

## On Reading Oneself Cited in Someone Else's Book

“Read me! Read me!” screamed the little red book with the title, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Between the Lines, 2005), and so I did. I have a Pavlovian reaction to such titles, as they remind me instantly of the kind of reading that used to consume me in my halcyon days of romancing the left (Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book!*, Michele Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today*, William Hinton's *Fanshen*, Pierre Valliere's *White Niggers of America*...add your own faves.)

The author of *RRR*, Ian McKay, is a History professor at Queen's and unknown to me. But I note that he was born in 1953 (so not exactly the newest kid on the block) and that he dedicates his book to “my partner Robert Vanderheyden,” so he's probably gone through a demonstration or two of his own.

It's the sort of book in which you underline like mad, because it is a kind of Poli Sci crash course and you want it to sink in. Stuff like (I'm flipping through, looking for the underlined bits): “A left historian is engaged in obtaining information of use in the lengthy war of position that, as Gramsci observed, Western leftists necessarily fight.” Or: “Not only, said Marx, is it possible to ‘live otherwise,’ but also because capitalism has changed traditional society beyond recognition – ‘all that is solid melts into air,’ in *The Communist Manifesto*'s famous remark – it is very possible that working people will be required to do so.”

In fact, imagining the possibility of “living otherwise” becomes McKay's working conceit for the long, historical trajectory of “rebels, reds, and radicals” in Canada, and lends his book a certain hopefulness, for there will always be some dissident element that springs up amongst us who, having done the necessary “reconnaissance” of her/his society (another of McKay's key concepts), can take advantage of a “matrix moment,” a moment of profound change which calls out for “moments of refusal,” and rebirth the left.

Well, by page 50 I was really liking this stuff, and by page 80 I was a total fan; and then, on page 85 I see my name: “Without a historically defined ‘affinity group,’ leftists are tempted to define success or failure in the terms of the society around them. In *A Long Way From Home*, an eloquent, underrated study of the radical 1960s in English Canada, Myrna Kostash points out this problem... “etc.

There's even a footnote. “This title [*A Long Way From Home*] remains an indispensable book on the 1960s, an understudied decade in Canada.”

Indispensable!

I tell you all this not just to draw attention to myself but to give you the “back story,” as it were; for the experience of being the author of *A Long Way From Home*, which was published in 1980 by James Lorimer & Co., almost finished me as a writer. And it was only my second book.

In one of his compendious footnotes, McKay noted that “remarkably we still lack in Canada one historical monograph that could be placed with confidence alongside these [American and British] titles” about the 1960s. And there precisely lay my problem, even back in 1977-9, when I was researching my book.

I had received a Canada Council grant for what was supposed to be essentially a literary project: a composite study, in the style of the New Journalism, of characters in the Canadian “movement.” I imagined getting to know all kinds of people and then drawing them up as a series of Tom Wolfe-ish sketches: the Hippy, the Draft-Dodger, the Pot Head, the Rock Musician, the Earth Mother, the Political Guru, the Folk Singer, and so on.

The book I eventually wrote bore almost no resemblance to this proposal. The literary project was sabotaged by the fact that, to my dismay and consternation, the secondary sources which I hoped to consult as preparation for my own project had not been written. Or barely. I mean the historical monographs and surveys, but also the memoirs, the biographies, the critical deconstructions, the correspondence, the celebratory memorabilia, that were issuing non-stop from British and American and French writers and activists. (What a treasure-trove *Rolling Stone's* oversize photo essay on the 1960s proved to be, just as a ‘for instance.’) Well, there were a few things, and several anthologies, but there wasn’t nearly enough for me to make use of as a “mere” writer. Not only that, but until the women’s movement in the 1970s, I had not been an activist but rather a sympathising hippy who had been politicized and stoned by a year in the USA, 1966-7...

But I digress. My point is that I found myself having to do primary research – interviews with former activists, screening old tv footage, rescuing mildewed journals from basements, reconstructing events from the hodge-podge of people’s disorganized files – because none of these glorious veterans, these “rebels, reds and radicals,” had sat down to write a comprehensive account of their own experience and their critique of it. (And they never have.) I felt, perhaps wrongly, that *I* somehow had to do it, that I had to assimilate all the disparate materials into a coherent political project as well as serving my original literary purpose, when in fact I was ill-equipped to do so.

The result was a book that failed.

The immediate failure was the to-be-expected trashing it received from the media - this was 1980; the mainstream media were not friendly to a book that celebrated the New Left - and to this day I have not read the *Maclean's* review (friends warned me not to). Nor shall I ever forget the humiliation of reading the mocking review in the *Globe and Mail*, spread out across the top of one of the book review pages, mortified by the thought that *the whole country* was reading this review and laughing at me.

But the deeper disappointment, which embittered me, was the resounding silence from the very Left to whom the book had been dedicated. There were a few exceptions – the

*Black Rose* publisher, Dimitri Roussopoulos, made a bit of a happy fuss and even invited me to meet with a group of anarchists in Montreal, and an old university buddy, Duncan Cameron, who had become a Marxist economist, said I had done a good and important thing, and one of my interviewees, a neighbour in my housing co-op, Robin Hunter, composed a little “chant” in my honour: “Hey, hey, Myrna K, how many books did you write today?” But that wasn’t nearly enough to assuage the hurt I felt that no one on the Left came publicly to my defense as all the hostile notices arrived. (It’s axiomatic that, if there were any good ones, I’ve forgotten them.) In following years, the book was never referred to in any Left forum that I was aware of (technically it remains in print, although I’ve never earned out my modest advance) nor included in any syllabi, and so on.

Nor was it noticed among the literati. But this was less of a shock, as nonfiction in Canada has been decidedly declass . And, besides, I knew in my heart of hearts that I had betrayed my writerly muse by abandoning my original project in order to write a political history that overwhelmed my own “voice.” I can see now that there were other problems: my publisher should have sent the manuscript back to me for a rewrite, as one of its early readers, Patrick Watson, urged me to do, warning me the reviewers were going to hate it; instead, Lorimer glibly dismissed my fears with “even bad reviews are publicity,” which is a cruel deception foisted on writers by publishers who don’t need to sell books, only collect Canada Council block grants. I was a female writer from Alberta who had not been a Movement person-of-consequence, so what sort of “street cred” did I think I had? I was desperate to please my then-current political circle in Edmonton who included very self-confident Trotskyists and Maoists, allowing them to peer over my shoulder. as it were, as I was writing. (This is why I never think about who I’m writing *for* anymore, at least not until I have a first draft.) The book’s anticipated audience – all those Sixties people – were busy making fun of their younger selves.

My immediate reaction was to run away from the scene of my failure, which I did by spending several winters in Greece, happy to be a “nobody” and to read a lot of books about Greece. I don’t regret this interlude now, for it steered me towards my next Big Subject, eastern Europe, its “generation of 1968,” and my relationship to the territory, which I did manage to write as literary nonfiction (*Bloodlines* and *The Doomed Bridegroom*).

This all happened twenty and more years ago, and I’ve got over it. I’ve kept on writing, I did discover my “voice” even when writing about politics and history, I did establish “street cred” among fellow writers. Now, when I read out of the blue that a book which had caused me so much hurt is thought to be “indispensable” and “eloquent,” I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.