

Jean Watts and the Spanish Civil War: Writing, Politics, and Contexts

A Case Study Collection

Case Study One: Jean Watts and the Canadian Press in the Spanish Civil War

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Jean Watts's most significant contribution to writing on the Spanish Civil War was to the *Daily Clarion* (1936-39), the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) newspaper, for which she and fellow writer, Ted Allan, would work as foreign correspondents during the war. This case study describes the context of Watts's and Allan's contributions to the newspaper. First, I describe the field of Canadian journalism during the Spanish Civil War and contrast mainstream papers with smaller, politically committed papers. This description situates the *Daily Clarion* within Canadian journalism and the print environment in which Watts's work would appear. Second, this study compares the role of individual foreign correspondents in mainstream political papers to that of correspondents in small politically radical papers from Canada like *New Commonwealth* and the *Daily Clarion*. Canadian foreign reportage in this period was in some ways paradoxical: larger, mainstream newspapers depended on newly formed news conglomerates for foreign news while smaller newspapers were more likely to source their foreign news material from correspondents hired for specific reporting roles.

Watts and Allan emerge as journalists in this context. Their precedents and cognates in the journalistic field also become visible through this analysis: fellow Canadian Henning Sorensen's work with *New Commonwealth* sets an immediate Canadian precedent; famous American journalists like Martha Gellhorn and Herbert Matthews are cognates in the American news industry.

Canadian journalists who were assigned to cover the Spanish Civil War rarely immersed themselves in the action in the way that Watts and Allan were able to do. By situating Watts's work in both the context of international journalism, alongside Allan's work, and the context of the practices of other Canadian journalists, Watts's reporting aligns with an international journalistic practice even as it was unique in a Canadian context. The context of Canadian journalists and Canadian journalism during the war frames Watts's journalistic intervention.

The Canadian Leftist Press

The relationship between the Canadian press and the international press provides the backdrop for Watts's and Allan's participation in Spanish Civil War journalism. When Watts and Allan arrived in Spain in 1937, the Canadian press had recently and rapidly developed a dependence on foreign news agencies, and the domestic Canadian journalistic sphere was dominated by middle-class, centrist to left-leaning publications. In contrast, the *Daily Clarion* published largely domestically produced content and espoused an explicit Communist

politics, not least in its direct connection to the CPC. Even amongst other leftist Canadian publications, the paper demonstrated a remarkably close proximity to and overt concern with the Spanish Civil War.

What studies exist of Canadian journalism concentrate on mainstream newspapers. As a result, they paint Canadian news media as largely dependent on foreign sources. Mary Biggar Peck's study, *In Red Moon Over Spain* (1988), a landmark account of the responses of the Canadian press to the Spanish Civil War, concentrates on domestically produced Canadian context. Peck depicts the Canadian news media as a profession that mirrored international concerns with the war in a domestic space. In this depiction, Canadian news media drew much of its content from large international news sources like Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. Domestic production featured the political opinions of predominantly leftist and centrist Republican sympathizers in English-speaking Canada, or of conservative Fascist sympathizers concentrated in French-speaking, Catholic Canada.

Carlton McNaught's 1940 study finds that in 1937 English-language Canadian papers published between twenty-one percent and forty-eight percent foreign content, which was distributed between American news (thirty-two percent to sixty-eight percent), British news (fifteen percent to forty-six percent), and global news (McNaught 39). The Canadian press's relationship with the AP was the most robust, as McNaught notes that "Canada is a North American nation whose social and economic structure is closely related to that of the United States" (36), and that the cost of sourcing news from the United States was considerably cheaper

than relying on overseas sources that would have been sent by mail or by wire. While the AP had a reputation for accuracy and impartiality in Canada, Canadian papers and readers complained that AP foreign news was selected and written for American readers, and passed on to Canadian papers as an afterthought (Peck 11). This dissatisfaction drove Canadian papers to begin obtaining news from European and British sources in 1936. In McNaught's account, this dependence upon foreign news stems from Canada's cultural ties to Great Britain and economic ties to the United States: "Because of Canada's political and sentimental ties with Great Britain and the other members of the Commonwealth, news from these countries is less foreign to her than it would be to a country like the United States" (36). The trend in Canadian journalism of the 1920s and 1930s towards increasing dependence on newly established news agencies held true worldwide. News agencies would quickly come to dominate the newspaper industry in Britain, Europe, the United States, and Canada. However, while newspapers outside Canada would draw upon powerful news agencies, those news agencies operated from their own national perspectives. Canadian newspapers did not have a comparable domestic agency from which to draw.¹

In combination with this dependence on foreign news, mainstream Canadian newspapers in English-speaking 1930s Canada fell along a primarily middle class and left of centre political spectrum. McNaught describes the *Globe and Mail*, for example, created in the merger of the

¹ Despite the establishment of the Canadian Press (CP) in 1917, the agency seems to have held little power and does not figure into McNaught's 1940 study.

Globe (Independent Liberal) and the *Mail and Empire* (Independent Conservative) in 1936, as centrist in politics, and Peck describes the *Globe and Mail* to be conservative in comparison to other Toronto publications (10). The *Toronto Star* was pro-Republican during the Spanish Civil War, although it was sometimes praised for its supposed neutrality (Peck 43), as were the *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Vancouver Province*, and the *British Columbia Federationist*. Mainstream newspapers were generally pro-Republican or neutral.

Although mainstream news espoused centrist politics and the virtues of neutrality about the Spanish Civil War, more explicitly leftist publications took a stronger pro-Republican stance. These publications were far less homogenous than the monolithic mainstream newspapers: numerous leftist publications were trade union papers or literary magazines. The political leanings of *Canadian Forum* (1920-2000), for example, have been variously characterized. According to Peck, the publication was “literary and non-partisan, intended for the professional and businessman,” praised for its neutrality during the Spanish Civil War (11); James Doyle, by contrast, identifies *Canadian Forum* as the ideological inspiration for explicitly pro-Communist publications like the magazine *Masses* (1932-34), the mouthpiece of the Progressive Arts Club (91), a socialist artistic collective based in Toronto, whose editors were largely moderate socialist (99). Doyle further identifies *New Frontier* (1936-37), a magazine established by Watts and her husband, Lon Lawson, as a primary outlet for leftist creative work, particularly socialist realism that aligned itself with Leninist principles of art (106).

The field of Anglophone Canadian periodicals, then, was made up of mainstream, centrist to left-leaning newspapers, trade union papers, and, further to the left, literary magazines.

Distinct from *Canadian Forum*, *Masses*, and *New Frontier*, however, the *Daily Clarion* positioned itself as a newspaper, rather than a magazine, maintaining strong ties to the radical leftist literary community. In 1936, the *Daily Clarion* replaced the Toronto *Worker* as the mouthpiece of the CPC (Doyle 103), and would reach a circulation of approximately 7,600 across Canada by the time that Watts and Allan were employed by the paper. The *Clarion* continued the precedent set by such publications as the Toronto *Labour Advocate* (1890-91), the “first free-standing newspaper that was primarily socialist in content” (McKay 148), and “well-circulated newspapers” (McKay 129) like Quebec Eastern Township socialist newspaper *Cotton’s Weekly* (1907-13) (McKay 106), and British Columbia newspaper the *Western Clarion* (1903-25), all newspapers that combined news items with socialist strategy and theoretical treatises on the rights of the worker.

According to Ian McKay, in 1920s and particularly 1930s Canada, Leninist-Marxist political allegiances came close to becoming the dominant leftist political identity. In the *Clarion’s* role as the official publication of the CPC, the paper would have represented a considerable proportion of Canadian leftists. The *Clarion* positioned itself, in format and content (with comics pages and sports sections), in order to “compete with the bourgeois papers” (Doyle 103) that dominated Canadian journalism. As the newspaper emerged from a history of

politically explicit newspaper publications in Canada and aligned itself in its visual language and contents with the mainstream Canadian press, it also provided a platform for literary publication, a practice common to trade and labour union papers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Doyle 8), becoming the “main outlet for radical literary works” (Doyle 107), particularly after the closure of *New Frontier* in 1938. The *Daily Clarion* existed in tension amongst the radical political commitments of its literary contributors, its role as the mouthpiece for one of the dominant leftist political identities of the era, and its attempt to compete in the Canadian mainstream journalistic industry.

Despite the *Clarion*'s self-fashioning as mainstream competitor, the operations of the newspaper distinguish it from the mainstream in two important ways. The first of these is the paper's connections to the CPC, which may have ensured its longevity. Unlike financially independent newspapers, the *Clarion* enjoyed remarkable endurance during the Great Depression. While McNaught's study notes that other newspapers experienced profound financial challenges and closures during the 1930s, the implicit contrast that McNaught draws is one of the *Clarion*'s continued strength, despite its more specialized target market. The *Clarion*'s overt politicization and connection to an international political body like the Communist International seem to have kept the paper afloat. The paper would only close in late 1939, in the wake of increasing Canadian government suppression of Canadian Communist activity, and would be quickly reincarnated as the *Canadian Tribune*, a more politically neutral title, in January 1940.

A second important difference between mainstream papers and the *Clarion* is the *Clarion*'s practice of drawing much of its domestic content from submissions by CPC members, and, in at least one case, employing Party members as staff writers (Doyle).² Articles do frequently appear in the paper without a byline, which may at first suggest that these articles may be sourced from large news agencies, similarly to larger, mainstream Canadian papers. However, the content of these anonymous articles in the *Clarion* is by and large explicit in its alignment with the Communist politics of the newspaper, suggesting that the anonymous columns were written by *Daily Clarion* staff writers. Likewise, in an international context, Watts and Allan's roles as foreign correspondents in Spain provide a very different economic model to mainstream Canadian foreign news sources. Allan's bylines in the *Daily Clarion* indicate that he wrote for both the Federated Press and for the *Daily Clarion*, moving to reporting exclusively for the *Clarion* later in his tenure in Spain, while Watts wrote almost exclusively for the *Clarion*. Both writers would contribute a handful of articles to *New Frontier* in addition to their *Clarion* contributions. Among these news outlets, the *Clarion* seems to be the only Canadian newspaper to have sent correspondents with the express purpose of covering the Spanish Civil War.³ As the CPC had a vested interest in the war, and recruited Canadians for the International Brigades, a mandate to provide dedicated coverage on the war would fulfill a public relations role of an

² Party Member Joe Wallace seems to have been able to support himself writing for leftist publications like the *Daily Clarion* (Doyle 136), indicating that journalism for these outlets was paid work.

³ See Case Study Two.

organization heavily invested in the conflict. Indeed, Watts explicitly understood her post to fulfill the role of a “public relations person” (Watts 0:46). While mainstream papers would have had to choose the most cost-effective news source and would be beholden to the support of their subscribers, the financial support and backing of the CPC may have allowed the *Clarion* to engage in this alternate mode of production. Dedicated foreign correspondents may also have fulfilled an ideological goal. The clear line of participation of leftist and Communist political affiliates, in what was for many a leftist war, may have likewise made the paper’s decision to send dedicated Spanish Civil War correspondents to be an extension of the role the CPC already played in the conflict.

If the *Daily Clarion* was unusual in Canada for its commitment to sending correspondents to Spain specifically to cover the Spanish Civil War, such a commitment was not unique on an international scale. Peter Monteath notes that the war was “more widely reported than any previous war” and cites correspondents who were sent from such major papers as the *New York Times*, the *Daily Express*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Pravda*, *Paris-Soir*, *Völkischer Beobachter*, the *London Times*, and the *News Chronicle* (125). Further, literary writers seemed to go to Spain with the expectation that writing for newspapers was an option available to them: George Orwell had “some notion of writing newspaper articles” (qtd. in Monteath 125), and Hemingway acted as correspondent to the North American Newspaper Alliance. Career journalists built their reputations as correspondents to the Spanish Civil War, Martha Gellhorn

reporting for *Collier's* and Herbert Matthews for the *New York Times*.⁴ The paradoxical role of the *Daily Clarion* in the context of Canadian journalism attests to its alignment with international journalistic practice; both literary writers and journalists acted as dedicated foreign correspondents to Spain, mirroring the *Clarion's* decision to send Watts and Allan as correspondents to the conflict, and further mirroring its strong ties to literary writers in Canada.

The *Daily Clarion*, often dismissed in historical accounts as merely a propagandistic organ with limited appeal, was in fact aligned with a leftist politics that represented a strong proportion of Canadian leftists. It drew on a history of radical leftist publications providing a platform for radical literary production, but through its visual and textual content positioned itself as a competitor with mainstream newspapers that did not espouse explicit or radically leftist political partisanship. By further contrast, it seems to have enjoyed an economic security due to its alignment with the CPC that other newspapers were not able to depend on. This economic security may have supported its dispatch of foreign correspondents rather than the reliance on foreign news agencies that dominated other Canadian publications. The multiple contradictions of the *Clarion's* role in Canadian journalism frame Watts's and Allan's journalistic activities. These contradictions contextualize the operations of Canadian journalism on the Spanish Civil War. This context will be invaluable as I now turn to parse the nature of the Canadian journalistic presence in Spain.

⁴ See Case Study Four.

Canadians as Foreign Correspondents

The mainstream Canadian press's heavy dependence on foreign news agencies obscures the extent of Canadian press reporting by Canadians stationed in Spain. While mainstream Canadian papers would often feature Canadian foreign correspondents, the relationship of those correspondents to mainstream papers varied widely. In fact, correspondents whom mainstream papers would bill as Canadian reporters stationed in Spain would often not be Canadian,⁵ would work for foreign news agencies instead of Canadian papers, or would be stationed outside of Spain. There seem to exist only three examples of Canadians reporting directly for Canadian papers from Spain: Henning Sorensen, Watts, and Allan. An analysis of the roles of foreign correspondents billed as Canadian for mainstream papers and of Sorensen's experiences provides the context and precedent for Watts's and Allan's work in Spain, and offers the historical framework for some of Watts's oral accounts of the press presence in Spain.

In an interview from the late 1960s,⁶ Watts describes the press presence in Spain, testifying to both her singular perspective from her

⁵ Although at this point in history all Canadian citizens would have held a British passport, for the purposes of this case study I define a Canadian as an individual who spent significant time in Canada, identified at least in part as Canadian, and developed at least some of his or her career in the country. Copenhagen-born Henning Sorensen is a prime example of a foreign-born Canadian of this era.

⁶ The Dorothy Livesay Collection in the British Columbia Archives records this interview to be from 1970. This is likely an acquisition date, as Watts died in 1968. The interview is also attributed to Vancouver leftist radio host Charlie Boylan in the catalogue listing. However, Larry Hannant asserts that the interview was more likely conducted by historian Victor Hoar.

station near Madrid and more broadly to the dominance of foreign news agencies and relative absence of Canadian news presence. Watts recalls the nature of the foreign press presence in Spain:

Interviewer: Were there press core of sorts?

Watts: Oh, yes indeed there was. The AP, and UP, and Reuters, and the French Agency, and of course people like [Herbert] Matthews from the *New York Times*....The bigger papers had all their own people there, as well as the agencies. And at one time the Canadian press sent a man who spent the night in Madrid, and then sent the following cable: “[tape difficult to hear] food, shelling, etc. Leaving.” And then left. Which embarrassed me very much because he was the only Canadian press man, I think, who was there at all. But most of the correspondents were quite good, you know. (Watts 8:20)

According to Watts, while the large European and American news organizations and newspapers were well represented in Spain, the Canadian press presence consisted of one man on a short visit, and individual Canadian newspapers may not have sent representatives at all. While domestic Canadian news media certainly had a vibrant response to the Spanish Civil War, the nature of the Canadian press presence in Spain is little more obscure.

In contrast to Watts’s account, Peck notes that in 1936 the *Toronto Star* ran a “special series from their reporters on the scene, such as Matthew Halton, Pierre van Paassen and Frank Pitcairn” (43). This

suggests that the Canadian Press presence in Spain was relatively robust, and that Watts's account of a lone, unimpressive journalist may have been inaccurate. But a closer look even at Peck's own account of these three "on the scene" members of the Canadian press—Pitcairn, van Paassen, and Halton—reveals that they either may not have been employed directly by a Canadian press outlet or may not have been that close to the action in Spain. Frank Pitcairn was not a Canadian journalist, but an English member of the militia and correspondent for the British publication, the *Daily Worker*. Pitcairn's eye witness account of his experiences near Madrid ran in the *Toronto Star* on 12 November 1936, but Peck's characterization of him as a reporter for the *Star* seems tenuous. Instead, Pitcairn's role in the Canadian media aligns more closely with the trend in mainstream Canadian newspapers to rely on foreign news agencies and correspondents. Pierre van Paassen, who the *Star* described as its "European correspondent," alongside Coralie van Paassen "his talented wife" (25 August 1936 qtd. in Peck 44), were based in France near the Spanish border and contributed stories to major news agencies. Coralie had mailed eighteen of Pierre's articles from Paris and produced some reporting on the conditions on the French-Spanish border. Pierre at the very least visited Barcelona, as he reported on atrocities that he witnessed there, even claiming to see Fascists set a church on fire (Peck 43). As Peck does not present any evidence that either of the van Paassens reported near Madrid, it is possible that Watts would never have met them nor known them to be part of the Canadian press presence.

Matthew Halton may be the strongest candidate to have been the Canadian “press man” who Watts recalls. Halton’s best known dispatch about the Spanish conflict, an interview with Spanish Socialist Party leader Francisco Largo Caballero (28 July 1936), was conducted in London at an international trade unionist conference. By the end of 1936, Peck locates Halton near Madrid, as in November he “sent back a series of articles from the area around Madrid and the [*Star*] carried many photos of devastation in the city” (Peck 44). Halton, then, who was in Spain at the end of 1936, may have stayed in Madrid long enough to cross paths with Watts in the early months of 1937, even though the publication dates of his articles do not overlap with Watts’s presence in Spain. Both Pitcairn’s and Halton’s time in Spain may have overlapped with the time that Watts spent there, but only Halton was both Canadian (not just supplying the occasional article to a Canadian paper) and in Spain solely as a correspondent.

While Halton is likely the only reporter who qualifies as the fly-by-night “press man” who so embarrassed Watts, Watts would also have relatively close contact with another person initially sent to Spain as a reporter: Copenhagen-born Canadian and reporter for the *New Commonwealth*, Henning Sorensen. The *New Commonwealth* was a small weekly paper run by the Co-operative Commonwealth Foundation of Canada, which sent Sorensen in part to research the medical needs of the Republic and primarily as foreign correspondent (Petrou 158-9). By Sorensen’s account, he easily secured a visa as a journalist, was given a car and chauffeur by a press office located in Spain, and “just went

around writing stories about what [he] saw” around Madrid (qtd. in Gerassi 104). When Sorensen met Canadian Blood Transfusion doctor Norman Bethune and toured visiting hospitals with the doctor, he “became disgusted with [his] regular profession of foreign correspondent” (qtd. in Gerassi 104). He compared the nobility and utility of Bethune’s work to the character of his fellow foreign correspondents, including “such giants” as Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, who Sorensen saw as lazy, drunkards, cynics, liars, and cowards, who would frequently send false dispatches and whose role in the war has been overstated by history (Gerassi 104). By the time Watts arrived at the Blood Transfusion Unit in early 1937, Sorensen had already “gladly abandoned journalism” (qtd. in Gerassi 105).

Sorensen’s contribution to Canadian journalism deserves further study. Although it was short-lived, his reportage on the early months of the conflict and the establishment of the Blood Transfusion Unit may provide a particular Canadian voice on the early optimism of the war. His journalism may offer a telling point of contrast with that of Watts and Allan, who did not arrive in Spain until after Bethune’s relationship with Spanish doctors had begun to sour and after the major Republican victory at the Battle of Jarama. Far from Watts’s ambiguous reference to the uncommitted Canadian press man, Sorensen’s work in Spain provides a precedent for Watts’s and Allan’s journalism. Canadian domestic newspapers were certainly invested in publishing Canadian voices on the conflict, as their publication of Halton’s and the van Paassens’ journalism indicates, and scholarship has proved eager to

claim non-Canadians like Pitcairn as examples of a Canadian press presence in Spain. Only Watts, Allan, and Sorensen, however, are at once Canadian and stationed in Spain, and only small-scale leftist publications like the *Daily Clarion* and the *New Commonwealth* sent dedicated foreign correspondents to the conflict. A closer look at this group of journalists sheds light on the broader field of Canadian foreign correspondents. It helps to contextualize Watts's accounts of the communities of journalists around Madrid.

Conclusion

Canadian reportage on the Spanish Civil War drew from multiple sources, but rarely did individual papers depend on dedicated foreign correspondents. Mainstream papers relied heavily on foreign news agencies through the 1920s and 1930s, and Canadian-produced content on the Spanish Civil War was more likely to be editorial in nature. Furthermore, the Canadian international journalistic presence in the Spanish Civil War, a field that historians like Peck begin to give us a glimpse into, consisted of a mix of journalists supplying pieces to Canadian papers, some of whom were Canadian, few of whom were stationed in Spain, and many of whom may have been employed primarily by the foreign news agencies that mainstream Canadian papers already relied on.

However, beginning with Sorensen, and continuing with Watts and Allan, a small number of Canadian foreign correspondents offer an alternative model of Canadian journalistic production that works against the dominant, foreign-sourced model of mainstream Canadian papers. In contrast to Pitcairn, the van Paassens, and Halton, Watts and Allan were sent to the Blood Transfusion Unit run by Dr. Norman Bethune just outside of Madrid, with Watts's role as a "kind of public relations person" with a broad range of coverage (Watts 0:46) approaching what we would now call an "embedded journalist."

Watts would remain in or around Madrid for almost a year from February 1937 to early January 1938. From there she produced over fifty articles for the *Clarion*, wrote at least one article for *New Frontier*, a journal she helped found, and conceived of and ran a radio broadcast with Allan and Herbert Kline. Allan's regular column "Salud Nortamericanos!" consisted of over thirty-five articles in the *Daily Clarion* published from October to December 1937. Allan also produced two articles for *New Frontier*, and eventually published a novel, *This Time A Better Earth* (1939) based on his experiences in the war.⁷ Watts's and Allan's journalistic oeuvres together constitute a body of journalism that focused exclusively on the Spanish Civil War, and was produced by Canadians stationed in Spain.

In the next case study, I will compare the experiences of Watts and Allan during their time with the *Daily Clarion*. I will argue that the

⁷ See Ryan van den Berg's Case Study, "Ted Allan: *This Time a Better Earth* and 'Salud Nortamericanos!'" on the Canada and the Spanish Civil War website.

newspaper prioritized Watts's journalism—both in appointing her as correspondent and in prominently marketing her writing on the war as a feature of the paper—over Allan's. As Watts's and Allan's writings are subject to ongoing recovery and evaluation, and as unofficial biographies of Allan attempt to establish his journalism and literary writings on the war as central to Canadian letters, Watts's experiences offer an important corrective and counterpoint. By evaluating Watts's writing, a leftist, female, predominantly journalistic Canadian writer regains her importance to the writings on the Spanish Civil War, contrasting a history that has so often concentrated on the contributions of male literary writers and bolstering the achievements of an international network of female war journalists starting with the Spanish Civil War.

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