

“War is stupid.”



# Muriel Duckworth

## 1908-2009

Muriel Duckworth was gentle and fierce. An acclaimed peace activist and feminist, she taught generations of women to stand up, speak out, and work together for a better world. Her life spanned 100 years. Her influence shaped more than 17 organizations, from local Home and School Associations to the internationally recognized Voice of Women for Peace.

You may be lucky enough to have known her, or to know someone who loved her. Muriel's circle of friends and admirers was huge. On the occasion of her 100th birthday, an enthusiastic crowd filled the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium in Halifax to celebrate Muriel's passion for peace. They sang, shared stories, and ate 100 birthday cakes baked in her honour. When she died the following summer, memorial services were held across Canada. Tributes poured in from politicians, fellow activists, and ordinary Canadians.

Muriel's name was not always so honoured. When the world was at war in the 1940s, peacemakers like Muriel were shunned for being unpatriotic. During the Cold War years, anti-nuclear activists were dismissed as naïve or marked as dangerously pro-communist. Muriel feared the labels, with good reason, but she faced her fears. The older she got, the braver she grew.

Muriel's long and courageous life began in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. Her grandmother taught her to read. Her mother taught her to take a stand and make a difference. "The adults in my mother's family loved to talk politics," she once said. "They would argue at the top of their voices and got very mad at each other."<sup>1</sup> Muriel inherited their passion and wit, but learned to listen, to question, and to cultivate an open mind. She entered McGill University in Montreal at the age of 16 and soon joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM). The movement was progressive and sometimes controversial, challenging its members to think critically

1 \ Quoted by Marion Kerans in *Muriel Duckworth: A Very Active Pacifist*, 26.

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and put their beliefs into action. In later years, Muriel described her experience in the SCM as the most formative part of her education at McGill. "This was the beginning of my adult search for truth and my sense that all things must be open to me. It was unsettling; it was painful. It was exciting."<sup>2</sup> The SCM was also where Muriel met her future husband, Jack.

Muriel and Jack married in 1929, soon after her graduation. They spent a year in New York City studying at Union Theological Seminary, immersed in the social gospel movement. To social gospellers, being Christian meant standing with the poor and the powerless. It meant actively working to turn the world right-side up; creating heaven on earth. Muriel worked part-time helping teenaged girls in the hardscrabble neighbourhood of Hell's Kitchen. She was a witness to history when the New York stock market crashed in October 1929, plunging North America into the Great Depression.

Muriel and Jack returned to Montreal in 1930 and raised three children there. They were outspoken advocates for social justice—promoting living wages, affordable housing, unemployment insurance, health care, pensions, education, and interfaith and intercultural dialogue. They joined a number of groundbreaking organizations, including the League for Social Reconstruction, a forerunner to both the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party.

During her years in Montreal, Muriel helped to organize a nursery school at the YMCA where Jack worked. She also contributed to the development of Quebec's first legislation to regulate nursery schools. She was a founding member of three Home and School Associations. Believing in the strength of coalitions, she envisioned a French-English, Catholic-Protestant affiliation of Home and School groups—a radical and unrealized dream.

2 \ Kerans, 32.

In 1947 the Duckworth family moved to Halifax. Jack became general secretary of the new family YMCA on South Park Street. Muriel continued her volunteer work for the Home and School Association and, from there, branched into paid part-time work as a parent education advisor for the Nova Scotia Department of Education. Her paid and volunteer roles often overlapped. Through the 1950s, her volunteer responsibilities grew. She was a founding member of the Halifax branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Canadian Conference on Education, and the Nova Scotia Education Association. She also served as president of the Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations. In her own middle years, she was becoming the go-to woman for community activism.

It was through her work for the Department of Education that she became aware of Nova Scotia's deeply entrenched racism. She advocated for change and joined the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP).

Each issue broadened Muriel's awareness and deepened her commitment to radical social action. When the call came in 1960 to help form a national women's organization committed to global peace, Muriel was ready. The stakes were high. The United States and Soviet Union were armed and poised for nuclear war. International peace talks had broken down. Citizens were being advised to build their own bomb shelters. The first meeting of the Halifax branch of Voice of Women (VOW) drew about 20 women to Muriel's living room. They booked a school gym and organized a successful public meeting to protest the dumping of American nuclear waste off the coast of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.



Muriel and Alexa McDonough (right) at Muriel's 92nd birthday celebration, October 2000.

VOW members learned to dig for facts, challenge arguments, prepare briefs, lobby politicians, and issue press releases. They struggled to find common ground over complex issues, sometimes losing members for being too bold or not bold enough. Muriel agonized over the conflicts. She found strength in the practice of deep listening and inner silence, taught to her by Quaker friends.

She served on the VOW board from 1960 to 1975, and as national president from 1967 to 1971. Reflecting on her presidency, she said: “It was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done and the one from which I learned the most—from just having to do it and feeling overwhelmed by it from the beginning.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1974, three weeks before the provincial election, Muriel was asked to run as a New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate in her south-end Halifax riding. It was the longest of long shots. She did it because it needed to be done. She was the first woman in Halifax to run in a provincial or federal election. Alexa

3 \ Kerans, 97.

McDonough, then a rookie member of the party, accompanied Muriel as she campaigned door to door. Muriel ended third in the polls, but she boosted her party's share of votes in that riding to 19 per cent, an increase of more than 11 percentage points. She ran again in 1978, raising the NDP share to almost 23 per cent.

Jack died in 1975. Muriel was 66. They had been married 46 years. Muriel coped by continuing the activism that had shaped their lives together. She travelled to peace events around the world, always inspiring, unsettling, and connecting people. In 1980 she moved to a house owned by her son John. She invited her friend and fellow activist **Betty Peterson** to live with her. They welcomed student tenants, including **Elizabeth May** who was at the time a first-year law student and who went on to lead the Green Party of Canada. The house was a community hub, like a wellspring of fresh water for a thirsty village.

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Raging Grannies singing out for women's rights at Province House in Halifax, December 6, 2011.

**The Raging Grannies** use humour and music to draw attention to critical issues of ecological, economic, and social justice. The movement began in 1987 in Victoria, British Columbia, and quickly spread across Canada. There are now gaggles of grannies in countries around the world.

Here is how they describe their philosophy: "We are totally non-violent, believe in only peaceful protest (with lots of laughter), work for the 'many not the few' ... and see our work as the spreading green branches of a great tree, rising up to provide shelter and nourishment for those who will come after us." ([raginggrannies.org/philosophy](http://raginggrannies.org/philosophy))

Muriel was an active granny in the Halifax gaggle.





Muriel at 100 in 2008.

4 \ *Muriel's Song*,  
written by Rose  
Vaughan and Cheryl  
Gaudet, 2008.

Muriel continued to do what prophets do—comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable—throughout her life. She received many honours and awards, including the Order of Canada, the Pearson Medal of Peace, ten honorary degrees, and more. In 2005, Muriel was one of 1000 women worldwide to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize ([www.1000peacewomen.org](http://www.1000peacewomen.org)). The one prize that would have meant everything—lasting peace—remained elusive. But there was, and is, always hope. At her wonderful final birthday party, a choir of children sang this promise: *In your name we'll carry on, speaking out for everyone, and honour all that you have done with passion and with grace.*<sup>4</sup>

## And now ...

**Alexa McDonough** remembers the phone calls. “When Muriel called, you knew she had a plan, and you knew you’d be part of it.”

Alexa worked with Muriel on many campaigns. “Muriel was a natural mentor,” she says.

In 1980, Alexa was elected leader of the Nova Scotia New Democratic Party, becoming the first woman to lead a recognized political party in Canada. She went on to lead the federal NDP from 1995 to 2003, and continued to represent Halifax in the Parliament of Canada until her retirement in 2008. She was succeeded in the 2008 federal election by **Megan Leslie**. In 2013, Mount Saint Vincent University renamed an important feminist institute in Alexa’s honour. The Alexa McDonough Institute for Women, Gender, and Social Justice provides a focus for feminist energy, action, and research aimed at building a better world.

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