

Foreword

This collection of case studies is the result of my time as a doctoral fellow with Canada and the Spanish Civil War (CSCW), an online archival recovery project. Jean Watts is their subject. She was a Canadian theatre artist, journalist, and activist in the early twentieth-century, and her cultural impact has been vastly under studied. The work represented here is only a small fraction of the broader research and recovery that the project has achieved. All of Watts's work that I refer to is digitized and featured at <http://www.spanishcivilwar.ca>, in addition to an impressive body of digitized materials on Canada's involvement in the Spanish Civil War, and other case studies produced by students and researchers across Canada. Broader still, Dr. Emily Robins Sharpe and Dr. Bart Vautour have envisioned an ambitious and systemic excavation of this portion of Canadian history, one that has resulted in critical editions of out-of-print literary texts and groundbreaking collections of Canadian literature in addition to the CSCW website. They have built student mentoring into their research, and I cannot begin to express my gratitude for their patience and support.

As the CSCW website introduction notes, “[t]he Spanish Civil War was a crucial moment in developing Canada’s political identity on the world stage” (spanishcivilwar.ca, “Introduction”). Estimates of Canadian military participation in the war sit at approximately 1600 combatants—a considerable chunk of the estimated 30,000 total combatants and 10,000 non-combatants with the International Brigades. Participating in a military role in the war was made illegal by the Non-Intervention Agreement. The major political powers in Europe and North America, still reeling from the First World War, refused to provide material support and prohibited volunteer troops from going to Spain under pain of losing their passports. This decision on the part of major powers was tantamount to a betrayal of the new, legally and democratically elected Spanish government. While Britain, France, the USA, and the Dominion of Canada adhered to the pact, fascist countries Germany and Italy (and to a certain extent, Communist Russia) did not. Germany and Italy would provide sophisticated military assistance and resources to Generalissimo Franco, and some have argued that Spain thus

became a testing ground for Adolf Hitler's more vicious military tactics in the Second World War. Many of the Canadians who volunteered were new immigrants, who had only freshly acquired the passport that they risked by volunteering. The scale on which anti-fascist men and women risked themselves and their political protections is difficult to comprehend.

Military participation in the Spanish Civil War was illegal. As a result, the history of that participation is particularly difficult to study. Many of the most compelling historical accounts of the Spanish Civil War have relied on oral histories and diaries; John Gerassi, Michael Petrou, Jim Fyrth, and Sally Alexander are some examples of historians whose books feature first-hand recollections of the conflict. Memoirs on the war proliferate, and it has become a central event in the formation of a Canadian literary canon. My research on Jean Watts fits into this context: I am interested in her writing. Her eye-witness journalism of matters both military and human interest is a kindred genre to the oral history, the memoir, and the semi-autobiographical fictions on the conflict that emerge frequently in twentieth-century Canadian writing. Watts would participate both as a journalist—a legal mode of participation—and as a driver with the International Brigades—an illegal one. Her story straddles multiple roles and perspectives on an already complex war.

Ted Bishop, a Canadian academic and motorcycle enthusiast, coined the term “archival jolt” (33). It is the shock of an object placed in front of you that both *contains* and *is* history. It is the moment of discovery after weeks or months of dead ends. In my research on Watts, I, too, have felt that jolt. I have sat in the archives listening to an interview on a staticky cassette tape, straining to hear her voice: she is frank and matter-of-fact; she exaggerates little, if at all; she is not afraid to contradict her interviewer or attempt to steer the conversation elsewhere. Outside of the archive, I have chanced on her image flipping through out-of-print books. I have stumbled upon her in memoirs where I did not expect to find her. And I have walked up Spadina Avenue in Toronto, imagining her as poet Dorothy Livesay describes her—in a green suit, walking a poodle. My case studies can only begin to account for some of these discoveries. I present only the

recovery of her writing and the contexts in which she fits. The work of arguing for Watts's place in Canadian history and culture is yet to be done.