

ally detail the effect of trench warfare on the men. Young Basil Morris's pleading for letters from home, the gradual replacement of youthful enthusiasm for weariness with the constant fear, the lack of rest, and the mud of the European trenches, give us a good picture of homesick and confused boys fighting a war which had scarcely any meaning in their lives, once the romance of adventure had worn off. In one letter, young Basil explains that, here, in the trenches, there was no one to give one comfort and sympathy, and his longing to be home with his parents and sister, is strong and undisguised. We even learn such mundane features of trench life, as the value of having a cat in one's trench-home in order to keep out rats and mice.

These letters also tell us, most articulately and eloquently, the way in which the men coped with the idea of death; how they became, of necessity, almost callous to the loss of comrades and family, and how they learned to live with the fear of their own death.

Unfortunately, *But This Is Our War* does not balance the beautifully detailed picture of the soldier's life, with an accurate and realistic account of home life during the war. In this sense, the book can scarcely be considered women's history, as it sadly tells us very little about the author herself. By so eloquently eulogizing the heroism of her soldiers, and passing quickly over the lives of the women left to wait for their return, the author of *But This Is Our War* tells us whose war it really was.

But if the book is poor women's history, it is an admirable piece of oral history of the World War I period, told from a soldier's viewpoint. One must keep in mind, however, that this book deals only with the lives of wealthy middle class boys who were sheltered from much of the agony of the overall war experience. Although Basil was involved in trench warfare, he had a much more comfortable life than many, being an officer and an engineer involved in tunnelling

operations. The young officers whose correspondence makes up this book did not suffer from the demoralization of unemployment, which was high during the early war years and prompted many men to enlist, nor following the war when many returned servicemen came back to a country which did not seem to need them anymore.

Morris's description of Canadian pre-war life as a gay adventure, may be true to her personal experience, and/or remembrances, yet it is hardly representative of the average Canadian young woman. The British loyalty and unquestioning support of the war effort displayed by the Morris family and reflected in *But This Is Our War*, may have been typical of many middle class, Anglo-Saxon Ontarians, but was in no way typical of all Canadians. Despite the limited view presented in *But This Is Our War*, Grace Morris Craig's book is readable, interesting, well-illustrated and a notable contribution to Canadian social history.

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Louise Michel. Edith Thomas. Translated by Penelope Williams. *Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980.*

The name of Louise Michel - "petroleuse" and "communard" - has been etched on the banners and in the traditions of both communism and anarchism. For them, Louise Michel has assumed a somewhat mythical status which

obscures the realities, ambiguities and complexities of her experience. She bridged the gap in her time between an emerging feminism and the left, and lived the tension between her commitment to women and her overriding attachment to the male-dominated left. She played the role of a female "ringleader" and living symbol of the Paris Commune for the left.

Edith Thomas's biography helps us to learn more about the life of this remarkable woman - her experience, her passions, her limitations and her accomplishments. Louise Michel begins to take on flesh and blood in the pages of this biography. We get a glimpse of the drama and tragedy of her life, and through this porthole into the past a sense of French history and the oppressions and struggles of women.

Louise Michel lived from 1830-1905. Her life bridged an important period of transition in French society from a rural, peasant-based agricultural economy to an industrialized and increasingly urbanized capitalist political economy. In Michel's life is embedded the experiences of industrial capitalism and a revolt against its horrors. Michel's life coincides with the emergence of oppositional political currents within the working class and among intellectuals to the poverty and degradation of capitalist exploitation. She was to witness the emergence, growth, and institutionalization of the proletarian and trade union movements. She would also witness the resistance of working class women to their conditions of life and labour and the stirring of middle class feminists demanding their rights.

Michel was never one to stand aside from the historical events of her day as she became immersed in feminist and left-wing agitation. She played an active role in the Paris Commune of 1871 which has been referred to as the first attempt by working people to take over political power and govern for themselves. The Commune was drowned by the Versailles government in the blood of the Parisian lower classes.

More than 30,000 were murdered as the bourgeoisie wreaked its revenge on those who had dared to take power into their own hands. Michel through the unique circumstances of her upbringing and education was one of the few women involved in the defence of the Commune who was in a position to write about her experiences. She achieved fame as a skilled public speaker for the revolution.

Louise was born to a housemaid in the Vroncourt chateau. The exact identity of her father is unknown but it seems to have been either Etienne-Charles Demahais or his son Laurent. She was raised as one of the family in the Vroncourt chateau of Etienne-Charles Demahais. Louise's coming to understand the circumstances of her birth and her "bastard" status may have had some effect on her, making her more sympathetic to others facing injustice or who were different from the norm. She did not blame her mother for the circumstances of her birth and was always very tied to and respectful of her mother, Marianne Michel.

Louise Michel received a liberal education which provided her with interests and skills in literature, poetry and culture which would become of great use later in her career as a revolutionary. She became concerned with the problems of the local peasants with whom she interacted in her daily life and developed a sympathy for the downtrodden. A pronounced humanitarian and charitable streak developed in her character through these experiences.

Louise along with the other young women of her day and social status had very few social options and little chance of a life economically independent of a man. She could marry, go into the church or try her hand at teaching. She rejected marriage and a career in the church. The only option left for her was to take up teaching. Given the sex-segregated division of labour of the day this was just about the only option left for educated women who rejected marriage and

the church. Working as a teacher she developed a number of innovative and creative educational methods which foreshadowed some of the progressive transformations in educational pedagogy.

Louise Michel moved to Paris and began to develop a more left-wing perspective. She was involved in the Women's Rights Group which demanded equal education for the sexes and an adequate salary for women so as to eliminate the need for prostitution. She was drawn into debates against the Second Empire's anti-feminists, including Proudhon. She was also secretary for the Democratic Society for Moralization which campaigned to make it possible for women workers to earn living wages.

During the 72 days of the short-lived Paris Commune, Louise Michel was a member of both the women's and men's Vigilance Committees of the 18th arrondissement. As Thomas puts it, Michel, "whole-heartedly joined the Parisian masses in their choice of the historical path of revolt and social justice" (p. 67). She acquired the reputation of being a "ringleader." Women played a significant role in the life and defence of the Commune. When the bourgeois republic first tried to disarm the Parisian masses, their soldiers refused to fire on the women. At the same time, within the organising practices of the Commune, male domination prevailed. Women were excluded from political decision making as only men could vote. The man whom Louise Michel seemed to be platonically in love with, Theophile Ferre, was as anti-feminist as the other male communards.

Louise Michel spent the early days of the Commune trying to implement progressive social and educational reforms. As the Versailles troops began to advance on the Commune's revolutionary guards she became an ambulance driver and soldier. The male patriarchs of the Commune, however, disliked women running around the battlefields instead of sticking to their kit-

chens where they belonged. Louise Michel resisted this sexism and fought for women's right to care for the sick and to fight on the battlefield. Against opposition from communards she spoke up for the women prostitutes who worked on the ambulances in defence of the Commune.

With the crushing of the Commune, Louise Michel was taken into custody. She figured prominently in the trial of a group of working class and poor women who had been active in the final defence of the Commune, who were labelled the "petroleuses" for supposedly igniting Paris with petrol bombs on the defeat of the Commune. Louise was sentenced to deportation to a fortress and was sent to New Caledonia. During her ocean voyage conversations with Nathalie, another deported woman, led to her conversion to anarchism. She came to believe that it had been the legality of the Commune which had been its downfall, that all power needed to be gotten rid of, that liberty could not be associated with power of any sort.

During her stay on New Caledonia, she sympathized with the local inhabitants and the Algerian deportees. She developed a firm and consistent anticolonialist politics. Her sentence was commuted to simple banishment and she was allowed to teach the islanders, an activity she delighted in. In 1880 she returned to France as part of a general amnesty. She was greeted by thousands to whom she had become a living symbol of the Commune. Uppermost in Louise Michel's mind, however, was her need to see her mother again.

Louise Michel embarked on her career as spokesperson for the revolution, particularly its anarchist wing, and spokeswoman for free marriage and equal education for women. The media spun tales about her which aided in her emergence as a public personality. There was always a certain sense of scandal and controversy surrounding her appearances. She fought a battle for unity against the powerful currents rip-

ping apart the fragmented left. The development of institutionalized Guesdist trade unions led to the isolation of the anarchists from the working masses.

Louise Michel lived the rest of her life in and out of jail as she was thrown in and out of custody for her speeches and participation in demonstrations. Her periods in custody provided her with some of the more quiet and contemplative aspects of her life. At one speaking engagement she was shot in the head by a man enraged by her anti-church remarks. Even though she campaigned for women's economic independence, in her own life she remained partially dependent on male benefactors like Rochefort. She tried to earn money of her own through literary ventures. As Thomas explains, Louise's writings had the same quality as her life, that is, the character of a hurried first draft.

Marianne's death shattered Louise and through the last years of her life her heart seemed broken. Louise lived her last years in London (where she met Emma Goldman) and on speaking tours of France. It was during one of her speaking tours in 1905 that she died of double pneumonia. Her funeral attracted one hundred thousand working people, socialists and anarchists united for a rare manifestation of solidarity.

Thomas describes Louise Michel as a feminist and in the context of the times she was. She fought for women's rights in the social and educational spheres, but not in the traditional political sphere. Her anarchist politics, which was generally stronger than her feminism, was opposed to any participation in bourgeois institutions including bourgeois electoral rights. She therefore placed herself in opposition to the female suffrage movement and to many of the most radical women fighting for their liberation.

She seems to have seen women's battle as part of a broader class struggle from which women ought not to separate. In her view, "women must

not divorce their cause from that of humanity as a whole" (p. 182). She felt that women could be better fighters in these class battles than men. As she put it, "If the men hang back when the time comes, women will lead the way" (p. 57). She apparently saw no real conflict between the needs and interests of male and female working class people which needed to be struggled through. She therefore did not see any need for an autonomous women's movement although at various points she did participate in and help build up various women's organizations.

Her feminism had remarkable but understandable limitations. While she fought for free marriage and for equal educational rights for women, she felt that in a new society a woman's place, when you came right down to it, was in the domestic-private realm. Louise was opposed to women demanding the right to work outside the home. Once speaking to women, she said:

You're the ones who bear the responsibility of family and home, while men are responsible for work outside the home, production in all its forms. Once you are free, you must no longer deform your natural attributes nor spend twelve to fourteen hours a day in the workshops.(p. 294)

While it is understandable that women would not want to spend their lives in workshops, Michel's comments reveal an acceptance of a "natural" sexual division of labour which is at the root of women's oppression. Louise's vision of the proper male and female roles thus dovetailed with the organized male working class demands for a "family wage" to be paid to and under the control of the male wage-labourer. This helped to bring about a sexual division of labour within the working class which secured women's subordination. Her vision was limited by the circumstances of her life, the weakness of any autonomous feminist theory, and the blinders of her anarchist politics which prevented the integration of an autonomous feminist perspec-

tive. In this sense the anarchist black flag did not wave more positively for women in that period than the red flag would once appropriated by Stalinism and the Soviet Union.

While Louise Michel was friends with some of the main feminists of her time, like the Duchesse d'Uzès, she seems to have seen herself as different from other women. Speaking of other female prisoners when she was in jail she wrote, "They have the usual strengths and weaknesses of womankind, and that is exactly what I do not have" (p. 109). Her education set her apart from lower class women, and her political positions from middle class women. She does not seem to have had a feminist support network which could have provided her with the basis for an autonomous feminist vision.

Edith Thomas's biography provides us with a useful view of Louise Michel's dreams and aspirations. Unfortunately the work which was originally written in French for a French audience presupposes a basic understanding of French history. It would have been helpful if the translator could have provided some historical notes on such topics as the Commune, the Dreyfus affair and other historical developments. It is quite irritating for the English reading audience that Louise's poetry, which was so important to her, is left in its original French and never translated into English.

The biographic account could have paid more attention to the various shifts in her political thought; for example, her transformation from a supporter of violent revolution in her youth to a believer in the possibility of a peaceful change in her later years. The historically important debate about the sexual orientation of Michel is referred to in only one brief paragraph. A fuller exploration would have been in order although the existing sources are few. The suggestion that she may have been a lesbian and what this would have meant in that historical period could have been approached through an examination of

Louise's intimate relationships with her women friends. The companion for the last fifteen years of her life was Charlotte Vauvelle, for example, and more of this relationship needs to be rediscovered. Emma Goldman's adamant denial of allegations regarding Louise Michel's lesbianism could also have been reported (see Katz, *Gay American History*, p. 378-380).

Edith Thomas's biography of Michel deserves to be read by all historians of the relation of feminism to the left, of women and various social struggles and movements. It gives us an important account of her life. It provides us with an inspiring story of a woman who remained true to her convictions and who always sided with the oppressed and maligned. As Thomas puts it, "Her glory is that she never lost her faith in, or her passion for, the destiny of humanity." (p. 401)

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The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914. Karen Blair. *New York and London: Holmer and Meier Publishers Inc. 1980. Pp. 119.*

Women's clubs embrace a diversity of form and action, some more notable than others. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries top marks for excitement have always gone to those groups promoting suffrage, sexual purity, temperance, clothing reform and equal rights. Organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National Women's Trade Union League, the National Woman Suffrage Association and the National Woman's Party, all of the United States, won maximum attention in their day and ours. Such devotion, enshrined for example in the three volume *History of Woman Suffrage* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton *et al* (Rochester: Susan B. Anthony, 1881-6) and Page Smith,