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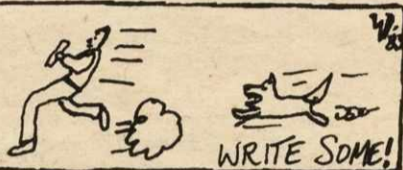
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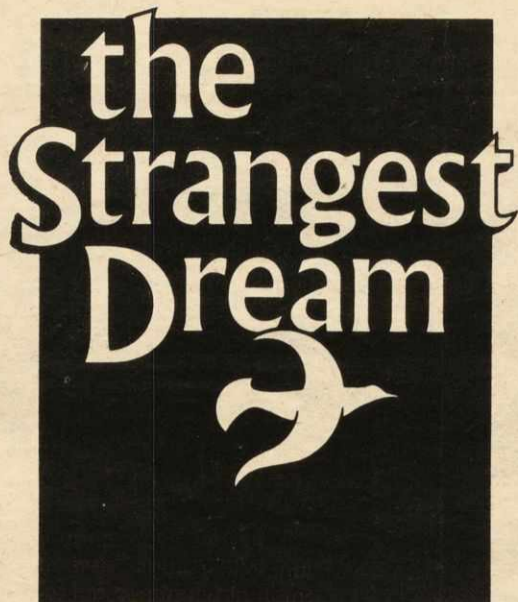


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# Communism in Canada



Canadian Communists,  
the Spy Trials, and the Cold War

Merrily Weisbord

*The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War*  
by Merrily Weisbord  
Lester and Orpen Denys, 255 pages, \$18.95 (cloth)

Review by Geoff Martin

The years of the Great Depression were part of a nasty period in Canadian history.

Article 98, The Unlawful Associations Act, disallowed attendance at meetings of "revolutionary associations" and limited the freedom to distribute "radical literature". After the 1935 repeal of the article by MacKenzie King, the infamous "padlock law" was passed in Quebec by the government of Premier Maurice Duplessis, the man who read Adolph Hitler's autobiography *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle") and said he "liked it."

Throughout the whole of Canada, the political climate was one of fear—fear of the unknown, fear of new ideas—the sort of fear which grips people whose main concern is to hold on to the little they still have left.

In *The Strangest of Dreams*, Merrily Weisbord attempts to explain, primarily by drawing from dozens of interviews with former members, fellow travellers and sympathizers, how and why the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) rose and fell when it did.

The author is writing from the perspective of a daughter whose parents were involved in the movement. The tone is personal, thanks to the excerpts presented from conversations with people like Fred Taylor, Raymond Boyer, Stanley Ryerson, Irene Kon and Henri Gagnon. Her most valuable interview was with Fred Rose, the only communist ever elected to the House of Commons (in the riding of Montreal-Cartier in August 1943), who died recently in his native Poland.

The book suffers from a number of problems despite the interest which these interviews generate.

The author tells us that she wrote the book in order to understand "[her] parents and

the ethos in which [she] was raised," but in places we are given the impression that communism in Canada was more popular than it actually was. It is probably inevitable when you are writing a book of mostly personal recollections, but she should have made greater efforts to temper the euphoria with realistic assessments of the situation at the time.

She writes, for example, that Prime Minister R. B. Bennett was rejected in 1935 "by an electorate increasingly fed up with the Conservative government's harsh and repressive politics." This argument springs out of her optimism, but it is more likely that Bennett was defeated because he was unable to "blast" our way into world markets and give Canadians the prosperity they demanded.

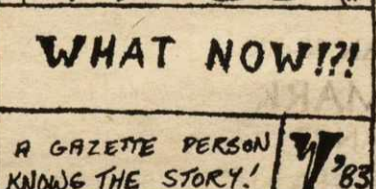
The author is also too benevolent regarding the reality of the Soviet Union in the 1930's onward, despite the fact that the CPC was slavishly pro-Soviet in line. She does not discuss the Soviet betrayal of the Spanish Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, or the failure of the Canadian communists to think freely and recognize Stalin's mass murder of the 1930's.

Despite these problems we can appreciate much of the book's analysis. Weisbord discusses the inner mechanics of the communist party, especially in the context of the election of Fred Rose to Parliament, the Gouzenko Affair and the spy trials, and Khrushchev's "secret" speech of 1956 which served as a denunciation of Stalin's rule and was the single most important event in the destruction of the early Canadian communist movement.

Weisbord has provided us with a very interesting, if uneven, account of communism in Canada from 1919 to 1956, as seen through the eyes of the people involved.

It provides an interesting addition to the present literature on the CPC, Fred Rose and the Gouzenko Affair.

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