

Irene Spry: More Than a Life of the Mind

Irene Mary (Biss) Spry (1907-1998), Political Economist

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There are economists and economists! Irene Spry's economics - as did her life - centred on people. Small wonder that the paperback edition of her influential book on the political economy of nineteenth-century western Canada is now a hot item at the Polar Peek bookshop in Fernie, British Columbia, as well as at Chapters in Ottawa. *The Palliser Expedition* reads like a novel, giving a vivid sense of the lives of Captain John Palliser and his survey team, yes, but equally of the Kootenay or Stoney Indians. Achieving an accessible book took intense research in archives in four countries, as well as a personal voyage retracing Palliser's routes. The full-scale edition of *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition 1857-60* which followed has been called "a model of scholarly editing." But Irene Spry believed that scholarship could not stop at scholars. Whether writing about hydro-electricity for a Royal Commission in the 1930s or about finite resources and world peace for an academic audience in the 1970s, she wrote for all readers, not just peer reviewers. Her crystal clear prose communicates her powers of observation and her exacting ethical principles - topped off by sparkling wit. For this, Irene gives credit to her professor at the London School of Economics, Eileen Power, who said firmly, "I will not read a single essay in which you use jargon. You have got to write so that any intelligent person could understand what you have to say."

Irene Spry's fundamental sense of scholarship required getting out and listening to the people who were really doing the work or organising the action. Pursuing an MA (1929) at Bryn Mawr College, in the Social Research and Social Work Programme, she spent most of her time inside factories. This get-involved style of

research was confirmed when she studied with Harold Innis at the University of Toronto - where she continued to teach, write and research Canadian political economy for over a decade, as well as helping to reinvent it in the League for Social Reconstruction. In 1930, people were sufficiently surprised to find a woman economist hopping the Yukon by bush plane and steamboat for on-site research that her trip made headlines.

In person or in print, Irene Spry could instantly mobilise others to share in her passions - for environment, social democracy, Canadian culture, women and development. Beyond sheer force of personality, I am convinced that this was because her daily life and her life of the mind were one. Not for Irene the compartmentalisation we are told will favour professional productivity. Research meant long solitary hours digging into documents, naturally, but it also meant bringing the archivist to lunch! People from all over the world, including St. John's or Moose Factory, showed up with Irene at an outspoken weekly lunch group. Professors, activists, artists, socialist civil servants (yes, Irene found them!) met at a dive near the University of Ottawa where she was a super-active *emeritus*. Inevitably, Irene would pull forth from her purse the perfect clipping for another, even when it had to be read by large magnifying glass in the dimming light of her 80s.

Being open to people and politics, it turns out, may not lead one down a straight and narrow career path. Irene Spry married and followed her husband to England, leaving an incomplete PhD dissertation behind. But this didn't mean her studies at Toronto or Cambridge (at the time John Maynard Keynes, A.C. Pigou and Maurice Dobb were teaching) were lost. The idea and basic

research for the Palliser books came in this "interim," after which Irene again took up a teaching career at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Ottawa. Nor did the family have rigid role definitions. Irene became engaged in the work of the Federated Women's Institutes in Canada in the 1950s and extended this commitment globally to the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) - a non-governmental organisation with consultative status at the United Nations which promoted women-centred rural development. Irene liked referring to ACWW as that "Amazing Collection of Wandering Women." As a member of the executive for two decades, she left three children at home with husband Graham Spry to fly off to projects and conferences from Hong Kong to Nairobi, usually returning with a new friend in tow to stay over and meet the family.

How you live may best be revealed by how you age. Irene kept connecting - to people, to politics, to ideas. Even after she lost her eyesight, withdrawing just wasn't an option. CBC radio brought in news, research assistants read the notecards aloud, and friends offered rides to Council of Canadians conferences. When Irene was awarded the Order of Canada in 1993, five women friends invited others to a formal tea and some one hundred and fifty turned up. Most of the time, however, Irene Spry was more intent on shaking the conscience of any complacent order than on receiving one. November rains didn't keep her from demonstrating on Parliament Hill against cuts to the CBC in 1996. The *Ottawa Citizen* photograph perfectly captures the glow of delight that was always hers when people gathered to "do the right thing." Ever loyal as she was to her friends, the friendships had to accommodate uncompromising critique if needed. In a lovely hand-written note Irene sent to thank me for a contribution to essays in her honour, she added, "On the first page, French imperialism might have been mentioned as well as British."

The word "mentor" may be overused, but it is the right word here. I know that whenever I make a compromise with patriarchy, such as taking money for dubious consulting, Irene is there. After preparing half the night, I sleep to dream that I am

struggling in the wrong language before a panel of stern, suited bureaucrats, when suddenly, in one of those marvellous *segues* through the unconscious, I am seated at a small round wooden table alone with Irene Spry who looks at me with her intense blue eyes and in the kindest voice invites me to tell her all about myself. Time to wake up! Authenticity, curiosity, generosity, meaningful commitments to people and politics - a life of the mind is only as true as life as a whole.

Finally, it is through both the personal life and the life of the mind, in their synergy, that one person and her work may contribute to others. Irene Spry is probably one of very few whose obituary in the *Globe and Mail* was also an invitation to a book launch. It tells us, "she died knowing that her most recent book *From the Hunt to the Homestead* will be co-published by the University of Alberta and University of Calgary Presses." This study, in progress over twenty years, will doubtless make a major contribution to understanding the socio-economic effect of European settlement on native people in western Canada. For the wide circle of Irene's friends and colleagues, however, there is another contribution - her personal demonstration that one really can combine gracious living, exacting scholarship and enthusiastic social-democratic politics.

If you want to know more about Irene Spry:

Wisdom and Wit: Irene Mary Spry. A delightful 1996 film about her life and work by Karen Shopsowitz (sponsored by the Harold Innis Research Foundation, Toronto), Monteith Inn Productions.

Explorations in Canadian Economic History: Essays in Honour of Irene M. Spry. Edited by Duncan Cameron. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985. In addition to the essays reflecting Irene Spry's interests in political economy, resource development and the Canadian community, this book also provides a long biographical note drawing from conversations with Irene and a bibliography of her scholarly work.

Passion and Conviction: The Letters of Graham Spry. Edited by Rose Potvin. Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1992. Irene's husband, Graham, a key figure in the founding of the CCF (now NDP) party and a driving force behind public broadcasting in Canada, gives

close up glimpses of Irene's professional and personal life in this collection of letters and photographs.

"Irene Spry: a remarkable life of wit and work." Janice Kennedy. *Ottawa Citizen* (March 8, 1993): A1-A2. Special profile for International Women's Day.



Drawing of Irene Spry by Ottawa artist Jerry Grey, 1993.