

## Interview with Joe Barrett

KEVIN LEVANGIE

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Joe Barrett was trained as Spanish language teacher who worked as a substitute in the BC public schools for several years. Barrett has also been an organizer for the NDP and worked as the researcher for the BC Building Trades Council from 1997-2012. Barrett was co-chair of the BC Monument Committee (with Tom Kozar), responsible for fundraising and lobbying, leading to the placement of the "Spirit of the Republic." The monument on the BC Legislature grounds commemorates Canadian and BC volunteers in the International Brigades. He spoke to the Kevin Levangie of the Canada and the Spanish Civil War project over the phone on August 10th, 2014.

### **How did you first become interested in the Canadian contribution to the Spanish Civil War?**

I come from a very left wing family. My father is Dave Barrett, the former Premier of British Columbia. He was Jewish, grew up in Vancouver in the 30s and 40s. My father's cousin was Allan Ross, who was a Mac-Pap vet. I grew up hearing about the Mac-Paps. Bethune was a hero of my father's and there was a little statue of Bethune in the house growing up. But, I really didn't know the details of the Mac-Paps until my university days. I remember seeing the NFB film on the Mac-Paps, [*Los Canadienses: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*]. It's a collection of Mac-Pap vets, and it's fantastic. It was certainly an inspirational film for me. These guys got together once a year in Whiterock, British Columbia to talk about things and people and picnic. It's a documentary film, and there are some great interviews with the veterans. I saw that in university, and [the war] was just one of those things that I knew about. I remember a good friend of mine was reading Hugh Thomas's *Spanish Civil War* at the time, as we were finishing university.

I travelled to Spain myself in 1981, and lived there for six months. That didn't have much to do with the Spanish Civil War particularly, but I kind of recalled it more and more as I was there. I later became a Spanish language teacher in high schools, though I didn't actually teach for very long... By pure coincidence I was reading Mary Biggar's book *Red Moon Over Spain*. It's a book about propaganda and journalism in Canada during the war. A really interesting little book. I don't know why I was reading it at that time, in 1995. At that time I was a substitute teacher in Prince Rupert. From time to time I'd take off and work for the NDP, and I did that in 1995. For a couple of months I left teaching and was working as an organizer. I was travelling around the province doing membership drives for the party and knocked on the door of this older fellow. He just kind of threw out there, "I was a veteran." I said "Really? I've never met a Mac-Pap before." The guy's name was Arden Nash, he lived in Kamloops. Arden and I then kept up a correspondence and friendship. Just about six months before the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the war in 1936, Arden said, "I'm going to go to Spain, would you like to come with me? You speak Spanish." I said, "I'd love to accompany you."

So I went to Spain to participate in this 60th anniversary celebration. When I went there were probably nine Canadian veterans from the Internationals. You know, we say there were 1600 Canadians that fought with the International Brigades, and many were not part of the Mac-Paps. They were Internationals, and Canada was their home, but they went to fight with the Romanians, or the Danish... their home country. So there were about nine veterans and probably another nine people accompanying these people in November 1996. There were around 200 or 300 Internationals who came to Spain. When we went, we were there for two weeks. The Spanish government had a ceremony to bestow Spanish citizenship on all surviving International Brigaders. This was a promise that had been made by La Pasionaria as they left the country. There were about 1000 people including journalists and family from around 25 different countries that came. We visited a lot of memorials around the country, but 1000 people can't travel together so we broke

unto different groups. Some groups went down south to Andalucía; other groups went to other battle areas. Our group went to Albacete, which is where Internationals were camped and training. There were ceremonies in Madrid at the beginning, then we travelled around the country, then we got back together in Barcelona at the end. There was a separate set of ceremonies from the Catalonia government there, and then we went home.

### **How did the idea for the monument come about?**

One of the things those of us from Canada went home with was this sense that “we’ve got to do something” to raise awareness about the forgotten heroes, the whole story of the Mac-Paps. One way to do that is through memorials, but probably even more important, we’ve got to bring pressure on the Canadian government to finally recognize the contribution of these, as they were known, “premature antifascists.” So we did put pressure. I had some connections into the NDP caucus in Ottawa. Nelson Riis, Member of Parliament from Kamloops, the area where Arden Nash was from, had a private members bill. It got a lot of support from the Liberal Raymonde Folco, a Laval West MP who was the daughter of a Polish International Brigade volunteer. It didn’t get enough votes in the house, but it did get a bit of news and I think it was kind of one of the steps on the path to the national memorial that we did get in 2000. You know, the governor general at the time, Adrienne Clarkson, she really championed it. Without the Governor General’s blessing, the national monument would not have happened. When it was inaugurated she was front and centre and there was a reception at Rideau Hall[, the official residence of the Governor General]. Jules Paivio was also key.

The answer to what got us doing these monuments and memorials is that it was a spin off from the 60th anniversary in Spain, and it was first of all to raise public awareness, but as importantly, it was to get some official recognition from Ottawa. In BC, we had an NDP government at that time. It was lead by premier Glen Clark, who has his own connection to the Mac-Paps. Glen comes from a very left-wing, trade

union background in Vancouver. He supported us whole-heartedly. Without the NDP's support there is no way we would have gotten the monument in the legislative precinct. There is a plaque inside the BC Legislature. It kind of sits alongside all the other plaques to the First World War, Second World War, Korean War. There was a ceremony inside the buildings, before we finally raised enough money to erect the Jack Harman sculpture in February 2000. I think we got the plaque in late 1998. We wanted to get some pay dirt because time was running out; we knew a provincial election was coming and we wanted to make sure the statue was up before an election was called.

### **Why was Jack Harman selected to sculpt “Spirit of the Republic”?**

This was really more to do with Tom Kozar. Tom, if you didn't know already, was the son of a Canadian nurse who accompanied Norman Bethune in China. There is a book about her by Pierre Burton, Canadian Nurse in China. Her name was Jean Ewen. Tom was Jean's son. He had all kinds of connections. His uncle, who was younger than him, Sean McEwen, is an architect in Vancouver, and was the son of Tom McEwen and the brother of Jean. Tom McEwen was one of most prominent communists in Canada. He was one of the guys who was locked up along with Tim Buck, the leader of the Communist Party of Canada.

Tom Kozar was a red diaper baby. He wasn't on the 60th anniversary trip in Spain; he was on the 50th anniversary trip. His father was an American International Brigader with the Lincolns. His father[, John Kozar] was killed in the Second World War. He was in the merchant marines. He didn't really know his dad. Tom had a connection to Jack Harman. Tom had this thing that it had to be a big bronze statue. Some of us, the others on the committee, we weren't going to fight with Tom on it. I wasn't crazy about the statue idea, but then it didn't turn out too bad after all. It wasn't a “Great Man,” it was really more of an ideal. So it worked out ok.

**How were most of the funds raised? Was it primarily individual donations? Did you reach out to traditionally left wing groups, such as labour unions, for donations?**

I was in charge of the ‘direct ask’ fundraising. I was actually in charge of a lot of the little details, all of the political maneuvering with the NDP and stuff. We sent out 250 or more letters. I had done fundraising for the NDP in the past, so we really targeted people we thought we could count on for money. It was trade unions, and it was individuals we knew had direct connections or were historical figures in their own right. There was a guy, a retired judge, Sonny Nemetz . He was a well-known supporter of the Mac-Pap volunteers in Vancouver during the years 1936-39. Of course he had to be non-political as he was a senior justice in BC later on, but we got \$200 out of him because he had personal connections to the time. It was targeted, so of course we went to trade unions. A lot of unions did give us money, but there were no single donations of thousands coming in. There may have been a few checks for \$1000 or \$2000 or \$3000, but I can’t remember them. The BCGEU [The British Columbia Government and Service Employees Union] one of the bigger unions, of which Tom was an executive member, [donated some money]. I was working with the Building Trades Council at the time, so I kind of shoe horned about \$500 from all those, and there were 14 of them. You know, you send out a letter, and then you phone and you phone and you phone and you make sure you get all 250 contacts to actually come up with money.

There were fundraising events that we held. Tom Kozar took the initiative to raise funds through a motorcycle ride, raffles, T-Shirt sales and by organizing a banquet sponsored by the BCGEU. Probably 1000 people came out to the banquet. It was huge, and it did raise quite a bit for us. We did raise about \$100,000, and that was a bargain for the statue. Sean Ewen, Tom’s uncle, did all the design for the memorial. It’s a little garden area and there are these really impressive stones. They’re kind of naturally hexagonal columns, and they were brought in from an area up by Squamish.

**[Interview ends, conversation continues on the topic of further research]**