

Fictionalized Realities, Imagined Histories: Contemporary Canadian Literature about the Spanish Civil War

DANIEL MARCOTTE

Canada's involvement in the Spanish Civil War has been taken up in contemporary literature by a handful of authors as an exploration of historicity, social experiences, and Canadian identity. Often fusing elements of social realism and historical fiction, these narratives delve into the social and political climate of the late 1930s in both Canada and Spain, unveiling the motivations of those who fought and the complex situation that prompted them to volunteer. In most cases, these authors have clearly done their research; references to historical events, living conditions, and political climates pertaining to the Spanish Civil War are typically well-informed and impeccably illustrated through narrative. In traversing the difficult terrain of historical fiction (particularly of a period of which academic and critical attention remains scarce and unpopular at best), however, it is important to ask several questions of the author: in what ways are people, places, and events represented? To what extent does the author idealize, romanticize, or nationalize the context about which they are writing? And, perhaps most importantly, to what degree does the work acknowledge and navigate the exemption of these Canadian volunteers from historiographic discourse? This case study aims to examine three contemporary novels and highlight the ways in which they depict both real and imagined historical landscapes of the Spanish Civil War.

June Hutton's debut novel, entitled *Underground*, was published in 2009 and follows the ever-transient life of Albert Fraser from his injury at the Somme Offensive to his participation in the Spanish Civil War as a Canadian volunteer. Through her

fictional protagonist, Hutton captures a familiar narrative that many would recognize: Albert is a World War I veteran who struggles to find job security upon returning to Canada; he marches in the On-to-Ottawa Trek of 1935; eventually, he begins to sympathize and identify with leftist politics; and finally decides to join the International Brigades to fight fascism abroad as an outlet for his political and economic frustrations with the situation in Canada. This closely aligns with Michael Petrou's assessment of Canadians in the Spanish Civil War in his historiographical account, *Renegades*, when he notes that many who volunteered often reported dissatisfaction with the Canadian economy during the Depression, and sought to change their circumstances by joining a cause that would provide them with purpose and allegiance. Petrou writes:

The Great Depression did more than simply radicalize young Canadian men. Without jobs, and by and large without wives or children, packing up to fight in a foreign war seemed like a much better idea than it would have if prospective volunteers faced leaving loved ones and prosperous lives. The Depression severed their ties to Canada even before they left the country. (31)

Similarly, Hutton's protagonist becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the social and cultural climate of his own country, and instead decides to travel to Spain in order to directly combat the repressive global regime on different shores.

Other than simple biographical details, Hutton also engages with political and cultural ideals that circulated during this time, including the works of Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, and elements of Marxist theory. In some ways, Albert embodies the quintessential

figure associated with the Spanish Civil War, as he is both artist and working class hero; during his painting job, he is commonly referred to as “Michelangelo”, and defines himself in terms of his labour in a way that invokes Marxist theory: “Without his work what is he? Who is he? Just a man who climbs six flights of stairs to avoid the cramped space of an elevator” (42). Through her expert use of free indirect discourse, Hutton also delivers Albert’s ekphrastic examination of Picasso’s “Guernica” and the chillingly powerful effect it has upon him, revealing his true affinity for and affiliation with the visual arts (152-3). Finally, Hutton illustrates that Albert’s artistic and literary consciousness is directly connected to his political partisanship; after learning that Ezra Pound sympathized with fascist ideology, Albert destroys his previously adored book of imagist poetry by tearing it to pieces and setting it ablaze (186-7). In these sections, Hutton demonstrates her understanding of the connection between modernist art and political ideology during the Spanish Civil War, embodied by Albert’s character and his experiences throughout the novel.

Despite Hutton’s adherence to these historical realities and cultural ideals, it is often difficult to believe that the novel’s protagonist is genuinely committed to the ideals and motivations that are presented. While he shares a similar background to many Canadians who participated in the Spanish Civil War, Albert’s decision to volunteer appears suddenly and without careful consideration: “This is what Al wants one day. Exactly this” (125). Despite the frequent and horrific flashbacks Albert has when remembering World War I, he seems instantly ready to return to war at the very mention of Spain, and justifies it to himself by changing his name: “Alex Johnson had no darkness inside him.

Alex Johnson had never been to war” (142). Not only does this decision betray every aspect of Albert’s character that Hutton develops up to this point, but it also depicts a Canadian’s desire to support the Spanish Republic as arbitrary and apolitical, and ignores the strong anti-fascist temperament that a majority of Canadian volunteers exhibited (Howard and Reynolds 26-7). In this way, Albert’s desire to fight fascism seems manufactured to serve the end goal of Hutton’s novel, rather than reflect the politically complex and economically desperate conditions in which Canadians decided to volunteer. This is an important distinction to make; if one conceptualizes the character’s motivations as contained within the novel and thus the historical context in which it operates, one runs the risk of reducing the Canadian volunteers to an isolated instance and solely a “product of the times.” Rather, we must ensure that we depict these volunteers as individuals who continued to defend their actions well beyond the trenches; as veteran Louis Tellier recounted in the documentary *Los Canadienses*, “That has been part of my life. I base all my thinking today and my dealing with people today on my experiences there [in Spain]” (Kish).

Unlike Hutton’s stark realism, Mark Frutkin’s 2001 novel *Slow Lightning* is much less interested in presenting a purely historical or familiar account of the Spanish Civil War, instead utilizing elements of fantasy, quest narrative, and magic realism. The novel follows the journey of Sandro Cánovas, a pacifist archaeologist who evades the growing conflict by secretly riding along the *Camino de Santiago* in fascist-controlled Spain to the coastal town of Arcasella on his bicycle, named *Libertad*. Abounding with references to *Don Quixote* and Dante, Frutkin’s

tale is less of a historical account than a light, exciting narrative that pays homage to a variety of literary traditions.

Like Hutton's protagonist, Sandro discovers his own artistic inclinations in Spain, as he is amazed and inspired by the Palaeolithic cave paintings he encounters at Arcasella. Sandro expertly reproduces these prehistoric markings, channelling his knowledge of archaeology into a full-scale replica:

He knew the only way he could let go was to immerse himself in the work, to lose himself in that world ... He went to it, his arm and the stick-brush with its dollop of blood-red pigment bulbed at the tip extended toward the wall until the cleft in the stone bled into life. (Frutkin 141)

In what ends up being an elaborate deception, Sandro tricks future archeologists into believing these paintings are originals, leaving only a trace of his presence for his friends to find and later destroy. Whereas Hutton's engagement with artistic expression is political and socio-economic, Frutkin's is therefore historiographical; Sandro succeeds in fabricating a history that never existed, a narrative through which Frutkin comments on the unstable nature of historical narratives and the misleading or conflicting stories people can deduce from limited access to substantial evidence.

Despite its interesting engagement with the constructed nature of history, Frutkin's novel does its fair share of avoiding the representation of its chosen context, instead using the Spanish Civil War as a convenient backdrop for its creative objectives. If any event could provide a literary exploration of historical construction, it's this one; as Cary Nelson points out, literary history and recovery are ultimately defined and influenced by cultural trends and dominant power structures, an idea that is

inextricably connected to the Spanish Civil War (Nelson 11). However, Frutkin chooses to focus his poetic attention on the Palaeolithic paintings as the novel's central symbol, opting instead to create an apolitical protagonist that potentially neglects the complex poly-partisan climate of the Spanish Civil War. Other characters within the story identify with varying positions; for example, Sandro's lover Teresa is a Marxist revolutionary, and Adam, a Canadian soldier who aids the wounded protagonist (a character who, one might add, bears striking similarities to the "tall soldier" that saved Spanish refugee Manuel Alvarez) and later conceals his archeological evidence, notably says: "I decided to come here – the Left needs our help" (84). However, when asked about his political association, Sandro proudly self-identifies as a "bicyclist" and refuses to associate himself with fascists, Marxists, socialists, anarchists, or any other partisan group (39). What's more, Frutkin even appears to ridicule or satirize the conflicting diversity of leftist political opinions during this time, yet these critiques only occur early in the book and are never balanced or reconciled with a similar treatment of fascist ideology. For this reason, just as Sandro evades the politics of the Spanish Civil War throughout his clandestine bicycle journey, so too does Frutkin himself avoid properly addressing this political and cultural element with any dedicated detail.

Terrence Rundle West's 2011 novel *Not in my Father's Footsteps* can be seen to excel in areas where Hutton's and Frutkin's narratives fall short, serving as a text that expertly negotiates the representation of history while exploring and complicating the individual Canadian experience. West tells the story of two Montrealers with drastically different identities and motivations: Martin "Marty" Kellenberger, a working-class

Jewish-Canadian who abandons Vancouver work camps and hopeless protests to volunteer in the Spanish Civil War; and Dollard Desjardins, a middle-class French-Canadian nationalist who lands a job writing propaganda journalism in support of Franco's Spain. Using elements of social realism and an acute understanding of history, West investigates the myriad facets of the Spanish Civil War including racial identity, class-consciousness, and political ideology.

From the start, West demonstrates his dedication to historical representation by equipping the novel with a paratextual apparatus and dozens of academic references, including maps, a timeline, a bibliography, and a glossary of important events, organizations, and figures of the Spanish Civil War. In addition, each chapter is headed with an exact date that ensures every moment of the novel is accurately situated in reality. However, West also recognizes that dates and facts are hardly the only things to be respected; when Marty is forced to conceal his Jewish heritage and fake his way through Christmas and Catholic mass, the reader is presented with the reality that Canada's religious and racial tolerance was on trial in the 1930s. In general, West creates characters that are often defined by their upbringing and socio-economic circumstances, but suggests that the attitudes or political ideologies of said individuals are subject to change through their experiences. For example, Dollard is visibly changed by his experiences with fascist brutality in Spain, despite his nationalist leanings; his conversations with Marty introduce him to new perspectives he had not previously considered, and the actions of Italian soldiers solidify his ideological transition. West therefore constructs an imagined textual realm that responds to historical reality in convincing ways,

signifying an inherent connection and coexistence between the realms of history and literature.

As a literary text, West's novel is valuable to the study of Canadians in the Spanish Civil War because it accentuates the diversity of experiences. Unlike the novels of June Hutton and Mark Frutkin, *Not in my Father's Footsteps* reinforces the idea that every Canadian who ended up in Spain was the product of a unique story and a complex set of values and motivations. This is of course not to say that Hutton and Frutkin fail to adequately develop their characters or the historical context in which they are set; it is to say, however, that the literary treatment of the Canadian contribution to the Spanish Civil War is inherently fraught due to its continued under-representation in the public consciousness and cultural memory.

Because these authors hold in their hands the power to potentially affect the ways in which readers perceive and conceptualize this lesser-known historical moment, it is important that both readers and writers remain diligent in their critical and analytical capacity. This, I contend, is why West's novel is so valuable to the study of Canadians in the Spanish Civil War: not only does he frame his text with a historical apparatus, but his characters also reflect a diversity of motivations and perspectives that evolve before, during, and after the events in Spain. Above all, West seems to insist that the Canadians' experiences in Spain were not a spontaneous and uninformed decision, nor an inevitable teleology based on cultural circumstances; rather, he demonstrates that this historical context is much more complex and difficult to represent. In general, West's novel recognizes that it is not capable of supplying easy answers or convenient truths; instead, it prefers to invite discussion and investigation of Canada and the Spanish

Civil War through fictional narrative, a model that feels appropriate for the emergent study of this historical period.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Alvarez, Manuel. *The Tall Soldier: My 40-year Search for the Man who Saved my Life*. Toronto: Virgo Press, 1980. Print.
- Frutkin, Mark. *Slow Lightning*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2001. Print.
- Howard, Victor and Mac Reynolds. *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: The Canadian Contingent in the Spanish Civil War*. Ottawa: Carlton University Press, 1986. Print.
- Hutton, June. *Underground*. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2009. Print.
- Kish, Albert, dir. Interview with Louis Tellier. *Los Canadienses*, National Film Board of Canada, 1975. Film.
- Markels, Julian. *The Marxian Imagination: Representing Class in Literature*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003. Print.
- Nelson, Cary. *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. Print.
- Petrou, Michael. *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008. Print.
- West, Terrence Rundle. *Not in my Father's Footsteps*. Renfrew, ON: General Store Publishing House, 2011. Print.