

OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE



George F. MacDowell
1913 - 86

Errol Black

GEORGE MACDOWELL, AUTHOR of *The Brandon Packers Strike: A Tragedy of Errors*, died of cancer at his home in Brandon on 26 February. A few days before his death he said to me: "I'd like to think I've done something useful with my life." For those of us who knew him, this was a question that had never arisen; it was evident from everything he'd said and done that his life was indeed useful.

George was born and grew up in Prince Edward Island. He studied at Dalhousie University from 1930-3 and then returned to the island to take up fox farming. During World War II he served in Canada and Europe in the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals. By the time the war ended, he'd made up his mind that he wanted to be a scholar — as he put it, "to read, to think, to teach and to write."

He went back to Dalhousie, graduating with a B.A. in 1947. From there, he went to Clark University in Massachusetts to do graduate work in economics. He completed his M.A. and all the requirements for the Ph.D. except the thesis. Following his formal studies, he had brief teaching stints at Acadia and the University of Alberta in Edmonton. He was only at Alberta for two years, but this was long enough for a colleague, Eric Hanson, to recognize that George was a "dedicated and able teacher."

He came to Brandon College in 1957 to teach economics and sociology. At that time, he had two main research interests, Keynesian economics and industrial relations. His interest in Keynesianism came naturally; he was a student at the time the full impact of Keynesian ideas was being felt in the teaching of economics in North American universities. Moreover, he shared Keynes' conviction that ideas were of great consequence in affecting the lives of individuals and societies — for good or for ill. His interest in industrial relations was in part an offshoot of his recognition that developments in labour markets and collective bargaining affected the main macroeconomic variables, but it was also inspired by a belief that the rules and institutions of the labour market and industrial relations were rigged against workers.

When George came to Brandon he had published one article in the *Canadian Banker*, "Some Economic Aspects of Guaranteed Annual Wages." Subsequently, he published a couple of notes in *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*: "Consumption and the Rate of Interest," (1957), and "The Real Goods Illusion," (1959). Then came the strike at Brandon Packers in 1960. This was a strike that had all the elements of the classic confrontation between capital and labour — the use of scabs, violence on the picket line and in the pubs, a divided community, crooked owners who were stripping the firm of its assets, and an industrial inquiry commission whose findings and recommendations led to changes in Manitoba's labour legislation. For the next ten years, much of George's time and energy went into a study of this "little" strike.

His research culminated in 1971 with the publication of *The Brandon Packers Strike*. The preface to this book details its purposes. It also reveals much about Professor MacDowell's attitude to industrial relations and to scholarly activity in general. The last few sentences are especially revealing:

... most people are "uninitiated," and the need to eliminate "mysticism" in a matter of public concern is obvious. An examination of the events and issues in a dispute incorporating the participants' explanations and interpretations of them, often in their own language, will, it is hoped, help to dispel "mysticism." The presentation of the law and legislation, as a context for an examination of the issues, is designed for lay readers in the belief that (to parallel Talleyrand's comment on "war" and "military men"): Labour relations are much too serious to be left to lawyers. (xi)

I first met George MacDowell in 1962. After working for a few years, I decided I would have a go at university. But I was there without really knowing what I wanted to do or what I should be taking. By chance, I had enrolled in the

introductory course in economics. George MacDowell was the teacher. Within a couple of weeks I knew that I wanted to learn a lot more about economics, so I took more courses from George, including his courses in labour economics, and labour relations, and labour law. He encouraged me to go on to graduate studies, which I did. Then by a quirk of fate — Len Evans, a member of George's department, was elected for the NDP in Brandon East in June, 1969 — and I became his colleague.

Over the next sixteen or so years, I learned a great deal more about George MacDowell the scholar, and George MacDowell the man. He was a person of many paradoxes. He was introverted, shy and nervous; not the characteristics you would normally expect of a teacher. Teaching was difficult for him; indeed, he once said that when he went to a classroom door he never knew whether he was going to go in or run away. But he never once ran away. Moreover, he was an excellent teacher. His approach to teaching was based on two main ideas: first, the idea that the study of economics did not yield answers, but rather provides people with an approach for seeking to understand economic issues; and secondly, the idea that the people with whom you become involved in the classroom are your intellectual equals — perhaps your intellectual superiors. His role as a teacher, therefore, was to create a context for stimulating and challenging the intellects of students. Consequently, his classes involved much discussion and debate, sometimes heated debate.

This philosophy was also evident in his relationships with other groups in the community. He had a long association with the members of the Association of Firefighters, Local 803. They had asked him once to help them with their *preparations for presentation of their submission to an arbitration board*, appointed to resolve an impasse in their bargaining with the City of Brandon. George became a mainstay of the association, a situation the firefighters acknowledged by making him a member of the association and presenting him with a brass firefighter's hat as evidence of his membership. George never imposed himself in this relationship, seeing his role instead as one where he used his specialized expertise to help capable people prepare and analyze data and information. Many of the firefighters were so intrigued by his approach to the issues that they ended up taking his courses so they could improve their own analytical abilities.

George was also a private man, really only comfortable in his house on Almond Crescent. Yet he took on public responsibilities that obliged him to attend lengthy and demanding meetings in Brandon and Winnipeg. Thus, during the Schreyer years, he served as a member of the Manitoba Development Corporation and as chairman of McKenzie Seeds. He was again appointed chairman of McKenzie Seeds by the Pawley government, and served in this capacity until he resigned in January 1984. These activities drained him, but he stayed with it, because he believed that as a scholar he had an obligation to use his knowledge and expertise in the interests of society.

Another manifestation of this "obligation" was his view that a scholar

should engage in debates of public consequence not only in journals and books, but also in the forums which were used and read by the layperson. He wrote frequent letters to the editor on issues pertaining to economics and industrial relations. In recent years in particular, he was concerned about the resurrection of ideas — monetarism, supply-side economics, and so on — which he believed were damaging to society, especially the weaker members of society. These ideas were attacked in his letters. Similarly, when he resigned from the chair of McKenzie Seeds in 1984 in response to the government's handling of a scandal, he wrote a pamphlet explaining his position — "By Gossip and Myths: The Winnipeg Takeover of McKenzie Seeds."

Finally, George was a gentle man, but in forums where important issues were being discussed, he could be cutting and vicious when people tried to assert ideas which they couldn't defend on the basis of logical argument. Moreover, he had little time for "toadies" — people overly deferential to authority.

George retired in 1979. Since then, he had been working on a revision of a manuscript — "a book he never intended to write" — tentatively titled: *Labour Law: A Guide to Students*, and proceeding with research on the CFI fiasco and the question of the ownership of jobs.

When George found out he had terminal cancer (pancreas and liver), he said, "I've tried to be objective about things all of my life; there's no reason why this should be any different." He did concede, however, that he was a bit "pissed off" he wasn't going to be able to do some of the things he had planned on.

Just before he'd gone into the hospital for the first time, he'd written a letter to the editor in response to an attack on "Red Square" — the term used to describe Brandon University by backward members of the local business community and some Tory politicians — by a spokesperson for the Brandon establishment. One of the readers of the *Brandon Sun* had replied to George's letter with the comment: "Horsefeathers." George said, "That's what they do you know. They can't refute what you say with logic and facts, so they try and shout you down." George desperately wanted to respond to this letter, but he never made it.

No matter. With his comment on the "Horsefeathers" letter, George had coined a suitable epitaph for himself:

THEY NEVER SHOUTED HIM DOWN.



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Lingan, portrayed with its large manager's residence and Rumble miners' cottages, as seen by the Canadian Illustrated News in 1873. It was later to be the site of a major battle between the several Mining Associations and the Provincial Workmen's Association. From Charles P. DeVolpi, Nova Scotia: A Pictorial Record. Longman Canada Limited, 1974. (Plate 148).