, while a huge achievement, hasn’t necessarily lived up to its promise as a voice and mechanism for international self-governance for northern Aboriginal peoples. Ever the realist, Kyra notes how hard it is to keep momentum in any project, including recent efforts around protecting Canada’s boundary waters and ground water, and renewed attempts, through a partnership with the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, to launch a new Arctic Security Program. There is also the recent Mackenzie Basin program, a Foundation-generated project, dedicated to developing the technical capacity of the Aboriginal communities along the river to monitor its health — a high priority in the second decade of the new millennium.

Having now overseen, or been part of a team that oversaw, 30 years’ worth of efforts at creating or funding programming that “demonstrates innovation and has the potential for deep and lasting impact,” Kyra Montagu is philosophical about effecting real change. “All of these shifts in the ways things occur,” she says, “these movements are taxing and burn out northern leadership at a horrifying rate. I think northerners have had to struggle with this.” The need to keep generating new leadership and collaboration is vital.

For this reason, she takes special pride in a Foundation program associated more with her
sister: the Jane Glassco Northern Fellows. “Creating a community of Fellows, who gather together regularly, despite their different geographic locations, have some sympathy for what each is doing. I think it’s incredibly important. So do they.”

Another important practical outcome of more recent Foundation work has been the Impact and Benefit Agreement (IBA) Community Toolkit developed with co-authors Ginger Gibson and Ciaran O’Faircheallaigh. According to Tom Axworthy, the toolkit explains “how to begin to think of what will help you negotiate with people who want to use your property.” More than 1200 Aboriginal leaders have participating in training, using the Toolkit. “It’s a how-to-produce, from beginning to end, a detailed environmental plan with the best practices in the world,” Axworthy says.

All the triumphs, the defeats, the projects brought to impressive completion, the ones never quite properly sustained, form part of the steady, ongoing process that Kyra Montagu believes in — the kind of philanthropy that might actually change society. “It’s really an incredible privilege to be involved in these things,” she says. “A privilege, and very exciting.”

Long-time Foundation collaborator Janice Gross Stein, now a board member, attributes much of the Gordon success to a rare kind of toughness and patience. “Most foundations don’t have a strong enough vision,” Stein says. “The Gordon Foundation does. Throughout their whole history, they’ve stayed the course.” For her, the backbone is, simply, Kyra. “She is wonderful at thinking long-term. She’s passionate and strategic and has had a lasting impact.”

How effective has The Gordon Foundation been in the North? “For a long time The Gordon Foundation was the only foundation from the South that recognized the North needed help,” Barry Stuart says. They were also pioneering in their commitment to high-
risk-to-rewards projects, the kinds that other foundations, and certainly governments, wouldn’t venture to fund. “Regardless if a business analysis favored the risk or not,” Stuart says, “if the Foundation believed they might produce a huge impact, they took it.” For Tom Axworthy, that risk-taking impulse came directly from the Gordon siblings. First, there was the attitude they brought around bringing the might, power and money of the “South” to the supposedly needy, backward “North.” “What Jane, Kyra and the Foundation did wasn’t to say was ‘we know what’s best for you to improve your life.’ Instead, it was ‘how can we help you empower yourselves?’”

Such an approach may seem routine best practice in 2015, but a quarter-century ago, in the shadow of the colonial, and then colonized, eras of government oversight of, and attitude towards, First Nations and Inuit peoples, it was a bold declaration of a new way of being: humble, collaborative and pragmatic about outcomes. “Talking to people,” Kyra says of the Foundation’s core methodology, “convening them whenever possible, beginning to have conversations — that’s how you start. It has to be gradual. It has to take time. And,” she adds, citing another mantra, “clearly the voices from the North itself are the ones that resonate with the most knowledge and awareness. They have the most to contribute.”

Axworthy, likewise disinclined to take personal credit, also shares Stuart’s belief that the Foundation was a pioneer. “If Kyra was ahead of the curve on Gorbachev and water,” he says, “Jane was about what we’d call self-expression and empowerment for northern peoples, and John focused on one of the toughest challenges in education, dropouts.” The recent focus on water, especially in the Mackenzie River Basin, seems similarly at the cutting edge of environmental thinking and activism, putting a finger on another seminal 21st century issue.

Tom Axworthy and Kyra Montagu agree on one aspect of the Foundation: its roots in Walter Gordon’s singular vision of strengthening Canada for the benefit of all Canadians, and in the wider ethos of Pearsonian Canada. “There has never been anything since to match that burst of government activities,” Axworthy says of Lester Pearson’s Liberal
governments of the 1960s and Pierre Trudeau’s into the early ‘70s. “These weren’t small programs, either — these were gigantic efforts at improving society. It was an era when government seemed to work, with terrific public servants and good politicians at the helm.” For Axworthy, the idea of a cohesive liberal project was rooted almost in a personal value system among certain individuals. “It’s a deep-rooted civility,” he says of the Gordon family. Thinking of Walter and Duncan, he adds: “They were genteel. They were kind.”

For Kyra, being the daughter of Walter Gordon and raised inside the house on Chestnut Park made her a born-and-bred, lifelong adherent of progressive liberalism, including her father’s forceful, and not-yet-realized, belief in the need for an economically, as well as socially and perhaps spiritually, independent nation. “I certainly inherited the notion that Canada is Canada and not the United States,” she says, “and that our country simply has certain built-in liberal values. I know the country has changed in recent years,” she adds. “But I hope these values are still here.”
Jane Glassco

BY THE SUMMER OF 1986 Jane (Gordon) Glassco was ready to be inspired. She was 47, the divorced mother of three grown children and a veteran of multiple career paths partially taken. Not that the middle child of Walter and Elizabeth Gordon hadn’t done much with her life. Quite the opposite: besides raising Briony, Daniel and Rufus, she’d studied physiotherapy in the hopes of becoming a doctor and co-founded the Tarragon Theatre with her husband, Bill Glassco, serving as the iconic Toronto institution’s co-managing director for its first seven years. Of late, having “retooled as journalist,” the feisty Jane had done investigative work for the Globe and Mail and CBC television, including stints as field producer at the shows “The Nature of Things,” “Market Place,” and “Wonderstruck” (a science series for kids), as well as Saturday Night Magazine. She’d achieved a great deal, and given much.

Fed up with CBC politics, in particular attitudes inside the corporation towards women, Jane went freelance in 1986, contributing to a series of documentary profiles titled “Our Stories.” If her first effort, a profile of Connie Matthews, a friend of her mother’s, fell safely within the class net — an examination of the money in old Toronto society — her second did not.

Barry Stuart was a good friend from Tarragon Theatre days. Then a Toronto lawyer, Barry had helped the Glasscos develop both a defining Canadian play — David Freeman’s
Creeps — and a theatre space to house it, when no one else would touch this ground-breaking look at people with disabilities. Now the chief justice for Yukon and a pioneer in alternative conflict resolution, Barry Stuart had invited Jane out for a visit a couple of years earlier. Asked to accompany him to the airport, where he was collecting Johnny Johns, a legendary Gwitch’in trapper, guide and hunter, Jane ended up drinking whisky with the elder. Not long after she paid her first visit to Old Crow, the tiny Gwich’in-speaking Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation village where Johns lived.

She was smitten. In Johnny Johns, Jane found both the kind of rugged individualist spirit she admired, and someone who could guide her into the world of the North and its peoples. In Jane Glassco, Johns — like so many others — found an honorary fellow member of the “colourful two per cent,” as locals described any Yukon habitué with the kind of unconventional, fun-loving, and occasionally in-your-face personality that seemed drawn to the territory.

At once Jane decided to make a film about the Vuntut Gwitchin elder for the “Our Stories” project. Johnny Johns and Old Crow attracted her equally, and she soon was meeting more key influences on her thinking and life, most notably Gladys Nitro and Mark Wedge, and doing what she could to help people and communities she came to love. With government agencies still favoring patronizing and disastrous efforts at controlling Aboriginal families, much of her focus fell on protecting children from being taken away. “Jane was at the forefront of trying to protect Aboriginal kids,” Barry Stuart says, “to keep them from being taken into government care.”

Walter Gordon died in 1987, followed shortly by his brother Duncan. Conversations about reconfiguring The Gordon Foundation began in earnest among the second generation, along with Tom Axworthy, who volunteered his advice. Not long before,
middle-child Jane might have had difficulty articulating her views on the directions the work should take. All of a sudden she knew, for sure and for good. The North, in all its complexity, is what Jane insisted The Gordon Foundation partially address and support, and though she was deeply engaged with the issues — land rights and treaty negotiations, resources, especially water — first and foremost it was the people who summoned her passion, compassion, and humanity.

She was born at the outset of the Second World War and raised inside a singular household of social status mixed with often radical social conscience. Obliged to cope with her share of childhood ailments, Jane emerged a classic tomboy, her character a slow-reveal of her father’s analytic intelligence and her mother’s large-spirited flamboyance. Never a natural student, she had a spotty record at successive boarding schools — her daughter Briony believes she was asked to leave at least two of them — before graduating from Havergal College in mid-town Toronto. Sharing a similar temperament with Elizabeth did not make for an easy mother-daughter relationship. Jane always had a calmer relationship with Walter. At the University of British Columbia (UBC), she started a science degree in preparation for medicine. Letters home, mostly to her father, reveal a young adult mind slowly awakening, the subjects shifting abruptly from shopping and boys to social justice and economic inequality. She left UBC after two years to get married.

The 1960 Jane Gordon-Bill Glassco match was made in Toronto society heaven. By marrying the son of a former Gordon business partner, Jane seemed to be conforming. But Jane and Bill were rebels within their clans, and a child of Walter and Elizabeth was unlikely to blithely uphold class expectations; always the deep family passions lay elsewhere in politics, social and political reform, the arts. Soon enough the Glasscos, after spells in London and New York, established themselves as Rosedale hippies, anti-war and
pro-disarmament, their Hawthorne Avenue home painted sky blue with flowers climbing up the front of the house by draft dodgers, and never mind what the neighbors thought. Jane followed the tradition of shocking the neighbours in the years to follow by painting it bright purple, then famously with a tour-bus-attracting rainbow splayed across the front. The children attended public schools and wore hand-me-downs. They were brought to rock concerts with their parents and babysat by actors during Tarragon rehearsals.

From her marriage to Bill Glassco, which ended in divorce in 1976, came much that was wonderful: three children and the legacy of having established and supported the Tarragon Theatre, a catalyst for the emergence of a genuine Canadian theatre (“Bill kept the theatre and I kept the kids,” Jane joked in a letter). A personal tragedy, the drowning death in 1962 of their first-born, one-year-old Benjamin, naturally cast a shadow. But according to her older sister Kyra, out of such loss emerged the “true” Jane Glassco, a protective and nurturing mother, an independent woman with a powerful empathy gene, a fierce commitment to friendship, and a desire to effect genuine change. After the divorce, she tried again to become a doctor, attending the University of Toronto to complete her science degree, but when turned down by McMaster medical school for being too old (at 38), and with three children to raise, she then turned her energies to journalism.

The divorce disappointed her parents. “It’s not your fault,” Jane wrote to her mother in a candid and wise letter from 1976. “It’s not because of the way you brought me up. Surely senior citizens can stop blaming themselves and feeling guilty when their children mess up. Surely by now I hold myself and not you responsible for my life and choices. I do.”
This wiser, more mature Jane Glassco had spirit and energy in full. Briony remembers her mother’s work on a suicide hotline, frequently sharing stories at the breakfast table about the troubled souls contemplating jumping off the Bloor Viaduct. “She had a huge moral outrage button,” her daughter says. Much closer to home, as Briony remembers, “my mother was constantly taking in families to live in our house.” One such family were Sào and Tanya Santo. Hired as a cleaning lady, Sào eventually confessed her involvement in an abusive relationship, a situation that was affecting her infant daughter. Jane’s solution was to invite them both to live with her and the kids. At the same time, she encouraged Sào to develop her skills as a seamstress and for Tanya to go to university. “Tanya had two mothers,” Briony recalls. Kyra characterizes the expanded Jane Glassco household: “It made the house very crowded but happier. There were two struggling mothers to help each other and cover for each other.”

All that conviction and drive was still looking for a point of focus when Jane made those fateful early trips to Yukon. Her thinking was further galvanized by a formal Foundation outing with Kyra to the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Conference in Sisimiut, Greenland, in 1987, followed by a disturbing first look at life on Baffin Island, then part of the Northwest Territories.

Kyra Montagu recalls attending the ICC conference with her sister. “We were both interested, we stayed together in someone’s house, we gained a sense of how life was being lived — never easily — up there. We also got to watch a very interesting mixed group of people talk through a lot of things that were on their minds.”

Many of those Aboriginal leaders Kyra and Jane first met in Greenland became essential partners in the work of the Foundation over the next quarter-century. Jane’s feeling for people, her instinct for networking, evolving personal relationships with individuals such as Gladys
Nitro, Joanne Barnaby and Mark Wedge, along with her essential relationship with Barry Stuart, complemented the more formal approaches and policy directions taken by Foundation staff, in particular under the leadership of Christine Lee, Patrick Johnston, and, much later, Tom Axworthy. The combination yielded results.

Always, The Gordon Foundation would hold true to Walter Gordon’s founding vision of an independent and strong Canada. But the second generation was rightly determined to take the family’s philanthropy in new directions. Though it is too simplistic to clearly demarcate Kyra’s policy-driven Arctic Council from Jane’s community-focused Northern Program, temperamental differences between the sisters contributed to the variety of the work. With Jane, it would always be, in her older sister’s words, a “gut-level people response” to the challenges of Canada’s northern regions. Hugh Segal, chair of the Foundation’s board in the 2000s, saw Jane’s approach as rooted in an impulse to take advantage of opportunities and be willing to assume risks. “Jane was about breaking down barriers and doing things that hadn’t been done before,” Segal says. In an article from the 1990s, Jane Glassco, then in her mid-fifties, captured her own experientially-driven spirit.

“We’d been thinking about it for years,” she wrote of a prospective journey. “But this spring was the first time it got serious. Would I like to come with Barry and other friends to white water raft the Firth River in northwest Yukon, into the Arctic Ocean? You bet your sweet elbows I would!”

Close friend Andrew Ignatieff marvelled at her devotion to a Canada so unlike the one she had grown up in, and which she first experienced only at age 40. “In her work in the North,” Andrew recalls, “she was romantically stirred by ancient Aboriginal lore, values and traditions. But she was also genuinely and practically engaged by Aboriginal land use
practice, knowledge of the land, and an underlying belief in the sustaining power of the environment.”

Elbows out, courage and compassion at the fore, Jane Glassco pushed for directing funding to projects that made most sense to her understanding of philanthropy and social change. Starting in the late 1980s, and happily influenced by Judge Stuart, the Foundation focused on grant-making that supported the efforts of northerners to use traditional knowledge in decision-making. Among the many land-use planning and traditional knowledge projects that received funding were the Porcupine Caribou Management Board, the Dene Cultural Institute collection, and the Kwanlin Dun First Nation’s study. A three year study of the 28 Inuit and Cree communities surrounding Hudson’s and James Bay, completed in 1997, has been recognized as a landmark on the use of traditional environmental knowledge.

Notable grant-making projects that reflected Jane’s spirit into the new millennium often had a pronounced environmental dimension. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society of the Yukon received support to create a forum to define a local vision of the Peel Watershed. The Grand Council of the Cree were backed in their land claims implementation policies. The over-arching theme of this granting stream was encapsulated in a 2007 Gordon Foundation forum, attended by Jane, in Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories. “Freedom to Choose” highlighted the necessity of a fairer distribution of natural resource revenues among First Nations inhabitants.

But Jane’s most visible legacy had a clear, strong human face. The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship, an ongoing program devoted to supporting young northerners committed to building their own futures, did not officially launch until after her death in 2010. But Jane had been involved in the planning, and just before she passed away Tom Axworthy and the chair of the board, Karen Hanna, visited Jane to say the scholarship program would be named after her. This impulse — to help foster a generation of northern leaders who would have the capacity and confidence to control their affairs — dates back to her earliest experiences and impulses, and runs through the Northern Program.
Those friends remained unaware of another way that Jane Glassco was expressing her spirit, unrelated to The Gordon Foundation. The “Crazy Jane Fund,” administrated in part by Barry Stuart, gave out small gifts to hundreds of worthy individuals and community organizations, the majority of them in the North. Jane insisted this generosity remain anonymous. In a 1986 letter to her parents, she first joked about the money coming her way through the Canadian Corporate Management (CCM) fund set up by her Uncle Duncan. “Am trying to think up what to do with all this CCM money. My first desire is world peace. Couldn’t we buy a relatively flat farm, bulldoze it 1000 feet deep and ask all the people in the world to bring their countries’ bombs and dump them into this hole?” More seriously, she wrote, “I’d like to use the $ (money) to give away anonymously to people and projects where knowing the source would make life difficult (for the receiver).”

Her parents had to be pleased by the decision. Elizabeth in particular felt most comfortable with the personal dimension of philanthropy: the chance to positively affect lives and careers, one individual at a time. The family matriarch had also long preached that what mattered was to give, not to be known to have given. In this regard, and so many others, Jane was her daughter, living out the credo that with affluence come responsibility and humility, in equal parts. People who’d received cheques from the anonymous benefactor would sometimes call her in astonishment at their good fortune. “Oh my God, that’s amazing,” Briony remembers her mother saying. “I had no idea.”

In her final years, having been diagnosed with ALS, she went so far as to insist her lawyer send out letters announcing the temporary suspension of the “Crazy Jane Fund” due to the death of the benefactor, whose identity she fabricated. By killing off her secret philanthropist before her own actual demise, she ensured her giving remained secret.
“She was a total trickster,” Briony says. Behind the impulse, however, lay a serious point: Jane didn’t want to put a strain on friendships by being known as “the lady who gives us money.” This was especially true of groups and people in the North, where the generosity could seem patronizing.

Only after the sad fact did friends in Toronto begin to learn of her equally discreet and determined involvement in their lives. A friend who had to work at home because of chronic asthma needed her house adapted for it. Jane paid for the renovation. She also provided a special attendant to help care for Andrew Ignatieff’s mother in a nursing home. Briony and her brother oversee the giving now.

“A feisty, irrepressible, notorious and demanding spirit,” her sister Kyra calls her. Briony declares her mother “fearsome,” in the best sense. “She had real political vision,” Briony Glassco says. “We’ve always been a very political family.” For Barry Stuart, Jane Glassco was both a natural trouble-maker, born to stir things up, and endowed with a “powerful sense of being human.” In her will, she left instructions that some of her ashes be buried in Toronto and some next to the Johns family plot in Old Crow. Sharing her spirit between the world she came from, and the one she came to hold so dear, seems exactly right.
“HE WAS MUCH BOLDER than the rest of us,” Kyra Montagu says of her late brother. “A natural risk-taker.” A decade the junior of Kyra and seven years younger than Jane, John Gordon was born in 1946 into a family of distinction, and distinct personalities. Although he started his career with Clarkson Gordon, where he was mentored by his beloved Uncle Duncan and ultimately made a partner, John was fated by his own strong personality to strike out independently. Sure enough, not long after relocating to Calgary in 1978 for the firm, he resigned from Clarkson Gordon, turning his energy to real estate development, most notably an award-winning community development project in the Town of Sylvan Lake, north of the city. He also raised two daughters, Cristina and Nicole, and two step-children, Kristen and Matt. In his final years John’s primary passion was stock market analysis, working to understand the hidden patterns that can trigger financial crises.

According to Kyra, the Rockies also kept her brother rooted in Alberta. He loved mountains. “They spoke to him in ways that were essential to maintain his sense of wellbeing,” she says. Western living suited his zest for challenges, and people with appetites for risk and reward. “East Coast intellectual and behavioral restraints were not particularly welcome to John,” Kyra says.
For all these reasons, when The Gordon Foundation was reinventing itself in the 1980s, a process accelerated by the deaths of Walter and Duncan Gordon in 1987, it was natural both that John would want to become involved, and would seek his own project to spearhead. Once the children “divided Gaul again,” as Tom Axworthy says of the three core programs that emerged from discussions, the youngest Gordon announced his desired priority of helping to improve public schools in Canada.

In an interview a year before his death, John Gordon, then sixty-seven, an elegant man with his father’s thoughtfulness and reserve, recalled the 1987-88 period at the family foundation. “I guess it just started with a personal value,” he said of an initiative dear to his core beliefs. “I thought that education for myself, and for everyone else, was the most fundamental thing that moves us forward in life.” At the start he had even hoped to create an “Institute of Quality Education,” dedicated to improving education on a continuing basis.

The impulse ran deep in the Gordon family. “Dad was interested in education,” John Gordon said, “always surrounding himself with professors to counsel him, especially on economics. And he was chancellor of York University.” In 1988, he commissioned educational consultant Roberta Axworthy, wife of long-time advisor, Tom Axworthy, to produce a series of themed reports outlining the educational landscape and proposing possible programs. “We looked at all kinds of different things and really it was ‘how can we be most effective?’”

Given his love of western Canada, it was no less natural that John Gordon would launch the program in Winnipeg. Manitoba hadn’t yet standardized its public education best practices as much as other provinces — leaving room for innovation from the outside. “It was teacher-based,” John said. “We wanted to work with individual schools and
individual teachers.” In effect, the Foundation announced that it would support any good program or initiative that educators in the Winnipeg system could come up with to enhance their students’ experiences. The program, reflecting John Gordon’s own approach to business, was designed to be simple and direct, oriented to real outcomes.

Teachers duly brought forward ideas, and the Foundation’s assessment team subsequently analyzed them for potential effectiveness. Some proposals went on to the next stage of being funded; others did not. The intention from the outset was to empower classroom educators and school administrators, and build capacities to engage students in their own learning.

“The Foundation believes that the future of the country depends upon individuals who have the education and training they need to manage a complex world successfully,” John Gordon told a Winnipeg gathering in 1992. By then, the Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP) was already in its second year of grant-making, and was helping schools “test and evaluate their ideas for innovative approaches to teaching and learning.” A program co-ordinator had been hired, and an advisory committee set up. “They began with quite large investments in the Winnipeg school system,” Tom Axworthy says. “To try out a whole series of new teaching techniques, and class-room innovations, to counter drop-out rates.”

John Gordon’s own passion focused on the problem of “at risk” youth. “Our concern is for those who aren’t getting through,” he told the same audience, “who aren’t realizing their potential, for whom school has never felt a very comfortable, inviting kind of place.”

For eight years, John drove the education program inside The Gordon Foundation.
Among the more successful initiatives were “Student Voices,” a study of how to boost student confidence, and the conference “Listening to the Voices” that followed. Other projects addressed curriculum reform and conflict resolution and equity in the classroom. Some 22 schools were involved, and $5 million spent. A 1998 study of the MSIP declared that “I know of no other strategy that has taken 20 or more schools and shown this level of success in this short a time.” Even so, the evaluator acknowledged that “encouraging change” was a challenge for a private foundation, and “it takes courage to take risks.” A year later, an attempt was made to widen the initiative to develop a pan-Canadian vision for public education, as well as to seed model projects outside Manitoba.

![Marina Bay, Town of Sylvan Lake, Alberta.](image)

Even with the re-direction, the education program couldn’t find traction, defeated, perhaps, by the vastness of the terrain, and the difficulty of devoting only part of a foundation’s mandate to such a fundamental issue. The MSIP was formally wound down, a decision made by Kyra, Jane and the board, and one that caused friction among the siblings.

Throughout the ’90s, the Foundation had been simultaneously giving grants to major educational institutions, including the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, mostly to address the impact of government policy on public education. They also committed to the Akitsiraq Law School in Nunavut and, more recently, the Dechinta Bush University program in the Northwest Territories. Launched in 2010, the Dechinta pilot project reinforced the Foundation’s core belief in the need to create higher-level learning institutions within the North itself.

Finally, with the emergence of the Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship Program, the family’s educational imperative meshed comfortably with its focus on life in Canada’s North. To this day, the Glassco Fellows represent The Gordon Foundation’s most visible and, in some respects, cherished outcome: dynamic young leaders committed to making
their communities more independent and prosperous.

For John Gordon, the MSIP had been honorable and forward-looking, true to the spirit of the family’s philanthropic drive to better society. Part of the problem was the failure to find a model that could be transported to all schools across the country. The decade he committed to education failed to diminish his faith in the need to transform how we educate our youth. “I was always looking at a greater picture,” he said in last year’s interview, “if we could just have gotten there.”

John Gordon passed away on October 16, 2015.
A Summation
BY THOMAS S. AXWORTHY

“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”
ROBERT BROWNING

The Family Portraits of The Gordon Foundation founders — Walter, Elizabeth, Duncan, Kyra, Jane and John — admirably penned by Charles Foran describe strikingly different individuals, interests, and personalities. Yet there is an essential unity that animates these lives: all of them wanted to make a difference in this world, and each of them had the confidence and means to try.

The first founders of the Foundation — Walter, Elizabeth and Duncan — were part of a generation that had lived through the Depression, won the war, built the peace, and saw Canada evolve from being a colony to becoming one of the most prosperous and admired nations on Earth. They thought big and big things happened during their era: peacekeeping, Medicare, a Canada pension plan, the Canada Council for the Arts, a Canadian flag, bilingualism, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Walter Gordon typified this spirit when he told Canadians in A Choice for Canada, “Canadians should stop harping about their problems. We have our problems, but they are nothing compared with those that other nations have to face. We should talk more about our great opportunities: opportunities not only to vote and make life more abundant, more satisfying, and more complete for all of us in Canada, but opportunities to help other people in the world both by example and deed.”

The next generation of founders — Kyra, Jane and John — shared this spirit of optimism and adventure. Different horizons beckoned than those of their parents and uncle, but the
sweep of the ambition was equally large. John focused the Foundation on education and within that large domain, chose the tremendously difficult issue of dropout prevention. Jane fell in love with the North, which was treated at that time like a colony of Ottawa with neither legislatures nor Aboriginal self-governments. Empowerment of the North became her mantra, a goal the Foundation has followed ever since. Kyra began by throwing the weight of The Gordon Foundation behind the creation of a new international organization, the Arctic Council, and when that audacious idea was actually realized in 1996, moved on to promote the protection of Canada’s fresh water, a priority that most Canadians still do not recognize as a need. The Gordon family is not lacking in boldness!

Many paths can be trodden to achieve desired public goals: politics, media, culture, academe, and corporate investment, to name just a few. The history of the Gordon family shows that they have tried them all. Yet one instrument was relatively new in Canada when Walter, Elizabeth and Duncan created a foundation in 1965. Fifty years later there are many foundations in Canada and the world, and some, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, are as important as small countries, but it was an innovative departure half a century ago. A foundation uses private capital to educate the public about needs, priorities, and definitions of the public interest. A strategic foundation tries to invest to change the fundamental context or the source of a problem rather than simply responding to symptoms. Duncan Gordon, himself a superior thinker in business strategy, understood this well, and characteristically, in making his large gift to the Foundation, he supported a general mission of improving the public good rather than his own prescription of what that good should be. Issues change and new problems emerge, said Duncan, and the future board and staff of the Foundation should
have the flexibility to respond as they thought best. Ever since, the Foundation has listened to the needs of communities, brought together bright people to think about solutions, given them scope and time to implement their ideas, and has always opted for pushing the envelope rather than following standard operating procedures. As these portraits demonstrate, adherence to conventional wisdom has never been a sin of the Gordon family.

Another characteristic that unites the disparate members of the Gordon family is modesty. Today, politicians arrive at events with huge retinues of assistants carrying their own podiums, desperately seeking attention. When I used to meet him at airports, Walter Gordon would arrive alone carrying one bag. All of the Gordons want to achieve great things but only so long as they can stay in the background. Elizabeth Gordon supported artists and museums without drawing attention to her philanthropy, and Jane followed the example of her mother by creating an anonymous foundation to do good works. The Gordons are as different as it is possible to be from our age of the “selfie.”

This ingrained modesty has had an important impact on The Gordon Foundation. The second generation of founders created a new era for the Foundation, one in which the family voluntarily gave up control of the Foundation they had created in favour of an independent board. The Gordon Foundation has evolved from being a family foundation to being a professionally-run family foundation to its present status as a legally independent foundation with the family as a minority on the board. The Gordon family now leads by its values, legacy, and example, not by its control of the Foundation’s endowment.

A strong sense of purpose has always been the driving force of the Gordon family. The staff of The Gordon Foundation is motivated to serve and its board is motivated to volunteer their time because of this legacy. The Gordon family believes in using private capital to achieve a public good. They know too that it is not enough to hope: one must also do, so they have built a learning, caring, listening and effective organization. They have done something else too: Elizabeth’s interest in artists, John’s interests in drop-outs,
Jane’s interests in northerners, especially Aboriginal northerners, and Kyra’s support of beleaguered environmentalists who worry about the future of our water, demonstrate that the Gordons believe in including the excluded. That value continues to animate the Foundation. The philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man. In the case of The Gordon Foundation, it is the lengthened shadow of one family.

_Thomas S. Axworthy was President and CEO of The Gordon Foundation from 2009 to 2015._
About the Author

Charlie Foran is the author of 11 books, including Mordecai, a biography of Mordecai Richler. He is a Senior Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto, and a member of the Order of Canada. Charlie Foran is also CEO of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship.
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