**Watts, Myrtle Eugenia “Jim” 1909-1968**

Emily Christina Murphy (Queen’s University at Kingston)

Myrtle Eugenia Watts, known variously as Jim, Jean, or Gina, was a Canadian foreign correspondent for the Spanish Civil War, theatre artist in the Theatre of Action, and patron of Canadian leftist literary and theatre culture in the 1930s. In her short career, Watts had a significant impact on Canadian leftist modernist culture.

Jean Watts was born in Streetsville, Ontario to a wealthy family. By 1920, Watts’s family had moved to Toronto’s Annex neighbourhood, where Watts’s social and artistic circle would eventually include such prominent Canadian cultural figures as writers Dorothy Livesay and Stanley B. Ryerson, and theatre artists Toby Gordon Ryan and Oscar Ryan. Watts and Livesay would spend their adolescences as self-identified bluestockings, attending lectures by prominent feminist Emma Goldman, and reading the literary works of European and British modernists. Beginning in her early adulthood, Watts contributed significant resources to the Worker’s Theatre (later the Theatre of Action) and to the establishment of the leftist literary journal *New Frontier* (1936-38)*,* for which her husband Lon Lawson was editor. In early 1937, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Watts took up a position with the Canadian Communist Party newspaper the *Daily Clarion* (1936-39) as a foreign correspondent stationed at the Blood Transfusion Unit outside Madrid. Frustrated by her limited mobility as a correspondent, Watts found employment at the Spanish censorship bureau, and then enrolled in the International Brigades as an ambulance driver. After a year in Spain, Watts toured Canada to raise funds for the Spanish cause and then travelled to France in 1939 to aid Spanish refugees. She spent her later years as an ambulance driver in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps and as a personnel officer at the Kingston Army base in Ontario, Canada.

Watts’s largest contribution to Canadian textual production is her body of journalistic work, which balances reportage on international politics with narrative-driven, human-interest stories. Watts’s style aligns her writing with American female journalists such as Martha Gellhorn and Helen Kirkpatrick, who became renowned for their war reporting. As part of the Workers’ Theatre, Watts co-directed the sole production of the infamous leftist play *Eight Men Speak* (1933), introduced Canadian audiences to politically motivated American plays such as Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* (1934), and, along with Toby Gordon Ryan, developed highly stylized, politicized dramatic performances that the troupe toured through rural Ontario. Watts’s role in Canadian culture has also been the frequent subject matter of memoirs, in which Watts emerges as a muse, socialite, and public intellectual whose suicide haunts those who knew her. Watts’s upper-middle class background and commitment to leftist, working-class causes has proven divisive, but sympathetic perspectives recognize her bombastic, passionate, and generous personality as a central force in Canadian culture in the 1930s.

**Works**

Watts’s journalistic oeuvre consists of over fifty articles contributed to the *Daily Clarion* and *New Frontier*. Watts also produced radio broadcasts with fellow journalist Ted Allan that reached Canada from Spain; the content of these broadcasts is lost.

Selected Journalism

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---. “Spain Tries Salvage Art During War.” The Daily Clarion 15 Apr. 1937. 2. Microform. The Daily Clarion 2 (1937).

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Watts, Jean, Charlie Boylan, and Victor Hoar. *Jean Watts Interview.* Casette Tape. Victoria, BC, 1975. Dorothy Livesay Records. British Columbia Archives. http://search.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/sn-BEA448/view/SoundRecordings/find%2Bwatts%2B%2B%2B%2B/1#holdings. Print.

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Allan, Norman Bethune. “Chapter One: The Pen as Sword.” *Ted Allan: A Partial Biography*, n.d. [http://www.normanallan.com/Misc/Ted/nT%20ch%201.htm](http://www.normanallan.com/misc/ted/nt%252520ch%2525201.htm). Web.

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Liversedge, Ronald. *Mac-Pap: Memoir of a Canadian in the Spanish Civil War.* Edited by David Yorke. Vancouver: New Star Books, 2013. Print.

Livesay, Dorothy. *Journey With My Selves: A Memoir, 1909-1963.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991. Print.

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Ryan, Toby Gordon. *Stage Left: Canadian Theatre in the Thirties: A Memoir.* Toronto: CTR Publications, 1981. Print.

**References and Further Reading**

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Hannant, Larry. “‘My God, are they sending women?’: Three Canadian Women in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939.” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 15. 1 (2004): 153-176. Print

Filewod, Alan. “Performance and Memory in the Party: Dismembering the Workers’ Theatre Movement.” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 80 (2003): 59–77. Print.

Rifkind, Candida. *Comrades and Critics Women, Literature and the Left in 1930s Canada.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Print.

**Media**

**Entry Name:** “Watts, Myrtle Eugenia ‘Jim’ 1909-1968”

**Material you want to use:** Portrait of Jim Watts by fellow leftist artist, Frederick B. Taylor.

**Purpose of inclusion:** Portrait of article subject

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**Bibliographic details (if appropriate):** Taylor, Frederick B. *Eugenia “Jim” Watts*. Oil on canvas, 1940. Frederick B. Taylor fonds. Library and Archives Canada.

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