

Charlottetown

The pleasures of a small town
with the stimulation of a city

By Silver Donald Cameron

MOST CANADIANS think of Charlottetown, if they think of it at all, as a quaint little place where people go in the summer, where Anne of Green Gables never dies, where in the summer of 1864 a group of bearded drunkards (some still insist) began to transform themselves into Fathers of Confederation. That last is a Maritime viewpoint: would any sane man, if sober, have led the smug and prosperous ocean provinces into union with the rebellious Québécois and the raw pioneers of Upper Canada? Prince Edward Island itself stayed out until 1873, Newfoundland until 1949.

Nevertheless, memorials to this ambiguous achievement abound in Charlottetown. The Confederation Centre of the Arts, the Confederation Court shopping mall, Confederation Inn, Confederation Dining Room — Confederation is to Charlottetown what the schooner *Bluenose* is to Lunenburg, NS: the relentlessly remembered focus of its brief moment of national glory.

The stereotype of Charlottetown is not exactly wrong, but it only applies to the eight-week summer. The rest of the year Charlottetown belongs to the people who live there; they find it combines the pleasures of small-

town life with much of the stimulation of a city.

For example, listen to clothing merchant Brian Cudmore:

“There’s the fact that we’re a province, even though we’re so small. We get almost every federal department. Anything that wants to be national tends to come here, so we get exposed to everything that has to make a coast-to-coast tour, and that’s invaluable. I think people here are much more involved in national issues than a suburban person in Ontario. There’s a daily flight to Ottawa, non-stop — 75 or 100 people every day going up and down to Ottawa.”

Not your typical town of 20,000 certainly. When I was in Charlottetown last May — long before the tourist season — the Liberal leadership candidates were on tour, led by Island native Mark MacGuigan. John Allan Cameron was playing at the Confederation Centre, BC novelist William Deverell was reading at an art gallery, Newfoundlander and

Right: Charlottetown's waterfront has been redeveloped with a new hotel, offices, a convention centre and housing.

Bruce Paton/Regional Industrial Expansion





Above: a brass band entertains during noon hour at Confederation Plaza overlooking Queen Street.

Left: shops and cafés along lower Queen Street.

Below: merchant Brian Cudmore has fought to preserve Charlottetown's business core and to protect it from the threat of suburban shopping malls.

Photos by Wayne Barrett and Anne MacKay



children's author Kevin Major was speaking to a conference of librarians, and the Confederation Centre art gallery had an exhibition of PEI quilts, another of 19th Century photos from France, and a third featuring the Age of Shakespeare.

With such stimulation, the arts have become an important Island industry. Across Richmond Street from the Confederation Centre is Pat's Rose and Grey Room, a haunt of the artistic community which offers what I would personally nominate as the best submarine sandwich on record — a savoury, toasted confection of salads and meats buried in melted cheese. In the middle of the restaurant is a Victorian safe, dating from the tenancy here in 1884 of a dry goods store. All around the walls are polished mahogany cabinets, remnants of the drug store displaced by the restaurant. Above the cabinets a ring of pale silhouettes of unicorns prances around the room, the work of Island artist Lindee Climo, whose rotund, luminous animal paintings can be sampled in her book *Chester's Barn*.

Pat's boasts a bottle collection, a fan collection, and a straw hat which once graced the head of Maurice Chevalier. And why is it called the Rose and Grey Room? Because that was the name given by the druggist, I.Y. Reddin, to the "tea parlour and dance club" which he once operated on the second floor.

And here, talking animatedly as he orders another carafe of white wine, is Reshard Gool, out for dinner with his wife, Hilda Woolnough. She is a painter, he is an impresario, and the two of them together are a phenomenon. A man of cosmopolitan education and experience, Gool likes old buildings, young poets, good talk, talent, jokes, good food, Prince Edward Island and Hilda, for starters. Officially, he is a professor of politics at the University of PEI. He is also a poet, essayist, critic, sometime publisher, journalist, novelist and aficionado of the arts generally.

He interrupts himself to reach into

the aisle to stop a young woman.

"Nancy," he says, "there's someone here I want you to meet . . ."

Nancy Minard was only 15 years old when her poems were published in Wayne Wright's anthology *The Poets of Prince Edward Island* (now out of print). She's one of Gool's students, and one of the many young writers he has encouraged during his 15 years on the Island. At Bill Deverell's reading, later in the evening, we will meet another protégé, the satirical poet Leon Berrouard who now toils in the educational system.

The reading is held at the Great



The arts are alive and well in Charlottetown thanks to people such as gallery co-ordinator Hilda Woolnough and impresario Reshard Gool, who are wife and husband.

George Street Gallery, a block from Pat's and half-a-block from Province House, where PEI's legislators sit in a chamber down the hall from the Confederation Chamber, which is a national historic site. The gallery is an artist's co-operative, 38% funded by the Canada Council and 62% by monies the artists raise themselves. Creations made of stained glass, serigraphs, oils and watercolours hang everywhere. In the adjoining room is

an exhibition of wooden sculpture by David Fels.

Deverell, rumped and wry, admits that he thought nothing much happened on PEI — until last night, when a roistering crowd of residents captured him and carried him off to nearby Fort Augustus, and plied him with strong waters, giving him a very good time and a very bad headache. Despite this handicap, he gives us a funny, thoughtful evening, passages from his thrillers interspersed with excerpts from his reviews.

Hilda Woolnough is the Great George Street Gallery's co-ordinator. She is also an artist, with paintings in collections across the country.

The arts are not exactly new to Charlottetown, as one discovers in reading *Island Painter*, Moncrieff Williamson's biography of the painter Robert Harris. Harris, a founder of the Royal Canadian Academy, was a celebrated turn-of-the-century portrait painter, many of whose works are hung in the Confederation Centre gallery. He is best known for his group portrait of the Fathers of Confederation at their Quebec conference. The original painting was lost when the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa burned in 1916, but the painting had been widely copied — without authorization and without royalties to Harris. It lives on in reproduction; it is the dominant image of the founders of Canada.

Other Harris paintings hang in All Souls' Chapel, on Rochford Square, a small building of Island sandstone attached to St. Peter's Cathedral. These paintings are tributes by the artist to members of his family who lie buried in nearby St. Peter's Cemetery, as does the artist himself. Everything connects in Charlottetown: "Crieff" Williamson, Harris' biographer, is the director emeritus of the Confederation Centre, lives in Charlottetown and writes murder mysteries despite his reputation as a respected commentator on art. And the chapel itself was designed by the artist's brother, William Critchlow Harris.

Charlottetown has supported sev-



Above: Confederation Centre, where the musical "Anne of Green Gables" is performed all summer in the theatre (inset, right).
inset: Bruce Paton/Regional Industrial Expansion

Below: folk art exhibit in the Confederation Centre art gallery.





Above: view of Grafton Street. The war memorial at left is beside Province House, the legislative building.

eral fine architects, but none marked the city more than “Willie” Harris, as he was known to his family. An astonishing number of Charlottetown’s Victorian mansions and commercial buildings come from his drawing board. People are aware of him, and

value his work. At Crapaud, three-quarters of the way from Charlottetown to the New Brunswick ferry terminus at Borden, a well-kept Victorian church stands proudly beside the Trans-Canada Highway. Oh yes, the church at Crapaud, people nod.

That’s a Harris church.

Such treasures have always been there, but until recent years had been little regarded and their creators had been ignored. Charlottetown’s pride of heritage is a relatively new thing. When I first visited the city in 1968, it was a shabby-looking, dispirited town reached by a seemingly endless bumpy road and a sluggish ferry. Like all Maritime cities, it had known greatness before Canada was born. But steam, steel and federalism had defeated it.

Its life had rested on three pillars: shipbuilding and shipping, agriculture, and government. By the 1960s, the great days of sailing ships were long gone, the farms were small and outdated, and “regional disparity” had barely entered the language of Canadian politics.

All that has changed. PEI has seen a revolution in agriculture, which in turn has brought back shipping to





Above: *Beaconsfield, a Victorian mansion of 1877 designed by William Critchlow Harris. It is now the home of the PEI Heritage Foundation and Museum.*

Right: *residences along North River Road. Charlottetowners take great pride in their homes and gardens.*





Left: watchdog over Charlottetown's heritage buildings is Ian Scott, posing here outside his office at Beaconsfield, home of the PEI Heritage Foundation.

carry Island potatoes to world markets. Tourism has boomed. A federal government anxious to compensate for at least some of the damage done by Confederation has shifted the Department of Veterans' Affairs to Charlottetown — an injection of some 400 plump civil servants and their families into an economy small enough to notice them. The Island's seductive mixture of farms, wood-

lots, beaches and fishing villages has attracted a whole generation of well-educated dropouts and homesteaders, many of whom are now passionately patriotic Islanders. The Liberal government of Alex Campbell, in office during most of the 1970s, looked benignly on these imports, and funded projects in energy self-sufficiency and "appropriate technology" which drew international attention.

"In many ways," observes Eddie Rice, "outsiders have shown us the way to go. The biggest problem is being too close to see the possibilities. But visions are opening up all the time. This is an exciting time to be here."

Rice is supposed to talk this way: that's what aldermen do. But Rice is a most unusual alderman. A tall, skinny man in his early 30s, he is also executive director of the PEI Council of the Arts. He got into politics "because they tore down the Bank of Commerce building", and his vision of Charlottetown is not a vision of growth, wealth and industrial might. He wants it to be as graceful and attractive a city as can be found in North America, and he works hard to make it so.

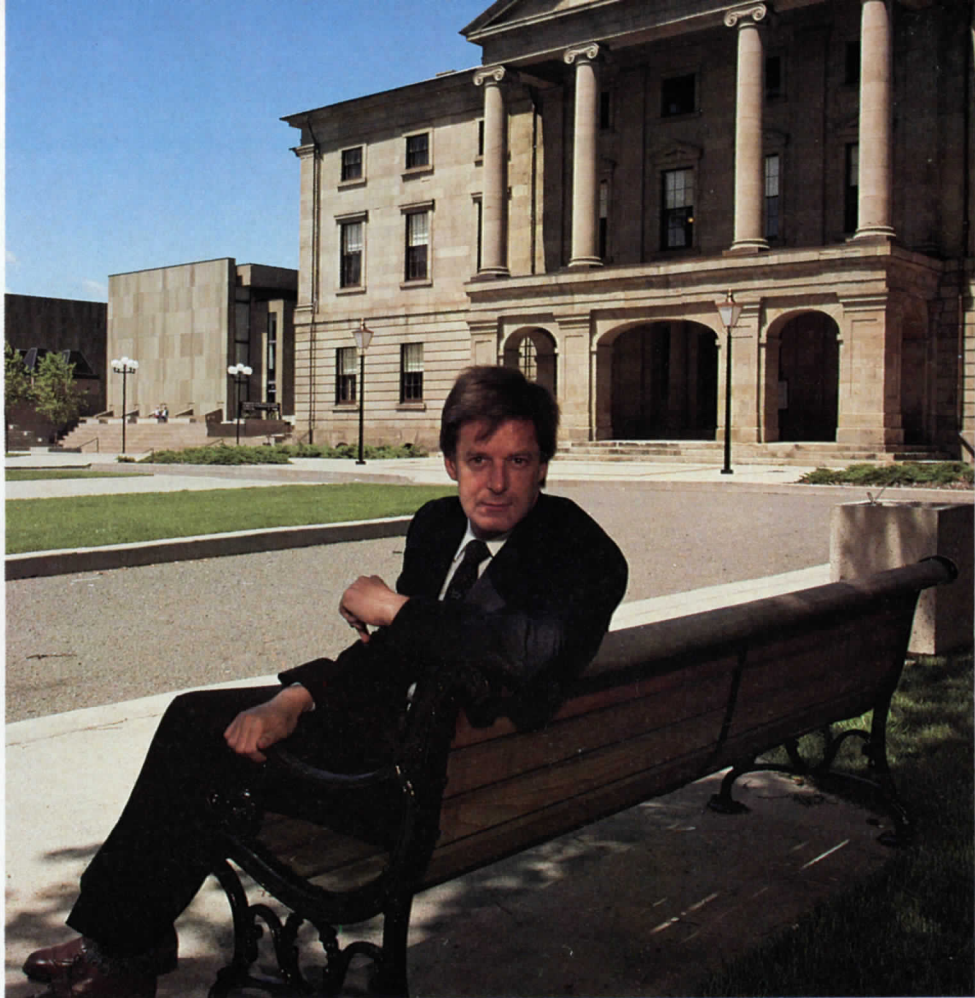
He leans back in his chair in an office adjoining the Great George Street Gallery, and talks enthusiastically about waterfront development, the restoration of City Hall, the beautification of a dozen intersections this year, the possibility of putting a full-time tree doctor on the city's payroll. *Arbour Day*, when trees are planted, has been a Charlottetown tradition for a full century.

"We're fragile," he remarks. "Halifax can afford to lose a block of heritage buildings and still retain its character. But in Charlottetown, the scale of the town is crucial. Losing one or two buildings could destroy it. But we've been lucky, in that poverty preserves."

Lucky? Perhaps so. With a stagnant economy, Charlottetown was spared the office towers and high-rise apartment buildings which erupted in most city centres. Downtown buildings are still at human scale — three or four storeys — and, by the time Charlottetown's economy had picked up, a new ethic had set in, since rein-

Right: Alderman Eddie Rice is executive director of the PEI Council of the Arts. So it is natural that he should dream of and work for Charlottetown becoming increasingly graceful and attractive. His ward—known as Old Charlottetown—includes historic Province House, seen in the background.

Below: modern Canada began here in the Confederation Chamber of Province House, where an 1864 conference of Maritime premiers was enlarged on short notice to include Sir John A. Macdonald and some of his colleagues from Upper and Lower Canada, now Ontario and Quebec. They persuaded the Maritimers to consider the idea of a larger federation, and to join in another conference a few weeks later at Quebec. Agitation in the U.S. for annexation, as well as Irish-American Fenian raids, did much to unite the Fathers of Confederation; and so the Dominion of Canada came into being July 1, 1867. This chamber in Charlottetown where it all began is a national historic site.



forced by recession. As Rice puts it, "It is now more sensible to recycle than to build." What Charlottetown has is worth recycling: heritage buildings at affordable prices. Rice himself lives on West Street, which consists of two blocks of splendid mansions overlooking the harbour. His house cost him \$73,000 in 1981, when real estate prices elsewhere were spiralling towards the moon. It is four blocks from his office, three blocks from City Hall.

Libby Oughton is one of the "outsiders" Rice refers to. After a successful career in Toronto publishing, she now operates Ragweed Press in a former convent school on Pownal Street. She lives two blocks away on the same street. Ragweed has published 26 titles since Libby Oughton took over in 1980. On this particular day Libby is meeting with provincial educational officials over a social studies text Ragweed is publishing.

"Charlottetown," she says, "is small enough to get your mind around." She likes the downtown farmers' market, and the park that runs all along the waterfront; she was delighted when a city bylaw obliged the new harbourside Hilton Hotel to reduce its planned height to 10 storeys from 14.

At the corner of West and Kent streets stands Beaconsfield, a 25-room "Willie" Harris mansion built in 1877, a fairyland of cupolas and gingerbread, stained-glass windows and plaster mouldings, marble baseboards and fancy fretwork. It was built for James Peake, Jr., a shipowner and merchant with a substantial overseas trade. Alas, Peake lost his fortune, and the house passed to the mortgagee, Henry Cundall, in 1885. It later served as a nurses' residence and a YMCA. In 1973 it was donated to the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation, whose offices occupy the second and third floors.

The Heritage Foundation publishes *The Island Magazine*, an engaging semi-annual of Island history and folklore edited by folklorist and poet Jim Hornby. It has also published a

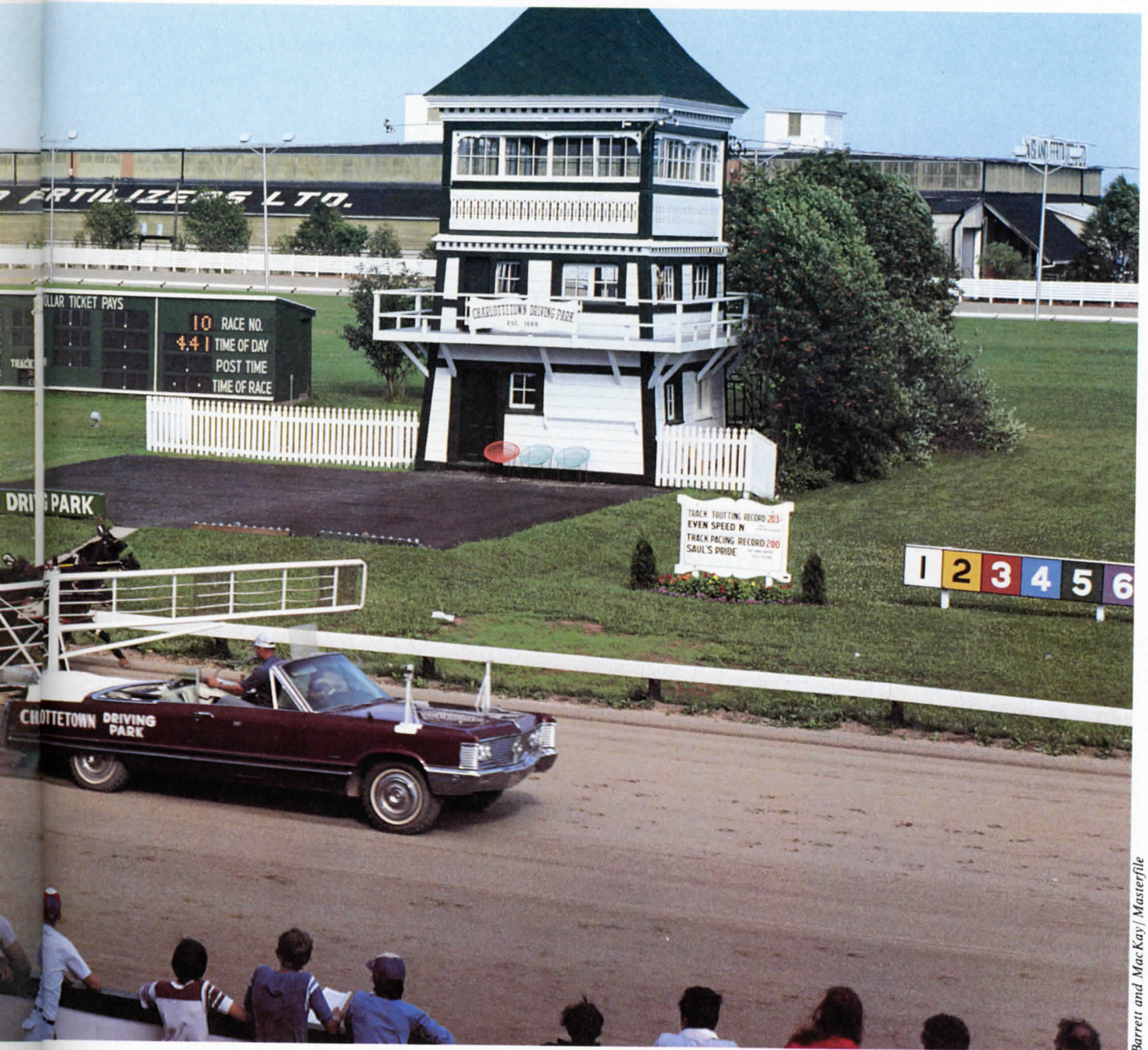


notable book by Irene Rogers, *Charlottetown: The Life in its Buildings*. Exhaustively researched, and illustrated by archival photos, Rogers' book gives the history of scores of heritage buildings erected on the 500 town lots into which Charlottetown was divided by the original town plan of 1771. A few downtown buildings date from the 1790s, and perhaps earlier.

Ian Scott, the Heritage Founda-

tion's director, muses on the Island attitude to buildings and land. Much of the Island's early history was marred by conflict between tenant Islanders and absentee landlords, and so the ownership of land is a theme about which Islanders are particularly sensitive.

"Islanders have great pride in their homes," Scott comments. "We have a greater percentage of people who own their homes outright, no mort-



Barrett and Mac Kay / Masterfile

Above: ... and they're off! Harness racing at Charlottetown Driving Park.

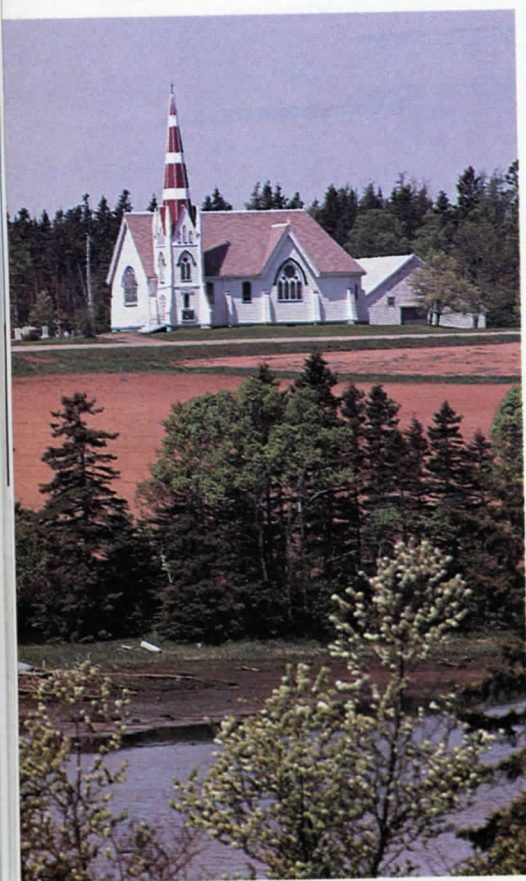
Right: Harbourside is a new complex of business and government offices. Before this waterfront area was redeveloped, it contained an unsightly assortment of warehouses and railway tracks.





Above: *Government House, a colonial style mansion built in 1834, is the residence of PEI's lieutenant-governor.*

Below: *church at Crapaud designed by William Critchlow Harris. He also designed many of Charlottetown's fine homes and public buildings.*



Opposite: *Charlottetown's skyline is dominated by the spires of St. Dunstan's Basilica, with not a highrise yet to be seen.*

Barrett and MacKay / Masterfile

gage, than anywhere else in the country. Perhaps that's part of the reason for the pride in home ownership, for the fact that homes and even barns here are kept up so well — repaired and painted and so on.

"The Island never really booms or busts. The peak and valley of real estate prices in 1980-81 never happened here. Small business is dominant, and everyone works at more than one thing — a little farming or a part-time business besides their job."

Echoes. Eddie Rice, the alderman, notes that the recession didn't affect Islanders to any great degree. "It was a tight time, but we haven't got all our eggs in one basket. We're watchful and careful, and we weathered it nicely." Brian Cudmore, the clothing merchant, agrees. The recession made him re-examine his business methods and become more efficient. But his customers are loyal, and support local business, so the recession touched him very lightly. And both Rice and Cudmore commented on the city's sound management of its own finances; Charlottetown has a balanced budget, and has not raised taxes in five years.

In the same way, when Cudmore and other downtown merchants found themselves threatened by suburban malls, they got together with the government, the Charlottetown Area Development Corporation and

the Toronto-Dominion Bank. The result was Confederation Court — a mall *behind* the existing shops opposite the Confederation Centre, entered through stores whose façades were unchanged. If one looks, there is an office block rising in Henderson & Cudmore's backyard — but because it is behind the shops, it passes unnoticed. Indeed, chuckles Cudmore, it surprises tourists who find their way into it.

This is a good time for Charlottetown. The themes all converge: the artists, the conservationists, the prudent Island traditions, the interests of tourists, the pride of ownership, the common sense of recycling — they all conspire to create a sense of community, a vision of the future rooted solidly in the present and the past. I asked Brian Cudmore about the future.

"I'm optimistic that things will stay pretty much the same," he said, smiling.

When the inhabitants view their city's future as good if the trends of the present simply continue, what do you call it?

I call it a successful city. ♦

Silver Donald Cameron is a frequent contributor to Canadian magazines, writing about many different subjects. Raised in Central Canada, he adopted Nova Scotia as his home and lives on Isle Madame, off the south coast of Cape Breton.

