

Lukin Johnston of *The Province*

Rural rambles and a conversation with Hitler

by Frances Welwood

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Notes

1. *Lukin Johnston, In England To-day* (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent 1931), 123.
2. *Lukin Johnston, Down English Lanes* (London: Heath Cranton Ltd. 1933), 128.
3. *ibid.*, 170.

In the very early hours of November 18, 1933 a distinguished middle-aged gentleman mysteriously disappeared from the deck of a Hook of Holland ferry crossing en route to Harwich, England. The subsequent and largely accepted supposition was that the man had accidentally fallen from the ship into the inky dark waters of the North Sea. It was in the course of his profession as journalist and newspaper correspondent that Lukin Johnston was making the crossing on that murky mid-November night in 1933. And therein lies the astounding story of why Mr. Lukin Johnston was aboard the ferryboat *Prague*.

Edwyn Harry Lukin Johnston, Canadian citizen, second son of a Church of England clergyman, was born in Surbiton, Surrey in 1887. Rector Reverend Robert E. Johnston's family lived in the near-coastal communities at the outlet of the Thames. Edwyn's mother, Ellen Jane Lukin Johnston, was the daughter of a London Inner Court barrister and the niece of the adventure-seeking Major General Sir Henry Timson Lukin. Uncle Sir Henry had military aspirations from a very young age. In 1879 at age 19, after greatly disappointing his family by failing entrance examinations to Sandhurst Military College, Henry set off alone to join in the Anglo-Zulu conflict in South Africa. A distinguished and colourful military career in the South Africa Wars and WW1 followed his participation in this Colonial war. The Major-General (KCB, CMG, DSO) was of the stiff, polished, humourless order so often characterized by the British Colonial Army of the late Victorian period. Upon Major General Lukin's death in 1925, his brother-in-law, the Rector Reverend Johnston, authored a biography *Ulundi to Delville Wood* recounting Sir Henry's career from his adopted home in South Africa to the horrors of the battlefields of World War One.

The good Rector's son, Edwyn H. Lukin Johnston, received a classical education as a boarding student and chorister at the historic and prestigious King's School, Canterbury. With a heritage typified by his famous uncle and a host of early Lukin naval and military forebearers, along with the 'second son's' penchant for leaving Britain in search of adventure and opportunity and his mother's death in 1903, it was not a surprise when

young Edwyn Lukin Johnston announced he would seek his future in Canada. In November 1905, as his uncle Henry had done, Lukin (as he came to be known) set off alone aboard the CPR vessel *Lake Manitoba* from Liverpool bound for Montreal. There were "ten sovereigns in his belt". The money, he reflected in 1931, ". . . was to be the basis of the fortune which has not yet materialized."¹ Lukin drifted about the farming area near the village of Burford, Ontario learning ". . . to handle a fork-load of manure and to navigate a one horse plough."² He then settled briefly (including the lengthy, cruel winter of 1906) in the Qu'Appelle Valley of Saskatchewan before it was 'disturbed' by the railroad. Here he enjoyed the sole company and ". . . the tutelage of [a] hard-hearted son of the soil . . . who attempted to make me into an efficient hired man."³ Lukin referred to this experience as his time as a bohunk or common tramp. The young Canterbury chorister's Canadian resume also included a stint 'singing illustrated songs' accompanying movie pictures.

Wherever and whenever he roamed, Lukin found work and became a keen observer of the land and the people. Moving westward, the friendly young Brit discovered the rugged Kootenay area of British Columbia, but left few marks or memories of his encounters there. Martin Burrell of Grand Forks and Member of Parliament for Yale-Cariboo (1908-1917) knew Lukin as a companionable, alert lad, full of life and intelligence. It is doubtful Lukin Johnston fell into the privileged or posh Remittance Man category of other Kootenay or Western Canada newcomers – although it is tempting to picture a well-spoken, good-looking newcomer walking into dusty, rural newspaper or political officials' quarters in search of news and conversation.

In March 1909, with no hitherto noted experience, Lukin was hired as a reporter for the *Vancouver Province* where he earned the nickname Ginger. He staked his entire worldly wealth of \$20 on his first assignment. In order to secure an interview with a North Vancouver real estate developer Lukin put a \$20 down-payment on a speculative lot. He then filed his first story on the bustling real estate market across Burrard Inlet from the Vancouver Province building. For the next several years Lukin and future newspaper reporters Hugh

Savage and Kenneth Meyers shared digs in a Barclay St. apartment. They were learning the news trade, honing their writing and reporting skills and establishing career-building contacts. In August 1911, moving about as far west as geographically possible, Lukin accepted a promotion as managing editor of the weekly *Cowichan Leader* at Duncan on Vancouver Island. In less than three years under Johnston's direction the *Leader* expanded from four to ten pages. A professional and thoughtful editorial page became a regular feature. Of interest to local readers was an entry in the 'Local and Personal' column of April 25, 1912 announcing the wedding on August 18th, of their esteemed young editor Lukin Johnston and Miss Bertha Court recently of Canterbury, Kent. The young couple was wed at St. Mary's Church, at Somenos two miles north of Duncan, where they made their first home. Lukin's elder brother Roy served as best man. Son Derek Robert Lukin Johnston was born in Duncan February 8, 1913.

Hugh Savage, chum and fellow reporter working at the *Vancouver Province*, received a telegram from Lukin in January 1914 inviting him to take over the helm of the *Cowichan Leader*. Lukin would be moving onward and upward to take on responsibilities as city editor of the *Victoria Colonist*. At the *Colonist* Lukin polished his political reporting technique and gained the respect of politicians and journalists in an ever-widening circle of national and international events and personalities. However, as was the way with many new and now-Canadian young men of the time, a call to arms from the British homeland was not to be ignored. From his home, the "Aberdeen" on McLure St. in Victoria, Lukin enlisted in the 88th Battalion (Victoria Fusiliers), Canadian Expeditionary Force, in November 1915. He later acknowledged ". . . our goods and chattels were sold up . . . so I could join the C.E.F."⁴

Lieutenant Johnston and the 88th Battalion were shipped overseas May 1916, where the 1150 boys from Victoria were promptly absorbed into the 30th Reserve Battalion. Johnston's War record was exemplary. He fought at Vimy in April 1917, Passchendaele in November 1917, Amien in August 1918 and was mentioned in dispatches January 1, 1919. The memories of these horrific experiences were to remain with him the rest of his days. They provided a

personal, wary backdrop to his journalistic and international career. While on leave in England Lukin enthusiastically re-connected with the family, the homeland and the countryside from which he had detached himself ten years earlier. Lukin slowly recognized in himself a deep affection and loyalty to both England and Canada. He saw England with all its history, foibles and self-assured manners through the eyes and ears of an adventuresome, intelligent young Canadian. There was much honour and humour to celebrate in both dominions and he was the privileged possessor of this dual good fortune. It was also his good fortune to have survived the European conflict physically intact and to be honourably discharged with the rank of Major. Major Johnston marked every November 11th Remembrance Day (Armistice Day or Veterans Day) thereafter with the deepest regard for his comrades. Whether at Cenotaphs on Whitehall, Vancouver's Victory Square, Ottawa's Parliament Hill, Arlington Memorial Washington DC, the Arc de Triomphe or on a hiking trail deep in a forest of Vancouver Island, Lukin paused to reflect on his fallen comrades and the people of the war-ravaged countries of Europe.

In 1919 his newspaper career took on new meaning and a new location. Johnston settled in at the 'telegraph' desk (news wire service) at the *Vancouver Province*. With his wife Bertha he enjoyed participating in amateur theatricals, where his distinguished presence easily adapted to the stage. In 1921 he became the first President of the B.C. Institute of Journalists and later President of the local St. George Society (which represented 'all things British'.) Reporting assignments that capitalized on Johnston's European experience and knowledge as well as his clear, accurate writing style came his way.

He covered the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference of November 1921–February 1922 and when in July 1923 American President Warren Harding paid his first visit to the northern American territory of Alaska, Johnston knew he and the *Province* must accompany the Presidential entourage on this historic event. Johnston's fellow American news correspondents 'smuggled' the extraneous Canadian on board the Presidential vessel at Portland Oregon. Although his application to accompany the President had been denied,

4. Johnston. *In England Today*, 134.

once on board Harding himself genially agreed Johnston should be made welcome. Lukin Johnston had an easy charm and a way of wrangling invitations and interviews. On the return voyage from Alaska, Johnston jumped ship at Campbell River, motored to Nanaimo and ferried to Vancouver, allowing *Province* readers to view reports and photos of Harding's northern sojourn prior to the President's triumphal arrival in Vancouver on July 26, 1923. Vancouverites were so overwhelmed with Harding's visit that 50,000 came out to hear his rather poor oratory at Stanley Park. Within the week Harding died of (possibly or possibly not) food poisoning in a San Francisco Hotel.

During the post WW1 decade Lukin Johnston matured as a journalist and participant in the intrigues of global politics and international affairs. He countered this worldly sophistication with an increasing delight in discovering the vast interior waterways, mountain trails and rudimentary roads of his adopted province. He was overwhelmingly attracted by the call and the challenge of the semi-wild and would set out whenever and wherever his career permitted. Johnston did

not wander, musket over his shoulder into the timbered mountains or tackle the jagged waterways by solo canoe, but rather travelled by foot, auto or whatever vehicle appeared en route. Johnston's seemingly aimless rambles took him, in the summers of the mid-1920s into the Chilcotin, Cariboo, Omenica and the Peace and Nechako Rivers areas, and to the Gulf Islands and BC's coastal inlets. His largely pleasant encounters with local citizens and his vivid descriptions were made available to all in *Beyond the Rockies: 3000 Miles by trail and canoe through little known British Columbia* published in 1929.

In February 1925, the management of *The Province* gave Lukin a new challenge.

He was appointed the first editor of the paper's new populist family-oriented weekly Magazine Section. The position required an editor with considerable editorial ability and a wide knowledge of travel, local stories, adventure, politics, fiction and even children's and women's interests. The Magazine reflected Johnston's belief that newspapers should not only relay the news and editorialize, but should also offer opportunities for Canadian writers of fiction, local stories and entertainment for

a wide readership. Each eye-catching cover page of the Section was boldly illustrated with photos or drawings announcing articles featured in the issue.

The roster of writers featured in the *Province Magazine* was a preview as well as a summary of the most accomplished and up-and-coming Canadian writers and journalists of the 1930s. Bruce Hutchison, a personal friend and one of Canada's most respected

Rt. Rev. W.R. Adams, Anglican Bishop of the Cariboo and Lukin Johnston pause in their dusty travels c. 1927. Taken from Johnston's *Beyond the Rockies: Three thousand miles by trail and canoe through little known British Columbia*, published 1929.



IMAGE FROM BEYOND THE ROCKIES BY E.H. LUKIN JOHNSTON

and outspoken political commentators into the 1980s, was a frequent contributor. Lukin would have enjoyed immensely his friend's classic non-fiction works *The Fraser* (1950) and *The Unknown Country* (1943). Don Mundy, explorer-mountaineer brought stories of conquests of majestic Coast Range mountains to Vancouver's arm-chair explorers. B.A. McKelvie would enjoy a lengthy writing career at the *Province*, while George Godwin, who contributed articles on foreign affairs and politics authored a remarkable array of books well into the 1950s. Youthful Frederick Soward of UBC's History Department, a Canadian pioneer in International Studies wrote with authority and style. Dorothy Livesay, namesake of the BC Annual Book Prize for Poetry, saw her first poem published in the *Province* over 70 years ago.

The Magazine quickly took on a familiar format: Front-page feature article, followed by "News Jottings from the BC Hinterland" contributed by stringers from all points in BC, short stories and tales of adventure, a biography

or two of historic British Columbians, book reviews by UBC English Dept. head G.G. Sedgewick, travel and cultural "Glimpses of Life in Britain and Distant Parts", women's issues and insights by Dorothy G. Bell and even works by established international writers. Stories by well-known mystery writer Mary Roberts Rinehart; inventor of *Oz*, L.G. Baum; creator of *Jeeves*, P.G. Wodehouse; and novelist Arnold Bennett made regular appearances. A retired Robert Gosnell, BC's first Provincial Archivist (1908-1910) contributed, while Vancouver's legendary Archivist, Major Matthews could always be counted on to contribute words and wisdom about Vancouver's recent but historic past.

Mrs. Ann Garland Foster, a Nelson and Vancouver-based freelance writer of travel, local history, native lore, biography and unimaginative tales for children, credited Lukin Johnston with her moderate measure of success in the world of journalism. He encouraged the widowed Mrs. Foster (the first biographer of 'native poetess' Pauline Johnson)



The Province January 31, 1926.

The Province Magazine Section celebrates its first year of publication January 31, 1926.

5. Correspondence 2009
Derek Johnston to author
July-Sept. 2009.

6. *Province* Nov. 18,
1933, 1.

in her modest literary endeavours and the Magazine published over 30 of her offerings during Johnston's years as editor. Mrs. Foster's husband, William Garland Foster who died in France in the final days of WW1, had been editor of the *Nelson Daily News* (1909-1914) and had served a stint at the *Victoria Colonist* prior to moving to Nelson. Garland Foster could well have been a personal newspapering acquaintance of Johnston's. It would not be uncommon for Johnston to lend a hand or a gentle assignment to a widow of the Great War.

Johnston's personal bias in favour of England, English ways and the charms of the English countryside was obvious in the content of the Magazine, but it was also a direction very popular with subscribers. The *Province* was on the right track with the weekly Magazine.

Along with his many private and public interests, Lukin Johnston enjoyed the limelight of public speaking. In February 1928 he spoke at a gathering of UBC students concerning the development and power of the modern newspaper. There is a 99% assurance that in this audience of eager students of foreign and international affairs sat 23 year old Robert (Count) Wendel Keyserlingk. In 1928 Keyserlingk was a student of writing and foreign affairs. He was a widely experienced, multi-lingual, young European with an incredibly varied background, education and work slate – from an aristocratic family in Lithuania, with schooling in Japan, to the fishing and logging villages of northern British Columbia. Keyserlingk and Lukin Johnston became genuine and respected friends. According to Lukin's son Derek,⁵ Keyserlingk was quite likely responsible for enabling Johnston to secure the most significant (and unfortunately the last) interview and story of his entire journalistic career. That interview culminated in the tragic incident in the English Channel in November 1933.

Lukin Johnston, with his broadening journalist panache, was destined for a world beyond the pleasant scope of the *Province* Magazine. In May 1928 he was appointed European representative of the Canadian Southam News agency (the *Province* was one of five associates) in London. As chief Canadian correspondent he established a working

agreement with the *Times* and found himself the recipient of invitations to many formal social functions – a *Times* party at Hever Castle, dinner at the Mayfair Hotel for Canadian Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, the Lord Mayor of London's banquet at the Guildhall and a disappointing fete, if there ever was one, The Derby. The Canadian journalist excelled at these social functions but realized they were only a backdrop to the darkening crises looming over continental Europe. 1930 was a banner year for meeting and mingling with the powers and personalities of these heady but troubled times. Johnston attended and dispatched informed, colourful accounts from the London Naval Conference, the Imperial Conference (pre-cursor of the British Empire and Commonwealth gatherings) and most notably the Lausanne Disarmament Conference of 1932 at which WW1 treaty reparations against Germany and its allies were suspended. In the House of Commons Johnston revelled in the oratorical skills of Lloyd George, Lord Simons and a youthful Winston Churchill as they debated Britain's Trades Dispute Act of 1931.

A contemporary Canadian journalist best summarized Johnston's impact on Canadian news services in the 1930s. "[H]e established himself as a brilliant and reliable interpreter for Canadian readers of British events and political developments. His cables from London to the *Vancouver Province* and Associated Southam Newspapers throughout Canada were the most eagerly read of any despatches from the Old Country."⁶

Remembering the good times experienced by his hardy travels through the interior of BC in the mid-1920s, Lukin Johnston of Fleet Street of the 1930s regularly loosened his collar, took up his walking stick, cleared his mind of worldly distresses and set out on rambles about the English countryside. This England, 'this green and pleasant land', was a source of great enjoyment and relaxation. Delightful, readable accounts of Johnston's wanderings were initially published in the *Province* and other Southam papers for the benefit of 'exiled' Brits. His time in Canada and abroad had taught Lukin that an Englishman's nostalgia for his homeland is unwavering. Johnston collected these essays into two charming, enjoyable and often humorous books: *In England Today* (1931)

and *Down English Lanes* (1933). His intent was simply stated. "Here then in these pages are some random impressions of England as it has appeared to a wanderer who left her shores as a lad and returned again when the 40th milestone [birthdate] was not long past."⁷

Although essentially a social person, with a genial interest in local residents encountered on the byways and in public inns, Lukin hiked alone. His wife, Bertha remained at their home in Epsom outside London, their son Derek had finished school in Tonbridge, Kent and was studying languages in Switzerland and the host of worldly personalities and correspondents with whom he worked remained behind their desks on Fleet St. or Whitehall. Johnston believed the lone traveller was more likely to strike up conversations in pubs, fields and country paths than was the companioned traveller. Also he was free to deviate from any route or schedule. Maybe he simply wanted to be away from the heavy concerns of the international workplace. No matter...wherever he tramped Lukin Johnston introduced himself as a Canadian. He likened the green hills of Wales to those of Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley and found similarities in the climates of Cornwall and the Gulf Islands. At every turn of the road he seemed to meet with a connection to Canada or Canadians and although 'at home' in the country of his birth Johnston admitted his homesickness for Canada. He had exchanged 'one good country for another' and had become an ambassador as well as a journalist. The quaintness of the English village, countryside, graveyard and copse would not survive for many decades. Englishmen can thank Lukin Johnston for capturing in prose the essence of a country and a people soon to be overcome by the catastrophic movements taking form in continental Europe.

Cruel economic conditions and suspicions of broken promises and treaties emanating from Central Europe in the mid-1930s prevented British diplomats and observers from appreciating the true situation in the Republic of Germany and its historical neighbours.

To add to the difficulty in providing accurate news coverage, Hermann Goering, prior to his election as President of the German Reichstag in 1932, had imposed a ban on all

foreign newspaper interviews with Fuehrer Adolf Hitler. Nonetheless, in 1931 Johnston had the good (?) fortune to meet Herr Putzi Hanfstaegl, head of the Foreign Press section of the Propaganda Ministry of the Weimar Republic. Hanfstaegl later noted rather blandly that he "... was struck by the fair and loyal character of the Canadian journalist."⁸

Against all odds, also in July 1931, Robert Keyserlingk, Johnston's friend and ally at United Press European headquarters in Zurich, had manipulated a personal interview in Munich with Hitler. Keyserlingk had presented himself as "Count" Keyserlingk, "... speaking for some foreign financial interests and that in view of the threatening [banking] crisis . . . , it was imperative that I [Keyserlingk] speak with Hitler."⁹ Following the resulting rather clandestine, late-night interview with Hitler (which was of little consequence on the international scene), Keyserlingk concluded, "To me it was memorable merely as an opportunity for some three quarters of an hour to study the man who will go down in history as its child, and as the sad expression of a human error."¹⁰

No doubt Lukin Johnston was aware of his friend's journalistic coup. Johnston now felt he also would try his hand at directly interviewing persons of influence. Hence, en route to the Lausanne Disarmament Conference of June-July 1932, Lukin consulted his friend, Keyserlingk. Keyserlingk (acting as interpreter) arranged a meeting in Berlin between the inquisitive Canadian correspondent and His Highness Victor Salvator Prince Isenburg, special representative of the Czech Skoda munition works. The resulting interview was a shocking lesson in cynicism and duplicity. Isenburg quite bluntly and haughtily advised the naïve Canadian to observe the high-level talks of disarmament as a 'pantomime'. "We [Skoda Munitions] are not interested today in disarmament but in armament . . ." ¹¹ He referred to "the horrors of peace" and its ensuing unemployment. The key to prosperity was to re-arm Germany. "... We supply both sides."¹² Johnston's report was published in the *Province* with little fanfare.

1933 was a desperately significant year in European history. In October the Fuehrer took Germany out of the Geneva Disarmament

7. Johnston. *In England Today*, vii.

8. *Province* Nov. 20, 1933, 1.

9. Robert Wendel Keyserlingk, *Unfinished History*. (London: Robert Hale Ltd. 1948) 213.

10. *ibid.*, 223.

11. *ibid.*, 230.

12. *ibid.*, 231.

13. *Province* Nov. 18, 1933, 1.

14. *ibid.* Nov. 17, 1933, 1.

talks. November 12th, Hitler's infinite authority was overwhelmingly confirmed by a national election and a plebiscite that endorsed his new 'peace policy'. Any meeting with foreign diplomats or journalists was rare and strictly stage-managed. Nonetheless journalists were eager to be in Hitler's company and the Canadian Lukin Johnston, now an experienced European correspondent, was granted a formal interview with the Chancellor. The nature of any back-room negotiations that facilitated this surprising and exclusive interview are not generally known. However, it is logical to conclude "Count" Keyserlingk, now living in Berlin as manager of United Press in Northern Europe, had a hand in the manoeuvre. Also Herr Hanfstaegl, of the Propaganda Ministry may have provided a good word on Johnston's behalf.

On November 15, 1933 it was to Lukin Johnston of Southam News Agency "... the first Canadian newspaperman to whom he [Hitler] had ever granted an interview, ... he

unequivocally declared that Germany is ready to consider any invitation to recommence negotiations for disarmament or the limitation of armaments so long as she [Germany] was invited on terms of absolute equality."¹³ Johnston asked Hitler if he considered that Germany should make the next move toward disarmament. Hitler responded with the rationale that "...the initiative should come from those states which have not disarmed. Germany after all can not disarm because she has disarmed already."¹⁴ Thus, in Hitler's mind, Germany assumed the role of non-aggressor.

Johnston's article, filed by telephone with Southam late on November 15th, also described Hitler's classic Nazi attire: black pants, light fawn military-style tunic, swastika armband, iron cross on his chest. Hitler displayed a friendly, jovial demeanour when he discussed the Canadians he had met across the battlefields of the Great War. All this was precisely reported in Johnston's press release. The *Province* banner headline of Friday Nov.

Johnston and Rev. John Antle on board M.V. John Antle before the 84 foot BC Columbia Coast Mission boat embarked for the West Coast from its berth on the Thames, England, 1933.

IMAGE PORT P1295 COURTESY OF CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES



17th, 1933 was an eye-catcher: "Germany Ready To Reduce Arms Claims Hitler. German Chancellor Makes Unequivocal Declaration to The Province Correspondent In Exclusive Interview." Indeed, the interview was the culmination of Lukin Johnston's outstanding international journalistic career.

Upon filing his story and chatting with his Southam joint London correspondent and colleague Arthur C. Cummings, Johnston boarded the train, then the ferry from the Hook of Holland to Harwich on England's east coast. He had now completed a three or four week intensive tour of Europe, investigating and reporting on the deepening complexities of European diplomacy and he was rather weary and eager to return to the seeming normalcy of life in Epsom Surrey. His second book of English countryside rambles *Down English Lanes*

had just come off the press and there would be reviews and interviews of a more pleasant nature.

Following dinner Lukin strolled the *Prague's* promenade deck. He paused to take in the cold damp air and relax in a deck chair. At 2:30 a.m. Saturday Nov. 18th, a seaman noted the well-dressed gentleman asleep on deck. When daylight came and the ferry docked at the English quay, Mr. Johnston was not to be found. Alarms were rung. Johnston's unused stateroom was searched. Johnston's disappearance was as first viewed as a 'mystery'. However within hours of his disappearance an acceptable scenario developed in which the seemingly-healthy 45 year old Johnston suffered heart failure or stroke. The gentleman had risen from

Germany Ready To Reduce Arms Claims Hitler

German Chancellor Makes Unequivocal Declaration to The Province Correspondent In Exclusive Interview—Recalls War Experiences With Canadians

By LUKIN JOHNSTON.
(Representative in London of The Vancouver Province and Associated Southam Newspapers. Copyright.)

BERLIN, Nov. 17.—Germany stands ready to consider favorably any invitation from the other great powers to recommendations for disarmament or limitation of armaments. She cares whether the negotiations take place within or without the work of the League of Nations. Her only condition is that they enter only on terms of absolute equality. She awaits the call or elsewhere. She believes the time has come when there is a general feeling that some movement should take the place of the Versailles.

Such were the unequivocal statements of your correspondent by Chancellor Hitler in his exclusive interview here. This is the first of Germany's future policy since Sunday's referendum constituted Hitler the absolute ruler of Germany. Incidentally, it was the first view he has ever granted to a Canadian newspaperman.

There was a complete absence of any news about our meeting. He received me in his office in the chancellery in a room of mahogany without pictures, without ornate furniture. As I entered he rose from a desk and turned toward me, clasping his hands together as the introduction was made and we



Lukin Johnston

MAJOR LUKIN JOHNSTON IS LOST AT SEA

Vanished From Steamer On His Return From Germany.

WAS LAST SEEN ASLEEP ON DECK

Province Staff Writer Had Just Had Interview With Hitler.

The Vancouver Province and Southam News headline Johnston's remarkable historic interview with Adolf Hitler, November 16, 1933.

November 18, 1933 The Province delivers the shocking news of Johnston's mysterious disappearance at sea, hours after his conversation with Hitler.

15. *ibid.* Nov. 18, 1933, 1.

16. *ibid.* Nov. 20, 1933.

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Vancouver Sun

Victoria Colonist

his deck chair, gone to the ship's railing and vanished from the deck into the black waters of the North Sea.

In a terrible irony the headline in Southam papers: "Major Lukin Johnston Lost At Sea" replaced the previous day's headlines linking Johnston with Chancellor Hitler. Reaction to Johnston's death was immediate, sincere and wide-spread. His close friends and fellow journalists in Canada and London mourned Johnston's demise with deep shock. All agreed he had been a brilliant, conscientious and honest reporter of world events. Charles Swayne, friend and editor of the *Victoria Colonist* affirmed, "... [Lukin's] devotion to his task, natural ability in the segregation of news values and keen study of all happenings both local and telegraphic. . . . made him a valuable asset."¹⁵

J. Butterworth a colleague and at times rival from the *Province* reflected, "It is a glorious thing to become a great journalist and it is a glorious thing for the boys on the *Province* to think that Lukin became a great world figure in journalism after serving his first years on this paper."¹⁶

Even Herr Hanfstaegl stated he was authorized to report that Chancellor Hitler was "deeply moved by the tragedy". Reviews of Johnston's latest book took on the tone of eulogy and tribute. A memorial service held November 28th at St. Bride's Church ("the Journalists' Church") just off Fleet St. in London was attended by a host of diplomatic, news service and political worthies. Chief amongst the mourners were: Johnston's wife Bertha, son Derek Lukin, Lady Lukin (widow of Sir Henry), step-aunt Mary Johnston and J.R. Johnston – not a large family, but the deceased was very widely respected by colleagues, readers and diplomats.

November 20th newspapers reported Derek Johnston had travelled to Harwich in connection with his father's disappearance. A.C. Cummings was conducting similar enquiries in Berlin. Yet no theories of foul play of a personal or diplomatic nature were publicly expressed. Was there ever any element of doubt that Johnston's disappearance was other than an accident? What motive could be conjured to explain the removal of a respected journalist from the European diplomatic

scene? Only six months prior to Johnston's disappearance a strikingly similar incident had occurred. Captain Cecil Brooks, of the P & O steamship line was returning from an important company mission on the continent. Brooks dined, strolled the deck and ... vanished before the ferry arrived at Harwich. An inquiry uncovered no evidence of foul play.

Was the similarity between the Johnston case and the Brook case merely coincidental? Had the Brooks case been thoroughly investigated? Could deeper inquiry into the two incidents have revealed unknown motives?

From a distance of 75 years one might take a more skeptical point of view. Did German authorities wish to draw attention to (or away from?) Johnston's interview with Hitler two days earlier? These ends could possibly be achieved by the startling demise of the journalist in question. Were Johnston's credibility as a reporter, his somewhat 'neutral' position as a Canadian correspondent and his direct reporting on Hitler's pronouncement on German disarmament advantageous to Hitler's position? And . . . do we know the full story of Johnston's interview with Hitler? Was Johnston's report of Nov. 17th simply the first installment of a more in-depth release? Did Johnston intend to reveal more or comment further from the security of his Fleet St. office?

It is tempting to construe a 'conspiracy theory', however these theories are easily dismissed. There would barely have been time for Hitler and company to review Johnston's report of the interview in the press, and then to formulate a plan to facilitate the disappearance of the reporter.

Undeniably, Edwyn Harry Lukin Johnston was one of the most respected but now generally unknown journalists to have called British Columbia home. Vancouver and BC are still the home of his son's family. Derek earnestly continued his father's tradition of service to the community and one's profession until he passed away December 2009 at the age of 96.●