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## “My God, are they sending women?”: Three Canadian Women in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939

LARRY HANNANT

Ronald Liversedge recalls Jean Watts bursting into the Canadian Cadre Service office at the International Brigades headquarters in Albacete, Spain, in December 1937.<sup>1</sup> Liversedge was a volunteer with the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of the International Brigades who had been assigned to an office job after being felled by pleurisy and dysentery at the disastrous Republican military offensive of Fuentes de Ebro in October. Although he hailed from Cowichan Lake in British Columbia and she was from distant Toronto, Ontario, Liversedge knew Watts. She had come to Spain in February 1937 as the correspondent for the Canadian Communist Party newspaper, the *Daily Clarion*.

But on that day Watts was not hot on the trail of a story for Canadian readers. She had come with a different purpose – to test the International Brigades’ stand on the critical issue of gender equality. Watts demanded the right to enlist in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, the Canadian section of the International Brigades. There were no women enlisted in the unit, she told Liversedge, and that was just not right. Liversedge handed her a volunteer enlistment form to fill out. With that completed, Myrtle Eugenia (“Jim”) Watts became the only woman to join the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion and one of no more than six Canadian women in the entire International Brigades.<sup>2</sup>

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1 My gratitude for their help in the research, conceptualization and writing of this article goes out to Nancy Butler, Franca Iacovetta, Kirsten Larmon, Elise Lerman, Myron Momryk, Joan Sangster, Larissa Stavrov and three anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, among many others.

2 Mark Zuehlke, *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Vancouver and Toronto: Whitecap Books, 1996), pp. 185-6. Another Canadian woman officially part of the International Brigades was nurse Florence Pike, who was with the American Medical Bureau. The status of five others within the International Brigade is still under investigation. In total, perhaps 12 women went to Spain from Canada. The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion was the Canadian section of the XVth Brigade of the International Brigades, comprised of English speaking

The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) is often seen as a key political conflict of a turbulent era. General Francisco Franco's July 1936 uprising against the country's elected republican government galvanized political forces on both the right and the left. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany saw this as a perfect opportunity to improve their militaries and extend their influence. They also wanted to test the democratic countries' will to resist. So they supplied arms, ships, aircraft and pilots and over 150,000 troops to Franco. The governments of Britain and France were desperately afraid that the war would spill over into the rest of Europe. They also feared the spread of communist influence, since the communists were the most energetic party to rally international support for the Spanish republican government. So Western governments, including those of Canada and the United States, declared a policy of non-intervention and imposed an embargo on the shipment of military goods to the country. On the other hand, the Communist International, authorized by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, urged people throughout the world to come to the defense of the Spanish Republic. This call was answered by a remarkable outpouring of international solidarity. Forty thousand men and women from throughout the world volunteered to go to Spain, where they believed the first war against fascism was being fought. There they created the International Brigades. Among ordinary Canadians, some 1,600 men and a small number of women voluntarily joined the International Brigades. Many of them became members of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the left-right political significance of the Spanish Civil War, the gender politics of the war has also become an important subject, especially in the past two decades. Just as traditional political parties and movements saw Spain as a challenge and an opportunity to advance their causes, women too might have been expected to join the struggle with their own agendas and to weave into it the threads of their own experience and perspectives. For both Spanish women and those from abroad this was the first major war in modern times where women participated on their own accord, rather than being either relegated to the sidelines or to the home front by governments (as in most wars before 1936) or marshaled into fixed subordinate roles by governments (as in

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volunteers from Britain and North America, plus those from Latin America and Yugoslavia. Ronald Liversedge's experience in the Spanish Civil War is recounted in his unpublished 1966 "A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War" manuscript at the University of British Columbia Special Collections.

3 Paul Preston's *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Fontana Press, 1996) is the most recent of a great number of comprehensive histories of the Spanish Civil War, which include Hugh Thomas's, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961). The Canadian effort on behalf of republican Spain is documented in Victor Hoar with Mac Reynolds, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War* (n.p.: Copp Clark, 1969); William C. Beeching, *Canadian Volunteers: Spain, 1936-1939* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1989) and Zuelkhe, *The Gallant Cause*. Astonishingly, these three works skim over women's involvement in no more than a paragraph (sometimes just a sentence) each.

the Second World War).<sup>4</sup> Spanish women engaged in the war in a variety of ways, ranging from the time-honored chore of surviving and maintaining their families to active involvement in the front as armed *milicianas* (militia women). Women from abroad also took on varied roles in the Spanish struggle. Many were traditional caregivers – mostly nurses – but they also performed novel tasks such as ambulance drivers and blood-transfusion truck chauffeurs, photographers, journalists and, occasionally, soldiers. Since foreign women were true volunteers who had had not been recruited by governments – indeed were frequently present in Spain in defiance of their own governments – it might be expected that they would have latitude to set their own agenda. And that could be expected to include advancing their own status, acting independently of men and being sexually autonomous.

Recently, feminist scholars have tested the hypothesis that women in Spain, to adopt the title of Mary Nash’s 1995 book, “defied male civilization.” They have often found the argument wanting. Nash herself examined Spanish women during the civil war and concluded that the revolutionary climate of the time did not “imply the breakdown in patriarchal relations or a deep challenge to ‘male civilization.’”<sup>5</sup> Angela Jackson’s assessment of the voluntary involvement of British women in the Spanish Civil War sounds a similar note. She contends that in going to Spain or working at home in support of Republican Spain, British women were engaged in political struggle; but they were no less moved by the desire to provide humanitarian assistance, a more conventional female role. Jackson argues that “the key motivator for almost all these women was empathy, and without doubt, the prime objective was practical action.” Although “many of the women who feature in this research could be regarded as having interests which were deeply political,” no less important to them was a tradition of meliorism – the determination to make the world better through social action. Jackson insists that the two sentiments are integrated, not contradictory. She plays down any idea of there being a distinction between women’s political and humanitarian motives. She writes that “most women were motivated by concern on both levels[;] the personal and the ideological were inextricably linked in varying measures, sometimes altering through time and experience.”<sup>6</sup> Tom Buchanan takes issue with Jackson’s emphasis on meliorism as a key motive behind the Spanish Republican support work of women – and, for that matter, of men. The 1930s, he insists, was a period in which party politics of the Left was “most

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4 Ruth Roach Pierson’s *“They’re Still Women After All”: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) chronicles the ways in which the Canadian government both recruited and restricted women in the Second World War.

5 Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver, Colorado: Arden Press, 1995), p. 180

6 Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 7, 26, 16, 11

intensely contested.” Leftist politics, to him, was “the paradigm within which the individuals discussed in this [Jackson’s] book had to operate.”<sup>7</sup> Examining a handful of U.S. volunteer nurses, Frances Patai takes the view that for those women there was no distinction between humanitarianism and anti-fascism; their work in Spain was “inseparable from their already considerable activities to effect an egalitarian society at home and abroad.” Patai also concludes that the war was a “social revolution;” the “exigencies and the unique nature” of it “facilitated the women’s success in exercising autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there has not been much research on North American women to test the various hypotheses on women’s role in the Spanish Civil War. Patai’s article is one of the very few published studies of American women’s involvement in Spain, and, as for Canadian women’s involvement in Spain, nothing of substance exists.<sup>9</sup> This paper is a preliminary effort to examine Canadian women’s work in Spain, as well as their motives for joining and experience in the struggle, through the lives of three such women: Myrtle Eugenia (“Jim”) Watts, Margaret Crang, and Florence Pike.

When it came to Canadian politics and gender conventions, “Jim” Watts was used to making waves. Parting waves might be a better description. Born in 1909 into a wealthy Streetsville, Ontario, family, Watts “woke up” early in the 1930s and realized that she was “nothing more than an ordinary human being with a few extra breaks I did nothing to earn.” By January 1934 she already had become the object of attention by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for distributing communist literature. And by then her challenge to capitalist gender norms was also well advanced, having read Frederick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in university and developed a strong friendship with Dorothy Livesay, later a renowned Canadian poet who, in a memoir written long after Watts’ death would say about her friend “in the [nineteen]thirties and forties you were the New Woman.”<sup>10</sup>

Watts’ rebellious streak was also manifested when she first set her compass on Spain. Within the left community in Canada, the idea of a woman joining

7 Tom Buchanan, “Review of Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*,” [H-Albion@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:H-Albion@h-net.msu.edu) (September 2003)

8 Frances Patai, “Heroines of the Good Fight: Testimonies of U.S. Volunteer Nurses in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939,” *Nursing History Review* 3 (1995), pp. 83, 96

9 Julia Newman has directed a documentary film on American women’s involvement in Spain, *Into the Fire: American Women in the Spanish Civil War* (2002) and there are scattered articles about individual women, such as William Loren Katz’s “Salaria Kea: From Harlem Hospital to Madrid,” *The Black World Today*, April 10, 2001.

10 *Toronto Star*, February 7, 1938; CSIS Access 117-95, Jean Watts, RCMP Personal History File, D/Cpl. R.W. Irvine report of January 27, 1934; Charles Robert Boylan, “The Social and Lyric Voices of Dorothy Livesay,” Unpublished MA Thesis, English, University of British Columbia, 1969, pp. 15-6. Joan Sangster characterizes Watts as “an ‘anti-family’ rebel who would renounce all her wealthy parents stood for.” *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left 1920-1950* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), p. 155. Dorothy Livesay, *Journey With My Selves: A Memoir 1909-1963* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1991), p. 87. Livesay, whose late-life poetry

the fray seemed to be a violation of the unstated but still potent rule that the International Brigades took men only. So the twenty-seven year-old had to use a bit of subterfuge – venturing out as a *Clarion* correspondent – in order to carry it off. She had not previously been a *Clarion* reporter. She was better known as the director of the Toronto Theatre of Action and, in April 1936, funder, through her capitalist grandfather’s estate, of the leftist cultural magazine *New Frontier*.<sup>11</sup> But her zeal to aid the Republican cause in Spain was real, and early in 1937 she got approval to go, leaving about February 1. This was bad news for Ted Allan, the *Daily Clarion* correspondent in Montreal, who expected to be appointed as the newspaper’s reporter in Spain. But when he reported to the *Clarion* office in Toronto, he would later recall, “I was screwed.” Because of what he considered a mix-up, Watts, not Allan, was to be sent as the paper’s official writer. Allan insisted on going, however, even though his exact status was somewhat uncertain.<sup>12</sup> Watts herself seemed to regard her appointment as *Clarion* correspondent as a consolation prize of sorts:

I was sent officially by *The Clarion* because I was dying to go and I knew quite well that the brigade wouldn’t take me. So I was assigned to the Blood Transfusion Institute [launched by the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune in December 1936] as a kind of public relations person.<sup>13</sup>

Why would the International Brigade not take Watts? The reason seemed to be Watts’ gender. Another young female communist also found this was an impediment to acting on her strong desire to fight fascism in Spain. Mary Skrypyk, a Young Communist League activist and Communist Party member based in Hamilton, saw Watts at a meeting in Toronto, probably in the fall of 1936. Watts was “a very handsome woman and very popular,” and Skrypyk recalls being both impressed with her and infected by her enthusiasm. “I knew she wanted to go to Spain. ... She talked about Spain and about all the help that was needed.”<sup>14</sup> Skrypyk was not a writer, but she had another skill she thought would be equally valuable in Spain. She was a licensed airplane pilot and had twice parachuted from a plane, unusual accomplishments for a woman

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reflected a lesbian curiosity, wrote elsewhere that in high school “Jim [Watts] and I had an ill-concealed ‘crush’ on our mathematics, teacher, Margaret Ford.” She describes Watts as a “willful and wayward woman’s liberationist.” See *Right Hand Left Hand: A True Life of the Thirties* (Erin, ON: Press Porcepic, 1977), pp. 20-1, and, for other references to Watts, p. 34 and *passim*.

11 *Daily Clarion* February 8, 1937 p. 1; Dorothy Livesay, *Right Hand Left Hand*, p. 219; Douglas Scott Parker, “Women in Communist Culture in Canada; 1932 to 1937,” Unpublished MA Thesis, McGill University, 1994, p. 45

12 Dr. Norman Allan, “Ted,” unpublished biography of his father, at <http://www.normanallan.com/Misc/Ted/nT%20ch%201.htm>

13 British Columbia Archives (BCA), Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1. The interview of Jean Watts is credited to Charlie Boylan, but it appears in fact to be by Victor Hoar.

14 Interview with Mary Skrypyk, Toronto, August 8, 2003

of the day.<sup>15</sup> Seeing Watts set out for Spain for the *Clarion* and hearing of Spain's need for pilots, Skrypnyk got fired up. Thus, in the summer of 1937, when she attended a meeting featuring Norman Bethune, who was just back from Spain after having set up a pioneering blood transfusion institute, she approached the well-known Canadian doctor. Skrypnyk, then just twenty years-old, told Bethune about her keen wish to go to Spain and described her pilot's training. To her surprise and disappointment, Bethune was not encouraging but he spoke very nicely, like a father. He said:

“You know Mary, you really are too young for that. It needs a grown up man who already knows an awful lot more about that, how to fly. It's not just going up in the air, you have to fight, and that's very difficult. And you don't have enough experience for it.”<sup>16</sup>

Bethune's fatherly advice to stay home was enough to cause Skrypnyk to abandon her dream of flying for Republican Spain, although she continued to work for the cause in Canada. Would a man aged twenty have been told he was too young to fight? Not likely. In fact, Skrypnyk herself knew an Italian man from Hamilton, younger than her, who had gone to Spain.<sup>17</sup> Skrypnyk was not the only young Canadian woman discouraged from going to Spain by males. Claire Culhane, then an eighteen-year-old nurse, prepared to go to Spain in 1937 but faced opposition from both her parents and her lover, Reuben Rabinovitch. The latter's objections were based on concern for her welfare and his anti-communism. Ultimately, however, it was the Canadian government's Foreign Enlistment Act, banning Canadians from joining the Spanish Civil War, which prevented Culhane from making the journey.<sup>18</sup>

Watts encountered similar skepticism about women being caught up in a brutal war. A compelling example of that prejudice came when she reached

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15 Peter Krawchuk, comp. and intr., *Reminiscences of Courage and Hope: Stories of Ukrainian Canadian Women Pioneers* (Toronto: Kobzar Publishing, 1991), pp. 485-6

16 Interview with Mary Skrypnyk, Toronto, August 8, 2003. It should be noted that Bethune's views on women in Spain illustrated some of the common male biases concerning women. In November 1936, when he was collecting equipment in London to create the blood transfusion unit in Madrid, he categorically rejected taking a woman, Moran Scott. He told her friend, Hazen Sise (who did accompany Bethune to Spain) that “the situation was too dangerous” for a woman and he “didn't want to have the responsibility of a woman with him on the Unit.” Yet, once in Spain it was obvious to Sise that “there were a great many girls who had come out ... doing all sorts of jobs to help.” And Bethune, of course, accepted into the unit several Spanish nurses along with Cecelia Greenspan, whose technical expertise was invaluable to founding the unit, Jean Watts, a driver, and Kajsa von Rothman, a transfusion unit driver and lover of Bethune. See Hannant, *The Politics of Passion*, pp. 134 and 378

17 Interview with Mary Skrypnyk, Toronto, August 8, 2003

18 Mick Lowe, *One Woman Army: The Life of Claire Culhane* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 37-9

New York, the departure port for most of the Canadian and American men joining the International Brigades, in early February 1937. When she checked into the New York office where the departing men reported, the American recruiters were less than welcoming. “I remember knocking on the door and a voice said ‘Come in.’ and we go in and someone disappeared under the desk saying, ‘My god, are they sending women?’ It really threw them.”<sup>19</sup>

Arriving in Spain on February 13, Watts’ photo and articles were soon being featured prominently in the *Clarion*, which described her as “probably the only Canadian girl gathering news in Spain.”<sup>20</sup> She was stationed in Madrid, which in the fall of 1936 had been one of the most active front-line sites in the war. But by 1937 the right-wing forces attempting to destroy the republic had shifted their focus to other sectors. If she had hoped to report from the front lines, she was frustrated. “I couldn’t get around an awful lot,” she recalled. “I had no money, as other correspondents had. So I couldn’t ... lay on transportation or anything like that.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, Watts seemed to be assigned to what Canadian newspapers at the time would have described as the “women’s beat.” The subject of her articles was almost never military matters. Most often it related to culture or the Spanish Republic’s care of women and children. For instance, she attended a Roman Catholic church service to disprove claims that the Republican government had closed churches; she recorded the work of Bethune’s blood transfusion unit and interviewed the international visitors to it; she reported on meetings of the Spanish Women’s Anti-Fascist Organization and of the Muchachas de Madrid (“Girls of Madrid”); she described the republican government’s efforts to preserve precious cultural artifacts in the midst of war; she deplored the slaying of women and children in Madrid by fascist artillery; she wrote of the government’s work to vaccinate civilians and re-establish regular schools for children. Only once was she able to report on front-line fighting, and only then by speaking with Canadians who had returned to Madrid from the front. Watts also broadcast to Canada and abroad from the Madrid short wave radio station EAQ, sometimes with Ted Allan.<sup>22</sup> In August 1937 she was on holiday in France for one month; after that her articles appeared only infrequently in the *Clarion*. In addition to writing, Watts was part of a staff of sixteen at Bethune’s Instituto Hispano Canadiense de Transfusion de Sangre, driving a truck and assisting in blood transfusions.<sup>23</sup>

19 BCA, Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1

20 *Daily Clarion*, May 1, 1937, p. 14

21 BCA, Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1

22 *Daily Clarion*, March 12, p. 1; May 26, 1937, p. 3; March 22, p. 1; March 25, p. 2; March 26, p. 4; April 2, p. 3; April 15, p. 2; May 21, 1937, p.1; May 22, 1937, p. 5; June 19, 1937, p. 3; October 19, 1937, p. 4; April 28, 1937, p. 3; April 3, 1937, p. 1

23 Bethune describes her as living at the Blood Transfusion headquarters, which is confirmed by Ted Allan’s memoirs. *Toronto Star* June 16, 1937, p1; Norman Allan, “Ted,” <http://www.normanallan.com/Misc/TedCh3.htm>

By June 1937, restricted to Madrid, Watts found that “it was impossible to work, to function as a correspondent.”<sup>24</sup> Determined to stay in Spain, she applied for and got a job in the Spanish government’s censorship bureau in Valencia. It is hard to imagine the young rebel Watts being fulfilled by the tedious job of censoring press reports from Spain, and she did not last long at it. What actually happened is not clear, but Watts seemed to have fallen afoul of personal and political intrigue. On October 28, 1937, writing to Hazen Sise, a Canadian who worked at the blood transfusion institute in Madrid, she told him about a meeting early in the month in Valencia with “George.” “He was very scornful about me changing my job, as if he had nothing to do with it.” She also described her new job driving for the British Medical Unit as “an escape sort of ... Of course you can’t escape from politics in the bad sense anywhere and here is no different, but anyhow I do my best to keep out.”<sup>25</sup> The exact nature of the conflict is unknown, but her comments suggest that Watts’ next step, to gain entrance into the predominantly-male bastion of the International Brigades, might not have been entirely motivated by a desire to achieve a gender initiative. She recalled later that her decision in October 1937 to join the International Brigades was motivated by a desire “to do more” than just write about the war.<sup>26</sup> And her recollection of the time suggests a rather measured approach: I simply asked whether they’d take a driver. And was told, alright, come down and have a driver’s test, which they gave me – an enormous truck. My driver’s test was simply to back this truck between two narrow posts, which I managed by a miracle to do. And so I was in.<sup>27</sup>

Test passed, Watts was assigned to the British Medical Unit at Hueta in Cuenca province, about 200 kilometers northeast of Madrid, working as a chauffeur and grease monkey. The hospital was in an expropriated monastery, and the unit’s garage was in the church itself, with grease pits dug from old graves. An attractive woman who at age 21 had identified herself as bi-sexual<sup>28</sup> Watts enjoyed the easy camaraderie of the men:

they were a wonderful gang, the drivers. There were some Liverpool Irish ... Really marvelous people to work with. And the nice part was they said ... “We

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24 BCA, Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1

25 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), MG30 D187 (Hazen Sise papers) Vol. 7, File 26 Correspondence 1937-44, Jim to Hasen [sic], October 28 [1937]

26 *Daily Clarion*, February 15, 1938, p. 1

27 BCA, Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1

28 Dorothy Livesay, a close friend of Watts, quotes a letter to her from Watts in which the latter declares “I am not homosexual, but bi-sexual ...” *Journey With My Selves*, pp. 74-5. Yet Watts married William (Lon) Lawson in Toronto in 1933 and, after being demobilized from the Canadian Women’s Army Corps in 1946, adopted children with him and established a family before her suicide in 1968. CSIS Access 117-95, Jean Watts, RCMP Personal History File, December 22, 1953 and report by Insp. E.L. Erickson, June 19, 1968.

keep forgetting you’re a woman.” They would make remarks about passing girls’ bottoms to me and I’d say: “What should I do?” Which was very nice and allowed you to just work with everyone else.<sup>29</sup>

She told the *Toronto Star* later that the Irish drivers and mechanics “got to think of me just as another man, which suited me fine.”<sup>30</sup> In effect, while Watts was breaking gender barriers on the one hand, she was retreating to a sexist environment on the other. Paradoxically, she found the latter situation more congenial than involvement in formal politics as a communist newspaper correspondent, a Spanish government censor, and a driver in a blood transfusion project so fraught with political conflict that it undid Norman Bethune himself.<sup>31</sup> For Watts, being a female gender maverick dealing with the familiar sexism of working-class males was easier than negotiating the political minefield that Republicans created within their own camp during the Spanish Civil War.

If a woman driving an ambulance and trucks was unusual within the International Brigades, it was highly unconventional to at least some of the Spanish people. After her return to Canada, Watts later recalled that she knew of only one other female chauffeur, an American. And Spaniards in small towns found her an oddity. “Every time I drove into a small place, the whole village would circle round me and just gawk. They called me La Russe because they couldn’t imagine any other kind of a woman doing men’s work like that.”<sup>32</sup>

Because Watts had officially joined the International Brigades, her presence is briefly recorded in its archives. But the brigade archives note only that she served in the Service Sanitaire (Medical Service) and was repatriated via Paris on January 22, 1938, which she had already been anticipating the previous October. Her International Brigades record contains no political assessment about her work in Spain.<sup>33</sup>

But while she returned to Canada, Watts did not give up organizing for Spain. She was soon a key figure in the Communist Party’s campaign to assist Republican Spain and, beginning in 1939, to raise money to assist Spanish refugees, particularly children, fleeing Franco.<sup>34</sup> Mary Skrypyk recalls meeting her again after Watts’ return from Spain, and was no less inspired than

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29 BCA, Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1

30 *Toronto Star*, February 7, 1938

31 For a description of the political fracas that knocked out Bethune, see Larry Hannant, ed., *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune’s Writing and Art* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 118-129. Watts herself did not like Bethune, although in her interview with Victor Hoar she refused to elaborate on the reasons for this dislike. BCA, Dorothy Livesay Collection, Tape 1627:1

32 *Toronto Star*, February 7, 1938

33 LAC, MG 10 K2, Fond 545, File List 2, File 114, K258

34 CSIS Access 117-95, Jean Watts, RCMP reports by A/Supt. R.E Mercer, January 6, 1938 and by A/L/Cpl A.W. Parsons, May 19, 1939

before by Watts' dedication and energy: "She was organizing the money ... she was organizing people, helping them to go [to Spain] ... She traveled across the country ... I was very impressed with her."<sup>35</sup> Liversedge had the opportunity to meet her again too. Demobilized with other Mackenzie-Papineau veterans late in 1938, Liversedge found himself back at the Canadian Pacific Railroad station in Vancouver early in 1939. The welcoming crowd included Watts. Over breakfast at a neighboring café, Watts gave Liversedge and each of the other veterans a \$5 bill from the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion and told them that the support committee had an office on Hastings Streets which they were welcome to visit.<sup>36</sup>

Watts' Canadian campaign on behalf of Republican Spain, ended abruptly with the declaration of the Second World War.<sup>37</sup> After a period of conducting some clandestine political work for the Communist Party, under the surveillance of the RCMP, Watts joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps on December 15, 1941, where she rose from a private (as a driver for the Royal Ordnance Corps) to the rank of lieutenant before her demobilization in January 1946. With that, Watts' domestic life with husband William (Lon) Lawson resumed. In 1948, the Veterans of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion newsletter would report that "Jean 'Jim' Watts Lawson[,] Spanish Veteran[,] drives a baby pram now instead of an ambulance, but is always ready to do the Lions [sic] share, if there is any work to be done."<sup>38</sup>

Watts' involvement in the Spanish struggle was both innovative and traditional. She was a gender pioneer in that she actually went to Spain, despite misgivings from North American male political leaders, while other young women were put off from the same quest by male resistance. She performed admirable support work for Republican Spain as a reporter, worked as a censor for the Spanish government, drove a truck for the Canadian blood transfusion group, and also drove ambulances and trucks for the British Medical Unit. Back home she carried on as an organizer, a fund-raiser, and a social worker for the returned veterans. In Spain, she also attained some success in her quest for gender equality by becoming one of a very small number of female chauffeurs and the only woman in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. Gender politics

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35 Mary Skrypyk interview, August 8, 2003

36 Liversedge, "A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War," n.p.

37 CSIS Access 117-95 (Jean Watts), RCMP reports by Sgt. H. Collister, August 5, 1939 and September 8, 1939

38 CSIS Access 117-95 (Jean Watts), RCMP report by Cst. J.R. Huet, April 28, 1942; Director of Military Intelligence to RCMP Commissioner, July 3, 1946; RCMP report by Cst. J.H. Lumb, January 31, 1948. Irene Kon credits Watts with uttering one of the most bittersweet comments from a woman about the joy of resuming domestic life after WW2: "Irene, if you knew how wonderful it is to see the toilet seat up!" Interview with Irene Kon, Montreal, February 4, 1996. Watts' and Lawson's children were adopted.

seemed to be less disturbing to her than the internecine intra-republican issues that left her disillusioned and ready to return to Canada. At home, she assumed a more traditional female role as a fund-raiser for humanitarian work such as children’s welfare. As Jackson has pointed out, this latter work was probably the most common experience of female supporters of the Spanish Republic in other countries.<sup>39</sup>

For Margaret Crang, another Canadian woman who went to Spain, deviation from the accepted female role of the day became both controversial and personally costly. Crang was billed by the press as Edmonton’s “girl alderman” in October 1936 when her enthusiasm for the Spanish Republic threw her into a gender danger zone. A single act in Spain brought down on her severe criticism from conservative Canadians, and might have contributed to her losing her seat on the Edmonton city council.

Crang was fortunate to go to Spain very soon after General Francisco Franco’s July 18 military rebellion that plunged the country into civil war. In the first week of September, the twenty-six-year-old Crang was in Brussels representing the Alberta section of the League Against War and Fascism at the Universal Peace Conference (frequently billed as the World Peace Congress).<sup>40</sup> The conference brought together 5,000 representatives from thirty-two countries involved in veterans’ groups, trade unions, women’s clubs, youth associations and other organizations. The issues they discussed included the recently-erupted Spanish conflict and its implications for peace in Europe. Perhaps inspired by the fiery speech of the Spanish Republican leader Dolores Ibarruri, “La Pasionaria,” at the close of the conference in mid-September, Crang and some other delegates did not return immediately to Canada. Instead, they slipped into war-ravaged Spain.<sup>41</sup>

If they expected to see a country in mourning, the Canadians were surprised. They found the mood in Madrid to be exuberant. “In the streets people are wearing red neckties and ribbons,” Crang enthused. “There are banners in every window. It is like a city on parade.”<sup>42</sup> Of course, a visit to the front was obligatory. At the Guadarrama Mountains north of Madrid, Crang became swept up in the general euphoria and solidarity with her Spanish sisters. As she reported to the *Edmonton Journal* – “proudly,” the newspaper took pains to point out – “she went up to the sandbag barricade and, borrowing a rifle, fired two shots for the government side.” Crang’s shots, two of millions fired over

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39 Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.124-5

40 *Edmonton Journal*, October 13, 1936 p. 1; Thomas P Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) calls it the World Peace Congress, p. 165.

41 Hoar, *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion*, pp. 7-8

42 *Edmonton Journal*, October 13, 1936, p. 1

three years of war, did not have any discernible effect on the fascists. But they did resound ten thousand kilometres away in Edmonton.

In wielding that rifle, Crang was taking her immediate cue from two other young women on the barricade, neither more than seventeen or eighteen years-old. Both were armed but, as Crang noted, wearing make-up. The two were part of a brisk wind that had begun to stir Spain as early as 1931 but that blew into a gust after General Franco attacked the government. For several months after July 18, Spain witnessed a dramatic shift in gender roles that one Spanish Communist activist and writer, Teresa Pamies, characterized as a “revolutionary explosion” that transformed life for the female population of Spain.<sup>43</sup> In those heady early months of the war, the entire structure of Spanish patriarchy seemed to be shaking. Foremost among those pushing it were the women front-line fighters, the *milicianas*. These women combatants, often dressed in a mono, the simple one-piece coveralls that became the uniform of radical women in the early civil war days, were aiming their guns as more than just Franco’s soldiers. Crang described one woman at the front as “fighting not only for her own freedom, but for the liberty of the women of Spain.”<sup>44</sup> Mary Nash argues that “the heroic figure of the *miliciana* became the symbol of the mobilisation of the Spanish people against fascism.”<sup>45</sup>

These shots directed at the whole of Spanish orthodoxy were not ignored by the Western media. In the summer and early fall of 1936 Canadian newspapers – like those in other Western countries – prominently featured photos of this startling new development in Spain. Newspapers frequently presented images of Republican women either firing rifles at the front lines or parading jubilantly to the front carrying rifles. In fact, just about the time that Crang was taking her controversial shots at Guadarrama, the Edmonton *Journal* itself published a typical photo, captioned “Senoritas Aid Savage Attack,” showing two women “sniping at any human target in sight in the fortress” of Alcazar at Toledo. The Canadian communist paper the *Daily Clarion* printed similar photos, accompanied by more positive, although still patronizing, captions. One of them, for example, described the combatants as “young women and girl sharpshooters ready to give the fascists a hot dose of lead.”<sup>46</sup> These media images

43 “The Spanish Civil War,” pt. 5, August 6, 1985, Granada Television Productions, John E. Allen, Inc., as quoted in Shirley Mangini, “Memories of Resistance: Women Activists from the Spanish Civil War,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Autumn 1991, p. 172

44 Edmonton *Journal*, October 17, 1936, p. 3

45 Mary Nash, “‘Milicianas’ and Homefront Heroines, Images of Women in Revolutionary Spain (1936-1939),” *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 11, 1989, p. 236

46 Edmonton *Journal*, September 26, 1936, p. 25; *Daily Clarion*, August 7, 1936, p. 1. The *Daily Clarion* carried its first article about Spanish women joining the militia on July 29, 1936 (p. 2), barely days after the war began. In Britain, the single most important iconographic image of the warrior woman was “The Blonde Amazon,” seen in the *Daily Mail* on July 24, and the

helped to raise debate over gender roles both in Spain and throughout the West in the months from July to October 1936.

By September, after officially promoting women warriors and using them as propaganda icons, the Republican leadership had changed its stand on women warriors. What caused the new line was complex and included social, political, and military reasons.<sup>47</sup> Yet the change was clear. The slogan capturing this new note of caution was “Men to the Fronts, Women to the Homefront.”<sup>48</sup> Images of *milicianas* wearing the symbolically-rich *mono* that had been so prominent in July and August began to disappear. By October, women wearing *monos* came to be viewed with distrust as either prostitutes or bourgeois poseurs doing nothing more than aping a fashion trend.<sup>49</sup>

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Gaumont British Newsreel on August 13, 1936. The “Amazon” whose picture went round the world was a British schoolmistress, Phyllis Gwatkin Williams, who, wrote the *Daily Mail*, was in the centre of a squad of “Armed Girl Communists ... marching off to fight the anti-Reds in Madrid.” In the photo Williams was wearing a frilly dress and clutching a handbag, but she still carried a rifle in one hand and a bayonet in the other. Williams never claimed she had been involved in fighting, but the image gained considerable currency. See Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 128. Much remains to be written about the presentation of women in the communist press in this era, and a specific examination of the presentation of women in the Spanish Civil War as seen through the communist press would have much to say. Although the *Daily Clarion* extols women combatants in Spain, the underlying tone of at least some of the description of them reproduces the mainstream image of the novelty, even the “cuteness” of women engaged in a deadly enterprise. Although the communist press does not duplicate the menacing aspect of this combat that’s found in the mainstream press, a certain trivialization of women is evident. And, considered more broadly, sexist photos abound in the communist press, often presented in a pseudo-class guise, through disparaging comments on “starlets” or celebrities.

47 The cause of the change in direction was complex. One element was the fact that the *milicianas* offended public opinion, according to Shirley Mangini (*Memories of Resistance: Women’s Voices From the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 80. Militarily, one of the official justifications was the horrendous abuse of women who were captured by fascist troops. Daniel Roman, a wounded Canadian volunteer who returned home in 1938, reported to the *Toronto Star*: “I saw those [Spanish] women who were fighting in Spain. ... I saw them after the Moors had finished with them. ... They were pulled out of [ie. withdrawn from] the trenches, but not through any fault of their own. They were pulled out because the government could not see the things happen that were happening to them.” *Toronto Star*, December 20, 1938, p. 1. Another factor in women’s withdrawal from the front can be seen in testimonies of women and men who were in the fighting. They noted that men felt compelled to rescue women they thought were in danger of injury or death, causing soldiers to be needlessly wounded or killed. See Mangini, *Memories of Resistance*, p. 81

48 Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 5

49 Mary Nash, ‘*Milicianas*’ and Homefront Heroines: Images of Women in Revolutionary Spain (1936-1939), *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 11, 1989, pp. 237-9; Shirley Mangini points out that the *milicianas* – of whom there were at most 1000 at the front, supplemented by several thousand under arms in the rear areas – were sometimes vilified as prostitutes, partly because they were at the front, at a time when “decent” young women almost invariably lived with their parents. Yet some *milicianas* would later acknowledge that there might have been some prostitutes within their ranks. See Mangini, *Memories of Resistance*, pp. 80-5.

Despite her own sympathy with the *milicianas*, Crang seemed to be catching wind of the change during her visit, for she reported that although she saw women in uniform everywhere in Madrid there were apparently few at the front. One who was no longer on the barricades but who clearly wanted to be declared that Communist Party activist “La Pasionaria, who is our leader, says that girls are more useful here where they can make bandages and uniforms and munitions.”<sup>50</sup>

The Republican government in Spain thus quickly perceived the social and political threat represented by the sight of women wielding weapons. Back in Edmonton, the “girl alderman” was also reminded that Canadians were no more ready to entertain the idea of women Amazons. On Crang’s return, the *Journal* featured a front-page photo of her under the headline: “Ald. Miss Crang Leaves Peace Parley To Fire Shots At Rebels Near Madrid.” The headline alone pointed to an evident contradiction between her professions of peace and her militant actions. The accompanying article expanded on the undignified details: The “youngest member of the Edmonton city council” had recently been “on the Spanish front and exchanged shots with the rebels outside Madrid.”<sup>51</sup> That first *Journal* article was followed by another four days later that reproduced the card “enrolling Margaret Crang, Edmonton barrister and city councillor, as a member of the ‘battalion of young guards,’ or home militia of the government forces of Spain.” From Edmonton, the story of Crang’s transgression quickly took wing, and so did the reprimands. Crang’s action was denounced in church pulpits across the country. The Toronto *Star* joined the chorus in chiding Crang for behaviour unbecoming a peace activist.<sup>52</sup> But perhaps the most damning sermon was uttered by the Vancouver *Sun*. In a sharply-worded editorial, the *Sun* weighed in with four objections to Crang’s “foolish escapade.” First, it was “disloyal to Canada” because this country was officially neutral in the war. Second, it was “a bit of stupid bravado completely out of place even as a petty incident in a struggle that has cost so many lives.” Third, her act “was cruel and inhuman.” But the fourth criticism expressed the deepest conservative fears about the impact of the entire Spanish struggle – “it was unwomanly.” Spain may sink to whatever depths of degradation she chooses in employing her women as hired killers. But here in Canada we entertain a higher respect for our womenfolk than to permit them to take a belligerent part in the bloody business of war.<sup>53</sup>

Editorials and church sermons would not be the last that Crang heard of her impetuous act. It would also come up in a provincial by-election less than a year later. The contest was for the vacant Edmonton seat in the Alberta legis-

50 Edmonton *Journal*, October 17, 1936, p. 3

51 Edmonton *Journal* October 13, 1937, p. 1

52 Vancouver *Sun*, July 26, 1936, p. A10

53 Vancouver *Sun*, October 15, 1936, p. 6

lature. There was just one significant issue in the campaign – the provincial regime of William Aberhart, who had brought Alberta the first Social Credit government in the world in August 1935. By October 7, 1937, when Edmontonians went to the polls, Aberhart’s government had become infamous for its innovative, sometimes heavy-handed attempts to relieve the Depression’s burdens on Albertans. Among other acts, it had created minimum wages for farm and domestic labor, provided workers with collective bargaining rights, defaulted on provincial bonds, introduced a plan to use “prosperity certificates” to stimulate economic activity, and passed radical legislation that struck at the powers of the banks – the last of which was almost immediately disallowed by the federal government. While many Albertans saw the measures as a promising step to lift the province out of misery, the province’s business community either condemned or refused to participate in them.<sup>54</sup>

In such a polarized climate, the forces supporting Aberhart’s initiatives could hardly have chosen a worse strategy in the by-election. Four of them – including Crang – variously calling themselves “People’s,” “People’s Front,” “Labor Progressive,” and “Communist” candidates, faced off against one clear business candidate, E.L. Gray, a Liberal supported by the Conservative Party, but, ironically, running under the “People’s League” banner. As the *Edmonton Journal* editorialized, although four candidates supported or did not oppose Aberhart, “Mr. Gray declared throughout the campaign that a vote for him was a vote for the overthrow of the government.”<sup>55</sup> Gray was the clear winner, polling 17,786 votes compared to his nearest opponent’s 9997 votes.<sup>56</sup>

Crang, calling herself “an out and out socialist” and campaigning as the Progressive Labor candidate, had the advantage of being a city councillor. In 1933 she became the first woman elected to council and, at age 23, the youngest councillor ever. And in the 1935 civic election she had topped the polls for councillors. But that gave her little help, for she received only 1,275 votes, far below the 6,129 she had taken in a provincial by-election in the same riding in June 1936.<sup>57</sup> Political polarization and vote-splitting among left-wing candidates accounts for some of the serious decline in her votes. But Crang’s controversial decision to fire shots in Spain seems also to have been a factor. An election rally on the day before the October 1937 by-election witnessed a spirited exchange on the issue. Speaking about the personalities of the candidates, a supporter of Gray criticized Crang for returning from Spain and “boasting she had shot and tried to kill insurgent soldiers.” This caused a “storm of protest,” reported the *Edmonton Bulletin*, as Crang’s supporters

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54 Edward Bell, *Social Classes and Social Credit in Alberta* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), pp. 111-3 and 119-21

55 *Edmonton Journal* September 27, 1937, p. 1 and October 8, 1937, p. 6

56 *Edmonton Bulletin*, October 8, 1937, p. 3

57 *Edmonton Bulletin*, September 27, 1937, p. 11 and October 8, 1937, p. 3

objected to the remark.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, some Edmontonians were evidently uncomfortable with the idea of a young woman shooting to kill at the front lines of a war between left and right. If she saw such sentiments as a rebuke, Crang certainly did not to apologize for her action in Spain, although she did introduce a new conciliatory point. This emerged in Winnipeg late in October, when she spoke about her experience in Spain. As the Royal Canadian Mounted Police reported

she endeavoured to impress the audience by telling what she had seen, especially what she had seen in the fighting lines, how the women clenched the rifles, most of them who never before had a gun or pulled a trigger. She herself fired shots in the direction of the enemy. She is quite sure she did not cause any damage in the enemy's ranks but she wasted the shots.<sup>59</sup>

It is unclear what moved Crang to introduce the new idea that she had wasted the rifle shots. Perhaps it was to appease her pacifist supporters who might have objected to a peace conference delegate firing a rifle. But it may also have been an acknowledgement by Crang that conservative Canadians were not ready to see their womenfolk in battle.

Like the October provincial by-election, the Edmonton civic election of November 10, 1937 also saw Crang bruised. She campaigned for women's votes, arguing that "a woman can bring more sympathy to the many problems confronting the people today than can a man," and insisting that "there are many civic problems which affect women particularly – wages scales, hours of labor and relief allowances."<sup>60</sup> But this gendered approach seemed to have limited impact. The election hinged mostly on the interest rates on the city's debt. Slate voting dominated the contest over mayor, council and school board, with members of one party winning all but one of the twelve positions, that being a school board seat. No incumbent won a seat. Crang was among the incumbents who fell to slate voting; even her father, Dr. F.W. Crang, lost his seat on school board, where he had served for twenty-five years. The *Edmonton Bulletin* described the result as a sign that "the progressive vote" was badly split.<sup>61</sup> Edmonton's "girl alderman," who had provoked a storm of national criticism for her actions in Spain, saw herself pushed to the political sidelines.

Like Jean Watts, Crang's work for Spain did not end there. She remained a defender of Republican Spain, even if her other work was less controversial than firing a rifle. In April 1937, RCMP Commissioner J.H. MacBrien reported

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58 *Edmonton Bulletin*, October 7, 1937, p. 9

59 LAC, RG 146 Vol. 64, File 96-A-00111 pt. 11, RCMP report of October 27, 1936

60 *Edmonton Bulletin*, November 2, 1937, p. 1 and November 8, p.11

61 *Edmonton Journal*, November 12, 1937, p. 1; *Edmonton Bulletin*, November 12, 1937, p. 3

that Crang was “in charge of this work [recruiting men for Spain] in Alberta.”<sup>62</sup> In July 1937 she assisted Norman Bethune in his speaking tour through Alberta. Bethune was touring Canada to raise money for the blood transfusion unit in Spain and other projects of the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. He spoke in Edmonton July 23 to 25 and again August 16 to 18. When Bethune left Edmonton after his latter visit, he went with company. Margaret Crang traveled with him to Medicine Hat in southern Alberta, where the two spoke at a public meeting on August 19. From there they traveled to Swift Current, Saskatchewan, for another speaking engagement. And an RCMP report from November 7, 1938, eleven months after Bethune had left for China, indicated that Crang was still involved with the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion in Edmonton.<sup>63</sup>

Florence Pike was yet a third Canadian woman engaged with the Spanish struggle. Compared to truck-driving Watts and rifle-firing Crang, Pike followed a path to Spain that was more conventional and more consistent with the experience of other women internationalists: she was a nurse. Female nurses, according to Jackson, could be said to capture the essence of women’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War. They came out of a tradition of meliorism – the determination to make the world better through social action. But they also saw themselves as political actors and perceived no distinction between the two – “political and humanitarian concerns were, for them, inseparable, just two sides of the same coin.”<sup>64</sup>

Curiously, if one can judge by the opinion of the International Brigades leadership, Pike must have gone to Spain out of humanitarian motives only, for she appeared to be uninterested in politics *per se*. If it were true, it would be an unusual outlook for foreign volunteers in Spain, who, although of varying specific political opinions, were overwhelmingly united by their opposition to fascism. Nonetheless, a report on her written in September 1938, three months before she left Spain, dismisses her as politically uninterested and not a good anti-fascist.<sup>65</sup> This begs the question of what would cause an apparently apolitical woman to venture so far from home and remain in service in Spain from May 1937 to December 1938.

Motive, however, is just one of many unanswered questions about Pike. The first mystery is why a Canadian would volunteer with the American Medical Bureau (AMB) and would travel from Montreal to Chicago to do so.

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62 LAC, RG 25 Vol. 1802 File 631-D Pt. I, J.H. MacBrien to Under-Secretary of State, Department of External Affairs, April 10, 1937

63 David Lethbridge, ed., *Bethune: The Secret Police File* (Salmon Arm, BC: Undercurrent Press, 2003) p. 108-9, citing RCMP report by Cst. T.M. Guernsey, August 27, 1937; NAC RG146 Vol. 58 Access 95-A-00088, D/L/Cpl. H.P. Keeler report November 7, 1938

64 Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, p. 55

65 LAC, MG10 K2 Fonds 545, Florence Pike Political Questionnaire, January 4, 1939

One possible explanation is that while Canada had a reputation for medical innovation in Spain, as a result of Dr. Norman Bethune's pioneering efforts, the blood transfusion institute was mostly staffed by Spaniards.<sup>66</sup> And aside from blood transfusion, Canada did not have any medical presence in Spain similar to the AMB, the English Hospital, or the Scottish Ambulance. So Canada did not need to recruit nurses. Indeed, if Watts' and Skrypynk's experiences are common, Canada did not encourage women of any profession to go to Spain.<sup>67</sup>

But there may be another reason why Pike joined the AMB. She had a secret that the anonymity of Chicago would allow her to conceal – her children. Pike came from the small but ambitiously-named Ontario town of Paris, the daughter of a conservative farming couple with four children. Born Florence Mildred Tew in 1905, three months before her eighteenth birthday she married an Anglican minister, the Reverend Christopher Robert Stevenson-Pike, who was thirty years her senior. By 1927 the couple had three children and had lived for four years, from 1923 to 1926, in the United States. However, in 1927 her husband died, and the following year she began to study nursing at Western Hospital in Toronto, graduating in 1931.<sup>68</sup> At McGill University in Montreal she furthered her education, studying public health in 1931-32. Although the country was racked by the Depression, Pike found work immediately and, until 1937, remained employed at various hospitals in Montreal, including the Montreal General, where she was head of the social service department.<sup>69</sup> In May 1937 Pike made her fateful trip to Chicago and, from there, traveled to Spain with the AMB's third group. What might have sent Pike on this circuitous route to Spain was her children – Arthur, Alan, and Elise, ages about eleven to nine years-old, and living with Pike's mother on her farm near Paris.<sup>70</sup>

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66 Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Eyre & Spottiswode, 1961), p. 616; Hannant, ed., *The Politics of Passion*, pp. 150, 159-60

67 Canada prides itself on having, per capita, the second highest rate of enlistment in the International Brigades, next to France. Over 1600 went from Canada, most of them men, out of a total population of 11 million. This is about half the size of the American contingent in Spain, although the population of the USA was about 10 times that of Canada. But among women, the number from Canada is far smaller both in absolute terms and relative to other countries. The list of American nurses in the American Medical Bureau alone is over 57, for instance, while there were perhaps only 12 women who went to Spain from Canada. See New York University, Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, ALBA, F. Martin Collection, List of American Medical Bureau Volunteers

68 LAC MG 30 D187 (Sise papers) Vol. 7 File 22, Grace Paterson to Fredericka Martin, August 15, 1969

69 LAC, MG10 K2 Fonds 545, Florence Pike Political Questionnaire, January 4, 1939; New York University, Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, ALBA Fredericka Martin Collection, Box 84, Pike – various, (hereinafter Martin Collection), George Moser to Freddie [Martin], November 24, 1972

70 Martin Collection, Elise Lerman to Martin, n.d. [ca. 1969]. Pike left her children with her mother when she moved to Toronto to study nursing.

According to Fredericka Martin, the head nurse of the AMB and, by the late 1960s, its unofficial historian, the AMB did not accept mothers because one volunteer in an earlier group had been forced to return from Spain to attend to a child's health problems. In Chicago, Pike would have had the anonymity that would not have been available to her in Canada. She would not have had to tell the AMB about her children. In fact, she did not. According to accounts by those who knew her in Spain, Pike talked only infrequently about them in Spain. Such reticence could have been due to Pike's fear of being sent back to Canada if her secret were discovered.<sup>71</sup> The North American International Brigades' organizers' close attention to ensuring that female volunteers from North America were not mothers does not seem to be matched by a similar concern that male volunteers be free of family responsibilities. Government correspondence about Canadian men held by Franco as prisoners of war, for instance, includes several cases of men who had abandoned spouses and children to fight in Spain.<sup>72</sup>

One factor in Pike's decision to join the struggle in Spain could have been Bethune. While in Montreal from 1931 to 1937, Pike met Bethune. From 1928 to 1932 the charismatic doctor was an assistant to Dr. Edward Archibald, chief surgeon at the Royal Victoria Hospital, and from 1932 to 1936 was chief of thoracic surgery at the Sacred Heart Hospital in Cartierville, just north of Montreal.<sup>73</sup> Becoming increasingly dissatisfied by conventional medicine's treatment of illnesses such as tuberculosis and having been radicalized by a trip to the Soviet Union in 1935, Bethune joined the Communist Party of Canada in November 1935. Just less than a year later, in October 1936, he set out to fight fascism in Spain.<sup>74</sup> The exact nature of the relationship between Bethune and Pike is unknown, but she told others that she worked for Bethune. It was also possible that Pike was a member of the Montreal Group for the Security of the People's Health, an advocacy organization that Bethune had a key role in founding in 1935.<sup>75</sup> Certainly she knew him, for when she was interviewed by International Brigade organizers on the eve of her leaving Spain in December 1938 she mentioned him, along with Communist Party members Fred Rose and Stanley Ryerson, as people who were personal friends in Montreal. According to Fredericka Martin, “She used to say Bethune had inspired her in his speeches to volunteer.”<sup>76</sup> Bethune also might have been one reason why, in January

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71 Martin Collection, Martin to Lionel, January 13, 1970, March 8, 1970

72 See, for instance, LAC RG 25 Series G1 Vol. 1833 File 1937 291-H pt. 1, Mrs. J.S. Wilson to Under-secretary of State for External Affairs O.D. Skelton, October 21, 1938

73 Hannant, ed., *Politics of Passion*, pp. 36-7

74 Hannant, *Politics of Passion*, pp. 70-3

75 Martin Collection, Martin to Lionel, January 13, 1970; Hannant, *Politics of Passion*, p. 71

76 LAC, MG 10 K2 Fonds 545, Florence Pike Political Questionnaire, January 4, 1939; Martin Collection, Martin to Elise, March 12, 1970

1937, Pike joined the Communist Party of Canada, although it is also possible that she joined the party as a means to improve her chances of being accepted to go to Spain.<sup>77</sup>

Pike may have regarded Bethune as more than just a colleague and mentor. A romantic attachment of some kind seems also to have existed. But was it real or in Pike's imagination? In 1970, Fredericka Martin recounted to Hazen Sise, who worked with Bethune at the Blood Transfusion Institute in 1936-7, that Pike "is supposed to have gone to Spain because of Bethune – whether because she heard him speak or worked with him & had a 'thing' about him – can't tell which rumor to believe. Probably he did not know she existed."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps the tragedy of Pike's "thing" about Bethune is that in the absence of other information it appears to have become the accepted explanation for why Pike went to Spain. Among those who adopted this view was Pike's own daughter, Elise, who was nine years-old when her mother departed for Spain. Elise grew up not knowing her mother, and would later admit "I have never understood on whose side my mother was, nor why she felt the urgency to undertake such an adventure." But to her mind her mother journeyed to Spain in pursuit of Bethune. As an adult, Elise read *The Scalpel, The Sword*, a biography of Bethune, "to learn more about this man over whom my mother was about to travel to the ends of the earth." But she conceded that it brought her no profound knowledge about him, her mother, or their cause in Spain.<sup>79</sup>

If Pike was in fact "about to travel to the ends of the earth" to be with Bethune, she would be greatly disappointed when she got there. Bethune left Spain on May 18, 1937, about the time Pike arrived; his writing from 1935 to 1937 contains no mention at all of her. Martin, as chief nurse of the AMB, did not recall Pike asking to be transferred to Bethune's blood transfusion unit, and in the nineteen months she was in Spain Pike never served in Madrid.<sup>80</sup> Instead, when she arrived in Spain she was sent to Belalcazar on the Cordoba front, then to the AMB hospital at Benicasim, on the Mediterranean coast near Valencia, where she was in charge of one of four villas housing wounded volunteers. Sometime before September 1, 1937, she asked for a transfer to the English convalescent hospital at Valdeganga, near Albacete. This request was quickly granted, given the English hospital system's urgent need of personnel. At Valdeganga she was head nurse, effectively second in command of the hospital. Her last postings before leaving Spain in December 1938 were at the

77 LAC, MG 10 K2 Fonds 545, Florence Pike Political Questionnaire, January 4, 1939

78 LAC MG 30 D187 Vol. 7 File 22, Fredericka Martin to Sise, May 30, 1970

79 Martin Collection, Elise Lerman to Martin, n.d. [ca. 1969]

80 Hannant, *The Politics of Passion*, pp.70-165 (it should be added that few of Bethune's lovers were mentioned in his writings); Martin Collection, Martin to Lionel, January 13, 1970

Santa Columna hospital in Vich, northern Spain, and the Hospital de Farmés de la Selva.<sup>81</sup>

Socially, Pike did not always make a positive impression among the American volunteers in Spain. One nurse who was acquainted with her described her as “not a warm person and much older than those of us, nurses, at Benicasim and we did not get too close.” Another American volunteer who knew her at Benicasim recalled that “she struck me as being sort of ‘offish’ but not in a contemptible way – perhaps one finding it difficult to mix.” Yet patients regarded her positively, one at Benicasim calling her “very kind and giving” and one at Valdeganga characterizing her as “very good at her job” and a “cheer-giving person.” Yet Fredericka Martin would conclude in a letter to Pike’s daughter that “Your mother was not a very happy woman.” Still, Pike seemed to have at least two emotional relationships with men, one of which might have been sexual.<sup>82</sup>

For unknown reasons, Pike did not return to Canada as the International Brigades assisting the Spanish Republic were disbanded. Instead she made her way to England and worked as a nurse in a suburb of London. Although her passage to Canada was booked in early 1939, the looming war caused authorities to discourage nurses and doctors from leaving Britain. Late in 1940 Pike fell seriously ill. Although the nature of her illness is not known, her daughter believed that it was due to tension and poor nutrition caused by two wars, plus her mother’s allergies. In any case, when she finally returned to Canada, about 1942, there was no victory parade. Pike was in a stretcher and, in her daughter’s words, “a shell of a human being” weighing half what she should have. Pike never fully recovered and died on March 15, 1944.<sup>83</sup>

What had driven Pike to make the journey from which she returned a wreck? If we believe Spanish Communist Party officials, it was not political conviction. They described something about her political outlook in a report based on a political interview she gave in September 1938, just three months before she left Spain. As with many members of the International Brigades, Pike was queried by communist officials asking questions from a standard political form. Her answers, and her experience while in Spain, according to the officials, reveal her to be a woman who served without distinction in Spain, worked without enthusiasm and was politically confused. The assessment of the interviewers was that Pike was a poor worker, a poor anti-fascist, and

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81 Martin Collection, Martin to Lionel, January 13, 1970 and March 8, 1970; report by May Levine, n.d.; George Moser to Martin, October 8, 1969; letter (no writer) to Medical Bureau to Aid Spain, New York, September 1, 1937; email from Francisco Guerra to author, September 3, 2003

82 Martin Collection, May Levine to Martin, n.d.; Walter Shuetrum to Martin, October 1, 1971; H. Ruben to Martin, January 10, 1971; Bart Van der Schelling to Martin, July 2, 1968; Martin to Elise, March 12, 1970

83 Martin Collection, Elise Lerman to Martin, n.d.

politically-uninterested party member. The chief of medical services of the International Brigades seconded this judgment, calling her professionally qualified, but unenthusiastic, undisciplined and politically confused.<sup>84</sup>

But this harsh appraisal must be put into context. Firstly, the political reports on other volunteers showed that they frequently failed to live up to Spanish and International Brigades officials' expectations of them. For instance, a report by an anonymous Spanish political official identifies Norman Bethune – whose anti-fascist intensity drove him to his death – as of dubious political trustworthiness. One reason Bethune was suspect was that he kept notes on the locations of bridges and road junctions and recorded automobile journey times between Madrid and nearby fronts.<sup>85</sup> Collecting such information, of course, was necessary given that trucks from the blood transfusion unit were delivering blood to the front lines at all hours of the day and night. So the fact that Pike was not seen to be an enthusiastic leftist might reflect less about Pike herself than about the unrealistic standards of the political leaders in Spain and the atmosphere of suspicion that prevailed in 1937-8.

In contrast to this negative report on Pike, we have her own words about what took her to Spain. They are few, but eloquent. Pike wrote to her sister, Kathleen, and her family in Canada from Lower Edmonton, near London on June 18, 1940. It was Britain's lowest moment during the whole of World War Two, the day after its ally, France, sued for peace with Nazi Germany. Pike expected to see German bombs fall as early as that night, in which case she would be called from bed to her nursing station. At this dire moment, with the threat of fascism looming over her for a second time, she paused to reflect on her decision to fight fascism in Spain. She wrote:

My belief in my ideals, which I know differ from yours, are stronger than ever ... I believe that in the spring of 1937 I did the right thing and had I that two years to live over again I should do the same thing. It is to be regretted that most people did not see the menace at that time and do something about it before it was too late. ... I do not really think it is too late now, but the menace is much greater. ... I can yet see a way out, but will the people, the masses, see it in time, unite, and force it[?] That remains to be seen.<sup>86</sup>

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84 This is my translation of the following assessment by Jochmke, E. Servio [Gemino?] and Carlos: "profesionalmente calificada, trabaja mal, politicamente desinteresada, no es buen elemento antifascista, indisciplinada", dated Barcelona, December 5, 1938. The chief of the medical services in January 1939 assessed her as "Profesionalmente calificada. Trabaja sin entusiasmo, indisciplinada, politicamente desorientada." LAC, MG10 K2 Fonds 545, Florence Pike Political questionnaire, January 4, 1939

85 LAC Mackenzie-Papineau Collection (Moscow Archives), Fonds 545, file list 6, file 542, 1937-190, report of 3 April 1937. For a discussion of this document, see Hannant, *The Politics of Passion*, pp. 122-8.

86 Martin Collection, Florence to Mrs. K.G. Tew, June 18, 1940

We see in these words Pike’s quiet pride in her service to Republican Spain. Even from North America, far from fascist states, she had seen the threat of fascism three years before many others did. She had determined to stand against it, whatever the cost. And the cost would be great – estrangement from family, unrequited dreams, broken health. This injury was compounded by the insult of her dismissive official epitaph on almost two years of work for the anti-fascist cause. Yet this little-known woman still insisted on the rightness of her cause, reaffirmed her sentiments and looked to the greater power that she hoped could win the struggle that she and Spain had temporarily lost.

### Conclusion

These three left-wing women were clearly dedicated anti-fascists who sacrificed much for their belief that fascism must be stopped in Spain. Watts showed considerable determination to get to Spain and persevered there despite disappointments and the petty political intrigue that too often hamstrung the republican side in Spain. Even after returning from Spain more than a little disillusioned, Watts carried on with considerable determination to support the republic, the Canadian volunteers who had fought in Spain and the thousands of Spanish children made orphans by the war. Crang’s action in Spain made her the brunt of considerable opprobrium that focused on her violation of the norms of female behaviour for patriarchal and capitalist societies of the 1930s. Firing a rifle at the fascists in Madrid seems also to have contributed to her losing her place as a young, female Edmonton city councillor. Pike’s decision to go to Spain and her 19-month service there helped both to build a barrier between her and her family that was never adequately breached and to undermine her health.

Watts and Skrypyk also found that the principled male leftists who rallied to Spain’s cause were not always principled gender egalitarians. Watts defied male Communist Party leaders’ resistance in order even to go to Spain; Skrypyk and Culhane found male protectiveness to be a deterrent to going at all. Pike’s lengthy work to care for and help rehabilitate wounded International Brigade fighters was acknowledged only in passing with the phrase that she was at best just professionally competent. Nonetheless, she still failed to live up to the political expectations of male republican and communist officials.<sup>87</sup>

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87 With the complete Communist International records about the International Brigades personnel now available, the database exists for a much-needed study of how well the volunteers met the political expectations of Comintern and communist officials (elite versus grass-roots communism). An essential aspect of such a project, of course, would be the officials’ observations about the political reliability of female volunteers compared to the officials’ assessments of male volunteers.

It should not be surprising that these women grappled with stereotypes about women's inferiority, even in the midst of a political struggle that was billed, at least for a time, as a social revolution. In her study of women on the left in Canada in the years from 1920 to 1950, Joan Sangster has pointed out that left wing parties were characterized by persistent gender inequality, even though they were more progressive than mainstream society.<sup>88</sup> And the particular features of the Spanish Civil War probably reinforced this left-wing tendency. After an initial burst of enthusiasm for a revolutionary overthrow of gender conservatism, leftists in Spain mostly abandoned social revolution as they grappled with what was deemed to be the more pressing need to win the war. For many left-wing men, winning the war against fascism meant cultural business as usual: insistence on political loyalty and dismissal of social changes that were seen to be disruptive.

However, these three Canadian women's experience of persistent inequality in the midst of a broader political and military struggle for democracy should be put into context. They were gender pioneers, and the anti-fascist struggle in Spain was part of the reason why they could be pioneers. Along with thousands of other Spanish and international women, they waded into uncharted political and gender waters by the very act of going to Spain. For Watts and Crang, this involved overtly and implicitly confronting conventional views of proper gender roles. For Pike it involved setting aside expectations of mothers' devotion to their children in favor of what she believed was her personal responsibility to confront European fascism. In both subtle and conspicuous ways these women stepped out of line, defied cultural and gender conventions and put themselves to the fore, knowing that they were challenging patriarchal conventions. And leftist politics – what Buchanan describes as “the paradigm within which [those who went to Spain or worked on behalf of Republican Spain] had to operate” – helped to make possible their iconoclasm.

Yet their experience in Spain reveals that the “revolution” that accompanied the Spanish Civil War was at best partial and was not a great breakthrough for women, even if it did at times poke holes in patriarchal norms. Indeed, their experience serves as a reminder of the persistence of the barriers to male-female equality in Spain and Canada. As Nash has observed, “a redefinition of social relations between the sexes ... was not to be attained” in the Spanish Civil War. During the war, the left in Spain and Canada leveled much criticism at patriarchy and occasionally challenged it in practical ways. But it was too preoccupied with its epochal fight against rightwing forces and its own internal rivalries to offer a determined challenge to conventional patriarchal politics and practice. In the midst of the anti-fascist struggle in Spain, leftist politics was at once an opportunity and a burden for at least three Canadian women on the left.

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88 Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, pp. 229, 237 and *passim*