



# SHE HELPED BRING THE CANADIAN CONSTITUTION HOME

By Lisa Crandall

There is a plaque honouring Jean Casselman Wadds (1920-2011) in Prescott's Centennial Park, but her story is far too interesting to be expressed so simply. She was an accomplished woman who led by example and that often meant being the first woman to step forward.

Casselman Wadds, a long-time resident of Prescott, Ontario is credited with being instrumental in getting the Canadian Constitution patriated to Canada. She was Canada's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1983. In his memoirs, Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau gave credit where credit was due, writing "It was thanks to three women that we were eventually able to reform our Constitution. The Queen, who was favourable, Margaret Thatcher, who undertook to do everything that our Parliament asked of her, and Jean Wadds,

who represented the interests of Canada so well in London."

Casselman Wadds grew up with a ring side seat in politics. Born on September 16 1920, in Newton Robinson. (at that time a rural hamlet north of Toronto) She was the daughter of a well-respected local politician, Earl Rowe, who eventually became the 20th Lt. Governor of Ontario (1963-1968).

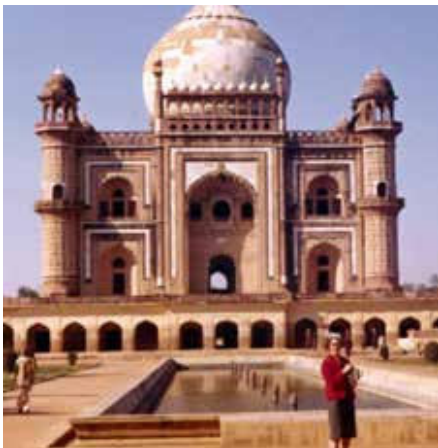
She graduated from the University of Toronto with a BA in 1940, then went on to Business College. At the age of 26 she married another long-time politician, A.C. (Aza Clair) Casselman, known as Cass, who represented Grenville-Dundas for 33 years, from 1925 until 1958. He was a long-time family friend and they had met when she was still a child. They had two children together, a girl (Nancy Jean) and a boy (William Clair). He also had two children from

a previous marriage.

When Cass died unexpectedly in 1958, shortly after being re-elected, Jean stepped up to replace him, winning the seat in a bi-election. This made her only the 10th woman in Canada to sit as a member of the House of Commons. She held that seat in subsequent elections in 1961, 1962 and 1965.

While serving in government, Casselman Wadds travelled to China as part of the first commercial tour in 1959. This was at a time when the country was still very closed to foreign visitors. In 1961 she was in Moscow the day Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, returned to earth (April 12). She was among the throngs of people in Red Square celebrating this historic event. She was also in Berlin the day before the Berlin Wall went up (August 13, 1961).

During her years in government, Casselman



**Jean Casselman Wadds at the Taj Mahal, India. Probably taken 1965. Photo supplied by Nancy Casselman.**



**Doing the tourist thing in India, Jean Casselman Wadds (on the left), Margaret Aitken (on the right) and Robert Wadds (center front), probably taken 1965. Photo supplied by Nancy Casselman.**



**Close up of the plaque honoring Jean Casselman Wadds in Prescott's Centennial Park. Photo by Robert Erickson**

Wadds was the first woman to represent Canada at the United Nations (1961). She was also the first woman to serve as a Parliamentary Secretary (for the Ministry of Health and Welfare) in 1962 and 1963.

In the 1960's she re-married to Toronto stockbroker Robert Wadds, taking the name Casselman Wadds. The marriage ended in divorce after 10 years, but she kept the name.

Although she lost her seat in government during the 1968 election, she remained active in government, acting as the National Secretary to the Progressive Conservative party from 1971 until 1975. She then moved on to the Ontario Municipal Board where she remained until 1979, when Prime Minister Joe Clark offered her the post of Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in London. Her continuing appointment was approved by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau when he returned to power in 1980. As the Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Casselman Wadds was not only the first woman to fill the role, but also the first Canadian to do so.

At the conclusion of her time in London, Casselman Wadds returned to Canada and

Prescott where she became one of the 13 commissioners on The Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, looking into the economic future of Canada. The final report of this group, known as the MacDonald Commission, recommended free trade with the United States in 1984.

Casselman Wadds received the Order of Canada in 1982. Shortly before that, in 1981, she had been awarded the Freedom of the City in London (England) in recognition of her work as Canada's High Commissioner. Over the years she also received honorary degrees from four Canadian universities; the University of Toronto, Dalhousie, Acadia and St. Thomas University in Fredericton.

After retiring from government life, Casselman Wadds settled into life at her long-time home in Prescott, a historic residence overlooking the St. Lawrence River. Besides keeping busy with her garden and swimming (her favorite activities), she sat on several high profile corporate boards including; The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Bell Canada, Canadian Pacific, Air Canada and Royal Trust, as well as serving on the

boards of local organizations, such as the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival. Her annual parties for the cast and crew of the Festival are well remembered, and were enjoyed by all who attended. Her daughter Nancy, who inherited the family home, has continued that tradition and is already contemplating the 2018 event.

Casselman Wadds' love of travel was an important part of her retirement years. She owned a property in France, a small former priory, where her son Clair had established his home. She spent six weeks there with him each Spring and Fall. He inherited this property from her and continues to reside there. In addition to her visits to France, she and her daughter Nancy took six weeks each year to spend time travelling together. Nancy recalls fondly, trips to South Africa, Russia, China and Brazil. Her mother was particularly fond of Russia.

She died peacefully at home in her bedroom overlooking the St. Lawrence River. She was 91 and had lived a long and successful life, having contributed greatly to her country, her community and her family. **LH**