

Head of the class

Honour In a room of titans, three Irving brothers stand tall

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TORONTO - Three of New Brunswick's greatest industrialists were inducted into the Canadian Business Hall of Fame on Tuesday night before a sellout crowd at the Metro Toronto Conference and Convention Centre.

Surrounded by business leaders from virtually every major company in the country, Arthur, Jack and James K. Irving joined their late father, K.C. Irving, on the honour roll of the country's most esteemed laureates. K.C. Irving, the family patriarch, was among the hall's first inductees in 1979.

"Arthur, Jack and Jim Irving are truly legends in their own time," fellow laureate John E. Cleghorn, the chairman of the board of Canadian Pacific Railway, said. The other honourees were Serge Godin, the founder and executive chairman of the board of the CGI Group, and John Robert (Bud) McCaig, the former chairman of the Trimac Corporation. McCaig, inducted posthumously, was represented by his wife.

There were so many New Brunswickers in the audience that the solemn occasion could have easily turned into a Maritime kitchen party. Irving Oil and J.D. Irving, Limited., filled seven tables at the gala dinner between them, and other favourite sons such as Derek Oland, Richard Currie and Scott McCain were also in the house.

Even the master of ceremonies - CBC newsman Peter Mansbridge - had New Brunswick ties. The NewsWorld anchor's younger brother recently relocated to Moncton from Halifax after accepting a position with J.D. Irving in Moncton.



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Former premier Frank McKenna and James K. Irving share a joke at the Canadian Business Hall of Fame induction gala in Toronto on Tuesday night.



Tory Zimmerman

Arthur Irving, at left, Jack Irving, and Bud Bird, the former Tory cabinet minister from Fredericton, visit at the Canadian Business Hall of Fame induction gala in Toronto on Tuesday night. The event honoured six laureates, including Arthur, Jack and James K. Irving.

"We are here to wave the New Brunswick flag proudly," Shawn Graham said. Seated at a table near the front of the auditorium, the premier was joined by a group of fellow New Brunswickers, including cabinet minister Greg Byrne. Graham and Byrne, the Business New Brunswick boss, are in Toronto for private business meetings. "To have three New Brunswickers recognized is a real tribute to our entrepreneurial spirit, and helps to sell our province's self-sufficiency agenda."

Arthur Irving and Jack Irving were recognized for the skills and leadership they have shown in turning Irving Oil into a regional and national leader. Their brother, James K. Irving, was honoured for helping to expand the diverse businesses of J.D. Irving, Limited. The three were honoured, one after another, in a program that lasted late into the night.

All three have resisted temptation and based their companies in Saint John, staying true to the New Brunswick roots of their industrialist dad. The late K.C. Irving, who founded Irving Oil, will soon receive a lifetime achievement award from Atlantic Business Magazine.

"I am very proud to be here," Oland, the president of Saint John-based Moosehead Breweries, said before the gala. "The Irvings are great people, do a lot for the province and deserve to be recognized."

"Through good times and tough times, they have hung in there and deserve every bit of credit."

The former chancellor of the University of New Brunswick, Currie also heaped praise on the newly anointed tycoons.

"They have done a marvelous job for a long, long time," said Currie, the chairman of BCE and former head of Loblaws' parent company, said. "It is great to see them recognized, and it is none too soon."

"I am very proud of them."

Before the event, Mansbridge exchanged small talk with the Irvings, and asked if the province is beginning to recover yet from its flooding.

"Have things settled down?" Mansbridge asked. "Was it ever a problem in Saint John?"

While Mansbridge presided over the event, New Brunswick's former premier, Frank McKenna, also played a role. McKenna, now deputy chair of the TD Bank Financial Group, is chancellor of the Canadian Business Hall of Fame.

The function was held in a cavernous auditorium that was bathed in light, and included video presentations detailing the accomplishments of each inductee. The crowd was serenaded beforehand by a violinist and a pianist playing a Steinway & Sons piano, and dined on shrimp and mango salad, and beef Wellington.

It was a meal fit for a king.

Or at least a business titan.

The eldest of the three brothers, James K. Irving talked about the first business venture he and his brother got into as young boys - Jim, Art and Jack's chicken farm. In six years, their little operation grew from a dozen egg-laying chickens to more than 1,500. James K. Irving paid tribute to his father for mentoring him and his brothers.

"He was a great teacher who inspired us, involved us in the business, and invested in our potential," he said. "He provided us with hands-on education. And, the lessons that began 70 years ago, still hold true today."

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