

Literary Biography and Little-Magazine History

Dean Irvine, *Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. xiii + 348 pp.

Editing Modernity: Women and Little-Magazine Cultures in Canada, 1916-1956 is a handsome book. The dust jacket is beautifully illustrated by P.K. Page-Irwin's felt-pen drawing of a typewriter and Floris McLaren's notes on *Contemporary Verse*. It's ironic, then, that the book opens with an epigraph by F.R. Scott, who, despite his ground-breaking work in literature, law, and politics, was mired in the patriarchal gender politics of his time. Scott refused, for instance, to include poetry by Dorothy Livesay in *New Provinces*, a collection of modernist poetry edited by himself and A.J.M. Smith in 1936. *Editing Modernity's* epigraph from Scott's "The EDGE of the PRISM" is a humorous exercise in name-dropping, a clever, snappy party invitation in which Scott references *New Provinces* and Canadian little magazines up to 1966. *Editing Modernity's* more appropriate second epigraph by P.K. Page highlights the system of distinctions on which the culture of little magazines is based. The insider, Page tells us, is aware of the value of little magazines, while the outsider inaccurately interprets the adjective little as a sign of inadequacy. In placing Scott before Page, Irvine foregrounds the system of devaluation that is inherent in gendered societies, including Canada during modernity.

In spite of this awkward beginning, *Editing Modernity* is required reading for anyone interested in the history of Canadian periodicals. It's also an excellent resource for students and scholars of Canadian women's writing. The book is organized into five chapters based on individual editors. Dorothy Livesay is central to Chapter 1 and appears in several others. Irvine considers Floris McLaren and Anne Marriott in Chapter 2. Miriam Waddington and P.K. Page take up Chapter 3, while the fourth chapter concerns Flora MacDonald Denison, Florence Custance, Mary Davidson, Laura and Hilda Ridley, and Eleanor Godfrey. The final chapter discusses Catherine Harmon, Myra Lazeckko-Haas, Yvonne Agazarian, Aileen Collins, and Margaret Fairley. Much of the Conclusion to *Editing Modernity* is a history of *CV/II*, founded by Livesay in 1975. Thus *Editing Modernity* is well-framed: beginning and ending with Livesay.

Irvine organizes his discussions of Canadian women editors around perceived crises and turning points in their lives and work. For Livesay, the crisis revolves around her temporary membership in the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) and its incompatibility with high modernist poetics. Irvine's approach to Livesay is categorical: she is either antimodernist and anti-middle class during her CPC phase, or socialist romantic, or modernist. In fact, Livesay's entire life's work is both modernist and leftist, with the exception of the anti-bourgeois proletarian stage. Chapter 1 ignores Livesay's early Imagist writing, pre-1930, even though Livesay was a modernist from the time she started to write poetry. She was thrilled to discover publications by other modernists in the early 1930s because she recognized her own aesthetics in their poetic forms and thematic concerns. Yet literary history's artificial separation of Imagism from modernism leads many historians to classify Imagism with Romantic poetry, and this view apparently motivates the author's decision to omit Livesay's early writing from *Editing Modernity*. Furthermore, considering the context of Irvine's argument—women's marginalization in Canadian modernism—it is remarkable that he omits any reference to Livesay's role as a mother. Like many other female Canadian writers, including Miriam Waddington, Livesay lived with the tensions surrounding professional writing and motherhood. In their poetry, correspondence, and essays, both of these women wrote about their struggles to be artists and mothers simultaneously.

In his discussion of Page and Waddington in Chapter 3, Irvine focuses on gender roles and the pressures and expectations these two women faced in their relationships with editors of little magazines. *Editing Modernity* frequently reveals that women performed routine production tasks for early little magazines in Canada, while more powerful editorial roles were filled by men, a finding that deserves repetition. Chapter 3 provides ample historical evidence of the domination and control practised by John Sutherland, Irving Layton, and Louis Dudek over Miriam Waddington, Kay Smith, and P.K. Page during their contributions to *First Statement* (1942-5). For instance, Irvine tells us that the Sutherland-Waddington professional relationship was based on Sutherland's devaluation of topics that have been gendered as feminine, such as love, a devaluation that led to biased publication decisions. We learn that Waddington and Sutherland had a literary friendship in 1943; however, Sutherland was manipulative and unreliable. He published Waddington's poem "Indoors" in *First Statement's* August 1943 issue, for example, yet, his editorial of the same issue criticizes the poem as part of the "romantic tradition" (154). Furthermore,

his essay "The Role of Prufrock," published in the September 1943 issue, refers to "Indoors" as a negative example of Romantic poetry. As a result of Sutherland's behaviour, Waddington stopped contributing her poetry to *First Statement*, sending it instead to *Direction*, *Contemporary Verse*, and the *Canadian Forum*. In spite of this excellent exposé, Irvine disappoints the reader by perpetuating the false claim that Floris McLaren, Anne Marriott, Doris Ferne, and Dorothy Livesay "assisted" Alan Crawley to found *Contemporary Verse* (79). These poets founded the magazine as a collective. They asked Crawley to edit it because his knowledge, interest, and supportive approach was a wonderful resource, and, more importantly, none of them were free enough to take on the editorial tasks.

Besides discussing the power politics surrounding the publication of poetry in little magazines, *Editing Modernity* provides many close readings of individual poems. For example, Irvine's reading of Page's modernist poetry, modelled on critical writing by Brian Trehearne, Laura Killian, and Astradur Eysteinnsson, consists of a psychoanalytical-literary interpretation of the "personal" versus the "impersonal" in Page's writing (131). This approach to poetry brings up a question that feminists have struggled with for decades: how to break down the gender stereotypes based on the binary of female/nature/personal/object versus male/culture/impersonal/subject. Although the subjective/objective binary may very well describe Page's poetic trajectory and her relationships with little magazines in Canada, the theoretical underpinnings to this reading perpetuate essentialism. The impersonality of Page's poems on office work, for example, is surely a rhetorical means of representing and emphasizing the impersonal nature of her topic. The omission of this point weakens an otherwise strong argument. Essentialism also creeps into Page's "After Rain," yet Irvine fails to recognize it. The female "poet-persona's shame" in "After Rain" is essentialist because it assumes that females are naturally empathetic (173). Likewise, Irvine's discussion of Waddington juxtaposes the contemplative to the social. Irvine treats the following themes in Waddington's poetry as separate halves of a binary: subjective interior themes and exterior, community-based themes, described by the author as "the desire to express human sympathy" (166). Was Waddington struggling with the professional objectivity and distance required in her roles as university professor and social worker? To clarify this topic, readers of *Editing Modernity* look for more non-literary context to Waddington's writing.

Yet most of *Editing Modernity* is well supported by historical-biographical context. A highlight of the book is found in discussions of little-known female Canadian editors, especially Margaret Fairley, who edited the

Canadian Forum, and Hilda and Laura Ridley, sisters who founded the *Crucible* in reaction to the commercialization of the *Canadian Magazine*, a major outlet for English-language poets and prose writers. Irvine is also to be commended for analyzing Anne Marriott's uncollected poetry from *Contemporary Verse* and *Canadian Poetry Magazine*. Like many other "minor" writers, Marriott could have been a larger literary figure if she hadn't been distracted by the material reality of making a living at the National Film Board, and Irvine's work expands our understanding of Marriott's place in Canadian literary history. *Editing Modernity's* section on Flora MacDonald Denison and her magazine *Sunset of Bon Echo* will also interest readers. Denison's editorial work was influenced by her commitment to theosophy, a progressive world view that supported gender equality and the breakdown of the class system. *Editing Modernity* takes up many neglected publications and writers, thus providing an interesting and valuable addition to Canadian literary history.

P.L. Kelly

Contributors

Wanda Campbell, Acadia University
Tanis MacDonald, Wilfrid Laurier University
Kevin Flynn, University of Saskatchewan
W.J. Keith, University of Toronto
Donald Hair, University of Western Ontario
Tracy Ware, Queen's University
Jody Mason, Carleton University
P.L. Kelly, University of Ottawa