

A Remembrance of Red Wilson

by Joe Martin, Founding President of the CBHA



Photo from [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#).

I first met Lynton "Red" Wilson in 1969 at the Federal Tory Thinkers Conference in Niagara Falls. My family had moved to Toronto from Winnipeg the year before after I co-managed (with a future Mayor of Winnipeg) Duff Roblin's 1968 attempt to get elected to the House of Commons. With a blot on my CV like that I thought I better get out of town. It was wonderful

to be in beautiful places like Niagara Falls and meet people like Red Wilson. Red was Ontario (Port Colborne) born and bred. He had attended McMaster for an undergraduate degree and a Master's, and gone on to Cornell to become a professor, but he quit because of student activism (recall this was the era of Kent State). He joined the Foreign Service and worked in exotic places like Vienna and Tokyo, where he met his wife Brenda. He left the public service to go to work for Jake Moore, the first non-Labatt CEO of Labatt's, as an economist, and in the following years moved back and forth between government and business posts, including the federal Ministry of State for Science & Technology, MacMillan Bloedel, Redpath Industries (where he was President and CEO), Deputy Minister of Tourism Ontario, and CEO of BCE. Along the way he served on many high profile corporate Boards both Canadian and International, such as Scotia Bank, Mercedes Benz, and CAE.

After first meeting him in 1969 we got to know each other in the relatively close-knit Canadian business/government community over the next 25 years. In 1990 I started to see him more often after I joined the Toronto Club where he was already a Member. But it was in the mid to late 90s that History with a capital H drew us closer together. One day I read in *The Globe and Mail* that Red had decided to gift \$500,000 to a new organization whose purpose was to increase citizens' knowledge of Canadian History. This organization, formed with Charles Bronfman, came to be known as Historica Canada.

Shortly before Red's Historica announcement I had joined the founding Board of Canada's History Society, an organization dedicated to popularizing Canadian History. This was at a time (1995) when I had resigned as a Partner from Deloitte Consulting and was looking forward to becoming more involved in history. Shortly afterwards I became involved in a series of historical developments that involved Red. After leaving Deloitte I joined the Faculty of the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto and also served on a variety of corporate boards. One of the boards I was Chair of was called ANGOSS, a new generation of software solutions. I was in that position when the dot.com crash occurred which really upset me.

I made an appointment to see the Dean of the Rotman School, Roger Martin (no relation) and said I thought we needed a Business History program at Rotman, just like the Harvard Business School had had since 1928. Students needed to know more than finance, marketing and accounting. They had to understand *context*, which they could only achieve by studying history. The Dean quickly agreed with me and informed me that all I had to do was raise \$3 million. The first person I went to was Red and he spoke to his friend Dick Currie and they both committed to a \$1 million each. That just left a million to go. We agreed NOT to accept any donation less than \$250,000, which we quickly raised from Hal Jackman, Tony Fell and Jim Fleck. Because Jim was on Faculty we received an additional \$250,000 matching grant from the University. The icing on the cake came with a US\$55,000 donation from the Canadian Dean of the Harvard Business School John McArthur. And so the Wilson/Currie was launched and is thriving under Professor Dimitry Anastakis.

As I was now working in the field of business history I began attending conferences in both the United States and Europe and was struck when I would be sitting beside a faculty member from a relatively small university and I asked what he taught. He quickly informed me that he had a full load with Business History. So I thought maybe we needed in Canada a business history association to spread the word on our business history.

In the latter part of the 1st decade of this century I invested a huge amount of time working with a small group of senior business leaders including Red (the others were Purdy Crawford, Bill Dimma, Hal Jackman, and David Maclean) on behalf of Junior Achievement (JA) and we prepared a long list of the most important events in Canadian business history. Once the list was prepared I facilitated discussion which led to a list of the 10 most important events as well as the next 10. These 20 events were incorporated into a 'mural' which is on display at the Canadian Business Hall of Fame in Brookfield Place and also led to an article which was published in Canadian History.

This activity led JA to ask me to Chair a new board of governors to create a National Business Archive. This was our original mandate, but the mandate was expanded to determine the feasibility of creating a National Business Centre, similar to the one in Stockholm. The board consisted of Red Wilson, Charlie Baillie, John Cleghorn, Jack Cockwell, Dick Currie, Hal Jackman, Joe Rotman, as well as Jos Winterman, longtime Chair of the Junior Achievement Foundation. Tom Jenkins, Chairman and Chief Strategy Officer of Open Text, committed his support as well. While we had funds and a team, in the end the project came to nought, but Red continued to be a stalwart supporter of history, and of business history in particular.

WNED, the PBS affiliate, asked me to assist them in raising money for a TV production about the War of 1812, and with Red's lead gift we raised one third of the cost of the production. And at Rotman, we finally recruited our first Wilson/Currie Chair of Canadian Business History History, Chris Kobrak, an American from Paris. Chris was a real enthusiast and felt strongly that Canada needed a business history association. He convinced a group of us and the Canadian Business History Association started up in in 2015.

We were doing well as an Association when I received a call at our cottage in the summer of 2021. It was Red telling me he was donating \$1 million to the CBHA. I spluttered and stammered a thank you and he said 'I am not finished'. He went on: if you can raise an additional million dollars I will match that as well. Which we gratefully did.

We wanted to honour him the following Spring at a function at the York Club. Red was tied up, maybe at a Mercedes Board meeting in Stuttgart, so he sent Pete Sharpe, CEO of the Wilson Foundation. In response to our honouring Red, he gave us an additional \$500,000 to continue on our work.

What a guy. Before he became sick we would have the occasional lunch or dinner in Oakville or Toronto. After he became sick I would visit him at home in Oakville. He had lost weight but his mind was as sharp as ever and we solved many of the world's problems although the world didn't listen to us. The world and more specifically the GTA lost a great Canadian with Red's passing. His like will never be seen again.