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Cedric Ritchie rose rapidly from branch teller to CEO and later chairman in a 50-year career at the Bank of Nova Scotia. He is credited with expanding the bank's footprint at home and abroad.

With only a high school education, but an eye for detail, an unflagging work ethic and people skills, Cedric Ritchie rose rapidly from branch teller to the most senior jobs in a 50-year career at the Bank of Nova Scotia, expanding its domestic and global footprint.

He died in his sleep March 20 in his Toronto house at the age of 88.

From his appointment as president and CEO in 1972 (one of the youngest at age 45) to his retirement as chairman in 1995, Mr. Ritchie oversaw Scotiabank's expansion into more than 40 countries, especially the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia, growing to 33,000 employees.

"He was one of the living legends of that era, no question, both in the country and in the banking industry," says former Scotiabank chief executive officer Peter Godsoe, who succeeded Mr. Ritchie as chairman in 1995 after a gradual transition of leadership in the 1990s.

Even with setbacks, Mr. Godsoe says his predecessor "never lost his faith in continuing to expand."

He is also credited, with others, in raising the bank's domestic profile, including the 1958 "Scotia plan" that offered a consumer lending alternative to finance company credit.

"He was a pioneer for the little guy," says Robert Pattillo, a former aide to Liberal Finance Minister Allan MacEachen before joining the bank in 1984, at Mr. Ritchie's invitation, as head of public and corporate affairs. "I can't emphasize enough how much of a common man this guy was," Mr. Pattillo adds, noting the Scotia loan plan "took off and helped the bank broaden its base."

Mr. Ritchie was a voracious reader of nonfiction until losing his sight in 2007, a storyteller, a curious listener and, according to current Scotiabank president and CEO Brian Porter, possessed with "great instincts as a banker."

Mr. Porter, who was with McLeod, Young, Weir when Scotiabank acquired the brokerage firm in 1987, saw firsthand Mr. Ritchie's banking philosophy.

"There were a lot of Canadian entrepreneurs who [now] have grown businesses ... Ced would lend them money when they did not have a lot in their wallet or [have assets] to pledge to the bank," Mr. Porter says. "He liked the person or he thought he or she had a good business plan and provided the financing, in some cases, when a lot of other banks wouldn't."

Mr. Ritchie's patience was tested during the 1980s Latin American debt crisis.

"His view was that you had to run the business for the long term and that these countries would get their financial house in order, so to speak, and that there would be a growing middle class and it would be a good place for a bank," Mr. Porter says. "That all turned out to be true."

Mr. Ritchie "took a lot of heat" for not selling the bank's restructured Latin America bonds, recalls Sabi Marwah, who retired as Scotiabank vice-chairman and chief operating officer in 2014. Years later, he says, the bonds helped purchase a Mexican bank. "On that front, history turned out to be right in his favour."

For his financial patience, Mr. Pattillo says, "many people will tell you that Ced Ritchie was probably the last great risk manager in banking."

A staunch federal Liberal, Mr. Ritchie had a "fantastic relationship" with Pierre Trudeau, says Mr. Pattillo. But Mr. Ritchie also was "loved by politicians on both side of the aisle," he adds, for his knowledge of banking and the economy.

Liberal senator David Smith, a former Bay Street lawyer and a long-time federal party official appointed to the Senate in 2002, says "Ced had as strong a reputation with the Ottawa crowd as any sort of top Bay Street banker ... he was a guy who was well-liked and respected and appreciated by both sets [in business and politics]."

In 1981, he was named an officer of the Order of Canada for his "wide knowledge of banking and commerce." Later, he was recognized by the Canadian and New Brunswick business halls of fame and served on more than a dozen private and public sector boards.

In 1995, Mr. Ritchie was tapped to sit on the board of Canadian National Railway, just months before its privatization by the federal government.

As a director, he urged the domestic railway to become a North American transportation player through acquisitions south of the border, according to CN chairman Robert Pace, a Halifax businessman.

"Cedric had just finished a career of building an international bank and he brought that expertise and vision to CN," Mr. Pace recalls. "Before the word globalization was popular he was talking about it."

The two Maritimers stayed in contact after 2003 when Mr. Ritchie left CN's board (which several times hiked the director retirement age to keep him). "The first thing he would ask is 'what is going on in the Maritimes?'" says Mr. Pace, of his mentor's unfailing curiosity. "'Tell me what is going on in business.' 'Tell me what is going on in politics.'"

Cedric Elmer Ritchie was born Aug. 22, 1927, in Upper Kent, N.B., the youngest of four children of Elmer and Marion Ritchie. His father died in a farm accident when the newborn was only six weeks old. His mother, a former teacher, convinced the postal service to let her operate an outlet from her home, which she did for decades while raising her family.

In 1945, with his brother killed in the Second World War and two sisters enrolled in higher education, 18-year-old Mr. Ritchie decided to ease the financial burden on his mother, according to his daughter Kim Persky.

He started with Scotiabank as a teller in nearby Bath, N.B., after he heard about the job and went in for an interview. Before long, he was transferred to Montreal and later joined the inspection staff, where he and a colleague travelled by train, unannounced, to audit branches across Canada and the Caribbean, giving him an insider's perspective.

"He knew the country, he knew the staff in every area even though they changed, he knew the customers and the businesses," says Barbara Ritchie, his widow. By the time he was posted to Toronto in the mid-1950s, she says, "he had the best history lesson of all."

Mrs. Ritchie, a nurse, met her future husband in 1955 when one of his inspection colleagues was hospitalized in Lethbridge, Alta. The following day, she says she and Mr. Ritchie went to church on Easter Sunday before he left town for his next audit. In 1956, he wound up at the same Lethbridge hospital with appendicitis, tended by his future wife.

"He would write a letter and tell me where he was," she says, since his only fixed address was the bank's main Toronto office at 44 King St. West. "He wrote every day until we were married [in 1957]." Mr. Ritchie may not have proposed formally, but an engagement ring arrived in the mail. "My landlord gave me the box when I got home," she says.

Inspection staff had to be single, so the now-married banker and his wife moved to Toronto, where he steadily climbed through the ranks – chief accountant, 1960; chief general manager, 1970; president and CEO in 1972; and chairman two years later.

His commitment to detail was legendary.

At annual meetings, a couple of hotel rooms were set aside and lined with tables piled with reports on bank operations, so Mr. Ritchie could pore over them in preparation.

"He was of the view we should be able to answer any question any shareholder could ever ask," Mr. Marwah says. "Needless to say we never got a question." That never deterred Mr. Ritchie.

His definition of "bankers' hours" was 6:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, according to former staff.

"I have never known anyone in my entire life who worked as hard as him," says Rod McQueen, a journalist and business book author who was Scotiabank director of public affairs from 1976 to 1978. "Eighteen hours a day and many days on the weekend, fuelled by cigarettes and black coffee."

He adds, "you would have a hard time keeping up with him. He strode along and – classic person from Atlantic Canada – it was almost like he was leaning into the wind."

After his retirement, Mr. Ritchie still attended annual meetings and regularly went to his office at the bank until a couple of weeks before his death.

Long-time Scotiabank employee Marilyn Dean, his executive assistant for the past 13 years, says he set an example for others. "He had a good understanding of what was right and wrong and a wonderful, wonderful work ethic," she says. "He never expected perfection but he certainly expected you to work to the best of your ability."

Mr. Ritchie still made time for his family, on one occasion including his then-teenage children (at his expense) on a multi-country tour of Asia in the late 1970s, says daughter Heather Walton. He made time for fun at home, too.

"Every Saturday morning, my dad would be the one out with my sister and I and any kid in the neighbourhood in our backyard," she says. "He would run everyone around in a wheelbarrow. ...He was everybody's go-to dad on the weekends."

Mr. Ritchie gave to a variety of causes, including education, Ms. Persky says. "He never went to postsecondary school; his education was boots on the ground, but he valued education."

He received honorary degrees from six Canadian universities, four of them in the Maritimes.

Mr. Ritchie leaves his wife, Barbara; sister Ruth Ritchie; daughters, Heather Walton and Kim Persky and seven grandchildren. He was predeceased by his brother, Douglas, and sister, Helen Baker.