

Killing Me Softly

I.

When my book, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* was published (by James Lorimer & Co.) in 1980, it provoked a flurry of disdain, scorn and denunciation from the mainstream press, and virtually no reaction from the Left.

I had steeled myself for the former but I was utterly unprepared for the latter.

The book opened with CUCND's march for nuclear disarmament in 1959, the first student demonstration in Canada since the end of the Second World War, and closed with the War Measures Act of 1970 and the collapse of the New Left Caucus; between these dates, the chapters covered *inter alia* student power, anti-war campaigns and draft resistance, hippie culture, Red and Black Power, the rise of Women's Liberation, and anti-colonialist struggle in Quebec. Schooled in the New Journalism, I made no pretence of "objectivity" but wrote a kind of full-tilt boogie prose which, admittedly, fit awkwardly with sober patches of analysis. As Ted Allan, for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, described my style, not unfairly: "It's by turn passionate, clumsy, comprehensive, inflated, zealous, hyperbolic and unequivocal." As it turned out, it had some few admirers.

I had told myself that I was writing this book "for" the English-Canadian Left; I fancied myself a bit of a heroine for having taken the trouble to launch this vividly-romantic but not uncritical history on the cusp of international Thatcher-Mulroney-Reaganism; and, considering that no one else in Canada – least of all the Left's own loquacious avant-garde – had yet bothered to write anything like as sweeping as *Long Way From Home*, I felt justified in expecting an enthusiastic response, or at least a warm welcome. Of course, I also girded myself for the inevitable critical appraisal of my arguments from activists, even those whom I had interviewed, who had been far more engaged in the New Left's *praxis* than I had been. Truth be told, I was always a more convincing hippy than Leftist activist (feminism was to change that).

II

"Publishing," said Marshall McLuhan, "is the self-invasion of privacy," and bad reviews were hanging out there for all the world to see.

The *Winnipeg Free Press*, rather wittily describing me as an "auto-anthropologist picking over the navel lint of the '60s," found the book "ineffably dull" with "hardened arteries." The *Sarnia Observer* also took me to task for "navel-gazing," and for vilifying "Anglo-Saxons," and producing "the nostalgic musings of a middle-aged revolutionary." (I was thirty-six.) The reviewer was deeply offended by the fact that I had received a grant from the Canada Council. "But she expresses no

compunctions about tapping Establishment assistance for her opus – which might better have been compacted for compost.” The reviewer at the *Ottawa Citizen* found the book “sometimes shallow and often breathless in tone. *Maclean’s* hated how I ladled out the “leftist hagiographical hooey in syrupy globs” about the era’s “tarnished icons,” “dogmatic adolescents,” and “LSD pillow talk”: “If memories are made of this, let’s forget the Sixties.” The *Globe and Mail* ran a derisory review across the top of the book section – I imagined hundreds of thousands of Canadians reading and smirking – so mean-spirited that I never kept a copy of it and don’t have one now.

The publisher sent me on a promotional tour. I kept notes. In Toronto, interviewed at CITY-TV and transformed by make-up, I shared the program “You’re Beautiful” with two older women who were teaching Women’s Studies somewhere; one of them declared the Sixties was “American” and “just a bunch of spoiled middle-class kids having a temper tantrum.” At CHFI radio, the interviewer wanted to know “what happened after we lost Camelot?” *We?* The interviewer for the *Ryersonian* asked me what sort of childhood I had had and what the women’s movement had “accomplished.” I sold one book at a book-signing table at York University. In a Canadian Literature class at St Michael’s College at the University of Toronto, a student challenged me to defend myself: “How can you talk about an anti-war movement when thousands of babies are being aborted every year?” I skated around this by firing off a dazzling rap about the need to integrate the questions of production and reproduction.

In Winnipeg, a freelance contributor to CBC Radio came to a party friends threw in my honour, and went around the room with the question: “Did you protest in the Sixties?” The artist Esther Warkov: “Against what?” The artist Ted Howorth: “I was involved in one protest but I don’t remember what it was about. We all went down to the Legislature but I don’t remember why.” Melinda McCracken, writer: “I didn’t protest but I was involved in the music end of it. The coffee house was a centre for protest. A lot of runaway kids ran away to this coffee house.” A CBC news reporter, Judy Waytiuk, remembered a protest at the University of Manitoba: “We ran a ring of cars around the administration building because the professors had parking spots close to the building and the students didn’t.” The bookstore owner, John Oleksiuk, was “never involved in any protest at all.” But the printmaker Bill Lobchuk was, once: “It was the first time tuition fees had gone up and we were all standing around in the Rotunda of the Legislature building. The protest organizers demanded to see the Education minister, who refused to come out. Our guys said: ‘Well, I guess that’s it. Let’s go home.’ I couldn’t believe it. We had a march down the streets, we had had a rally, and now we were all just going to go home? I figured if that’s the level of protest at this campus, we’re in a lot of trouble.”

“To fit the occasion,” the reporter went on, “music tapes filled the room with *You Can’t Always Get What You Want*, *The Eve of Destruction*, and *Sounds of Silence*. The hostess had baked a carrot cake and decorated it with the peace symbol, brown

icing on white. She brought it into the living room and ceremoniously gave it to Myrna to cut. Everybody tried to sing *We Shall Overcome* but nobody could remember the words.”

In Calgary, the *Herald* wanted to know my position on federalism, and the *Sun* – a young woman who had missed the whole thing - whether there was anything left of the Sixties. To a full-house of students at Nelson’s David Thompson University Centre I read from my chapter on the war in Vietnam; “Isn’t it true,” one of them asked, “that all the radicals have become chartered accountants?” In Vancouver, the photographer for the *Sun* wanted me to look “tough,” “just like the Sixties.” A live television appearance with the legendary Jack Webster, host and curmudgeon, made me anxious. He had “mellowed,” I was assured, and he did indeed treat the guests who preceded me with gruff deference – a Social Credit cabinet minister, a senior bureaucrat, and Duke Redbird, Metis poet and social activist. But, having admitted he hadn’t “really” read my book, he let loose a stream of abuse about the Sixties as an era of deadbeats, drug casualties, broken families, and anti-growth anti-capitalists. I was also unaccountably interviewed at a heavy metal FM station where neither Bob Dylan nor Gordon Lightfoot dared speak their names.

In Regina, not a single interviewer asked a question about the extraordinary role played by Saskatchewan activists in the New Left and NDP, and all the callers to a phone-in radio show, with one exception, hated the Sixties, holding the era’s “Marxist-Leninist malarkey” responsible for all ills, including the rise in the crime rate, rampant VD, and lack of labour discipline. The exception was a Native man, who called the 60s a “right-on decade.” (Later in the afternoon, at a book-signing, I noticed a Native man -perhaps my caller - hovering about a stack of my books at the cash register, and I felt an acute pang about the \$17.95 price tag.) Invited to address a first year Political Science class at the University of Regina who were studying Canadian Government, I was confronted by students all seated in a pack by the doorway (for a quick getaway?) who returned my increasingly frantic “rap” about the Canadian Sixties with unblinking stares of complete blankness. I was unnerved, as though all the grievances behind the demands for Student Power of fifteen years earlier had come to roost again at the front of this classroom where it was now *I* who stood in solitary authority, and the “alienation” and “impersonality” of the university classroom took on an awful concreteness in that collective blankness. Actually, explained the professor, they weren’t blank at all, they were all “stunned.” An old radical himself, he had tears in his eyes.

By the time I “did” Edmonton, my home town, the questions and my answers had become predictable. And the questions did not necessarily derive from a reading of the book; reading the jacket copy would do. Where are all the radicals now? Why were the 1970s so apathetic? How were the Canadian Sixties different from the American? Why should hippies get government hand-outs?

At the end of the tour, and with the reviews all in, I may be forgiven for wondering if I had hallucinated the Sixties, at least as I had described them. Everyone else’s

“Sixties” seemed to be, at best, an occasion for rueful nostalgia, at worst a period of self-indulgent, anti-social, perverse, drug-addled and long-haired conspiracy against Western civilization. Thus, there were only two possible stances toward the era from the vantage point of 1980: misty-eyed reminiscence of one’s wild, irretrievable youth; sarcastic, even hostile, dismissal of its agenda. No one, it seemed, took the Sixties seriously anymore.

I fought back for awhile. In *Alberta Magazine* I reminded readers of what had happened in just one year, 1969-70, in just one place, the University of Alberta: “...women run for student council office on a platform to ‘end the brutal suppression of women as second-class citizens.’ Two radical sociology professors are denied tenure and the Students for a Democratic University (SDU) raises a hullabaloo. A German new leftist visits; the posters announce: ‘Humanity will not be free until the last capitalist is hanged with the innards of the last bureaucrat.’ A united front of SDU, the Student Christian Movement, Maoists and freelance leftists protests the existence of the ‘fascist’ Law and Order (Disciplinary) Committee....The students’ council sponsors a teach-in on the American domination of Canada and Walter Gordon, Robin Mathews and Mel Watkins are there. You can hear a pin drop when Watkins says: ‘Even if it could be done, it hardly seems worth the effort to build an independent capitalist Canada. The U.S. has given that option a bad name.’”

This was nothing if not serious business.

In *Today* weekend magazine, I made the case for viewing the Sixties as unfinished business, in “lifestyle,” the arts, the status of women, politics, Native land claims, the environment: “Do we let the economic despair and social nastiness of the ‘80s win the day, or do we keep the promise of the ‘60s?”

I would not have sounded so plaintive had I had the “left” in my corner. But the men and women of the organized new left had gone MIA.

Only the people around *Our Generation* rallied around the book - I remember a friendly gathering at Black Rose bookstore – and, except for Duncan Cameron of the University of Ottawa who put up a spirited albeit unpublished defense in a letter to the *Globe & Mail*, no one on the Left came publicly to my defense as all the hostile notices arrived. Even the people I had interviewed remained silent as to my work’s importance. This was completely bewildering to me. As I explained to the *Ottawa Citizen*, I believed that each one of my chapters could be expanded as a whole book, and I fully expected an entire bibliography of books about Canada in the 1960s to follow on my heels, by the people who themselves had fashioned it on the left. Instead, the immediate response was silence, which I could only interpret as indifference, if not disapproval, as if I were being chastized for something I was in the dark about. In following years, the book was never referred to in any Left forum that I was aware of nor included in any syllabi – although I was delighted to discover that a copy in Trent University’s library was heavily marked with

enthusiastic exclamation marks in orange marker pen – and technically it remains in print, although I've never earned out my modest advance.

For more than twenty-five years, I carried a mixed burden of shame and anger at this outcome. I shelved *Long Way From Home* and filed away all the papers bearing on it, and left them to moulder. I fled to Greece several winters in a row – they had just elected a social democratic government after decades of a junta and a right-wing party - where I set myself the task of trying to write a different kind of book henceforth, experiments in what is now called creative non-fiction. Then I began several years of travel in Eastern Bloc countries, displacing onto the Generation of '68 in Warsaw, Prague and Belgrade the unrequited love for my “comrades” back in Canada.

Then, in 2005, a quarter-century after the publication of *Long Way From Home*, the Queen's University historian, Ian McKay, published a fine little book, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History*, and I was flabbergasted, and delighted, to read there that, in the opinion of this scholar almost a whole generation younger than me, my book is “an eloquent, underrated study of the radical 1960s in English Canada,” and “indispensable.” In 2007 I was invited to take part in the international conference at Queen's, “New World Coming: Canada and Global Consciousness”; and that year I also received a royalty cheque for sales of *Long Way From Home*, the first such, in twenty-seven years.

III.

This was not the end of the surprises. In a phenomenon well-known to artists, because bad reviews are the only ones, deep in our hearts, we believe, only the bad reviews stick. And so it turned out that, on rereading all the reviews in preparation for the Queen's conference, I discovered that I had completely forgotten that my book had had its admirers. I had forgotten that June Callwood, for example, was a fan, writing in the Edmonton *Journal* that “those [the '60s] were lively, lovely time...there was prevailing decency, joy, democracy and ceaseless commitment to destroy Ghandi's old enemies, ‘injustice, untruth, and humbug.’ Myrna Kostash ends her tough, definitive, marvellous book with a memorable line: ‘We should be so ridiculous again.’ Soon, I hope.” And in Toronto's feminist paper, *Broadside*, Susan Cole concluded a long review essay, “Where have all the flowers gone?” with this assessment: “But whether the actual political activity of the sixties was more than a brief spasm of outrage remains to be seen. I for one do not share Myrna Kostash's optimism concerning our generation. But you have to love her for the fact that she still believes.” Elsewhere, the book was judged “profoundly moving at times,” “conclusive and worthwhile...a must for anyone mildly interested in recent political movements,” “fascinating, well-researched,” a “valuable social record,” written with “flinty righteousness that is hard-earned,” “an encyclopedic review destined to become a classic.” Some were overtly partisan: “The reviews of Kostash's book to date have often been so unnecessarily negative in tone that one suspects many of the commercial media types have vested interests for denouncing

any book which suggests there were indeed some constructive and ongoing lessons to be taken from that period.” Finally, some were in deep identification with the subject: “In the end, the 60s changed the common coin of our lives....We are all changed.” At the *Montreal Gazette* the novelist Michael Dorland (identified as the author of *The Assassination of Leon Trotsky*) wrote of the Sixties that “for the first time in a good long time, youth stopped acting like the jerks they are and said NO....Such beautiful presumption, such unmitigated gall...In *A Long Way From Home* Kostash has tried to keep that special 1960s spirit alive by blowing on the ashes....the alternative is living death.” And from another review, balm to a writer’s esteem: “I stayed up late to finish it.”

I now have a more balanced view of the fate of my book, but one answer still hangs over it: why did the Canadian Left ignore it?

In *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*, Ian McKay noted in one of his compendious footnotes that “remarkably we still lack in Canada one historical monograph that could be placed with confidence alongside [American and British] titles.” 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.” This bore faint resemblance to the book I eventually wrote. That 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 monograph(s) 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 (along with Dimitri Roussopoulos, I often think of Canadian intellectuals being particularly susceptible to *anthologitis*, an inflammation of the organ of self-doubt) but there wasn’t nearly enough for me to rely on as a “mere” writer who had not been much of an activist until the women’s liberation movement but rather a sympathising hippy who had been “stoned” then politicized by two years in the USA, 1965-7.

The point is that I found myself having to do primary research – interviewing former activists, screening old TV footage, rescuing mildewed journals from basements, reconstructing events from the hodgepodge 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: where are the memoirs by Peter Boothroyd, Clay Ruby, Danny Drache, Marjaleena Repo, Jim Harding, Dimitri Roussopoulos, Judy Rebick...?) I felt, perhaps wrongly, that I somehow had to do it, when in fact I was ill-equipped to do so; that I had to assimilate all the disparate materials into a coherent political project as well as serve my original literary purpose.

Nor was it noticed among the literati. But this was less of a shock, as nonfiction in Canada has been decidedly déclassé. And, besides, I had abandoned my original project in order to write a political history that ended by overwhelming it. (In retrospect, I can see 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, as indeed some did, for its tortured phrasings as much as for its politics: instead, Lorimer glibly dismissed my fears with a “even bad reviews are publicity,” which is a cruel deception foisted on writers by publishers who are already thinking about the next season’s list.)

In fairness, by the time of the book’s publication in the Fall of 1980, many true believers on the Left were full of skepticism and weariness about the romance of the ‘60s in the face of recession, unemployment, police repression and the looming struggle against Free Trade, and those who remained optimistic had hived off into the women’s and gay liberation movements and the nascent environmentalism of the 1970s. Students, it had turned out, were not a revolutionary class: “The absolute last thing that the 1960s were was a crisis of capitalism,” as one correspondent put it. Perhaps the potential lay in marginalized, diasporic, racialized subalterns?

I was a female writer from Alberta who had not been a Movement person-of-consequence, a freelance writer not a scholar. Eventually, word reached me that, among some of the men of the New Left, there had indeed been a reaction: “Who the hell does Kostash think she is?” Was this a fight over political memory? They would not grant my book the dignity of a response by writing their own accounts. Perhaps this was the rub: I had written a book and they hadn’t.

Now in the early twenty-first century there is a whole library of books about Canada since the 1960s, many of them written by Sixties activists, but their own life and times as youthful “rebels, Reds and radicals” remain unexamined. It’s the next generation that will have the last word.

Myrna Kostash, Edmonton; February 6, 2008