

A Humanist Portrait: Claire Culhane

Glenn Hardie



[Photo: Public domain image, McMaster University]

The life story of Claire Culhane occurred against a backdrop composed of the Roaring 20s, the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Second World War in the 1940s, the Cold War in the 1950s, the McCarthy era in the 1960s, the Vietnam war and the FLQ crisis in the 1970s, and prison riots in Canada in the 1980s.

As well, the conversion of Canada from a largely agricultural country to a major industrial force occurred over this same period. In all of this, Claire was an active and outspoken participant in many of the secondary activities flowing from these great events and eras. This summary merely presents some highlights of just a few of these activities.

Early Life (1920 – 1940)

The daughter of Rose and Abraham Eglin, themselves Russian Jewish refugees, Claire was born in 1918 in Montreal. She had an older brother, Jack. The family fortunes, though never great, generally improved over time, lessening

the social pressures and enabling them to assimilate more readily into society.

Her early secular education occurred in English-language Protestant schools. She proved to be an apt student, with an interest in politics and social issues, especially women's rights. One of her heroes was Emmeline Pankhurst, the British Suffragette. Despite obstacles, she graduated from high school, learned how to drive, and trained as a nurse, with a special interest in ethics. However, due to a clash with her superiors, she did not complete her training. In the mid-1930s she took a short business course and got a job in a family garment company. She later found fairly consistent employment by specializing in systems of medical records, and earned additional income by typing reports and theses for cash.

Her religious education started at age six, when she was physically beaten for attempting to kiss the Torah in a synagogue, though she was only following the example of her brother and other male family members whom she had seen do just that. Her education continued by

way of having to deal with severe anti-Semitic discrimination at almost every point in her life. Once when asked about religion, she replied "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Later, when asked about her racial origin, she said her mother came from Kiev and her father came from Vilna. The interrogator recorded her as being Irish!

The Union Period (1940 – 1965)

Claire's experiences with conditions in the Quebec garment industry triggered her first interest in improving the lot of the ordinary person. She worked for the anti-fascist movement in Quebec during the Spanish Civil War (1936 - 1939), joining the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, supporters of the Republican cause, and she intended to go to Spain to act as a nurse or an ambulance driver. However, a new law prevented Canadian citizens from engaging in foreign wars.

Near the end of the Depression, the Eglin family lost their business and moved to California. Claire went with them, and after finding work in a medical laboratory, became involved with the Los Angeles branch of the Communist Party. But not for long; she returned to Montreal in 1938, picking up where she had left off in her commitment to social issues. However, she began to disengage from communist party influences.

Claire found work as an organizer for the Office Workers Union and the Retail Clerks Union. It was through this latter group that she met Garry Culhane, a man with a significant Irish political pedigree, but who was also then married to a woman he said he no longer loved. In 1940, Claire and Garry came under scrutiny of the RCMP in a file which was to expand to several hundred pages over the next 50 years.

When she finally risked introducing Garry to her parents, the meeting was a complete disaster, opening family wounds which lasted a lifetime. In 1941, they both moved to the West Coast, where Claire found work as a bookkeeper with the Sauder Lumber Company

in False Creek, BC. In 1942, they moved to Victoria when Garry got a job at Yarrows Shipyards.

For most of the WWII period, Claire and Garry were involved in the trade union movement. However, conscription was introduced in Canada and every able-bodied male had to register. If Garry had done so, he would have been arrested. So Claire got a temporary job at one of the registration booths and managed to make it appear as though Garry had in fact registered. The risks in doing this were enormous; the penalty was 10 years in jail.

Shortly after this, Claire discovered that she was pregnant, and given their straightened circumstance, elected to have an abortion, a process which was then as risky as it was illegal; luckily, it was successful. But they still could not get married because of Quebec's strict divorce laws, until Garry's wife became involved with another man, thus opening the way for legal separation and subsequent divorce. In the midst of all this, Claire found that she was pregnant again, and again sought an abortion, in a very negatively-charged social, family, and political atmosphere.

Garry's fortunes continued to improve and in 1944, they moved back to Vancouver, where Claire became again involved in union activities and various social issues, but still under the scrutiny of the RCMP. In 1945, she was pregnant again, and this time fought successfully to keep the baby, a girl born in 1946 named Sandra Roisin, and who was partly instrumental in reconciling Claire with her parents in California.

She finally married Garry Culhane in the fall of 1948, but it was not a happy union. The family was chronically short of money. They both became disillusioned with the Communist Party and quit around 1950. To add to these problems, Claire found that she was pregnant again, giving birth to a second daughter, named Hanna Dara. In 1958, they decided to try their fortunes in commercial fishing and boat rentals in Cork in southern Ireland. The business was not successful, and Claire and one daughter Dara moved first to Dublin and then back

to Montreal. Garry and the other daughter Roisin stayed in Ireland.

The Political Period (1965 – 1975)

After another 10 years in various positions promoting trade unionism and the anti-war cause, while working mostly in medical records jobs, around 1967 she applied to and was accepted by External Affairs to participate in the establishment of a tuberculosis hospital in Vietnam as a consequence of which she was able to assess the situation first hand and in particular Canada's role there. That was a major turning point in her life. Quite apart from the glacial pace of bureaucracy when trying to get equipment and supplies, she also encountered at first hand the tragic human effects of indiscriminate bombings, shootings, and napalm strikes.

She decided that she could resist the war more effectively at home, and after about 6 months, returned to Canada in 1968 where she proceeded to stir up the politicians in Ottawa for the next 5 years to bring an end to the war. In one episode, she chained herself to a chair in the House of Commons and challenged the members directly. She was arrested, but the charge of disturbance was dismissed in court. She was 50 years old. In succeeding years, she was involved in confronting government ministers and bureaucrats, reporting on the My Lai massacre, speaking out against the FLQ crisis in Quebec, and establishing the *Voice of Women* in Canada.

The Justice Period (1975 – 1995)

In 1974, Claire was back in Vancouver. She volunteered to teach a Women's Studies class at the Lakeside Regional Correctional Center for Women. The following June, three prisoners who were about to be returned to solitary confinement at the BC Pen took 15 hostages. The

*[S]he chained herself
to a chair in the
House of Commons
and challenged the
members directly.*

standoff with prison officials lasted 41 hours and ended with the emergency response team storming the hostage takers. In the process, the guards shot and killed one of the hostages, Mary Steinhauer, a correctional officer who was implementing courses for prisoners.

Over the next month, Claire would join in demonstrations in support of prisoners who were staging sit-ins and work strikes over the conditions inside. Her participation with the Prisoners' Union Committee would result in the cancellation of her Women's Studies class. A group of Vancouver area activists then set up the Prisoners' Rights Group (PRG). Claire was one of its founding members.

The mandate of the PRG was to help prisoners help themselves – especially in matters of involuntary transfers, finding competent lawyers, filing and following up grievances, qualifying for parole hearings, getting access to health care, educating the public and, finally, to advance the implementation of the philosophy of prison abolition.

In 1976, she joined the newly formed Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). This group was formed by the Canadian Penitentiary Service (CPS), later the Correctional Services of Canada (CSC), in an attempt to better its public image. The CAC was in the process of establishing itself when BC Pen erupted in a full scale riot. At the request of the prisoners the CAC was called in to help negotiate an end to the riot. The prisoners had control of the prison for 3 days before an agreement with the CPS was reached. Claire was there all along; she spent 80 hours locked in with the inmates.

The fear was that if the CAC left the prison, the military and police stationed outside would move in and take the prison by force. All of Claire's life experiences had prepared her for this moment; she and the inmates stood their ground and were in the end mostly successful

in their demands for adequate accommodations. Damage to the building amounted to \$1.6 million, raising memories of prison riots in Laval, Quebec, and Attica, New York. She was twice charged with trespassing and fined small sums; she refused to pay and was admonished and set free.

As we now know, Claire was a woman of action. She was barred from many prisons, staged many sit-ins at the wardens' offices, picketed outside the gates and on Parliament Hill, hosted a cable TV show called *Instead of Prisons*, responded to every article about prison written by the press, wrote articles of her own, and spoke extensively on the subject of prisons as social control. Whenever a prisoner wrote the Prisoners' Rights Group with a concern the response from Claire was immediate, letters would fly up the chain of command, to the politicians in Ottawa and finally to the media if necessary. She was especially critical of the BC Penitentiary and, in 1979, wrote a book titled *Barred from Prison* about it.

As Claire set off on her book tour, her intention was to stop and visit as many prisoners as wanted to see her, in as many prisons as would let her in. This was not the policy of prisons at the time; visitors could only visit one prisoner, in one prison, in one region. She managed to visit every maximum security plus several of the lower security prisons outside BC. In 1987, Claire's visiting privileges were reinstated. In 1990, one of her final major public acts was to take sides with a group of Mohawk people at the Oka Reservation.

Hansard

Anna Terrana, Member of Parliament for Vancouver East, BC, reported in June 1885 in Hansard, the official written record of the Canadian House of Commons:

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce that Mrs. Claire Culhane of Vancouver East has been selected as one of the 23 recipients of the 1995 Canada Volunteer Medal and Certificate of Honour.

Mrs. Culhane is a respected and admired Canadian who is a competent fighter for justice. Some of her

campaigns against injustice include: anti-Franco activities in Spain in the 1930s; anti-poverty activities in Montreal in the 1940s; assisting her husband with the Shipyard Labour Organization in 1944; leading the Workers Education Association in 1945; and opposing Canada's involvement in the Vietnam war.

She is currently forming the Association in Defence of the Wrongly Convicted. She became involved in the support group for the wrongful imprisonment of Christine Lamont in Brazil. She has written books which are required reading for criminology courses in many of Canada's universities.

Mrs. Culhane received the commemorative medal for the 125th anniversary of Canada's Confederation and is an honorary member of the British Columbia Humanist Association.

I would like to thank Mrs. Culhane for her outstanding work and congratulate her for her many achievements.

Despite these major experiences, Claire still managed to find time for her daughters, her friends, and their families. After she died in April 1996, a commemorative bench was set up for her at John Hendry Park (Trout Lake) in East Vancouver. Donations for the maintenance of the bench can be made through the Vancouver Park Board.

Source Material

- 1) Most of the forgoing information was extracted from a biography written about her by Mick Lowe entitled *One Woman Army* (Toronto, Macmillan Canada, 1992).
- 2) In the Special Collections Division of the UBC Library, the Culhane records list runs to 100 pages and the material itself numbers in the tens of thousands of pages.

Glenn Hardie is a founding member of the B. C. Humanist Association and a life member of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. He holds degrees in Philosophy and Education and diplomas in Construction Economics and Property Appraisal. His most recent book is Reason with Compassion – The Humanist Way (Aurora Humanist Books, 2009). He lives in Vancouver with his wife Lorraine.