

Eugene Alfred Forsey, 1904-1991: Caring Canadian

W.J. C. Cherwinski

Volume 27, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t27ob02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Cherwinski, W. C. (1991). Eugene Alfred Forsey, 1904-1991: Caring Canadian. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 27, 10–13.



Eugene Alfred Forsey, 1904-1991

Caring Canadian

LAST OCTOBER, while being interviewed by Peter Gzowski regarding his just published memoirs, *A Life on the Fringe*, Eugene Forsey referred to himself as a Campbell Soup politician because he had embraced so many political parties during his career (first Tory, then CCF, and most recently Liberal) that no one would know what he was if he ran again. His self-deprecation, however, inadvertently revealed his most enduring quality in the analogy he used: Campbell Soup, for all its shortcomings, is consistent at all times in its content. So too was Forsey who tenaciously adhered to fundamental principles, often unpopular and usually without concern for his personal welfare. The result was that he suffered deprivation for the positions he took and the causes he championed.

The throw-away journals, including *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail*, have already said their bit, and recognized Forsey's terrier-like behaviour, but, predictably, they concentrated on the obvious past quarter-century when Canada discovered Forsey about the same time that Prime Minister Trudeau appointed him to the Senate. Consequently, they emphasized his pan-Canadian perspective of the country and how this translated into a running critique of the failed Meech Lake process. Otherwise, we were reminded that Forsey was the consummate writer of letters to the editor whose fans included those who loved to see him deflate the perpetrators of sloppy reasoning, pompous pronouncements, and flagrant abuses of the English language. Numerous other specialized publications which will pay homage to his memory over the next few months will no doubt recognize the incredible breadth of this little man with the acerbic wit and the ability to put his views on paper with such economy.

Even the Conservative Party can lay claim to part of Forsey's legacy because of his early membership and his friendship with Arthur Meighen which spanned four decades. While it flourished outsiders had trouble understanding how the diminutive socialist and labour official could have anything in common with the much-despised person who was so closely associated with the Military Service Act in 1917 and the addition of Section 98 to the Criminal Code. Cynics speak of their mutual dislike of the elusive Mackenzie King as the source of their friendship but it was their devotion to honesty over equivocation, and to principle over pragmatism which moved the two men to animated conversation in their walks around Ottawa and later Toronto.

Most readers of this journal have greater claim to Eugene Forsey's legacy, particularly that part which he contributed before he became the darling of the

12 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

middle class. His early embrace of social democracy while a Rhodes Scholar is well known. Unlike others so honoured, however, he put his career on the line as a sacrificial lamb for the CCF at election time while still a young academic. That, plus his association with the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR) and his vigorous condemnation of the anti-Communist Padlock Law in Quebec focused the kind of establishment attention which in turn led to his inability to get a full-time university teaching position. But his fate, and that of others from the LSR in similar circumstances helped secure academic freedom for those teaching at Canadian universities in the next generation.

With no options in academia Forsey's move to the Canadian Congress of Labour as research director in 1942 was natural, and it was a position he continued to occupy in the Canadian Labour Congress after amalgamation in 1956. Despite the title, however, the job was, by Forsey's own admission, one of "General Handyman," a collector and distributor of information to affiliates, and the person who appeared for the labour movement wherever and whenever a learned opinion was required. Nevertheless, the care and attention he devoted to preparing labour's case drew praise even from critics, and his vigorous arguments in defense of trade union principles when organized labour was under seige in the '50s are still surprisingly current and are worthy of reprinting.

While in the service of the CLC Eugene Forsey realized that the Canadian labour movement had to be made aware of its historical development if it hoped to pursue its objectives with pride and conviction. Alas, however, the cupboard was bare except for H.A. Logan's *Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning*, and it was badly flawed. (His umpteen-page, single-spaced list of Logan's sins, errors, and omissions should also be reprinted somewhere.) Armed with Canada Council money Forsey proposed in 1964 to write a history of Canadian labour in time for the 1967 Centennial Celebration, assisted by eager students in the various provinces. This project was seminal and Forsey soon became the authority to whom most graduate students working on labour and working-class topics eventually submitted their efforts for criticism. He gave all of them the same attention he had given to Logan, because he believed that to be good "every dot and tittle" had to be correct both in fact and form. His comment, "Too much American PhDesse" still leaps off one of the many pages he attached to an early effort by this writer. Meanwhile, to further promote scholarly study of labour and working-class history Forsey worked actively to encourage publication of worthy work. Therefore, after a committee was formed in 1973 to establish this journal he helped to obtain funding two years later which resulted in the publication of *Labour/le travailleur* in 1976.

Unfortunately, the time Dr. Forsey spent with the work of others meant that his own suffered. Long after Centennial Year, 1982 to be exact, only a portion of the massive study he had envisaged appeared as *Trade Unions in Canada 1812-1902*. Admittedly, the volume is encyclopedic in form and institutional in content rather than analytical and interpretive, but in a way it speaks volumes for its author

who believed that the facts, if correct and complete, should stand on their own. The same truths held for labour history as for a country's constitution. Nevertheless, Forsey's role as a founding father of Canadian labour studies is undisputed.

Just hours after Eugene Forsey died on 20 February 1991 a radio commentator observed that his passing was untimely because at this moment Canada needed the good Senator more than God did. The reference no doubt was to the constitutional mess the country is in. Reflection, however, reveals a more fundamental, continuing need he could fill as a principled beacon dedicated to the welfare of all Canadians while remaining constantly vigilant to oppose those who erode human relationships by resorting to popular, short-term expedients.

W.J.C. Cherwinski
Department of History
Memorial University of Newfoundland