

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VIII, Number 1, 2016

General Issue

Indexing and abstracting

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SNIP, IPP and SJR Factors

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1	21100201709	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	0.313	0.034	0.1	0.271	0.038	0.116	0.061	0.007	0.101

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Ideological Conversions: Three Women Activists in the 1930s

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Abstract

What would lead three upper middle class women to question the ideology of their peers and challenge the accepted world view to the extent that they cross the line between acceptance of the status quo and political activism? This paper looks at the life and work of three women – two British and one American – who, in the 1930s, experienced a dramatic change in the way they interpreted the world, which led them to a conversion to a different political viewpoint that had an almost evangelical quality to the way it would affect their subsequent life. Margot Heinemann, Rebecca West and Martha Gellhorn: three impressive writers and activists whom we remember now for their fervent defence of political causes – the struggle of the working class for autonomy, the alternative philosophy and quality of life that existed in the divided Balkans, and *La Causa*, the doomed Republican fight for democracy, respectively. Apart from their intrinsically interesting individual conversions to the faith of a new cause which we can trace in each of these women, their experiences reflect a wider movement in the twentieth century. Heinemann and Gellhorn represent a tendency which has dominated the century – the struggle between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed; fascism and dictatorship versus socialism and democracy. West represents a new respect for a culture that is not a dominant, first world power; she is one of a few writers of her time who looked around the world and discovered values that were not merely material in another way of life. This is a global shift in the appreciation of another culture which has led in the direction of recent political movements based around “thinking globally and acting locally”. Finally, all three writers implicitly echo what has been possibly the biggest social “crossing” of the twentieth century: the struggle for women to find their voice and exercise power: to cross over from second class citizen to equal member of society.

Keywords: Women, politics, 1930s, activism, class, Spain, Balkans, feminism.

1. Introduction

This paper looks at the life and work of three women – two British and one American – who, in the 1930s, experienced a dramatic change in the way they interpreted the world, which led them to a conversion to a different political viewpoint that had an almost evangelical quality to the way it would affect their subsequent life. Margot Heinemann, Rebecca West and Martha Gellhorn: three impressive writers and activists whom we remember now for their fervent defence of political causes – the struggle of the working class for autonomy, the alternative philosophy and quality of life that existed in the divided Balkans, and *La Causa*, the doomed Republican fight for democracy, respectively.

Their experiences reflect a wider movement in the twentieth century. Heinemann and Gellhorn represent a tendency which has dominated the century – the struggle between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed; fascism and dictatorship versus socialism and democracy. West represents a new respect for a culture that is not a dominant, first world power; she is one of a few writers of her time who looked around the world and discovered values that were not merely material in another way of life. This is a global shift in the appreciation of

another culture which has led in the direction of recent political movements based around “thinking globally and acting locally”. Finally, all three writers implicitly echo what has been possibly the biggest social “crossing” of the twentieth century: the struggle for women to find their voice and exercise power: to cross over from second class citizen to equal member of society.

2. Margot Heinemann

Margot Claire Heinemann (1913-1992) enjoyed a privileged early life, being the daughter of a banker; her parents were left-wing German Jews. Margot Heinemann was educated at one of the most expensive independent girls’ schools in Britain, Roedean in Sussex, which prided itself on preparing girls to enter the women’s colleges at Oxbridge. She went on to win a scholarship to read English at Newnham College, Cambridge University, in 1931, later graduating with a Double First Class honours degree and was awarded a one year’s research scholarship. Her studies at Cambridge coincided with very hard times outside this centre of academic privilege, as Britain and the rest of Europe experienced the suffering of the Depression, and the rise of Hitler and Fascism in Germany. Margot Heinemann also became very active in politics, espousing a radical ideology that would sustain her throughout her long life, and became a member first of the Cambridge Socialist Society and then of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1934; she remained a member despite all that would happen in the twentieth century until the Party was dissolved in 1991, a year before her death. A group of Hunger Marchers passed through Cambridge in February 1934, and this contact with an organized and articulate working class struggle had a huge effect on her. Heinemann later recalled that her political views were changed by attending a meeting: “I remember there was a demonstration to go out to greet the contingent of hunger marchers from the north-east coast who were passing through Cambridge. And we marched out to meet them at Girton and marched back with them... And there was a meeting in the town in the evening which was addressed by the leader of the contingent, Wilf Jobling... And I remember that as a landmark because it was the first time it had ever occurred to me that the working class could have a leading role, or a central role in politics.” Commenting on her decision to join the Communist party, she said: “We are all, as it were, the natural allies of the working class, it wasn’t a question of crossing over from your middle-class background to find yourself a niche in the working-class movement, but of trying to unite all these kinds of people on the basis of a conscious desire to combat fascism and war.” After leaving university she taught 14-year old girls, factory workers at Cadbury’s Continuation School for day release at the Bournville factory in Birmingham, thus putting into practice her desire to improve the life of the working class in a practical way, despite the fact this meant giving up a comfortable academic life and future in Cambridge. As Graham Stevenson argues, “Conscious of those few privileges she had enjoyed, Margot would fight all her life for privileges to those who did not have them, never once expecting special treatment for herself.”¹

In 1935 she became the lover of John Cornford (1915-1936), the poet and soldier in the Spanish Civil War, who died in the fighting in Andalusia in 1936 at the age of 21. When Cornford left Cambridge to go and fight in Spain, only three weeks after its outbreak, Margot stayed at her job in Birmingham but supported the Republicans in Spain from England, by selling pamphlets and organizing meetings to promote their cause, despite the indifference of the British government to the democratically elected Spanish government which had been overthrown by Franco’s coup and the war that ensued. The only government that actively supported the Republican *Causa* during the war was Russia, which could explain Heinemann’s loyalty to the

country during the following decades, when many left-wing British turned away from the Soviet state after 1956.

Heinemann wrote the first of several poems dealing with the war and her anguish over his absence, (*For R.J.C., summer 1936*), poems which she continued to write until the 1990s. On the news of his death in action towards the end of 1936 Heinemann wrote 'Grieve in a New Way for New Losses', which balances a reassuring refrain, 'All this is not more than we can deal with', against deeply pained verses:

To think he lies out there, and changes
 In the process of the earth from what I knew,
 Decays and even there in the grave, shut close
 In the dark, away from me, speechless and cold.ⁱⁱ

With reference to her poetry, Stevenson says, "Her carefully non-romantic poems were always utterly clear about the human cost of war and yet tear at the emotions". Her poem dedicated to Cornford inspired him to reciprocate with an untitled poem beginning with the quotation from Karl Marx, "Heart of the Heartless World", one of the most powerful love poems of the century, written in the trenches in Aragon the day before his 21st birthday. For decades Cornford's poem circulated, especially in the communist countries of eastern Europe, as 'To Margot Heinemann', following its publication under this title in *John Cornford: a Memoir* (1938).ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1937, she joined the staff of the Labour Research Department. Part of her Jewish family was exterminated in Germany in the death camps during the Second World War. During the war, she worked closely with trade unionists. During the war, at LRD, she prepared the Miners' Federation's evidence for the Greene Board of Investigation into coal mining wages. In this period, she wrote several books dealing with the importance of the nationalization of the pit industry. In 1949, she left the LRD to work full-time for the Party, and stood as a Communist candidate for Vauxhall in London at the 1950 General Election. She served on the editorial board of the party's intellectual journal the *Modern Quarterly* (1945-53), and edited the literary supplement *Daylight* (1952-3), which promoted working-class writing. She published a novel in 1960, "The Adventurers"; set in a fictitious mid-Wales coalfield; this focused on life in the Left in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s, especially the crisis in the Party in 1956. In 1959, she returned to teaching at the Camden School for Girls, until she moved to Goldsmith's College, from 1965-1977. Her two main areas of research now were the 1930s and Renaissance drama, both periods marked for her by their fascinating relation between literature and politics. With Noreen Branson she published "Britain in the Nineteen Thirties" in 1971. Margot was made a Fellow of New Hall, Cambridge in 1976 and edited a collection of essays, "Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 1930s", published in 1979. Her acclaimed "Puritanism and the Theatre" came out in 1980. She used this brilliant study of Middleton and the anti-Court drama of the period leading up to the Civil War in 1642 as a way to analyse questions of class and gender in literature. An example of her sensitivity to the historical conditions in the early 17th century that meant the poor suffered so much more than the rich is the following:

Despite the savage penalties imposed on vagabonds, the landless and workless poor flocked to the towns, where many lived at a bare subsistence level. In bad years children died of hunger and cold in the streets of London; every few hundred yards there were whipping-posts for sturdy beggars. And meanwhile the prosperity and luxury of rich landlords and well-to-do gentry was advertised by the building of vast "prodigy houses" of the nobility like Audley End and Hatfield, and innumerable manor-houses and great merchant-houses in the cities and suburbs. People were used to great differences of wealth

and status, of course, but the total insecurity of peasantry and labouring poor, alongside the idleness and wealth of court favourites, office-holders and monopolists, represented a worsening situation which led to growing fear and repression by the authorities. (p.135)

Another aspect which is highlighted throughout the study was the importance of the popular drama of the late Jacobean period in giving a voice and respect to those who rarely had it in the eyes of the powerful. She points out how, in Middleton's *The Changeling* (1621), when the aristocratic Beatrice hires two underlings to do her dirty work for her^{iv}, Diaphana, "though a servant, turns out, like De Flores, to be a human being with her own lusts and desires" (p.177).

A final example comes as the book summarises the period in theatre:

In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama the common people do have a voice and often provide a skeptical commentary on the main heroic or royal action. One thinks of Henry V's soldiers before Agincourt, the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, the plebeian gibing of Lear's Fool, the outraged middle-class morality of Leantio's morality in *Women Beware Women*. In the courtly Cavalier plays of the 1630s this voice is silent, and the structural use of contrast is gone. It was something the Restoration did not restore. (p.255).

H. Gustav Klaus, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, sums up her life thus:

Heinemann belonged to a generation of British Marxists whose formative years were during the anti-war and anti-fascist struggles of the first half of the 1930s. Loyalty to the Soviet Union, the country which embodied the hopes of millions of downtrodden people across the world, which alone had delivered arms to the beleaguered republican government of Spain, and which had borne the brunt of the German attack in the Second World War, came naturally. Conversion to communism was a total commitment, and devotion to the cause came before considerations of a career.

A further tribute came from the historian Eric Hobsbawm at her funeral, "Margot worked for the unions and especially the miners, and she had a right to ask that her life be judged by that and what she did for British workers and not by what Stalin did in Russia. And what she did as a British communist was good."

3. Rebecca West

The following section looks at the ideological interests of two women writers who dealt with parts of Europe in the 1930s that were not easily accessible to most travellers, focusing on Rebecca West writing about the Serbs in Yugoslavia, and Martha Gellhorn on Spain. Neither woman grew up with any particular connection to either place, so it may seem surprising that their travels in these regions had such a huge impact on their ideas and the rest of their lives.

In 1959, when the writer Rebecca West went to Buckingham Palace to accept the title of "Dame", she said she accepted the honour because it should do something for the prestige of women journalists, "who are a downtrodden class" (Glendinning, 1987 / 1998: 222). Although it is hard to see Rebecca West herself as particularly downtrodden, it is interesting that she classed herself primarily as a journalist, rather than a novelist or a travel writer, which she could equally claim to be. In fact all three genres become blurred in her massive output, especially as she began writing in her teens: she published an article in the feminist weekly *The Freewoman* in November 1911, when she was 19, that began "There are two kinds of imperialists – imperialists and bloody

imperialists” (Glendinning, 36), and continued to write until her death at the age of 91, publishing an article in *Vogue* on what it felt like to be 90 in 1982.

This blend of genres is particularly notable in her major work on Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, published in 1942 in Britain, though written as the war began. Having made three trips to the Balkans between 1935 and 1938, West considered herself an authority on certain aspects of the problematic region, though she recognized that she was not alone in adopting a cause in her desire to champion the Serb people in particular; she wrote that English travellers

of humanitarian and reformist disposition constantly went out to the Balkan Peninsula to see who was in fact ill-treating whom, and being by the very nature of their perfectionist faith unable to accept the horrid hypothesis that everybody was ill-treating everybody else, all came back with a pet Balkan people established in their hearts as suffering and innocent, eternally the massacrée and never the massacre (West, 1942: 20).

West's project in the book was to try to describe the Balkans historically and politically, in order to understand what was happening to Britain and Europe as they became entangled in another World War. She writes, “I had come to Yugoslavia to see what history meant in flesh and blood” (1995:103). The text was originally published as two thick volumes that deal in detail with the history and culture of the Serbs, Muslims and Croats and their neighbours and invaders. The style is not that of a neutral history text-book, despite offering an immense work of scholarship and research separate from the actual journey; West is pushing her own political prejudices and opinions. She links Balkan history with the rest of Europe, and also deals with the rise of German Nazism as it emerges in the attitude of individuals and their reaction to Slavs and to Balkan culture. The choice of Yugoslavia was determined more by political interest than by individual preference, even to the point of wanting to influence British foreign policy. British readers and policy-makers alike wanted to know as much as possible about the background to the ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia which dated back to the defeat of the Serb army in Kosovo in 1389, so that current policy towards the different factions, each with their different religious and cultural traditions, could be decided. This was the case at the time of the book's original publication at the outbreak of the Second World War, as much as it was when it was re-issued and re-read during the conflict that broke out again in 1992, and yet again in 1998.

West's writing has had an enormous impact on British readers and their attitude to the situation in what is now known as “the former Yugoslavia”; Carl Rollyson, in his biography *Rebecca West: A Saga of the Century* (1995/96) writes:

Black Lamb and Grey Falcon is still the book to read on the Balkans. It renders vividly the tensions between Croats, Serbs, and Muslims, and the inability of the great powers to understand or to promote a unified Yugoslavia... [H]er book explains better than any other why Serbs led in founding Yugoslavia after World War I (183).

Other writers are less convinced that we should read the text as mainly an objective, political documentation of a foreign country. Felicity Rosslyn, in an essay entitled “Rebecca West, Gerda and the Sense of Process” writes:

Rebecca West's relations with Yugoslavia in the 1930s were nothing short of a love affair, with a period of rapturous discovery, rising to a generous climax in the writing of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, followed by bitter postwar recrimination, lawsuits and silence [...] I do not imagine anyone mistakes it for a mere travelogue, but unless one knows all the rest of the author's work, it is not so clear what the central thesis is [...] One can trace a fascination with the interrelations of large powers with small, both in the work of Rebecca

West and in her biography; and in this sense she was looking for Yugoslavia before she found it^v.

Her interest in this distant and confusing region is by no means purely academic, especially in 1934 when, prompted by the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia, she decides to find out what she can for herself by travelling and writing about her travels:

I had to admit that I quite simply and flatly knew nothing at all about the south-eastern corner of Europe; and since there proceed steadily from that place a stream of events which are a source of danger to me, which indeed for four years threatened my safety and during that time deprived me forever of many benefits, that is to say I know nothing of my own destiny. That is a calamity (West, 1942: 21).

The critic Bernard Schweizer discusses the connection between locations and ideology in his essay on *Black Lamb* in his book *Radicals on the Road*, where he argues that although the immense text may seem fragmented and at times in danger of losing its thread in digressions, he is able to identify a coherent political argument based on a combination of feminism and “liberationism”:

In fact, West consistently wove an ideological critique into her discussion of Yugoslav localities, turning places such as Split, Sarajevo, Belgrade and Kosovo into sites whose history served her to exemplify different aspects of liberationism. In this way, West systematically elaborated her brief against patriarchy, against the Christian doctrine of atonement, and against imperialism, simply adapting the journey motif to the purpose of political rhetoric (Schweizer, 2001: 82).

By “liberationist”, Schweizer seems to refer to a kind of ethnic, emotionally based nationalism – precisely the combination which has caused such unmitigated disaster in the Balkans recently, and which involves the one-sided defence of the Serbs which West became infamous for throughout the book. Schweizer defines it thus: “This prioritizing of the local over the universal, the ethnic over the imperial, the emotional over the pragmatic, constitutes the radical core of West’s liberationist ideology” (ibid: 91).

4. Martha Gellhorn

Martha Gellhorn, born in the USA but more than most people with a claim to be a citizen of the world, also began her writing career as a journalist, notably in Spain during the Civil War, where she defended passionately *La Causa* of the Republican side. Her articles in *Collier’s* drew attention to the appalling conditions inflicted on ordinary civilians in Madrid and Barcelona, focusing not on the battles but on the people trying to survive in their daily lives. This experience affected all her subsequent work, as she became a war journalist and went on to write about most of the major wars of the 20th century. Her choice of travel destinations was clearly determined by the theatres of war, and her message is always implicitly or explicitly that there are no depths to the horrors of war and yet these go largely unrecorded from the point of view of the victims.

One of the unique qualities of Gellhorn’s work in her collection of articles on this theme, *The Face of War* (1959/1993), is precisely how she manages to personalize war, in the sense that she talks about her own reactions and daily experiences, and focuses on individual civilians rather than Generals and strategies. She is not an objective camera, in the style of Isherwood, or a tough professional giving the cold facts without bias, in the style of modern journalists. At least, that is the case in her early writing about the Spanish Civil War, and is the actual effect of all her journalism, though she herself claims that in writing about the Second World War, “The sense of

the insanity and wickedness of this war grew in me until, for purposes of mental hygiene, I gave up trying to think or judge, and turned myself into a walking tape recorder with eyes” (1959/1993:56). Nor does she aim for some kind of scientific detachment; her style of journalism is polemical and ideologically overt: she writes to campaign for our support, to educate our ignorance, to challenge our apathy.

Some of her descriptions achieve an effect which is comparable to that of a television documentary, a kind of ‘fly on the wall’ overview. This is done by the way descriptions of a specific, personalised encounter or conversation are suddenly interrupted by a long section in which the wider social implications of what is being discussed are introduced. For example, in Barcelona Gellhorn is shown a badly malnourished baby, in a family where she has gone to see the extent of the bomb damage. The baby’s mother is defensive about the poor state of her child. Suddenly, the text switches to a parenthetical section which describes a visit made to a children’s hospital by Gellhorn on a separate occasion; none of the children are in the wards suffering from normal childhood illnesses: all of them are direct victims of the bombing, or indirect victims of war suffering from rickets, T.B. and malnutrition. We are given a wider view of the problem; it is impossible to dismiss the first case as an isolated example; the change in focus enables Gellhorn to include statistics, commentaries and her own horrified reaction; the individual is reconnected with the society but without being reduced to a case-study or a statistic.^{vi} Her accounts of life during wartime and the powerful style she developed on the Spanish front were enormously popular with her American readership. Sadly, it seems her success in this area was such that it provoked the jealousy and resentment of her husband at that time, Ernest Hemingway who also worked as a war correspondent before concentrating purely on fiction. As Veronica Horwell wrote in her obituary: “She advanced recklessly up through Italy with the allies. Hemingway’s telegram to her there read: ‘Are you a war correspondent or my wife in bed?’”^{vii} Luckily for the rest of the world, Gellhorn chose her professional success over her marriage to such an unappreciative man.

The world is not divided into ‘us and them’ according to East/West divisions, or gendered divisions, as each new war involves Gellhorn in a new understanding of the political agenda involved, and a new identification with the people suffering, and the need of the individual to fight to have a voice of protest:

For we are led and we must follow whether we want to or not; there is no place to secede to. But we need not follow in silence; we still have the right and duty, as private citizens, to keep our own records straight. As one of the millions of the led, I will not be herded any further along this imbecile road to nothingness without raising my voice in protest. My NO will be as effective as one cricket chirp. My NO is this book (1959/1993: 375).

Like Rebecca West, Martha Gellhorn is an example of a traveller and writer whose main aim was not to write about herself against a backdrop of foreign lands and strange peoples, or about the hardships or originality of her travels, but who focused her texts on the places she went and above all on the people she met. Like Margot Heinemann, her sympathy is clear for those who were suffering most and had least power to change things. Perhaps the characteristic she shares most strongly with them both is modesty - the decision always to underplay her own achievements, to disregard the problems and prejudices inevitably suffered by such pioneering women in an overwhelmingly male world, in particular during the appalling conditions of war. Like West and Heinemann, Gellhorn’s understanding of the rise of fascism in Europe in the early 1930s was her initial motivation to investigate and report on what she could find out for herself; once the process had begun, she felt morally bound to continue: when she heard of the outbreak of the Second World War, she felt

paralyzed by conflicting emotions: private duty, public disgust and a longing to forget both and join those who were suffering the war. It is too hard to sit on the outside and watch what you can neither help nor change; it is far easier to close your eyes and your mind and jump into the general misery, where you have almost no choices left, but a lot of splendid company (1959/1993: 95).

5. Conclusion.

What would lead three upper middle class women to question the ideology of their peers and challenge the accepted world view to the extent that they cross the line between acceptance of the status quo and political activism? All three women considered here offer us a model of female endeavour and political commitment that perhaps could only arise in the 1930s, when the big issues of fascism, communism, poverty and war were impossible to avoid for anyone who cared about society. Despite all the difficulties faced by women who wanted to work for a cause, these three examples showed that social obstacles could be overcome with effort and bravery, and that literature and struggle have been part of the cultural process of overcoming the gap between what we have and what we desire.

Notes

ⁱ http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=264:margot-heinemann-&catid=8:h&Itemid=109

ⁱⁱ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=39546&back=,30813>

ⁱⁱⁱ Heinemann's poems were first published alongside Cornford's dedicatory one in John Lehmann's magazine *New Writing* in autumn 1937.

^{iv} De Flores is hired to kill an unwanted fiancé, and Diaphana is made to substitute Beatrice in her marriage bed so that her loss of virginity – the price demanded by De Flores for the murder – is not discovered.

^v 1991, 101.

^{vi} See a similar use of statistics in Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

^{vii} *The Guardian Weekly*, March 1st 1998, p.23

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