

E.L. Bobak

Review Article

Political Radicalism in Periodicals of the Thirties

Voices of Discord: Canadian Short Stories From The 1930s. Edited by Donna Phillips. Introduction by Kenneth J. Hughes. Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1979. Pp. 220. Paper only, \$3.95.

Voices of Discord is an anthology of twenty-six short stories reprinted from four Canadian periodicals. Two of these, *Masses* and *New Frontier*, were founded during the Depression and survived less than two years. Two still exist, *The Canadian Forum* and *Queen's Quarterly*, which was established in 1893 and started printing short stories in 1931. Only one story in this anthology has been drawn from the *Quarterly*, "Circus in Town," by Sinclair Ross, and the periodical is therefore of little significance in judging the degree of "discord" in the "voices" in this collection. The stories are of political and social interest, and some are very skilfully written; they deserve this new exposure to the public.

Almost half of the stories are drawn from *The Canadian Forum*. Founded in 1920, it grew out of *The Rebel*, a University of Toronto magazine which had been started three years earlier. These periodicals were part of the nationalist movement of the twenties which also resulted in the founding of the *Canadian Historical Review* (1920), the *Canadian Bookman* (1919), the *Dalhousie Review* (1921), the *McGill Fortnightly Review* (1925-27) and the *Canadian Mercury* (1928-29). The first editorial statement of the *Forum* declared that it wished "to secure a freer and more informed discussion of public questions and, behind the strife of parties, to trace and value those developments of arts and letters which are distinctly Canadian." The *Forum* cultivated a liberal attitude towards politics, airing the issue of Canada's independence from Great Britain and attacking social evils through such writers as J.S. Woodsworth, Frank Scott and Frank Underhill. The *Forum* also proved open-minded enough to publish writing by unknown authors like E.J. Pratt and graphics by unknown artists like the Group of Seven. By the thirties, the *Forum* was one of the most influential and vital periodicals in the country. Though it continued to be politically left of centre, it never moved towards communism.

Among the best of the *Forum* stories in this anthology is Bertram Brooker's "Mrs. Hungerford's Milk," in which some undelivered milk becomes a symbol of a farmer's feelings of frustration and failure. Brooker is

typical of the *Forum* contributors to the volume. A solid member of the Canadian literary and artistic community, he won the Governor General's Award in 1936 for his realistic novel of prairie life *Think of the Earth*. He was also a graphic artist and a painter, a member of the Ontario Society of Artists and edited the *Canadian Yearbook of the Arts* (1929 and 1936). A.M. Klein's "Beggars I Have Known," probably the best story in the anthology, appeared in the June 1936 issue of the *Forum*. The story is similar in theme to the revolutionary poetry that Klein was publishing in the *Forum* and in *New Frontier* at this time. "The Soirée of Velvel Kleinburger" (*Forum*, August 1932) probably is the best known of these Marxist poems, and a group of ten poems called "Barricade Smith: His Speeches" (*Forum*, September/October 1938), is the most radical. "Of Violence," the first of this group, points out the hypocrisy of the rich who fend off violence by calling it "uncouth and impolite," "wicked," and "simply . . . not cricket."

The Forum was willing to publish poetry of this sort, but it was not itself advocating violence as a response to social injustice. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that it would be attacked by a periodical as far left as *Masses*. In the May-June 1933 issue, the editors of *Masses* reviewed important international developments in the capitalist economies of the world. They then surveyed the editorial content of the *Forum* for the period February 1932 to May 1933. Their conclusion follows:

Liberalism today, even under CCF colors, is a strongly reactionary force, as its chief teaching is that there are always two sides to a question and that the real observer cannot take sides. Under the present system, this attitude means only the strongest possible support to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (in the last analysis of financial capital) by the very fact that it suggests no struggle against it.

In an addendum to this article in the September issue, *Masses* further attacked the reactionary nature of the "chaotic group" which made up the Editorial Committee of the *Forum*.

During the period in question, J.M. Dent and Sons were subsidizing the magazine and paying the salary of a full-time editor, J. Francis White, and Frank Underhill was on the editorial board. Both men were constantly haranguing the government for not making a rapid enough shift to the left. In the July 1932 issue of the *Forum*, White urged the populace to express political support for public ownership of such vital industries as transportation and electrical power; otherwise, he warned, it would find itself in the position of owning only poor-houses and penitentiaries. In the August 1932 issue of *Forum*, White argued against the wholesale deportation of aliens, describing it as "one of the weapons of the class struggle," which would continue to be used by the government unless Canadian workers greatly strengthened their political and industrial organizations. During the critical period singled out by *Masses*, Underhill wrote an article about the

launching of The League for Social Reconstruction, and another about the programme of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, and another called "Canada and War" in which he argued that "The men who control Canada at present are practically all men who made their pile out of the last war," and who would be willing to preach a new war "from the point of view of a proud, self-reliant nationalism." He urged the populace to resist these arguments.

In the January 1934 issue of *Masses*, the general articles in the *Forum* were attacked as being written by petty bourgeois intellectuals determined to defend their own interests. Fascist tendencies in the *Forum* were identified, but the C.C.F., the "Canadian petty bourgeois party," was identified as the real enemy within the ranks. *Masses* argued that Underhill and F.R. Scott had turned the *Forum* into a theoretical organ of the C.C.F. By this time, Dent was no longer subsidizing the *Forum*, which had been rescued by a group of Liberals and was being edited by Steven Cartwright, who had been private secretary to Vincent Massey. It was not until 1935, when *Masses* was defunct, that the C.C.F. gained *de facto* control of the *Forum*. This state of affairs lasted about a year and then control passed into the hands of the League for Social Reconstruction. C.C.F. thinking did play an important role in the *Forum* at this time, and the charge *Masses* made was accurate in spirit, though not in fact.

The first number of *Masses* appeared in April 1932; there were twelve issues, the last appearing in March/April 1934. It was published by the Progressive Arts Club of Canada, a group of thirty-five artists and writers in Toronto, who wanted to develop a "militant working class art and literature." This club spread cross the country, finally reaching what *Masses* described as "one of the blind spots in Canada," Halifax. The first editorial statement in *Masses* expressed disgust with "the barren fields of Canadian bourgeois culture, with the smirking complacency of Canadian artists and writers, with their puerile ignorance of and contempt for social questions . . ." The Progressive Arts Club rejected the notion that art could have nothing in common with politics and asserted that under capitalism, all art is the art of the ruling class. Instead, art should be "propaganda," and artists should "actively engage in the social life of Canada. . ." *Masses* urged the formation of a "Workers' Theatre," and in a later issue published an act of *Eight Men Speak* by Mildred Goldberg,¹ a dramatization of conditions in Kingston Penitentiary where Tim Buck and seven other communists had been imprisoned for sedition under Section 98 of the Criminal Code. This play, along with others from the Canadian Workers' Theatre (which had over a hundred branches), has been reprinted by New Hogtown Press as well. *Masses* also was interested in "mass dance," a movement which had originated among German workers and spread to the United States. In its June 1932 issue, *Masses* pointed out that though dance and music are "ab-

stract arts" and therefore difficult media for agitprop, they can reflect a "definite class ideology." The January 1934 issue issued a call to musicians who wished to participate in a Workers' Symphony Orchestra.

The Group of Seven and their imitators came under constant attack in the art review column. A.Y. Jackson's "Red Cedar," which was shown in the O.S.A. exhibition in the spring of 1932, was described as reflecting the tradition of Thomson "and others of his school. They take a fancy to a lone tree, typical of course, and create a mood round it—usually grey." Of the 1933 O.S.A. exhibition, full of paintings of "rural houses on suburban streets," the reviewer asked, "Is this Canada? . . . Is this industrialism, depression, bankruptcy, oppression and struggle?" These were questions that needed to be asked. The Canadian Group of Painters, established in 1933 as a replacement for the Group of Seven, derived its inspiration from Group landscapes and techniques and retreated from the realities of the depression. The review of the 1933 exhibition noted "the ghost of the Group of Seven, 'the urge to snow scenes on northern lakes.'" However, the bluntest attack *Masses* launched on the group was in a cartoon by Avrom Yanovsky captioned "Group of Seven, Famous Canadian Painters at Work," which appeared in the April 1932 issue. One painter is depicted as a fat capitalist whose canvas shows a swastika; another painter is in Mountie uniform and his canvas shows dead workers on the ground at Estevan, a coal-mining town in southeastern Saskatchewan where police recently had broken up a parade of striking miners and killed three men. A third painter's canvas shows the figure "98," a reference to the section of the Criminal Code under which Buck and others had been imprisoned. The four other members of the "Group" are similarly delineated. In a "Brief History of Canadian Art" published in the May-June 1933 issue, the "revolt" of the Group of Seven was declared to be "sterile" because its "subject matter" was "isolated from life and from any social meaning."

Masses was equally, and perhaps even more justifiably, annoyed by the kind of writing being produced by members of the Canadian Authors' Association. In its first issue, *Masses* described Canadian writing as "confined to a very narrow field of imagination, heavily glossed over with religious and other superstitious dogmatisms." In its third issue, *Masses* attacked Nellie McClung (a sitting duck) as having "no place in culture, at least not in proletarian culture. Such insipid burblings as have come from this writer can only be consumed with relish by the tea sipping, coupon clipping strata of society. . . ."

Naturally, the stories *Masses* published, five of which appear in *Voices of Discord*, make their social point with considerable bluntness. In Leonard Spier's "Dream of the Air Meter," the narrator encounters a man who can breathe only so long as he feeds coins into an air meter attached to his body by the state. As neither the narrator nor the victim can feed the machine, the man will die of strangulation. The narrator paraphrases, "You have nothing

to lose but that weight on your neck." Together, they destroy the air meter. Ruby Ronan's "One-Day Service" exposes working conditions in a dry cleaning establishment, and Larry Lawson's "Burp's Busy Day" shows up the indifference and hypocrisy of a politician to the suffering of the poor and unemployed. These are savage stories which convince through their honesty and conviction rather than through writing craft.

The eight stories from *New Frontier*, though equally direct in their goal, the exposure of social evil, exhibit a greater degree of professionalism in the writing. One would expect this of Dorothy Livesay, who is represented by two stories, "The Waiting Room," and "Case Supervisor," probably based on her own experiences as a social worker. However, Livesay's best piece of writing for *New Frontier* is "Corbin—A Company Town Fights for Its Life," a piece of reportage which appeared in the June 1936 issue. This excellent documentary already has been reprinted in *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English: 1914-1945*, edited by George L. Parker. Mary Quayle Innis is represented in the anthology by three stories. The two from the *Forum* (with an O. Henry twist) are inferior to "Staver," which appeared in the April 1936 issue of *New Frontier*. The story depicts the relationship between a housewife and an unemployed man who does casual help for her. Innis reveals the class and sexual tensions in the situation. Kimball McLroy's "Late November" relies for its effect on the narrator's dawning comprehension of the plight of a bum who wants to eat peanuts intended for the squirrels. Dyson Carter, author of the communist novel *Fatherless Sons* (1955), is represented by "East Nine," a vividly realized account of an industrial accident.

New Frontier, which was published between April 1936 and August 1937, numbered among its editors Leo Kennedy, Dorothy Livesay and J.F. White. Though still well to the political left of the *Forum*, *New Frontier* was less radical than *Masses*, whose identification with the working class and international communism had been clearer. The shift in ideology from the earlier to the later periodical is best expressed by the dominant communist party slogans of the two periods. Between 1929 and 1934 the catch phrase was "class against class." By 1934 this hard line approach had been abandoned, and a "people's front" was being emphasized. Whereas formerly intellectuals had had to identify wholeheartedly with the proletariat, they now could make common cause with intellectuals of all "progressive" political outlooks in the defence of liberal democratic rights and cultural values.² *New Frontier* was put together by leftist intellectuals who made the mistake of pricing it at twenty-five cents a copy (*Masses* cost ten cents). By its sixth issue, *New Frontier* had dropped its price to fifteen cents, deciding that "the main obstacle" to its growth was its cost, and that the very people whose support it needed could not afford it.

New Frontier's first editorial described its aims as twofold: "to acquaint the Canadian public with the work of those writers and artists who are expressing a positive reaction to the social scene; and to serve as an open forum

for all shades of progressive opinion." The latter aim forms a sharp contrast with the view expressed by *Masses* and quoted above that no struggle against "the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" is possible when other views are given unchecked license. Though not so vehement as *Masses* about the Group of Seven, *New Frontier* also believed that "the rediscovery of the Canadian north country landscape . . . with its infinite possibilities for presentation in art, and its eminent suitability as background for sentimental romance," had set back the cause of writing and art which took social reality as their subject. The editorial expressed apprehension about "the gradual corruption of Canadian democratic institutions," and made clear that it wished to work for the extension as well as the defence of "democratic liberties": "We will expose intolerable conditions, but we will also encourage wholehearted efforts to solve the difficulties." Thus *New Frontier* in proposing to oppose "the forces of reaction" rather than "to secure a freer and more informed discussion of public questions," which was the professed aim of the *Forum*, had identified the enemy as vigorously as *Masses* had, but the phrase "wholehearted efforts" does not suggest the confrontation that "class against class" does.

New Frontier devoted its December 1936 issue to the Spanish Civil War, which had begun six months before. In an article called "Where I Stand On Spain," thirteen prominent Canadians expressed their views on the attitude the Canadian people should take towards the struggle. No one of the persons polled actually supported the Franco forces. However, opinions on Spain showed a wide variation. William Arthur Deacon, at the time literary editor of the *Toronto Mail and Empire* and *Globe and Mail*, stated that as a nationalist, he believed in Canadian "neutrality," and urged Canada to "cut clear of the Empire" lest the country become involved in the war in order to defend British interests. Salem Bland took the opposite position, arguing that "any democrat who thinks that no democratic country is called upon to give any aid to a democracy so lawlessly assailed, *if such aid involves any risk* to itself [italics mine], reveals a democracy that will not long survive the ceaseless attacks of a Fascism that accepts risks." E.J. Pratt declared that his sympathies were "wholly with the Popular Front. . . ." B.K. Sandwell, then editor of Toronto's *Saturday Night* and one of the founders of the Canadian Authors' Association, did not find "very much to choose between the two organizations . . . contending for the right to govern Spain," and therefore argued that "a trial of strength" would best produce a government "satisfactory to the governed." This surprisingly indiscriminating attitude on the part of so influential a public figure argues powerfully not only for the existence of the counter-culture periodicals of the thirties, but for those of any era. Several contributors found it ironic that the Spaniards had fought for centuries to drive out the Moors, and now they were back in Spain at the invitation of the rebels to help topple a legal Spanish government. A few months before the publication of this special issue on Spain, a "Battle Hymn for the Spanish Rebels" by L.A. MacKay had appeared in the *Forum*:

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.

MacKay, literary critic, poet and professor of classics, is represented in this anthology by a *Forum* story, "Another Man's Poison," about a man who prefers urban poverty and unemployment to the deadliness of rural life. MacKay's witty poem on the Moslem-Christian axis coincides with the more angrily expressed sentiments of Morley Callaghan, who also was polled: "The spectacle of the devout foreign legion thugs and pious, infidel Moors, the ancient enemies of the Christian Spanish people marching to the tune of Onward Christian Soldiers leaves me very cold indeed."

Last, I must say that I am very cold indeed about the lengthy introduction to *Voices of Discord*. Offering no information about the sources of the stories, nor about the writers selected for inclusion, the introduction offers instead simplistic analysis of what are sometimes simplistic stories. In this sample, analysis is evaded in favour of a semantic quibble: "B. Gluckman's 'Juggernaut' is also a most interesting story. . . . Why call the work 'Juggernaut?' *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines the title word as being derived from. . . ." When the introduction attempts strict Marxist analysis of the stories, the rhetoric becomes pompous:

As social types the storekeeper and his wife represent an historical phase of capitalism in its transition from an emphasis on primary accumulation and production in the mercantile and industrial phase to the consumption phase of monopoly capitalism in the recent past. The storekeeper's wife represents the acquisitive, possessive Calvinist phase while the storekeeper stands for the consumption phase. . . .

In some cases, the introduction totally misses the point of the story. "Circus in Town" by Sinclair Ross is not about "the disintegration of the old pioneering farm unit," but about a child's ability, even necessity, to create an imaginative world which transcends poverty and failure. Had the thirty-one page introduction been eliminated, the editor could have included four or five more stories (most average seven pages).

Masses and *New Frontier* ceased publication because of a lack of financial support. Both periodicals, along with *The Canadian Forum*, had made a significant contribution in the thirties to the destruction of the assumptions that art had no business concerning itself with social inequalities and that a working class understanding of life had no cachet in the rarefied atmosphere of Canadian *belles lettres*. It is unfortunate that reprints of the entire runs of these periodicals are not available to scholars. *Voices of Discord* only gives a picture of the literary thrust of these publications.

NOTES

1. Though *Eight Men Speak* was advertised in *Masses* as having been written by Mildred Goldberg, authorship was attributed to four persons in the published version. The other three were Oscar Ryan, publicity director of the Canadian Labour Defence League; Ed Cecil-Smith, later commander of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and Frank Love, active at the time in the Workers' Theatre Movement.
2. I am indebted for clarification of this point to Greg Kealey and John Manley of the History Department of Dalhousie University.