

Obituaries | Nécrologie

Richard Allen

Richard Allen lived his scholarship, politics and passions as an integrated whole. A historian, social activist and teacher of immense intelligence, integrity, compassion and decency, Richard passed away in March of 2019, just as his most recent book of essays, *Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies: The Protestant Ethic and the Quest for Social Justice in Canada*, was to be launched.



The son of a United Church Minister, Richard grew up surrounded by discussions of the intellectual questions that would come to preoccupy much of his writing: the role of religious belief in fostering social justice, one's duty to humanity, the role of spirituality in our daily lives. After degrees at University of Toronto and University of Saskatchewan, and time working with the Student Christian Movement, he earned a doctorate from Duke

University. He subsequently taught at the University of Regina (1964-73) and at McMaster (1973-87). Richard's PhD dissertation became his first book, *The Social Passion*, a landmark study that remains a preeminent treatment of the social gospel in Canada. The book situated its subject within transnational religious/philosophical debates, while offering an in-depth analysis of the emergence, growth and decline of the social gospel across Canada. Characterized by extensive archival research and a breadth of vision that was remarkable, *The Social Passion* empathized with historical actors while still holding them up to scholarly scrutiny. It was a balancing act that I respected, and that he also conveyed in his graduate teaching.

I was lucky to be one of his McMaster PhD students. Richard did not advertise himself as a feminist, but his quiet, unrelenting, professional support (at a time when academe was not that friendly to feminists) sustained me – indeed, his encouragement was one reason I pursued a PhD. Richard mentored by example. He always engaged critically, but with a spirit of tolerance and respect. We had some significant political differences but his role was not to change my mind, but rather offer feedback that would help me become the very best scholar possible.

Richard was also absolutely committed to an English-French dialogue and a bilingual Canada; in 1977-78, he spent a year in

Montreal with his wife Nettie and their two sons Philip and Daniel, learning French. In 1982, his new research on Salem Bland, a leading social gospel intellectual, was interrupted by a distinguished political career. Richard was elected an NDP MPP for Hamilton West in 1982 and served in the Legislature until 1995, including five years as a Cabinet Minister in the Bob Rae NDP government. Richard's commitment to social democracy was inseparable from his spiritual outlook and scholarly interests. He was a tireless advocate for the disenfranchised and vulnerable, a critic of inequality and intolerance, and a firm believer in the possibility of a peaceful transition to a more just society. After he left the legislature, his engagements seemed to multiply: he championed a progressive vision within the United Church; was an enthusiastic promoter of the arts; and he worked for countless social justice causes in Hamilton and beyond.

Nor did Richard ever retire from scholarship. Although he increasingly dealt with sight problems, he dedicated himself anew to research and writing, producing the first volume on Salem Bland, *A View From the Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late-Victorian Controversies*, and the *Search for a New Christianity*. An erudite combination of religious, intellectual history and biography, it traced the emergence of Bland's vision of faith in the service of a more just, Christian world. When he passed away, Richard was working on volume two of the Salem Bland biography as well as a memoir. His wife of 52 years Nettie, a true soulmate, passed away in 2016, a difficult blow for Richard.

At Richard's memorial in Hamilton, I was struck by the common sentiments expressed by family and colleagues. They stressed the qualities we all identified with Richard: his inquisitive, incisive mind, love of scholarship, and his compassion, decency, humanity. Richard lived that humanity in both personal and social ways, earning the esteem of all those whom he touched. I will never forget volunteering for his first by-election in 1982. I worked with Liberal and Conservative scrutineers, and as the votes were counted, the other two women seemed positively secretly delighted he had defeated their candidates! I suspect they might have secretly voted for him. That was the kind of respect Richard elicited throughout all his careers.

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