

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

A Case Study Collection

Introduction

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Myrtle Eugenia “Jean” Watts haunts the record of Canadian modernism but rarely does either memory or scholarship turn its attention to her alone. The record of her life is likewise dispersed: she shows up in Dorothy Livesay’s and Toby Gordon Ryan’s memoirs, and her letters surface in Livesay’s writing and in Livesay’s papers at the University of Manitoba. In addition to this dispersed archive, what records exist of Watts’s own voice are in the service of other figures in the period. For example, an interview with Watts from the late-1960s has the goal of gleaning information about Dr. Norman Bethune and other Canadian doctors; what evidence surfaces about Watts’s own involvement in the Spanish Civil War is largely incidental (“Interview,” Watts). Even the more famous anecdotes about Watts’s life may be fabrications. The historical record of Jean Watts is dispersed, secondary to other historical figures, or erroneous.

Reconstructing the history of Jean Watts is an exercise in gathering these multiple sources, sifting through the various fabrications and anecdotes that seem to be the only records of her involvement in 1930s Canadian culture. Although there have been some attempts to restore an account of Watts’s role in Canadian history generally (Butler), and the

Spanish Civil War specifically (Hannant), these attempts are largely historical rather than literary. They either bypass or denigrate Watts's journalistic and textual production during the war (Hannant), or acknowledge its importance but subordinate it to her role as cultural and political actor in leftist Canada over the course of her life (Butler). By turning my attention to the context and content of Watts's textual production, I hope to restore her centrality to Canadian writing on the Spanish Civil War.

As a historical figure, the Jean Watts of both contemporary and retrospective accounts is multifaceted, if not protean. Even her names and nicknames proliferate, as though she were multiple, changing with each context: she was known as Eugenia to her teachers, Gina to her lifelong friend Dorothy Livesay,¹ Jean in her professional circles, and Jim to her fellow Spanish Civil War ambulance drivers and the members of the Toronto theatre scene. Watts seems to have led her life in defiance of expectations and of traditionally feminine roles, and in turn she has defied easy categorization. Accounts of her life and involvement in 1930s Canadian politics and arts have alternately ignored her, dismissed her, or glorified her. Alan Filewod dismisses Watts's involvement in the Workers' Theatre and Theatre of Action, politically aware, leftist theatre movements centered in Toronto in the 1930s, as that of the "one refugee from bourgeois wealth" financially subsidizing the operations of the theatre (68). To Filewod, Watts is simply a wealthy benefactor rather

¹ Nancy E. Butler notes that Livesay gives Watts this moniker "for legal reasons...but makes no further effort to conceal that it is Jim Watts about whom she is writing" (390).

than a true participant in a movement he wishes to cast as exclusively working-class. He obscures the depth of her involvement in 1930s theatre, the prominent role she plays in her contemporaries' memoirs, and the complex class relations in 1930s leftist artistic movements.

In contrast to Filewod's characterization of Watts as an intruder in a working-class Toronto theatre community, critics like Larry Hannant depict a bombastic Jean Watts demanding to be admitted to the International Brigades, a heroic crusader for the cause of the Spanish Civil War and a woman insistent on her equal and rightful participation in the social issues of her day. In Hannant's work, Watts becomes a fantastical figure who broke the rules at every turn. Similarly, Candida Rifkind laments how Watts has been relegated to a tragic footnote to Dorothy Livesay's life, playing a supporting role to Livesay's genius, and has been "dismissed as a mere enabler of greater talents" (226n9) across theatrical, journalistic, and literary spheres. For her part, Livesay constructs this subordination in her writing. According to Livesay, Watts was purportedly in love with her, and Watts's great tragedy was that she longed to, but could not, write, that she was doomed to support others' artistry, but not to effect her own. Even Watts's untimely death by suicide is not off-limits for Livesay, as she implies that the death was brought about by Watts's own nature: "it was ironic that your fighting spirit and aggressiveness hardened—all in the cause of peace! You were hard to live with, Gina, and hard on your own heart. You died too soon" (*Journey With My Selves*, 85).

But if, from Livesay's perspective, Watts's destiny was to be subordinate to Livesay and eventually to be destroyed by her own passions, political or otherwise, Livesay's motivations in subordinating her friend cannot hide how brightly Watts burned. Livesay herself describes Watts—a lifelong friend with whom she would eagerly consume British modernist literature—as the modern-day New Woman, a fellow 'bluestocking' (*Journey With My Selves*, 64) labels that speak to the independence and feminist politics that the young women espoused. But in Livesay's and Ryan's descriptions, Watts was also a woman remarkable for ineffable and innate qualities; for Livesay, a beautiful body, and an iconoclastic personality; for Ryan, an attractiveness intertwined with generosity and political commitment. In her work for the Spanish Civil War, her production of leftist theatre, and her committed political involvement, Watts's talents as journalist, theatre artist, and activist shine through. I wish to take a cue from Rifkind and restore Watts's place in the 1930s Canadian Left, both on Canadian soil and in an international context. The Spanish Civil War offers one particularly fruitful context for this restoration.

Much of the biographical information that survives about Watts has been filtered through memoirs, including those of Livesay, Ryan, and Mackenzie-Papineau combatant Ronald Liversedge. In contrast to her commitment to leftist politics and Canadian leftist culture in her adulthood, Watts's early life was comfortable and conservative.² She

² Watts's grandfather was a capitalist of enough wealth that Watts would receive a substantial inheritance in her twenties. However, no scholarly accounts have presented more detailed records of her family history. Some small pieces of evidence do exist to characterize Watts's family. For instance, Dorothy Livesay notes that Watts would seek to spend

was born to an upper middle-class family in Streetsville, Ontario in 1909. In the spring of 1921, she and Livesay, both twelve years old at the time, met in Clarkson, Ontario (Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand* 59). Livesay would grow up to be among the most prominent Canadian modernist poets, and the lifelong friendship she forged with Watts would feature in much of her prose writing. When Livesay moved to Toronto in 1923, she and Watts ended up in the same class at all-girls Glen Mawr School in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. While, in Livesay's words, their upper-middle-class peers from old Toronto families were "'coming out' and going abroad and getting married" (66), Livesay and Watts transitioned from their schooldays to young women who attended lectures by Emma Goldman, read modernist works of literature, and went to university. Watts attended two years of pre-medical school at the University of Toronto, and her time there ended with what Livesay calls a "breakdown," relaying a letter from Watts's mother that "[t]he medical work is far too heavy to be undertaken, unless one had a body of

more time in the Livesay household as a child as her parents were very strict (*Journey With My Selves*). Despite the money that Watts would eventually come into, as a teenager she did not expect to receive any routine inheritance when she turned twenty-one. When Livesay decided to go to Europe for a semester, Watts lamented that she wished to join Livesay, but would not likely be able to: "Really, though, I don't get any money when I am 21 so that, unless the family would consider it, it would be hopeless" (qtd. in Livesay 72, *Journey With My Selves*). Whether Watts would not receive inheritance because she was a woman or because the wealth of her family has been overstated is unclear. Similarly, when Watts found a lack of money to be a barrier to her activities in Spain. First, she found it "impossible...to really function as a correspondent" (13:00), unlike privately funded correspondents like Ernest Hemingway, to the extent that she left for work in the censorship bureau and then the International Brigades. She also found herself without money after leaving Spain for France: "And I had no money, and no clothes. It was awful. I had to ring in Paris till someone wired me some money" (27:15). By contrast, Watts would famously fund the establishment of *New Frontier* and the Worker's Theatre before she departed for Spain, demonstrating her access to not inconsiderable wealth. Watts seems to have been without funds in Spain, but not out of the reach of emergency support, and it is unclear whether her participation in the Spanish Civil War was the cause of any rift between Watts and her family that may have prompted them to withhold funds. Watts's family life, then, seems to have been relatively affluent, but not so affluent that Watts could expect the same level of freedom with funds as such contemporaneous socialites, writers, and participants in the Spanish Civil War as Nancy Cunard. The nature of Watts's family offers a fruitful area for future research.

(practically) cast iron” (qtd. in Livesay 71). Watts eventually completed a degree in psychology from the University of Toronto in 1933 (Butler 227).

During and after her time at the University of Toronto, Watts’s work in establishing the cultural infrastructure of the 1930s Left was profound. She helped found Toronto’s Theatre of Action and was instrumental to the staging of performances for which the theatre movement would become famous, including *Eight Men Speak* (1933), about the arrest of Canadian Communist Party leader, Tim Buck. With her husband Lon Lawson, she also founded the monthly leftist literary journal *New Frontier* (1936-1938), “intended to rally middle-class intellectuals in Canada, as did the Left Book Club in England and *New Masses* in the United States” (Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand* 83), both explicitly Marxist publications, fundamental to politically committed artistic production in England and America. Rifkind notes that without the financial support and energy that Watts brought to the Canadian Left in the 1930s, “the Workers’ Experimental Theatre, *Masses*, the Toronto Theatre of Action, and *New Frontier* would have struggled to survive” (226n9). Rifkind’s list of the cultural projects that Watts supported reads like a list of the primary cultural achievements of the Third Period cultural front in Canada. Furthermore, by the 1930s, when the Canadian political left was particularly active, Watts had made a significant enough impact on 1930s leftist culture that her involvement was noticed outside of that community. Watts “had become the object of attention by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for distributing communist

literature” (Hannant 156). Protean and multi-faceted Jean Watts was involved in some capacity across multiple contexts in cultural and political activities of the 1930s Canadian Left, and the Canadian government was well aware of her involvement.

By the time Watts left for Spain in February of 1937, she had already made a considerable contribution to Canadian leftist cultural production. Her writings from Spain are a unique first-hand perspective on the Spanish Civil War, especially since she was one of the only Canadian foreign correspondents in Spain. Thus, assessing her contribution to Canadian journalism in the 1930s restores her singular impact on the writing about the conflict. Furthermore, while most of the experiences of women in the Spanish Civil War consist of humanitarian and medical aid (Fyrth and Alexander), Jean Watts’s experience is more akin to the international and politically aware journalistic interventions of such contemporaries as British socialite and editor Nancy Cunard, and American poet and activist Muriel Rukeyser, both of whom undertook major projects related to the Spanish Civil War. Further still, the intensity of her participation in non-literary aspects of the Spanish Civil War—as an ambulance driver and mechanic in the International Brigades—dispels the common criticism that writers on the Spanish Civil War had no true experience of the struggles of volunteer combatants (Jump, Cunningham). Watts’s participation in the Spanish Civil War can shed new light on the experiences of Canadians across multiple contexts of the war. She illuminates Canadian and international journalism, the operations of Norman Bethune’s Blood Transfusion

Unit, the International Brigades, and Canadian Communist Party (CPC) efforts to support war refugees back in Canada.

In the case studies that follow, Watts's historical, cultural, and literary impact on Canadian modernism emerges across varied contexts. Case Study One explores Watts's broad context—Canadian press and Canadian foreign correspondents in comparison to international journalism. It accounts for the uniqueness of the *Daily Clarion* within the Canadian newspaper industry, a small-scale, CPC-backed paper to which Watts contributed most of her journalism. At a time when Canadian papers were dominated by material from British and American news agencies, the *Daily Clarion* featured work by Watts as their primary perspective on the Spanish Civil War, a Canadian woman in a role that we have now come to call an 'embedded reporter.' Case Study Two compares Watts's experiences in the Spanish Civil War to those of fellow Canadian foreign correspondents in Spain, Ted Allan and Henning Sorensen. An analysis of the means of transportation and sources of support for foreign journalists in Spain provides a lens through which to understand the singular experiences of Canadian foreign correspondents during the conflict. Case Study Three analyses Watts's writing style in comparison to canonical accounts of Spain such as George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), assesses how Watts's writing aligns with and departs from the Communist politics of the *Daily Clarion*, and seeks to understand how the newspaper depended upon and created a celebrity status around Watts's writerly persona. This analysis challenges scholarly assumptions that Watts's journalism held little

literary or cultural merit and that the newspaper published only writing that aligned with Communist Party of Canada politics. Case Study Four expands the scope of Watts's Canadian context in order to analyze her political motivations and writing in tandem with a broader community of female correspondents in the Spanish Civil War. Martha Gellhorn, an American journalist for *Collier's Magazine*, represents a close parallel to Watts in terms of her career and oeuvre. By comparing the two women, this case study identifies an important precedent for the communities of female journalists that emerged during the Second World War; it establishes the emergence of the modernist female celebrity journalist squarely in the Spanish Civil War. The Conclusion to these case studies discusses some of the work that remains to be done on the Watts's contributions to the Spanish Civil War beyond her literary contributions. Much of the literary and archival evidence available about Watts contradicts the anecdotes that survive about her, and foundational scholarly accounts of her historical, non-literary involvement in the conflict deserve to be revisited in light of this new evidence.

Watts is an enigmatic figure in Canadian cultural history, and these case studies concentrate only on the immediate contexts of her writing. Her cultural impact, however, expands beyond her short-lived journalistic career. Her work as a theatre artist, as an editor, as an activist, and as a patron of the arts all deserve equally close scholarly attention. I offer starting points for future research. Watts's writing and cultural impact alike are ripe for recovery.

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