

## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

### Madeleine Parent (1918–2012)

#### *Introduction*

**Bryan D. Palmer**

SMALL IN STATURE, MADELEINE PARENT had a decidedly large impact. Few women stand as tall in the history of Canadian and Québec labour, and none, it might be argued, have left legacies of significance that link together as many causes associated with organized labour, peace movements, civil liberties, and the rights of immigrants, women, and Native peoples as did Parent. Celebrated Québec painter, sculptor, and glass maker, Marcelle Ferron, once called Parent, “The greatest figure of our time, the one who did the most to change Quebec.”<sup>1</sup> Alongside her life-long partner, Kent Rowley, Madeleine helped, certainly, to change the face of Canadian trade unionism.

When Madeleine Parent died in a Montréal nursing home on 12 March 2012, Canadians and Québécois lost an iconic figure of the left. The outpouring of appreciative obituaries, the well-attended memorial celebrations of her life in Montréal and Toronto, and affectionate reflections of many activists touched by Madeleine’s example and schooled in her disciplined approach to social transformation all spoke of how Parent had, indeed, altered history, and very much for the better.

In remembering Madeleine Parent’s convictions, commitments, and causes, *Labour/Le Travail* presents commentaries by two feminist historians, Andrée Lévesque and Joan Sangster. We close this remembrance of Madeleine Parent with one of the many speeches she delivered over the course of decades of organizing, activism, and agitation. The occasion of Parent’s address was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul Robeson’s historic Peace Arch open-air concert. Robeson, a huge artistic talent nurtured in the Harlem Renaissance, graduated from Columbia’s Faculty of Law but renounced a legal profession because of

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1. Quoted in Rick Salutin, “Madeleine Parent, 1918–2012: Death of an Icon,” *Toronto Star*, 15 March 2012.



Madeline Parent, Labour Day march (approx. 1947)

the racism rampant in the field in the 1920s. A distinguished theatrical and movie actor, Robeson was also a celebrated singer, his rich bass-baritone voice associated with the popularization of African American folk songs/spirituals. By the 1930s he was increasingly affiliated with radicalism, endorsing the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and becoming more and more outspoken in his resistance to racism. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, he led mobilizations against lynch law in the American South and spoke out against the Canadian government's proposal to deport thousands of Japanese Canadians. Targeted in the anti-communist witch-hunt of the McCarthy era, Robeson had his passport seized by the United States government, prohibiting him from leaving the country. A supporter of militant unionism, Robeson was invited to sing at the Fourth Canadian convention of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, to be held in Vancouver in February 1952. But because his international movements were restricted, his appearance before the assembled Mine-Mill delegates was blocked. In protest, Robeson

sang across the US-Canada border, his concert delivered from the back of a flat-bed truck at the Blaine, Washington and Douglas, British Columbia Peace Arch. A crowd of 40,000 assembled in international solidarity to hear Robeson, and demonstrate their opposition to the reactionary political climate of the times.

On 18 May 2002 a “Here We Stand, Paul Robeson Memorial Concert” was organized to commemorate the original 1952 event. Madeleine Parent was a logical person to deliver a speech, and her remarks, reprinted below, reach back to the height of the Cold War, when Robeson’s victimization moved thousands to take a stand on social justice issues. It was a period in which the related vilification of Parent was commonplace. That attack, as Lévesque and Sangster show, came from a variety of quarters, none of which managed to sustain the kind of principled dignity and defence of the downtrodden that animated Parent’s life of struggle and its varied legacies.

## *A Life of Struggles*

### **Andrée Lévesque**

SHE WAS NOTORIOUS, she was vilified, and she was worshiped, Madeleine Parent (1918–2012), a militant since her student days at McGill University, never left anyone indifferent. Every social movement owes her an immense debt for her leadership and the inspiration she has given over three generations of activists.

Madeleine Parent was born in Montréal on 23 May 1918. It is important to remember this as she was later deemed to be a Russian spy, when the powers that be were convinced that a foreign origin would discredit her, or make her actions more understandable. She was first educated in convent schools, and then sent to a prestigious English high school by parents who valued education. She attended McGill University from 1936 to 1940, at a time when women were a distinct minority, but also when this conservative institution counted some progressive social scientists such as Leonard Marsh, and a lively student movement. Everett Hughes left his mark on her and her fellow students, as did Frank Scott and scientist Grant Lathe. Madeleine involved herself in various student clubs, as well as participating in the Canadian Students Assembly. She is best remembered for her part in the Canadian Students Movement campaign for scholarships for needy students, in which she argued the case for increased financial assistance before McGill Chancellor, Sir Edward W. Beatty, and other members of the Montréal business elite.

In 1939, at a Civil Liberties Union meeting at McGill, Madeleine met union organiser Lea Roback. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship. They had a memorable cup of coffee together and Lea, fifteen years her elder, became Madeleine’s role model and her mentor. Both women shared a dedication to

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