Epilogue

Mac died at 92 in his sleep early in the morning on December 30, 1997. He had spent the previous evening with friends going over the materials sent out by Chuck Matthei about the death of his close friend Ernest Bromley, who had passed away on December 17th. Matthei had been there with Bromley in his final hours and had sent out a brief biography of him and a message from him to all those on Bromley's mailing list. After Mac had had these things read to him, he raised his fist in celebration and said, "What a man!"

Many thought Mac slipped away that night at peace in order to join his longtime friend. Local cartoonist Jim Borgman even published a cartoon in the Cincinnati Enquirer to that effect: two angels step away from the heavenly registration desk to view two suitcases emblazoned with "McCrackin" and "Bromley" sitting next to a ladder that had been used to scale the heavenly fence. One angel says to the other, "That's a first! . . . Just as I was ushering them in, they up and scaled the fence." This, of course, was a reminder of the action McCrackin and Bromley had taken several years earlier when, as part of a protest, they had scaled the White House fence.

Mac and his friend Ernest Bromley at ages 85 and 78 respectively had been arrested in early 1991 after scaling the fence surrounding the While House in Washington, D.C. They and three others had been arrested for pouring red dye and blood into a White House fountain as part of a protest against the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf. They were charged with illegal entry and aiding and abetting destruction of public property as part of the Coalition to Stop Intervention in the Middle East. The two were held for several days in a federal hospital, both fasting. Their friend Berta Lambert was also part of this protest and fasting. As soon as they were released and sent home, all continued their protest, in spite of a court order to desist, at the Federal Building in Cincinnati. McCrackin's friend, Gordon Maham, 72, was also part of those protests and was arrested for demonstrating without a permit.

The protests against military intervention in the Middle East were just one strand of a whole series of actions McCrackin participated in as a senior citizen. In February of 1990 Mac had joined with Sister Evelyn Ancilla, Director of the Transfiguration Prison Ministry of Cincinnati, and five prisoners in protesting the lack of medical treatment for inmates at the state facility at Lucasville and in opposing the death penalty. He was arrested later that same month when he dared to attend an overnight "sleep-in" on the streets of Cincinnati as part of a national protest against homelessness. As usual, Mac went into a fast after being arrested.

Later in 1990 he was arrested on charges stemming from his earlier protests at Fernald Nuclear Feeder Processing plant, which has since been closed and turned into a Superfund Clean-up site because of the contamination to land and aquifer that Mac had helped call attention to. However, the rightness of his cause did not excuse him in the eyes of the law from having broken the law, trespassing in an act of civil disobedience. An irony of the 1990 arrest was that Judge Sylvia Herndon gave Mac a "moral sentence" because he had gone limp when arrested. She assigned him to do forty hours of unsupervised community service, as though Mac had not spent his entire life doing community service. However, Judge Herndon specified that Mac’s presence at demonstrations could not be counted.
The demonstrations at Fernald brought to mind the earlier efforts organized by Polly Brokaw and which McCrackin had participated in, to prevent start-up of a nuclear reactor on the Ohio River, the Zimmer plant. Zimmer had proven to be unsafely constructed and was eventually converted to a coal-burning facility (which, of course, also does environmental damage).

Other causes were not so easily "won," especially McCrackin's various protests on behalf of the poor and homeless. After appealing to the legislators and the governor in vain to rescind proposed cuts in public assistance, McCrackin entered a period of fasting, which he broke only so as to gain strength to participate in a People's March in Columbus organized by his friend Berta Lambert. Ultimately the Ohio legislature voted in a measure that would cut off some recipients of public assistance as of March 1, 1992; over five thousand people in Hamilton County would be affected. McCrackin and others decided on a way to dramatize the crisis. They occupied the outer office of Governor George Voinovich in Columbus, Ohio after the governor refused to talk face-to-face with them about these cuts. They had been arrested after posting an eviction notice and removing office furniture as an illustration of the effects on others of cuts in public assistance. By ignoring the date set for his court trial on trespassing charges, McCrackin opened himself up to another arrest the next year.

Then in 1993 he and four others--Bonnie Neumeier, Berta Lambert, Wilbur Worthen, and Buddy Gray--were held overnight for refusing to leave an abandoned building at 1947 Race Street, which was about to be torn down. They planned another action to protest the demolition of the Milner Hotel, a facility that furnished low-cost housing to the city's poor. This time the demonstrators were arrested before their take-over even began. Not trusting the city's offer to replace the lost housing stock, McCrackin and Lambert went into another fast. Roxanne Qualls, a city council member who later became Cincinnati's mayor, delivered a petition to McCrackin at the Justice Center entreating him not to continue his fast and promising that city officials would not neglect the indigent. Still Lambert and McCrackin persisted in their fast for thirteen precarious days.

In spite of his ongoing conflicts with civil authorities, McCrackin was recognized as a hero by those who understood oppression. He was awarded Cincinnati's Dream Keeper Award in 1993, the first nonblack person ever to do so. The award is given annually by Applause magazine to those who have contributed to the city's life and culture [by acknowledging and affirming its black heritage].

In 1995 Bill Joiner, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, nominated McCrackin to receive an honorary degree. His nomination was buttressed by twenty-eight letters of recommendation and was unanimously endorsed by the faculty committee that passed judgment on nominees for such an honor. However, McCrackin's reputation as a challenger of the status quo followed him into the board room, where the UC trustees, in a secret session, vetoed the nomination. The university, it seems, was not yet ready to recognize McCrackin's particular brand of community leadership.

It seemed that McCrackin's support came most often from those who had worked with him and shared his vision of the possibilities for human cooperation. On December 1, 1995, McCrackin celebrated his 90th birthday. Mary McCoy, longtime community organizer, spearheaded an effort to help him celebrate and to honor him. She gathered together a group of his friends to plan a gigantic birthday party to be held on December 2 at
the Union Baptist Church as a fundraiser for Justice Watch, a prisoner advocacy program that McCrackin had helped found. Over four hundred well-wishers attended this event.

A smaller number attended a ceremony held later that month to honor McCrackin as a living example of the values espoused by the Jain Society, a 2500-year-old indigenous religion of India believing in individual freedom, nonviolence, and compassion. His friend Elizabeth Farians had initiated this honor.

In April of 1996 McCrackin received the Courage Award from the Council of Christian Communities.

Throughout these years McCrackin struggled with various manifestations of ill health. It is possible that the prolonged fasts undertaken in old age had a permanently deleterious effect on McCrackin's health, for the next winter he again experienced a profound depression and other debilitating physical symptoms. In fact, in his last years, he was never free of pain from his back through his thigh and knee, often keeping him awake at night. He also suffered from macular degeneration of the eyes and from prostate cancer. His heart worked with the aid of a pacemaker.

Soon after one of his hospitalizations, he made the effort to be present in Washington Park on the sad occasion of the memorial service for his friend and fellow activist Buddy Gray, who had been shot to death on November 15, 1996, by a mentally ill man he had tried to help. It was a deep concern of Mac's at the end of his life that Cincinnati's efforts in the name of urban renewal would work to threaten the work of Re-STOCK (the Race Street Tenant Organization Cooperative) and the existence of the Drop-In Center, located near Music Hall. These were the projects that Gray and others had given their lives to in the name of Cincinnati's poor. The Drop-In Center is Buddy Gray's finest legacy and a model for homeless shelters nationwide. Mac mourned the death of the younger man, his friend, who had been killed in such a senseless way.

Confined though he was at the Communicare Nursing Home, Mac still took a healthy interest in the kinds of local, state, and national issues that had always been the focus of his attention: the plight of the poor, the lack of affordable housing, the welfare of prisoners, the threat of war. For example, he strategized with Ed Richey, creator of the Cincinnati Homeless Hotline, about ways to bring the plight of the homeless to the attention of politicians and the general public. He received visitors constantly and got out when he could in his wheelchair to concerts, rallies, and demonstrations.

Always appreciative of the thoughtfulness of others, Mac needed to accept help from a variety of friends and healthcare workers as his sight failed and his body weakened. Bill Mundon and Jean Barlage helped him with his correspondence, but they couldn't keep him from occasionally losing the little black books in which he kept his addresses. When this happened, he used the services of the telephone company to look up numbers and to place a steady stream of calls to other activists and to his friends. People whom he had helped in his more vigorous years and whom he now needed help to recognize, stopped by to show him their grandchildren or to bring him gifts of cookies. All knew that this old man, this man of principle and unquestionable consistency, would not be among the living much longer. Indeed it seemed that only his quiet determination and loving spirit were keeping him alive. All who visited him in those last months were grateful to be able to say goodbye. All knew that there would never be another such a man walking among them for a long, long time.

Just a few weeks before Mac's death, he was awarded the prestigious St. Francis Xavier medal by Xavier University as one who exemplified St. Francis in "action, courage,
daring, and imagination." The awards luncheon on December 6, 1997, at Xavier University was attended by many of Mac's friends, and that day they heard the last of his great orations, delivered in a soft but still powerful voice, encouraging them to protest unjust conditions in the name of compassion for all.

By the time of Mac's death, Polly Brokaw, Miriam Nicholas, Vivian Kinebrew, Marion Bromley, and Ethel Edwards--as well as Ernest Bromley and Buddy Gray--had preceded him in death. The warriors were falling one by one.

Even after death McCrackin was magnanimous. He donated his body to the Medical Center of the university that had turned him down for an honorary degree.

A memorial service for Mac was held on January 17, 1998, in Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church. A dozen speakers and Cincinnati's Muse Choir attested to the long life and lasting power of McCrackin's influence. The sanctuary was filled with hundreds who had been touched by McCrackin's life: young and old, black and white, established and disenfranchised. Later that month a smaller gathering at St. Joseph Church in the West End also commemorated McCrackin's life. Then the next June a living memorial was initiated by Ed Ritchey: the first annual Mac Day, a neighborhood festival in Washington Park, organized around causes Mac valued, with displays, entertainment, and food. The Center for Peace Education had begun in 1992 to pay a living tribute to Mac by naming its annual peace and justice awards after him. Both of these memorials, continued under different auspices, continue to this day. But the most important memorials are those carried in the individual hearts of those who knew and loved the man Maurice McCrackin. A representative sampling of these tributes are included in the closing section of this book.