

The man who saved the Parliamentary Library from fire

By GARY LEVY

ON MARCH 11, 1976 an exhibition marking the 100th anniversary of the Parliamentary Library Building opens at the National Library in Ottawa. Among other things the exhibition has settled once and for all the identity of the person responsible for saving the Library when the Parliament Buildings were destroyed by fire in 1916. For years it has been part of the folklore on Parliament Hill that Arthur Meighen, later prime minister, shut the iron doors sealing the library off from the rest of the building. One of the best known publicizers of the story is Senator Eugene Forsey who says he was told by Mrs. Meighen that Arthur, on hearing the alarm, "thought at once of the library, rushed over to it and helped close the doors" (The Journal, Feb. 17, 1968). No evidence for this can be found in the Meighen papers, in Professor Roger Graham's three volume biography of Arthur Meighen or in the parliamentary and governmental papers concerning the fire.

In fact, while Senator Forsey is one of the most knowledgeable parliamentarians in Canada, the documents on exhibit at the National Library

and others in the Parliamentary Library prove he is mistaken in attributing the saving of the building to Arthur Meighen. The credit really belongs to a former library employee, Michael C. MacCormac. Four days after the fire — in a memorandum prepared for the Joint Parliamentary Librarians — Mr. A. Hamlyn Todd, Assistant Parliamentary Librarian, said he was going home at about 10.20 p.m. when he saw a bright glow in the direction of the Parliament Buildings. He made his way through the police and arrived at the library.

"I found Mr. MacCormac, two messengers and government police, with doors closed to prevent the rush of flames and smoke from entering the buildings, the adjoining passage-way to the library, on the other side of the iron door, being a sheet of fire. He reported to me that the first warning of fire came from one of the library messengers who shouted fire. On this warning he immediately ordered the iron door closed to check the rush of hot air and smoke which instantaneously made itself felt."

ONE WEEK later the prime minister, Sir Robert Borden, reported to the House of

Commons on damage to the library. He said:

"Mr. MacCormac, who was present at the outbreak of the fire, promptly had the iron doors leading into the corridor closed against the on-rush of smoke and flame. He was probably instrumental in saving the lives of some members who were in the library by refusing to open the doors and by sending them safely through the side door, usually kept locked and bolted."

An Ottawa newspaper (Citizen, Feb. 7, 1916) also noted that the magnificent library was practically intact, "due largely to the foresight of the officer in charge at the time, Mr. M. C. MacCormac . . . Two MPs — Messrs. Nickle and Thornton — were in the library at the time and wanted to get out, but the officer insisted upon their securing an exit by library caretaker's quarters. It is agreed that the prompt closing of the fire doors saved the library, whose contents are invaluable and to a great extent impossible of being replaced."

A royal commission was eventually established to investigate the fire and Mr. MacCormac was called to tes-

tify. Under oath he said:

"I went on duty a little before eight, and about the time the fire started I was engaged in getting information for two or three Members in the library at the time. I was at the west side of the library in one of the alcoves getting the information, and afterwards I recrossed the library to the east side to get a book for Mr. Nickle . . . One of the messengers cried out that the reading-room was on fire — it was full of smoke. I told him to lock the door. In the meantime, Mr. Nickle had gone out after he heard the cry, and he had to turn back again, but the door was then locked and kept locked — that is after Mr. Nickle returned."

On June 4, 1935 Mr. MacCormac became a Member of the Order of the British Empire and when he retired on Sept. 30, 1936 he received a testimonial address from the Honorable Martin Burrell, one of those who had been severely burned during the fire. Mr. Burrell recalled: "When the disastrous fire of Feb. 3, 1916, swept these great buildings, you had the foresight and quickness to close those iron doors which probably saved this special part of the buildings from destruction."

THUS insofar as it is possible to be sure of anything in this world, Michael C. MacCormac is the one who deserves credit for saving the library. Mr. MacCormac worked 51 years for the library and his action during the 1916 fire was acknowledged and recognized by his contemporaries. Yet twenty years after his retirement, when a memorial plaque commemorating the fire of 1916 was unveiled the minister of public works, Robert Winters, simply observed "the prompt closure of one of those doors saved the building from serious damage." Governor-General Vincent Massey speaking at the same occasion did allow that it was not some mechanical device which closed the door when he said the library was saved "by a prompt decision on the part of one of the staff." Such anonymity is customary for public servants, but surely this year, as the library celebrates its centennial, an appropriate way could be found to honor the memory of Michael MacCormac and to insure that credit for his coolheaded act is properly recorded for all time.

Mr. Levy is a researcher employed by the Parliamentary Library.