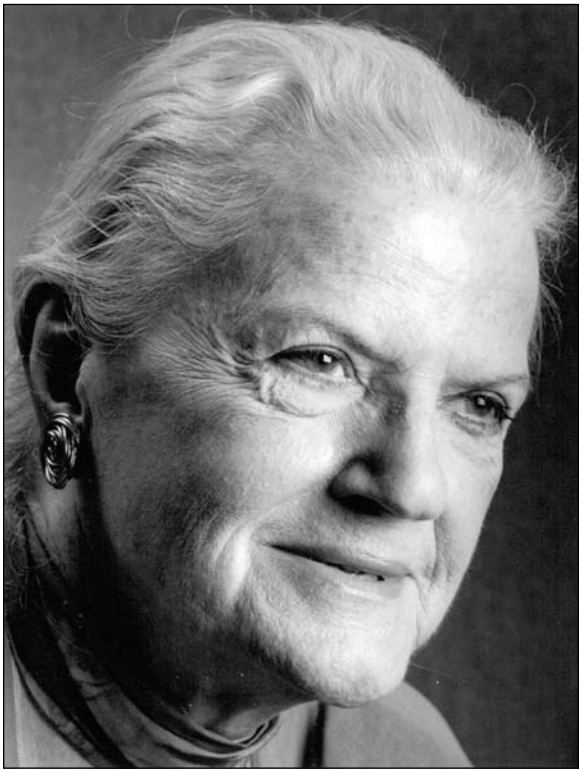
The Celebration of Her Life

WENDY ROBBINS

"Ce que je désire plus que tout, c'est d'être capable de voir à mes besoins et de m'assurer que chaque femme dans le monde puisse en faire autant." Ainsi écrivait Doris Anderson dans son autobiographie, "Rebel Daughter." La cérémonie commémorative tenue à Toronto le 12 mai 2007 en a fait état. Le thème. "Célébrons la vie de Doris Anderson" exprimait haut et fort qu'elle avait réussi à amener les Canadiennes plus près de ce rêve. L'auteure se rappelle les discours et les paroles des proches et amis de Doris qui avaient partagé ses engagements et son amitié.

"What I wanted more than anything was to be able to look after myself and make sure that every other woman in the world could do the same." So wrote Doris Anderson in her autobiography, *Rebel Daughter*. That she largely succeeded in bringing women across Canada closer to this dream was a main theme of the memorial ceremony, "Celebrating the Life of Doris Anderson," which took place on Saturday, May 12th, 2007, at Convocation Hall, University of Toronto. I was there, coming from Fredericton to pay tribute to a woman whose feminist editorials in *Chatelaine* (she edited the magazine from 1957 to 1977) marked my adolescence and influenced the course of my life, like that of so many of us, baby-boom daughters and mothers coming to our feminist awakenings together. Here are my personal impressions and notes on that day.

Prior to the official start of this "public memorial," a collage of scenes from Doris Anderson's life, starting in 1920s Medicine Hat, Alberta, scrolled by on two big screens that flanked the stage. Most were from old black-and-white photos. The images recorded both Doris and the vintage paraphernalia of mid-twentieth-century Canadian womanhood, the era of wide skirts, cinched waists, and flat hats, a stark contrast to the "women's liberation casual" garb (loose pants, unstructured jackets, and running shoes) worn by the majority of the older women watching, not always with nostalgia. Later, portions of a documentary film in the CBC's "Life and Times" series



Doris Anderson, c. 2003.

rounded out Doris Anderson's life story, highlighting the historic political event for which she is most famous—her protest resignation as president of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) in 1981 and her key role in an independent national Ad Hoc Conference on the constitution, convened to ensure that women would be comprehensively included in the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms. All ten memorial service speakers bore witness to Doris Anderson's professional integrity, personal courage, and "take charge" leadership, as well as her uncommon kindness to her friends and deep love of her children.

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a latter-day "love in," honouring Doris as a literal mother (one of her three sons regaled the audience with stories of Doris's living solo, fiercely independent into her 80s, defiant of doctors and of distances, still driving herself from Toronto to her cottage in PEI) and as a symbolic mother—a mother of second-wave feminism, even a "mother of the nation." In attendance was a considerable "who's who" of Canadian feminist leadership, including two women who had been, like Doris, president of our National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) in its glory days, Lorna Marsden and Judy Rebick.

sounds, which seemed to signal the whelping of a renewed women's movement, were a fitting dirge for this beloved and feisty feminist champion.

Norma Scarborough of CARAL reminisced about how her mother gave each of her six daughters a subscription of her own to *Chatelaine,* which, under Doris Anderson, introduced such "revolutionary" subjects such as female orgasm and women's sexual satisfaction, the need to repeal the law criminalizing abortion, and calls to participate in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women—all without losing its mainstream, conventional readers, the

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Journalist and editor Sally Armstrong, who was the MC, began by paying tribute to Doris Anderson as a person who has "changed the way our entire country considers 52 percent of the population." Former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, who knew Doris since childhood, described Doris as "an electric charge." Yet, despite her grit and her iconoclasm, Doris endured sexist experiences where she "just had to take it." Adrienne Clarkson recalled the time at *Chatelaine* when Doris, pregnant, was told to go home as the publishers did not want her working in public in her condition. She also recalled doing book reviews for *Chatelaine* at Doris's invitation, bonding further as they went through their divorces together, and driving around PEI latterly with Doris, ever a caring person, inquiring at one point about the adequacy of the former Governor General's pension. The "mothering" side of Doris, combined with the strategic feminist leader and astute editor, making her a "whole" woman, stressed Adrienne Clarkson. (Others, however, mentioned how Doris often felt guilt about her parenting as a divorced single woman, struggling with what we now label work-life balance issues.)

MP and MD Carolyn Bennett, Doris's physician, recalled the fight that they and many others waged to save Women's College Hospital, and the support Doris offered when Carolyn decided to run for political office. (Doris herself had once run under very unfavourable conditions and thus was unsuccessful.) Doris vigorously lobbied for proportional representation in her later years, wondering impatiently "how anything so sensible could take so long to accomplish." Carolyn Bennett praised Doris Anderson's courage and candour, and called us all to action, proposing a new kind of "D-days." When she opined, "I think she'd want us to get rid of Steve," the assembly gasped (didn't only "George" get to call our Prime Minister "Steve"?) then laughed and ruptured into applause. Such raucous "common woman." Doris Anderson was not writing for the converted, but rather to make change, an updated Mrs. Beeton, dispensing advice about work, family, and society, along with "no-fail" recipes and affordable fashions.

Julyan Reid and Wendy Lawrence, two people who worked with Doris as president of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women in the early 1980s, were scheduled as the next speakers. A last-minute change had Linda Markowsky (formerly MacLeod) substitute for Julyan Reid. She reminded us of the ground-breaking research on the prevalence and prevention of wife-battering and other violence against women that the CACSW commissioned her to do—research which became a model for the world. Doris Anderson, she said, exemplified "how to be a strong woman in the world," a woman who was "sensitively strong" and "pragmatically idealistic." She paid tribute to Doris for changing her life profoundly, instilling in her Doris's own "passion for change."

Some of the feminist anthems of Doris Anderson's day movingly punctuated the memorial. Wendy Lawrence introduced "Song of the Soul" by Cris Williamson, with its promise that "truth will unbind you." Many of those present still knew all the words by heart. Wendy explained that after Doris's resignation from the CACSW, she used to get together over potluck dinners with her former staff who would sing and dance along with that song. Wendy Lawrence planned the music for the memorial at Doris' request, and wrote the "Music Notes" on the back of the program.

Linda Palmer Nye affectionately remembered Doris for her sense of humour. "You really needed it 26 years ago—and we may need it even more today," she said. In those "heady times," Canada could boast a large number of women's organizations; now even such important groups as NAC and CCLOW (Canadian Congress of Learning

Opportunities for Women) have fallen on hard times or folded. She described the gutsy action of Doris and five of the CACSW staff resigning their positions to protest the decision to cancel a national conference made by the Minister responsible for the Status of Women, Lloyd Axworthy (yes, a man held that portfolio right into the 1980s). She described the subsequent grassroots mobilization of women from across the country, and expressed the wish "may it happen again soon." She said that "Doris made courage look easy," and observed that "We trusted Doris. When she did something, she did it for all of us." Referring to wide-scale political organizing to achieve a goal (e.g., proportional representation), she proposed that we start to "Do it like Doris, and do it today." She sang out a song with the ringing chorus "We're all feminists and we're damn proud." Again I felt like a witness to resurrection or rebirth, a Woodstock-generation "happening" in 2007.

Laurell Ritchie honoured Doris as "quietly seditious" and "extraordinarily principled," and gave an example of how she bridged differences: Doris defused a divisive debate about pornography by bringing the opponents together informally and joking that the image in question was "not her style of S & M." She created coalitions that served NAC well. Louisa Moya, also of Equal Voice, was the youngest speaker, and she movingly described the impact of her meetings with Doris not long before her death, meetings which inspired young women like herself to take up the challenges, both of getting a system of proportional representation in place in Canada, and also of running for political office themselves. She told of how ten young women friends have pledged to run within ten years—in fact, two have already taken steps to do so. The audience endorsed them all with its enthusiastic applause.

Michele Landsberg said that all women in Canada "owe Doris big time" when it comes to such issues as childcare, Aboriginal women's rights, and eradicating poverty, racism, and violence against women. Canadian feminism for a time was, she said, "a decade ahead of American feminism" (an undeveloped allusion perhaps to Doris's famously turning down for *Chatelaine* an extract from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the early 1960s). Michele characterized *Chatelaine* as "a working manual for transforming the country." Mothers and daughters read it, "soaking up its feminism, taking this as the *norm*," she noted gleefully, her pride obvious for the magazine's hiding-in-plain-view subversiveness. There was a time when one in three Canadian women read *Chatelaine,* "a record unmatched in Canadian journalistic history." (The magazine featured the writing of dozens of the country's best women journalists whom Doris Anderson nurtured, including Adrienne Clarkson, Barbara Frum, June Callwood, and Michele Landsberg herself.) She, too, cited courage and compassion as Doris Anderson's defining characteristics; at one point, Doris expressed her concern to channel more work to Michele when Stephen Lewis, her husband, as new leader of the NDP, finished with his party in third place after an election. She described Doris as "a pioneer with staying power," whose energy never flagged. Michele Landsberg suggested that to honour "this woman [who] touched so many lives," we might dedicate ourselves to completing, as far as we humanly can, the "unfinished revolution" Doris Anderson cared so passionately about.

Some speakers brought tears, and others laughter. Mitchell Anderson, her son, painted an endearing, humorous portrait of his mother. "She lived like she drove," he said, "straight ahead, pretty fast, with not a lot of shoulder checking." An activist to the core, "If there was something to do, she did it." This included laying a homemade trip wire in her cottage to allay concerns about her staying alone there in her 80s. He also noted that one of the greatest thrills of his mother's life was to be an observer (or in her case, more like a hands-on participant-observer) in the 1994 election in South Africa that brought Nelson Mandela to power and ended the gross injustice of apartheid.

With gentle music by the Rose Vaughan Trio, "Stone and Sand and Sea and Sky," the mood shifted again to emphasize Doris's love of nature and of Prince Edward Island (she was for a period Chancellor of the University of PEI). Sally Armstrong, closing the ceremony, mentioned the tranquility of her visits with Doris on the island, their long nature walks sometimes punctuated, however, by political discussion, as when Doris would interject, "Someone's got to raise a little more hell about proportional representation!"

In conclusion, Mary Lou Fallis, accompanied by Peter Tiefenbach, belted out "Song for Doris," which she had composed for Doris's 80th birthday. At that event, Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul reportedly picked up their white table napkins and spontaneously waved them as the crowd burst into song. As a parting gesture, white handkerchiefs were given to everyone at the memorial, and a sea of unstarched white linen, not remotely flags of truce but rather tokens of fond fare-thee-well, waved to the words "Doris, We Sing in Chorus," while from the screens faded the final, bigger-than-life portrait of Doris Anderson, mother and crone, woman of wisdom and power. Then Chopin's "Polonaise in A Major," Opus 40, Number 1, Doris Anderson's music of choice when she was feeling down-hearted and needed to be galvanized into action again, filled the hall as if with marching orders.

Sisters of all genders, we have some very big shoes to fill; our work is cut out for us.

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