

Introduction: The Year 2000 and the Deaths of Three Who Made Labour History

Bryan D. Palmer

Volume 48, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t48ob01>

[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

Palmer, B. D. (2001). Introduction: The Year 2000 and the Deaths of Three Who Made Labour History. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 48, 9–11.

OBITUARIES / NÉCROLOGIES

Introduction: The Year 2000 and the Deaths of Three Who Made Labour History

Bryan D. Palmer

THE STUDY OF THE WORKING CLASS and commitment to its causes is central to what this journal is about. Three men who made significant contributions to working-class life over the course of the last century, but whose personal efforts, sadly and to our collective loss, came to an end in the year 2000, merit our attention.

Marcel Pepin, a vibrant voice in the modern history of Québec's union movement and former leader of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CNTU/CSN), died 6 March 2000. Few trade unionists in Canada have exercised the influence of Pepin, who was one of three major leaders of the historic 1972 Common Front general strike in Québec's burgeoning and critical public sector. Jailed for his defiance of back-to-work legislation, Pepin announced the rise of labour militancy that would be associated with Québécois workers and their leaders throughout the 1970s, and served notice that capital and the state now confronted a powerful presence in French Canada, where the realization of class exploitation was heightening with awareness of national oppression. We offer below a brief obituary in his honour, a tribute to Pepin's place in the history of Canada's and Québec's class struggle by Michel Rioux, "La fidélité, l'affaire de toute une vie."

On 15 June 2000 another advocate of Canadian workers, especially those incarcerated in homelessness and poverty, Norman N. Feltes, died. Feltes, a marxist literary theorist with an acute sense of the significance of an Althusserian reading of "texts," was one of many dissidents who left the United States in the 1960s to

Bryan D. Palmer, "Introduction: The Year 2000 and the Deaths of Three Who Made Labour History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 48 (Fall 2001), 9-11.

10 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

take up residence in Canada as a protest against their society's politics and culture. A former US Marine, Feltes served in Korea before utilizing the GI Bill to pursue graduate studies in English at Dublin and Oxford. Returning to the United States, Feltes began what would prove a life of protest, marching in southern civil rights campaigns and turning his opposition to the imperialist policies of the United States in Vietnam. In 1969, convinced that the country of his birth gave him no other option, Feltes came to Canada where he found a niche in York University's English Department. There he produced two rigorously terse texts on the production of the Victorian novel, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (1986) and *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel* (1993), before retiring in 1996. He then commenced a labour of love, an exploration of determination and historical process, *This Side of Heaven: Determining the Donnelly Murders, 1880* (1999). It was a reflection of Norman's intellectual venturesomeness that he shifted scholarly gears so seemingly effortlessly, crafting a brilliantly iconoclastic 'reading' of an event well-known in Canadian historical and literary circles — the tale of the 'Black Donnelly' murders near Lucan, Ontario — in ways that totally recast the meaning of what had taken place in that quintessential central Canadian locale, Biddulph Township.

Writing was not all that Feltes did in his retirement years. Outraged by the ways in which Mike Harris's Tories were assailing the poor, Feltes was drawn to the protest politics of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), and he lent his analytic insights, his Marine training and discipline, and his considerable compassion and openness to new perspectives to the cause of the homeless, in whose interests he gave his boundless energies and enthusiasm. He organized, he rubbed shoulders with new friends and became a common site in new parts of Toronto frequented by the poor, he travelled to protests, he was arrested. And he thought, and struggled to write in ways that would force people to consider OCAP's significance. We offer here a tribute to Norman from John Clarke, a leading figure in OCAP, as well as one of Feltes's last intellectual undertakings, an important paper first written for a conference in Cuba, and published posthumously in this issue. "A New Prince in a New Principality: OCAP and the Toronto Poor," will no doubt prove a controversial statement, and we regret that Norman is no longer alive to engage those who might disagree with his views. But the essay has already struck chords in some quarters, where its message of alternative ways of organizing on the left, and its implicit demand to rethink how we conceptualize "labour" has proven stimulating.¹

Jack Scott was a revolutionary of the 20th century who had hope for the 21st. He no doubt understood, however, that others would be making history in the new millennium, and his contributions had already been made. He died as the century closed, on 30 December 2000. Born in Belfast in 1910, having celebrated his 90th birthday, Jack's longevity and independence — he managed his own household

¹ See Frank Pearce, *The Radical Durkheim* (Toronto 2001, 2nd edition), xviii.

until the end — were striking, especially when it is recognized that for much of his life Jack worked physically-exacting, poorly-paid jobs that did not give him access to the best nutrition and health care. A life-long communist, Scott was also deeply committed to labour history. At first he read and lectured, especially to comrades in various political tendencies with which he was affiliated or which he founded and led, such as the Communist Party of Canada or the Progressive Worker Movement of the 1960s. Student leftists and Maoist groupings in the 1970s found his talks particularly stimulating. And in this period, with Jack now able to 'retire' from the demands of physical labour, he started to do historical research on the history of class struggle in Canada, producing a series of studies with the Vancouver-based publisher, New Star Books. Politically-poised and popularly-pitched, Scott's labour history writing was also prolific: four volumes appeared between 1974-1978, covering the origins of working-class struggle in Canada up to 1899, the Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia, and two volumes attacking the imperialist agenda of the American Federation of Labor in Latin America and Canada. Enthused by the youthful anticapitalism of the 'globalization' protests of the last years of his life, Jack Scott died as part of a generation of the Canadian revolutionary left that had linked the upheavals of the Great Depression of the 1930s to the street battles of Seattle and Quebec City in our time. His life is remembered here in a collaborative statement produced by Bryan D. Palmer drawing on notes provided by Al Birnie and Ralph Stanton.

Marcel Pepin, Norman N. Feltes, and Jack Scott — three figures from the diversity that is Canada, they were historically separated by geography, culture, origins, language, politics, and the sociology of everyday life, which meant they earned their livings, developed their contributions, and made their mark in decidedly different ways. Yet they all expanded our appreciation of working-class life and struggle, and like countless other men and women of their and our times they have touched us in their commitment to the cause of labour. We mourn their passing by thanking them for the gifts they bestowed upon us, by celebrating their lives, and by continuing the work that they all believed in so passionately.

* * * *