

John Ross Bullen, Ph.D. (1952-1989)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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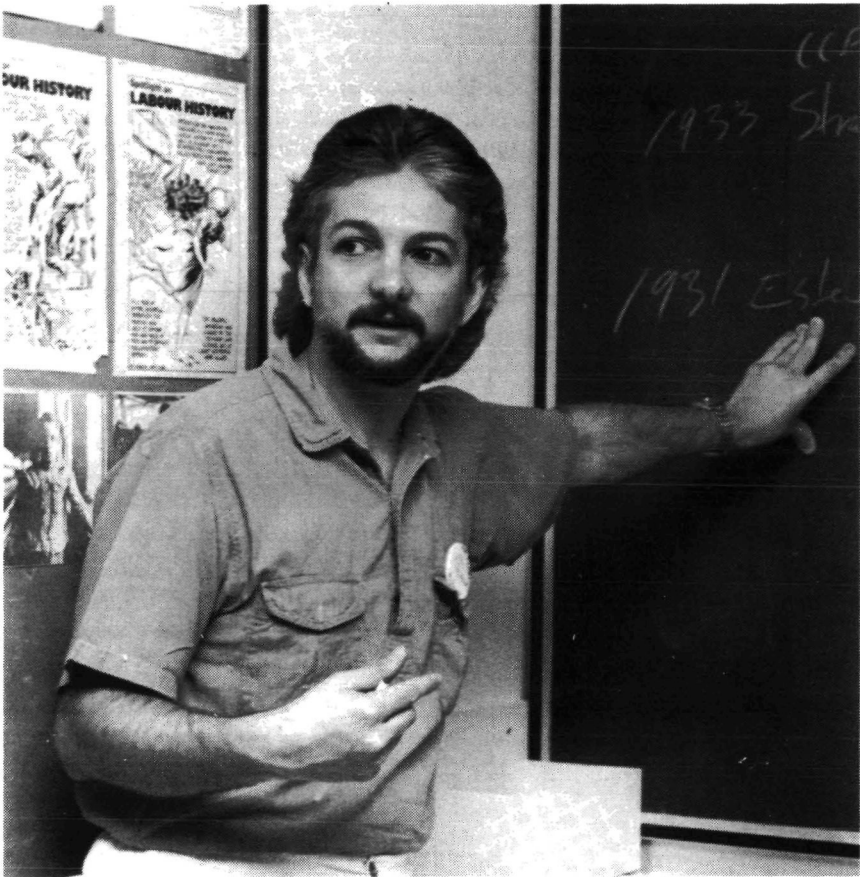
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OBITUARY/NÉCROLOGIE



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12 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

ON 27 NOVEMBER 1989, labour and education communities in Ottawa and beyond were profoundly saddened by the death of our friend, John Ross Bullen. John affected our lives in many ways and left us richer for having known him.

I first met John when he entered the University of Ottawa as a Masters student. I knew him then as a friend rather than as a student. He was much involved with the Waffle movement, and we spent long hours debating its significance. John also was a musician; we shared a common love of jazz. John leaned toward swing and played with an ensemble formed by students in our music department, as well as with a number of local combos. I remember the joy and excitement we shared at a Bill Evans concert. John never lost his love for music, and music provided one of the communities in which he lived. Scholarship provided another.

It was not until John finished his excellent Masters thesis on the Ontario Waffle that we began working together. John was the ideal student. Sharp, critical, and disciplined, he was most importantly independent. He challenged ideas, interpretations, prejudices, and all idiocy no matter the source. At the same time he, as always, threw himself into the political life of his community. On this occasion, it was a community of fellow graduate students whom he represented at all levels in the Department.

With time, John became an ever more-proficient historian. This spring, years of effort culminated in the defense of his Ph.D. thesis, "Children of the Industrial Age: Children, Work, and Welfare in Late Nineteenth-Century Ontario." In addition to his thesis, John leaves a legacy of published work which attests to his accomplishments.

John worked hard at his scholarship because he believed history provides a means to understand the human condition. This belief insured that he was a dedicated teacher. In the classroom, John responded to his students with warmth and empathy; they responded to him with enthusiasm. I have seen him on a number of occasions manage to draw out more from particular students than I thought them capable of. He worked his magic at every level, with any audience, with all students. In courses taught at the Universities of Ottawa, Erindale, and McGill he worked with the full range of undergraduate students. At the Labour College of Canada, he worked with trade unionists, many with little or no academic background. In all of these situations he laboured to insure that every student learned as much as they were able. Over the years, I came to admire greatly his skill and his dedication. Future generations of students have suffered a great loss with his passing.

I often have heard debates about whether good teachers are born or made. John was "made"; I have never met anyone who worked harder at their teaching. He always found time for his students. But John also seemed born to teach. The quality which made him so accomplished in the classroom is what made him our friend and our comrade. He cared.

John cared about his students. He cared about his friends. He cared about total strangers. He railed against injustice of any kind. When you read John's thesis, you will find outlined any number of sound methodological, historical, and historio-

graphical reasons why child labour attracted his attention. None truly explain his choice of a research topic. Those children suffered the deprivations of an industrial society which forced them to confront a culture of work at far too young an age. John became the voice of working-class children, and he wrote their history with the passion and outrage which injustice demands. Scholarship is about truth, accuracy, and precision. For John, it also was about a commitment to human dignity, and a deep concern for the human condition.

John's concern for the human condition, and his outrage at injustice, made him more than a scholar and a teacher. It made him an activist. He worked with the NDP, in the peace movement, and with local unions. Perhaps his best work was at the Labour College of Canada, where he exposed dozens of militants to the power of history. At the Labour College, he was organizer and chief negotiator when the Canadian Union of Labour Representatives won its first collective agreement. When he died he remained steward of our local. His militancy and his activism created yet another community which has suffered a tremendous loss.

John was, above all, a family man. Despite the wide variety of communities in which he actively participated, he could be an intensely private person. It was always to Catherine Craig-Bullen that he turned for love and sustenance. John devoted himself to their partnership. In this partnership, he found his greatest joy: Catherine, Donovan, and Joshua. To them we extend our deepest sympathies. Their loss is great. They, and we, will find strength not by marking a passing, but by noting a life lived to the full, a life of passion, of joy, and of commitment.

In solidarity we say goodbye to John Ross Bullen. We will remember John for the values he held dear.

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