

This Issue Is Not Ended Canadian Poetry & the Spanish Civil War

The most striking characteristic of Canadian poetry about the Spanish Civil War is that although it has so little to do with Spain, nonetheless, it is about the war. The reasons for this rather unlikely state of affairs are several. First, with the exception of Norman Bethune who wrote poetry only occasionally, no Canadian poets went to Spain, during the war. Of the 1,448 Canadians who are known to have served in Spain almost all were genuinely working-class,¹ and whatever the ideal might be, the reality is, as Leo Kennedy has noted (“DfCP”), most Canadian poets were (and are) from the middle-class. Of the combatants, only Ted Allan and Hugh Garner were to make a mark on Canadian letters, both as prose writers. Canadian poets thus had little or no first-hand knowledge of Spain.² Second, until the start of the war on 18 July 1936, few Canadians (poets included) knew or cared much about Spain; and during the war what they did know they learned through the war. Spain thus for them quickly became practically synonymous with the war, or, more accurately, with the issues being decided there: its ideological and international (geopolitical) significance. Third, the Spanish Civil War coincided with two critical events in Canadian poetry, the one literary, the other social and economic: the arrival of modernism in Canada, and the Great Depression. If modernism had reached Canada more than a decade earlier,³ its confirmation was the publication the same year the war began of the anthology *New Provinces: Poems of Several Authors*,⁴ and of the first book-length appraisal of modernism in Canadian literature, W. E. Collin’s *The White Savannahs*.⁵ A particularity of

Canadian modernist poetry, which neither the anthology nor the critical text adequately reflect, is how the Depression transformed the poetry of key members of Canada's first generation of modernists. The most cursory comparison of early verse by, for instance, F. R. Scott and Dorothy Livesay with their work from the 1930s shows a reorientation from aesthetic to social and political considerations. Compare, for example, Scott's "Moment," written in 1926 or "Old Song" from 1928 with "Social Notes I, 1932" or "Overture"; and Livesay's "Doves" written in Paris in 1931, or even "Old Trees at Père La Chaise", also from Paris the following year, with poems such as "Twenty Years After" and "An Immigrant", written after the poet's return to Canada, when her experience of the Depression as a social worker in Montreal had, in her own words, "brought me to my senses." ("Zynchuk's Funeral" *RHLH* 87)

While Canadian poets were not alone in their turn to politics in the 1930s, in their ignorance of Spain, or in their concern above all for the issues being decided there, the coincidence of the Spanish War with the beginnings of modernism in Canada ensured that this far-off and apparently unrelated event would exert a special influence on the development of Canadian poetry.⁶ Most interesting, however, is not the fact that Canadian poets turned their thoughts to the war—for almost three years the world did after all its attention fix on Spanish politics—but the particular manner in which they responded to it, writing at once about the Spanish War but only rarely about Spain. This apparent contradiction is not limited to Canadian poetry; the same may be said, for example, of W. H. Auden's "Spain", probably the most famous English-language poem on the war. Like the Canadian poets, Auden appropriates the Spanish War in his poem through a *displacement*, a transposition of the most pressing issues of the time to, as he called it, "that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot/Africa."

The international and acutely ideological nature of the Spanish War facilitated, even demanded such a displacement. As Norman Bethune remarked to a friend just before leaving for the war, "It is in Spain that the real issues of our time are being fought out. It is there that democracy will either die or survive" (qtd. *Bethune* 90). Whether he was right or not is less important than that his contemporaries, right and left, saw the Spanish conflict as crucial. In Spain the future, alternatively utopian or cataclysmic, was being born. Spain herself: her peoples, her history, and especially the Republic,

was very much an unknown. But Spain was not the question. Rather, Spain was the theatre only, and to Spain and the very concrete and immediate struggle there for political and economic democracy the poets (and not only the poets) transposed from Canada, as from the rest of the world, their hopes and dreams, which at home could manifestly only belong to a remote and abstract future.

To speak of Canadian poetry about the Spanish War is to speak first of all of Canadian poetry in English. For though the Depression brought a new awareness of social and political issues to Francophone writers, as it did to their Anglophone counterparts, among French Canadian poets there appears to have been little if any interest in the Spanish War, as there was little support for the Republic in French Canada.⁷ A notable exception was *Clarté*, the Communist newspaper in Montreal, which published some poetry, including translations of Arturo Serrano Plaja and Pablo Neruda, then Chilean Consul in Madrid.⁸ None of the original, Canadian poetry in *Clarté*, however, makes any mention of the Spanish war, focusing instead on the immediate details of life in Canada and the struggle for social justice at home. In contrast, poets writing in English published some two dozen poems about the Spanish War, mostly but not exclusively in left-leaning newspapers and journals, from *The Daily Clarion* to *The Canadian Forum*. Like *Clarté* in Montreal, the short-lived *New Frontier* in Toronto and the better-established *Canadian Forum* also published translations of Rafael Alberti, Manuel Altolaguirre, Rafael Beltrán Logroño, Antonio García Luque and Pascual Pla y Beltrán. (The poems of Beltrán Logroño and Pla y Beltrán translated by W. E. Collin⁹). The group around *New Frontier*, a publication considered by Peter Stevens as “perhaps ... the one attempt in Canada to organize a coherent centre of writing” (*McGill x*), was also in contact with Republican supporters in Britain and the U. S. and, amongst others, published one of the finest poems about the war by a British poet, “Arms for Spain” by Rex Warner.¹⁰ Whatever else the Spanish War meant for Canadian poetry, it widened its horizons, not least significantly exposing the first generation of Canadian modernists to Spain’s brilliant Generation of 27 and the equally brilliant poets of the Civil War.

One of the most important poems of the Depression, Anne Marriott’s “The Wind Our Enemy,” written in 1937, is not, strictly, a poem about the Spanish War, but a portrait of life on the drought-ravaged

prairies in the Thirties. Yet the war is present, and its presence both situates the war in relation to Canada during the Depression and gives the poem a scope and depth it could not have attained had the reference been omitted. Placing Marriott's text in that vast library of Canadian literature of struggle against the elements, Northrop Frye has suggested that in this poem "the enemy is still the wind rather than the forces of economic breakdown that helped to create the wind" (*BG* 154). The elements, the wind in particular, are indeed unbearably present. But almost exactly in the poem's centre the stanzas change, shifting from wind to economics and politics:

Relief cars.

'Apples, they say, and clothes!'
 The folks in town get their pick first,
 Then their friends—
 'Eight miles for us to go so likely we
 won't get much—'
 'Maybe we'll get the batteries charged up and have
 the radio to kind of brighten things—'

Insurgents march in Spain

Japs bomb Chinese

Airliner lost

'Maybe we're not so badly off as some—'
 'Maybe there'll be a war and we'll get paid to fight—'

The poet's use of italics for the brief snatches of news as well as for her descriptions of the devastating wind establishes an intimate relation between events in the world beyond the prairie, the war in Spain for example, and the wind: all are forces assailing life as the now desperate farmers had known it. In this sense Frye is correct, with the qualification, however, that the enemy includes a whole complex of elements, man-made as well as natural. Marriott's poem thus incorporates three key aspects of the Spanish War as it is (usually) represented in Canadian poetry. One, the war is a distant event with, for the poet, no specific attributes and especially no particular importance connected to the fact that it is in Spain; its significance lies above all, like that of the Japanese invasion of China, in its international and ideological character, that it is the product of fascist aggression and that it portends further war. Two, this aggression is transferred to a more familiar context, assimilated by the poet to forces closer to home—in the unique case of Marriott's poem, with natural forces: wind and drought. Three, this assimilation implies a translation of positions now (apparently) clearly

demarcated in Spain to Canada, and, most often, an analogous translation in the reverse direction of Canadian issues to the Spanish War, redefining it in terms that make it comprehensible and, especially, relevant to Canadians.

Very different from “The Wind Our Enemy,” the satirical poems of E. J. Pratt, L. A. MacKay and Lionel Reid¹¹ effect no explicit displacement of Canadian issues to the Spanish War, although there is certainly an implicit connection made. In Pratt’s “Dictator” especially, as in Marriott’s poem, it is understood that the war in Spain may lead to war over all Europe, and that war in Europe will mean war for Canada. In these poems, Spain as a concrete place, a real country with a geography, history, culture and political life is irrelevant. Most important is the historical struggle between two opposing visions of humanity, the one humanist and democratic, the other fascist and totalitarian; a struggle which *at the moment just happens to have come to war in Spain*. Reid’s “Salutes,” a quatrain published late in the war (August 1938) but given its subject: Mussolini, probably written earlier, is a case in point. More than a poem about the Spanish War, it is an attack on the Italian dictator and what he represents, well demonstrated it is true by his actions in Spain, and an affirmation of solidarity with those who oppose him and his sort:

Rome over a reviewing stand
the stout dictator’s empty hand.
Madrid the tightly folded fist
Of a dead baby Loyalist.¹²

This poem is certainly about the Spanish War, but it is just as certainly not about Spain. Spain is significant only as the theatre where fascism and its benefits are best displayed.

Pratt’s “Dictator”, alternatively titled “Baritone”, published in the *Canadian Poetry Magazine* in December 1936 is, like Reid’s short poem, clearly about the Spanish War, though not once does it explicitly refer to Spain. The poet compares an unnamed dictator, either Hitler or Mussolini, probably both, to a baritone whose “wind-theme ... grew into the fugue of Europe,” a fugue answered in turn by the different sections of the orchestra: the stock exchanges, various currencies, clerics, “The clang of the North sea against the bows/ of the destroyers, ... The grunt of the Mediterranean shouldering Gibraltar,” and finally “Morticians/ And the Linen Manufacturers—.” Thus accompanied, Pratt’s baritone

Called the brides and the grooms to the altar,
 . . .
 To replenish the earth,
 And in due season produce
 Magnificent crops of grass on the battlefields.

The poem's focus on Europe rather than Ethiopia or China, and its date (before the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia) confirm that Pratt's allusions are to Italian and German involvement in the Spanish War. And yet "Dictator" is also, as the absence of a specific reference suggests, not about this war, but about the general danger posed by fascism, about the consequences for the rest of the world of a fascist victory in Spain.

The most effective satirical verse written in Canada during the Spanish War is uncontestedly the work of L. A. MacKay, perhaps a less accomplished poet than Pratt, but the author of some worthwhile verse nevertheless. MacKay published five poems on the war, three of them masterful assaults on non-intervention and attendant hypocrisies. Particularly effective is "Battle Hymn of the Spanish Rebellion", which makes excellent use of allusions to a popular Christian hymn, in response perhaps to Nationalist claims that they were saving Christianity and Civilization from godless Communism and Anarchy while systematically slaughtering civilian populations.¹³ This short poem is worth quoting in its entirety:

The Church's one foundation
 Is now the Moslem sword,
 In meek collaboration
 With flame, and axe, and cord;
 While overhead are floating
 Deep-winged with holy love,
 The battle planes of Wotan,
 The bombing planes of Jove.

"Battle Hymn" is of especial interest because it calls attention to some specifics of the war. MacKay makes much of Franco's use of Moroccan troops to shore up Catholicism in Spain, and of Italian and German help to carry home its message of "holy love". Yet despite this precise reference to an unambiguously Spanish fact of the war, the focus of Mackay's poem is less Spain than Christianity—Christianity at the service of Realpolitik.

Mackay's most complex poem about the Spanish War is "Murder Most Foul,"¹⁴ a long denunciation of the various Republican factions engaged in

fratricidal struggles for power, apparently more concerned with advancing regional and sectarian interests than with winning the war against fascism:

Consider next the Catalan,
That singularly prudent man.
When bombs and bullets start to fall
He squats behind his mountain wall
And sees his neighbor's cities burn

...

They rally to Adventure's call
By taking pot-shots as they list
At Socialist, or Anarchist,
And the save the Duce and Fuehrer bother
By blowing holes in one another.

This poem sets MacKay apart from almost all other Canadian poets who have written about this war, and certainly it stands alone among poems published during the war. On the one hand, like Orwell, whose some might say naive concern for truth (as he could best see it) obliged him to describe the terrible May Days of 1937 in Barcelona, Mackay refuses to bow to "the logic of the times," as C. Day Lewis was to write, and "Defend the bad against the worse" (qtd. Cunningham, epigraph). On the other hand, and more importantly, MacKay's attempt to write about the Civil War as the specifically Spanish affair it also was fails. And it fails because the poet removes the concrete particulars of the war from their political (both national and international) and ideological contexts. The war thus abstracted from a context (or contexts) in which it can be understood, the killing and the sacrifice it involves can only be meaningless. There is no irony in the final lines:

And war's again a curse, save righteous war,
And we believe it, as we did before,
And still mankind pursues the same old goal,
To gain the world, and only lose our soul.

This conclusion, a move up onto the moral (and religious) high ground made possible only by a withdrawal from reality,¹⁵ is as revealing as it is disappointing. As far as the poem itself is concerned, it shows that in spite of his attention to details of the Spanish War, MacKay is in fact not writing about it, but about all war —of which the present example in Spain is simply a convenient and especially nasty specimen. Further, as far as Canadian poetry and the Spanish War is concerned, this poem shows that, however

much its ideological and international aspects might obscure and distort its specificity as a Spanish affair, at least for a Canadian poet (but probably for anyone), to ignore or set these aside renders the entire business incomprehensible. More than its details, it is the war's links to events and questions beyond Spain, events and questions which more directly affect Canadians, that that transform it from a distantly viewed and incomprehensible blood-bath as in "Murder Most Foul," into an issue and a cause.

Few Canadian poets even tried to grasp the complexities of the Spanish War as Mackay tried—and failed—to do. If they entertained any of the sort of reservations concerning the Republic that troubled him, they kept them to themselves. Whatever its evils, the Republic was far better than the alternative proposed by Franco and his mentors in Rome and Berlin. This publicly uncritical (and legitimate considering the nature of the war and the strength of the opposition at home as well as in Spain) attitude encouraged the displacement of Canadian issues and aspirations for exposition and development on the Spanish stage. For there, where all was manifestly a matter of life and death, these could be presented with the urgency they demanded, but could command only rarely if at all in Canada, where despite the bitterness of the Depression the haves and have-nots had not yet taken to their respective trenches.

The Spanish War thus provided an ideal vehicle for advancing, amongst others, some of the views put forward by Leo Kennedy in his essay "Direction for Canadian Poets" published, significantly, only a month before the war began. Kenneth Leslie's dramatic narrative "The Censored Editor" published in *New Frontier* in September 1937, and curiously omitted from his *Collected Poems*, has been qualified by Dorothy Livesay as "the most ambitious of any poems written in Canada about Spain" (*RHLH* 254). Livesay's praise notwithstanding, this poem makes clear that Leslie knew little about Spain; he gives an Italian name, for example, to one of his main characters.¹⁶ But this is unimportant. For the poem is not about Spain; it is a discussion of the intellectual's political and moral responsibilities conveniently set in Spain where such questions are now, dramatically, a matter of life and death. A dialogue between Inés and her son, Guido, who has chosen opportunistic collaboration with fascism, "The Censored Editor" is a condemnation of an intellectual's sophistic justifications for his lack of political and moral will. At the end of his poem Leslie

summarizes his argument in a fable about climbers in the Pyrenees:

A rockface in the Pyrenees. Five climbers.
Five dizzy lives held by a fingernail.
That moment on the trail when every eye
must focus on the trail. One puffing fool
flings out his arms to point the distant view.
The balance breaks. And so well roped together
down go the five like plummets. All for one
who was a two-fold enemy and traitor,
betraying beauty and its living hosts.
"Beauty was underfoot there in the rock."

Beauty, Leslie notes, echoing Keats, in the previous stanza, is truth. But, breaking with Romanticism, Leslie also maintains that beauty is not ideal; it is concrete and immediate. Beauty, and hence truth, is not in "the distant view" as the Romantics proposed, but "*underfoot there in the rock.*" Thus, Leslie concludes with a warning, one that acquires shape and substance through his use of the fable of the climbers, and immediacy and relevance by being placed in the context of the Spanish War. Whatever the ultimate goal may be or become, the issues are being decided here and now. To forget this: to hesitate, to doubt and dwell on intellectual niceties is to invite defeat, and is thus betrayal—of ourselves above all.

Similar to "The Censored Editor," Kennedy's most notable Spanish War poem, "Calling Eagles" is very much a poetic version of "Direction for Canadian Poets" applied to the present international crisis. The poet's eagles are the intellectuals and artists, "Swift thinkers, readers in books and the bones of nature." As in his essay, the poet calls on his fellows to turn to "immediates" (or "political immediacies"),¹⁷ in his poem he calls on them to

Come down to life, Eagles, where iron grinds bone, hands falter
And brave men perish for a tyrant's peace;
Come from where Spain strangles in blood, Ethiopia
Groans at the ironcased heel, Vienna
Numbers the dead ...

To remain above, aloof from the great and sordid questions of the day means not only denial of one's responsibilities as a human being. It also, and this seems to be Kennedy's chief concern at least in the essay and this poem, means the failure of one's art: "*There is only glacial death on the lonely crags.*" Although it provided an excellent context for settling, aesthetic as well as political scores, it would be unfair to suggest that Kennedy or any

other poets writing about the Spanish War cynically appropriated it for their own ends. Rather, their attitude is more like that expressed by Margaret Day in “Ode to Spring, 1937” in which she condemns poets who, knowing what is happening in Spain, continue to write of the first crocus, etc.: “While horror whistles down in Spain/Who can announce Canadian spring?” Her concern is firstly, if not overtly political, humanitarian, and only secondarily aesthetic.

For Canadian poets, by far the most common displacement occasioned by the Spanish War was of treasured utopias. Curiously, considering that the Republic was on the defensive, and that the war was consistently described, quite rightly, as the last chance to prevent a general fascist assault on the world, this war is often represented as the dawn of a new era of justice and fraternity, a vision which, as the war progressed and a Republican (let alone revolutionary) victory seemed less and less imminent, was transferred to an increasingly remote future.

A. M. Stephen’s ballad “Madrid,” published in *New Frontier* in May 1937, is typical in its final evocation of a bright and future world, and atypical in its attempt to present the war in some semblance of its Spanish context. In the poem’s first four stanzas, Stephen sketches a caricature of Spain: guitars, castanets, shawls, moonlit squares and dark eyes that gleam—the sort of thing probably better left to Spanish poets. These individual details, however, are less important than what the poet does with them together. For he uses them to accentuate the contrast between the idyllic, fairy-tale Madrid of “Last night,” and the Madrid of the second part of the poem, of “Tonight” where “Red death is arm-in-arm with hate—/Hate of the creeping Fascist horde.” Madrid’s “last night” is the world the fascists are determined to destroy. Neither the Madrileños nor the fascists in Stephen’s poem, however, have an existence distinct from and independent of their respective roles in the present monumental contest, a contest which the poet ultimately defines in religious terms, the present battle in Spain comparable to the crucifixion, victory now or in a far-removed future, to the resurrection:

Though on twisted Nazi cross
 They nail those hands that were so brave,
 The flower of liberty will spring
 Triumphant from the martyr’s grave.

Stephen was not alone in his appropriation of the Spanish War through Christian myth. Increasingly, the Republic's waning chances of survival demanded an abstraction of its (and the world's) liberation to this sort of a resurrection in future time.

Like Stephen, two key members of their generation, Leo Kennedy and Dorothy Livesay, as well as a number of lesser-known poets such as Harold Gerry and H. G. M., draw on images of resurrection and rebirth to express their fears (usually implicitly) and their hopes concerning the outcome of the war. Kennedy's "You, Spanish Comrade" and "Memorial to the Defenders," published under the pseudonyms Arthur Beaton and Leonard Bullen, both end like Stephen's "Madrid" with evocations of a world reborn, the first with a socialist utopia where

a place there'll be for work and skill and learning
for peasants turning earth no locust bares,
and girls with flowers, new children springing tall.

the second with a vision of revolutionary Spain victorious:

And newborn men erect as monument
To your dispersed flesh and valiant hearts
The People's Spain with freedom in its towers!

Peter Stevens has noted the formal similarities between Kennedy's political verse and the poetry of his much-praised volume *The Shrouding*, published in 1933 (Stevens "Kennedy"), and Brian Trehearne has remarked on "the burials and potential resurrections that dot the book" (116), most certainly the reason why in *The White Savannahs* Collin calls Kennedy "this man of April." These similarities raise some important questions concerning Kennedy's poetic development, especially in view of how enthusiastically he renounced the poetics of *The Shrouding*. They seem to contradict the view that art requires new forms to master new questions—unless of course, and this is perhaps the key to the importance of the war for Canadian poetry, Kennedy's politics and poetics do not change as radically as they at first seem to, but simply find focus and substance through his involvement with *New Frontier* and the Spanish Civil War. This is not to suggest that Kennedy does not evolve as a person or poet, only that whereas the Depression provided the conditions for his turn to political poetry and his critique of Canadian society and art, because it was a war and a revolution, a historical moment when (at least from as far away as Canada) it seemed that anything

might happen, the Spanish War provided the poet with a context (or pretext) for expressing his aspirations and his most improbable but necessary dreams.¹⁸

Like Kennedy, Dorothy Livesay supported the Republic as a matter of course and transferred to it her utopias. Her poems about the Spanish War constitute not only the largest production by any Canadian writer, but also some of the finest verse written on the subject. Her poems written during the war are in many ways similar to Stephen's "Madrid" and Kennedy's poems: all end with an invocation of a better world to come. Like Kennedy, Livesay makes an appeal to solidarity with those fighting for democracy—and revolution—in Spain; and like Stephen and Kennedy, she concludes her poems with images of resurrection and regeneration, though unlike them she makes no overt religious references. Rather, as in "Old Trees at Père La Chaise," nature is the source of regeneration. But between the Paris poem and the Spanish War poems, politics have intervened and transformed Livesay's nature. It has been assimilated to history and humankind's (political) will-to-liberation; it is not a regenerative force in itself, but an aspect of that will upon which depend our individual and collective destinies. In "Comrade" this will is more profound in its influence on the individual than even romantic or physical love:

I see you now a grey man without dreams,
Without a living, or an overcoat:
But sealed in struggle now, we are more close
Than if our bodies still were sealed in love.

More typical are "And Still We Dream" and "Man Asleep," both published in *New Frontier* in October 1936, which emphasize the issues rather than the individuals who made and lived them. In these poems, nature is clearly dependant upon human efforts and sacrifices. Victory, the new more just world, is not an inevitability. In "And Still We Dream" the poet exhorts her comrades to greater efforts, for to falter is to be vanquished: "Manhood and growth are on us; rise up, Comrade! / It is death to rest." Perhaps because it was written at the start of the war, "Man Asleep" presents another, more optimistic aspect of the poet's vision. Just as surely as idleness will guarantee defeat, action will ensure victory. In late summer of 1936 (that is, between the start of the war and the poem's publication) the triumph of Republican and especially revolutionary Spain seemed, and indeed was, a distinct possibility. This possibility (*not* inevitability) is reflected in the poem's final lines:

See, the world's home they built in Spain—

...

Now hunched in sleep, you dream the battle's done:

But still your bones shall spring to life like steel

Clamp down on victory, behold the sun!

This conclusion is typical of Livesay's Spanish War verse, as it is of Stephen's and Kennedy's, but with the nuance, absent in their work, that the future is not predestined, but contingent.

As the war turned against the Republic Livesay's poems lost some of their early revolutionary euphoria. Though to the end the poet maintains her faith in the eventual establishment of a new world, this promise is removed from the imminent to the far distant future. The poetry becomes more sober and, like Kennedy, Livesay settles some aesthetic as well as political scores. In her "Spain," published in *New Frontier* in June 1937, hard accusations replace the early enthusiasm. Aesthetes, those fortunate enough to contemplate nature and beauty at their leisure and in peace, she calls to account for their complacency. Their leisure and their peace, their art, is paid for by others:

You who hold beauty at your finger tips
Hold it because the splintering gunshot rips
Between your comrades' eyes ...

You who live quietly in sunlit space ...
Can count peace dear, when it has driven
Your sons to struggle for this grim, new heaven.

In another poem, "At English Bay: December, 1937," which she includes in her chapter on the Spanish War in *Right Hand Left Hand*, the poet turns her attentions from Spain to China, where the same battle against fascism was being fought. The tone of this poem is meditative, resigned. Nature is as always a regenerative force, but its powers now are limited, as are the poet's and her comrades' abilities to realize their dreams of a better world. As hope of victory fades, all that is left the poet is a sort of millenarian belief that the new world will come.

Livesay's longest poem about the Spanish War, "Catalonia," a description of the human catastrophe of the war's end and a (fictitious) tank battle during the retreats behind the Ebro River and into Catalonia in late 1938, ends with such a wish. Its last stanza turns to the future when the dead will "burst/Out of the earth again" to bring "another spring!" though now, with defeat, there is a conclusiveness about their burial in Catalonia's "rolling

plains” that makes this resurrection distant indeed. It is the rest of the poem that is most significant, however. The war is clearly lost. The roads are choking with refugees; the remnants of the Republican forces try to make brief stands, knowing they cannot hold. A soldier, Sorenson, saves several comrades from their crippled tanks. Almost certainly Sorenson is with the International Brigades, probably he is Canadian;¹⁹ for the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion played an important and tragic role in this final phase of the war. These details: the refugees, the battle, make Livesay’s “Catalonia” an anomaly; apparently it is the only Canadian poem published which (perhaps) makes a reference to the Mac-Paps, as the Canadian battalion was usually designated, and one of the few which attempts to describe something of the Spanish War as a war fought and endured by real people rather than as an issue.

Other exceptions are Patrick Waddington’s so far unpublished “Daybreak on Spanish Hills”; and a poem which appeared in *The Canadian Forum* in June 1939, Gordon LeClaire’s “Now When the Fire Long Frozen,” a reaction to the slaughter in Badajoz after it fell to the Nationalists in August 1936.²⁰ That these poems are few is understandable, considering how few Canadian poets had any experience of Spain or of the war. Bethune, the exception, is remembered as a poet for “Red Moon,” a poem which he wrote shortly before his departure for Spain. There are two extant versions of this poem, one which appeared in *The Canadian Forum* in July 1937 while Bethune was in Spain; the other, a draft found among his papers by Ted Allan and reprinted in his and Sydney Gordon’s biography of the surgeon, *The Scalpel, the Sword*.²¹ The principal differences between the versions are the final quatrains. In the draft they read:

To that pale moon, I raise my angry fist,
And to those nameless dead my vows renew:
Comrades who fall in angry loneliness,
Who die for us —I will remember you.

while in the *Canadian Forum* they are as follows:

To the pale disc, we raise our clenched fists
And to those nameless dead our vows renew,
'Comrades, who fought for freedom and the future world,
Who died for us, we will remember you.'

Bethune has made some minor changes to punctuation, indented every second line and, in the first line of the quatrain, substituted “disc” for moon, a

word he had already employed in the first line of the poem. More important is the shift from the first person singular to the plural and the complete revision of the penultimate line. For with the changes the *Canadian Forum* poem conforms to the paradigm established by the first generation of Canadian poetry about the Spanish War. The change from “I” to “we” and from the vivid but subjective and politically uninspiring “who fell in angry loneliness” to “who fought for freedom and the future world” transforms the poem from a very subjective reaction to the scandal against humanity that was the fascist uprising in Spain to a more objective, but more vague and less effectively poetic translation of this reaction into a determinate ideological and historical perspective. This is not to say that such a translation is incompatible with good poetry. The Canadian poetry on the Spanish War is ample evidence to the contrary: a translation of some sort is an essential part of coming to terms with the (otherwise) chaotic and incomprehensible and thus unwritable matter of lived experience. The point is that in the case of “Red Moon” this translation has occurred, has been imposed or (most probably) has imposed itself, transforming the poem from a subjective response to the war itself to a perhaps more objective, but also less immediate and more abstract assessment of what the war means. This change is especially interesting because it was accompanied by Bethune’s own displacement to Spain, where he wrote at least one other poem about the war. His “I Come from Cuatro Caminos” is a reaction to the continuous fascist bombings of this working-class district during the Siege of Madrid. Less well-wrought than “Red Moon,” and especially than the *Canadian Forum* version of the poem, it is dominated by incomprehension and rage:

Ay Little One, Little One;
 What hast thou done to these dogs
 That they have dashed you to pieces
 . . .
 Why have they killed my grandfather?
 . . .
 Because the blood that runs in their veins
 Is blood of brothel and mud
 Because in their regiment
 They were born fatherless
 A ‘curse on God’ rends the air
 Towards the infamy of heaven.

A poem *from* rather than *about* the war, “Cuatro Caminos” is unique

among Canadian poetry on the Spanish War. Significantly, it is also one of the few poems that makes no mention of the issues.

Even those poems with the most intimate connection to the Spanish War, poems written to friends who had gone to Spain, sometimes to die there, are, like Livesay's "Comrade," poems less about Spain than about the questions being decided there. Two poems dedicated to Canadians killed in the war, Harold Gerry's "To Jack Bloom" and the as yet unidentified H. G. M.'s "A Tribute to Rod Gillis," published in *The Daily Clarion* in August 1937 and February 1938 respectively, both end with declarations of faith in future victory over fascism. Understandably, neither poem conveys the same sense of its organic necessity that informs Kennedy's and Livesay's early war poetry. Whatever treasures the future may hold, however worthy the cause, the price paid is indeed high. And yet the rhetoric is there, Gerry's poem ending, for example, thus:

Madrid that holds your honoured grave
Shall be the site of Franco's tomb.
That freedom that you died to save
Will hurl reaction to its doom.

A. M. Klein's triptych "Of Castles in Spain" is more complex than Gerry's tribute to Jack Bloom, but it is informed by the same elements: an attempt to come to terms with a friend's decision to go to the Spanish War and with this war's implications, beyond Spain especially. Published in *The Canadian Forum* in June 1938, this poem reveals Klein the political poet at his best, the poet of "Political Meeting," "Of Shirts and Policies of State," and the *Hitleriad*, which, surprisingly, makes no mention of the Spanish War. "Of Castles in Spain" is best understood, however, not only in view of Klein's other political verse, but in the context of other Canadian poems on the Spanish War. The first part of Klein's poem is dedicated to his friend, Samuel Abramson,²² who fought with the Mac-Paps until the International Brigades were disbanded in Barcelona in October 1938. Klein establishes the relation that binds him to his friend, and especially his debt, for by going to Spain Abramson is protecting the poet from fascism:

'Tis you who do confound the lupine jaw
And stand protective of my days and works,
As in the street-fight you maintain the law
And I in an armchair—weigh and measure Marx.

In the second and third parts of the triptych Klein then presents alternative conclusions to the war. In the second and shortest part, "Toreador," he likens those fighting for the Republic to a toreador, the fascists to a bull whose death brings peace. The third part, "Sonnet Without Music," represents one of the few successful efforts by a Canadian poet writing during the Spanish War to impart some reality to some of its Spanish protagonists, though Klein attempts this only for the enemy, the three pillars of the rebel cause: the "haemophilic dons" who "delicately lift their sherry in the sun," the magnate who recovers his expropriated land and with it his smile, the priest. When he turns to the specifics of how these enemies will be defeated, the bull slain, Klein is understandably, considering how the war was going, vague, ending his poem with a familiar defiant and despairing cry:

... beware!
The peon soon will stir, will rise, will stand,
breathe Hunger's foetid breath, lift arm, clench fist,
and heal you to the fascist realm of death!

Though a fascist victory in Spain is increasingly probable, no more than Kennedy or Livesay or virtually any other Canadian poet concerned with the war, can Klein accept the possibility of absolute, unredeemable defeat in Spain. He must therefore like them move victory to some distant, undefined future.

Ultimately, even William Robbins' poem "To L___ B___," published in *The Canadian Forum* a few months after "Of Castles in Spain" is no exception to this retreat, if not also into the future, into the issues. In this poem more than any other it is a friend's sacrifice, his decision to go to Spain, and his death there that are the overriding question; they preclude even the most tepid revolutionary rhetoric, any discussion of the issues except with disdain. For Robbins, L. B.'s death shames "the mumbling mouths that try to glow/The dying embers of democracy—," makes mockery of dreams like Livesay's "grim new heaven," "the world's home ... built in Spain." And yet, even as they are rendered irrelevant by this death, the issues return, giving it, however inadequately, meaning: "Before the broken mirror of his challenge, / We drop our eyes, and stammer to a pause."

As with the mocking death of L. B., the disastrous conclusion of the Spanish War became a scar on the hearts of those who had rallied to its cause. But, as the poets had so long maintained, defeat in Spain was not and could never be conclusive. This point is made most eloquently by F. R. Scott, who despite his involvement in campaigns to support the Republic

seems to have written only one poem about the war, "Spain 1937." A response to Auden's "Spain," this poem looks at the same time back to the war and forward into the future. Whereas Auden ends his poem with a reflection on the futility of the struggle:

The stars are dead. The animals will look.
 We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and
 History to the defeated
 May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.

Scott ends his with one terse line:

This issue is not ended with defeat.

True, Scott did not go to the Spanish War as Auden did (albeit as a tourist), true his poem does not encompass the vast expanse of human history from the cromlech to the present, true Auden's is a great poem and his perhaps only an excellent poem, but Scott's response to Auden's disillusionment with the Spanish Republic and his historical pessimism is the only one possible.

However apt Scott's response, his resolution was not universally shared. The poetry written about the Spanish War in the years following the defeat of the Republic is imbued with a sense that in Spain, we, the entire human race, had failed in our apprenticeship to the 20th century. In "This Is No Crusade," for example, L. A. MacKay looks back from that war foretold in Spain that was the Second World War and, abandoning the moral high ground and implicating himself in the Spanish War's catastrophic consequences, writes:

We patted Peace on the head, and smirked in our shell.
 Our death on China fell like the monsoon rain.
 Our death paraded, grinning at us, on the hills of Spain,
 And we grinned cheerfully back, and wished him well.

Similarly, George Faludy insists on the causal link between the Spanish War and the Second World War. Fleeing the Nazis after the capitulation of France, he laments the Nationalist victory in Spain, for it guaranteed the present war and robbed him in this war of his last refuge. Dorothy Livesay's "The Lizard: October 1939" and "In Time of War" reflect the same sense of betrayal. Spain was our last chance, we abandoned it, and now we too must pay the price of our indifference.²³ To refresh memories and consciences Livesay included the last section of "In Time of War" under the title "V-J

Day” as an epigraph to her collection *Poems for People* published shortly after the Allied victory over the Axis. The final stanza of this poem makes clear that this war that has just ended and that has cost so much began, not in Poland in September 1939, but in China in 1933 and Spain in 1936:

Now it is eight years after, to the day, to the hour:
The wrath has devoured itself and the fire eaten the fire.
And again at sundown over the bird’s voice, low
Over the firs fluted with evening I hear the Yangste flow
And the rubble of Barcelona is this moss under my hand.

Future generations of poets would continue asking what the war had meant, translating now, not their hopes, but their disappointments to that defeat, asking what had gone wrong, why fascism had triumphed over justice and humanity. The question is already present in Patrick Waddington’s “Dust Patterns After Revolution,” published, as the war was drawing to a close, in *The Canadian Forum* in February 1939 under the pseudonym David Andradeas. It returns with the poets of *Preview* and *First Statement* in the 1940s, with Patrick Anderson’s “For a Spanish Comrade” and the epigraph to *The White Centre*, “. Who fell on bed”; P. K. Page’s “Poem” (“Let us by paradox”) and “Generation”; Miriam Waddington’s “Dog Days” and “The Exiles: Spain,” a poem written in late 1937, but which already conveys a sense of the war’s outcome; and James Wreford’s “The Mental Butterfly.” To these poets must be added George Woodcock, who in England in the 1930s and 1940s had known many of the more prominent writers on the Spanish War and who, with his “Ballad for W. H. Auden” also settles a few things with the English poet concerning Spain.

Little by little the poetry has changed. No longer pressed by the battle as were the poets of the 1930s, poets who came after have had the opportunity to learn about Spain, the Spanish War, and of course the regime it brought to power. They have written about Lorca and Bethune, and writing about them have brought the issues from which their names have become inseparable home to Canada again. Dorothy Livesay’s “Lorca” written in 1939 was followed by poems by George Woodcock, Louis Dudek, Eldon Grier, and Mark Frutkin. To Raymond Souster’s “The Good Doctor” published in 1967 have been added poems by Robin Mathews, Milton Acorn, Marya Fiamengo, Laura McLauchlan, and Peter Stevens.

And finally, some poets have written about Spain. Starting with three

poems by Irving Layton, "On Spanish Soil," "El Caudillo" and "El Gusano," published in the *Tamarack Review* in 1964, perhaps struck by the grotesque survival of Franco a generation after V-E Day, Canadian poets began writing about the Spanish War as an issue, certainly: but also about the specifically Spanish affair it was and remains; about the war as the consequence of a specifically Spanish reality; about the Spain that had made Spain the stage where the world's destiny had been made and unmade; and about the Spain the world had abandoned to itself. To Layton's poems must be added Eldon Grier's particularly insightful "Biarritz"; Ralph Gustafson's "Valle de los Caídos," about Franco's monument to himself; and Seymour Mayne's "Parrots, Generals," "Madrid Evening" and "Spain, You Hurt Me," poems which, quite rightly, will not let the matter of the Spanish War rest.

Not the least remarkable thing about poems written in Canada about the Spanish Civil War since its unhappy conclusion is that they were written at all. If poets like Livesay, Kennedy and Scott were more or less directly implicated in the war, already for the poets of the 1940s the world was nothing like it had been in July 1936. The Spanish War had been lost; it belonged to history, to a past made suddenly distant by the holocaust that followed and the realignment of forces it entailed. Almost from the moment it was over the Spanish War, which for so many had been the battle upon which hung the future of civilization, was transformed by subsequent events into a minor skirmish, a dress rehearsal. And yet, this issue, as Scott insisted, is not ended. To write in Canada today about the Spanish War is, if not as obviously urgent as it was in 1936 or 1939, nonetheless a political act of import. For the poets of the Thirties transposed their dreams of a better world, a more just Canada, to Spain, to this war; by writing about the Spanish War today, the poets bring these dreams home again —and well they might!

NOTES

- 1 Only 729 returned (Beeching xxxvi). Mortality for Canadians in Spain was thus almost 50%. Compare with 10,000 French volunteers of whom 1,000 were killed; 5,000 Germans and Austrians, of whom 2,000 died (Thomas 983).
- 2 Ralph Gustafson visited Spain just before the war, a visit remembered in part in "Basque Lover."
- 3 *The McGill Fortnightly Review* was founded in 1925, succeeded in 1928 by *The Canadian Mercury*; *The Canadian Forum*, took up the banner of modernism in 1931 with a series of articles on modernist writers, followed in 1932 by a series on "The New Writers in

- Canada" (Beattie, 751); and Dorothy Livesay's *Green Pitcher* and Leo Kennedy's *The Shrouding* were published in 1928 and 1933, respectively.
- 4 The authors are the Montreal Group: Leo Kennedy, A. M. Klein, F. R. Scott and A. J. M. Smith, plus Robert Finch and E. J. Pratt in Toronto.
 - 5 These two events alone mark 1936 as a watershed in Canadian literature. As well, in 1936 the Governor General's Awards were instituted, though it was not until the following year that the first award was made for poetry, to E. J. Pratt for *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems*; the *University of Toronto Quarterly* began the first systematic appraisal of Canadian writing with its annual reviews, "Letters in Canada"; the *Canadian Poetry Magazine* began publication with E. J. Pratt as editor; and Émile Coderre, writing under the pseudonym "Jean Narrache," published *Quand j'parle tout seul*, poetry written in *Joual* about the poor of Québec during the Depression.
 - 6 Dorothy Livesay noted in her conclusion to a lecture she presented at Bethune College in 1976 that "the Spanish Civil War has had reverberations which have stirred Canadians to think of their own human condition. The Thirties poets stated the case, but the Forties poets carried the message further through the Second World War. I think of Waddington, Page, Souster; and join with them Birney, Layton, Dudek, Mandel. They in turn have directed younger poets of today towards social concern, commitment to change And one has only to mention the names of Purdy, Acorn, Nowlan to realize how they have stirred the imagination of Lane, Lowther, Wayman and Lee." ("Canadian Poetry and the Spanish Civil War" *RHLH* 255)
 - 7 There were, nonetheless, several dozen French Canadians with the Mackenzie Papineau Battalion in the International Brigades.
 - 8 "Les quatre bataillons de choc," 9 Jan. 1937; and excerpt from "L'Espagne au coeur," 30 Nov. 1938, respectively.
 - 9 Altolaguirre: "My Suffering," *New Frontier*, Jan. 1937; Beltrán Logroño: "Ascaso," and Pla y Beltrán: "Elegies On the Death of A Miner," *New Frontier*, May 1937; Beltrán Logroño: "Death of the Innkeeper 'Quitapenas,'" and Pla y Beltrán: "This Is How We Live," *New Frontier*, June 1937; Alberti: "A Spanish Revolutionary Poem" and "Ay," and Antonio García Luque: "Yo Estar Un Rojo!," *Canadian Forum*, Jan. 1938.
 - 10 July-Aug. 1937; the poem is signed "R. E. Warner."
 - 11 Many of these poems were later reprinted in Smith and Scott's anthology of satirical verse, *The Blasted Pine*.
 - 12 Every effort has been made to reach the author or copyright holder of this and all other poems quoted here. Some, however, have proven difficult to identify or impossible to locate.
 - 13 For an overview of Nationalist sympathies expressed in the Canadian media, see Mary Biggar Peck's *Red Moon Over Spain*, ch. 1-4.
 - 14 Brian Trehearne suggests that MacKay's poem was influenced by Oscar Wilde's "Sonnet to Liberty (90)."
 - 15 A similar retreat greatly weakens a poem which mentions the Spanish War in passing: "Hunger," by Mary Elizabeth Colman, published in the *Canadian Poetry Magazine* in June 1937, and five years later in *For This Freedom Too*. In another poem which refers to Spain, "We Men Are of Two Worlds," also included in the 1942 collection, Colman hap-

pily refrains from asserting the primacy of a there-beyond at the cost of the here-below:
 “We men are of two worlds/how great the cost of our forgetting—.”

- 16 Leslie was not alone. Bertolt Brecht, for example, gave Italian names to the characters in *Señora Carrara's Rifles*, his play about the Spanish Civil War.
- 17 In his essay Kennedy wrote that Charles Bruce “writes convincingly of the sea and ships, but his poetry carries the personal, insular emotion of one still unaware of immediates.” Bruce’s response, a poem “Immediates,” included, when it was published in *Grey Ship Moving*, Kennedy’s attack quoted at the bottom of the page along with a further comment by the poet: “Kennedy later said that ... a typographical error had resulted in ‘immediates’ replacing ‘political immediacies.’”
- 18 Necessary because, as Karl Mannheim remarked, when we lose our utopias we lose our will to shape history (*Ideology* 262-63).
- 19 His name may have been inspired by Henning Sorensen, Bethune’s interpreter in Spain.
- 20 Especially in the revised version published in 1943, LeClaire does nevertheless insist on the Spanish War’s international significance.
- 21 This is, interestingly, the version reprinted by Brian Davis in *The Poetry of the Canadian People*.
- 22 I thank Seymour Mayne for providing this information.
- 23 A Canadian veteran of the Spanish War remarks at the end of the NFB film *Los Canadienses*, that when the blitz began on London it was terrible, but that he thought, “Well, it serves you right” for not having done anything about Spain.

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