

WALKING WITH MILDRED FAHRNI

A Reflection

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No Plaster Saint: The Life of Mildred Osterhout Fahrni

Nancy Knickerbocker

Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001. 287 pp. Illus. \$19.95 paper.

NANCY KNICKERBOCKER has written a wonderful book about Mildred Fahrni. Through careful recounting of events and experiences, people and places, she covers the whole span of Mildred's life, from childhood days of innocent romping, to being a rather flirty lass followed around by forlorn swains, to maturing into a passionate and committed worker for peace. The book is, however, more than a chronological narrative about a remarkable woman. Knickerbocker knits Mildred's story in with the fabric of society, casting it against the backdrop of world, Canadian, and BC history. Of course, being about Mildred, the book is also a history of the peace movement in Canada, the two being as good as synonymous. The details (including juicy nuggets) Knickerbocker provides are testimony to her perspicacious and diligent research. These details are tightly woven and well organized into coherent chapters, enabling Knickerbocker to maintain our interest throughout what might easily have deteriorated into a boring tome.

Knickerbocker draws up so many facets of Mildred that, coupled with her astute analyses of Mildred as a person and individual add rich depth to the book. Knickerbocker shows us Mildred

as a young woman, "actively struggling with basic questions of gender and freedom" and "questioning the conventional boundaries of expression" (55), feeling the tussle between her own outwardness and spontaneity and the restrictions imposed on her by her father and society: "Mildred was always welcome in the best company, but on the other hand she was supposed to set an example of girlish Christian virtue and be a paragon of propriety. Her tomboyish nature railed against these limitations" (16). Mildred is revealed as a teenager worrying a lot and feeling "insecure about her looks and capabilities," criticizing herself "for not being expert in anything" and fretting about her weight (23). The Mildred fighting spirit shows early on, too: "Imagine father saying that I'd cry my eyes out if I went to Alberta. I wont spill a single tear just for spite" (24). Mildred was a good person, but she was no sap either. She comments at taking meals with some rather dull people on board the ship taking her to India: "If an idea ever got loose at the table I'm sure the furniture would fall down under the weight of it" (98).

I like the way Knickerbocker describes things, uses words. From describing how a newspaper article

was “breathlessly questioning” whether Gandhi would exert similar influence on British women as he did on Indian women (51) to her analysis of Mildred’s decision to marry Walter: “In the end she decided to marry him because she loved him and knew him well enough to believe he could be happy in an unconventional relationship” (134). She knows how to turn a dramatic line, describing how Gandhi set Mildred’s life on a “heroic” rather than a “romantic” course (49), with the meeting itself being the “accident” that freed Mildred “from the confines of a conventional woman’s story” (60).

Such revelations provide a dimension of understanding about Mildred, her lifestyle and decisions she made. When I was staying with Mildred at West 8th in the 80’s, I remember wondering at her spartan lifestyle, spartan even for me as an impoverished graduate student. We both shopped for day old bread at Pasqual’s Bakery, with Mildred’s usual tea treat being Pasqual’s crusty cinnamon rollovers. Coming from a materialistic and well-fed world, I did not understand the philosophy behind this frugality. Another time I was walking with Mildred past “rich houses” and Mildred commenting they were a “waste” because they could house two or three families, and probably only two people lived in them, who were hardly even home. I understood Mildred’s words but not its significance until Knickerbocker’s telling us how from very early on, Mildred was already questioning “Why is it possible for one family to have so much heaped around them when at least 120,000 in Philadelphia are dependent on charity?” (43)

I remember the 1981 Peace Walk. Mildred picked up my parents, who were arriving at the airport from Malaysia. We were late, but despite

breaking the speed limit and screeching through Richmond, we were able to walk for peace. We were cringing in the thirty-degree heat. Not so Mildred Fahrni. Her rallying cry, as the Bastion family valiantly tried to keep up, was, “You there, get up and walk for peace,”

Knickerbocker’s book, in revealing this depth of knowledge and understanding about Mildred, fills me with regret that I did not know her better, did not appreciate the full significance of who and what she was. *No Plaster Saint* opened my eyes to so much too late. What a shame it is that one only reads a person’s biography after she has gone.

Knickerbocker’s book evokes Mildred’s spirit and individuality, which fills us with hope and faith in human kindness and care. But it is a sad book because it evokes nostalgia for a time “of innocence and optimism, of rapid progress and boundless possibilities” (12) – an era, a phase, that, like Mildred, has passed on and will never be again. It is also sad because Mildred, “a child of the twentieth century” (11), did not live the century out. However, as it turns out, this is possibly a good thing because September 11th would have broken her heart. She would have been devastated to learn that, after all her efforts, sacrifices, attempts to make the world to a better place it has actually become worse.

I didn’t like the title of the book. Mildred was not a saint, she was a human being – that is the whole point – she was a beautiful human being. If she had been a saint, goodness would simply have been expected of her. What would I have chosen as a title? “I Walked with Gandhi” – one of the first things Mildred told me about herself. After reading Nancy Knickerbocker’s book, I feel a similar pride in having walked with Mildred Fahrni.