

Hingston: Peacemakers fitting final book for Douglas Roche

Edmonton writer has dedicated his life to peace and disarmament issues

BY MICHAEL HINGSTON, EDMONTON JOURNAL APRIL 10, 2014



Douglas Roche will launch his new book at Audreys Books on April 12.

Photograph by: Chris Schwarz

EDMONTON - It's a tall order trying to stuff Douglas Roche's career into a single paragraph. But let's give it a shot.

Raised in Ottawa, Roche started out travelling the world as a writer for an American Catholic magazine before moving to Alberta and getting elected as a Progressive Conservative MP for Edmonton-Strathcona in 1972. Twelve years and four elections later, Roche left federal politics, only to be named Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament at the United Nations. In 1988, he served as chairman of the UN's Disarmament Committee. Roche was a visiting professor at the University of Alberta for another dozen years after that, and returned to Ottawa for a stint in the Canadian Senate from 1998 to 2004. Along the way he has received nine honorary doctorates, was named an Officer of the Order of Canada, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and received the Papal Medal from Pope John Paul II. Oh, and he's also found the time to write 20 books.

This year, Roche turns 85. And after dedicating decades of his life to the twin causes of peacemaking

and disarmament, he's finally thinking about retiring. At the very least, he believes his latest book, *Peacemakers* (Lorimer), will be his last — which, if true, is a rather fitting note to go out on, given that the new book is in many ways a culmination of his life's work.

"I wanted this to be a kind of statement about how I feel about the world today, which is that humanity is on an elevating curve upward," says Roche. We're sitting in the living room of his downtown apartment. Behind him is a tightly packed series of bookshelves; it takes me a minute to realize that his own books take up an entire row. "Some of the headlines notwithstanding, the world is moving ahead. I want to put that out. I want to share — to the extent that I can, you know, modestly — my experiences and my position on issues of peace. I feel a certain obligation to help people."

To many, *Peacemakers* may look like a counterintuitive book. If you polled the average person about the state of the world today, chances are the response would be built around catastrophes, from climate change to financial collapses to human rights violations. Relatively few would jump to the fact that the global extreme poverty rate has been cut in half since 1990. Developing countries are developing faster. Infant mortality rates are dropping. So are disease rates. Last month, the World Health Organization declared that 10 Asian countries, including India, are now officially free of polio. (Measles has returned to Alberta, but that's a different story.)

The real difference, however, is when it comes to war. The bulk of Roche's new book is a multi-pronged demonstration of the ways in which the world is moving — slowly, sometimes almost invisibly, but steadily — away from violence and toward diplomacy.

"The world is full of people who are advancing the mechanisms of peace," Roche says, citing UN efforts around democracy, peacekeeping and anti-genocide work as recent examples. "That work is building up. And it's laying a much stronger base for future treaties — a nuclear weapons convention, perhaps — and for a general resistance against war."

"You don't get people singing about going off to war today. War is regarded as a futile means of resolving conflict. That's a very significant gain that people ought to take on board their thinking."

Roche has numbers to back up these claims, but what he really has are people. *Peacemakers* bears the fruit of more than 60 interviews with leading religious, political and academic figures, all of whom are convinced that peace is the only way forward. Notable among them are Sen. Roméo Dallaire; Tad Akiba, president of the global anti-nuclear weapons group Mayors for Peace; and Jody Williams, the American Nobel laureate whose movement to ban and remove anti-personnel landmines is one of Roche's shining examples of civil society pressuring the international community to take action.

That's not to say that the work is complete, of course. *Peacemakers* is not a victory lap, but a signal boost. Despite our more pessimistic tendencies, Roche says it's vital that we appreciate the progress that's being made.

One of the experts interviewed for the book is Stephen Pinker, a psychology professor at Harvard and author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. In 2012, Roche

ventured backstage at the Winspear Centre, minutes before Pinker was set to deliver a lecture to a packed audience. One of the things Roche asks him is why so many people have a hard time believing the world is, in fact, moving toward peace.

Pinker gives several reasons. A big one, he says, is that the media only “reports what happens, not what doesn’t happen.” As *Peacemakers* demonstrates, there are countless workers, from the UN and elsewhere, whose work, integral and life-saving though it may be, will remain invisible to the general public.

But, Pinker adds, “only when you look at the dogs that don’t bark do you realize how much better off we are now than we used to be.”

Douglas Roche will launch *Peacemakers* at Audreys Books (10702 Jasper Ave.) on Saturday, April 12 at 2:30 p.m.

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