

Breaking a path for the sixties radicalization in Canada - Review of Ernest Tate's 'Revolutionary Activism'

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"A police cruiser with two uniformed officers pulled up alongside me," recalls Ernest Tate in his newly published memoir, *Revolutionary Activism*. "They jumped out and asked me for identification. I gave it to them. 'What's in your suitcase?' Dirty underwear, I said. 'Open it,' they ordered. I told them it was none of their business. They almost went berserk..."

To learn how this story ends, you'll just have to read *Revolutionary Activism*, or at least the first of its two volumes, dealing with Canada 1955-65. And the suitcase saga, which wrote a page in the history of civil liberties in Toronto, is only one of many gripping adventures found in Tate's account of socialist activism in Canada in the years before the radical upsurge of the late 1960s. (For details on a June 11, 2014, book launch in Toronto, see below.)

As a 21-year-old Irish immigrant in Toronto, Tate made contact with the socialist movement in 1955, after he noticed "The Toronto Labour Bookstore" on a then-shabby sector of Yonge St. He asked the manager, Ross Dowson, how to get *King Jesus*, a book by the radical British poet and scholar Robert Graves. Graves was hardly a household word in Toronto, and neither Tate nor Dowson had benefited from much formal education. Yet their shared familiarity with Graves was not surprising in the small world of self-educated radical workers of the time.

A child of poverty from Belfast's Shankill Road, Tate was endowed with intellectual curiosity and a voracious appetite for reading. At the Labour Bookstore, he encountered a small but vigorous socialist group, Trotskyist in outlook, whose radical goals matched his own. Shaken by recent splits but on the road to expansion, the group then had about 15 members, mostly youthful industrial unionists.

A world to win

Left-wing politics in Toronto was then dominated by the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the social-democratic predecessor of today's New Democratic Party, and the Communist Party. The tiny Trotskyist group was then the only visible alternative to their left. In the depths of the cold war, "socialism was a dirty word," Tate recalls.

Yet the youthful Tate, supremely confident, told a co-worker that Canada would have a socialist

government within five years. "Are you sure?" his co-worker asked sceptically.

"Yes," Tate replied. "There's no way capitalism can overcome its contradictions."

"Would you like to place a bet on that?" his friend shot back. "How about \$20?"

Concerned that he had overreached, Tate responded, "How about ten years?"

When I joined the Trotskyist movement in 1960, I didn't share such optimism, but no one could deny that the trade unions and social movements in Canada were then on the move. Trotskyists, organized before 1961 in the Socialist Educational League (SEL) and thereafter in the League for Socialist Action (LSA), were prominent in many of struggles of that time, and an account of these experiences makes up most of Tate's book. Chapters of his book tell the following stories :

- The SEL's efforts to work with dissident forces leaving the Communist Party after Khrushchev's anti-Stalin revelations of 1956.
- The SEL's role in the movement to launch what became the NDP and to build its left wing.
- The remarkable successes of LSA activists in an upsurge of militancy in the 1960s among Toronto Teamsters.
- The history of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (Canada), for many years Canada's leading Cuba solidarity movement. Tate's extended account is a valuable supplement to the previous article on FPCC by Cynthia Wright and a worthy tribute to the remarkable founding leader of the FPCC, Vernal Olson.
- The LSA's engagement with radical Canadian poets like Milton Acorn and Al Purdy.

Tate's text follows the contours of his own activity and thus has less to say on some other major political developments of the time, including the rise of Quebec labour and nationalist radicalism ; the beginnings of the youth and antiwar radicalizations ; the role of feminism ; the impact of the Black civil rights movement in the U.S.

Bridging two generations

Tate's account also does not reflect the impact he had on some younger LSA members, including myself, who joined the movement in 1960-63 - a decisive period when it was winning its first student members. Among the older, worker comrades in Toronto, Tate was the only one who compared to the central figure, Dowson, in political effectiveness and judgment. An experienced union activist, Tate also had an instinctive feel for and capacity to learn from the nascent social movements in which the student comrades worked. His longtime companion, Jess Mackenzie, also played a significant role in socialist, feminist, and antiwar movements.

What is more, Tate could speak in the idiom of radical youth and became a close friend to many of us. He was unique in his capacity to span the two generations and social milieus, and thus to facilitate their ultimate fusion into a single team. In Vancouver, where he spent several years in the early sixties, this goal was largely achieved. In Toronto the process faced much greater obstacles. Tate devotes only few paragraphs to these issues, but what he says is telling.

At my first LSA Toronto branch meeting in 1961, Tate made a proposal that was opposed by Dowson ; I voted alone with Tate and against the rest of the branch. I have forgotten the point at

issue, but I still recall the scent of their antagonism. Tate spent most of his time In the 1960s outside Toronto, and this seemed to me to be in part a device to prevent him and Dowson from coming into conflict.

Challenge of leadership

Dowson was unquestionably the outstanding figure of Canadian Trotskyism from the 1940s through the 1960s. He is remembered by many on the Left, including Tate, with respect and affection. Dowson believed that “the theoretical problems [of socialism] have been resolved by the socialist movement - the task is to popularize.” Yet he, Tate, and the younger generation all proved adept at modifying received doctrine to encompass lessons from the new social movements of the sixties.

Nonetheless, as Tate notes, Dowson came into conflict with every significant leader who worked with him in Toronto during the period of Tate’s first volume. No team leadership developed ; Dowson remained preeminent and unchallengeable.

In Tate’s opinion, the LSA’s story illustrates the danger of a “very strong leader’s personality if it remains unchecked.” Dowson’s “intellectual and political development ... stood head and shoulders above everyone else.” But “[h]e was also a liability in that his personality ... could be extremely damaging.” This contradiction came to the fore in the years after 1965, when Tate was in Britain.

The LSA during the period of Tate’s account was small but lively, energetic, and full of promise, winning influence and learning from the rising radical social movements. In the years after 1965, the LSA grew into a significant Canada-wide movement, with about 500 members at its peak. It has now passed from the scene. The post-1965 story still awaits a chronicler.

In the meantime, Tate’s *Revolutionary Activism* provides a vivid picture of what a small and resolute group of socialists can achieve in non-revolutionary times.

John Riddell, May 18, 2014

Meet the Author, Ernest Tate

...and special guests Bryan Palmer, Chris Shenk, and Richard Fidler, at a celebration of publication of *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s*, by Ernest Tate, on Wednesday, June 11, 6:30 p.m. at Paupers Pub (second floor), 539 Bloor St. West (Bathurst Station), Toronto.

Books will be on sale for a special price of \$30 (cash) for both volumes.

Sponsored by Centre for Social Justice and Socialist Project.

Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s : Ernest Tate, a Memoir.

Volume 1, *Canada 1955-65*. London : Resistance Books, 2014, 268 pp., C\$15.00.

Volume 2, *Britain 1965-70*. London : Resistance Books, 2014, 395 pp., C\$21.00.

Available from Amazon.

P.-S.

* <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/05/18/breaking-a-path-for-the-sixties-radicalization/>