

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

A Case Study Collection

Conclusion

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Over the course of these case studies, I have begun to uncover the impact and context of Jean Watts's journalistic writing on the Spanish Civil War. I read Watts in the context of the Canadian press's relationship to international reportage on the Spanish Civil War, and of the way that Canadian foreign correspondents were supported in their journalistic roles while in Spain. The singularity of her experiences emerges in comparison to other Canadian foreign correspondents like Ted Allan and Henning Sorensen. The commonalities between Watts's journalism and that of other female journalists like American journalist Martha Gellhorn evince the emergence of communities of female war correspondents that predate those that emerged during the Second World War. Situating Watts's writing within these various contexts contributes to a new understanding of the international field of journalism during the Spanish Civil War.

Watts's writing is the least studied aspect of her contributions to Canadian culture and I have attempted to provide some corrective to that lacuna here. However, one direction in which future research may lead is towards Watts's continued resonance across the writing and histories of the participants in the Spanish Civil War. Alongside the recovery of the

work of women during the conflict, we must contend with the way that those women are described in the stories about them that survive. For instance, historical accounts of Watts's cultural contributions generally focus on two aspects of her life: her sexuality and her bombastic, iconoclastic nature. To briefly take up the former, Watts's bisexuality features prominently in the memoirs of her life-long friend, Dorothy Livesay, and Watts became known for gender-bending performance in her theatrical work. Her fellow journalist Ted Allan frequently speculates in his diaries that Watts's motivation to dislike Dr. Norman Bethune was due to her jealousy that Bethune did not find her attractive. Allan does not substantiate this claim, nor does he explain its relevance. In fact, he glorifies Bethune's sexuality where he vilifies Watts's. Allan's glorification of Bethune's sexual exploits parallels biographical treatments of Bethune's life such as the National Film Board production, *Bethune* (1964), in which Bethune's virility is as much a cause for celebration as his political commitments. The gendered dynamics of women's portrayals in these historical and autobiographical accounts deserve further research. What might we learn about gender in the Spanish Civil War when we consider Watts's resonance across historical accounts of the Canada and the Spanish Civil War? As discussions of her sexuality and gender performance has been woven into historical and scholarly accounts alike, how is it significant that Watts's peers would filter their accounts of her through a heteronormative, if not homophobic, lens?

These questions are particularly exigent in light of recent research about the political commitments of female combatants and participants in the war. In contrast to previous scholarship that cast women's participation as largely apolitical (Fyrth and Alexander), the activities and writings of figures like American nurses Salaria Kea and Thyra Edwards¹ shed new light on the complex motivations and politics of women participating in the Spanish Civil War. Watts is no exception. Ironically in Watts's case, the political motivations for Watts's participation, combined with her gender performance, have occasioned one of the most persistent erroneous anecdotes in history and scholarship. In one of Ronald Liversedge's memoir manuscripts, Watts demanded to be enrolled with the Mackenzie Papineau Battalion as there were at that time no women enrolled with the Battalion. Scholar Larry Hannant, in his foundational historical work on Watts's involvement in the war repeats this anecdote from the manuscript; he likewise describes Watts "bursting into the Canadian Cadre Service at the International Brigades headquarters" (153) to the amusement of Liversedge, who then worked for the Cadre office. Although Watts has become famous for this particular anecdote, its basis in the historical record is shaky at best.

Specifically, Watts has difficulty either recalling Liversedge or anything remarkable about her induction into the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. Watts states that she "can't remember ever having any lovely ceremony, like take one step forward or anything. I know I got my pay

¹ See Anne Donlon's forthcoming chapter, "Thyra Edwards' Spanish Civil War Scrapbook and Black Women's Internationalist Life Writing," in *To Turn this Whole World Over: Black Women's Internationalism during the Twentieth Century*, eds. Tiffany M. Gill and Keisha N. Blain.

book and I guess I signed documents. There wasn't anything memorable at that time" (Watts, "Interview" 17:22). Watts's interviewer asks how she "managed" to become an ambulance driver (15:38), as Watts's time driving an ambulance and fulfilling a typically masculine role in the war is one of the singular aspects of her participation. But Watts saw nothing particularly remarkable about becoming an ambulance driver, as she "simply asked whether they'd take a driver" (15:38), concentrating on the tricky nature of the drivers' test rather than on her intentions to subvert gender norms. Watts has trouble remembering Liversedge, exclaiming, "Oh, that's where I must have known Liversedge, because I know his name" (24:06). Whether or not Watts might have been memorable to Liversedge, neither Liversedge nor the manner in which Watts was inducted into the International Brigades were memorable to Watts.

Similarly, the publication history of Liversedge's memoir indicates that Liversedge did not wish to publish this anecdote about Watts. Two editors worked on Liversedge's memoir: first, Irene Howard worked with Liversedge in the 1970s, then, David Yorke worked with Liversedge's estate in the 2000s, many years after Liversedge's death. According to Yorke, Liversedge rescinded his manuscript from Howard, "somewhat uncomfortable with the extent of Irene Howard's revisions" (23). The anecdote of Watts's insistence upon joining the International Brigades was among those that Yorke omitted from the published version of the memoir, and the original interview tape that contains the anecdote has not been found. Yorke makes a particular effort to note

that, “while some aspects of it appear accurate, other details seem inconsistent with the record” (196).

If this account has a shaky standing in the historical record, across Watts’s recollections, the publication history of Liversedge’s memoirs, and the historical due diligence of Liversedge’s editor, why has it had such potent resonance amongst researchers? The answer may lie in how the anecdote compellingly depicts Watts as exceptional—the only woman in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion—and invested in a performance of strong, ‘New Woman’ femininity. If we are to understand how the dynamics of gender shaped the experiences of women in the Spanish Civil War, whether as journalists, nurses, or combatants, we must also account for the ways that narratives about their exceptionality, their sexuality, and their femininity continue to resonate through the voices of their contemporaries. We must also interrogate how we as contemporary researchers may begin to unravel these various aspects of the experiences of women in the Spanish Civil War.

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