



CASEY HOUSE

Canada's Conscience: A Biography

June Callwood, C.C., O.Ont., LL.D.

June 2, 1924 – April 14, 2007

Fit your dream to what should exist, and should be possible.

–June Callwood, a founder of Casey House

June Callwood, journalist, author and activist known as "Canada's Conscience", died peacefully in the care of her family and close friends, after a courageous and well-spent life. She was 82.

Carrying with her the memories of an adverse and impoverished childhood, combined with her fierce intelligence and immense compassion, Callwood inspired all of Canada for more than six decades through her words and actions. She had a roll-up-your-sleeves pragmatism and could accomplish anything she set her mind to, all with grace and style and never without a sense of humour. She loved Canada, loved humanity, and most of all loved children. Speaking of her adoration of babies in a 1988 interview, she said, "I think that they're so perfect... They're just full of God, if God is your goodness and your decency and your capacity for affection." But besides her strong convictions, what she credited with giving her the most joy and strength was her family. She was devoted to her four children, Jill, Brant, Jesse and Casey; to her five grandchildren, Bree, Emma, Marie, Lucy and Jack; and to her partner in life, her husband Trent Frayne. From the beginning and over the course of their 63-year marriage, Frayne encouraged her in her work, finding happiness in her successes. Of his support, so unusual in the those days, Callwood said, "He's never felt that if I grew, he would be smaller."¹ Their marriage withstood some immense tragedies, including the death of their beloved son Casey, killed by a drunk driver in 1982.

She did not grow up with a model for a happy home life. Born in Chatham, Ontario on June 2, 1924, Callwood spent her childhood in the village of Belle River. Her mother was the daughter of a Metis bootlegger and her father was the son of a magistrate. Their marriage was deeply troubled, and despite the affection shown to her by her grandparents, Callwood's childhood was marked by adversity. They were desperately poor, moving at night from one house to another, the sheriff taking their furniture. "It all flooded back how it hurts to see people eating when you haven't eaten for a day, or two, or three... For the rest of your life, you feel that everything you have can be taken away from you and you can be hungry again," she was to later recall.² Her childhood came to an abrupt end when her father left the family and she was forced to drop out of high school to earn an income. She launched her career at 16 as a cub reporter at the *Brantford Expositor*, earning \$7.50 a week, half of which she gave to her mother for rent. In the

¹ CBC Television, A Storybook Marriage January 11, 1983

² Dublin, Anne. June Callwood: A Life of Action. Toronto: Second Story Press, 2006



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midst of World War Two, at the age of 18, Callwood moved to Toronto and talked her way into a job as a reporter at *The Globe and Mail*. It was there that she met Frayne, a sports writer. They married when she was 19. She continued to use her maiden name, as *The Globe and Mail* did not employ married women at the time.

Growing into one of the most exceptional and respected voices in Canada, Callwood was a proud career journalist and writer, and a founding member of the Writer's Union of Canada.

She achieved acclaim and a loyal following for her nearly 2,000 articles and columns for newspapers and magazines including *Macleans* and *Chatelaine*. She was the host of several television programs, including CBC Television's *In Touch* and VISION TV's *National Treasures*. She was a sought-after ghostwriter, quietly sharing her talent on behalf of many celebrities, including penning the best-selling Barbara Walters autobiography, *How to Talk with Practically Anybody about Practically Anything*. These were lucrative projects for her, but she felt proudest of the dozens of books written under her own name and concerning issues about which she felt impassioned, including *Love, Hate, Fear, and Anger* (1964), *Canadian Women and the Law* (1973), *Portrait of Canada* (1981), *Emma: A True Story of Treason* (1984), *Twelve Weeks in Spring* (1986), *Jim: A Life with AIDS* (1988), *The Sleepwalker* (1990), *June Callwood's National Treasures* (1994), *Trial Without End: A Shocking Story of Women and AIDS* (1995), and *The Man Who Lost Himself: The Terry Evanshen Story* (2000).

But Callwood was not content to simply write about the injustices she came across as a journalist: she felt compelled to help. Her activism spanned a myriad of causes, from poverty and illness to freedom of expression, to women and children in crisis. She had a knack for exposing the tears in Canada's social fabric, and envisioning ways to mend them. She started by founding *Digger House*, a shelter for homeless youth, in the late 1960's. She went on to found *Nellie's*, one of Canada's first shelters for women in crisis, in 1974, and *Jessie's Centre for Teenagers* in 1982. In 1988, she founded *Casey House Hospice*, named after her dear lost son. *Casey House* was the first hospice in the world to provide support and palliative care for people with HIV/AIDS, at a time when little was yet known about the disease and the ignorance and fear surrounding it were intense. Deeply affected by participating in the care of Margaret Frazer as she was dying of cancer, an experience she chronicled in *Twelve Weeks in Spring*, Callwood had come to the strong conviction that when a person is dying, they should do so according to their own wishes, surrounded by loving caregivers. Her goal for *Casey House* was to establish a place of medical excellence in the treatment of HIV/AIDS and, most importantly, a place of love and compassion.

Callwood's gentle manner and graceful beauty belied her rock-steady resolve, even at the centre of controversy. In 1968 she was arrested and briefly spent time in the Don Jail after siding with homeless Yorkville kids in a battle with police. She co-founded the *Canadian Civil Liberties Association* and *Feminists Against Censorship*, wading into



bitter debates about pornography and freedom of expression. She was a vocal founding member of PEN Canada and Maggie's Toronto Prostitutes' Community Service Project, and fought for women's right to reproductive choice at a particularly contentious time. But perhaps the most painful conflict in Callwood's life as an activist came when she found herself at the centre of a firestorm in 1991 while on the board at Nellie's, when a number of women she considered friends failed to stand up for her in the face of unfounded allegations of racism. "Nobody asked what happened," says Callwood, "you didn't have to do anything in those days. You just had to be in the way of legitimate rage. It woke people up...but a few of us got our heads kicked in."³ The controversy forced her to withdraw from public life for a time. Although many who knew her defended her vigorously, and some vindication came her way when she was awarded the Harmony Award in 2003 for her work in fighting discrimination, she was deeply wounded. Callwood did eventually return to her work despite the damage done to her reputation, focusing most particularly on fighting child poverty as a spokesperson for the Campaign Against Child Poverty. It was during this low period, in her seventies, that she found a way for her spirit to soar again by learning to pilot glider aircraft. "I wanted something to get above the muck and I guess I did it more literally than most people,"⁴ she said.

Callwood always seemed surprised by the many honours she received. When she was informed in 2004 that the City of Toronto intended to name a street after her, her only request was that it be a street near where children play. There is also a park named in her honour. She was a patron, chair or board member for over 80 different events and organizations. She served as a judge for numerous literary and media awards, including the Governor-General's Non-Fiction Award. She lectured at numerous Canadian universities, and received 17 honorary degrees. The June Callwood Professorship in Social Justice at the University of Toronto was created on the occasion of her 80th birthday. She was awarded a Doctorate of Law from York University and was appointed by then Ontario Attorney-General Ian Scott as a lay bencher looking into complaints review. Her countless awards include the Order of Ontario and all three ranks in the Order of Canada, Canada's most prestigious civilian award. The citation recorded when Callwood was awarded the rank of Companion reads, "Her dedication and commitment to the plight of those in need serve as an example for all Canadians." Premier Dalton McGuinty recently announced that the Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism in Ontario will from now on be named in June's honour. She was known to laugh at the irony of all these accolades for a high-school dropout-"with a criminal record," she was always quick to add.

Dubbed "Canada's Conscience," "Canada's Mother Theresa" and "Saint June" by the media, Callwood generally shied away from organized religion. "I am missing a formal religion, but I am not without a theology, and my theology is that kindness is a divinity in motion," she said in a 2005 speech delivered as the first lecture in the June Callwood

³ CBC Television, *Life and Times* November 30, 1998

⁴ CBC Television, *Idols and Icons* July 1, 2004



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Professorship in Social Justice at Victoria College at the University of Toronto. She fervently believed that if one witnesses injustice, one must intervene. Above all, she carried with her a deep love of humanity. In a 2006 radio interview, she said, "Most people will do anything to help a child and that's the way the human race is meant to be. We're meant to be a tribe. And when it works, it just makes your heart leap."⁵

⁵ CBC Radio, Metro Morning September 1, 2006