

# Margaret Laurence:

## Teaching, Sharing Chancellor of Trent University

by Allen Wilson

*Allen Wilson, Professor of History at Trent University, where Margaret Laurence served as Chancellor, delivered this memorial to the University Senate on 10 January 1987.*

Trent University has lost a giant, and it pauses now to mourn — but also to remember and to celebrate. At Trent Margaret Laurence had been Chancellor, colleague and friend; in death she leaves a shadow over us all at this time, but she also leaves a rich legacy.

Margaret Laurence was a woman of extraordinary courage: her relentless honesty forced her to see the world as it was, yet she retained such commitment to hope and such compassion that she condemned herself to a troubled passage through life. Equipped with such a complex nature — but armed by a powerful faith, she set an example of moral and intellectual integrity for us all.

Many of us have shared stories of Margaret in the past fortnight, and I will be no exception. My association with Margaret Laurence began at Trent, and it began in the years when we were attempting to set out the first of Trent's interdisciplinary programmes.

Journeys are the stuff of Margaret Laurence's best metaphors, and that is the one she used when she and I first talked about our plans for a Canadian Studies Programme at Trent. Margaret saw our new venture in much the same way as she had described her own feelings about Canada on her return from Africa. It was to be the beginning of "a long journey back home."

But she did not mean by that some narrow academic exercise in nostalgia. Instead, she saw it as a forward-looking journey into our tribal past, a kind of collective psychic search for roots to prepare us for further change and growth. Her enthusiasm was infectious, and we all

took heart from her support and advice. It would be an exciting journey, open not just to a few but to the whole university — students, faculty and friends alike — and she would be one of our closest friends.

To explain our goals, I had been using the tedious jargon of the academic: "interdisciplinarity," "curricular development with student input," an emphasis upon "regionalism" before we put the country back together, and reliance on faculty who could see beyond the limits of their own disciplines. Typically, she immediately set our approach to the confederation and to Canadian diversity in another perspective: "Hey, kiddo, you'll find it all in I Corinthians, 12!"

She was, of course, right, and we read together these words: "For the body is not one member, but many... But now are they many members, yet but one body." "Why," she chuckled, "there's even something there for you Maritimers," and again we read: "... but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked." And then she ended on that great challenging passage, commenting on how much it applied to Canada and to the world community: "That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another."

Such mixtures of reverence and appreciative humour when faced with the jests of God would become familiar to all of us. Such ironies reflected her great spiritual and intellectual strength — with which she so frequently nourished us. Margaret Laurence always supported Trent's emphasis on interdisciplinarity, just as she respected our colleges and our departments in their concern for the development of the individual students. She once observed, "Look, kid, Peterborough's a testing town. They try out everything there is on us here — from ballpoints to

bathroom deodorants — so why not test out a new university!"

In that testing process she came to play a major role. The story is as familiar to countless Trent students as it is to faculty: her design to be a teaching, sharing Chancellor; her humility and her willingness to be a friend; her determination to be a regular presence on the campus, in the lecture hall, in seminar, in the colleges, and in the study. In all of these places and by her example, she would add grace and wit and flavour to our teaching and to our learning. To many individual students she was frequently and generously available, sensitively correcting and always encouraging those who aspired to what she called the "trade" of writing.

To women students she offered the example and support of one who had blazed a trail in women's efforts to offset the coercive effects of ancient social pressures. In university they could learn to defend themselves from those pressures by exploring their own natures and intellects. If living is risking, as she always maintained, then, like Rachel, women could dare to find and accept themselves.

As a member of University delegations Margaret Laurence lent authority to Trent's presentations of its claims for support. Her beautiful written testimonial to Trent won us countless converts and supporters. Presiding over Convocation, if she lacked Tom Symons' power to keep the rains in check, she could achieve grandeur even under an umbrella when the heavens opened.

This remarkable Celtic woman with the bold features and straight black hair that took you back to the Highlands — or reminded you of the Métis whom she so loved — has been a powerful presence in this University for nearly twenty years. She has been such a source of innovation and inspiration for Trent for so long that some may wonder how we shall do with-

out her.

She herself gave us the answer. From Psalm 39, with her afterthought: "...for I am a stranger with thee, a sojourner, as all my fathers were... *Mothers, too, I feel compelled to add.*" And finally, from her "My Final Hour" statement to a Trent audience:

*The death of the individual is the end which we will all one day meet, but in the knowledge that our children and their children will... go on, that the great works of humankind will endure in art, in recorded history, in medicine, in the sciences and philosophies and technologies that our species has devel-*

*oped with devotion and a sense of vocation throughout the ages. The individual is the leaf on the tree. The leaves fall but the tree endures... I would not claim to pass on any secret of life, for there is none, or any wisdom except the passionate plea of caring.*

# Margaret Laurence, Peace Worker

*by George Ignatieff*

I met Margaret Laurence through reading her books and serving with her on the Board of that determined and dedicated organization, Energy Probe.

Samuel Johnson once said: "I cannot see that lectures can do so much good as reading books from which lectures are taken." Margaret's books breathed a reverence for life and individual responsibility. It was natural that this reverence should be converted into a recognition that the human race must not suffer extinction through uncontrolled competitive technology.

The idea that profit and loss should dictate what was done in the utilization of nuclear machines, rather than giving priority to reverence for life and the safeguards they required, made of Margaret a dedicated as well as well-informed advocate for control of the atom in its various

manifestations.

The proposal that tritium, one of the essential components of hydrogen bombs as well as of the more common-place nuclear bombs, should become material for trade between Canada and the U.S.A., in order to reduce the tremendous overhead cost of the new nuclear reactors being built by Ontario Hydro on the basis of paper assurances about their "peaceful" uses, made Margaret as concerned as I am. Her last and most forceful appeal on behalf of Energy Probe on this issue represents an example of her insistence that reverence for life requires a fresh mental attitude to replace the unquestioning certitude of some of our decision-makers that threatens to permit civilization to drift towards nuclear disaster on the basis of assurances that everything is "under control," when it isn't.

Margaret Laurence's dedicated mind will be numbered among Canada's immortals as long as there are those who share her reverence for life, and her respect for language.

In her final message to "What Peace Means To Me" [a collection of essays by recipients of the Order of Canada, published by External Affairs in connection with the 1986 celebration of the International Year of Peace], Margaret wrote: "Peace: a word reverberating with meanings, achievable meanings." But she warned that "politicians often use words not to clarify but to conceal what they mean to do. Militarists often use jargon in perhaps the meanest way of all, to obscure the appalling meaning of their statements." Timely wisdom from Margaret Laurence.

## HEATHER CADSBY

Evelyn Hart was dancing, I was crying,  
and my mother was unpacking her  
china.

She moved like a leaf loose in wind  
a shooting star. Some chance,  
to be sitting in the audience watching  
just after

I'd been sitting with my mother  
as movers carried her life to a truck  
and the old house was gone to us.

Something like smoke blew in from the  
wings  
covered a grave, and she danced like  
nothing I've seen.

My mother had said, It's chilly with the  
door open.

My sister was waiting at the new place,  
I was checking empty rooms and  
Evelyn was rehearsing or sewing  
ribbons  
on her slippers. The lambswool is still

in place  
in my old toe shoes. My mother's  
circular stitching  
still intact.

I was fifteen and dancing with big  
dreams  
and my mother saying this and that  
which made me cry for truth.  
*Giselle*, for instance, as it was today  
after my mother moved.