

Faith Johnston. *A Great Restlessness: The Life and Politics of Dorise Nielsen.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006. xi + 312 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88755-690-6.



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A Woman in Process: Dorise Nielsen and Canadian Communism

When I teach first-year university Canadian history, I use Dorise Nielsen's oft-quoted House of Commons speech from 1944 to illustrate the retrenchment of women's employment and equality gains after the end of World War II: "Are the government and the employers going to say to these women, 'Well girls, you have done a nice job; you look very cute in your overalls and we appreciate what you have done for us; but just run along; go home; we can get along without you very nicely?'" (p. 171). But I never really knew who she was until I read this biography. Hers was an extraordinary life shaped, above all, by political commitment and identity. Nielsen, a British immigrant to northern Saskatchewan, became a communist during the 1930s, and remained one all of her political life. In 1940, she was Canada's second woman ever elected to Parliament, and the first communist (she ran under the United Progressive banner). She worked with various communist organizations throughout the Cold War, and her life ended in the service of the Communist revolution in China. Her life, until now, has been almost entirely unknown, and the unavoidable certainty is that this is because she was a woman.

Faith Johnston's biography of Nielsen probes with particular sensitivity and clarity the fluid political identities common in Dorise Nielsen's formative political years: the 1930s, when the boundaries between a belief in communism, socialism, and social democracy were never constant. Nielsen and her family lived in extraordinary, appalling poverty in northern Saskatchewan. It only makes sense that she was radicalized by her experience. The home where she lived with her husband, Peter Nielsen, and their three surviving children, was barely more than a shack. She was spirited enough to resist her fate. Not wanting to give birth without a trained midwife or doctor, she traveled eighty-five kilometers to a nursing home to have her children. It is unclear how her family afforded the medical bills. In 1930, they lost their second child to dysentery, the nearest doctor thirty-five kilometers away. These were the conditions of poverty and suffering against which Dorise Nielsen and others struggled. A tall, striking woman, with powerful eyes, she was a standout even in an era when many talented and committed individuals were drawn to the left in Canada. Nielsen was apparently a gifted rhetorician and orator, capable of greatly moving her audiences, and drew large

crowds when she spoke publicly. The complex and powerful ideas she articulated in her speeches and writing, and to which she dedicated her life, might have received more detailed attention from her biographer.

Perhaps more so than would be the case in a political biography of a man, Faith Johnston thoroughly considers the tensions and challenges of being a mother (and, after 1939, a single mother), lover and partner, and political activist, and makes it very clear how much of family life was sacrificed in order for Dorise Nielsen to carry the banner of communism in mid-century Canada. Not surprisingly, given how much time she spent away from them or was too distracted to give them her full attention, Nielsen had strained relationships with all three of her children. Throughout the last twenty-three years of her life spent in China, she saw family members only rarely, although she worked hard to maintain contact with her daughters. Sadly, upon one meeting, she did not recognize her adult son, whom she had not seen in years. Men came and went through Dorise's life, but close personal relationships were clearly difficult. One question that persists for me throughout Johnston's study is the degree to which Dorise Nielsen became so deeply involved in politics because she found personal relationships so fraught, or, alternatively, how much political life cost her emotionally, draining away her already limited energy for sustaining intimacy. There is little question that the pace at which Nielsen, and other political activists of her generation, drove themselves took its toll. As Johnston notes, "fatigue became a way of life for Dorise" in the 1940s (p. 125). Even before her election to the House of Commons, she traveled extensively. And as the Cold War began, and hostilities deepened between committed communists and others on the broader left (particularly Cooperative Commonwealth Federation [CCF] activists), Dorise became more and more of a target, especially in her home province of Saskatchewan. These fractures of the left cost Dorise Nielsen not just politically but personally.

During the 1945 federal election campaign, communist candidates proposed a suicidal Liberal-Labour coalition to defeat the Tories—a strategy that infuriated the CCF. The CCF ran a candidate against Nielsen and easily defeated her. She moved to Toronto to work at Communist Party headquarters, and promptly found herself in the middle of the Gouzenko affair. Although Nielsen was on the national executive of the Labour Progressive Party (a communist organization), and her former colleague in Parliament, Fred Rose, was arrested, Dorise herself was not detained by the Canadian government. John-

ston does not connect Nielsen directly to the spy scandal. Nielsen testified in Fred Rose's defense, but her name did not appear in the press.

As the Cold War deepened, Dorise Nielsen worked organizing, writing, and public speaking in a declining Canadian communist movement. Johnston concludes, "these were not happy years" (p. 229). Dorise's ambitions were undermined by the male leadership of the party. The manner in which she was pushed aside by men such as Fred Rose and James Endicott was shamefully sexist. Her ability to organize, speak publicly, and raise funds was fully exploited, even while she was chastised for lacking theoretical rigor and intellectual ability. As one party leader condescendingly stated, "she lived by emotions rather than knowledge" (p. 229). Johnston argues that Nielsen's faith in herself suffered. She never felt she could meet the doctrinaire standards of the party, and spent endless hours studying the sacred texts of Marxism and communism. This sense of failed aspirations may have contributed to Dorise Nielsen's decision to leave Canada, first for England, then in 1957, for China, where there was still some hope for communism. The fallout from Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin, and the invasion of Hungary, had left the Canadian communist movement in tatters.

Dorise was fifty-five years old when she arrived in China, hardly a hot-headed young idealist. Yet China, too, was a mixed experience for her. Her relationship with her Canadian male companion deteriorated and she left him to live alone. She was part of a very small English-speaking expatriate group, most of them refugees of the Cold War. Her Chinese-language skills never developed very far, and so she was isolated from the lives of ordinary Chinese. Yet, it is fascinating that Dorise survived the Cultural Revolution without great suffering, despite the fact that Chinese attitudes toward Westerners were very negative during the period—just as she had lived through the Cold War in Canada without being arrested or imprisoned. Was it because she was a woman, and therefore not important enough to bother with? Or did she have finely honed survival skills? After years of poor health, Nielsen died in China in 1980 and is buried in Babaoshan, the cemetery for revolutionary heroes.

Faith Johnston seems to confirm the perceptions of historians such as Joan Sangster, who has argued that gender equality was considered secondary to class struggle in the Canadian communist movement, but goes further in documenting the degree to which the abilities of

one woman were derided and devalued by her contemporaries, and elided in Canadian history. Johnston does not elaborate on where her study fits into the historiography of gender and the left in Canada during this period: this is legitimate, given that the biography is not meant to be a scholarly work; academic historians, however, will regret the omission. Johnston's biography is part of an apparently growing resurgence in historical interest in gender and political life: it was published the same year as Andr e L vesque's *Red Travellers: Jeanne Corbin and Her Comrades* (2006). Johnston has made a valuable con-

tribution to the history of gender and political belief in twentieth-century Canada, a subject recently neglected by historians of women and the left, and written the life of a powerful, flawed, and fascinating woman.

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