

Poet Laureate of the Poor

Dorothy O'Connell

BY MARY GARRETT

In the spring of 1975 the executive of the Federation of Ontario Tenant Associations (FOTA), a provincial tenants' group, was sitting around a conference table at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto. We were strategizing how to get our fairly nasty messages across to the Minister of Housing. With us, on loan, was a very unassuming staff member of the Canadian Organization of Public Housing Tenants (COPHT), Dorothy O'Connell. As a provincial group and in our local tenant associations across the province, we knew it was easy to get information to politicians and the public. The problem was to get them to listen to the information! We participated in presentations, sit-ins, marches and media conferences where we found a touch of theatre, and a double dash of humour usually helped to get people's attention.

That day, we tossed around some of the usual ideas, such as placing bags of garbage on the minister's lawn, or renting a travelling sign and parking it outside his house with a short but perky message. We decided we wanted to do this without getting arrested. What to do? A singing telegram! But what will it say? Who knows, and why should we worry about that when we have Dorothy with us? She'll think of something.

Off I went with Dorothy to the hotel office to use typewriters and compose a singing telegram. I didn't go to do the composing. I'm tone deaf and no poet. I went along to ask if we could use the typewriters. Dorothy's talents, although many, do not include asking people to use their property for her own use. Like most of us in the movement, she will fight like hell for others but is a bit shy about asking for herself.

Behind the typewriter Dorothy stares blankly. Finally she says, "Oh yeah, write a song. You have 20 minutes, go write a song. Who do they think I am?" Fifteen minutes later we are on our way back to the meeting, song in hand. Unfortunately we could not find any company who would deliver the telegram.

This is Dorothy O'Connell, activist, author, playwright, wife, mother of five children, friend and poet laureate of the poor.

When Dorothy sat on the board of the Ottawa Tenants' Council for Public Housing she started writing amusing poems, short

stories and anecdotes to entertain and to educate. Dorothy has a knack for getting the point across with humour. She is a modern-day Aesop. One of the first poems Dorothy wrote was about the *ten ants*,¹ who live in an ant complex and who form an ant association to show what happens if you do not accept all members of the tenants' association for what they are. It also points out how the housing authority may try to turn tenants against tenants to prevent their effectiveness.

Dorothy reached national recognition when she wrote the slogan for an Ottawa Tenants' Council fundraising button. Written in black on a yellow background the button read, *Pierre*

Trudeau lives in public housing. Because the policy of the council was not to take advantage of the people who live in public housing, it was decided that the button would sell for fifty cents to the public but only a quarter to public housing tenants.

Dorothy wrote a letter to Prime Minister Trudeau, explaining the purpose of the button. She included a button, a bill for a quarter, and a tenant's newsletter. After seeing the Prime Minister wear the button in the House of Commons, the CBC contacted Dorothy to get the story. She mentioned that he hadn't paid his bill. Shortly thereafter Dorothy

received a letter from the Prime Minister enclosing his payment in full. Dorothy used this connection with the Prime Minister to inform him about the issues concerning his fellow public housing tenants. They corresponded back and forth during the remainder of Trudeau's term.

Dorothy told the CBC about her stories about life in public housing. As a result she was asked to read these tales regularly on CBC's *Morningside* radio show. Dorothy and the friend and heroine she created, Chiclet Gomez,² were introduced to people across Canada. Chiclet is the embodiment of many of the women Dorothy knew. Dorothy took the stories and events described to her by other tenants and rolled them into her short stories about Chiclet, Tilly, Poison Ivy, Linda, King Kong and the others.

Chiclet and her circle of friends and antagonists have turned out to be a valuable tool in organizing and educating tenants and



non-tenants alike. Because Chiclet and the others are really composites of many people, the characters are recognizable by everyone. Every tenant association in every public housing community in Canada has a Chiclet Gomez and a Fat Freddy. In parts of British Columbia they think Chiclet is really Gus Long. In Windsor, Ontario it has to be Donna Gamble, while in Ottawa she is sometimes Aline Akeson or Ruth Wildgen.

The important thing is not who Chiclet really is or even who Poison Ivy is, but that people can identify with the issues. They can see the problems facing these women without getting confused with the personalities. Through Chiclet and the gang, Dorothy has been able to empower the women she was working with by showing them they can fight and take chances because there will always be a Chiclet there to stand beside them.

Dorothy has used her national recognition to continue to help the people she is so much a part of. She has travelled the country, speaking at conferences and conventions on the issues dear to her heart: "Poverty, a Women's Problem," "The Lack of Housing for the Poor" and "Homelessness."

Yet with all her prominence Dorothy has never been able to grasp her importance and the effect that she has on the lives of others. Returning from a conference in Manitoba in the late 1970s, Dorothy told me about the night she caught a ride from the convention hall to the hotel. Roy Atkinson, the president of the National Farmers Union, was driving, with Dorothy at his side. In the back seat also grabbing a lift was the deputy premier of

Manitoba. As they were driving along Dorothy was silently very giddy. She was thinking to herself so as not to appear unsophisticated, "Wait until I get home and tell everybody who I'm sharing a car with!" Not much later formal introductions were made and the deputy premier excitedly blurted out, "Oh boy, wait until I get home and tell my family I shared a car with Dorothy O'Connell!" Another time, while Dorothy was waiting in a British Columbia television station for her turn to be interviewed, Patrick Watson passed by her door. She wondered if he would remember her since it had been several years since they had met very briefly in Ottawa. She thought better of saying anything to him in case he thought her a groupie. But he turned around and came to the doorway, saying, "You probably don't remember me, Dorothy, I am Patrick Watson." This lack of self-importance has been one of the main reasons Dorothy has been able to relate to so many people on so many different levels.

Dorothy has given me and others in the tenant movement, as well as those who have benefited from the movement, a great legacy. She has helped us recognize our-

selves through Chiclet. She has shown outsiders that we are not the villains of society we are sometimes thought to be. She has shown Canada who we are and made most of its people — well some of them — like us. She has stood up as an example to us all.

I believe, however, that Dorothy would be the first to agree that she in turn has gained a great deal from helping the tenants' movement and being a part of it. After all, in helping each other we help ourselves.

¹ See Dorothy O'Connell, *Sister Goose: Feminist Nursery Rhymes and Cautionary Tales* (Ottawa: Steel Rail, 1987).

² See Dorothy O'Connell's book of short stories *Chiclet Gomez* (Ottawa: Deneau and Greenberg, n.d.).

In the early 1970s Mary Garrett began organizing tenants in Kingston, Ontario where she lived with her three children. She has been active in the public housing movement ever since. She is a community legal worker with West End Legal Services of Ottawa, where she specializes in housing issues.

Errata

1. Les oeuvres d'art reproduites aux pages 19 et 21 dans "Le féminisme et l'art visuel," (volume 11, numéro 1) ont été incorrectement attribuées à l'auteur de l'article. La légende aurait dû indiquer le nom de l'artiste, Corrine Corry.

The reproductions on pages 19 and 21 of "Feminism & Visual Art" (Vol. 11, No. 1) were wrongly attributed to the author of the article. The captions should have identified Corrine Corry as the artist.

2. Veuillez noter que l'oeuvre de Freda Guttman à la page 7 continue à la page 8 dans "Le féminisme et l'art visuel."

Please note that the artwork by Freda Guttman on page 7 continues to page 8 of "Feminism & Visual Art."

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