

—Roy Leitch, Spryfield journalist and teacher

His home on lands near Colpitt Lake

1939 - 1957



## **From Rhodes Scholar to hermit, Roy Leitch was a radical thinker.**

**By Iris Shea**

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A query several years ago from Major Michael Patton, a researcher in England, prompted this article on Roy Leitch. Many will remember, as I do, Mr. Leitch going door to door late at night on his bicycle selling his self-published newspaper, "STORM". From 1939 until just before his death in 1957, Mr. Leitch and his four cats lived in a cabin in the woods off Colpitt Lake Road in Spryfield.

From his remote cabin in the woods, Mr. Leitch produced multiple copies of his typewritten newspaper on a hand-printing press. The object of the paper, according to Leitch, was to try and persuade people to think for themselves. Known by many as "Mr. Storm", he was reporter, editor and publisher. In 1941, he charged three cents a copy, and by 1947 the price was five cents. There were always two or three pages of small ads, from large businesses like Zellers of Nova Scotia, and from small local businesses like Ken's Hilltop Groceries of Jollimore Village. The front page, usually pink or yellow, sometimes contained a drawing done by a local school boy.

Residents in the area accused Mr. Leitch of practicing Communism, of being "a dangerous man" and "an insane man". Leitch reported these accusations in his own newspaper. The only accusation he denied is that of practicing Communism, saying he was even more radical than the Communists, but that he believed in "Freedom and Democracy". Although his controversial writings offended many, others applauded him for his outspoken views on clergy, politicians and lawyers. He opposed all governments and formed the Christian Socialist Party (he was its only member).

Mr. Leitch was not always so down on the "Establishment". In a 1941 issue of his newspaper, referring to himself as "Storm" and writing in the third person, he asked "Is Mr. Storm Crazy"? He answered his own question, pleading guilty to the charge of insanity. He wrote: "He was insane when he served his country at his own expense in the first Great War. He was loony when he expected politicians to give him back his job after returning from the Front. He was suffering from mental aberration when he thought so-called Christians would applaud his self-sacrifice and give him at least a 'thank you' for it." (Mr. Leitch fought for his "King and Country" in World War I, serving in the Serbian Army when Canada and Great Britain turned him down for health reasons).

Roy Leitch was born in Charlottetown, P.E.I., in 1885. He excelled in academics and athletics at Prince of Wales College and at Dalhousie University, playing hockey and football on several championship teams. He received his Arts degree from Dalhousie in 1908 and attended Oxford University that year as a Rhodes Scholar, concentrating on English and Economics. In the Daily Echo, front page, March 23, 1908, was this headline "Another Dalhousian for Rhodes Scholar". The article went on to describe Leitch's academic excellence at Dalhousie University... "In second year he ranked fourth, leading in English, won second class in Latin, and in French won High First. In his third year he led his class, winning High First in English, first in Latin and History, and 2<sup>nd</sup> class in Greek. Thus in two years he has won general distinction. In his fourth year he led his class in English, Education, Philosophy and Political Economy; second in Anglo Saxon History and Latin. Thus far he won six in points over great distinction and is among the class leaders in all individual subjects."



## Roy Leitch

# *Publisher of Spryfield newspaper was known by many names*

By BLAIR MITCHELL

A crank. Eccentric. Tramp. Rabble Rouser. Rhodes scholar. Freedom fighter. Patriot. All of these were used to

describe a man named Roy Leitch, one of Spryfield's notable, if obscure, historical characters.

For 17 years, from 1939 until his

death in 1957, he published the weekly, type-written, mimeographed journal "Storm" from his shack on Colpitts Road. For that he became better known to many Spryfield residents as Mister Storm.

It was not a gossip column nor a neighbourly newsletter. Not to aggrandize the paper, which Leitch claimed to spend 95 hours a week preparing, it might be called a radical news-weekly today. While it was filled with Leitch's individual brand of political philosophy, he made an effort to keep the paper timely, including regular comments on the latest bit of news.

In the first issue, August 7, 1939 Leitch defined his publication, "Storm". "This paper is highly controversial and will always contain one article to offend somebody."

Offend it did. One angry neighbour, taking revenge for a particular column, put a shotgun blast through Leitch's front door, killing one of the household's many cats and narrowly missing the publisher himself.

For his view on religion, government

and the economy, Leitch earned the label "crank", and from a very small minority, "Patriot". For, while he lost no opportunity to blast the MacKenzie King government in particular, and capitalism in general, he also vehemently supported the war against Hitler.

From his appearance no one could call him anything but a tramp. Dressed in an old overcoat, wearing a formless cap, he became a familiar Spryfield figure as he peddled his papers.

But he was a Rhodes scholar too. At Oxford where he studied towards a master's degree in English he represented his home province of P.E.I. He had graduated from Dalhousie in 1908 with a Bachelor's degree.

The title "patriot" referred to Leitch's efforts in the First War as well. Determined to fight for the empire, and refused service for health reasons in the British or Canadian services forces, he enlisted in the Serbian Army as a "gentleman volunteer."

There is no record of his wartime services. But it is known that he

reached a top rank and rumours tell of his part in rescuing the Serbian king from invading German troops.

Returning to Canada with the conclusion of the war, embittered by the failure of the Serbian, Dominion or British governments to pension him for wartime services, Leitch wandered North America for years. He taught history in Tennessee, mined and taught in Alberta, returning to Halifax in 1929. For a time he marked English composition papers at Dalhousie University.

In 1937 he left to fight the fascists in the Spanish civil war. For this one letter to the editor called him "freedom fighter."

With his health gone Leitch returned to Halifax early in 1939 to establish "Storm". It was a paper that was perhaps a little advanced for its time. "Storm" attacked racism when prejudice was established practice. It advocated equal rights for women, years before it became fashionable. It called for Chamberlain's resignation and the Churchill's Prime Ministership before the outbreak of the Second World War, and well before the established press. "Every individual, regardless of

race, sex or creed, should receive the employment for which he or she is best fitted," said an early "Storm" editorial.

In the late 1940's, when Soviet-Chinese co-operation was at its height, "Storm" noted the difference between the two, calling the Soviets "capitalists in another form" and claiming the Chinese communists to be the closest ideology to that of his own Christian Socialist Party.

Mr. Leitch earned the title of eccentric too. While continually attacking organized religion as hypocrisy and sham, he nevertheless claimed a personal audience with the pope as a qualification for these pronouncements.

A contemporary called Leitch a "mild, unmannered but friendly man." A biography written of him as a student in a 1908 "Dalhousie Gazette" described him as one always able to contribute largely to the fun."

Leitch wrote perhaps his own best obituary in a 1947 article asking "Is Mr. Storm Crazy?" He replied, paraphrasing Mark Twain, "Perhaps I am but maybe there should be more idiots in God's world."

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ROY LEITCH, (Arts, '08.)  
Rhodes Scholar for Prince Edward Island, 1908.