Introduction

The story of Bill Walsh is not the story of an ordinary man — which is not to say that the everyday lives of so-called ordinary people are unworthy subject matter for biography. It comes down to this: some people have an appetite for living that makes them extraordinary. Bill Walsh is one such person. He has lived an extraordinary life that has placed him on location at several of the key (and not so key, but interesting) historical events of the 20th century: on Wall Street as a courier the day the stock market crashed in 1929; a factory worker in the Soviet Union in the days of the first Five Year Plan; in charge of a campaign to organize Kitchener’s rubber workers unionization drive in southern Ontario in the 1930s; a jailbird and subsequently an inmate of an internment camp for membership in an illegal organization, the Communist Party of Canada; a foot soldier on the front lines in Europe as a member of the Canadian Army during World War II; and a strike leader in the midst of the 1946 strike wave that was to establish the ground rules for collective bargaining over the next half century. And this covers just one-third of a very long life!

I have read many accounts of these events, but written from the vantage point of journalists, academics, party leaders, union presidents, and army generals rather than from the grass roots or the foot soldier. Walsh was never the lead actor in any of these events. His is a unique angle of vision, not because it is so uncommon, but because it so rarely finds public expression.

To the small circle of friends and relatives familiar with the Bill Walsh story, his trip to the Soviet Union in 1931 is likely a highlight. Together with his best friend, Dick Steele, both barely past their teen-age years, he hitch-hiked across Europe. When their money ran out they headed towards Russia where they had heard they could find jobs. They ended up in the city of Minsk and for two years worked in a ball-bearing factory there. Enamored with the Communist experiment, they joined the Young Communist League. In the fall of 1933, Bill was dragged home by his father, a leading member of Montréal’s Jewish community. By then he was thoroughly committed to the cause and within a few years he was working in
various cities in southern Ontario as a Communist Party organizer. In this capacity he was instrumental in organizing the rubber workers of Kitchener.

Intimates of Bill Walsh will also know of his double tragedy: the loss of his first wife Anne Weir in 1943, just after he had been released from internment camp; and the loss of Dick Steele, cut down by a German anti-tank gun in August 1944, six weeks after the historic landing at Normandy. When Walsh returned from the war — having participated in the liberation of France, Holland and Belgium — he married Dick Steele’s widow, Esther, and became father to the Steele-twins, Michael and Johnny.

Because of his behind-the-scenes style of work, even labour historians are unaware of the important role Bill Walsh played in organizing Kitchener’s rubber workers. Similarly, few are aware of his role in the famous 1946 steel strike at Hamilton’s Stelco plant. Walsh’s near 20 year career as Hamilton area staff representative for the United Electrical Workers ground to a halt in the mid-1960s when he was forced out of the union. Because of the bitterness that marked his exit, official UE histories barely mention his name, let alone recognize his contribution. His longstanding conflict with the national leader of this Communist-led union, C.S. Jackson, also led to his resignation from the Communist Party.

In the final 25 years of his career, spent as a union consultant, Walsh earned the reputation as one of Canada’s leading labour arbitrators and was regularly engaged in this capacity by the Ontario Nurses Union and elsewhere in the health sector. For years he led the negotiations for the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers in Sudbury; he helped re-write the constitution of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and was involved in that union’s first successful rotating strike. In the industrial relations field his advice was sought after across the industrial spectrum and he mentored more than one generation of union leaders and labour arbitrators. His reputation as a negotiator had spread so far that in the early 1980s he was asked by the Inuit to head up their land settlement negotiation team.

Bill Walsh has lived his life as one large adventure. He possesses great personal charm and a wonderful sense of humour. He is serious and yet has an infectious gaiety. He is lively and playful. He is a romantic. Joe Salsberg, an early mentor, thinks of Bill as a gentle soul. “He was a bit of the poet and dreamer,” he told me, “features he tried to overcome to become a hardened revolutionary.” Salsberg says he wondered at the time whether Walsh might be too soft to be a Communist organizer and a trade union leader in the United Electrical Workers which, as he said, had “lost so many promising young Party members because of the poisonous and embittered atmosphere produced by that union’s top leadership.” In fact Walsh was sensitive, not soft, and he survived the Communist wars well into the 1960s,
long after most others, including Joe Salsberg, quit. For nearly twenty years he also survived the vicious wars inside the United Electrical Workers. Both however, took their toll on his health.

Walsh was nothing if not loyal, both to the cause and to its organizations. But he was also a rebel, and like all rebels, he was not always a good team player. He was always looking for innovative ways of doing things and he was often prepared to take more risks than his superiors. Being part of a highly centralized organization cramped his style. He was a strong individualist. He liked to put his personal stamp on things. It is not surprising, then, that he often found himself out of step in both the Party and the union. He was better as a lone operator. The union consulting work he eventually took on was more congenial to his personality.

Walsh was an incredibly hard worker and possessed enormous powers of concentration. He was a workaholic and a perfectionist, meticulous, deliberate. To those who worked under him, he could be a hard task master. UE staff members often felt cramped by him. He made all of the decisions and he supervised all of their work very closely. The work had to be just so. Delegating tasks to others was not easy for him. He preferred to do everything himself.

Clever with words, he was a shrewd and brilliant strategist. As a public speaker, he appealed to reason rather than to emotions, and he was persuasive rather than shrill or bombastic. He never came off as a fanatic or a crank, even in the most dogmatic moments in the history of the Communist Party.

His work was all consuming. Everything else, including family life, was secondary. In fact, to his wife Esther and the children, he seemed rarely at home and when at home his work still took precedence over all else. He and Esther never felt fully at home in their adopted city of Hamilton. They had little or no social life outside the union. They missed the camaraderie of their younger days. They were happier when, in 1981, they left Hamilton and moved to Toronto.

Bill Walsh was a man driven to prove himself, perhaps to his perennially disappointed father, Harry Wolofsky, who had thought that in Bill he finally had the son that could follow in his footsteps as the publisher of Montréal's largest Jewish newspaper. In fact, Walsh never applied himself in school and though he was possessed of remarkable intelligence and could have been an excellent writer, he never emerged as a man of letters. To say nothing of the fact that he never identified with the Jewish community or the Jewish people as such. To the contrary, he saw himself as a secular humanist and internationalist, with class ties far stronger than either religious or national ones.
Walsh is a phenomenal story teller. This is the first observation that anybody who has met him remarks upon. His remarkable memory never failed to impress me. One weekend I accompanied him and Esther to their summer cottage an hour or so from Toronto. As we made our way in his Thunderbird, he burst into song. I noted that the words were not English and I asked him what he was singing. It was a Russian ballad he had last heard in 1931! And he sung verse after verse of it in Russian, a language totally foreign to him until his trip there 45 years earlier.

I first met Bill Walsh in the mid-1970s. I had heard a little about him from mutual friends in the Waffle movement, a left-wing ginger group inside the New Democratic Party. When CBC producer Jim Littleton offered to introduce me to him, I readily agreed. I knew nothing of his story at the time, but just one question over coffee was enough to launch him into a series of stories about his life that I found so entertaining and intriguing I knew I needed to hear more — if he was willing. And he was willing.

I arranged to take a few weeks from my next few summer holidays to stay with Bill and Esther in their Hamilton home, cramming in whatever free time he had listening to his stories. When I heard enough of his story to know it deserved a wider audience, I offered to help him write it in autobiographical form. But he had strong feelings against this. I decided to write my own account, relying largely on his telling, but also interviewing family members and numerous individuals, including both friends and enemies whose lives intermeshed with his at one point or another. Apart from personal letters, some leaflets, lectures and union correspondence, the only recorded material is a lengthy statement he prepared at the time of his resignation from the Communist Party, some excerpts of which appear in this introduction.

Like most political activists I have known, Bill Walsh was never very introspective. He probably possessed little awareness of his inner life, which made it difficult for me to really come to know the man. He could talk endlessly and in remarkable detail about the smallest events in his life. But he struggled to relate what was going on inside of him. There is, of course, a theory that people who abandon all else for their work, whether it be for a corporation, a union, or a political party are desperately seeking to avoid looking too deeply into themselves. As a generalization, this theory is far too sweeping, and as a theory it's far too simple, but I think it has some application in the case of Bill Walsh. He usually found some way to divert himself from the moments of pain and desolation in his life, as well as from news items and internal political controversy he would prefer to ignore. There were endless meetings to attend, picket lines to organize, leaflets to draft, campaigns to plan, and labour boards to appear before.
Like the rest of us, Walsh has his faults. Although he could sometimes admit to his failings, he had difficulty accepting criticism from others. "He was far too competitive," his brother Sammy told me, "even competing with Dick Steele over who could work faster in the Russian ball bearing factory, but that was the way he was everywhere. He had to be first." "You always have to be right," Ross Russell, a union colleague and friend, complained to him. "You make the rest of us look like schlemiels." There is no doubt that Walsh was vain. He could not resist an opportunity to shine. He loved to be the centre of attention, which is perhaps why he never needed to be persuaded to tell and retell stories of his life. "Bill never needed friends — except as an audience," a close friend of the family told me. "He didn't seek them out; they sought him out. They loved to hear his stories as much as he loved to tell them. They adored him."

The question of his relationship to the Communist Party is a puzzle. Why would a person of his keen intelligence and practical sense remain a member of the Party so long after its own internal contradictions had rendered it feeble and ineffective? Walsh displayed the same stubbornness with the Waffle, remaining involved long after it had begun to crumble. I asked Paul Middleton, a Walsh protegé and fellow Waffler if he had an explanation. "Bill had sense of the long haul," Middleton offered. "He saw each moment in long term perspective. He was sustained by the belief in a workers' movement and in socialism. He never gave up the dream, but he knew that there would be hard years and that you had to take the bad with the good. Compromises would be necessary along the way and he had no problem with that. As long as there was a sense of working together in a comradely way, he was prepared to stick, no matter how difficult the times."

Walsh's letter of resignation submitted to the Hamilton branch of the Communist Party in 1965 confirms this insight.

When I joined the Young Communist League during the depression years more than 35 years ago, I believed that socialism was the only answer to depressions, race hatred, chauvinism, anti-semitism, fascism, and war — that socialism would open the door to a golden era for the people of the world, including me.

I believed it during the terrible defeats in Germany when the Nazis took over and crushed the Party, when the Popular Front in France was defeated, when the Spanish Republic was destroyed. I was shocked by all these events and many more, but I still believed it, and did so during the most confusing period of the Soviet pact with Nazi Germany. We were for the war in the first few days ... then we were against it, calling for the withdrawal of Canadian troops and defeat of our own bourgeoisie. Then after Hitler crushed France and attacked the Soviet Union we were all-out for the war.
I believed in it when old Bolsheviks were liquidated in the Soviet Union, many of them after making confessions of all kinds, others by simply disappearing. After all, the top leaders of the CPSU condemned these people as betrayers, as agents of the capitalists and even as allies of the Nazis. And the Party in Canada fully agreed with these purges — and we believed what our leaders told us. If I had doubts and reservations, I didn’t express them. After all, the enemies of the Party were making capital out of these purges — and to express any doubt would be a mark of disloyalty. I did have doubts, but I didn’t express them — not even to my closest comrades. When anybody else, outside the party, sought to engage me in discussions on these matters — I defended the party position, condemned those who had been condemned by the purges in the Soviet Union. And I did this in the post-war years too, when new purges took place, including so many people in the field, the writers, artists, the Jewish doctors, and so on.

It is not that there weren’t differences and debates and sometimes very sharp arguments on some questions, like the best way to fight evictions of unemployed from their home, what kind of unemployed organizations to set up, how to work within the trade unions and how to build them, attitudes towards the CCF and so on.

We had differences of opinion on such questions and others. And we’d argue them out. Sometimes I was convinced by the arguments of other comrades. Sometimes I wasn’t. But the things we all agreed on — the basic things — were far more important than what we didn’t agree on. And there was a feeling of comradeship, of crusading, of friendship. The atmosphere was warm and friendly. And as long as that comradesly atmosphere was there so you could discuss and argue out things with people you respected and loved — the other things didn’t seem to matter so much.

Even in the internment camp with 60 or so Canadian communists locked up together for a long period of time. We would discuss all kinds of things, political, personal, the most intimate personal things and the most intimate thoughts — but nobody ever questioned the bigger things. Nobody ever expressed any doubts about the general position of the Canadian Party, and nobody expressed the least doubt about anything at all that was being done in the Soviet Union. Certainly I never participated in or heard of any such discussions. I felt that to do so would be treason. Mind you, I harboured in my mind some doubts about the purges, about all those who used to be regarded as wonderful people and who were later labeled as traitors and disgraced and executed. But you didn’t express anything about it. I can’t speak for others, of course, but I would be surprised if they didn’t also feel the same way.

Even my best friend, Dick Steele, with whom I went to school in Montreal, with whom I studied and worked in the USA, with whom I hitchhiked through Europe and into the Soviet Union, we shared and
shared alike for many years. We joined the Young Communist League and Party together. We became Party organizers at the same time. We could talk about everything, and he was the warmest, most dedicated man I ever knew as well as one of the most capable. No matter what problems there were, we could always discuss them. But even with Dick, we had no discussion on such things as the purges, except that we both took the very same position as others — that the purges were fully correct, fully justified, and absolutely necessary in the interests of keeping the party pure and strong and eliminating spies and enemies who had been uncovered through the vigilance of Stalin, the special Party and state organs for investigating and ferreting out such enemies. But we had differences on many other questions, some of them were not so important, but from the arguments you would think that arriving at a correct decision would make all the difference as to whether we were going to erect the barricades in the revolutionary struggle this year, or would have to wait a lot longer. And although there were some I was closer to than others, and one or two I never learned to like, by and large I felt a solidarity and friendship with all my comrades, and I had no doubt that they felt the same way toward the collective and toward me as part of the collective.

Mind you, two years in jail and internment camp, almost three years in the army, as a soldier during most of the second front — especially during this period as a front line infantry man — the death of several of my closest friends in the fighting — all these things combined to bring my doubts closer to the surface. But still I considered it necessary to defend every position and I smothered my doubts, so deep was the loyalty.

I knew these events were happening — the Jewish doctors plot, the exile of Jewish poets to Siberian labour camps, the Khrushchev revelations in 1956 — but I was always involved in some negotiation or another or in some grievance. I never seemed to have the time to really pay attention to them. As far as I was concerned, the working class needed its own Party and however imperfect, we were it. I didn’t take it much further than that.

When Joe Salsberg urged Walsh to quit along with him and thousands of others in 1956, Walsh asked his former mentor, “what do you have to replace the Party with?”

Clearly Walsh’s strong sense of loyalty, together with whatever personality traits led him to a life of unreflective activism, meshed with the Communist Party’s authoritarian tendency to quash dissent, forbid any questioning of leaders, and discourage debate except about tactical matters. In the end, it was less a matter of principle and more one of malicious conduct towards him and a profound sense of personal betrayal by comrades he had regarded as close friends for twenty years that finally drove
him from the Party. Only after his resignation was he willing to consider that the Party itself might be fundamentally flawed. In 1969 Walsh joined the NDP and continued to be very active in public affairs.

In the final analysis, the Communist Party, the Soviet Union, and the world-wide Communist movement was more than a political cause for Bill Walsh. In this, of course, he was hardly unique. It gave him a way of life and it gave meaning to his life. He had a need to belong. The Party gave him a community of friends that sometimes felt like an extended family. Given what was at stake for him, until the very end when he no longer felt that warmth and friendly atmosphere, he would find some way to minimize, deny, dismiss or tolerate the accumulation of political mistakes, betrayal, and crimes against humanity that were part and parcel of the history of the Communist movement.

Most of the material in this book was gathered during the mid-1970s and early 1980s. After an unsuccessful first effort, I returned to the project and re-explored some of the ground a decade later. I confess that at first I had difficulty finding the voice in which to tell the story and the right tone for a man inclined mainly towards a life of action. I decided to let Bill tell his story in his own words, and corrected for dates and details on the rare occasion where these proved to be in error. My contribution has been to explain the historical context and background against which the action takes place, and to provide my own interpretations. As well, I have interviewed dozens of Bill’s colleagues, relatives and friends to bring other perspectives to bear and to help me sort out some personal and relational issues that are crucial to any life story. Where there are occasional gaps in the narrative, I have followed a strategy developed by Alex Haley of vicariously adding or creating dialogue. While my fidelity to the spoken word is not absolute, it is almost always so and in the few passages when it is not, it is always true to the spirit of the situation.

I have never before written biography, only political economy. I don’t know if it is customary to do so, but I feel bound to say a few words about myself in relationship to Bill Walsh and his story. I have always been a person of the Left, having in 1963 founded a magazine of Left opinion, *Canadian Dimension*. But my political role has mainly been that of an observer, commentator, and analyst rather than an organizer or activist. In fact, except for the few years I was a member of the NDP and the Waffle movement, I have never been a member of any political organization. The Communist Party would have been a particularly difficult organization for me because of its blind loyalty, intolerance of internal dissent, its self-righteousness and smugness — features that have always triggered in me an attitude of rebellion and defiance. At the same time I’ve held romantic notions about the Communist Party of the 1930s — its intensity, activism,
youthfulness, camaraderie, devotion to the cause — some of which I know is exaggerated and some of which comes with the very features that repulse me. I’ve also held romantic notions about the Bolshevik revolution and at the height of the Cold War I would often find myself on the Soviet side of a conflict with the United States. But I always had major reservations about the kind of socialism the USSR represented and I abhorred the vast crimes of Stalin. Until the end, though, I had hoped, à la Isaac Deutscher, that the internal evolution of Soviet society would release forces that would obtain a thorough-going democratic revolution and an independent justice system such as to propel the USSR towards a higher stage of socialism. For a moment I thought that with glasnost that day was coming. Alas for utopic delusions.

When I started this project, the mood of the Left in this country and elsewhere around the world was still upbeat. The American Empire had just been defeated in Vietnam and we had made a contribution to that defeat. We thought we were winning the war of ideas as well. By the time I had completed the first draft a few years later, our faith that “the times are a changin” had still not been dashed. The heady days were over, we knew, but we were still on the offensive and even winning a few rounds — Nicaragua and Mozambique come to mind. Even the Communist Party of Canada, as small and marginal as it was, was displaying the spirit of glasnost and perestroika. In France, Britain, and Sweden, social democratic parties were being pushed to the Left.

At that time, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of biographies and memoirs of Left thinkers and leaders were being published. There was obviously a large audience for such work. By the time I took up this project again, a decade later, the political environment had dramatically changed. The Soviet Union had collapsed, along with its East European allies. Revolutionary governments in Nicaragua, Mozambique, and elsewhere were isolated and could not survive without the old support system. Social democratic governments were falling and when their parties managed to get elected, they embraced the policies, if not the ideology, of neo-conservatism. The Left in Canada shared in this deep descent. Interest in the lives of old Lefties waned, and it has not been easy finding a publisher willing to take a chance with this manuscript. But there are now some promising signs of Left renewal. I hope that the publication of this book is an indication that we are at the beginning of a new cycle of activism and hope.

Cy Gonick