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Irene Whitfield

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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE



IRENE WHITFIELD

NEE SKINNER, B. 4 MARCH 1941, STRATHROY, ON,
D. 20 JULY 2013, ST. JOHN'S, NL.



IRENE, THE LONG SERVING MANAGING EDITOR of *Labour/ Le Travail* (1982–2007), died in July after a struggle with lung cancer. Irene's battle with the disease paralleled her life in which she always demonstrated great tenacity and strength.

Irene grew up in south-western Ontario in an agricultural milieu. She moved to Newfoundland in the 1970s and ran a small business on the west coast. After moving to St John's in the early 1980s, she found employment as a researcher/ data compiler on the SSHRC-funded Atlantic Canada Shipping Project in the History Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). Initially employed on contract, she received a permanent position in November 1981 and soon thereafter was transferred to work on the journal *Labour/Le Travailleur* (*L/LT*), which had moved to MUN with its editor, Greg Kealey, in the summer of that year. The late Jim Tague, then Head of the MUN department, wisely judged that Irene's business background would provide a positive balance for the editorial vision of the journal. In recognition of her strong contribution to the early years of the journal at MUN, she was promoted to Publication Assistant (PA) II in February 1983, PA III in January 1985, and finally Managing Editor in September 1988.

After 1984 she served in the same position not only for *L/LT*, now renamed *Labour/Le Travail*, but also for the new MUN journal, *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies (NLS)*. *L/LT* expanded its operation into book publication in the early 1980s and Irene oversaw CCLH Books, the imprint of the Canadian Committee on Labour History, as well as *L/LT*. With Greg Kealey's retirement as *L/LT* editor in 1997, Irene worked closely and productively with new editor Bryan Palmer. In the summer of 2000 Irene also became managing editor of MUN's Faculty of Arts publications, which added Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) Books to her portfolio. After *L/LT*'s departure for Athabasca University Press in the summer of 2007, she continued to work for ISER and *NLS*, until her illness forced her to take leave and subsequently to retire.

Irene's life was organized around her three children (Debbie, Kim, and Michael) and her work at MUN. By the time she moved to St John's she was single parenting and providing for her three young children was a significant challenge. With her usual enthusiasm she became involved with co-op housing and lived in a new co-op housing development for a number of years before purchasing a home in Topsail which she transformed with her gardening skills, one of her other passions. She brought great enthusiasm to her role at *L/LT* and learned the ins and outs of journal and book production over the years helping in significant ways to professionalize the operation. She also became an activist in her MUN union and continuously pushed for militancy around the issues of the day. She also was keen on workers' control and like one of David Montgomery's machinists she ran her own shop to a considerable degree. One of her biggest union battles was the struggle to abolish mandatory retirement in which she was successful. So, while *L/LT* and CCLH celebrated her retirement at the 2007 York University Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Toronto, she discovered on her return to St John's that MUN had conceded. Hence she worked until her illness was diagnosed, well past her anticipated retirement date.

L/LT always employed MUN students in a variety of support roles. It was here that Irene shone. Any number of MUN History undergraduate, graduate and post doctoral students became members of Irene's extended family over her 25 years with *L/LT*. These students could count on Irene for coffee and humour, advice for their word-processing, good company on social occasions, moral support in difficult times, and reminders when necessary about not taking their woes too seriously. Lest anyone mistake all of the above as an invocation of sainthood, we should add that the tenaciousness that we mentioned at the outset translated into no quarter for anyone whose work did not meet her high standards. She had a long memory for those who she felt had failed her tests of hard work, honesty, and integrity.

We worked with Irene for some 25 years and she devoted her working life to making *L/LT*, CCLH books, and other MUN publications as good as they could be. We thank her for that and want to dedicate this issue to her memory.

GREGORY S. KEALEY
University of New Brunswick

SEAN CADIGAN
Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador