

Women and the Socialist-Modernist Encounter

Candida Rifkind. *Comrades & Critics: Women, Literature & the Left in 1930s Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. x + 268 pp.

There are practical limitations to the study of the 1930s cultural left—its rich multilingual traditions remain largely untranslated and unstudied, and the “profoundly ideological” barriers that mediated the socialist cultures of the decade continue to have effects for researchers today (Rifkind 127). Moreover, the literary 1930s is a field that has been well-tilled and tended in post-Cold War studies such as Dean Irvine’s *Editing Modernity* (2007); James Doyle’s literary history of the Communist left, *Progressive Heritage* (2002); Ken Moffat’s *A Poetics of Social Work* (2001); Caren Irr’s *The Suburb of Dissent* (1998); and Alan Filewood’s work on leftist theatre history. Rifkind’s book is a stunning extension and augmentation of this body of work.

Comrades & Critics sets out to “mobilize feminist cultural criticism” to “recognize women who came to prominence on the literary left” in the 1930s and to “ask about the conditions of their cultural production, its distribution and reception” (34), but it is also a study of the “larger field of national cultural production,” and, in particular, the “interplays between leftism and liberalism in the nationalist project to define the field of Canadian literature” (20). Attempting to “take another path into a field that is increasingly surveyed for the known rather than the unknown” (33), Rifkind’s study considers both well-known leftist writers such as Dorothy Livesay, lesser-known contributors to the literary left such as poet Anne Marriott and novelist Irene Baird, as well as playwrights and theatre workers Toby Gordon Ryan, Mildred Goldberg, Elsie Park Gowan, Minnie Evans Bicknell, and Mary Reynolds. (The chapter on theatre includes a discussion of the social-democratic drama of the CCF, and examines texts and playwrights that are all but forgotten.) As historian Joan Sangster has shown, women did not achieve prominence in leftist political parties in the 1930s; however, as Rifkind’s book ably demonstrates, they were active in the decade’s cultural left, albeit because this field was perceived as an appropriate site for women’s participation. Yet women’s cultural interventions on the left are not easily categorized as feminist: given the subordination of gender to class and the ubiquity of the trope of the effete bourgeois in leftist discourses of the period, women artists and cultural producers diminished both women’s issues and any aesthetic that might be perceived as feminine.

In an admirable historical and theoretical introduction, Rifkind points to the complexities of all the terms she is invoking in order to read the work of these writers—the “imaginary coherence” of the 1930s (5), the diversity of the leftist spectrum, the masculinist gender politics of both socialism and modernism, and the dialectics of what she terms the “socialist-modernist encounter.” In grappling with the problem of what it means for a writer in this period to be on the left, Rifkind draws on historian Ian McKay’s non-sectarian approach to the history of socialism in Canada and, indeed, mimics the broad coalition-building work of the Popular Front. The frame of the “socialist-modernist encounter,” which Rifkind resituates in each of the four chapters, places the book in the admirable company of U.S. scholars such as Michael Denning and Barbara Foley, who have similarly decried narrow and elitist definitions of modernism, and also adds a strong voice to the growing number of Canadian critics, such as Dean Irvine, who attend to the imbrications of socialist and modernist cultures. Following Foley, Rifkind challenges the “critical tradition that bifurcates aesthetic forms into the traditional and the new only to designate the latter as modernist” (14), and, while she offers an admirable reading of the imagist and other experimental aesthetics in Anne Marriott’s long poem “The Wind Our Enemy,” focuses on how the conventional forms favoured by leftist women writers in the 1930s mediated “the fractured conditions of modernity” through their “stylistic opposite of unity” (90). In other words, as interpreters of and interlocutors with the conditions of modern life, these women writers were indisputably modernist.

What distinguishes Rifkind’s analysis of the poetry, prose, and drama that she selects is her rigorous commitment to a combined sociology of literature and cultural studies approach, which is augmented by extensive archival and historical research. Rifkind has combed all the major archival holdings of leftist materials in Canada, including the Robert S. Kenny Collection at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library and the Toby Gordon Ryan Collection at the University of Guelph. Refusing the “ossification” of the 1930s left and demanding our reclamation of it as a means of resisting the increasingly naturalized association of liberalism and culture in Canada, *Comrades & Critics* offers a significant and groundbreaking feminist contribution to the study of cultural production in Canada during the Depression and the international contexts that informed it.

Jody Mason