Letters from Spain: Joe Dallet, the Mac-Paps, and Canadian Identity in the Spanish Civil War

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Letters from Spain (1938) is a brief collection of letters from Joe Dallet to his wife, Kitty (Peunig) Dallet. It was published as a pamphlet shortly after Joe Dallet died fighting in Spain. Dallet was an American citizen, but as first commissar of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, he is a significant figure in the narrative of Canada's involvement in Spain. *Letters from Spain* invites a deeper character study of one of the many international volunteers: in this case, a man whose behavior was a source of great controversy. The publication also enables a discussion concerning nationality and its instability for many of the international volunteers, particularly the Canadians, and the significance of a Canadian-named battalion.

Letters from Spain was one of many epistolary collections published during the war, alongside *From Spanish Trenches: Recent Letters from Spain* and *From a Hospital in Spain: American Nurses Write*. All these collections served similar purposes: to provide North American citizens with a subjective view of the Spanish Civil War, and to garner public and financial support for the Spanish cause. *From a Hospital in Spain* juxtaposes long, personal letters from hardworking nurses with the brief, urgent cables from Edward Barsky, chief surgeon of the American Base Hospital, in which he demands supplies, and ends with a cut-out donation form. *From Spanish Trenches* highlights the international nature of the conflict and the diversity of the participants, and includes letters from journalists, medical personnel, soldiers, and prisoners from seven countries. Both of these publications emphasize the immediacy of the Spanish Civil War to North American readers through direct personal narrative.

Dallet's letters were republished in *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*. This 1996 collection served once again to represent the subjective experiences of American volunteers, which had been marginalized by Cold War anti-communism (Nelson and Hendricks 14). Nelson's introduction provides a background of the Spanish Civil War and brief biographies of a few letter writers, "some representative and some exceptional" (9), while each chapter includes its own introduction. Unlike the earlier letter collections, which allowed personal testimony to stand on its own, Nelson and Hendricks contextualize these personal narratives for a less informed contemporary audience.

Letters from Spain expands on the brief personal narratives of the other wartime collections by following Dallet through his entire time in Spain. Like the other collections, this publication functions as propaganda and fundraising initiative, but it is also commemorative; Dallet died in his first attack in October of 1937. Dallet's letters reflect positively on the International Brigades and the Communist Party, and his heroic death made him an easy martyr for the Spanish Cause and the Communist Party. This martyrdom is set up in the "Tributes to Joe Dallet" that precede his letters: "[i]t is revolutionary fighters like Dallet who will write the epitaph of capitalism" writes William Foster, Chairman of the Communist Party of the U.S.A., and many other tributes end with a call to action in honour of Dallet (4).

Initially, Dallet seems the obvious choice for this kind of tribute. He had an illustrious career as a labour organizer in Ohio and Illinois; he attained fame before arriving in Spain as the leader of twenty-five North American volunteers imprisoned in France; he was a high ranking member of the Communist Party and the

International Brigades; and he died an honourable death while leading his troops into battle. But Dallet's short time in Spain was troubled. He was deeply disliked by the soldiers in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and as such, he has garnered a lot of attention in scholarship. In particular, Cecil Eby presents a damning portrait of Dallet that casts doubt on the heroic tone of *Letters from Spain*. For example, Eby describes Dallet's leadership in a scathing manner: "He wore the proprietary air of an overseer inspecting a gang of migratory wretches doing piecework in his grove" (233).

Though Eby's portrait seems unduly harsh, this and other accounts provide useful context for *Letters from Spain*. They reveal countless anecdotes and details omitted from Dallet's letters, including information about his wife, Kitty.[1] Many accounts of Dallet argue that he worked hard to conceal his wealthy, educated background, and even performed an exaggerated proletariat identity, complete with deliberately ungrammatical speech.[2] This persona and his strict sense of discipline irritated many of the Mac-Paps (members of the Mackenzie Papineau Battalion) enough so that a meeting was called to discuss the countless complaints registered against Dallet. The meeting was

[1] Dallet and Kitty had been separated for two years before he went to fight in Spain. She met Dallet in Paris on his way to Spain, where they spent a week rekindling their romance. She was traveling to Spain to join him when she received news of his death. Kitty returned to the United States to complete her education and pursue a career in academics. She remarried twice, and eventually became the wife of famed atomic scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer (Nelson 240).

[2] Dallet's close friend Steve Nelson recalls Dallet playing beautiful Chopin on a piano near the courthouse in France. This drew the attention of many reporters, who wished to write about the cultured American volunteer. Dallet was deeply embarrassed by this incident, and begged Nelson to keep it from the other imprisoned volunteers, lest they think he was one "of these bloody bourgeois intellectuals" (Nelson 197).

held the night before the battalion's first advance to the front and it ran long into the early morning (Hoar 124). The meeting clearly shook Dallet's confidence, and many presume that he was attempting to prove himself when he led his troops into battle. He was shot down within the first minutes. His bravery that day resonated with his troops, some of who had placed bets he would prove himself a coward on the battlefield (Petrou 75).

There is little use now in passing judgment on Dallet. His true motives and merits will never be clear, as his letters reveal so little. What do they shed light on is the naming of the Mackenzie-Papineau battalion. The Canadian volunteers campaigned to name the battalion after Canadian revolutionary heroes rather than American historical figures.[3] Though the battalion was not entirely Canadian, the naming was a significant step for Canadian volunteers, who, Dallet writes, "have done wonderful work for Spain…have fought splendidly…but always their national origin and national traditions have been swamped in the publicity splurges for the Lincoln Battalion" (52). Dallet continues, "the Canadian movement has something in Spain to rally around" (53). Just as he predicted, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion profoundly altered Canadian support for the Spanish cause.

This shift is vividly tracked in the pages of *The Daily Clarion*, the Communist Party of Canada's daily newspaper. The paper's coverage of the Spanish Civil War was already incredibly thorough, but the new Battalion garnered even more attention. The

[3] Louis-Joseph Papineau and William Lyon Mackenzie were major figures in the Rebellions of 1837-38. Leftist groups celebrated both revolutionaries during the Great Depression, and the anniversary of the rebellions in 1937 led to media coverage that honoured these men.

Clarion put out special issues devoted to the Mac-Paps, including letters and photographs from the volunteers, and the paper's special correspondents often visited the Mac-Paps at the front.[4] Through the miracle of short wave radio, a Dominion Day broadcast had members of the Mac-Paps speaking directly to their Canadian comrades, including a huge rally at Toronto's Queen's Park.[5] The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was a brilliant marketing tool that increased Canadian engagement in the Spanish conflict and focused Canadian fundraising efforts, particularly when the Association of Friends and Veterans of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was founded. This association became a major fundraising body in Canada: it coordinated aid, organized lecture tours, financially supported the repatriation and rehabilitation of Canadian volunteers, and continues to preserve the legacy of the volunteers for decades after the conflict.

Today, the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion remains a significant touchstone for commemoration and scholarship. The term Mac-Paps functions as a catch-all for Canadian volunteers, though many fought outside of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. Because of this dispersion, it is difficult to accurately track the numbers and fates of Canadian volunteers. Half a dozen men listed by Michael Petrou as Canadian volunteers have letters included in *Madrid 1937* that link them to American family and friends and hint at American citizenship. Seventy-eight percent of Canadian volunteers were born abroad, and their immigrant status made

[4] Jean Watts and Ted Allan were the *Daily Clarion*'s correspondents in Spain, and both produced daily short-wave broadcasts to North America.

[5] The Dominion Day Broadcast featured Mac-Pap political commander Bob Kerr, volunteers E. Bergeron and Wally Dent, and Canadian surgeon Dr. Magid.

citizenship unstable (Petrou 22).[6] At least one volunteer was deported from Canada before his service in Spain.[7] Many chose to fight with their original countrymen and joined other battalions, such as the Hungarian Rakosi Battalion and the Balkan Dimitrov Battalion (Petrou 59). Canadian identity was uncertain, and volunteers may have identified more strongly with political groups than nations. Samuel David Malet writes: "some veterans reported that the obligations to the transnational identity of anti-fascist were more salient than the national identity of American," which is a sentiment perhaps shared by many Canadians who defied Canadian laws and left their homes to fight for a "foreign" cause (148).

If the Canadians who named the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion felt upstaged by the Lincoln Battalion, they would perhaps be disappointed by the contemporary scholarship on the International Brigades. Many collections of letters, poetry and writing casually overlook Canadian involvement. This is hardly surprising, given that Canadians have produced less scholarship on their own involvement than their American counterparts. As Canadian scholars reinvigorate public interest in this cultural and social history, figures like Joe Dallet will continue to act as

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[6] Petrou performs a careful analysis of the volunteers' backgrounds, including ethnicity, education, employment history and political affiliations. This kind of analysis enables a comparison with British and American volunteers, who were often more educated than their Canadian counterparts.

[7] Peter Zepkar, a Croatian-Canadian, was deported two years before he died in Spain. See "Zepkar Dies in Action Fighting for Loyalists…Deported in 1935." *The Daily Clarion* 18 March 1937. 1. Microform. *The Daily Clarion* 2 (1937). Other *Clarion* articles discuss the deportation of US volunteers after their service in Spain. For example, Paul List was deported to Germany to meet a dangerous fate. See "Vet of Spanish War Faces Nazi Axeman." *The Daily Clarion* 24 October 1938: 3. Microform. *The Daily Clarion* 4 (1938).

essential links between the well documented American and international involvement in the Spanish Civil War and Canadian participation.

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