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The Politics of Influence: Birney, Scott, Livesay and the Influence of Politics

The immediate focus of this essay is the manner in which most criticism of Dorothy Livesay, Frank Scott and Earle Birney has worked to obscure the influence of politics on their writing. More specifically (because the actual extent of political influence must be set aside for the moment), my aim is to demonstrate that dominant critical approaches have foreclosed any possibility of political influence on the writing by disguising, diminishing or eliminating the role that politics played in their lives. The narrow question of how these writers have been packaged for general consumption is best appreciated, however, if viewed as representative of the way that criticism has neglected a key aspect of Canadian literary history. I refer to a suppressed tradition of affiliations, remarkable in both range and intensity, between Canadian writers and socialist ideology.

The affiliations between our writers and socialist thought have taken many different forms: some have declared their socialist sympathies in essays and journalism (Archibald Lampman, Margaret Laurence, Kenneth Leslie); some worked long and hard for left-wing organizations or political parties (Earle Birney for the Trotskyists, Dorothy Livesay for the Communists, Frank Scott for the CCF/NDP, David Fennario for the Socialist Labour Party); some stood for political office (F. P. Grove, A. M. Klein, Phyllis Webb, Robin Mathews); some were involved with literary journals that promoted a socialist aesthetic (John Sutherland, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Patrick Anderson, Milton Acorn, Al Purdy, Miriam Waddington, Margaret Atwood).

Socialism's literary legacy has been uniquely intensified in our culture because of its exquisite sense of timing: the old Left's moment of greatest influence in the thirties coincided with the arrival of Moder-

nism on our poetic shores, and the heyday of the New Left in the post-Centennial and Vietnam years coincided with the dramatic foundation of an indigenous professional theatre (George Luscombe, Nathan Cohen, George Ryga, Carol Bolt, Sharon Pollock, Rick Salutin, George F. Walker, David Fennario, Collective Creations, Theatre Passe Muraille, Mulgrave Road Co-op, Mummers Troupe). A list of other writers whose socialist affiliations merit acknowledgement might include Adele Wiseman, Hugh Garner, Mavis Gallant, Pat Lowther, Tom Wayman, Patrick Lane, Ken Mitchell, and Red Lane.

My intent here is to develop this hypothesis about a suppressed tradition of socialist affiliations by arguing, not that a bias against socialist politics has led us to exclude these writers from the canon—that would be foolish, for these writers clearly enjoy privileged status in most survey studies of Canadian literature—but rather that a historical and methodological bias against the influence of politics on writing may have led us to misread these writers and re-present them in classrooms and critical journals in such a way as to repress the political dimension of their writing. In other words, even if we have the right canon, it is still possible that we have the wrong tradition.

Fairly indicative of the way criticism resists the pressure of politics on writing is the way it handles the question of “influences”—those factors that are dutifully recited in the biographical notes we provide as aids to attentive reading in anthologies, survey histories, literary companions and encyclopedias. And fairly representative of writers whose political beliefs and activities have been undervalued in such guides to the tradition are Dorothy Livesay, Earle Birney and Frank Scott. Frank Scott’s political involvement with the League for Social Reconstruction and the CCF/NDP is so well known as to require no rehearsal here; indeed, general awareness of his socialism is an encouraging sign, but by no means the complete story. Less well known are the political biographies of Dorothy Livesay and Early Birney.

At the age of 28, while working on a doctorate at the University of Toronto, Birney became, in his own words, a “political animal,” reading G.D.H. Cole, John Strachey, Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and the literature of the new League for Social Reconstruction. He wavered between philosophical anarchism and social democracy until converted to the cause of Trotsky in 1933 (Birney, 25,26). There followed, again in his own words, a “conscious involvement in ‘the class struggle,’ and a seven-year loyalty to the cause of reforming the Third International or building a new one” (27). During those seven years he attended meetings, rallies and demonstra-

tions; he organized Marxist student clubs; he solicited socialist writing for the *Canadian Forum* in his role as literary editor (1936-39), and in his own numerous review articles practiced what he called the application of "Marxist aesthetics to contemporary literature" (Birney, 29); he twice interviewed Trotsky and published, under pseudonyms, much party literature; he spent 1934 and 1935, while in England to complete his dissertation on Chaucer, working as a Trotskyist functionary, "reconciling various factions of the party and organizing a party cell within the Independent Labour Party" (Davey, 2). These are only the sketchiest of facts, but few of them can be found in most standard reference sources. Birney, of course, makes fiction of them in *Down the Long Table*.

Dorothy Livesay's involvement with politics was no less intense and transforming than Birney's. In fact, she was a step ahead of him. While in her final undergraduate year, and only 21 years old, she became a member of a group that gathered to discuss politics in the apartment of a communist economics professor who had come to Toronto from Holland, Otto Van der Sprenkel. Livesay recalls that "he had been to Russia and we had great arguments about why he wore silk pyjamas because if he was communist he ought to wear cotton!" (Livesay, 31). She graduated in 1931 and went to the Sorbonne, where she wrote a thesis on the influence of French symbolists on modern English poetry and became committed to communism. In 1932 she returned to Toronto and enrolled in the school of social work, a choice of careers that was clearly influenced by her political beliefs. Of that period she writes, "My political convictions became the dominating obsession of my life. This lost me friends, split me away from parents, disrupted my relationship with my lover" (48). For the next eight years, Livesay devoted her life and her art to the cause of communist revolution. Like Birney's life, and indeed Frank Scott's, Livesay's was filled with the obligations of party writing and organizing. But whereas Birney was an academic who wrote no poetry or fiction while a Trotskyist, Livesay toiled as a social worker and somehow found time to write poems, short stories and plays whose ideology was consistent with her Communist Party membership. Both revolutionary writers terminated their party membership at the end of the decade, whereas the reformist Scott remained an active member of his party until he died in 1985.

These are bare outlines of political lives, and while our poets have demonstrated various degrees of reticence or forthrightness about them, the facts have been readily available to anyone the least inter-

ested in their discovery. But if we open a representative sample of literary histories, companions, anthologies or student guides, we must be struck not only by how political allegiances and activities are ignored as possible influences on the poets' writing, but also by how various rhetorical devices are used to discount or devalue the political dimension when its existence is tacitly or obliquely admitted. The *Literary History of Canada*, for instance, makes absolutely no mention of Livesay's or Birney's political activities. Tom Marshall's survey of Canadian poetry, *Harsh and Lovely Land*, is typical in the way it sees A.J.M. Smith's influence on Scott as important, but is blind to the influence of politics on Scott. Birney's life is totally depoliticized, and we learn nothing of Livesay's eight years as a poet for the CP. The most recent survey history of Canadian literature, W. J. Keith's *Canadian Literature in English* muffles the facts: Scott is fairly admitted to be "a tireless campaigner for a moderate and orderly socialism" (62); Livesay's commitment to political verse is recorded, but her crucial allegiance to communism is masked when all we are told is that "she became actively engaged in social work and left-wing politics" (62); Birney is treated at great length, but there is no mention he was ever influenced by politics. Of the survey histories, only the earliest, Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada*, is frank about the revolutionary nature and importance of politics in the careers of Livesay and Birney, but even he does not specify the particular set of beliefs that shaped their thinking.

When we turn to literary companions, we find that Noah Story's *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature* does justice to Scott's political history, but of Birney's and Livesay's immersion in politics we learn only that the former "became interested in left-wing politics" while a student (78), and the latter wrote some "poems of social protest" (465). The *Supplement*, edited by William Toye in 1973, remains as silent as ever on the influence of politics, although Peter Stevens's expanded account of Birney details the influential visit to Vancouver of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan (17). William Toye did well to select Frank Davey and Sandra Djwa to write the entries for *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983). Davey's book on Birney (in the Copp Clark series, 1971) first made available the facts of Birney's political life that subsequent biographies have been studiously ignoring, and Djwa has enriched Canadian studies with her *Life of F. R. Scott*, surtitled *The Politics of the Imagination*.

A perusal of the biographical introductions in a selection of popular anthologies (to be fair, all those consulted have been included) re-

vealed the following gaps. Geddes's *15 Canadian Poets X2* is silent about Livesay's politics and tells us that she "no doubt . . . inherited . . . her concern for social issues from her parents, who were literary people active in the field of journalism" (542). Wilson's *Poets Between the Wars* omits mention of her membership in the Communist Party, but does tell us she is a member of the Unitarian Church. Bennett and Brown's *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* is very good on the political biographies, but David and Lecker's *The New Canadian Anthology* says nothing about Birney's politics and can barely bring itself to tell us that Livesay belonged to "politicized cultural groups" (95). In the first volume of Birney's autobiography, published in 1980, we find the following explanation for his delayed poetic blossoming: "Heavy teaching loads and growing political involvements kept me from any serious attempts to write verse myself . . ." (33). Note how this gets re-presented, and what gets dropped, in the *Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* published in 1981: "[Birney's] slowness to begin publishing is explained by his involvement in academic studies, teaching, and his literary editorship of the *Canadian Forum* (Weaver, 19). Needless to say, politics are nowhere to be seen in the Oxford biographies of either Livesay or Birney.

The critical methodology at work in the treatment accorded Birney by *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English 1945-1970* (Denham) is intelligently typical of how certain orders of biographical facts are privileged as influences, while political affiliations are ignored, no matter how large a role they played in the author's intellectual and emotional growth. Silence on the question of Birney's Trotskyist decade is complemented by a summary of his importance that has nothing to say about the radical social critique in his poems, but restricts itself to celebrating his formal experiments with the possibilities of Old English alliterative verse, concrete poetry, and Black Mountain poetics. Also typical is the way Birney is associated with the later narratives of E. J. Pratt, "with the theme of man confronting the forces of nature" (24). All well and good, but what about his omnipresent theme of man confronting the forces of social production?

Our reluctance to admit political affiliations into the charmed circle of biographical influences has been matched by the rhetorical ingenuity that we bring to the task of discounting, dismissing or rescuing our poets from the political dimension in their writing. The subtlest and perhaps most favoured rhetorical ploy is the use of recuperative language to recover political poets for the tradition. The intent is to deny their threatening difference by dressing them up in reassuring and

normalizing terms drawn from liberal humanist discourse. Socialism, for instance, is regularly characterized as a faith or religion. The introduction to *On F. R. Scott: Essays on His Contributions to Law, Literature, and Politics* sets the stage by asserting that "Socialism, in effect, was the new faith of the thirties" (Djwa, x). We are introduced to Scott's political career as an activity "permeated by a basically religious belief in 'the spirit of man'" (x). Actually, socialism was the *ideology* of the thirties and it makes more sense to speak of MacKenzie King's political career as permeated by religious belief. Scott's career was different because it was permeated by anti-capitalism and a rejection of class privilege. Louis Dudek, who embraced socialism under Irving Layton's tutelage and rejected it under Lionel Trilling's, also translates Scott's political life into a religious crusade: "Yet, at the very heart of his poetry there is a priestly cast of mind; his entire career and his ethical vocation, as a political thinker and poet, suggest the priestly mission" (Djwa, 36).

Scott specifically satirized laissez-faire economics and Liberal politics, but you would not know that from reading most accounts of his career. Tom Marshall defangs the satires by summarizing them as exposés of "a social system insufficiently attuned to human values" (48). Elspeth Cameron, in the *Profiles in Canadian Literature* series, buries Scott the socialist under a mountain of humanist sludge. With the onset of the depression, she writes, "he turned to philosophical reflections on questions such as 'What is man?' or 'How can man's knowledge serve him to bring about a better society in Canada?' With such questions in mind, Scott turned his poet's perception to the human condition." (Heath, 106).

Another popular method of redeeming political poets from the thirties and forties is to cast them in narratives of conversion or transcendence, the story of the eventual triumph of good aesthetic sense over misguided political commitment. The *Profiles in Canadian Literature* series presents Livesay's Marxism as a phase, something she passed through on her way to better things: "From her early naturism and an almost Lawrentian belief in a religion of love . . . in the 1920s, Livesay moves to Marxism in the 1930s, then to a liberal humanism in the 1940s. A traditionally religious, essentially Christian, point of view dominates the poetry of the 1950s . . ." (Heath, 90). Another critic speaks of the Marxist poetry as "something of a digression from the poet's natural bent" (Marshall, 52). One can almost hear Pacey breathe a sigh of relief as he writes, "Disillusioned with dogmatic solutions to the problems of our time, [Livesay] has turned, for the

basis of hope, to the promise of children, the courage of men, the delights of love and the beauty of nature" (150). The *Literary History of Canada* could not agree more: "Fortunately, in the books that followed [Livesay's 1944 publication, *Day and Night*] the sensitive reverberator has prevailed over the agitator. The most rewarding way for the expression of her talents is . . . the communication of private sensations in precise images and delicately shifting cadences." (Klinck, 252-53).

Frank Davey begins his story of Birney with a false conversion: "Always a humanitarian, in the fall of 1932 Birney began to believe that he was probably a socialist . . ." (8). But the story ends happily with a true conversion to a depoliticized "optimistic humanism" (18). Pacey records the poet's progress in similar terms, reassuring us that Birney turned from "dogmatic Marxism to an idealistic humanitarianism" (150). But as I read Birney's critical articles in the *Canadian Forum*, or Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* for that matter, there is no more dogmatism to be found than one finds in the aesthetics of most idealistic humanitarians.

Convinced as we no doubt all are, as most of the critics I cited no doubt are, that we practice our trade in the benevolently tolerant realm of liberal pluralism, the results of this modest survey may come as a surprise. But liberal pluralism is not without its bias, without its firmly established, if often unspoken, hierarchy of values. Consider, for example, the values that inform the following, apparently benign and apolitical, description of a turn in Livesay's career: "By 1950 she had turned away in despair from her earlier political concerns in search for answers to more personal questions. In a small group of lyrics published in 1955 in *New Poems*, Livesay explores larger, existential concerns and more immediate problems of personal identity" (Heath, 91). On what scale of values do we measure existential problems of personal identity as larger and more immediate than political problems like fascism, oppression and starvation? W. J. Keith ranks Livesay's poetry according to a similar hierarchy of values: "After the 1930s, Livesay's active political commitment lessened. Now a wife and mother, she had deeper human insights to transmute into poetry . . ." (65).

This bias against the transmutability of political concerns into poetry of deep human insight is repeated in the judgment (echoed, among others, by Cameron and Dudek—107; 34) that Scott's satirical poetry does not "constitute his most lasting work. Like most socially committed literature, it tends to fade with time as its immediate relevance

passes" (62). Given that all but the most exceptional literature fades, and that some of what endures is clearly "socially committed," Keith's generalization seems a bit gratuitous, if not ideologically determined. Scott's "Laurentian Shield," which Keith himself singles out as a great poem that is clearly not about to fade with time, is slotted with Scott's "introspective" poems and praised for presenting "the geological determinants that have created the Canadian land" (62). But of course "Laurentian Shield" is a socially committed poem if ever there was one, and the determining forces that it explores are economic. "Laurentian Shield" is a political poem that attacks what capitalist exploitation has done to the land and projects as utopic alternative a socialist community built by miners, loggers and millhands, "whose hands can turn this rock into children." The importance of socialism's influence on the literary tradition is unlikely to establish itself so long as major critics continue to salvage the best political poems for posterity by emptying them of their socialist structures of feeling and thinking.

If an important feature of Canadian literary history is that a remarkable number of our principle writers have openly affiliated themselves with socialist ideologies which are critical of laissez-faire capitalism, perhaps some speculation is in order as to how or why our critical practice has worked to ignore or obscure this tradition. In part, it may be a question of historical timing. In the mid 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, when Birney was writing his brilliant and largely unknown autobiographical novel, *Down the Long Table*, the foundations of modern Canadian literary criticism were being laid. It is quite possible that the scholars who were writing the *Literary History of Canada* or general survey histories, or introductions to anthologies and NCL editions, or even lecture notes, were well aware that they would be doing writers whom they admired no favour by highlighting their political activities or writing.

Whatever may have been erased or omitted from the historical record under the pressures of cold-war ideology was not much missed by a subsequent generation of critics. Schooled in the close textual reading of the New Critics or the mythopoetic anatomies of Frye, Canadian scholars of the 60s and 70s were not much interested in researching the lives of the poets for influences from outside the text. I do not mean to slight the excellent work of a few critics, especially in the last decade, nor the promise of more to come, perhaps energized by the Marxist branch of postmodern literary theory, but the fact remains that their work, as yet, is marginal in terms of its impact on dominant critical perceptions, particularly as these are expressed in widely con-

sulted histories, student guides, literary companions, and anthologies.¹ The woeful state of political literacy in English studies may also have contributed to an evasion of the politics in our literary history. It is prudent not to write or speak whereof one does not know, and while most of us, I warrant, can recall having the study of texts interrupted or delayed until Yeats's vision was explained with elaborate diagrams, or the distinction between classic and romantic as understood by Joyce was set forth, or the aesthetic credo of the imagists itemized, how many of us can recall being taught the difference between a revolutionary socialist, a social democrat, a communist, an anarchist, and a Trotskyist? And what is the difference between Trotsky's aesthetics and Stalin's? Yet it we are to teach or write about *Down the Long Table*, or read the poems of Birney, Livesay and Scott with a sensitivity to the pressure of their politics, we must be prepared to explain these distinctions to students and readers. One hopes that it is not a sign of scholarly indifference, but rather of the equivocations of ideological illiteracy, that we regularly level these important distinctions by lumping all socialists together under the heading of "left-wing politics."

But finally, in order to understand why so little has been made of socialism's contribution to our cultural life, we must return to the issue of just what we mean by "influence" when we speak of a text's genesis, production, and relationship to such conventional categories as "tradition" or "literary history." There would appear to be a certain bias about what counts as influence. The dominant critical methodologies privilege as influence orders of experience that are deemed essentially private over experiences that are understood to be public. That is, a critical discourse whose terms of valuation are primarily psychological and formal cannot recognize or admit the influence of activities whose values are associated with the social and political. One occasionally reads, for instance, that Birney, Livesay and Scott were influenced by English left-wing *poets*; I have yet to read they were influenced by left-wing *parties*. "Influence" as a critical concept has been narrowly restricted to the inter-textual or inter-subjective.

At present, the canon of English-Canadian literature is being produced in terms of garrison mentalities, Wacousta syndromes, wolves in the snow, butterflies on rocks, and patterns of isolation or survival. Without wishing to disparage the merits of these approaches, one must nonetheless insist that they have in common a universal, homogenizing quality whose cumulative effect is to interiorize the study of cultural determinants. The geography of this critical landscape is mythopoetic and its natural laws are psychologicistic. Although political

mountains may be dimly perceived on the horizon, few critics choose to scale them, preferring instead to plunge into lakes in search of drowned poets and other watery archetypes.

The politics of influence are perhaps most nakedly displayed in the way that critics continue to sidestep the influence of politics on Birney's doctoral dissertation. When I was taught Birney, in the mid to late 60s, the lectures and secondary sources emphasized his poetry's debt to Chaucer. We were told that Birney had written his doctoral dissertation on Chaucer, so we dutifully searched, with some success, for Chaucer's influence. No one told us (did anyone know?) that his dissertation was a Marxist critique of Chaucer's irony as bourgeois punch-pulling. Finally, in 1971, Frank Davey actually read the thesis and quoted from it in his book on Birney:

. . . the direct influence upon Chaucer's literary expression of the ambiguous class-position in which Chaucer found himself, his middle-class origins, his courtly connections, his responsive interest in the new vigorous world of the bourgeois, and his economic and social need to reconcile that interest with the duties of a courtier. It is with a discussion and exemplification of this life-long contradiction in Chaucer, and its resulting literary irony, that much of the present study will be concerned. (13)

Although it is seventeen years since Davey's biographical chapter documented the Trotskyist aesthetics of Birney's early academic life, and although most of the studies which I consulted for this paper continue to make much of the Chaucer connection, not one of them enriched or completed this legitimate association by mentioning what Birney actually said about Chaucer. Despite the fact that Birney spent seven passionate and consuming years writing and organizing for the Trotskyists, Trotsky not only does not enjoy equal status with Chaucer as an influence, he is accorded no status at all. Pluralist we may strive to be, but the politics of influence continue to preclude the influence of politics.

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NOTES

1. In addition to autobiographical sources, and the books by Davey and Djwa, two collections of essays will give interested readers some idea of recent efforts to trace the influence of politics on the writing of Scott, Birney and Livesay. See Lindsay Dorney, Gerald Noonan and Paul Tiessen, eds. *A Public and Private Voice: Essays on the Life and Work of Dorothy Livesay*. Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1986; and the Earle Birney issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 21 (Spring 1981).