

*Book
Reviews*



Journey with My Selves. Dorothy Livesay. *Van-couver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991, Pp. 222 hardcover.*

Those eyes: the eyes on the cover photograph, the author's eyes at age twenty-seven. The eyes again, in the portrait by Eliza Massey, of Dorothy Livesay, at age eighty-one. Eyes of one who looks, who observes in order to understand, to describe, to write. Eyes of a poet, able to feel, express, crystallize precious moments of life.

In *Journey with My Selves*, Dorothy Livesay, one of Canada's foremost poets, with twenty-five books of poetry and prose to her credit, two Governor General's awards for poetry, speaks to us of her own life and the six hoods she wore: childhood, girlhood, womanhood, motherhood, widowhood and, last but not least, selfhood. Not to mention hoods worn at convocation ceremonies. Knowing that it is difficult to live of your pen, Dorothy Livesay acquired a B.A. from Trinity and an M.Ed. from U.B.C., which allowed her to have a somewhat regular income.

Livesay's childhood was easy yet difficult. One of the photographs reproduced in the volume shows her sitting on a garden swing with her younger sister; she looks happy at age seven. Yet she asks whether she might, at age three, have felt neglected. Both parents were journalists, the mother working as a freelancer, the father being in regular employment. She looks almost princess-like in the rabbit-fur coat sent by a grandmother, yet she speaks of the financial difficulties of the household where buying clothes for the children was not always easy.

Of her parents, Livesay speaks with discretion. To name them she uses their initial, FRL for Florence Randal Livesay and JFB for John Frederick Bligh (Livesay)—for brevity, I suppose, but also to distance herself, to avoid the *Dad* and *Mom* we so

frequently see in other memoirs. The parents were good, helpful. They assisted Dorothy in getting her first works of childhood and young womanhood published; they sent her to good schools and even abroad. The father, furthermore, helped Dorothy by paying for an abortion when she was twenty-five. On the other hand, they expected their children to abide by their rules and gaining independence was not easy. Also, FRL and JFB were not in love with each other; he was an agnostic and a freethinker, she was a Protestant, somewhat prude, yet rebelling against the traditional woman's role. JFB had drinking problems; she did not cope too well with the daily chores of a housewifery. At one occasion at least, JFB abused FRL physically and, most of the time, as Livesay phrases it, "they struck needles in one another" (53). Was her relationship with her father the closer one? Some pages in the book seem to indicate just that.

Dorothy Livesay was four when World War I started and, while here mother and father seem to have believed in the inevitability of war, her paternal grandmother had already instilled other thoughts in her. Politically progressive, both parents appear to have accepted quite willingly Dorothy's involvement with politics and political action. She was for some years a member of the Communist Party, and later became a socialist.

Journey with My Selves is a portrait of a Canadian poet surrounded, as of her infancy, by Canadian intellectuals, writers and poets. Her poetry reflects, of course, her personal experiences and vibrates with her pursuit of and active work for social justice and peace. Livesay has been a teacher, a social worker, a humanist. She has always considered that the poet must be in the world, not in an ivory tower. In 1935 already, E.J. Pratt said how delighted he was to find, in Dorothy Livesay, "a Canadian poet who was concerned with living people rather than with maple leaves" (151). Yet Livesay can also celebrate nature, just as she can speak of

love, of first person exploration without excluding the general. Wendy Robbins, who considers Livesay "one of Canada's most important social poets and a highly original love poet," states in her introduction of Dorothy Livesay, in *World Literature by Women, 1875-1975* (Longman, 1989, Marian Arkin and Barbara Shollar, eds.): "[her] central themes are freedom and connection, identity and intimacy, and the tension that exists between them" (458).

Livesay has divided her autobiography into 16 chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by some "After Words." Each chapter speaks of events and people that have, in one way or another, determined her development as a teacher, a social worker, a humanist and a poet. Thus she does not follow a direct chronological order. The risk of her method is that it can lead to repetition. We are told several times which schools she attended, for instance. However, this does not take away any of the reader's pleasure. Livesay understood poetry as oral communication. *Journey with My Selves* also seems to engage the reader in an intimate conversation with the author. Besides, as we all know, we sometimes repeat ourselves when telling our personal story.

What struck me again and again while reading the book was how sensitive and, at the same time, how pragmatic Dorothy Livesay can be. Probably it is this pragmatism that made life possible for the poet, in her clearly very busy world. When she hears of her husband's unexpected death and is in a state of shock, the words "I'm free, I'm free" come to her mind. Not because she is callous, but because, as a fifty-year-old woman, she had been wondering how she could exploit her potential. For her, "La Vita Nuova," as she calls the following chapter, is about to begin. Work with UNESCO, teaching in Africa, further studies at U.B.C., poetry that boldly expresses herself, the passionate and aging woman: these were to be her achievements.

The book has deepened my admiration of Dorothy Livesay. Author of many books, mother of two, wife of many years, this woman has also studied, taught, and been an activist. Her life un-

folds in this book, revealing all its richness, all its truth. "What is truth?" asked JFB when he was writing his memoirs. "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," wrote Emily Dickenson. Livesay concludes:

I am not ashamed to set down what seems to be the truth of my parents' lives nor what seems to be the truth of the lives of the men and women who have informed my consciousness since leaving the parental fold. These people who have demanded my love and attention have also become a part of me, and to set them down in these pages is not to relinquish them, but to remember. Always with longing, to remember. This is my truth. (15)

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Beyond the Moon Gate: A China Odyssey, 1938-1950. John Munro. *Vancouver & Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990, Pp. 273, paperback.*

Beyond the Moon Gate is the story of Margaret Outerbridge's years in China. Her husband Ralph was a medical missionary who worked under the United Church of Canada, while Margaret, who married Ralph in 1938 just before they went to China, felt no personal call as a missionary. In her words, "[we] are Missionaries! But I am not. Ralph is. I am Ralph's wife. The love that takes me to China is not the love that impels my husband" (2). The love that took Margaret to China was her love for her husband Ralph.

Using diaries that Margaret had written to be shared with her family in North America, letters home written by both Margaret and Ralph, and numerous conversations with Ralph who was still living at the time of the book's publication (Margaret had died several years earlier), John Munro wrote Margaret Outerbridge's biography of the years that she and Ralph lived in China. Margaret's story, as John Munro interpreted it, is a war story, a medical case book, an exotic adventure, an exposure of missionary life and an account of a couple's life together.