

# John Cleghorn

There was a time when John Cleghorn was described as the “greatest source of non-governmental power in this country . . . the new dean of the Canadian Establishment.”



It was 1998 and Cleghorn had just been named chief executive officer of the new mega-bank that resulted from the proposed merger of the Royal Bank and the Bank of Montreal. The merger had long been a dream for Cleghorn, an important step to becoming a serious global presence. However, the government put a halt to those plans and almost ten years later, while the debate continues, no bank mergers have been permitted.

During his career, Cleghorn became one of Canada’s most respected corporate leaders with his low-key style. After becoming chief executive officer of the Royal Bank of Canada in 1994, he shut down the executive dining room, eliminated executive limousines and sold the corporate jet.

His cost cutting may have been due in part to his modest beginnings in Waterloo. Cleghorn grew up on Albert Street in Waterloo and lived there until he was nine years old. His father, Edward was the bursar and a fine arts professor at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU). His mother Hazel Dunham, whose local roots reach back to the pioneering Eby family, cared for him and his sister during the family’s years in Waterloo. She also acted in a local theatre group and his father built stage sets. His maternal aunt, Mabel Dunham, was a well-known historian and chief librarian in Kitchener. A children’s book she wrote called *Kristli’s Trees*, was dedicated to her nephew John.

The Cleghorn family moved to Montreal where his mother worked as a dietician at the Montreal General Hospital and his father eventually became curator and the associate director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Cleghorn studied at McGill University and received a bachelor of commerce degree in 1962. He began making headlines first as a lineman for McGill’s Redman football team, which won the national championship in 1960. More than one person has noted that Cleghorn’s approach to the corporate world was like that of a lineman on a football team. Playing on the line is not a glamorous or dramatic position in football. “His style remains the same as in his college days: low-key, disciplined, and rooted in team.”

Turning down an offer to play with the Toronto Argonauts, Cleghorn articleed and became a chartered accountant.

Cleghorn is known for his ability to connect with people and then “a year later remember the details of that conversation. “It’s natural,” a colleague said once. “I remember telling him it transcends math, financial and other skills.”

Following an earlier term in the mid 1980s, he rejoined the WLU board of governors in 1996 and accepted an appointment to serve as WLU’s chancellor. He remained in that position until 2003.

Cleghorn retired from his corporate job in 2001, the same year he was honoured nationally as an officer of the Order of Canada. As a chancellor, Cleghorn was able to indulge his interest in Canadian history, sitting in on classes taught by history professor Terry Copp.

In 2001, Cleghorn, who is interested in First and Second World War history, donated money toward a battlefield viewing area in Normandy, France. He and his family also funded Canadian battlefield tours in Europe for WLU students, and provided support for the University's military history centre, the business faculty and campus landscaping. Today Cleghorn is on several community and corporate boards including serving as Chairman of Canadian Pacific Railway.

John Cleghorn once said he loves returning to Waterloo. "There's nothing better than coming back here on a fall afternoon. . . I look forward to it. I always feel rejuvenated."

*Photo courtesy of Wilfrid Laurier University.*