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Abstract

In March 1978 Dorothy Livesay visited the University of Aarhus, Denmark. She had been invited to lecture on 'Canadian Political Writing in the 30s' and discuss her latest book *Right Hand, Left Hand*. In the middle of a successful and busy stay Dorothy Livesay found time to answer several questions in connection with Canadian nationalism. The interviewer is Jern Carlsen who teaches Canadian literature at Aarhus University.

Dorothy Livesay

INTERVIEW

In March 1978 Dorothy Livesay visited the University of Aarhus, Denmark. She had been invited to lecture on 'Canadian Political Writing in the 30s' and discuss her latest book *Right Hand, Left Hand*. In the middle of a successful and busy stay Dorothy Livesay found time to answer several questions in connection with Canadian nationalism. The interviewer is Jørn Carlsen who teaches Canadian literature at Aarhus University.

The question of national identity seems a very dominant one in modern Canadian literature and criticism. Would you like to comment on this?

To speak of Canadian nationalism and the search for Canadian identity as a modern phenomenon is utter nonsense. The search for assertion of a Canadian identity goes back one hundred years. I should perhaps stress that I am talking about English speaking Canada – the Quebec problem is still a very separate one.

In English Canada in the 1880s there was a very strong movement to join with the United States. This led to a reaction on the part of writers and thinkers and men of education and a whole movement of 'Canada First' was started. One of the chief supporters of this movement was one of our leading poets, Charles G. Roberts who was a young man at the time. He edited a paper in Toronto called *The Week* and its policy was to work for a Canadian identity, rejecting the idea of being a colony of either England or the United States. That movement I suppose petered out so that during the first years of the twentieth century there was a lull. Of course those were the years of tremendous immigration

from Europe. We were so busy during that period grabbing land and building on it that the original Anglo-Saxon Protestant communities in the cities did not have time perhaps to think of the nation as a whole.

But then came World War I. And this stirred tremendous waves of patriotism. My father was a war correspondent in France. When he came back he wrote a book called *Canada's Hundred Days* which was an account of the Canadian's role in the battle of the Somme. It was in that atmosphere of great national fervour that I grew up.

At the same time my mother was very concerned with Canadian literature so that by the 1920s, by 1920 actually, there was such an interest in building up our own culture and literature that the Canadian Authors' Association was formed with Sir Charles G. E. Roberts as first president.

From then on all through that decade there was a great concentration on Canadian literature. Carmen and Roberts, the major poets of the time, toured up and down the country reading their poetry. And if you take the trouble to look you would find that the list of anthologies and books of poetry that appeared in that period is quite staggering.

You can say that I grew up in what you may call the 'maple leaf period' of our quest for identity. I was a cub reporter during one of my university summers for the *Winnipeg Tribune*. I had to cover a meeting where there was a British Imperialist who roared and shouted about the wonders of the British Empire. At the end of the evening he pulled out a Union Jack, wrapped it around himself and said 'Shoot who dare'. This so horrified me that I wrote to my parents and told them that from then on I would have nothing more to do with the Empire, that what I believed in was Canada. And so I did until the depression and then the whole picture changed.

What happened then, to my generation of university students in the thirties, was I think fairly common. We had been studying either at home or abroad and on the completion of our degrees we

found there was no work for anyone. I had wanted to be a lecturer in modern languages because that was the field in which I had specialized but there were no jobs to be had, either in the university or anywhere else. We became aware of the fact that unemployment was a problem not only in Canada or America where the banks were all falling but in Europe as well, in France for instance where the economic situation was deplorable. What was worse, the governments seemed to have no solution except to bring out the police whenever there was a demonstration.

And so we became politicized. We read Marx and Lenin, attended meetings of the Socialist party or Communist party and forgot all about the problem of nationalism and building up of our own culture. We were concerned with the world problem of unemployment, with the beginnings of fascism, the march of Hitler's youth groups, Mussolini's program for advancement through war. Our fight was for peace against war and fascism, we hoped to change the world into a more democratic and socialist society. Our thoughts were in terms of the world situation, not the nationalist movement.

Could you tell us when you again became involved in the question of national identity.

The Left I was associated with up till 1935 was very sectarian and solely concerned with the working class and its taking control. But the Comintern of 1935 came forward with the slogans of a popular front, with the idea that only by linking the working class with the progressive middle class would the change-over take place and Hitler be stopped. This gave an entirely new direction again to the work we were doing. Writing and pamphleteering and appearing on the picket line and being activist in these various ways, we were not told that we must reach the middle class. And so we began again. It was mainly done by means of conferences against war. I was in charge of the first peace conference of young people which took place in Montreal in 1934-1935. We contacted middle

class groups like YWCA's, church groups, and so on and got a conference going. This was followed by a major conference and after that several others were held round the world.

The one in Paris was very important. The slogan was 'there will be a mass massacre unless we can stop war and rally people now'. Well, of course the war started in Spain, and again this rallied us all to try and defend Spanish democracy. But the interesting thing about the articles I have looked at in *New Frontier* of that period, is that though we were very concerned with Spain and with world affairs we were also writing articles about Canadian literature and about Canadian culture and about our need to be a nation and speak out as a nation, so you will find these articles about Canadian literature and our national identity appearing in *New Frontier* and presumably also in *The Canadian Forum* at the same time.

So that was the way it came back again and of course after the defeat of Spain and the Soviet-German pact in 1939 our international hopes were completely dashed.

When Hitler attacked Europe the decision was made to send Canadians abroad, and this rallied all the Canadian feeling again. I've written a poem about the resurgence of national feeling during the early years of the war, it's called 'West Coast' and it's about the thousands of people that came to the West coast to work in the shipyards. For the first time we had a mass intermingling of people from all parts of Canada which had never happened before on this scale. The other thing that happened was that the soldiers who enlisted were sent to camps right across Canada and they for the first time in their life travelled and saw the country. So the war, however terrible it was, did an amazing thing for the Canadian identity. It really made us to get to know each other and those were good years in that respect because there was a positive feeling about the country.

So we were full of hope when the war was over and our soldiers returned from overseas. We thought that they had learnt their lesson about unemployment and fascism and that the young people would be ready to settle down and change society. But as I

said in my lecture today [14 March 1978, Aarhus, Denmark] and in my book, *Right Hand, Left Hand*, instead of a new society we got Hiroshima and the threat of the bomb. These events utterly discouraged us, so the later 40s and early 50s were times of great mental depression. The advent of the Korean War was another awful blow. However we made efforts from then on to build up the Canadian identity which has been written about by so many people. The Canada Council was formed, and George Woodcock started his magazine *Canadian Literature*. One could say that the basis was laid for the expansion of a national literature and for the creation of a Canadian consciousness. The tremendous progress that has been made over the past two decades owes much to those early efforts.

FINALE

High on our hill we watched, and saw
morning become high noon, and the tide full.
Saw children chequered on the western beach
and ferry boats plough back and forth, knocking the nose
of tugboats, barges, freighters, convoys, cruisers:
the harbour a great world of moving men
geared to their own salvation, taking heart.
We watched gold sun wheel past the sombre park
slip beyond Lion's Gate, illuminate
cool purple skyline of the Island hills.
Then to the hulls and houses silence came
blinds down on tired eyes
dark drew its blanket over trees and streets
grey granaries and harbour lights; muffled the mountain-side.
Yet still, far, far below those lights pierced sky
and water; blue and violet, quick magenta flash
from welder's torch; and still the foreshore roared

strumming the sea, drumming its rhythm hard
beating out strong against the ocean's song:
the graveyard shift still hammering its way
towards an unknown world, straddling new day.

'Finale' from *West Coast* is reproduced with kind permission of Dorothy Livesay.



Dorothy Livesay.