

Fellow Traveller A British Columbia Fisherman Writes Home from the Eastern Bloc, 1952

Benjamin Isitt

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NOTE AND DOCUMENT / NOTE ET DOCUMENT

Fellow Traveller: A British Columbia Fisherman Writes Home from the Eastern Bloc, 1952

Benjamin Isitt

IN AUTUMN 1952, FISHERMAN Elgin “Scotty” Neish travelled through Eastern Europe en route to the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference in Beijing, China. A member of the Labor-Progressive Party (LPP), as the Communist Party was then called, Neish penned letters home during his seven week trip for publication in *The Fisherman*, the newspaper of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers’ Union (UFAWU). These letters provide a unique window into the perspective of a radical British Columbia trade unionist at the height of the Cold War and touch on diverse global themes.

Elgin Neish was a salmon troller who had helped organize the UFAWU during World War II. The son of Scottish immigrants, he grew up in the squatter colony of Deadman’s Island, off Vancouver’s Stanley Park. After civic authorities evicted the squatter families in the early 1930s, Neish left school at age eleven to join his father and brothers fishing aboard the home-made skiff *Lindmore Lass*. He was a war veteran, serving in the “Gumboot Navy,” the armada of British Columbia fishers that guarded the coast against Japanese U-boat attack.¹ After the war, Neish belonged to the “militant minority” that challenged the assumptions and practices of the Cold War, as McCarthyism enveloped North American political culture and British Columbia’s “Red” unions came under siege.² According to a *Vancouver Province* exposé, the

1. Kevin Neish, interview by Benjamin Isitt, 11 May 2006, Victoria, British Columbia; Jean Barman, *Stanley Park’s Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch, and Brockton Point* (Vancouver 2005).

2. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York 1985), 2; Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935–56* (Toronto 1973), 111–138; Abella, “Communism and Anti-Communism in the British

UFAWU had “the tightest Communist control of any union on the North American continent. It has life and death power over BC’s second largest industry through a leadership hierarchy that is solid Communist from top to bottom.”³

Neish served as president of the UFAWU’s Victoria local, challenging large fishing combines for control of British Columbia’s resource wealth. The spring prior to his Beijing trip, Neish joined a flotilla of fishing boats that descended on Victoria’s inner harbour, pressuring politicians in the legislature to extend workers’ compensation benefits to fishers.⁴ As Neish departed for Eastern Europe and China, fishers tied up ships from the mouth of the Fraser to northern Prince Rupert in a major strike over the price of salmon, a dispute aggravated by slumping export markets.⁵ Neish expressed regret over his absence, but was confident that “the operators will know there is a Union in the fishing industry.”⁶ Like many communists, Elgin Neish was an early partisan of the postwar peace movement.⁷ His union had played a leading role at the first BC Peace Conference in May 1950, which endorsed the Stockholm Appeal for “the unconditional prohibition of the atomic weapon” – a statement the *Vancouver Sun* attacked as “a mischievous and evil thing.”⁸ Neish was elected founding president of the Victoria Peace Council, an affiliate of the BC Peace Committee where UFAWU secretary Homer Stevens served as first vice-president; business agent Alex Gordon travelled to Sheffield, England for the second World Peace Congress in 1950.⁹ Responding to the Korean War,

Columbia Labour Movement, 1940–1948,” in David Jay Bercuson, ed., *Western Perspectives 1: Papers of the Western Canadian Studies Conference, 1973* (Toronto and Montreal 1974), 88–100.

3. “15 Red-backed candidates running for seats in BC,” *Vancouver Province*, 6 December 1961.
4. “By Sea, Land They Came To Victoria Demanding Justice” and “Lobby Presses Legislature For Full Compensation,” *The Fisherman* (Vancouver), 18 March 1952; George North, *A Ripple, A Wave: The Story of Union Organization in the BC Fishing Industry* (Vancouver 1974), 42.
5. “Union Fishermen Solid For 1951 Chum Prices,” *The Fisherman*, 16 September 1952; also Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Canadian Security Intelligence Service fonds, RCMP Security Service, series A, vol. 2204, 85, file “Strike 7–4–1952 UFAWU.”
6. “Letter from Montreal: ‘Scotty’ On First Leg Of Trip to Peking Meet,” *The Fisherman*, 16 September 1952.
7. See Jennifer Anderson, “The Pro-Soviet Message in Words and Images: Dyson Carter and Canadian “Friends” of the USSR,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 18, no. 1 (2007), 179–2006. For pacifism and peace activism in Canada, see Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900–1945* (Toronto 1987); Peter Brock and Thomas P. Socknat, eds., *Challenge to Mars: Essays on Pacifism, 1918–1945* (Toronto 1999); also Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Paul Robeson in Canada: A Border Story,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 51 (Spring 2003), 177–221; Mark Kristmanson, “I Came to Sing: Paul Robeson on the Border,” *Plateaus of Freedom: Nationality, Culture, and State Security in Canada, 1940–1960* (Don Mills, ON 2003).
8. “Don’t Be a Blind Signer,” *Vancouver Sun*, 28 July 1950.
9. “Conference Seeks 75,000 Names for Peace,” *The Fisherman*, 6 June 1950; “People of



Elgin "Scotty" Neish, passport photo, 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

the UFAWU executive wired Canadian prime minister Louis St. Laurent urging a negotiated peace.¹⁰

Enduring communist strength in the UFAWU led to deteriorating relations with other unions and persecution of fishermen such as Neish. The parent Trades and Labor Congress of Canada had declared that "no known Communist can hold office in the Congress or its provincial and central bodies," lan-

guage incorporated into the Victoria Trades and Labor Council's constitution in a fractious vote.¹¹ In December 1950, Neish was stripped of his labour council credential on grounds of his association with the Victoria Peace Council and the "Ban the Bomb" campaign, prompting other UFAWU delegates to boycott the labour body.¹² In the mid-1950s, Neish would be expelled from the Royal Canadian Legion because of his "subversive" peace activities and criticism of the Korean War.¹³

Canada Join Fight For World Peace," *The Fisherman*, 18 July 1950; LAC, Canadian Security Intelligence Service fonds, RCMP Security Service, series A, vol. 2285, file "w1UC-Vancouver, BC," "Introduction to the Report of the Canadian Peace Congress," 6 May 1950; "World Peace Congress Outlines Job To Be Done," *The Fisherman*, 12 September 1950; "World Peace Congress To Forge New Charter," *The Fisherman*, 15 November 1950; "Britain Ends Long Tradition Of Freedom, Bars Leading Peace Congress Delegates," *The Fisherman*, 21 November 1950; "Europe's People Want Peace, Rebuild Devastated Areas," *The Fisherman*, 12 December 1950; "Declaration To People Issued By Peace Congress" and "Peace Program For United Nations," *The Fisherman*, 19 December 1950.

10. "End War By Negotiation UFAWU Executive Urges" and "End War In Korea," *The Fisherman*, 5 December 1950.

11. University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections (hereafter UVASC), Victoria Labour Council fonds, accession 80-59, series IV, box 5, Minutes, 19 April 1950; also Minutes, 1 March 1950; Bruce Lowther, *A Better Life: The First Century of the Victoria Labour Council* (Victoria 1989), 17.

12. UVASC, Victoria Labour Council fonds, accession 80-59, series IV, box 5, Minutes, 6 December 1950; also 19 July 1950; "Victoria Local Rebukes TLC Over Ban On Neish" and "UFAWU Locals Will Stick To Democracy," *The Fisherman*, 12 December 1950; Lowther, *A Better Life*, 18.

13. Neish's expulsion followed a year of hearings and legal exchanges. The original charge had been levelled in February 1954, by fellow Legionnaire Frank Partridge, a known anti-communist, outlining Neish's association with the Peace Council and LPP, his trip to China in 1952, and his criticism of the Canadian military's conduct in Korea. Neish contracted Vancouver

FISHERMAN

September 16, 1952

Men's Strike Song

NANCY NELSON

Vancouver Women's Auxiliary

"Ho," the Union boys
like with the Bosses,
late, so pull on your oars,
to take any losses.

"Ho," the sun's sinking fast—
the north wind's arising,
Oh Lord, danger is past,
and the tide in the morning.

"Ho," pull for the shore—
not a'coming, my laddies!
at a penny fish more
we back up our buddies.

"Ho," we're safe on dry land—
boats in a hurry
long, to meet all the gang,
learned boss fret and worry.

"Ho," The Hall is in sight,
and Homer are sweating;
load, put up a good fight,
strength they are getting.

"Ho," Though stormy winds blow
your duty.
stirk, keep up the good work
to win out with the booty.

"Ho," three cheers for the men,
strong and true,
of course, the finest of them—
stand behind you.



By ZERO TIDE

people who haven't got a pot to spit
of freedom . . . that is, freedom to
dom to scab, and freedom to lick the

take time and guts and a lot of
bovins.

Oh, yes, we said a scab is con-
sidered a fanatic; to hear out our
negotiation, in the case just men-
tioned, we heard at least a dozen
of the boys make this comment:
"He must have been nuts."

G. L. Miller, fisherman of Gil
Harbor, Washington, was in the
city last week paying a visit to Mr.

LETTER FROM MONTREAL

'Scotty' On First Leg Of Trip To Peking Meet

By ELGIN "SCOTTY" NEISH

MONTREAL, Sept. 10: It is just about two weeks ago since I was asked if I would accept nomination to attend the Pacific-Asiatic Peace and Economic Conference to be held in Peking, China, and it's just about a week ago since I got the word on the grounds that I was elected and we broke off our trip and returned to Vancouver and sold out our trip.

Well, here I am, September 10, ready in Montreal to leave to-morrow night for France on the second leg of my journey to Peking, China, in company with 11 other Canadian delegates to represent Canada at this all-important conference.

I believe I am the first fisherman to be on such an extended trip as this (although Homer Stevens was a member of the Beaver Brigade) and I have promised George North to keep him posted as my trip progresses, and also on the conference itself.

I felt right at home this morning when I came out of Central Station here in Montreal. It was pouring rain.

Coming across the prairies, they say what I saw from the train windows, was a bumper grain crop. I guess a few of the boys who left to go fishing will be wishing they were back there when they here the reports from home.

I met Laurie MacDonald on the train. He was returning to his home in Lockeport, Nova Scotia, after putting in the summer out of Prince Rupert on the halibut and I believe he said he was trolling with Thor on the "Larry II." He is considering moving his wife and family out to the coast so you better move over boys and make room.

By the price of things here, I would say the cost of living is about on a par with the West. Mind you, that is just from what I have seen in an afternoon of browsing around.

I know the meals are no different. You just get two small sausages, one pullet egg, two slices of toast, one piece custard pie and coffee for 75 cents plus five percent Hospital Tax. I hope the hospitals get it because there is very little social security in our Social Security Tax.

I notice there are many openings for waitresses (bilingual), I wonder if it could be on account of the miles they have to walk in relation to the way they get. On the West Coast, the waitresses just keep their top of the table clean. Down here, I notice that while they are "resting," the proprietor gives

them a bucket of water and a rag and they wash all the tables and chairs right down to the floor. I guess they might even have to do the floor but I ran out of food to eat before they got to the floor. The one that served me took a rest between me and the next customer by washing four chairs and two tables. A janitor must find it hard to get employment in restaurants here in Montreal.

Talking about meals, I went back into the dining car on the way across and took one look at the menu and walked right back out again (by the way people looked at me, I guess that's the first time it happens). I bought myself a can opener, knife, fork, pork and beans, sardines, etc., at the next stop and mugged up in the galley of our tourist coach all the way here. I haven't lost any weight yet.

Well, it's two o'clock in the morning and I guess I had better get to bed or I'll be looking like that guy's picture they've got posted in my passport.

P.S.—I sure hated to leave the West Coast when our Union was entering into a major strike and I have not heard how things are coming but I imagine by this time the operators will know there is a Union in the fishing industry.

CUMMINS DIESEL SALES OF B. C. LTD.



DEPENDABLE DIESELS
DIESEL ENGINES

1450 East Georgia Vancouver

Neish's first letter in *The Fisherman*, September 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

Such was the context for Elgin Neish's 1952 trip across the Soviet Bloc to Beijing. In early September, he was elected as one of twelve Canadian delegates to the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference, which took place from 2–12 October 1952, a trip sponsored by the UFAWU, other "red" unions, and local peace councils. The Beijing conference reflected the global contours of communist-led peace activism during the early Cold War years and also revealed strong ties between Canadian and Chinese communists; organized by the Chinese Peace Committee, it saw 400 "fellow travelers" from 35 countries pass behind the "bamboo curtain."¹⁴ Neish returned from the fishing grounds and then boarded a Canadian Pacific Railway train to Montreal – travelling around the world rather than across the Pacific due to the limitations of air technology and restrictive border laws. He flew to Paris and then visited Prague and Moscow, receiving first-class treatment as a fraternal traveller to these "new Democracies."¹⁵ Neish then hop-scotched by short-haul plane across Central Asia and Mongolia to Beijing.¹⁶ At the Chinese capital's industrial exhibition, he marvelled at the array of manufactured goods (subject to an American-led trade embargo) and insisted that "you cannot blockade half the world."¹⁷ In his address to peace delegates in Beijing, Neish tied the emerging international arms race to the living conditions of the working class: "as long as the cold war policies and the building up of armaments are being pursued, the living standards of the working people will continue to get worse."¹⁸

lawyer Harry Rankin as he prepared his defence. In January 1955, the charges against Neish were sustained and he was expelled from the Legion's Britannia Branch No. 7. See Kevin Neish Papers (private collection), File "Expulsion from Legion," Partridge to Secretary, 23 February 1954 ("Charge Against Elgin Neish"); Chairman (Trial Committee) to Neish, 5 March 1954; Anderson to Parker, 9 March 1954; Parker to Neish, 19 March 1954; Rankin to Neish, 29 March 1954; Ray Gardner to Neish, 20 January 1955; "Fight Looms Over Legion Suspension," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 January 1955.

14. For Australia's response to the conference, see Phillip Deery and Craig McLean, "'Behind Enemy Lines': Menzies, Evatt and Passports for Peking," *The Round Table* 92, no. 1 (July 2003), 407–422; also Stephen Endicott, *James G. Endicott: Rebel out of China* (Toronto 1980); Chung Chih-cheng, *Norman Bethune in China* (Peking 1975); Ted Alan and Sydney Gordon, *The Scalpel, the Sword: The Story of Dr. Norman Bethune* (Toronto 1974).

15. "China Does Want Our Goods," *The Fisherman*, 4 November 1952.

16. At the time of Neish's trip, Mongolia fell squarely within the Soviet orbit – as it did from the 1920s to 1980s. In early 1952, Russian-educated economist Yumjaagin Tsendenbal had seized power in a coup, ruling with a firm hand and moving closer to the USSR following the Sino-Soviet split. See Robert A. Rupen, "Mongolia in the Sino-Soviet Dispute," *China Quarterly* 16 (October 1963), 75–85.

17. "China Does Want Our Goods," *The Fisherman*, 4 November 1952.

18. "Text Of Speech By Elgin Neish To Asian, Pacific Peace Meet," *The Fisherman*, 18 November 1952; also Kevin Neish Papers (private collection), Speech by Elgin Neish, 11 October 1952, as published in *The Peace Conference of the Asian and Pacific Regions Bulletin, October 2–12, 1952, Peking*, English Ed. (Peking 1952), 146.

Writing from the eastern bloc in 1952, Neish revealed his views on class relations in Canada, shone light on fraternal bonds within the international communist movement, and illuminated aspects of cultural, economic, and political life behind the “Iron Curtain.” Like many red-tinged “peace workers,” Neish’s views often jelled with the strategic imperatives of Soviet foreign policy and he cast an uncritical eye on the social experiments unfolding in Prague, Moscow, Ulan Bator, and Beijing. Demands for “peace,” trade with belligerent countries, and a ban on atomic weapons – although motivated by benevolent ideals – served the dual purpose of blunting the military capacity of NATO armies in their crusade against expansionary communism. Neish visited Moscow and Beijing as Canadian soldiers fought a proxy war against Chinese and Russian communism in Korea. Neish’s journey occurred during the apex of Sino-Soviet friendship and the twilight of Stalin’s rule; his experiences would shape his attitude during raucous debates that split the BC Communist Party in the 1960s, when he and others were expelled for “Maoist sympathies.”¹⁹ In 1952, however, Neish’s sympathies lay squarely with the united communist bloc in its conflict against the capitalist democracies of the West. Elgin “Scotty” Neish, a lifetime fisherman with a grade six education, sought to transcend Cold War barriers and forge working-class solidarities more durable than national boundaries.



MONTREAL, CANADA, 10 September 1952:

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19. Kevin Neish, interview by Benjamin Isitt, 11 May 2006, Victoria, British Columbia; Kevin Neish Papers (private collection), file “China-Soviet Split/CP Expulsions,” J.A. Scott to National Committee, 7 June 1964; LAC, Communist Party of Canada fonds, reel H1593, vol. 24, file 24–25 “British Columbia Provincial Committee Meetings, Minutes,” Minutes of Provincial Committee meeting, 23 May 1964; Jack Scott, *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985*, ed. Bryan D. Palmer (St. John’s 1988), 137–157.

20. The Beaver Brigade was the name given to the Canadian contingent to the World Youth Festival of 1947, held in Yugoslavia. See “Homer Stevens Delegate to World Youth Festival,” *The*



Elgin Neish and the Canadian peace delegation boarding an Air France jet at Montreal, 10 September 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

promised George North [editor of *The Fisherman*] to keep him posted as my trip progresses and also on the conference itself.

I felt right at home this morning when I came out of Central Station here in Montreal. It was pouring rain.

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Fisherman, 23 May 1947; "Canadian Youth Termed Shock Brigade, Honored," *The Fisherman*, 3 October 1947; "Banquet Oct. 17 To Greet Youth Festival Delegates," *The Fisherman*, 10 October 1947; Homer Stevens and Rolf Knight, *Homer Stevens: A Life in Fishing* (Madeira Park, BC 1992), 79-83.

is considering moving his wife and family out to the coast so you better move over boys and make room.

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Well, it's two o'clock in the morning and I guess I had better get to bed or I'll be looking like that guy's picture they've got pasted in my passport.

PS – I sure hated to leave the West Coast when our Union was entering into a major strike and I have not heard how things are coming but I imagine by this time the operators will know there is a Union in the fishing industry.²¹

PRAGUE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 16 September 1952:

Here in the dining room of the Hotel Flora, Prague it is common place to sit down to your meal and upon starting a conversation with the person on your right, find that he or she does not speak English and have an Irishman across the table translate what you have to say into Spanish for the benefit of the delegate from Guatemala on my right who through my translator tells me he can also speak French but no English, or in the case of the person on my left who comes from Indonesia who speaks both French and English and his own native tongue.

21. "Letter from Montreal: 'Scotty' On First Leg Of Trip to Peking Meet," *The Fisherman*, 16 September 1952.



Elgin Neish at Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, 11 September 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

The Guatemala group includes a columnist from a rightist newspaper, a director of their principal radio station, and a young man who is a communist party member of the Guatemala Legislature.

Story of Colombia

The Colombia group is made up of one scientist, a doctor who is specializing in nutrition, and another young medical doctor as well as a small man who represents a large group – the peasants of Colombia. The Minister of Defence has made the proclamation prior to these men leaving for the Peking Peace Conference, “That all those who attend the Peking Peace Conference will be deemed as traitors and will be dealt with as such upon their return to Colombia.”

The stories they tell of what is going on in Colombia are almost unbelievable. There have been over 60,000 people killed in less than three years by the

government in an effort to hold the people in check. They say there have been hundreds of Lidices in Colombia.

Lidice Horror

We went to visit Lidice today and saw where the old village stood in the new Lidice. In revenge for the killing of one German (Heydrich who was a Germany military man in charge of the Prague area) by seven Czechoslovakian patriots, the entire village was blown completely off the face of the earth. The Nazis swooped down on the village in the early hours of the dawn and routed every man, woman, and child out of bed. The men were taken out into the village square and every last one of them lined up and shot (173 in all, ranging from 14-year-old Horonk Josef, to the eldest, 88 years of age) and the women sent to one concentration camp and the children to another.

Out of the 98 children who were taken out of the village, only 14 were returned to their mothers (their fathers all being dead). We saw all the documentary evidence of this including the picture from the Nazi film (as it was all recorded to show other ss troops how to completely destroy a village) in the Lidice museum. It took the demolition regiment in charge of this work six months to complete the job, but what was once a fine village is now completely leveled to the ground with just the odd pile of rubble showing through the ground.

New Lidice, built on a nearby rise of ground, is fast becoming a modern village with ultra-modern homes, streets, playgrounds, restaurants, etc.

Treated Royally

Upon our arrival here in Prague, our entire Canadian group (11 persons) were given 500 Kroner in Czechoslovakian money and 20 meal tickets, and splendid rooms in one of the finest hotels in Prague. The meals we receive free are excellent and the 200 Kroners a day to pay incidentals which we might need or presents to take home.

We have been supplied with a guide and two buses at our disposal to take us to places like Lidice and also on tours of the wonderful, beautiful city of Prague.

The night before last I saw a Czechoslovak opera (the first opera I had ever seen in my life) and tonight we saw two wonderful pictures. One was a puppet picture, a satire on two well known Hollywood actors, and the other, the most beautiful Technicolor picture I have ever seen called "Tomorrow We Dance," which dealt with Czechoslovak folk songs and dances, and ended with the most beautiful scenes from the World Youth Festival in Berlin.

Visited Peace Council

The other morning we went to visit John Darr, the secretary of the World Peace Council in their own building here in Prague. He took us in to one of the huge council chambers where we sat in huge chairs with magnificent hand-carved

arms. Around another huge table (The chamber and all the furniture, etc., would make what our cabinet uses in our Provincial Government House look petty) we discussed the world peace movement.

This entire building, a huge structure, (formerly occupied by the Society of Architects which moved to other quarters) five stories high which contains their own restaurant in the basement, was put at the disposal of the World Peace Movement for free.

We discussed the coming peace conference in Vienna (sometime in November I believe) to which all countries are invited to send delegates from all walks of life to bring THEIR OWN ideas and to expound them at this world-wide Peace Conference at Vienna.

I don't doubt those of you who are in touch with the peace movement have already heard of this conference. To those who have not, I would urge you to raise the subject in your local Union, PTA, or other organizational meeting to send a letter to the BC Peace Committee headquarters re the sending of delegates to this all-important conference

Have World By Tail

We have been here in Prague four days and have been wandering individually and in groups all over this large city, taking pictures and talking to people to our heart's content.

These people appear to me to have the world by the tail with a down hill pull. They are well dressed, the shops are full of food, including wines and beer, well housed, etc., and given a little time they will have an abundance of everything.

I cannot start to tell you everything I have seen here that is pleasing to the eyes, but undoubtedly will have the chance to tell a large section of the B.C. population about Prague and the rest of my journey (which is only started) and the actual Peace Conference at Peking through public meetings upon my return to British Columbia.

We are leaving for Peking tomorrow morning via Moscow.²²

MOSCOW, RUSSIA, 19 September 1952:

So much has happened or should I say I have seen so much since my last letter from Prague that I do not know where to start (we have only been in Moscow 12 hours). If I was to write down everything I have seen or heard that I know is of interest to the readers of *The Fisherman*, I would be here over 12 hours.

We landed at the Moscow airport and were ushered into a room to bide our time while we went through customs individually. We were met by Mr.

22. "Letter from Prague: 'Scotty' Sees Lidice; Prague Impresses," *The Fisherman*, 7 October 1952.

John Boyd²³ and representatives of the Chinese Republic. Our waiting room was just about on a par with what you would find in the lobby of the Hotel Vancouver.

As we approached Moscow by air, the first thing that caught the eye was the huge Moscow University building which we passed on our drive from the airport. It is a stupendous undertaking surrounded by huge buildings all of which are in different stages of construction.

On the outskirts of Moscow, we passed considerable number of hovels which are still in use but which have been earmarked according to John Boyd, our Canadian interpreter, for destruction by certain date to be replaced by modern apartments which we could see being constructed all along the route in from the airport.

Already, in several instances, I saw the manholes of sewers built up with brick, higher than the rooftops in between several rows of these hovels. The dirt fill was being pushed right up to the very doors of the buildings where the road to the university building will very shortly pass over the side of this particular group of hovels.

Housing is in acute demand here in spite of the tremendous building projects which are going on. The population of Moscow is growing so rapidly (from around four million in 1926 to close to seven million at present which I believe are the figures used) it is placing a tremendous strain on the building industry to keep apace and get ahead of the population growth. It is understood that where people's homes are demolished to make way for new developments, these people have the first choice when new apartments are built.

Upon our arrival in Moscow, we were given rooms in the Hotel Metropole which is one of the older hotels in Moscow dating back to the time of the Czar, and for the second time I found myself sharing a room with Doctor Dwight Johnson²⁴, a medical doctor of Brandon who is a member of your Canadian group going to Peking. Our room is really something that I don't think could be equaled any place in Vancouver outside the Hotel Vancouver.

Walking down the large corridors of the hotel is like walking through a museum as there are marble pillars and alcoves full of seats, chairs, tables, and furnishings which are museum pieces and would bring thousands of dollars as antiquities. Anybody interested in furnishings could really enjoy themselves

23. John Boyd was a prominent Canadian communist from 1930 to 1968. He resigned from the party after the Czechoslovakian crisis. See John Boyd, *A Noble Cause Betrayed... But Hope Lives On: Pages from a Political Life: Memoirs of a Former Ukrainian Canadian Communist* (Edmonton 1999).

24. Dr. Dwight Lyman Johnson was Manitoba CCF MLA for Brandon from 1943–1945. Elected in a 1943 by-election, Johnson was expelled for his left-wing activity in 1945 and defeated in the subsequent election, which he contested as an independent candidate. In the late 1940s, Johnson joined the LPP. See Nelson Wiseman, *Social Democracy in Manitoba: A History of the CCF-NDP* (Winnipeg 1983); Errol Black, "Labour in Brandon Civic Politics: The Long View," *Manitoba History* 23 (Spring 1992), 2–16.



Neish in front of one of Stalin's *Vysotki* (skyscrapers or "Seven Sisters"), Moscow, September 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

walking through these corridors admiring the furnishings of this lavish building. Two members of our Canadian group, Mr. Finlay McKenzie of Toronto and Mr. Gerard Filgon [sic. Filion], a newspaper editor from Montreal, have a grand piano in their suite.²⁵

The supper we ate (and the breakfast this morning) was something you read about but which the ordinary person very seldom gets a chance to participate in, included everything from Georgian wine (and vodka which to my taste is easier to take and far better than the best scotch whisky), caviar (white or

25. The Canadian delegation consisted of 12 people, including Gérard Filion, publisher of *Le Devoir* from 1947 to 1963 and an outspoken critic of the Duplessis government. An associate of André Laurendeau and Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Filion later wrote a preface for the French-language edition of CCF MP Stanley Knowles' *Le Nouveau Parti* (Montreal 1961); see also Pierre Elliot Trudeau, *Federalism and the French Canadians* (Toronto 1968).

black), borsch [sic], salads, beefsteak (one and a half inch thick), french fries, soda water (no coke) two flavors, mineral water bottled in mountains, mild cure salmon, ice-cream sundaes, french pastry, tea or coffee, several types of bread (including black bread which everybody enjoyed) and butter, cigarettes and matches. I feel that this meal could not be equalled anywhere in Vancouver regardless of price. The Georgian wine and the vodka were as we say "Out of this world."

Our breakfast this morning was just a small edition of our supper last night without the wine and vodka, but I guess we could have had that too by requesting it.

After supper we took a short walk (we are only a block away from Lenin's tomb and the Red Square up one of the streets running past the hotel). I will say this that there is heavy vehicular traffic here in Moscow but I don't think they will ever have the traffic problems of other cities because I don't believe there is any city in the world that has as wide streets as Moscow. Coming in from the airport, we travelled on streets that had six lanes of traffic going each way and each lane was not crowded either.

The Russian motor cars from what I can see from looks and style are quite similar to ours although there is not the number of different styles or models and not quite so much chrome trim as our very latest models.

Since writing the above, I have just come back from a two-hour tour of Moscow in a Zim. It is not the biggest or best car they build here as this position is held by the model called Ziss (the other half of our group was in a Ziss) and a Zim is similar to our 1949 better class car such as the Buick, Studebaker, and that class, while the Ziss is similar to our 1949 Cadillac as it is a little longer in the wheel base than the Zim. The Zim I travelled on had a radio, heater both in front and back, two folding seats for five passengers in the back if you so wished with the conventional front seat for three, white side wall tires, and a very fine car to ride in.

Several of the streets were travelled on had eight lanes of traffic flowing in each direction.

We saw a huge apartment building of skyscraper dimensions pretty near finished which contains 450 suites of which there are eight such structures to be built in Moscow.

We also saw the Moscow University building which is being built on the outskirts of Moscow now but which soon will be surrounded as Moscow expands.

The university will have 6,000 students all with separate rooms. The university library will contain six million books. It has one hundred and eleven elevators, some being express only stopping at the tenth floor, etc. It contains a swimming pool and gymnasium right in the main building; there are 32,170 rooms, halls, etc.



Neish with Russian children, Moscow, September 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

We were down to the banks of the Moscow River opposite the Kremlin and on the opposite side of the Kremlin where we saw Lenin's tomb. I believe tomorrow, if we have time, we may go into the tomb itself.

Tonight we are going to the opera at the Bolshoi Theatre to see an opera called "Swan Lake" of which the star ballerina is possibly the outstanding ballerina in the world.

I will have to tell you about that in my next letter as it's time to leave for the opera.²⁶

26. "Letter from Moscow: 'Scotty' Visits the Ballet," *The Fisherman*, 21 October 1952.

ULAN BADOR, MONGOLIA (undated, late September 1952):

I hope you will excuse me if I skip over from Moscow to Ulan Bador in the Mongolian People's Republic (a matter of about 3,000 miles). I am having a tough row to hoe trying to make up my mind whether to keep on going out to see things to make notes on or staying in and writing to those groups responsible for sending me on this Peace Mission to Peking.

When we have any time at a stop-over place such as Moscow, the people in charge of making us welcome fill our entire waiting hours with such a full schedule of events and trips to places of interest that it does not leave time for sleeping, let alone letter writing. This goes for every place we have touched on this trip. I am writing this letter as we are flying over the Great Gobi Desert and are preparing to land at some very isolated place on the desert called Sain Shanda, which is half way between Ulan Bador and Peking.

At this point, I would like to urge any person who would like to hear my report upon my return to raise it at the next meeting of their local Peace Council, or local Trade Union, or individually get together and form a sponsoring group. Make arrangements for a hall or a house meeting and then get in touch with the B.C. Peace Committee, Room 41, Ray Building, Vancouver. I will only be available for a limited time owing to a very poor fishing season. As a result of my financial resources being low, I will have to go to work in order to keep the home fires burning.

The Mongolian Peace Committee had the small airport at Ulan Bador decorated with two large peace flags (blue silk with white peace dove) and a large portrait of Joliot-Curie.²⁷ The delegates greeted us warmly and invited us in to the airport to have wine, tea, cakes, etc., and presented us all with their Mongolian Peace Pin, a small blue enameled flag with a white peace dove, and a small album containing about 15 of their commemorative Mongolian postage stamps.

Our delegation was very pleased (so were the representatives of the Mongolian Peace Committee) when we were told that we were to spend the night in Ulan Bador. We were loaded into a modern bus and taken to one of their mountain resorts where we had a wonderful supper and then to the capital city of the Mongolian Republic, Ulan Bador, where we saw their large buildings including a Drama Theatre where there is drama every night except Wednesday (the day we were there) and the university building where 1,200 students are registered this year. Thirty-one years ago, there was one school in the Mongolian Republic; now there are 500 schools. At that time, the population was 99 percent illiterate; now it is 98 percent literate. They showed

27. Nobel laureate Irène Joliot-Curie was an esteemed nuclear scientist (like her parents Marie Curie and Pierre Curie and husband Frédéric Joliot-Curie). She served on the Comité National de l'Union des Femmes Françaises and World Peace Council. See *Nobel Lectures, Chemistry: 1922-1941* (Amsterdam 1966), 375-376.

us through their library which contains 200,000 books and is visited by 150 people in the average each day.

The city has a population of 100,000 and the population of the Mongolian Republic is 1,000,000. It contains 25 million head of stock which is the main industry although they have mining, lumber, agriculture, and some small industry. Starting October 5 to 10 is a period of holiday and fiesta to celebrate the close friendship between the Republic of Mongolia and the Peoples' Republic of China.

Our guides emphasized the fact that most of their buildings had only been erected since the early 1940s because up until then, they were responsible for keeping the Japanese armies at bay along 500 kilometers of their borders. It was only after the defeat of the Japanese that they were able to undertake the construction of such buildings as the university (opened in 1946).

Due to the fact that we did not return to our mountain resort hotel till after midnight from our tour of Ulan Bator (when there was tea and cookies served in the dining room), we were called at 4:30 to wash and have breakfast as our plane took off at 6:00 and the airport was a half hour drive from the hotel.

I did not get much sleep so I will have to close now and try and catch a few winks before we arrive at Peking because I feel then our work will really begin.

Wishing, hoping and working for world peace.²⁸

PEKING, CHINA, 5 October 1952:

We, the delegates, had a special rostrum to view the National Liberation Day Parade.²⁹

It was colossal. There were over 600,000 people participating in it. Peace was the main theme and there were thousands of live Peace Doves released by the children with thousands more carrying replicas of the peace Dove in hundreds of different sizes and positions.

Also, there were all the different industries carrying the huge signs showing how the production in their own field or industry has increased. Chairman Mao Tse Tung reviewed the parade and gave special greetings to us peace delegates.

Conference Opened

The next day, the Pacific Peace Conference was opened and the opening address was given by Madame Soon Ching Ling who brought to our attention

28. "Letter from Scotty: A Night In Mongolia, Last Stop To Peking," *The Fisherman*, 28 October 1952.

29. National Liberation Day is China's national holiday, celebrating the anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 with the Communists' victory over the Kuomintang.



Asia-Pacific Peace Conference, Beijing, China, 2-12 October 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

the fact that this was the second International Peace Conference to be held in China; the other taking place in Shanghai in September, 1933.

At the time, Japan had already taken Manchuria and was using it as a base from which to spring an all-out attack on China. This was particularly denounced by the Peace Organization of that period.

It was at that time practically worth one's life to speak of unity within China and resistance to the enemy, or to seek a people's peace here or throughout the world. No person would rent them a hall. Authorities would not allow the peace delegates to disembark from their ship. But, in spite of these bans, a peace meeting was held.

The peace movement at that time represented some 30 million people as compared today with the 603 million persons who signed the demand for a Peace Pact among the five great powers, organized by the World Peace Council.

As there have been four very full days of the conference lapse since the opening address, I will not attempt to cover the intervening period of the conference in this letter but will leave that to my reports upon my return to Canada.



Peace Meeting, Square of the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, 13 October 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

Interesting Experience

But before I close this report I would like to mention a very interesting experience I had here.

Today being Sunday, it was decided by the Presidium of the Conference that the morning session should be cancelled to allow the delegates to attend church services. Not being a churchgoer, I took advantage of the morning to see the Peking Industrial Exhibition which is an Industrial Exhibition the same as any other Industrial Exhibition any place in the world. It shows what is manufactured in the Peking area.

I was simply amazed (and I say that without qualification) at what is manufactured here in Peking. More so when it is considered that Peking was strictly a consumer city prior to 1949.

There were seven pavilions (or halls) and I only saw two of them; one covering eight different industries and one of handicraft. They had four of industry.

To give you some idea of what is being manufactured here, I am going to go down the list I jotted down in my note book: Cotton goods; woolen goods; paper, from writing to roofing; drugs, from ether to glucose; rubber, from

football bladders to pressure air hose; plywood, from matches to finishing veneer; mineral oil, from facial creams to axle grease; porcelain water, from bed pans to tea pots; fire extinguishers; ceramics, from bath tubs to wash basins; glazed tiles; radios; movie projectors; electric transformers; power-house switches; floodlights; telephone switchboards; storage batteries (both wet and dry cell types); all types of wiring from light ignition cables to heavy duty underwater cable; carpets and bicycles.

Must Trade Soon

Now, mind you, I am not saying that these goods are being mass-produced, but the thought struck me: if we don't trade with these people soon, they will be in a position where they won't need to trade with us at all. I myself figure that by blockading these countries, all we are doing is forcing them to become self-sustaining quicker.

I just heard yesterday that China has built its first all-China car which is similar to the jeep only with a wider wheel base.

Now I maintain that if we had not put up a blockade it would not have been necessary for China to attempt to build its own car for many years to come due to the fact the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, etc., can supply them with only a limited number of cars and they must have cars. The only alternative, due to the blockade, is to build their own.

Is it not reasonable to assume that if our cars, etc., were available, that the natural thing to do is buy these things from us till the time comes for them to change their economy over to an industrial one? All we, I should say the United States, as they are the ones responsible for our foreign policy, have done, is stepped up the process and forced these people to become industrialized much sooner.

What About Our Bosses?

I think the businessman who allows himself to be misled in that line is "cutting his nose to spite his face." Another good example of this is the bus that transports us to and from the Conference Hall. It is brand new, like all the others used for this purpose, and they are built right here in China with the exception of the engines which are diesel from Czechoslovakia. Now, why couldn't we have built them in Canada?

It has been stressed time and again since I arrived here, China would welcome trade from Canada. But that doesn't mean that they want Coca-Cola or nylon stockings. They are willing to trade on the basis of material and equal advantage. That is, they might even consider Coca-Cola and nylons but you can only expect trash in exchange for trash.

No—I would say it's time our businessmen realized they are not dealing with infants and that you cannot blockade half the world.

The people of China, Republic of Mongolia, Soviet Union, and the other new Democracies, include in fact, one half of the world. Eastern Germany can

continue to grow and flourish whether United States and co. blockade them or not.

They might be slowed down momentarily but the time lapse is insignificant. What it actually means is just as if some big industrial corporation in the United States found, through some strike or stoppage, that they could not get their nails locally to build a house in New York, so instead they got them from San Francisco.

That is about all the inconvenience they are causing this half of the world.³⁰

TIENTSIN, CHINA, 16 October 1952:

I hope you will excuse the delay between letters but I have been putting off writing till I had delivered my short address to the conference, then, I was held up further waiting for a copy of my speech to reach me as they took my only copy for reprinting in the bulletin.

Actually, I guess all this is due to my feeling of self importance because there have been happenings and some tremendously important speeches delivered by important men and women at this conference that will go down in history to the benefit of mankind for years to come, and make anything "Scotty" Neish said fade into insignificance.

Important Declaration

I think the most important single thing to take place here at the conference was the signing of the Joint Declaration between India and Pakistan delegates to this conference.

In this Declaration, it states quite clearly that the two delegations agree to the settlement of all their differences by negotiations and leave the Kashmir problem to be solved by the people of the Kashmir.

The signing of the Declaration by the leaders of the two delegations was accompanied by the exchange of gifts, much hugging of each of the leaders amidst thunderous, prolonged applause and cheering of the delegates.

It must be kept in mind that both India and Pakistan had very large delegations – well over 30 each from all walks of life and members of both the Indian and Pakistan governments from both sides of the house and all different religious beliefs.

When the Declaration was signed, the entire membership of these two delegations, swarmed into the middle aisle of the conference hall and clasped hands and hugged each other, picking each other up on their shoulders and marched them up and down to the tune of the thunderous applause and cheering of the conference.

30. "China Does Want Our Goods," *The Fisherman*, 4 November 1952. The Editor's Note to this story advises readers that Scotty "just arrived home and has plenty to report."

Trade With Ceylon

The second important announcement was that the Ceylon Trade Delegation which was negotiating a trade agreement with Peking at the same time as the conference was taking place, had signed an agreement under which the Chinese representatives had agreed upon the delivery to Ceylon of 80 thousand tons of rice in exchange for the right to participate and purchase rubber in Ceylon.

This type of an agreement is what the Chinese people mean by trade on a mutual and equitable basis of benefit to both nations and not taking Ceylon's rubber and Chinese rice in exchange for Coca-Cola, nylon stockings and the other such pottage.

The day after the conference came to a victorious conclusion with the passing of all resolutions and declarations unanimously, the Mayor of Peking invited all delegates to attend a huge peace meeting in the Square of the Temple of Heaven.

There were over 50,000 Young Pioneers and other youth groups along with Trade Union and Athletic groups in the Square, all armed with bunches of flowers and branches of trees with imitation cherry blossoms, etcetera on them.

"Long Live Peace"

To get to the Square, the Peace Delegates had to walk through huge courtyard after courtyard filled with cheering children shouting "Hoepa Quan Soo Ai" (Long Live Peace). I guess my Chinese translation is not very good. They jumped up and down and strained eagerly forward to shake your hand, and if you made the mistake of reaching too far back into the crowd and they got you off balance, they eagerly pulled you into the mass of children. These young children, both boys and girls by strength of their numbers, picked delegate after delegate up off their feet and hoisted them on to their shoulders while screaming their enthusiasm for their victory in getting a peace delegate to themselves and into their own possession.

Upon entering this last huge Square which was just a sea of packed humanity busting with their "Peace Chant", it gave a person a great feeling of gratification that the Chinese people could show such enthusiasm for humble peace workers who in their estimation were raised and praised to a level of the highest people of their land.

While we were all filing in and fighting our way through this hand-shaking sea of people to our places of honor on the Rostrum, the youth out in the middle of this sea of waving cherry blossoms were building pyramids by climbing on each other's shoulders, three and four high with the top man waving cherry blossoms or cardboard replicas of the Peace Dove.

There were groups of Buddhist Monks and Roman Catholic Priests and Nuns as well as other religious groups unknown to me, participating in this



Neish being greeted by Young Pioneers, Beijing, 13 October 1952.

SOURCE: NEISH FAMILY COLLECTION

massive demonstration (although in a more subdued manner in keeping with their custom).

Bouquets For Delegates

After the rally, we were presented with huge bouquets of flowers by Young Pioneers and had once again run the gauntlet through the masses of cheering, surging youth to get to our busses. They took us back to our Peace Hotel (built especially for the peace delegates in 75 days) for a short rest, then back to a banquet as guests of the people of Peking presided over by the Mayor.

Upon our arrival at the Banquet Hall, we were again besieged by the youth of Peking who had remained here during our absence and reassembled of their free will to shake hands and exchange greetings with hundreds upon hundreds of these cheering youth. They were lined up in such a manner that you could reach out and shake your hands from both sides at once so that when you stretched your hands out each side, about 10 children would grab each hand and shake it vigorously.

Scotty Was "Sore"

After eating a huge meal amidst numerous toasts, we left the Banquet Hall to go to the theatre and the youth were still there. I can tell you, when I returned to the hotel that night, I was aching all up my arms and across my back from the pummelling I received at the hands of these vigorous and enthusiastic youth.

If I live to be one hundred, I will never have a more thrilling experience than I had that day.³¹

Text of Elgin Neish Speech to Asia & Pacific Peace Conference PEKING, CHINA, 11 October 1952:

As a commercial fisherman, an active trade unionist and a worker for peace from the Canadian west coast province of British Columbia, it gives me great pleasure to bring you warm and heartfelt greetings from the peace workers in the Canadian trade union movement.

Today in Canada, the members of the trade union movement and the working class as a whole are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their living standards. This is due to the fact that the Canadian Government follows the "cold war" policies of the United States. As a result of these policies, our country is losing its markets for its products and its manufactured goods one after the other.

The loss of these markets means less profits for the owners and operators of the industries affected. They, in turn, instead of putting pressure upon our government to change its policies, seek to lower the wages of our workers and increase the prices of consumer goods to our people.

In my province, British Columbia, logging and the wood products industries make up the major portion of the province's economy. When, as a result of the cold war policies of our government, Canada lost its British lumber markets, our lumber operators launched a concerted drive to lower wages throughout the industry as a means of maintaining their profits at a high level. This brought on a strike throughout the entire industry.

Our Canadian fishing industry is in exactly the same position. Since the loss of the British market for Canada's canned salmon, our fishermen have been advocating for quite some time that our government break away from the foreign policy of the United States and begin trade with all countries of the world through barter or long-term credits.

But our cannery operators, instead of backing the workers' demands, began to lower wages and prices paid for fish. As a result, our fisheries have been

31. "Enthusiastic Chinese Youngsters Make Scotty 'Sore' All Over," *The Fisherman*, 12 November 1952.

engaged in strike after strike, and our entire fishing industry has been thrown into a continuous crisis.

So far I have mentioned only two industries – those with which I am most familiar – but the same situation exists in many other industries in my country, ranging from agricultural products to manufactured goods of all kinds – almost everything except war materials and goods needed for war.

Another tragic problem in Canada's economy, which is a direct result of the cold war policies being followed by our government and which is of particular interest to this conference, is the loss of our merchant marine.

Canada's merchant navy and her merchant seamen helped to write a glorious chapter in the history of World War II. Yet, in spite of this proud record, our merchant marine is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

There is still another problem facing the workers of the Pacific Region which flows out of the policy of hatred and preparation for war and which can set a dangerous precedent if unchecked. I refer to the Tripartite Fishery Treaty signed between the United States, Canada and Japan soon after the infamous San Francisco Treaty.

By this treaty, both Canada and Japan have been forced to waive the rights of their nationals to fish in certain international waters of the north Pacific Ocean bounding on the shores of Alaska. Thus the Bering Sea has virtually been made a fishing preserve for U.S. fishermen. Yet by this treaty, if any fourth nation encroaches on these waters, both Canada and Japan can be called upon by the United States to join her in an international protest.

It is difficult to imagine that any sovereign nation would sign such a one-sided "agreement," yet Japan has already signed, while Canada has indicated its readiness to do likewise despite the widespread and angry protests from the entire fishing industry.

Every nation which has an outlet to the sea is interested to some degree in the protection of its fishing industry. This is especially true of those nations which are interested in increasing the living standards of their populations. The Pacific Ocean is big enough and rich enough to be shared by all the nations on its shores and no nation should be allowed to exploit it at the expense of others. That is why I, as a fisherman from Canada, say: Let us have friendly economic relations and unrestricted trade between the peoples of the Pacific! Through trade we shall find the path to friendship and peace!

I find myself in full agreement with the statements made earlier in this Conference by Mr. R. Thornton of the World Federation of Trade Unions, that the main problem facing the trade unionists of the world today is the fight for peace.

Yes, peace is a matter of life or death for working people of the world today. As long as the wars in Korea, Viet-Nam and Malaya continue, the lives of the workers everywhere are in danger. Peace is also a matter of our bread and butter. As long as the cold war policies and the building up of armaments are being pursued, the living standards of the working people will continue to get worse.

Peace means life! Peace means jobs! Let us, workers of the world – organized and unorganized – join hands to preserve peace and bring about an era of happiness and prosperity for all peoples, in all lands, for all time.³²

Acknowledgement

*Elgin “Scotty” Neish returned to British Columbia at the end of October 1952. After a month fishing along the coast, he reported on his journey at meetings in Vancouver, Langley, Campbell River, Lake Cowichan, Ladner, Pender Harbour, New Westminster, and Victoria. The author thanks Neish’s son, Kevin, for sharing photographs and personal records.*³³

32. “Text Of Speech By Elgin Neish To Asian, Pacific Peace Meet,” *The Fisherman*, 18 November 1952; also Kevin Neish Papers (private collection), Speech by Elgin Neish, 11 October 1952, as published in *The Peace Conference of the Asian and Pacific Regions Bulletin, October 2–12, 1952, Peking*, English Ed. (Peking 1952), 146.

33. “At Many Points ‘Scotty’ Speaks,” *The Fisherman*, 9 December 1952.