

# Thomas Adams, 1871 - 1940



*by David Lewis Stein*

*David Lewis Stein is a TORONTO STAR urban affairs columnist.*

It may be some comfort to remember that Thomas Adams, the godfather of Canadian planning, was an international figure who suffered because of the public mood swings that still affect the planning profession today.

Adams was born in 1871 on a dairy farm just outside of Edinburgh, Scotland, and in his early twenties he even operated a farm himself. From these agrarian roots, he went on to become a founding member of the British Town Planning Institute, founder of the Town Planning Institute of Canada and a founding member of the American City Planning Institute, forerunner of the American Institute of Planners.

Adams accomplished this institutional hat-trick -- as well as becoming one of the most important early private practitioners--not so much because of the originality of his ideas but because he was an active, vigorous individual who was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time.

While a farmer on the outskirts of Edinburgh at the end of the last century, Adams became a local councillor. He later moved to London to pursue a career in journalism and got caught up in the excitement of the Garden City movement. He qualified as a surveyor and became the first person in England to make his living entirely from planning and designing garden suburbs--doing no less than seven of them. By 1910, Adams was so widely recognized in his new profession that he became the first president of the British Town Planning Institute.

He believed that Britain's Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909 would help to establish a planning process throughout the country. Following passage of the Act, he acted as adviser to councils but found there was no will in the formidable British bureaucracy to advance the cause of urban planning. However, it took three invitations before Adams agreed to come to Canada in 1914 (Charles Hodgetts, the medical officer of Canada's Commission of Conservation, who had been impressed by Adams at a conference, pressed Clifford Sifton to invite Adams to this country to work for the commission).

The commission was headed by Sifton, a Manitoba businessman and politician whose wide-open immigration policies had led to the populating of the Prairies. Sifton was trying to deal with the impact of close to one million immigrants--many non-British -- who had come to Canada between 1896 and 1914. By 1911, with half of Canada's population settled in urban centres, the commission was seeking ways to cope with a wildly speculative housing market and the lack of regulation for land development. Adams's contribution to the commission was to bring the Garden City ideas of environmental standards and England's ideas about local government control. He became an advocate for provincial municipal affairs departments and local planning

As a private practitioner, Adams undertook plans for a number of new communities, including Corner Brook in Newfoundland, Temiskaming in western Quebec and, most notably, the Richmond district of Halifax. Adams was given the job of replanning Richmond, which had been devastated by the explosion of a munitions ship in the Halifax harbour in 1917--one of the great disasters of the First World War. Because of the emergency situation and war pressures, Adams was able to acquire extraordinary powers for a bureaucrat. Overruling local interests, he drew up a plan for Richmond that respected the district's hilly nature and put in diagonals to break up the street's grid pattern--a Canadian tradition that Adams particularly disliked.

After 1918, there was a demand for low-cost housing and Ottawa made twenty-six million dollars available for loans. Adams was appointed advisor to the Cabinet committee charged with disbursing the money

Philosophically, Adams was a late-Victorian liberal who believed in a sturdy, property-owning yeomanry rather than placing people in "socialistic," government-owned housing.

He designed Lindenlea in Ottawa, hoping it would become a model for urban planning and housing design throughout the country. It was to have one hundred and sixty-eight small, reasonably priced houses, each with a garden. The houses were to relate to each other, and the community was to share a parking garage, tennis courts, playground and clubhouse. Unfortunately, Lindenlea was taken over by others and Adams's careful plans were not followed. Rather than being a model garden suburb, Lindenlea became just another real estate development.

In 1919 Adams founded the Town Planning Institute of Canada, primarily to promote the new discipline of planning. He also wrote extensively in *Town Planning and Conservation of Life* and published *Rural Planning and Development* the first Canadian planning book.

In the early twenties, many of the functions for which the Commission of Conservation had been created were being taken over by federal and provincial ministries, and so Adams moved to the United States in 1923. There he distinguished himself by producing the first regional plan for New York.

In his final years he divided his time as a private practitioner between Great Britain and the U.S.

Although Adams's idea that planning is a technocratic, value-free, scientific endeavour has been shown to be untrue, his ideas about the wasteful use of natural resources, the follies of premature subdivision and the need to plan roads concordant with topography are as true today as they were then.