

# Muriel Duckworth, Peace Worker

*An Interview by Christine Ball*

Muriel Duckworth is one of the founders of the Voice of Women in Halifax. Since 1962, she has served as a member of the National Council of the Voice of Women/La Voix des Femmes, Canada; as Chairperson of the National Education Committee and as Vice-President and National President of the Voice of Women. She has played a major role in the creation of several organizations, including the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. She is a recipient of the Persons Award (1981), and the Order of Canada (1983). The following are excerpts from two interviews with Muriel Duckworth which took place on October 23rd and 24th, 1986, at Kay Macpherson's home in Toronto. Christine Ball, a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, interviewed Muriel.

*How did you hear of the Voice of Women?*

I heard about it on the radio because it started off with quite a bang in Toronto. A lot of media women were involved and there was a lot of talk about it but I didn't think of it affecting me. I then heard about it from Peggy Hope-Simpson, who lived in Dartmouth, N.S., at the time. I was 52 years old and I had just taken on the first full-time job of my life working for the Adult Education Division [Department of Education, Province of Nova Scotia] when Peggy phoned me. To back up a little bit, David Hope-Simpson her husband, and she, and my husband and I were involved in an anti-nuclear testing movement at the time...Somebody from Toronto wrote to David Hope-Simpson and said "do you know any women...who would help to organize?"...he didn't think of her doing it and she said "Well, I'd like to be in on that myself." She didn't have much time. She thought of me. I don't think we knew each other, but she

knew something about me. She thought I could organize and she phoned me. We had the first meeting in my living room. I was quite resistant; I had just taken this first full-time job and I said to myself "who needs another organization?"...I wasn't really looking for another organization to belong to. Kay said she had the same feeling.

*The same feeling? That was at the time the Voice of Women formed in 1960...?*

In 1960. Anyway, we had the first meeting in our house. The living room was packed, about 25 women came. Margaret Colpitts, known professionally as Joan Marshall, who was then a women's morning commentary on the CBC — they used to have them all across the country, 'women's morning commentators' on all kinds of issues — we asked her to chair it and she did. Then we immediately had an issue just dropped in our laps. Word came out that the United States was considering the dumping of nuclear waste off the coast of Nova Scotia into the ocean. People didn't know very much about it but they knew enough to be incensed from a nationalistic point of view that they would think that they could dump nuclear waste in our water and we knew that they were doing it because there would be too much of a fuss for them to do it off the coast of Maine or any other place along the Eastern seaboard. Harold Hathaway, in charge of Public Affairs, at CBC Halifax, got in touch with us about it. Because he was highly incensed, he helped with publicity. We had a good meeting in a school gym, a lot of people, television coverage, and a lot of radio coverage, and in the end they didn't do it. Whether our meeting had anything to do with it or not, of course, we don't know, but they never did do it.

*Was this after the first meeting with the 25 women?*

Yes. At that meeting, we began planning the public meeting so that was how I first got into [the Voice of Women]... That was 1960. It was founded in 1960 and it spread very rapidly across the country. It was founded in Toronto in response to a crisis in the Peace Talks in Paris. In the middle of peace talks, word came out about the shooting down of the U2 American spy plane with its pilot, Gary Power, over the Soviet Union. Of course, the US denied it. Eisenhower was the President. He denied up and down, which is what they do. We didn't know at the time that's routine; they deny ... [Khrushchev] broke up the peace talks and went home. Everybody was very afraid. Everybody thought that meant that there was immediate risk of nuclear war. You understand that by this time, people had begun to realize that, in spite of the terrible destructiveness of the atomic bombs, they were going ahead with planning and making even more powerful nuclear bombs. This knowledge as it seeped out took the place of the feeling that there could never be another nuclear war because it would be too awful. There was this incident in the South Pacific where the Japanese fishing boat was showered with radioactive fall-out and one man died and the Japanese peace movement came alive. Then, the testing, and the risks of testing, became very clear from the testing in the Nevada Desert...My first grandchildren were born in Sackville, New Brunswick in 1959 and the fallout from Nevada was coming across the border as well as causing death and destruction in the United States.

*So, these were all the factors around that time that were considerations?*

Fallout was a big factor; so was the danger of nuclear war, without a real realization of how terrible it would be but with some sense of it. Then, Lotta Dempsey, a newspaper woman in Toronto, writing [in] *The*

*Toronto Star* said "Where are the women? Why aren't the women doing something about this terrible situation? Half the people in the world are women." Then came the organization [Voice of Women]... I had heard that there was the beginning of a women's peace movement in Toronto before that. That women had begun to talk about one and they were almost ready to take off and this gave them a real push... It was Marion Catto who first told me about it. As they met in somebody's house for the purpose of organizing, a question was raised, "What do we call this women's peace movement?" Somebody murmured tentatively, "It has to be called the voice of women;" they latched onto it. You know, from where I sit today, I think that was brilliant, because the problem of women has been their silence. I don't think ... I know that we didn't clearly see it at that time as the problem of women that they are silent, that they don't speak up.

*That was three years before Betty Friedan's book The Feminine Mystique...*

I got into the women's movement at that point really through the peace movement ... I sort of gradually, gradually became more and more of a feminist.

*How long were you involved in the peace movement?*

I was involved before the Second World War. In Montreal, we [her husband, Jack, and she] belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation which was a pacifist organization.

*You're a Quaker. Have you been a Quaker all your life?*

No, I haven't. As a matter of fact, I started going to Quaker meetings, partly because of the Quaker peace witness, just after the founding of the Voice of Women. Dr. Helen Cunningham was a psychiatrist and one of the founders of the Voice of Women. [She]

moved with her husband and children from Montreal to Halifax in 1961. They immediately set up a Quaker meeting in their house and they invited us to come. At that time we were active members of the United Church of Canada which did not have any kind of peace witness — it was really pretty shocking. The then Moderator of the United Church was one of the people that the Canadian government took down to Colorado to show them the 'wonderful' headquarters of NORAD. He came back impressed, and he talked about the North, Canada's Northland, as a bargaining chip with the United States. We just couldn't stand that coming from the chief spokesperson of the United Church. So my husband corresponded with him two or three times but he was adamant, he wouldn't back down on this position. For a while we attended both the United Church and the Quaker meetings. Finally, we resigned from the United Church. It wasn't just that. It was also the way the Quakers functioned, the general way that the Quakers functioned which itself leads

to peaceable solutions, the general attitude of decisions by consensus... And it was the simplicity of their belief in the "Inner Light" and their belief "that God in every person." I was with the Quakers for many, many years but I didn't join. Within me, there was this very funny sort of inverted argument. I didn't want people to say "Well, of course she's for peace, she's a Quaker." I resisted that for a long time. I wanted people to accept the fact you didn't have to be a Quaker to be for peace. So, that was one reason I didn't join. Besides, I had an idea that all Quakers were saints and I knew I wasn't one. Finally, when I was 67, it seemed right for me to join. The path my life and thinking had taken seemed to lead to becoming a Quaker. Not something imposed from outside, I just felt comfortable there. They have such a strong social conscience and so much comes out of Quaker thinking into the whole community. Later, at some point in all this I discovered that my ancestor, who came across from the United States in 1792 or 3 and founded the little

village of Austen [Quebec] where I was born and where I spend my summers, was a Quaker. I didn't know that when I was growing up.

*You said that before World War II you were in the peace movement. When did you begin to be involved in the peace movement?*

I think a lot of this [was] partly my whole upbringing, not that my family were [involved in the peace movement], because they supported World Wars I and II. But, I was brought up in the country, and seemed far removed from wars. In the first World War, my brother was too young and my father was too old, and my second cousin was the closest we came to involvement with it. I think what happened more than anything was the Student Christian Movement at McGill when I was an undergraduate. I started at McGill in 1925.

*Were you born in Quebec?*



*Muriel Duckworth*

*Photo: NFB*

Yes, born on a farm in Quebec, in Austen, lived on the farm, started school in a little one-room school, and then we moved to Magog. I finished school there and then went to McGill. The most important thing that happened to me at McGill was the Student Christian Movement. It was really more important than my courses, looking back at it — being in a discussion group constantly all the time I was there, a religious discussion group. In this group, we supported each other in our attempts to express new ideas, often explored haltingly and tentatively. There was no space for that kind of exchange in the classroom. There was a real trend towards pacifism during that period between the two world wars. Of course, we talked about that too.

*Was that where you met Jack?*

Yes... He was a strong pacifist. As someone once said, he was the most aggressive pacifist they [had] ever met.

*Fighting for peace?*

Yes [laughter]. He was really fighting for peace. Then, we went to Union Seminary. We were married in 1929 as soon as I graduated. He was already in theological college. It was not common then to be married as students. We went to Union, to New York together, for one year. Pacifism was very strong around there at that time, that was 1929-30. Then, it became a very discussable question, of course, as World War II loomed up.

*Wasn't it overridden by jingoism?*

Yes, it was, and by people who felt that *this* war [was] the 'Good War,' this [was] the war that you [had] to fight. The students and the faculty at Union where we went were inclined at that time towards pacifism. Then, of course, came the Depression; the Social Gospel was very strong. We came back to Montreal and worked through the Depression which was really very hard... I remember the year that our first child was born, Jack's salary was \$1,800.

*What year was that?*

'33. We had this child in the bottom of the Depression... People talk now about hav-

ing babies with the threat — the world threat — hanging over them. We certainly had the same feeling: "Should you have babies when things are so, so bad?" There was desperate poverty. At that time, you could see the connection, you could see the buildup towards war which was to solve the unemployment problem. You began to see that war was being viewed as a solution to the unemployment problem just as the militarization of industry is now. There was a constant discussion and heated argument between the people who thought that you couldn't have war and social good at the same time and the people who thought "you've got to have war, you've got to defeat the Nazis in order to have a good society. It's absolutely the thing you've got to do."

*Did people see peace and social justice as interconnected?*

No, I don't think they did. I think [that] they thought the war against fascism had to be fought and won in order to be able to deal with issues of justice everywhere.

*How did you see it then? Do you remember?*

Yes. It was difficult. I wasn't too certain of myself because so many of my friends who were on the left had said "this is a war that's got to be fought." I remember them getting almost enthusiastic, almost happy, when finally war was declared. "It's got to be done, might as well do it now, it's been put off too long, should have been done sooner, this is all appeasement." My own feeling was often wavering. I found it hard. I wasn't as firm a pacifist as Jack was at that time. But I couldn't get into wartime effort. I didn't really want to and I didn't. I kept on doing work in the church, kept on doing work with young people in the YMCA, and I was aware of criticism. People [were] feeling "well, you're all mixed up; this is not where you should be putting your effort now; your effort should be going into the war."

*You were criticized for not supporting the war?*

Oh yes. I was aware of that. But, there was no serious suffering about it. I just didn't feel very comfortable about it when I

knew that was what people thought.

*What are the milestones of World War II that you remember?*

My brother's death was, of course, a big thing. The fact that he joined up... [His death] was a hard part of the war.

*I was just thinking, during this interview, that my parents discussed what they [had] heard, my mom especially when she was back here, what she had heard about rumours of concentration camps in Europe. She thought [that] they were just rumours.*

I remember feeling that, too, because after the First World War, we had been told such horror stories about the Germans. We had these horrible pictures of the Huns and stories of the cutting off of babies' hands, and then came these even more horrible pictures of the Bolsheviks. I was 10 years old when World War I ended and I used to have nightmares about Huns and Bolsheviks. *Terrible* stories of the Bolsheviks with their beards sticking out all over and their hair wild... so you see, it was hard, as your mother said, for some of us to believe what was being said about concentration camps under the Nazis — just impossible, couldn't be.

*The thing is that people will talk about concentration camps [now], but I find very few of my parents' generation will talk, or even mention the dropping of the bomb on Japan.*

Well, actually, what I remember about it, at that time... we had no idea how horrendous it was. We knew it had dropped on Hiroshima, we knew it had dropped on Nagasaki, we knew the war had ended, and we all assumed that it had caused the end of the war. But, the Americans deliberately kept information out of people's hands. Journalists were not allowed to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The word began getting out but a lot of it was hushed up. Immediately along came the Cold War. Actually, before the war was over, they knew who the next enemy was going to be, and one of the reasons that they bombed Japan was to keep the Russians from having any share in the victory in the Far East. Russia became the enemy and immediately we were caught up in that...

[During the time of the Gouzenko case], it was a *terrible* time, everybody was *afraid*; everybody was afraid to talk to anybody and it went on for quite a long time. Many innocent people suffered.

*It sort of merged into the whole McCarthy era...*

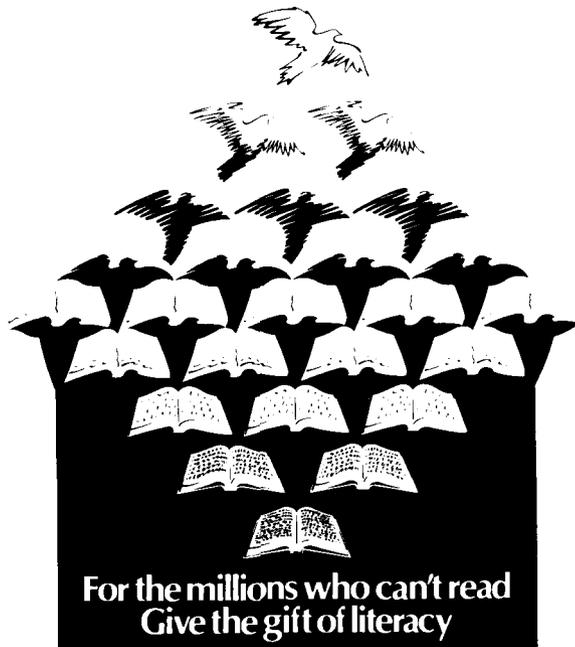
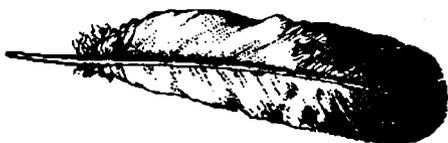
I remember coming from Halifax to a World Mental Health Congress in Toronto. That was 8 years later, in 1955. It was held here because the situation was so bad in the States that the Russians couldn't go to the United States. One of the Russians gave me a Russian cigarette. I didn't smoke but I had it for a souvenir and somebody said "Don't let anybody see you with that Russian cigarette." Everybody was so fearful. Everybody was going through all that. It was still going on when the Voice of Women was founded in 1960. We were called 'Reds,' because we felt that if you're going to talk about peace, you've got to talk to the people on the other side. It's strange just talking to yourself, and so we set out right away to make contacts with other women who had been defined as our enemies. It seemed the logical thing to do.

*How did you do that?*

Well, we held an international conference of women for peace in 1962 to which we invited them. We arranged exchange visits from women from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. We kept in touch.

*Muriel Duckworth became the chairperson of the program committee for the Voice of Women's second international conference of women for peace held in 1967 in Montreal. At the end of the conference, during a meeting of the Voice of Women, she became president of VOW/VDF, taking over from Kay Macpherson, who had preceded her as president from 1963 to 1967.*

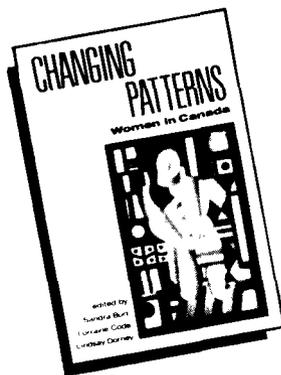
*Muriel was the last to serve as president of the Voice of Women (1967 to 1971) before it developed more decentralized (committee) structures.*



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June 1988, 0-7710-2853-9, paperback

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