Learning and Loving During the Lost Years

by Patricia Morley

Right Hand Left Hand

DOROTHY LIVESAY. ed David Aranson and Kim Todd. Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1977. Pp. 280.

This collection of Dorothy Livesay's early letters, stories, clippings, plays and essays is an unusual work. A grab-bag, certainly. But the question as to whether or not Livesay has been well served by her editors is not an easy one. An early reviewer has criticized the collection as undisciplined. Granted, there are a few letters which, from today's vantage point, seem to be of little relevance either personally or socially.

Nevertheless, this grab-bag packs quite a punch. I know of no other work (Ten Lost Years included) which singlehandedly conveys so well the feeling, the flavour of those dreadful years from 1929-1939. This is living documentary, part of the social history and intellectual tradition which Canadians have begun to record relatively recently.

Right Hand Left Hand is not a story of feminism in the thirties but of one woman's sensibility in the face of massive suffering and social unrest. References to women's problems as such are peripheral. But between the lines one can observe the struggle of a sheltered upper-class girl towards a committed radicalism and a social conscience. Marriage in 1937 (to Duncan Macnair) resulted in the loss of her job with the B.C. government, as soon as her husband succeeded in obtaining employment: such were the rules. Livesay has no comment on this inequity beyond noting that she "became quite depressed" over the loss of her job. The onset of war and the British-Russian pact resulted in less pressure on Canadian Communists and co-opted the sympathies of many on the political Left in the fight against Fascism. Thus the decade ended with Dorothy and her husband withdrawing (the emphasis

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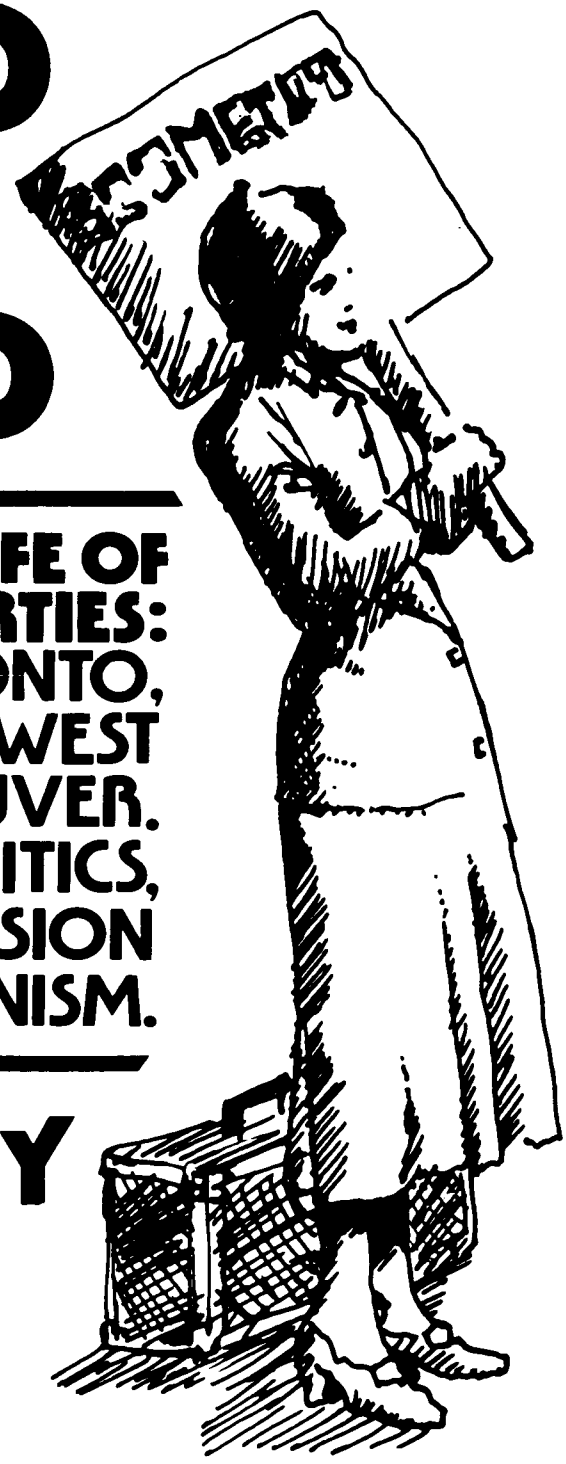
A TRUE LIFE OF THE THIRTIES: PARIS, TORONTO, MONTREAL, THE WEST AND VANCOUVER. LOVE, POLITICS, THE DEPRESSION AND FEMINISM.



DOROTHY LIVESAY

is mine not Livesay's) to raise a family and watch the depression being transformed by a wartime boom: "Our solution was to withdraw, to settle down to family life on the North Shore."

The "Toronto 1934" chapter is the only one with a focus on women's problems. It tees off with the following quote: "Such were the dichotomies I found in male-female relationships in the thirties. In theory, they were free and equal as comrades on the left. In practice, our right hand was tied to the kitchen sink." Livesay notes that her early concepts of women in society were determined by the famous British women writers whom her father made sure she read: Burney, Austen, Eliot, the Brontes, Woolf, Richardson and Mansfield. These were not "women's libbers, any of them, but creative women who dared to live by their own standards."

The Writers' Club at the University of Toronto was exclusively male. Livesay found, however, that by 1931 the climate was changing, as women's interest in politics, the arts and freedom of religious belief increased:

> Although women were still coralled in separate colleges and separate organizations, a liberated group of free thinking men and women were meeting informally with professors. . . . The final hurdle for the young women in those groups was that of "losing your virginity." Quite a few managed it. But so clandestine did the taking on of a lover have to be (on account of parental and religious disapproval) that the relationships were fraught with anxiety. We learned of only two methods of birth control; the French safe and the chemical pessary. . . . I saw that only in a society where men and women struggled together for equal opportunity and equal responsibility would the illegitimate child be accepted, and with no blacklisting of his mother. Liberal attitudes, egalitarianism between the sexes were certainly practices amongst intellectuals. . . . Probably the most severe restrictions against pre-marital sex and illegitimate births occurred not in the middle class (where they were secretly acknowledged or condoned) but amongst the working and farm people.

Livesay was a social worker. Under various pseudonyms, she wrote about women's roles in New Frontier, the leftist journal which succeeded the Marxist Masses and attempted to enlist a much broader range of left-wing writers and support. Many of her points about social conditioning sound familiar and contemporary: women are inclined to place love on a pedestal as the only real value; women are taught to expect less of themselves than men, and to fear and distrust work outside the house as a permanent prospect; non-working women are cut

off from their society and this deficiency is then reflected in their relationships with their children; a few years of marriage and motherhood unfit women to return to work outside the house. And so it goes. Livesay concludes that the only ultimate excape lies in economic equality of the sexes.

The decision by Livesay or the editors to include photographs from the thirties was well taken. They add to the immediacy of feeling for the period which this collection fosters. There are photos of powerful paintings and drawings by Miller Britain ("Longshoremen," "The Rummage Sale,") and Louis Mullstock ("Welder," "William O'Brien Unemployed," "Jos. Lavallée with Bowl of Soup"); there is Charles Comfort's surreal and menacing "Pioneer Survival." Photos from the Public Archives, the National Film Board and private agencies bring to life much of the agony of the times: the hunger, pain, humiliation, desperation and violence. There are even photos of special covers of New Frontier and "agit-prop" (agitational propaganda) theatre handbills.

Several types of print have been used to separate the different kinds of material: italics for Livesay's contemporary commentary (very brief); Times Roman for news articles, pamphlets and letters; and larger type for her stories, plays and occasional poems. These conventions are helpful.

Editor David Arnason's competent five-page Introduction provides an overview of the Left in the thirties: its contradictions, idealism and gallows humour; its periodicals (The Canadian Forum, Masses, New Frontier); the Workers' Experimental Theatre and "agit-prop" dramas (Livesay wrote several such plays); the repercussions of the Spanish Civil War and the Soviet German pact of 1939. Arnason writes: "When the war was over, the Canadian Left had lost its focus. . . . Once more the new age had failed to arrive." There is no reason to quarrel with his conclusion, that the book reveals part of our literary heritage "through the eyes of an active participant and sensitive poet."

Livesay's stories (seven are included here) tend to be uneven in literary quality, strongly emotional, didactic, built around obvious political themes such as the hypocrisy of the ruling class, the importance of worker solidarity and the necessity for bridging the gap between the proletariat and the white-collar workers. "Herbie," for example, presents the thoughts of a sadistic racist policeman assigned to spy on Leftist publications. The cop hopes to seduce the Negro bookstore clerk, whome he despises. Needless to say, he gets his comeuppance. In "A Cup of Coffee," a separated couple's chance meeting reveals the hideous economic situation in which they are caught, but the effects seem to be manipulated. The morals are too

clear, the assignment of vice and virtue too blatant. In a critique of one of her stories which had been published in New Frontier under the pseudonym of Katherine Bligh, Morley Callaghan speaks of the story as being "singularly devoid of feeling . . . . class consciousness, or an intention directed towards that end is not enough."

As a fledgling writer, Livesay aspired to write fiction and received, at the time, very little encouragement. She put aside her early lyric gift during the first three years of the thirties; political indoctrination, combined with the spectre of social misery, convinced Livesay that literature should be socially committed rather than pure or aesthetic, qualities she now termed "escapist." Some of her peoms motivated by political radicalism are pure doggerel: witness "Pink Ballad," included here. But the bulk of Livesay's poetry has a permanent place in our literature because it effectively fuses aesthetic, intellectual and social concerns.

In prose, it is her essays which strike this reviewer as being of permanent value. There are ten articles in the collection, all but two ("Raymond Knister: A Memoir" and a review of Morley Callaghan's novel They Shall Inherit the Earth) devoted to political and social problems of the Depression. As a critic of Callaghan, Livesay's political views blunt her judgment. The novelist is condemned for seeking "an individual solution" rather than a class one: "A hammer is being used to drive in a pin." Marxist theory dictated that the individual was not important, while Livesay's personal orientation insisted that he was. Fortunately for her writing, the latter view won out. Livesay's use of individual experience to illustrate political and social situations gives the fascination of fiction to much of her non-fictional prose. She was writing 'New Journalism' long before the term came into popular usage in the sixties. Essays such as "The Beet Worker" and "Indians at Caughnawaugha" describe misery and injustice in language that is simple but vivid and forceful.

Regrettably, there is no contemporary overview by Livesay on her actions and attitudes of forty years ago. The omission is especially teasing in the light of her own brief reference, in an italicized portion near the beginning, to her youthful naiveté with regard to Communist propaganda and political theory. The maturation implied here is never examined nor defined. A further regret is that Livesay subscribed, in the thirties, to the cliché verdict that there was no Canadian literary tradition and that nineteenth-century Canadian poets dealt exclusively with maple leaves and the first crocus. A cursory glance at Roberts, Lampman or D.C. Scott would disabuse any intelligent

reader of this notion. But if Livesay came to a more mature verdict on earlier Canadian poets, she fails to acknowledge it here.

Despite these shortcomings, Right Hand Left Hand, with its delightfully melodramatic subtitle "A True Life of the Thirties: Paris, Toronto, Montreal, the West and Vancouver, Love, Politics, the Depression and Feminism," is a book you should read. Read it because Livesay is one of our senior Canadian poets. And because those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat its follies.

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