

# The man who made New Brunswick a company town

By Russell Hunt & Robert Campbell

[*Saturday Night*, 88:8 (August 1973), 9-14]

The southeast shore of Grand Lake in central New Brunswick is not exactly a tourist mecca. But there are pleasant little rocky beaches and very often you find wild strawberry fields on the slopes coming down to the wooded shore of the lake. The beaches are marvellous places for midsummer bonfires, with marshmallows and hot dogs. Along the shore of the lake are scattered, in among the trees and on the margins of beaches, thousands of well-weathered, dry, four-foot logs anywhere from three to ten inches in diameter. But when you have a beach bonfire you don't burn those. You gather brush and driftwood that is identifiably driftwood. Not pulp logs.

A visitor is likely to ask, why not – surely the four-foot logs would make a marvellous fire? Something wrong with the wood? But anyone who's lived along the shore for a few years knows why those logs are left alone. It seems that sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s (the date varies with the teller) an Irving log boom on its way down Grand Lake from Chipman, headed toward Irving's pulp mill at the mouth of the St. John river, broke up in a storm on the lake and the logs were scattered far and wide along the coast. A few of the local residents (many of whom cut a little pulp on the side as a way of supplementing their income) began salvaging the logs, piling them along with their own logs by the side of the road, and selling them to Irving. An innocuous practice, it would seem; surely no industry the size of Irving's was going to care about those logs, much less try to salvage them from the thousands of inlets, bays, stream mouths and beaches where they had lodged themselves. Not so, the story goes: Irving himself went on the radio to announce that anyone "stealing" that lumber from the shores of the lake would be prosecuted: those logs were private property.

In any place but New Brunswick, such an announcement would have caused a sardonic chuckle and the pulp cutters would have merrily cut the identifying brands off the logs and sold them. Not in New Brunswick, a province which is well aware of K.C. Irving's penchant for going to court over insignificant matters. Hadn't Irving taken Gordon Green and Hazen Jordan of Barker's Point (just across the river from Fredericton) to court in September of 1948 for, in the words of the indictment, "fraudulently holding, without the consent of the owner, timber that was found floating in the Nashwaak"-a matter of about fifty-four logs? So there Irving's logs rest, twenty years later. Even yet, few people gather them for fuel. No one includes them in his corded pulp stacked along the road for pickup. Now, it is hard to be certain that that story is true. Radio broadcasts are difficult things to verify, a quarter of a century after the fact. In a province as small as New Brunswick, legends arise quickly; everyone, it seems, has an "Irving story" and all of them could be true only if Irving were two hundred years old. Yet many of those legends suggest not only insights into Irving but, more directly, insights into New Brunswick's attitude toward the man who owns it. Whatever the truth about Irving the man, Irving's corporate identity is created at least as much by what the society around it believes as by what it is in reality. And those logs are actually still there, a fact that says more about what the name "Irving" means in New Brunswick than any dry inventory of his holdings or abstract description of his political and social power – or even a scouring of the newspapers for the miles of type in their editorial and letters columns in praise of Irving.

Every New Brunswicker knows – though he may not be aware of knowing it – that K.C. Irving is a lot more than just a man. K.C. Irving is a social phenomenon on the same level of importance as a revolution or a war. And his importance is equally difficult to measure. You can't do it, for instance, by

counting up how much he owns: corporate law affords nearly impenetrable cover for corporate activity. Moreover, the question of how much Irving actually owns is not only probably unanswerable, but also meaningless. Irving often claims not to know the precise extent of his holdings, or the amount of their revenues. This has struck most journalists as disingenuous, but it probably is not: after a certain point, such figures cease to mean anything. To take an example: the refinery in Saint John is often referred to as the \$50-million Irving refinery. But that \$50-million figure surely has no meaning; the refinery is not for sale, so has no market value; though it cost somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$50-million to build, it could hardly be duplicated for that now, given the pace of inflation since 1960. In accountants' terms, on the other hand, it would be said to have depreciated since building. On the Saint John tax rolls, it is assessed at \$4-million. According to Irving's public statements, it has never made a profit, by which logic it should be a positive liability; on the other hand, a profit is made by the Bahamian company which sells it its crude oil at an inflated price. Perhaps the two together—the refinery and the Bahamian company could be valued? Not likely; the Bahamian company doesn't own anything but paper—and the Bahamas don't collect corporate income taxes, so no one knows how much profit it makes except Irving. Nor can Irving's power be neatly or easily measured. If there ever was a company town covering 28,000 square miles, with a population of 600,000, New Brunswick is it; and the company is K.C. Irving, Limited – a company that was begun by Irving and his mother and father in 1926 as a Ford dealership, but which has grown in thirty-five years to be the single most powerful economic force in eastern Canada. It has become a commonplace of journalism to list the number of contacts a visitor to New Brunswick must have with the Irving empire, from the newspaper to the gas station, from the bus line to the hardware store, from the tankers in Courtenay Bay to the dry dock where they were built. There is hardly a pie in New Brunswick worth having a finger in, in which you won't find an Irving finger. And if, in the early 1970s, under the pressure of Irving's aging, the empire seems to be losing a bit of its cohesiveness, it is still capable of deciding the fate of governments in New Brunswick, of determining the direction taken by society as a whole in that poor and backward province. But the social sciences haven't yet developed a yardstick for measuring that kind of power, or for distinguishing the power Irving actually exercises from the influence that is there whether he chooses to exercise his power or not.

Alternately, however, there is one sure way to understand or communicate a concept as complex as the extent of the Irving power in New Brunswick, and that is through an accumulation of suggestive specific examples. The procedure is that of the poet or novelist rather than the social scientist, and the understanding that results is an intuitive rather than discursive one—the kind of understanding that arises out of experience with, rather than knowledge about, the Irving phenomenon.

Think, for instance, about the opening of Irving's Ocean Steel plant. Not only did the company set up a heavy industry in an area that had been zoned for light, neglect to mention to the city that it was going to block streets and create traffic obstacles, but, without notice, it sealed off a road that was the only access to a fish store which had, for five days, to throw away a ton of lobster and salmon because nobody could get to it. Had it been anyone but Irving, the company would have been prosecuted or reprimanded; but it was Irving and the city council passed the buck—along with a motion to the effect that in the future any company had to warn the city of such plans "so merchants in the area can arrange their business, and fire and water departments can prepare for emergencies." That kind of incident is far more valuable in understanding Irving's power than a transcript of the clauses, in the incorporation acts of Irving companies, which allow him to expropriate land, protect him from being sued for creating a nuisance, and exempt him from various taxes and charges.

Or consider the implications of the disclosure, in a government report on social welfare released in the spring of 1971, that Irving discourages his employees from promoting the United Fund charity drive by

forbidding the payroll deduction method of donation for his more than 7,000 employees in the city. The disclosure was held for a day by Irving's newspaper until answering statements by Irving and Irving partisans could be run with the disclosure. And instead of the expectable flurry of statements deploring such antisocial and uncharitable behaviour, there was a flood of protests in the letters columns of the papers against the attack on Irving, claiming it was based on jealousy and envy. A characteristic letter said in part: "It is high time that an end was brought to these continuous attacks on Mr. Irving and his business interests by people who apparently have little or no appreciation of the amount of courage, determination, ambition and energy that he has exercised in developing industries which have played such a large part and influence on the economy of this province."

Irving's power, influence and prestige in New Brunswick and eastern Canada are so immense and pervasive that they cannot adequately be described, but must be experienced in terms of specific instances. But there are some general points that can be made, It's important to bear in mind, for instance, that no organization as large and complex as the Irving dinosaur can be entirely the responsibility of one man-even when that man is Kenneth Colin Irving. "Irving" as a phenomenon is not the same thing as K.C. Irving the man. When Irving's oil dock spills oil in the Bay of Fundy and Irving officials at first deny any knowledge of the spill – while simultaneously ordering tankers to hold out to sea while the pipeline is repaired – you can't infer that the inconsistency or dishonesty involved is the personal decision of Kenneth Colin Irving. When Irving's companies respond to "betrayal" with vindictive and often irrational intensity, and resort to excessive use of litigation and expressions of public outrage, you can't infer that the emotions involved are those of K.C. Irving himself.

But you can say, in both cases and in many other similar ones, that the responses are typical of the kind of organization Irving has created, and that in important ways it is his creation, and bears the stamp of his personality. Human personality proceeds from the most complex organism known; as a corporation gets more complex. as it acquires styles and traditions of doing things – often quite unenunciated, but nonetheless discoverable principles of action – it acquires personality. And, of course, corporations are, legally, persons, some of which exhibit more personality than others.

The Irving entity is an exceptionally clear case. The corporate personality has continued to grow and develop on its own, so that the corporation often does things that its creator never would have done. In fact. one of the most common observations about the Irving empire is that its public character sometimes bears almost no relation to the private character of its creator. For instance, Senator Charles McElman remarked that the Irving empire "displays none of the gentle or considerate attributes of the man. Its thirst for power and more power is insatiable." And the late Ralph Allen once wrote in *Maclean's* that Irving's "personal manners bear so little resemblance to his corporate manners that some of the people who have seen him lose his temper or heard him hurl his clipped insults toward his permanent or temporary foes have put it down to business tactics rather than blood pressure."

Testimony about Irving himself is unanimous in describing him as gentle, polite, gracious, and unassuming – yet as a public figure and in his business dealings his characteristic posture is either one of ruthless entrepreneurial aggression or of boundless moral outrage. Psychologists, no doubt, would have a lot to say about the stupendous capabilities of the human mind for constructing elaborate systems to express its inmost feelings without acknowledging them. And just as such theories are inadequate to explain poems or cathedrals, so they fail to explain K.C. Irving, Limited. But in the same way that we may wish to know something of the milieu and childhood of a sculptor or poet in order to understand something of his work, so it is interesting to look at the ground from which K.C. Irving sprang.

His home town is Buctouche, about halfway between the mouth of the Miramichi River and Moncton on New Brunswick's North Shore. Founded in 1784 by five Acadian families returning from exile, the village has always been overwhelmingly French and until the middle of the twentieth century was predominantly a fishing village, largely because of its fine harbour. When Herbert Irving, K.C. Irving's grandfather, arrived from Scotland, it can hardly have been an occasion recognized as one which would determine the entire future of the community. But today the visitor to Buctouche feels the Irving presence at a saturation level. There are two gas stations on the main street-both of them Irving stations. There is one large combination department and grocery store – the Irving store. There is one large visible industry, Kent Component Homes – an Irving company and the second largest employer in Buctouche. If you stand on the now-deserted dock where Irving's shipyards built Minca invasion barges during the Second World War, the panorama doesn't include anything not owned by Irving, from the Irving station on the far left through the Irving family homes across the street from the bay (and precisely in the centre of all the activity), to the Irving oil storage tanks across the water on the right. Beyond and above the panorama you can see forest, most of which belongs to the country's largest employer, J.D. Irving Woodlands Ltd.

To a Casual visitor, Buctouche seems to be doing better than the other communities in poverty-stricken Kent County; certainly there are a number of people making enough money to build new homes and paint old ones. But even as the centre of the Irving empire, Buctouche has not escaped the trap of poverty that holds the entire North Shore: unemployment is still rife, especially among the Acadians, who form the majority of the population. Most of the jobs are seasonal or occasional – Kent Homes itself, for instance, has a staff which varies from thirty to one hundred people depending on the state of the market. And of course the other main occupations, pulp cutting and fishing, are both seasonal and at the mercy of rapidly fluctuating markets. So the facade of middle-class prosperity that Buctouche exhibits to the casual visitor is no more than a facade – a fact which a side trip down any of the back roads will verify. Though the presence of Irvings over a period of a little more than a century has made an overwhelming difference to the segment of Buctouche that "counts," it has probably not changed the destiny of those shack-dwellers and broken farmers an iota. And in many ways the basic social structure of Buctouche cannot have changed much since Kenneth Colin Irving was born there on March 14, 1899. At that time, as now, a small, commercially-dominant Anglophone minority ran things with a gracious *noblesse oblige*, while the majority of Acadians either remained casual labourers or moved away. Growing up in such a world must have conditioned the way little Kenneth Colin saw himself and his relationship to other people, and it is tempting to speculate that some of his most fundamental tendencies – toward the centralization of power, the use of personal charity rather than institutional reorganization; toward, that is, a sophisticated form of paternalism – must have grown out of his experience of the relationship between those two cultural groups in Buctouche in the early twentieth century.

The sources of other qualities that may have helped make Irving what he is can be guessed at in his childhood. He was brought up, for instance, in a tradition of successful Presbyterian entrepreneurship. There is a widespread myth that Irving is a self-made man, rising from\* clerkship in a small rural general store to his present position. Forget it. Irving's father, J.D. Irving, was one of the most powerful and wealthy men on the North Shore; for his day and location, his interests and powers were almost as extraordinary as K.C. Irving's are for his. Owner of vast tracts of Kent County, as well as land elsewhere in New Brunswick, operator of mills and stores, interested in shipping and involved in the Saint John financial scene, J.D. Irving provided a secure base from which his son could operate. Many of K.C. Irving's early undertakings, in fact, were underwritten by his father. Beyond such childhood endeavours as reclaiming binder twine and raising ducks, business enterprise takes capital as surely as it does an entrepreneurial imagination – and young Kenneth had access to both.

He had other advantages which perhaps helped him to see beyond the borders of Buctouche and Kent County: he went to Dalhousie University; to Acadia University; to England for training as a pilot (though he never saw action); and at one point he and a friend contemplated going to Australia and actually made it as far as British Columbia before they turned back to Buctouche. Thus when, in the early 1920s, he started a gas station and Model-T dealership in connection with his father's general store, he was in a position to see which way the world was going, and predict what fields might repay investment and effort. And his perception that the internal combustion engine was going to dominate the twentieth century suggests that Irving's travels had been truly educational.

But there was more than a coolly intellectual prediction of growth involved in Irving's decision about the direction his endeavours were to take. That decision was a characteristic one; it was a choice of physical objects – automobiles, gas, oil – over symbols of objects. One of the most important differences between Irving and the majority of successful entrepreneurs is that while others habitually see the world in terms of abstractions, working with paper, Irving deals in objects. In gas stations, oil storage tanks, automobiles, trees, refineries, tankers. The abstractions are there as well, of course; but first there are objects. This in part explains why Irving stayed in New Brunswick while other gigantically successful – and less successful – entrepreneurs left for the world of high finance in New York, Montreal, London or Toronto. Irving's older half-brother John Herbert Irving, for instance, went to Montreal and worked as a stock and bond broker. In such a place you could wear a white shirt and deal with abstractions with clean hands: but in New Brunswick everything had to be built before it could be bought. Even the builders' tools themselves were not yet ready to hand, but had to be forged. That affinity with the concrete physical object was demonstrated in Irving's first business conflict, his famous dispute with Imperial Oil in 1924. Many of the other Buctouche merchants apparently objected to being forced to buy oil from their competition, so Imperial decided to take the franchise away from Irving and set up a new one. Irving's response, characteristic in several ways, was to tell Imperial where to get off; he borrowed enough money to put in his own storage tank and buy a supply of oil, and went into business himself – in competition with Imperial Oil. This was a characteristic act in that it involved, not merely paper and franchises, but a genuine, physical oil storage tank and a shipment of gasoline from Charles Noble and Company, Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was also a characteristic response in another way. Part of the motive for the audacious decision to go into competition with the giant company was moral indignation and outrage. They hadn't even bothered to inform him before cancelling his franchise.

That capacity for outrage, and that tendency to let outrage govern business decisions, was and has remained typical of the Irving corporate personality. It is easy for Irving himself to feel moral anger or outrage. His strict Presbyterian background has left him, if not holier than thou, holier than most. He neither drinks nor smokes nor swears. He fits, in fact, the archetypal pattern of the Protestant businessman. If financial success isn't a representation of grace, it will do just as well; through most of his active life, Irving may have been at St. John and St. Stephen's Church in Saint John every Sunday, but he was at work every other day. All day. The only recreation he ever seems to have allowed himself was a little fishing on the Restigouche or the Miramichi rivers, but in later years he seems to have given up even that. He seems either to make no distinction between work and play or to regard what most people call play as a waste of time. The creation of his corporate empire seems to have required all the effort and creativity he could generate, and to have satisfied his competitive instincts and his desire for play as well as any man's hobbies could. He came to terms with his world on a basis that was perfectly satisfactory to him, and one which allowed him to hold the typical view that the frailties of his fellow man were moral matters rather than psychological or sociological ones.

In turn, that conscious rectitude, that moral certainty, leads to an attitude toward "Justice" that makes Irving one of the most litigious men in Canada. He – and his companies – are characteristically far more concerned with "justice" than with the corporate balance sheet. One of the most popular Irving stories was originally told by a barrister who had worked for him. The barrister explained that normally a lawyer tries to keep his client out of court but that Irving wanted to fight everything through to the finish. On one really difficult case a lawyer advised him to settle out of court. "I don't believe I asked you for a verdict," Irving said to his lawyer. "I was inquiring if you'd care to represent me." Such stories have created a reputation which has very often made it unnecessary for Irving to go to court. Nobody picks a fight with the toughest kid on the block, so it's rare to find anybody from New Brunswick fighting Irving.

Were it not that he was more interested in getting satisfaction from some specific person or company than in making a paper profit. Irving would settle many cases out of court, or allow people to get away with lifting a few cords of lost pulpwood. But Irving has always felt more strongly about the specific than the general, has always had the dirtiest hands around the conference table. In the *Atlantic Advocate* for July of 1960, Russel H. Fraser, an Irving dealer in Halifax, explained how he started dealing in Irving gasoline:

"Up until 1928 I sold several other varieties of gasoline. One day, Mr. Irving came along and asked me to put in another pump to sell his gasoline. I had just finished paying for the installation of the other pumps and told him I didn't have any more money to play around with then. He told me he would help, and he really meant it, for he was soon back in overalls, ready to go to work. With a pipe-fitter to help him, Mr. Irving made the installation himself right here under the floor of the building."

There is perhaps another lesson to be drawn from Irving's challenge to Imperial Oil. It has to do with guts. It was, after all, one of the world's largest and most powerful companies that Kenneth Colin Irving was challenging. And even if hindsight, with its realization that Irving's gas stations now vastly outnumber Esso's in the Maritimes, makes his challenge seem a reasonable one, still, from the vantage point of 1924 it certainly must have looked pretty hopeless to an outsider. And that kind of challenge, too, was to prove a hallmark of Irving's career – which includes confrontations with the Canadian National Railway (CN told him, in 1937, to stop shipping his oil by boat up the St. John River; Irving not only refused, but stopped dealing with them altogether, building his own fleet of barges and trucks to transport his oil), the Saint John city government, the New Brunswick government, and such giant international business concerns as Sogemines, Patino, and Standard Oil of California.

Equally important among the personality traits Irving passed on to his corporate creation is patient perseverance. As is most dramatically demonstrated in the mammoth twelve-year battle for the bus franchise in Saint John, Irving and Irving's enterprises can never be safely counted out of any fight. In fact, the longer the conflict goes on and the more interim defeats Irving suffers, the more strongly he is likely to fight – both because of his tendency to allow anger to control business decisions and because he and his organizations have always made a point of learning from defeats; learning how to use the media to their own advantage, how to employ political influence or corporate secrecy, how and where to apply economic pressure.

There are other aspects of the Irving corporate personality which are perhaps less fundamental, and probably more closely allied to business tactics than to personality. For instance, Irving's and his corporate creation's attitude toward New Brunswick and toward "foreigners," "outsiders." Irving's self-proclaimed love of his home province seems never to be out of print, whether in his own public statements or in articles about him. This begins with his very first public notoriety, in the bus franchise

fight in Saint John in the 1930s, during which he repeatedly insisted that his businesses had "chosen" to locate in Saint John not out of the desire for profit, but out of local patriotism. It continues through to his departure from New Brunswick and Canada on December 22, 1971. Consistently, Irving has – one hardly knows whether to say, "used this technique" or "expressed this attitude," since the two are almost indistinguishable in the man and in the company.

That it is a technique as well as an attitude there can be no doubt. His motive for using it in the first place was to gain concessions from the Saint John Common Council, both for sentimental reasons (out of fellow-feeling for another New Brunswicker, and a patriotic one at that) and for solid business reasons. ("Look," he says over and over, "at how much good my presence does. Look at how many people I employ, how much capital I invest, how much economic activity I generate. And consider what my departure might mean.") The problem of the sincerity of his local patriotism is a complex one; it is so much to his advantage to seem to love New Brunswick that many people tend to assume the love is dissembled. Others, of course, do not. When Irving responded to Brigadier Michael Wardell's (Wardell was then publisher of the Fredericton *Daily Gleaner* and the *Atlantic Advocate*) asking him why he stayed in New Brunswick by saying, "Because I love New Brunswick. I would not want to be anywhere else," Wardell clearly took the statement at face value, commenting only, "It is as simple as that. K.C. Irving *is* New Brunswick." To less ingenuous Irving-watchers, however, the problem is much more complex. Take, for instance, his public statements about foreign-owned oil companies.

In 1962, Irving made a public statement to the effect that foreign-dominated and Upper-Canadian oriented firms were raising the price of crude oil from Western Canada, on the pretext that the devaluation of the Canadian dollar made it necessary. "When the foreign-controlled companies are through with their battle," he said, "some of us Canadians hope we will still be here." That certainly seems a characteristic Irving utterance; not only did it play on local loyalties, but it constituted another thrust in the long-standing fencing match with Imperial Oil, who were the prime movers in the price hike. But when Imperial riposted by pointing out that Irving was unaffected by whatever might happen to Western Canadian crude because "he imports his crude through an international oil company which owns an unrevealed but substantial interest in his oil operations," a good deal of doubt was cast on the sincerity of Irving's patriotism. A good deal more doubt arose out of the speech in the Senate a few years later by Charles McElman, who showed that Irving's international operations allowed him – like other oil companies which do not share his claims of patriotic commitment – to escape local taxation. This is part of his speech in the Senate, March 10, 1971:

"The crude oil is brought by water from either the Persian Gulf or Venezuela. In the Irving case it goes physically to the Saint John refinery. But on paper it goes to that convenient tax haven, the Bahamas. Two companies become involved. For purposes of discussion we will call them Eastern Trading and Western Trading. Eastern is a Bahamian company, which buys the crude at the low source price. Eastern sells the crude to Western, the Canadian company, at a vastly inflated price.

"The price is so high that the poor refinery operation is in trouble. Some years it cannot even show a profit or pay the national wage rate to its employees. Other years it can squeeze out a small profit and pay a correspondingly small corporate tax to the Federal Government. It is really to be pitied.

"It is very interesting to note that at this very point in time this refinery, because of this arrangement, either loses money on paper or pays a very small tax. At this very moment it is in the process of almost tripling its production capacity, at the expenditure of many millions of dollars, from 50,000 barrels to 135,000 barrels per day – presumably in order to lose more money, but not for the Bahamian outfit."

It is easy to assert that such cynical manipulations prove Irving's duplicity in claiming to love New Brunswick and Canada, but the situation may well be much more complex than that. Loving a country or a region and loving its government are two quite different things, and many indubitably patriotic citizens pay tax lawyers to locate, and manoeuvre through, the chinks in the tax laws that have thoughtfully been left by the other tax lawyers who wrote them in the first place.

It is in considering such questions that the problem of the relation between Irving and his corporate creation looms largest; for while a man may be either sincere or insincere or some impossibly complicated combination of both, a corporation can only be what it does. Its beliefs only exist in its actions. In such terms, it isn't difficult to figure out whether corporations – which traditionally take advantage of such tax loopholes, which constitutionally and by nature pay as little as they can for labour and charge as much as they can for their product – love anything. In such cases protestations of patriotic motives can be nothing more than propaganda.

The difficulties arise when K.C. Irving, a man in whom such emotions are almost certainly sincere, says, as a spokesman for the corporation, that its decisions are made on such a basis. And it is not simply a matter of saying that while the man may be sincere, the corporation must be judged only by its actions. Beyond a certain point, the man himself comes to be as much the corporation's creature as it is his. It may be at some such point that decisions such as Irving's leaving New Brunswick to take up residence in the West Indies in order to escape taxes are made.

In any case, Irving's attitudes toward "outsiders" and his preference for local ownership and control of industry are certainly genuine, though complicated by self-consciousness. Irving is aware that the public expression of such opinions appeals to the Maritime knee-jerk xenophobia that he knows so well, to the side of the Maritimer's character which causes him habitually to refer to "Upper Canadians" with the kind of deprecating hostility normally reserved for the family's black sheep cousins. Thus, when in 1970, magazine editor and university professor Donald Cameron called him to make an offer for the Fredericton *Daily Gleaner*, Irving's first question was not "how much?" but "how long have you lived in New Brunswick?" And when, in July of 1961, a spokesman for Canadian Oil claimed recklessly that his was the only Canadian-owned oil company operating in the Maritimes, there was hardly a Maritimer who didn't cheer Irving's characteristic and well-publicized statement pointing out that Irving Oil not only existed but was a good deal more important to the region than Canadian was. "Let's not forget," he concluded – clearly playing to the gallery – "that in some cases Upper Canadians are the worst type of foreigners."

That Irving is aware of the value of such public relations gambits as this there cannot be much doubt, though most commentators have chosen to stress his retiring nature, implying that what Irving wants is no public image at all. Stories involving Irving's retiring and even secretive nature are legion. When, for instance, he bought the Saint John Drydock in 1959, the first newspaper to get a hint of the deal was the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald*. When they called him to confirm the story, he would say only, "You never know what might happen." And certainly there is a minimal amount of news about him in the New Brunswick papers. It was said for years that there was a standing rule at the Saint John papers that Irving's name was never to be mentioned without checking with management. However that may be, it is certainly true that there is less media coverage of his activities than of any comparably important person. In August, 1971, the *Star Weekly* decided to do an article on millionaires in Canada. What they got on Irving was a seventy-word biography and a picture of his house in Saint John. And that's all. Irving clearly doesn't think his personal life is anyone else's business, and he has developed an inordinate caution about divulging his own business plans.



In spite of this, however, he has created a very specific kind of image for himself. From the time he first began to operate in Saint John, certain aspects of his activity have in fact been fairly widely publicized: his local patriotism, his litigiousness; the vast extent of his interests (and the fact that they may be even vaster, since their limits are not known); his position as an important figure behind the scenes in the provincial Liberal party. Power is always part substance and part shadow, and beyond a certain point the shadow itself attains substance. K.C. Irving is most certainly vividly aware of this, and the creation of the shadow of power has been one of his most consistent endeavours and one of his most spectacular successes. There is no way to calculate the number of actions people have decided against because of the fear, created by that shadow as much as by real power, of Irving's reaction. In the spring of 1972, for instance, the New Brunswick government proposed taking away from certain corporations in the province the right, which some of them had enjoyed for more than twenty years, to expropriate lands to their own uses. But a number of people pointed out obliquely that Irving wasn't likely to care for that, and the project withered. Or consider the Combines Investigation of the Irving interests for operating a newspaper monopoly: the major problem faced there, as with Senator Keith Davey's Senate inquiry into the mass media, was drawing the line between actions actually willed by Irving and his interests on the one hand, and actions undertaken out of fear of Irving or anticipation of his wishes on the other.

His image is not only one of undefined power, either. One of the most important aspects of Irving's reputation is involved with the common identification of him with the province itself; in many ways he has become a symbol of New Brunswick. When Michael Wardell said "K.C. Irving is New Brunswick," he was not only confirming that he himself worships the man but speaking for a sizable segment of the population of the province. When Irving marched to the provincial legislature in 1965 to protest aspects of the Liberal government's reformist "Equal Opportunity" programme, the Saint John *Telegraph-Journal* called him "the voice of New Brunswick." And it seems clear that Irving himself sees his position in similar terms. During the Senate Mass Media Hearings, Senator J. Harper Prowse engaged in an exchange with Irving which makes fascinating reading. Pursuing a line of questioning having to do with the way Irving's ownership of the New Brunswick newspapers related to control of the papers, Prowse asked Irving whether, if he thought an editorial policy was likely to damage the province, Irving would step in himself. Irving agreed that he would. Prowse then went on to list some of Irving's interests in New Brunswick:

"Now then, in our research, we got a lot of detail and I find that the K.C. Irving group have the major financial interest in the oil refinery, some 3,000 retail outlets for gas, oil and auto accessories; fuel oil and fuel oil retail distribution; residential propane gas distribution; shipbuilding and repair; a fleet of deep sea vessels; tug boat company; fishing vessels; a major pulp mill; saw mills; approximately two million acres of forest land, some in free hold and a little less in forest management licences, I believe; then with more in Quebec and in the State of Maine; aircraft, plumbing and heating, electrical and industry supporting and building supplies and equipment, manufacturing of light and heavy industrial equipment and machinery. . . . I think one of the figures that I had was that you have something like 13,000 employees that you provide work for altogether. . . . so that anything that hurts New Brunswick is going to, in one way or another, hurt K.C. Irving's interests?"

"Yes," Irving replied. Then, a bit suspicious, "Would you repeat that statement?"

Prowse obliged. "Anything that would hurt New Brunswick in any way, that would depress the level of activity, confidence in New Brunswick, or hurt it in any way, would have an adverse effect on the Irving interests."

Irving was mollified. "Yes. That would be a natural assumption."

Senator Prowse sprang his trap. "And would the converse also equally be true'?"

"Yes."

At that point in the hearing, by a coincidence even a third-rate novelist would never invent, the lights went out, and it took a few minutes before proceedings resumed. When lights were restored, Prowse went on to a clearer statement of the implications of his last question, almost stuttering in his eagerness to pin Irving down. "In effect, if anything hurt – it could be because you have your eggs in the one basket – if anything were to happen which was going to, or was going to appear to happen, which was going to hurt the Irving interests, this would be a threat to New Brunswick economy and to New Brunswick?"

But having had a few moments for consideration, Irving was not going to be caught again. "I am not sure of your reasoning," he said. "I think we are kind of grasping at straws."

But everyone else was sure of Prowse's reasoning. If "K.C. Irving *is* New Brunswick," then the instincts for self-preservation and patriotism merge, because it is impossible to distinguish between the interests of K.C. Irving Ltd. and those of New Brunswick. *L'etat, c'est moi.*