

Richard Readings for History 103:

- MacLennan and Katz, from *Remembering the Rocket* ed. Craig MacInnis (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), 39-75.
- Dryden from *Time Magazine*, 12 June 2000.

THE ROCKET: A HERO FOR QUEBEC

by Hugh MacLennan, January 15, 1955

I DON'T THINK I'M FANCIFUL IN MY BELIEF THAT 1954 WAS A YEAR OF CHANGE IN MONTREAL.

At the moment, Canada has no real focal point, partly because we are a bilingual nation but also because the issue between Montreal and Toronto remains undecided. At stake in this intercity rivalry is the privilege of setting the style for our growing country, and Montrealers are beginning to fear that the geographical and economic cards are stacked against them, just as they fear that the mentality of Toronto is better adjusted to the modern age than their own.

Montreal's current enthusiasm for a hockey player called Maurice Richard is probably not unconnected with the city's awareness that its prestige is being challenged. Richard has become the greatest hero Montreal has ever acknowledged, and it is obvious that his genius for hockey is only a partial cause of his apotheosis.

In many ways, Howie Morenz was a greater forward, and today Beliveau and Geoffrion are probably more useful to the team. But, as one sportswriter put it, the Rocket is terrific even while standing still. He is more interesting when he misses a goal than most men are when they connect. And when he does put the puck into the net, the Forum thunders with approval of something more than a change in the score.

It is admiration for the man himself, an identification of the city's spirit with his. For Richard is an old-fashioned personality, utterly nonconformist, relying more on elan than on cunning, with a strange courtliness even in his ferocity. There is no trace in him of the good mixer or the great guy, no pretence of being just like everyone else, no false modesty, no deliberate showmanship, no cheap appeals for popularity. He is a passionate individual.

It is to this old-fashioned individualism that Montreal responds. When Richard returned from Chicago after scoring his four hundredth goal, he was met by a mob of enthusiasts stretching out their hands to touch him. In his honour they carried a towering *papier-mâché* effigy of their hero that looked like one of those grotesque mediaeval images seen in Mardi Gras parades in the south of France. An anachronism in the middle of the 20th century?

It so happens that no hockey player has ever suffered more from illegal tactics than Maurice Richard. He is a type of player few English-speaking Canadians understand. He is that rare thing, a champion who is also an obsessed artist. Latin that he is, he might easily have been a great matador had he been born in Spain. He has the courage, the grace, the intensity, the sombre dignity. When you talk to him you feel he is as old as the hills and at the same time as young as a freshcheeked boy. Gentleness and ferocity both live in him. Even in a crowd he is strangely solitary. His eyes seem far away, and in hockey he has found a kind of personal destiny.

The reason he explodes is that he has again and again been prevented from playing hockey as well as he can because the referees have not enforced the rules properly. Every great player must expect to be marked closely, but for ten years the Rocket has been systematically heckled by rival coaches who know intuitively that nobody can more easily be taken advantage of than a genius. Richard can stand any amount of roughness that comes naturally with the game, but after a night in which he has been cynically tripped, slashed, held, boarded and verbally insulted by lesser men he is apt to go wild. His rage is curiously impersonal - an explosion against frustration itself.

It is bad for Richard and bad for the game that this kind of emotion has grown up around him, for it spreads far beyond the hockey rinks. Richard has become more than a hero to millions of *Canadiens*. Owing to the way in which he has been (so they think) persecuted, he has imperceptibly become the focus of the persecution anxieties latent in a minority people. Not even the fact that he is loved and admired almost equally by English-speaking Montrealers can modify the profound self-identification of loyal *Canadiens* with this singular man.

THEY SEE IN RICHARD NOT ONLY A PERSON WHO IDEALLY EMBODIES THE FIRE AND STYLE OF THEIR RACE; THEY ALSO SEE IN HIM A MAN WHO FROM TIME TO TIME TURNS ON HIS PERSECUTORS AND ANNIHILATES THEM.

It sounds fantastic to say it, but at the moment Richard has a status with some people in Quebec not much below that of a tribal god, and I doubt if even he realizes how much of what he stands for in the public mind is only indirectly connected with the game he plays.

<p style="text-align: center;">THE STRANGE FORCES BEHIND THE RICHARD HOCKEY RIOT <i>by Sidney Katz, September 17, 1955</i></p>

**ON MARCH 17, 1955, AT EXACTLY 9:11 P.M.,
A TEAR-GAS BOMB EXPLODED IN THE MONTREAL FORUM**

where sixteen thousand people had gathered to watch a hockey match between the Montreal Canadiens and the Detroit Red Wings. The acrid yellowish fumes that filled the stadium sent the crowd rushing to the exits, coughing and retching. But it did more. It touched off the most destructive and frenzied riot in the history of Canadian sport.

The explosion of the bomb was the last straw in a long series of provocative incidents that swept away the last remnant of the crowd's restraint and decency. Many of the fans had come to the game in an ugly mood. The day before, Clarence Campbell, president of the National Hockey League, had banned Maurice Richard, the star of the Canadiens and the idol of the highly partisan Montreal fans, from hockey for the remainder of the season. The suspension couldn't have come at a worse time for the Canadiens. The league leadership was at stake: they were leading Detroit by the narrow margin of two points.

Richard's award for individual high scoring was at stake too - he was only two points ahead of his teammate Bernie (Boom Boom) Geoffrion. Furthermore, it had been a long tough hockey season, full of emotional outbursts. All during the first period of play the crowd had vented their anger at Campbell by shouting, "*Va t'en, Campbell*" ("Scram, Campbell") and showering him with rotten fruit, eggs, pickled pigs' feet and empty bottles. At one time there were as many as ten thousand people packed around the outside of the Forum. Many of them rushed around in bands shrieking like animals. For a time it looked as if a lynching might even be attempted: groups of rioters were savagely chanting in unison, "Kill Campbell! Kill Campbell!" The windows of passing streetcars were smashed and cab drivers were hauled from their vehicles and pummelled. The mob smashed hundreds of windows in the Forum. They pulled down signs and tore doors off their hinges. They toppled newsstands and telephone booths.

But the greatest damage done was not physical. Montrealers awoke ashamed and stunned after their emotional binge. The *Montreal Star* observed, "Nothing remains but shame." The *Toronto Star* commented, "It's savagery which attacks the fundamentals of civilized behaviour." A Dutch newspaper [erroneously] headlined the riot story: STADIUM WRECKED, 27 DEAD, 100 WOUNDED.

The newspapers and radio were blamed for whipping up public opinion against Campbell before the riot. Frank Hanley, of Montreal city council, said that Mayor Jean Drapeau must accept at least some of the responsibility. Had he not publicly criticized Campbell's decision to suspend Richard instead of appealing to the public to accept it? Drapeau, in turn, blamed the riot on Campbell, who "provoked it" by his presence at the game.

In the case history of the Richard riot, the night of March 13, four nights before the Montreal outburst, is important. On that night the Montreal Canadiens were playing against the Boston Bruins in the Boston Garden. An incident occurred six minutes before the end of the game which set the stage for the debacle in Montreal. Richard was skating across the Boston blueline past Boston defenceman Hal Laycoe when the latter put his stick up high and caught Richard on the left side of his head. It made a nasty gash which later required five stitches. Frank Udvari, the referee, signalled a penalty to Laycoe for highsticking but allowed the game to go on because the Canadiens had the puck.

Richard skated behind the Boston net and had returned to the blueline when the whistle blew. He rubbed his head, then suddenly skated over to Laycoe. Lifting his stick high over his head with both hands Richard pounded Laycoe over the face and shoulders with all his strength. Laycoe dropped his gloves and stick and motioned to Richard to come and fight with his fists. An official, linesman Cliff Thompson, grabbed Richard and took his stick away from him. Richard broke away, picked up a loose stick on the ice and again slashed away at Laycoe, this time breaking the stick on him. Again Thompson got hold of Richard, but again Richard escaped and with another stick slashed at the man who had injured him. Thompson subdued Richard for the third time by forcing him down to the ice. With the help of a teammate, Richard his feet and sprang at Thompson, bruising his face and blackening his eye.

Richard was penalized for the remainder of the game and fined \$100. Laycoe, who suffered body bruises and face wounds, was penalized five minutes for high-sticking and was given a further 10-minute penalty for tossing a blood stained towel at referee Udvari.

Richard's emotional and physical resistance were at a low ebb on the night of the Boston game. It was near the end of a long exhausting schedule. The Canadiens had played Boston only the previous night in Montreal. Richard had been hurled against a net and had injured his back. He never considered sitting out the Boston game. There was too much at stake. With three scheduled games left, the Canadiens' chances of finishing first in the league were bright. Furthermore, Richard was narrowly leading the league for individual high scoring. If he won, he would receive \$1,000 from the league and another \$1,000 from his club.

IT'S POSSIBLE THAT RICHARD IS THE GREATEST HOCKEY PLAYER WHO EVER LIVED.

Opposing teams fully recognize Richard's talent and use rugged methods to stop him. One - and sometimes two - players are specifically detailed to nettle him. They regularly hang on to him, put hockey sticks between his legs, body-check him and board him harder than necessary. Once he skated 20 feet with two men on his shoulders to score a goal. His opponents also employ psychological warfare to unnerve him. Inspector William Minogue, who, as police officer in charge of the Forum, is regularly at rink side during games, frequently hears opposing players calling Richard "French pea soup" or "dirty French bastard" as they skate past. If these taunts result in a fight, both Richard and his provoker are sent to the penalty bench. Opposing teams consider this a good bargain.

Richard is a rarity among men as well as among hockey players. He is an artist. He is completely dedicated to playing good hockey and scoring goals. "It's the most important thing in my life," he told me.

There are better skaters, better stickhandlers, better checkers and better playmakers than Richard, but no better hockey player. He seems to have the power to summon forth all his strength at the very instant it's needed. "His strength comes all at once like the explosion of a bomb," says Kenny Reardon, an ex-hockey player who is now assistant manager of the Canadiens.

In April 1947, during a playoff game against Toronto, Richard used his stick on Vic Lynn's eye (four stitches) and on Bill Ezinicki's head (sever) stitches). He was fined \$250 and suspended for one game.

In March 1951, in the lobby of the Piccadilly Hotel in New York, he grabbed referee Hugh Mclean by the throat and cursed him loudly for several minutes. Richard was protesting what he considered a poor decision that was rendered at a game a few nights earlier. He was fined \$500.

In December 1954 in Toronto he charged into Bob Bailey with his stick, broke two of his front teeth, then turned and struck linesman George Hayes. He was given two 10-minute misconduct penalties and fined \$250.

Three months later came the incident in Boston. Both Richard and Campbell refrained from making public statements until after the hearing. The attacks on Laycoe and Thompson were deliberate and persistent, [Campbell] found. "An incident occurred less than three months ago in which the pattern of conduct of Richard was almost identical ... Consequently, the time for leniency or probation is past. Whether this type of conduct is the product of temperamental instability or wilful defiance doesn't matter. It's a type of conduct that cannot be tolerated by any player, star or otherwise." The room was completely silent as Campbell then

pronounced the punishment: "Richard is suspended from playing in the remaining league and playoff games."

There were portents of what was to happen on the night of March 17 in the phone calls received by Campbell. One of the first callers said, "Tell Campbell I'm an undertaker and he'll be needing me in a few days." Another person said, "I intend to kill you and I already have a hiding place picked out."

The Montreal press, both English and French, reinforced the fans' feeling that Campbell had victimized them. *Le Matin* castigated the NHL president for penalizing the public and the fans as well as Richard. One French weekly published a crude cartoon of Campbell's head on a platter, dripping blood, with the caption: "This is how we would like to see him."

On March 17 at 11:30 a.m. came the first sign that Montreal fans would not be content to limit their protests to angry words. A dozen young men showed up at the Forum where the Canadiens were scheduled to play Detroit that night. They bore signs saying "Vive Richard" and "A Bas Campbell." The activity outside the Forum mounted steadily as the hour of the game approached. Bands of demonstrators moved up and down with signs saying "Unfair to French Canadians."

At about 6:30 a number of panel trucks circled around Atwater Park, across from the Forum, a few times and discharged a number of young men in black leather windbreakers bearing white insignia. These windbreakers had special significance for the police. They were the garb of youthful motorcyclists who had been involved in disorders on previous occasions. Other groups kept arriving steadily. By 8:30, when the game started, in addition to the Forum patrons, there were probably about six hundred demonstrators. The Forum loudspeaker announced that all seats were now sold. A picketer shouted back, "We don't want seats. We want Campbell!" The cry was taken up and repeated endlessly with savage intensity. A few minutes after the game started Richard slipped into the Forum unnoticed and took a seat near the goal umpire's cage at the south end of the rink. He gazed intently at the ice, a look of distress on his face: the Canadiens were playing sloppy hockey. "Our players were as upset and excited as the fans," said coach Dick Irvin later. "The Richard suspension had taken the heart out of them." At the 11th minute of the first period Detroit scored a second goal and the Canadiens saw their hopes of a league championship go up in smoke. It was at this minute that Clarence Campbell entered the arena. He couldn't have chosen a worse time for his entrance.

As soon as Campbell sat down the crowd recognized him and pandemonium broke loose. They shifted their attention from the game to Campbell and set up a deafening roar. "Shoo Campbell, Shoo Campbell." The next 40 minutes were to be sheer torture for Campbell. Vegetables, eggs, tomatoes, rubbers, bottles and programs rained down on him. They were thrown from the \$1.50 seats and standing sections far above.

But Campbell stood his ground. Each time he got up to remove the debris from his clothes, the clamour grew louder. Whenever the Detroit team scored the crowd's temper rose and the shower of objects on Campbell thickened. Shortly before the end of the first period, a youth in a windbreaker came down the aisle from above and told the usher he was a friend and that he wanted to shake hands with Campbell. As he approached Campbell he held out his left hand. When Campbell took his hand the youth unleashed two or three blows. Fortunately, Campbell had expected a ruse. He had grabbed his assailant's left hand firmly and leaned back as the blows fell, thus avoiding their full impact.

The first period ended. Ordinarily, Campbell spends the intermissions in the referees' room. Tonight he decided to remain in his seat, believing that this would cause less excitement.

One André Robinson, a young man of 26 who resembles Marlon Brando, confronted Campbell. Without uttering a word he squashed two large tomatoes against Campbell's chest and rubbed them in. As he fled down the stairs Campbell kept pointing at him, signalling the two policemen to arrest him.

Now, hordes of people came rushing down from the seats far above, surrounding Campbell's box. The ill feeling against Campbell was growing more intense by the second and there was nobody to help him.

Who threw the bomb? This question has never been answered. There is no evidence that the thrower intended to befriend Campbell but that's what he may have done. Chief of Detectives George Allain later observed, "The bomb-thrower protected Campbell's life by releasing it at precisely the right moment."

The bomb landed on a wet rubber mat on the aisle adjacent to the ice surface. The people nearby didn't know what it was. Some thought that the ammonia pipes had sprung a leak; others that a fire had broken out in the basement. Within a few seconds they were coughing and choking as the fumes clogged their eyes, throats, stomachs and lungs. To protect themselves as they hurried out, they wrapped programs, handkerchiefs, scarves and coats around their faces.

Campbell was surprised when he saw the first cloud of smoke. He sniffed the air and because of his military training he immediately recognized it as tear gas. He made his way to the first-aid centre 50 feet away under the stands. Richard had also made his way to the first-aid centre but had never come face to face with Campbell because he was in a different room. He was aghast at what had happened. "This is terrible, awful," he said. "People might have been killed."

Armand Pare, head of the Montreal fire department, was unwilling to let the game continue. He felt that there was real danger of panic and fire. Campbell sent the following note to Jack Adams, the Detroit general manager: "The game has been forfeited to Detroit. You are entitled to take your team on its way anytime now. Selke agrees as the fire department has ordered this building closed."

Until the bomb exploded, the demonstration outside the Forum was neither destructive nor out of control. The explosion, however, signalled a change of mood. When thousands of excited, frightened fans poured outside and joined the demonstrators it seemed to unleash an ugly mob spirit.

By 11 p.m. the crowd numbered at least ten thousand. The Forum was now virtually in a state of siege. In the 15 blocks along St. Catherine Street, east of the Forum, 50 stores were damaged and looted. By 3 a.m. the last rock had been hurled, the last window smashed and the last blood-curdling shriek of "Kill Campbell!" had been uttered. The fury of the mob had spent itself.

Farewell to The Rocket Amid the sadness and the celebration at his funeral, he once again kindled our pride

By KEN DRYDEN

Time Magazine, Monday, Jun. 12, 2000

Imagine a household in Montreal in the 1940s. It's nighttime. Only the last chores and homework remain undone. The radio is on. The announcer's voice crackles with distance and excitement; a crowd choruses in behind. With only this bare-bones detail, the imagination of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians spun great stories. Everyone is bigger, stronger and more heroic on radio. No bad games were ever played there. Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey were radio giants. So were F.D.R. and Winston Churchill. So was Maurice Richard. And print journalists, live on the scene, wrote with the same breathless style, to the radio reality of their readers.

The "Rocket Richard" people saw in their radio-tuned imaginations was the mythical figure so emotionally remembered last week. He was the archetypal goal scorer. He didn't do it surgically, with long-range bombs like Bobby Hull, with Wayne Gretzky's deception, with Mike Bossy's precision or with Mario Lemieux's dazzling moves. Goal scoring for Richard was basic and elemental, less an act of skill and more an act of will.

His eyes told the story. Piercing like bullets, dark, almost maniacally wide and askew, their focus was somewhere else. Not on a puck, not on a camera, not on any opponent in his way; around, through and beyond all of them; focused on what only need and desire could see. His were dangerous eyes, disturbing, disturbed, not to be reasoned with, capable of anything, frightening to friend and foe. Beyond control.

His eyes mirrored a soul that had to get to the net.

He shot left-handed but played right wing, almost unique at the time. As he approached the net and banked around a defenseman, his skates biting the ice, he could hold the puck far to his right, on his backhand, and use his body as a shield. He wore little equipment. (None of the players did, and their sticks were heavy like boards.) Opponents hacked his arms, piled on his back. On his goalward mission, he seemed past distraction, outside pain, like a father trapped with his child under the wheels of a car who finds a desperate strength to lift that dreadful weight. Such was his need.

In a Quebec society dominated by the repressive government of Premier Maurice Duplessis, and by the Roman Catholic Church, Richard played under no one's thumb. Knock him down, he got up. Suspend him, he came back unchanged. You could not defeat him. Lay money and celebrity at his feet, he was undistractable. You couldn't get to him. And the people loved him for it. He didn't take that love and use it to cash in. Even as he got older, the Rocket wanted what they wanted of him. To score. To win. To those who wanted more, he wanted nothing of their ideas. He was not the embodiment of Quebec aspirations. He was not a political rebel. He was a hockey player.

After Richard joined the team in 1942, the Canadiens ended a run of several poor seasons and won the Stanley Cup twice in the 1940s, five times in the 1950s. He scored more goals than any other player, and more goals when his team needed him most--in playoff games and overtimes. From 1951 to 1960 the Canadiens went to the Stanley Cup finals for 10 straight years. In those Montreal households, and around the province, he stirred something profound. Maurice Richard made everyone proud.

He retired in 1960. I joined the Canadiens in 1971. Only two of his teammates remained by then, his brother Henri and Jean Beliveau. The Rocket had become estranged from the Canadiens. Off the ice, there was no role he wanted that the team was willing to offer. Fire immortalizes; grace is more adaptable.

But even if Richard was nowhere around the Forum, he was everywhere: in photos, in the stories we heard while his No. 9 jersey hung from the rafters above us. In his playing years, Richard had redefined what it meant to be a Montreal Canadien. There was passed to us, his successors, an expectation, an understanding, a relentless "get-to-the-net" spirit that began with him. In the 20 years after he retired, the Canadiens won 10 Stanley Cups.

Last Tuesday his body lay in state inside Molson Centre as people began to gather in the early morning to say their farewells. During the day and into the evening, the numbers grew until, after midnight, more than 100,000 people had filed past Richard's coffin. A few hours later, 2,500 people filled Notre Dame Basilica for a state funeral while millions watched on TV across the country.

It was an extraordinary gathering. People who in the rest of their lives had little in common sat, stood, walked side by side--people who by politics, ideology, station in life, language, culture, age or team loyalty were strange bedfellows. On state occasions, which this so strongly resembled, many in attendance come representing countries, organizations. All these people came representing only themselves.

No other Canadian could have generated such a gathering. There was sadness and celebration, but deeper than that, there was pride. In that church and outside, the feeling was unmistakable: pride in being Montrealers and Montrealais, Quebeckers and Quebecois, Canadians and Canadiens; pride in being current players and old-time players; pride in being whatever it is that makes you proud. Pride in sharing the same space and time as Maurice Richard. Forty years after his retirement, he had made us proud again.

Good for you, Maurice. Merci.

Hall of Famer Ken Dryden is president of the Toronto Maple Leafs. He played with the Montreal Canadiens from 1971 to 1979.