

Nationality, Socialism, and Great Depression Era Politics in *This Time A Better Earth*

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Ted Allan's novel, *This Time A Better Earth*, was published shortly after his time in Spain fighting against Franco's fascists. The novel is deeply idealistic and works to depict a transnational model of solidarity amongst anti-fascist volunteers. The novel, complicated and flawed, is representative of a poetics of engagement. Nonetheless, it fell out of print until 2015 and, as such, needs reintroduction to a scholarly and popular reading audience. In his paper, "Nationality, Socialism, and Great Depression Era Politics in *This Time A Better Earth*," Bradley Cox offers just such an excellent introduction to both the text and its political, social, and affective contexts. Noting that Allan's writing "conjures the idea of Canadian heroics" on an international stage, Cox teaches us about both the form and function of this political bildungsroman, and of the climate of national sentiment in Canada at the time of its publication. By paying equal attention to both Canadian leftist politics of the day, and Allan's attempt to script a cosmopolitan Canadian *Every Man*, Cox demonstrates the critical complexities of this important Canadian text.

—Dr. Erin Wunker

Ted Allan's *This Time A Better Earth* has a specific image of Canada's involvement in the Spanish Civil War and the country's identity in the global sphere of politics. In the preface of the novel's 2015 edition, editor Bart Vautour explains that the novel depicts Allan's

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"model of transnational solidarity" (Vautour xiii), which he ties to "Canada's involvement" in the history of the Spanish Civil War (Vautour xiii). Allan's writing conjures the idea of Canadian heroics with imagery of radical anti-fascist solidarity between Canadians and other nationalities to fight oppression on the international stage. This characterization is most evident with the main protagonist Bob Curtis, who is portrayed as a youthful, down-to-earth, cosmopolitan working-class everyman, and a volunteer soldier well-studied in socialist works. In reality, however, Canada's relationship with minority nationalities and with radical socialist politics during the time of the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War was highly contentious and far from pristine. Ultimately, Ted Allan's pretty, picturesque vision of the progressive Canadian during the Spanish Civil War is an idealized depiction, and this depiction should not be taken as wholly reflective of contemporary sentiments of Canadians at the time. *This Time A Better Earth* reflects one kind of Canadian experience of the Great Depression and Spanish Civil War era; it is important to consider the real historical context of the Canadians' less than altruistic attitude towards other nationalities, and Canada's unstable response towards radical socialist politics during the era of *This Time A Better Earth*, in order to understand that it is an ideal that Ted Allan is portraying and not a historic truth.

The generosity of Canadian soldiers towards other peoples in the story of *This Time A Better Earth* was not fully reflective of the body politic of Canada at the time,

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and certainly not of the government. Allan's story provides Bob as our everyman of his generation for the setting; his thoughts during the introductory chapter often use the pronouns "we" and "us" to establish the assumed commonality of his experience, including when he explains that "all of us" had told themselves that they "would find a place for [themselves] in this world" (Allan 8). During his time serving in the International Brigades, Bob befriends members from various nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, including an African American Chicagoan named Doug Rollins, a Jewish New Yorker known as Milton "Milty" Schwartz, and the German photographer Lisa Kammerer. Furthermore, the protagonist not only befriends these people of other nationalities but also acknowledges their skill and the important roles they play as equals during the war effort. This is demonstrated, for example, when Bob tries to refuse the position as radio broadcaster on the grounds that he knew Milty would do the job better and wanted the position, stating he "wouldn't be able to look the guys in the face" (Allan 53). Thus, Allan's Canadian everyman is depicted as someone who is humble towards peoples of other races and nationalities and cares for humankind across national borders.

While this characterization helps to establish the idea of transnational solidarity that motivates the story of the novel, Bob's role as the Canadian everyman and as a representation of Canada's involvement in the Spanish Civil War distorts the reality of Canada's immigrant and

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race relations at the time. First and foremost, the actual government policy of Canada during the Great Depression era was not friendly to other nationalities. In the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War, Canada's democratically-elected federal government imposed the deportation of some thirty thousand foreign-born Canadian residents (Lacroix p. 67), in part as a political opportunity for the government to suppress ideologies contrary to the government of the time (Lacroix p. 67). It was not the conservative right, liberal centrists, or even centre-left political camps alone that supported this kind of policy or expressed such sentiments; J.S. Woodsworth, founding leader during the Great Depression of Canada's first social democratic party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, held questionable views from 1909 onwards of how multiculturalism should function in a post-colonial Canada (Lacroix p. 68-9) and had expressed racist sentiments against Asian immigrants in the past (Lacroix p. 68). Even The Trades and Labour Congress, Canada's main labour organization during the Great Depression (Canadian Encyclopedia par. 1), was against the immigration of non-English speakers to Canada (Lacroix p. 65).

Canada's distrust towards people of other nationalities was not limited to foreign-born workers either; in 1939 towards the end of the Spanish Civil War and on the brink of World War II, the Canadian government had even turned away Jewish refugees boarding the St Louis who had been fleeing the certain death of the Third Reich, after

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they had already been turned down by Cuba and the United States (Abella p. 179-80). Thus, while Bob's camaraderie, care, and genuine respect for his allies of marginalized ethnic and national identities are traits clearly employed by the author to reflect positively on his character, his characterization still serves as a less than historically accurate portrayal of the complicated and often negative relations typical of the Great Depression and Spanish Civil War era between the Canadian body politic and the various marginalized nationalities and ethnicities. The idea that Bob represents for Allan is the young Canadian leftist filtered through rose-tinted glasses for the purpose of emphasizing the theme of transnational solidarity that dominates the novel.

Canada's own attitudes towards radical socialist politics itself was also murky during the time of the Great Depression, as the emergence of socialism and other radical politics in Canada during the time coincided with Canada's own brand of reactionary politics. Bob's characterization as an everyman also normalizes his socialist past, and Allan's depiction of the International Brigades suggests that socialism was a fairly natural part of the Canadian experience. When discussing his young adulthood with Lisa, Bob visits the topic of radical politics, explaining that in his early adulthood he "became convinced that capitalism had to go" after reading the works of "Lenin, Marx, Engels, Stalin." (Allan 86). He further explains that his peers had been "going through the same thing" (Allan 86), suggesting a common thread of

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working class dissatisfaction among his generation. Furthermore, early in the novel, Comandante Kuller notes that there are "quite a few communists from the United States and Canada" volunteering in the International Brigades (Allan 22). The Great Depression era was indeed a turning point for socialism and other anti-capitalist politics as well as anti-fascist radical politics in Canada, including the formation of Canada's own social democratic party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (Lacroix 59).

Socialism's newfound place in the sphere of Canadian politics was contentious, and federal politics were still dominated by the Liberals and Conservatives (Lacroix p. 59). Additionally, these governments, as mentioned previously, used tactics such as deportation of leftist immigrants to silence radical leftist dissent (Lacroix p. 67) in a manner all-too familiar to the early methods of fascist governments like the Third Reich who initially expelled their political targets such as the Jews (Abella p. 178). The socialists of the time were well aware and fearful of the possibility of government retaliation in Canada against socialist causes during the 1930s, as evidenced by the Co-operative Commonwealth Youth Movement's reluctance to participate in the 1935 On-To-Ottawa Trek protests with the fear that government might use the protest as an excuse to declare a state of national emergency and prevent political dissent by putting off elections (Naylor p. 75). While the existence of groups like the Co-operative Commonwealth Youth Movement proves that there was

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indeed a sizeable movement for socialism among Bob's generation, the normalcy of how Bob's politics are treated glosses over the hostile situation Canadian socialists faced when confronting the government during the Great Depression and Civil War era. Thus, while radical socialist politics in *This Time A Better Earth* may have been portrayed as a normal and commonplace phenomenon for the Canadians volunteering during the Spanish Civil War, it hardly reflects the reality of the adverse relationship socialist ideology had with the body politic of Canada as a whole.

Ted Allan's depiction of the average Canadian who fought in the Spanish Civil War represents one idea of the very best of what Canada could be, and how Canadians could become a part of a larger system of transnational solidarity. Woven into this idea of transnational solidarity is the image of the progressive Canadian, who comes from a place where socialism was revolutionizing the political landscape, and where nationality and ethnicity was irrelevant to participate in the body politic. Nevertheless, while it makes for a compelling story and an optimistic ideal, the Canadian soldier as depicted in *This Time A Better Earth* is not an accurate representation of the actual state of relations that the government of its time had with people from minority ethnicities and nationalities, and it does not capture the reality of the contentious situation of socialism that characterized the politics of the Canadian Great Depression and Spanish Civil War era.

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