

Remembering Wayne Roberts, 1944–2021

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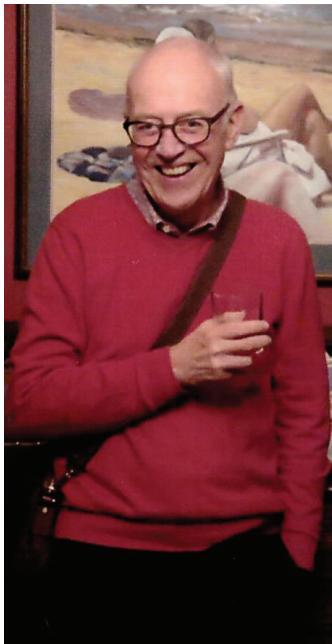
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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

Remembering Wayne Roberts, 1944–2021

David Sobel



WAYNE ROBERTS, AGED 76, PASSED AWAY on 20 January 2021 after a five-month battle with leukemia. An impressive and extensive community of family, friends, and admirers were part of a collective effort to support his treatment and care. It was a testament to the many people Roberts had touched and inspired through his activism, research, and writing on food security and urban issues. His contributions to the food, environmental, and green movements were rightly recognized in the media.

His work in Canadian labour history also merits remembering. He belonged to a group of Canadian labour historians, influenced by E. P. Thompson and others, who sought to expand the writing of history to include culture, social movements, and class struggle.

Roberts completed a master's degree in history at the University of California at Berkeley in 1969, and he occasionally spoke of what an exciting and intellectually challenging environment that was. It was there that his interest and involvement in left-wing politics grew. He completed his PhD thesis at the University of Toronto in 1978, with Kenneth McNaught as the supervisor. Roberts' deeply researched and interpretively venturesome dissertation on Toronto's working class in the years 1896 to 1914 remains a vital reference for the labour history of the city.

His historical writing and research helped develop an explicitly class-conscious Canadian labour history, informed, in part, by his participation in left-wing activism. For much of the 1970s to the mid-1980s, Roberts was a committed Trotskyist. He was part of a group aligned with Ross Dowson that parted ways with the League for Socialist Action (LSA) in 1974, forming the Socialist League, also known as the "Forward Group," after the newspaper of the same name. Roberts served as *Forward's* editor beginning in 1974 and continued to do so for about a decade. As his interest in more popular journalism grew in the early 1980s, Roberts, his then partner Ellie Kirzner, and his close friends Alice Klein and Michael Hollett established the alternative newspaper *Now Magazine*, where Roberts would become a featured columnist.

Much of Roberts' early labour history scholarship detailed and interpreted the exploitation of women and men and their struggles under capitalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. He had no illusions that these struggles had somehow come to an end.

I first met Roberts while an undergraduate, in 1980 at a labour history conference at McGill University called "Class and Community: Perspectives on Canada's Labour Past," where he was speaking. The presenters were an eclectic mix of practitioners, indicative of a certain tumult that the discipline was then undergoing. Roberts' paper clearly reflected the perspective of the upstarts, and his brand of history upset the academic establishment. Though the questions I raised with him after his talk were clearly those of a novice to the discipline, he took them seriously and was generous with his response. This was typical of him, as I came to know decades later.

Before completing his dissertation Roberts had already published two interesting works in women's labour history, uncommon for a male historian at the time. They first appeared in a collection of essays entitled *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850–1930*, published by the Women's Press in 1974. His chapter with Alice Klein explored the many challenges that confronted Toronto's women working for wages at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The essay demonstrated a sensitivity and understanding of the material conditions in many occupations dominated by women in the period.

The contradictions that women encountered as union members were astutely noted, when Roberts and Klein observed that a 1905 column on women's work in a labour newspaper was reduced to recipe suggestions a few months later. The anthology, edited by Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith, and Bonnie Shepard, provided information about how to do labour history, with suggestions for sources and methods. This aligned with Roberts' belief that writing history should not be left to academics alone. He later contributed to many popular history projects intended for a broader audience.

Two years later, in 1976, New Hogtown Press, a collective of New Left-inspired historians, published Roberts' pamphlet, *Honest Womanhood, Feminism, Femininity, and Class Consciousness among Toronto Working Women, 1893 to 1914*. His empathetic descriptions and analysis of working conditions in various women's occupations were innovative and thoughtful. That same year, another article by Roberts appeared in Peter Warrian and Greg Kealey's collection, *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*. It shed light on how Toronto's printers battled industrial capitalism in the immediate pre-World War I years.

His research on the building trades in the early 20th century, appearing that same year in the inaugural issue of *Labour/Le Travail (L/LT)*, discussed the complex structure of contracting in the construction industry. The piece also recognized that technological and structural challenges were uneven, varying greatly among the trades, with innovations liable to take place within short periods of time.

Over these years Roberts' book reviews were filled with humour and critical insights, appearing in the pages of *L/LT* and other journals. His approach to questions of work and labour were frequently interdisciplinary and committed to popularizing knowledge for a broader audience. He was an important member of the team that built the Labour Studies Program at McMaster University, where he taught for five years, until 1982. The introduction to the memorable collection of photographs of Hamilton workers, *All That Our Hands Have Done*, published by Mosaic Press in 1981, in which he played a major role, announced, "Labour history is a new field. It demands new methods, new sources, new questions and new, mutual relations between researchers and their subjects."

Roberts left academic life when he did not secure a tenure-stream appointment at McMaster. He next worked at the Centre for the Quality of Working Life, an agency of the Ontario government. As the editor of the centre's regular publication, he arranged for content so "subversive" it compelled the government to shred every copy of the offending journal before anyone had a chance to read it. Roberts laughed while sharing this story and delighted in telling it. He didn't work there long.

Next he served as the assistant to the president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), from 1983 to 1989. That experience also resulted in a work of popular history, called *Don't Call Me Servant: Government Work and*

Unions in Ontario, 1911–1984, which OPSEU published in 1994. In his review of several books about government unions, Desmond Morton was complimentary of Roberts' "lively prose," noting he was a "freelance historian and a dedicated socialist."

A further indication of Roberts' commitment to accessible history writing was his book *Cracking the Canadian Formula: The Making of the Energy and Chemical Workers Union*, published by Between the Lines in 1990.

His ability to communicate beyond academe was clear in his entertaining regular labour issues segment on CBC Radio's Metro Morning, broadcast in Toronto beginning around 1980. These aired at a time when many media outlets were losing interest in labour issues. At *Now Magazine*, and later at *rabble.ca*, Roberts expanded his interest in labour to encompass a wide range of commentaries on social justice issues, environmentalism, urban planning, public health, and sustainable food production. The magazine eventually named Roberts one of Toronto's leading visionaries of the past twenty years, an accolade buttressed by a Canadian Eco-Hero Award bestowed by Planet in Focus in 2008 and a University of Toronto Arbor Award in 2011, celebrating his role in establishing food studies as a field of inquiry at the university.

Among Roberts' celebrated writings on environmentalism, food security and sustainability, local provisioning, and global food equity were books such as the co-authored *Get a Life! How to Make a Good Buck, Dance around the Dinosaurs and Save the World while You're At It* (1995); *Real Food for a Change: Bringing Nature, Health, Joy and Justice to the Table*, a 1999 publication co-authored with Rod MacRae and Roberts' partner, Lori Stahlbrand; and *The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food* (2008). Manager of the Toronto Food Policy Council from 2000 to 2010, Roberts pioneered Toronto's Food Charter, also finding time to chair the Coalition for a Green Economy and sit on a number of boards and committees concerned with environmental and food issues. He brought the same relentless energy and passionate commitment to these fields as he had infused working-class history with in the 1970s.

Roberts' beginnings as a labour historian were, of course, linked to his later development as a food scholar and urban activist. He thought carefully about the origins of the food system's problems and saw the industrialization and monopolization of contemporary food production in much the same way as he had understood the development of 19th-century capitalism and ongoing degradation of labour.

If Roberts' interests gradually shifted away from labour history in the 1990s, he never left behind what he had learned as a historian of the working class. We collaborated on a short educational video for the Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre, the production opening in Hamilton. His knowledge of the labour movement and working-class experience was on display in that video; his witty narration introduced the stories of five labour activists, contextualizing their lives and struggles with archival footage.

More recently, Roberts and I went for long weekly walks, part of a regime of exercise that he was committed to all of his life. Our conversations spanned history, politics, the environment, and food. We talked about social movements and the state of the labour movement, as well as new restaurants that had sprung up in Scarborough, where he grew up. He loved how Toronto had diversified since the 1940s.

A warm and generous person, he loved to laugh, both at himself and at the absurdities and quirks of past and present. He remained throughout his life passionate about social justice, demanding that the world become a better place for all of its inhabitants. Thoughtful and curious, always informed by his deep understanding of the past, Roberts should be remembered for his many contributions—among them, that he was part of the generation that changed how history is practised in Canada.

Roberts' death is a loss to us all. He is survived by his partner and collaborator, Dr. Lori Stahlbrand, and daughters Jaime Kirzner-Roberts and Anika Roberts-Stahlbrand.