



# In Memoriam

**John Peters Humphrey**  
(1905-1995)

John Peters Humphrey was born in Hampton, New Brunswick. His childhood was marked by tragedy and subsequent tribulation. His father died before he was a year old and his mother, like her husband, of cancer when he was eleven. After an accident at age six, his left arm was amputated at the shoulder. After his mother's death, the executors of his father's estate sent him to a boarding school run on the British model. This was not a happy experience as many of the masters were martinets and his fellow pupils acted with predictable cruelty to the one-armed orphan. So desperate was Humphrey to leave this environment that he privately studied an alternative curriculum so he could gain acceptance to Mount Allison Academy two years before normal matriculation. The two years that he spent in Sackville were not an academic success, but he was not ready to enter business as his guardian wished. He finally got approval to enter the Commerce programme at McGill, which began an association with the institution which lasted over seventy years.

The Commerce curriculum and several summer jobs convinced Humphrey, by the time he got his degree in 1925, that a business career was not for him and he decided to become a lawyer. Since a B.A. was a prerequisite for the McGill faculty, he applied to and was accepted by Osgood Hall. He went to Toronto, found an apartment and obtained a job articling in a Bay Street firm. Within a week, however, he decided that he could not live in Toronto and returned to Montreal. His Economics professor, Stephen Leacock, told him how he could obtain the B.A. while taking some courses towards his law degree. Over the next four years he was awarded his B.A. (1927) and his B.C.L. (1929). Some years later he took a doctorate (1945), giving him the possibly unique distinction of graduating from four different faculties.

After six years working in a Montreal law firm, again an experience that he did not enjoy, Humphrey was delighted when his old professor, Percy Corbett, asked him to join the Faculty of Law. The agreement was that Humphrey would teach Roman Law but take over the international law course, his real interest, when Corbett retired in a few years. Humphrey found his true vocation in teaching and, apart from a twenty-year hiatus when he worked for the United Nations Secretariat from 1946-1966, he was on the Faculty until 1993-94. His U.N. activities, particularly in the field of human rights, have been well documented both in his own writings, the published editions of his diaries, and the articles based on his papers which have appeared in *Fontanus*. The leadership role that he took in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and his lifelong commitment to the promotion of these rights are now receiving the recognition that they deserve.

In March, 1995, the Faculty of Law sponsored a public lecture and private party to mark Humphrey's retirement from teaching nine months previously. He was, however, still active in the advocacy of individual causes, in particular the questions of compensation for the Canadian Hong Kong veterans and the Korean comfort women. The evening gave him a great deal of pleasure, but the next day he went to hospital with cardiac problems. Within a week he died of pneumonia, not knowing that the Japanese would shortly issue a formal apology for its wartime treatment of Korean women. He left the bulk of his large estate to the promotion of scholarship in the field of human rights at major Canadian law schools, but made a significant contribution to the new McGill law library. His large collection of books and manuscripts were also left to McGill and these will prove an important resource for future scholars. He was a great friend to the libraries and, in recognition of this, his family asked that donations in lieu of flowers be given to *Fontanus*.