

Margaret Laurence and the NDP

by Lynn McDonald

Margaret Laurence was committed to the New Democratic Party in the same way she was to the movements for peace, the environment and equality for women. They were all a response to a fundamental and driving conviction. She identified as a "Christian Socialist" in the tradition of Tommy Douglas and Stanley Knowles. Friend and fellow New Democrat Steve Thomas described Laurence's political commitment as a form of Christian witness. As Christians are taught not to be ashamed of the gospel, neither would she be ashamed to bear witness to her convictions, including their political manifestation.

The core beliefs are the same, whether called the "social gospel" as they were earlier in the century, or today's use of "liberation theology" or "the preferential option for the poor." Basic is a belief in the value of human life. Laurence was no respecter of persons, or perhaps more accurately, she was a democrat respecting all persons. Furthermore, she cared about all God's creation, so that stewardship of nature was a responsibility too.

A party colleague from a Peterborough riding, Keith Wooland, described for Laurence "a central core of belief and conviction," leading alike to her witness in the Church, the peace movement and the party. There was a "compulsion" driving her; she had no choice but to respond and act. In the case of the peace movement, this was painfully clear. Given the "insane increase in armaments" — her words — one had to be a worker in the cause of peace.

The same was true for Laurence's partisan political commitments. No more than many of us, she could not understand how anyone could work in the peace movement and then vote Liberal or Conservative. This point is entirely missed in the National Film Board (Studio D) film of Laurence, eloquent as it is on her

commitment to peace. In the film, Laurence is interviewed in her kitchen at Lakefield, her usual place for receiving visitors. The camera never strays from the kitchen cupboards, while inches away a New Democrat sticker tells the rest of the story from the fridge!

Laurence's political/social views can best be seen in her novels. Her characters are ordinary people as opposed to the privileged and mighty. Her sympathies are with the most dispossessed: women, the elderly Hagar, the Métis, the Christ-figure of a garbage collector. Their problems are the everyday struggles of love and hurt, marriage and divorce, child rearing and old age, jobs and poverty. Her stories show again that there is nothing ordinary about ordinary people, who meet life's challenges with courage and decency. There is a fundamental affirmation of the worth of ordinary people and, especially in *The Diviners*, a respect for the environment as well.

Laurence's creed goes back to her earliest experiences in rural Manitoba. The small town in which she was raised was the setting for most of her novels and the source also of the prairie radicalism she carried with her throughout her life. Her writing on the Depression shows her response paralleling that of the founders of the CCF, who were her heroes. While studying at United College she boarded in the north end of Winnipeg, the other hotbed of the CCF/NDP. She joined the CCF youth club, later the CCF proper and, in turn, the New Democratic Party. While living in England in the 1960s, Laurence became a staunch supporter of the British Labour Party.

Her shyness kept her from such party activities as door-to-door canvassing, but Laurence's neighbours and friends were never left in any doubt as to her views. She renewed her party card, paid her dues and helped in the various ways she uniquely

could. During an election people coming to Lakefield on Highway 28 were greeted by her large lawn sign, always one of the first to go up. Local New Democrat candidates would receive, as well as her donation, a letter of encouragement.

When Conservative Julian Porter published an election brochure that included a photo of Laurence, she fired off letters-to-the-editor to correct the misimpression (apologies were prompt). In the last ten years of her life she maintained a vast correspondence, the importance of which has yet to be evaluated. New Democrats, as others, received careful replies to their queries, and much encouragement.

Public speaking for Laurence was always painful, but something also to be endured for the cause. Thus she not only joined the local Kawartha Ploughshares group, but spoke for it at a peace meeting in Creary Park. She did a reading and spoke at an event for my 1984 election campaign. This was a moving experience for all present, as well as a great fundraising success.

More often, Laurence made her statements on politics, peace and the environment in writing. As a member of the board of Energy Probe, she sent letters to governments — federal and provincial — on the nuclear arms race, the risk of proliferation and the broader issues of environmental pollution from the domestic nuclear industry. In 1986 she led Energy Probe's campaign on tritium. Here, Joe Clark, Secretary of State for External Affairs, retaliated publicly, circulating his reply widely, but without her original letter. Laurence was also a founder of Energy Probe's international environmentalist wing, Probe International, with its special mandate on Third World issues.

Laurence's concerns about the domestic use of nuclear power are much less known than her opposition to the nuclear

arms race. Yet here she was just as vigorous and active, moved by the unsolved problems of nuclear waste. She was outraged, as a taxpayer, at the expenditure of so many billions of dollars on such a destructive technology.

In the 1980 federal election campaign Margaret Laurence wrote a campaign letter for the New Democratic Party, mailed to some 300,000 people. It reads better than most mailings of any party —

because it is largely her work. (Party headquarters, characteristically, wrote a draft for her, but she, just as characteristically, re-wrote it). The priorities, as the language, are Laurence's: civil liberties, a nationalist energy policy, women's equality, funding for the arts and social services, native people, Canadian unity and cultural sovereignty. Note, Pauline Jewett makes it onto the list of NDP leaders with Tommy Douglas, Ed Broadbent,

et al. The Tories are no less than a "disaster," and as for Trudeau — "Why on earth would we vote him in again now?"

This letter is vintage Laurence, compressing thought and passion into a few paragraphs. Several elections later her words still speak to the human condition in Canada and what needs to be done, politically, about it.

**CULTURES
CONTEXTS
CANADAS**

BORDER/LINES

Border/Lines
Bethune College
York University
4700 Keele St.
Downsview
Ontario, Canada
M3J 1P3

SUBSCRIBE

\$16.00 — individual
14.00 — low income
25.00 — institutions

Please make cheques payable to 'Border/Lines'. Outside Canada, please pay in U.S. dollars only. Air mail rates available on request.

***BORDER/LINES** is an interdisciplinary multi-genre quarterly magazine which explores and contests the boundaries between the social and the sexual, the theoretical and the everyday, the artistic and the political. Produced by a Toronto collective, **BORDER/LINES** was launched in 1984 with the aim to fill the gap between academic journals and specialised cultural magazines.*

Recent articles include:

- *Charles Levin on Psychoanalysis and Feminism*
- *Kay Armatage on Feminist Film Theory*
- *Mitch Thomashow on advertising and environment*
- *Susan Willis on children's toys*
- *Richard Kostelanetz on The Grants Fix*

Upcoming special themes include:

- *Regionalism and Tourism*
- *Cultural Geography*

Heather Cadsby

She gave him a bouquet of birds
Kinglets, brown creepers, redpolls
The delicate ones
with heart-shaped bodies or thread legs
She gave him these for nothing

She gave him a bouquet
and bowed
You're the one, she said
And this is a bouquet of birds for you
It comes from here
and consists of everything
The best of me

It was a singing telegram
this bouquet of birds
and she said, Look Look
Pay attention to our song
But he was cleaning his glasses
heard sour notes
saw red

And still she kept gathering
An oriole's orange, a veery's hollow
call
The bouquet grew heavy
The bouquet of birds she kept giving
away
She ached with the load of empty arms

On day she presented
the dark birds of prey
Turkey vultures, swainsons
a rough-legged hawk
The dark birds of prey
in a brand new bouquet
Oh love, he said
Picked her up
Swung her
gently