

“Collecting Stamps Would Have Been More Fun”: Canadian Publishing and the Correspondence of Sinclair Ross, 1933–1986

Jordan Stouck, ed., with David Stouck

Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2010, ISBN 978-0-88864-521-0, 304 pp., \$34.95 paper.

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“Collecting Stamps Would Have Been More Fun” is a selection of letters and excerpts from correspondence between Sinclair Ross and other writers, reviewers, interviewers, agents, and publishers, related to Ross’s writing and his writing career. The basically chronological letters are grouped under sub-titles, which are in themselves revealing: “American Dream,” “Canadian Failure,” “Modest Hopes,” “*Succes d’Estime*,” and “Literary Forefather.”

Through the text and the helpful “Chronology” (xxx), we learn of Ross’s background. Born in Saskatchewan in 1908, he lived, after his parents divorced, with his English-born mother, who supported herself and her son by working as a housekeeper. He received early encouragement from his mother’s brother, John Foster Fraser, who was a published travel writer in England. After completing Grade Eleven, Ross found employment in a bank, where he worked for the next 43 years, supporting his mother until her death in 1957. Except for the years he served with the Canadian Army Ordnance Corps in London during World War II, Ross was deployed by the Royal Bank from Saskatchewan to Winnipeg to Montreal. He published fewer than a dozen short stories between 1935 and 1955, four novels (in 1941, 1958, 1970, 1974), and a memoir in 1988. After he retired in 1968, he lived in Greece and Spain, returning to Canada after being diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 1980. He died in a Vancouver veterans’ hospital in 1996.

Getting an impression of Ross’s personality requires a bit more effort. His need to establish financial stability is understandable, given the family background. His sense of duty, and his recognition of the loneliness and isolation of men on the prairies, seem to be based upon both observation and personal experience. Reference is made to his homosexuality but not really to any impact it may have had upon his literary work or career. He had a strong sense of independence and privacy. In letters about the possibility of Canada Council grants, we see him resisting being used as a symbol of “the starving artist,” asserting that his steady employment was a personal choice and not an example of victimization. Indeed, he asks Margaret Laurence to “tone it down,” as he feared losing his hard-earned bank pension. Ross comes across as something of a hypochondriac and, later in life, as somewhat curmudgeonly. But his refusal to be pitied, his lifelong aversion to being interviewed, and his not wanting to be embarrassed by his illness reflect a sense of humility and dignity that seem to belong to another era. “I would be grateful if you would ignore me. You see, I have Parkinson’s disease. I don’t speak well. There are things that enter my mind to say but I don’t trust myself to say them. If you came to see me, I’m afraid it might be unpleasant for you” (258).

In spite of his oft-repeated “I never think about that,” Ross does talk about his creative process. “I think I shall probably always scribble away at something – it is my nature – but as the years go on one’s enthusiasms – even one’s compulsions – become tempered by common sense” (83). “[T]he basic urge behind all writing is . . . ‘Look!’ . . . Things impress you . . . you feel it so intensely that you must get it said and so you write it” (263). He saw his stories as character sketches about the will to survive, about “self-destructive” choices. “If your enemy is the land, and the seasons, it seems to me it gives you more room to have faith in basic human nature, in the basic good in your fellow man” (269). “[That feeling,] the Canadian artist’s sense of nature’s ‘indifference,’ . . . has always been

behind anything I have written” (138). His characters “ring true” and he “said something revealing about human nature, human conflicts, the human predicament” (272). “At least I know my label: *outsider*” (191).

This collection also offers telling glimpses into writing and publishing in Canada in the twentieth century. Several correspondents refer Ross to the one or two American publications that pay their writers. The dearth of paying markets is matched only by the dearth of paying readers in Canada. “Making my living as a writer was out of the question” (225). The gap between writing as an art form and publishing as a business is obvious, as is the gap between rural and urban. When a reviewer praises Ross’s characters as “not peasants,” Ross counters with “peasants aren’t necessarily lacking in dignity” (103–104). The gap between the West and publishing companies in the East is obvious: “literary decisions in the English language are made in New York and London and, to some extent, in Toronto, and I don’t think they’re particularly interested in Saskatchewan” (260).

Finally, we learn of the importance of advocates and mentors. Ross read widely and was interested in experimenting with style. The title of this book, taken from a letter from Sinclair Ross, echoes that horrible capitalist mantra, “If you’re not making money at it, it’s a hobby.” Unfortunately for Ross, he bought into that put-down, burdened as he was by years of publishing disappointment. This collection counters Ross’s self-deprecating estimate of the worth of his own literary output. As the editors say in their introduction, correspondence about his second novel, *The Well*, reveals “a striking instance of an author coerced to meet the expectations of the moral, psychological, and aesthetic standards of the day” (xviii). Robert Kroetsch is cited: “Ross embraced his historical moment with a kind of ‘invisibility’ that forces his readers to see themselves instead of the author and to examine the world they have created around them” (259). Novelist and academic David Williams notes that Kroetsch considered *As For Me And My House* to be “the first book in our literature, the great text that stands at the beginning . . .” (251). Williams addresses Ross directly: “I’m very grateful to you for ‘proving up’ the land, for making it artistically inhabitable. . . . [Y]ou made it so much easier to believe in [a] community’s need of an artist to paint the soul” (250). It took someone with the stature of Margaret Laurence to point out the importance of Ross’s achievement to Canadian readers: “[T]he stories . . . reveal a prairie ethic that is positively frightening . . . he has portrayed an entire people, their spiritual goals, their vulnerabilities. He really doesn’t have to worry about whether he ever does anything more” (101). As Earle Toppings said in his interview with Ross, “[T]here are much deeper ways to succeed” (271). ♡

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