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An Artist's Journey

Journey With No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page

by SANDRA DJWA

McGill-Queen's UP, 2012 \$39.95

Reviewed by MCKAY MCFADDEN

Sixteen years old and intellectually stifled by her prim headmistress, P.K. Page absconded to the Calgary Library to pursue her own education. With her best friend Fuzz, Page devoured literature and art, reading Dostoevsky and whispering over photographs of Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Genesis*, a bold, monolithic, pregnant nude that challenged staid notions of femininity.

It was 1933, and according to Page's biographer Sandra Djwa, life for a freethinking and spirited young woman such as Page would be a journey with no maps. With few female mentors or models, Page would evolve on her own organic path from a curious teenager seeking knowledge in the library into a beloved national figure in Canada, admired and awarded for her poetry, prose, and painting. One of the many pleasures of Djwa's comprehensive biography, *Journey With No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page*, is her careful reconstruction of the landmarks in Page's artistic evolution from riding in the Alberta wilderness to reading Virginia Woolf to hearing nightly drum circles in the favelas near the embassy in Brazil.

As a child, Page spent summers on the Sacree Camp, often riding across the great prairies with her father, who'd arrived in Red Deer, Alberta, in 1903 as a homesteader pursuing the riches of "God's country." One day they found the coffin of a papoose, "with tiny bead bracelets around its wrists, a sting of wampum brilliant against the bleached bones of its ribs and

small scraps of discolored cloth." Djwa's strength as a biographer is to eloquently link images from Page's memories like this papoose to Page's later poetry, such as "The First Part" in which the narrator remembers "this prairie eye / that stares and stares." "In all my cells dusk fell," Page wrote, recalling the tiny coffin underneath the expansive Alberta skies.

At age 25, after travels in Europe, Page moved to Montreal with her father's blessing (and \$85/month) to pursue writing. At this point in the biography, Djwa reaches a notable intersection in her own career of writing about Canadian literature. In 1987, Djwa published a biography of F.R. Scott, poet, intellectual, and socialist with whom Page had a long love affair. Scott was associated with the Montreal literary coterie that founded the journal *Preview*, credited with propelling modernism in Canada and early publisher of Page's poetry.

For Djwa, the amorous meeting of her two great subjects, whom she'd spent over twenty years researching as individuals, must have been a thrilling moment. Djwa beautifully describes the passion, love, disappointment, and pain between Scott and Page as they both struggle to honour their love and eventually end their clandestine relationship. (Scott was married to painter Marian Dale Scott.) Instead of allowing her knowledge of Scott to take over Page's biography, Djwa uses Page's letters and poetry to articulate the lasting effect of the relationship. The biography both honours the intensity between the two writers and also illuminates for the reader how Scott and the love Page had for him were landmarks in Page's creative evolution in the same way that certain books, travel, and other

mentors had both inspired and widened her worldview.

In her late thirties, Page married Film Board Commissioner Arthur Irwin and the couple soon moved to Australia for his new job as a diplomat. Of this great transition in her life, away from the country where she had been inspired, educated, published, and heartbroken, Page wrote in her journal, "I have gathered ghosts in Canada. They can perhaps be laid by going to a different country."

Page accompanied Irwin to his postings in Australia, whose searing light and beauty "make her turn inwards," and then to Brazil, which she found both "surrealist and seductive," and finally to Mexico, where she became interested in spirituality and the development of a higher consciousness. In these years abroad (1953-1964), what other critics refer to as "the silent decade," Page struggled with the responsibilities of being a diplomat's wife, including managing large households and formal social obligations, about which she wrote to a friend, "I don't think I was ever meant to be a *lady*."

This second part of the biography, while somewhat lacking the stirring descriptions of Page's influences in her youth, examines Page's struggle of being both wife, or *lady*, and writer. Though she was called Canada's greatest poet and had been awarded the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1954, in Brazil her writing was concentrated in journals and correspondence, published thirty years later as *Brazilian Journal*.

The poetry she wrote in her years abroad examines the challenges of creativity. Djwa offers close readings of several poems of this period, including "Arras," which she interprets to "evoke the beauty, fascination, hypnotic quality, and

sometimes overwhelmingly lonely task of creation." Djwa's writing is most compelling when she uses her immense knowledge of the poet's life, letters, work, and social milieu to make connections a lay reader would never be able to string together. When Djwa offers her own analysis of the poetry, it can feel too neat, or forced. No biographer can speak wholly for her subject's poetry; as Page wrote, "a poem is a labyrinth of the self."

In Brazil, in her early forties, Page became interested in painting and drawing. Later she suggested that her displacement from the English language during her years abroad diminished her desire to write poems. About the new creative challenge, she wrote, "What impossibly ghastly preconceived notions one carries in one's paintbox. How can one ever be newborn enough to paint?" While she may have produced less poetry during these years, Page was learning new languages, drawing, painting, and writing copiously in her journals about art and the life of an artist. Page described the years spent drawing as the happiest time of her life, living "almost entirely through my eye."

After retuning home to Canada, Page continued to write and paint; over the next forty years she was recognized with numerous publications, exhibitions, awards, and honorary degrees. This is not to say there weren't continued struggles to express herself through art and lifestyle or to find her place in a masculine literary culture, as well as suffering from depression, loss, and amnesia. In this long and studious part of her auto-didactic life, Page turned to Carl Jung and Sufism, eventually marrying much of her life's thought on consciousness in poems about death, such as "The End."

Djwa's writing about Page's creative pursuits in all stages of her life is charged with admiration and ballasted by thorough research. Throughout the biography, Djwa beautifully captures Page's sense of wonder, her desire to find articulate expression, and the daily life of her artistic pursuits. This biography is a valuable

addition to the history of Canada, of the artist's life, and of women in the twentieth century.

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