“Sidown, Brother, Sidown!”: The Problem of Commitment and the Publishing History of Irene Baird’s *Waste Heritage*

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Like much Depression-era writing in Canada, Irene Baird’s 1939 novel *Waste Heritage* is out of print and, perhaps as a consequence, has not garnered much recent critical or scholarly attention. Fortunately, University of Ottawa Press is publishing a new edition of the novel in 2007 (edited and with an introduction by Colin Hill), which will certainly bring the attention of a new generation of scholars to bear on the issue of women’s authorship during the interwar years in Canada.¹ Existing criticism of the novel is largely influenced by leftist nationalist Robin Mathews, who argued that Baird’s novel should be heralded as a classic of proletarian literature in Canada—a novel that sympathetically represents the inevitability of class revolution.² Yet archival evidence regarding the publishing history of the novel has allowed me to reconsider its political commitments in a more nuanced way. Although Baird has no authors’ papers and although the original manuscript for *Waste Heritage* is no longer extant, her correspondence with her Canadian and American publishers, as well as her articles on the writing of *Waste Heritage*, are integral to the process of interpreting the novel’s conflicted cultural and political meanings.

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1 I would like to thank Colin Hill for his generous assistance with my research on Irene Baird.

2 See Robin Mathews, “Canada’s Hidden Working Class Literature,” *Canadian Dimension*, (November / December 1997): 37 and “*Waste Heritage*: The Effect of Class on Literary Structure,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 6.1 (1981): 65–81. For similar appraisals of the novel, see Anthony Hopkins, “Thematic Structure and Vision in *Waste Heritage*,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 11 (Spring 1986): 77–85; and Roger Leslie Hyman, “Wasted Heritage *Waste Heritage*: The Critical Disregard of an Important Novel,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17.4 (1982–83): 74–87.

Baird's social realist novel certainly does decry the situation of those men who were cut adrift by the Depression and largely ignored by the federal government, but the narrative reinforces the social hierarchies and relations of power that the thousands of transient unemployed threatened to undo in the mass demonstrations and strikes they engaged in throughout the 1930s. As her communication with Macmillan Canada and Random House in New York demonstrates, Baird's work was constrained by numerous factors, including her class and gender, the demands of her publishers, and state censorship that resulted from the 1939 invocation of the War Measures Act, all of which led her to feel deeply ambivalent about writing a "strike novel." Like other writers with leftist sympathies in Depression-era Canada, such as Dorothy Livesay and Oscar Ryan, Baird articulates the importance of federal intervention in the crisis of mobility that had beset the nation, but her hesitancy regarding the politics of her project indicates that interwar leftist literary culture in Canada (and the literature that has been incorporated into its marginal canon by, for example, leftist nationalists) was by no means aligned by a homogenous conception of class struggle.

Waste Heritage as Protest Novel

Waste Heritage represents an explosive event, the troubling effects of which remained fresh in the minds of Canadians in 1939, when the novel was first published (it was re-published in 1974). The Vancouver Sit-Down Strike of 1938 involved more than one thousand transients who were protesting the fact that provincial and federal governments had been unable to formulate a permanent strategy for dealing with the unemployment that had ravaged the country for the better part of a decade.³ Baird's fictional narrative responds to this labour crisis with a depiction of a typical unemployed transient, allegorically named Matt Striker, who comes to Vancouver by train to join the strike

3 The strikers inhabited the symbolically significant sites of the Vancouver post office and art gallery for a month before the RCMP forcibly evicted them; the men then proceeded to Victoria to make their voices heard in the provincial capital. James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 192-93. There has been some misidentification of the context for Baird's novel in criticism of *Waste Heritage*. Caren Irr, for example, identifies the strike as the earlier On-to-Ottawa trek. Caren Irr, *The Suburb of Dissent: Cultural Politics in the United States and Canada During the 1930s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

just after the evictions. There, he befriends a fellow striker named Eddy, falls for a young department store clerk named Hazel, struggles with his sense of loyalty to the cause, and finds himself back where he started when the government settlement sends him out onto the road without hope of work or relief. Faced with so few options, Matt has a violent altercation with a police officer, kills the officer, and is arrested; Eddy, grieved by his role in Matt's arrest, stumbles onto the train tracks and is killed by an oncoming train.

Waste Heritage shares the ideological project of many of the stories and poems that appeared in Canadian leftist periodicals in the 1930s, such as the Communist-affiliated *Masses* or the social democratic *Canadian Forum*: through the figure of Matt Striker, the novel argues for the existence of a national labour force that deserves the attention of federal coffers. The possibility that Canada had a national labour force and, consequently, that the federal government was responsible for it, was an issue that had only begun to emerge in Canada in the 1930s. Under the Conservative government of Prime Minister Robert Bennett (1930-35), municipalities and provinces administered federal relief, but when the temporary Relief Act expired in 1931, this meant that most programs denied relief to non-residents.⁴ Transient men were the greatest victims of this restriction.⁵ The visible presence of these men in cities across Canada provided evidence for those who argued that unemployment was a national responsibility, and who decried the reluctance of the Conservative and subsequent Liberal governments to assume this responsibility.⁶ Yet the increasingly loud voices of democratic socialists such as

4 Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 206-07.

5 Struthers, *No Fault*, 51.

6 Dennis Guest argues that the "prevailing residual approach to social security" in Canada (an *ad hoc* system that responded with "charity" to "deserving" beneficiaries in times of emergency), as well as the need for constitutional amendment prevented the Bennett and King governments from acting on Unemployment Insurance during the 1930s. Bennett's government did capitulate with a "New Deal" in 1935—the Employment and Social Insurance Act. However, opposition leader Mackenzie King claimed that a constitutional amendment would be required if the federal government chose to administer a UI program. The Privy Council agreed, and the "New Deal" was shelved. King's Liberals won a majority in Parliament in the 1935 election, but chose to leave the delicate issue of constitutional amendment untouched until the late 1930s. Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 86-91.

J.S. Woodsworth of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), as well as the conclusions of the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations (1937-1940), urged the issue of federal jurisdiction over a national program of Unemployment Insurance.⁷ Insofar as *Waste Heritage* is sympathetic to this issue, it shares the commitments of both the social democratic and Communist movements in Depression-era Canada.⁸

In both political and literary cultures, which were admittedly intertwined in this decade, the transient unemployed became the symbolic battleground of the contested issue of jurisdiction over unemployment and relief. In a description of *Waste Heritage* that Baird wrote for Macmillan's sales catalogue, she called the novel a "protest against the stupidity, irony and menace of a policy that allows the country's richest asset to drift from coast to coast, homeless, unskilled, undisciplined and unwanted, its one hope of steady employment the next great European war."⁹ Baird hoped that this "protest" would create political change in Ottawa, as she noted in a letter to publisher Hugh Eayrs in 1939: "There seems to be no doubt that this subject will be the ace election issue. I hope that this may redound to the benefit of all of us."¹⁰ The novel makes its argument with regard to federal responsibility clear. The reader, for example, is meant to credit the one newspaper account of the sit-down strike that the strikers deem accurate and which calls the issue of unemployment

7 The CCF-affiliated social democratic League for Social Reconstruction (LSR) published *Social Planning for Canada* in 1935; the book calls for a system of insurance to replace unemployment relief. Similarly, Leonard Marsh, a McGill economist, member of the LSR, and author of the government-commissioned Report on Social Security for Canada in 1943, advocated a federally-run and funded system of unemployment insurance as a means of regulating both geographical labour mobility and the capriciousness of market forces. Leonard Marsh, "The Mobility of Labour in Relation to Unemployment," *Papers and Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association* 3 (1931): 7-31.

8 Historian Norman Penner demonstrates the parallel interests of the extra-parliamentary activities of the Communist Party of Canada and the elected members of the CCF. Although their methods differed, both parties fought for Unemployment Insurance. Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 156.

9 Irene Baird to Macmillan, 10 July 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds, The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

10 Baird to Hugh Eayrs, 23 August 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.

"a national responsibility demanding action by national authority and on a nation-wide scale."¹¹ However, while *Waste Heritage* empathizes with the strikers' claims for work and wages, it simultaneously assures its readers that the author herself is aligned with the values of the dominant class, and that the strikers cannot seriously challenge the prevailing social order.

***Waste Heritage* and the Politics of Ambivalence**

To gain public sympathy for the plight of the unemployed, Baird clearly felt that she needed her readers on her side but was also evidently aware that this posed a considerable challenge. Despite the rise of the New Left in the 1960s and a political climate that was newly receptive to leftist sympathies, Baird emphatically distinguished herself from Communism and radical politics and defended the novel's perspective in a 1976 article in which she reflected on the process of writing *Waste Heritage*:

There will be questions, I suppose, about my politics then, especially as the years draw away from the events my novel is written about. To begin, I have never been connected with Communism and I have never thought of myself as a radical if being a radical means wanting to overthrow the system we live in in favour of another political system. I think a reader of the novel will find, however, that I don't praise or condemn some of the most important people in the novel who are obviously connected with radical politics. . . . The times were too bad to say "I won't talk about that because I don't like the label you put on it."¹²

The "you" in the final sentence is clearly not the unemployed themselves but rather those who would be offended by or suspicious of radicalism. Baird identifies strongly with this skeptical reader; she deliberately places herself among the politically moderate and emphasizes her position above the fray. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that Baird lived through a postwar political climate that was less than friendly to the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), a key

11 Irene Baird, *Waste Heritage* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939), 81-82. Hereafter cited in text.

12 Irene Baird, "Sidown, Brothers, Sidown," *Laurentian University Review* 9 (1976): 82. Baird wrote three articles about the novel in the mid-1970s. These were occasioned by the fact that Macmillan issued a reprint of *Waste Heritage* in 1974.

player in the Vancouver Sit-Down Strike.¹³ The corollary of this in the novel is Baird's deliberate refusal to name the CPC. The unemployed strikers of the Vancouver Sit-Down posed a particular threat to the provincial and federal governments because they were organized in the CPC-led Relief Project Workers' Union, an organization that Baird does not directly name in her novel, although contemporary readers would likely have recognized the strike leaders as Communists.¹⁴

Yet analyzing Baird's political commitment to the cause of the unemployed strikers is a vexed pursuit. It risks the reductionism of Stalinist demands for the writer's commitment to reflecting "reality"—that is, the Marxist view that class struggle is the essential dynamic of society.¹⁵ James Doyle's otherwise admirable study of the relations between political radicalisms and literary cultures in Canada often adopts versions of this critical stance, reducing, for example, Baird's *Waste Heritage* to a simple reflection of her (arguably moderate) political allegiances. Examining the dialectical play of material and ideological forces more closely reveals that Baird's novel is deeply conflicted and fundamentally ambivalent about its own act of social critique. Consideration of the "whole social material process"¹⁶ involved in the production of *Waste Heritage* demonstrates that the constraints within which Baird wrote—namely, her subject position as an Anglo, middle-class woman and the cultural politics of North America on the cusp of a World War—are key factors in the novel's political ambivalence. While close reading of *Waste Heritage* offers some evidence of this ambivalence, it is only an investigation of the material conditions of the book's production that reveals how deeply conflicted Baird was about her novel's politics.

13 As James Doyle notes, the federal government declared the CPC illegal in 1940, and the Cold War years had a definite chilling effect on the CPC's ability to establish itself as a conventional political party in Canada. James Doyle, *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 161-192.

14 Struthers, *No Fault*, 192. The CPC's presence in relief camps was widely acknowledged in the 1930s. The CPC was able to improve its fortunes in the 1930s as a leader of organized labour because its Relief Project Workers' Union was willing, unlike craft unions, to tackle the problem of unemployment. Palmer, *Working Class*, 208.

15 For a discussion of the Communist International's definition of socialist realism in the 1930s, see Doyle, *Progressive Heritage*, 91.

16 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 138.

Since no major plot changes were made to the manuscript that Baird initially submitted to Macmillan Canada in early 1939, it is fair to assume that the novel's uneasiness, which is evident upon close reading, emerged prior to her dealings with her publishers. For example, as a means of anticipating criticisms of the strikers' political affiliations (which, as mentioned above, are never explicitly named), the narrative disarticulates the common connection between so-called foreigners and Communist political activity. As historians such as Donald Avery have pointed out, there was much fear of so-called foreign agitation in the 1930s in Canada.¹⁷ While Baird's novel demonstrates sympathy with the unjustly treated strikers, who have a right to return to their communities and to find work, this advocacy of the right to settlement is articulated through the creation of a binary: the transients become the deserving if neglected native sons of Canada and are opposed to those who are labeled as foreign. The so-called foreigners in *Waste Heritage*—the "Chinks," the "kike" junk dealer, the Greek café owner, the "shrivelled old Chinaman" who owns the laundry—constitute the panoply of workers who are the novel's "Other." These distinctly racialized figures are not labourers but rather small-business owners, and their avaricious, self-interested, financial success stands as a counterpoint to the plight of the unemployed. The novel thus demonizes the racial "Other" in order to vitiate the fears of those who would presume to find foreigners leading the agitation and who would thus withhold sympathy for the cause the novel champions.

Waste Heritage also exhibits a pattern of entrapment that signals anxiety about the conflict engendered by the strike and, more specifically, about the mobile threat of the strikers. While images of entrapment in the periodical literature of the 1930s often gesture to the possibility of escape (and, less often, revolution), Baird's novel offers only a stark choice between immobility and settled, bourgeois existence.¹⁸ Many early reviews of Baird's novel compared it to John Steinbeck's social protest novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937) because the

17 Donald Avery, "Dangerous Foreigners": *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 116-41. Note that Section 41 of the Immigration Act was added in 1919, which allowed the government to deport any individual who sought to overthrow the government or was affiliated with an organization that opposed organized government.

18 Short stories in Depression-era leftist periodicals often use the figure of the moving train to suggest both the entrapment of the unemployed and the possibility of social revolution. See, for example, Simon Marcson, "Dream

relationship between Matt Striker and his helpless companion, Eddy, is so similar to George and Lennie's; however, while George's murder of Lennie is meant to convey his love for his companion, Matt is not able to maintain his role as protector of Eddy.¹⁹ At the conclusion of Baird's novel, both men are equally victimized by forces they can neither comprehend nor command. Some reviewers and later critics also derided the novel's alleged imitation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); yet Baird's *Waste Heritage* had already gone to Macmillan when Steinbeck's novel appeared.²⁰

Waste Heritage is divided into four parts: "Aschelon," "Transit," "Gath," and "Transit." The allegorical city names of the first and third parts are meant to represent Vancouver and Victoria, respectively. The Old Testament names imply that the transients, who are allegorically aligned with the Israelites, have the right to settle in the cities of Philistia.²¹ Yet the enforced mobility that the transients experience denies them the right of settlement. The novel expresses this enforced mobility in terms of *immobility*, a condition of entrapment that lacks the security and agency of settlement. Although the intervening parts, both called "Transit," suggest geographical mobility, the novel demonstrates no concomitant narrative mobility, a fact that ironically undermines the implication of movement in the titles. The strikers physically move from town to town on their way from Aschelon to Gath, but, as one of the strike leaders comments dryly, their story would not make a good novel because "you got nothing to make a book out of . . . no plot, nothing" (294). Indeed, Matt Striker's response to the settlement that ends the strike emphasizes

Train," *Canadian Forum* (November 1933) or Dan Faro, "Colonist Freight," *Masses* (November 1932).

19 For an example of a review that compares *Waste Heritage* to *Of Mice and Men*, see Margaret Wallace, "Labor on the March," review of *Waste Heritage*, by Irene Baird, *Saturday Review of Literature* (December 16, 1939): 7.

20 Michiel Horn, "Transient Men in the Depression," *Canadian Forum* (October 1974): 38. The assumption that Baird imitated Steinbeck persisted for some time, as Desmond Pacey's article on modern fiction in the *Literary History of Canada* demonstrates. Pacey calls the novel "social propaganda" and claims it suffers from "imitativeness" because it borrows heavily from both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes*. Desmond Pacey, "Fiction, 1920-1940," in *Literary History of Canada*, Second Edition, Volume Two, ed. Carl Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 198. For a further discussion of the novel's relation to Steinbeck, see pages 157-159 of this essay.

21 For prophecies against Philistia (and therefore in favour of the Israelites' right to Ashkelon), see Jeremiah 47, Amos 1, and Zephania 2. See the Book of Samuel (especially 1:5, 7:14, and 17) for the restoration of Gath to the Israelites.

this lack of plot: "All we freight car cowboys know for sure is that we are right back where we started. About the only way we know we are alive is that we are liable to get locked up for trying to prove it" (310). The fates of Matt and Eddy are echoed in the narrative's circularity: the novel opens and closes with the image of a train, a symbol of capitalism's harnessing of mobility, inexorably charging across the nation.

Because *Waste Heritage* tames the prospect of social anarchy, it also seems to distance itself from radical art. Baird's chosen literary method in the novel—reportage—is often theorized as a leftist literary technique, but Baird's use of it arguably manifests her anxieties about being understood as a subversive or "red" writer. Critics like Georg Lukàcs consider reportage a leftist literary technique that mimics journalistic objectivism to create detailed, realist accounts of contemporary social situations in both fictional and non-fictional forms.²² Working with a much broader definition of reportage that does not insist upon its usage as a leftist literary technique, Colin Hill views Baird's method as "direct reportage"—a detached narrative style that attempts omniscience and "utter objectivity."²³ Baird also employs what Hill has called "mediated reportage"—the use of an objective narrator who reports from or through a "sustained subjective perspective" that is often metafictional in character.²⁴

Some aspects of Baird's use of reportage clearly serve to distinguish *Waste Heritage* from its more radical literary counterparts and to establish the author's claims to objectivity. Employing "mediated reportage," the novel's third-person narrator reflects on Baird's role as writer through the figure of Kenny Hughes, an unemployed teacher whose involvement in the strike inspires him to write a novel about the transient culture he has entered into. Though Hughes often mirrors Baird's role as author, the objectivity of his writing project is ultimately undermined in relation to *Waste Heritage*, which is consequently distinguished from "red" propaganda or radical reportage. The novel that Hughes claims to be writing, *Bloody Sore*, is a parody of the styles that were favoured in periodicals like *Masses*, which was published in the early 1930s by the CPC-affiliated Progressive Arts Club. Accordingly, a striker wonders if a book with a deliberately

22 Georg Lukàcs, *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), 45-75.

23 Colin Hill, *The Modern-Realist Movement in English-Canadian Fiction, 1919-1950* (PhD diss., McGill University, 2003), 260-61.

24 *Ibid.*, 263.

provocative title like *Bloody Sore* “ain’t quite nice to have around the house” (207). By contrast, Baird’s restrained but powerful title, *Waste Heritage*, speaks for the quality and tone of her novel. The publishing history of the novel begins to assert its importance with relation to the title. Macmillan rejected Baird’s own somewhat sensational title—*Sidown, Brother, Sidown!*—as too “strong.”²⁵ Archival records show that Baird also offered the title *Wrath to Come*, but did not object when Bennett Cerf, the president of Random House in New York, declared that the title must be *Waste Heritage* (which Baird and Hugh Eayrs had initially suggested as a possibility).²⁶ This final title is both a reflection of the publishers’ desire for austerity and moderation, and Baird’s acquiescence is an indication of her willingness to trust their conception of her audience.

Yet Kenny Hughes is not simply a foil for the novel’s moderate politics; the way in which Hughes’s character assumes and absorbs Baird’s undercover role—the way that she cross-dresses *through* him—is significant in terms of the novel’s political ambivalence. *Waste Heritage* may mock Hughes’s “propagandistic” tendencies, but his presence also reveals Baird’s desire to narrow the social distance between her and the strikers and to establish solidarity with them. That Baird was often thwarted in this pursuit is made clear by the fact that she can only achieve the desired proximity to the strikers through a surrogate character. While Hughes is often successful at narrowing the class divide between himself and the other strikers, Baird did not achieve this success so readily.

Recourse to Baird’s unpublished letters and published articles demonstrates the difficult position she was negotiating. Her uneasy position as an outsider—a middle-class woman—is carefully documented in her comments on the research she undertook to write the novel. After *Waste Heritage* was published, Baird claimed (with some false modesty, perhaps) that writing it was “not a woman’s job, I knew nothing about that side of life.”²⁷ In the second part of a 1973 article on *Waste Heritage*, Baird described the research methods that she used to gain intimate access to the world of the strike. She convinced her family doctor, who was also Victoria’s City Medical

25 Irene Baird, “Sidown, Brother ‘Sidown,’” *The C.C. Free Press* (July 16, 1973): 6.

26 Bennett Cerf, telegram, 8 August 1939, Archival B41, file 1, Random House Fonds. Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York City.

27 Baird to Cerf, 9 December 1939, Archival B93, file 2. Random House Fonds.

Officer, to let her accompany him on his inspections of the buildings where the striking men were housed. Like many contemporary women journalists, Baird transgressed gender norms during her undercover work for the novel. For example, she says that her family doctor was "scandalised" at her strategy for observing the strike firsthand, and one would assume that many middle-class readers would have shared his opinion about the proper place for a wife and mother.²⁸ Her 1976 reflection on her undercover work for the novel articulated similar issues: "(Needless to say none of my friends and family had any idea what I was up to.) My family practically gave me up; I think they feared I should be picked up with the jobless and tossed into jail."²⁹ This contradictory statement—her family did not know what she was doing yet they practically gave her up—suggests Baird's persistent lack of comfort with the relation between her divergent roles as undercover writer and homemaker. That she should be equated with and indeed mistaken for one of the transients is a source of humour, but it also reveals that Baird and those in her social class thought it ludicrous that she could be so misapprehended, which further emphasizes her difference from the strikers.

Baird and her New York agent, Marion Saunders, were obviously anticipating criticism of Baird's "unfeminine" audacity. Saunders clearly felt the need to deflect potential negative responses when she was attempting to secure a contract with Random House in 1939. In her sales pitch, she defensively argued that Baird did not need to adopt a male pseudonym for *Waste Heritage* because her cross-dressing style of writing might prove titillating for readers: "With the exception of a few pages *Waste Heritage* has all the earmarks of masculine writing. It is a marvel to find a sensitive woman writer able to produce a strong meaty story of this type."³⁰ Echoing Saunders's statement, columnist Bruce Hutchison's laudatory 1939 review of *Waste Heritage* in the *Victoria Daily Times* playfully questioned how "such a charming little lady" learned "so many bad words." Hutchison's review indicates that, while Saunders was right about the titillation of gender transgression, Baird was nonetheless risking great censure.³¹

28 Irene Baird, "The Summer of '39 (Part 2). Sidown, Brother, Sidown," *The C.C. Free Press* (July 23, 1973): 6.

29 Baird, "Sidown, Brothers," 84.

30 Marion Saunders to Bob Haas, 26 May 1939, Archival B1, file 1, Random House Fonds.

31 Bruce Hutchison, "Loose Ends," review of *Waste Heritage*, by Irene Baird, *Victoria Daily Times* (December 30, 1939). Carole Gerson's analysis of Baird's

The role of Kenny Hughes can therefore be thought of as a manifestation and deflection of Baird's understandable anxiety about her project: Hughes, like Baird, may be crossing class lines, but this is diffused by the fact that he shares a gender with the strikers and can witness and evaluate the actions of the cursing, poorly educated, and physically unkempt men around him without impropriety. While the character of Hughes enables Baird to get much closer to the objects of representation—the strikers—the novel paradoxically thematizes the difficulty of this endeavour, as if reflecting on the challenges Baird faced. Hughes is described as working from a vantage point that will make him an “insider,” but this perspective is only achieved with great physical discomfort and sacrifice. Yet the narrator's attention to the privations Hughes experiences also authenticates his undertaking, and, by extension, Baird's.

Analyzing Baird's negotiations with her Canadian and American publishers augments my contention that her experience of authorship was politically ambivalent. Archival evidence points to the ways that Baird's publishers were both attracted to and wary of the novel's controversial subject—a subject that was treated almost exclusively by leftist periodicals (rather than novels by mainstream publishers) during the Depression in Canada. In a letter to Random House in New York, Macmillan Canada's president Hugh Eayrs noted the fact that Lippincott, the house that published Baird's first novel, the pastoral romance *John* (1937), in both Canada and the United States, felt that *Waste Heritage* was “far too strong, in its language” and, therefore, “doesn't want to take up the Canadian end.” Eayrs offered a terse and somewhat inscrutable reason for going ahead with the “Canadian end”: “Personally, I do.”³² However, records indicate that Macmillan Canada were initially cautious about the novel because editors were concerned about the possibility of anti-state sedition. In his initial reader's report, editor Carl Eayrs stated

gender in relation to the adjudication of the 1939 Governor General's award for fiction indicates the masculinist literary environment in which Baird wrote. Using archival evidence, Gerson posits that *Waste Heritage* was “denied” the award because of a male-dominated “literary power network, whose operations were governed at least as much by personal acquaintance as by aesthetic judgment.” Carole Gerson, “The Canon Between the Wars: Field-Notes of a Feminist Archaeologist,” in *Canadian Canons. Essays in Literary Value*, ed. Robert Lecker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 52.

32 Hugh Eayrs to Bob Haas, 1 June 1939, Archival B2, file 1, Random House Fonds.

somewhat warily that Baird's manuscript was powerful enough to impact the impending federal election:

What I'm getting at is that if this is published before the election it can become a powerful weapon in the hands of Manion and the Conservative party. I'm not exaggerating when I say that. Even if the novel only reflected on the B.C. Government, whi[c]h is Liberal, it would help the Tories, but it is also a reflection of the Federal Government. Whether you or I think they could have done anything is beside the point. That novel is dynamite, becausee [sic] it's so powerful and because it portrays conditions so truthfully. A good many people are going to ask, after reading it, why King allows a condition to exist where the unemployed and the youth of the country appear to have no future.³³

Carl Eayrs avoided calling Baird's novel seditious, but his tone is clearly cautionary.

Hugh Eayrs must have heeded his brother Carl's warning because the 1939 contract that he offered to Baird included a libel clause that the agent found unusual. Baird's agent Marion Saunders expressed concern and stated the necessity of protecting the author, whom she represented as entirely willing to accept editorial changes: "I also hope that you will watch over any statement or reference to an existing condition in this novel of Canadian sit-down strikes, as the author is quite inexperienced in such matters and has no money for libel suits."³⁴ Significantly, Kenny Hughes also frets about the potentially controversial character of the narrative he is creating: "'This is going to be a hard book to write, far harder than I figgered on,' he said. 'Quite apart from the actual writing and the entire absence of plot, there are a lot of technical difficulties. One is keeping clear of anything that might border on libel'" (206). Baird's willingness to accept changes indicates a desire to distinguish *Waste Heritage* from radical works of art, such as *Eight Men Speak*, that were censored during the 1930s, but it also shows how fearful she might have been of jeopardizing her emerging and fragile literary career.³⁵ In response to Saunders's

33 Carl Eayrs to Hugh Eayrs, 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.

34 Marion Saunders to Hugh Eayrs, 2 June 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.

35 State censorship of supposedly seditious literature was not uncommon during the two World Wars or during the interwar period in Canada. During the Depression, the state frequently attempted to monitor and restrict access to Communist art. As E. Cecil-Smith notes in his foreword to the agitprop play

letter, Eayrs agreed to have the novel combed “for any possibility of libel.”³⁶ Carl Eayrs’s second report was much less concerned about the potential political impact of the novel and was reassuring in tone. He concluded that although the novel was “critical of the Government,” it was not aimed “at undermining constitutional authority” and was, in fact, “anti-Red.”³⁷ It could, therefore, be published without significant changes.

The novel’s “redness” was also a concern for Random House in New York, a publishing house that was both leery of a “warmed-over Steinbeck” and convinced that strike novels did not sell well in the United States, “especially when they are about sit-down strikes—a labor device that is now illegal in the United States.”³⁸ Indeed, prior to finalizing the agreement to publish *Waste Heritage*, Bennett Cerf, the president of Random House in New York, asked Baird to make a case for the originality of her character Eddy, who, as I have discussed, bears a strong resemblance to Steinbeck’s Lennie.³⁹ Moreover, as mentioned above, Cerf firmly rejected Baird’s suggested title for her novel, *Wrath to Come*; the implication is that the title was too evocative of Steinbeck’s controversial *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was published in 1939 and consequently censored in cities and counties across the United States.⁴⁰ As a result of their misgivings,

Eight Men Speak, for example, the play was first performed by the Workers’ Theatre Movement in Toronto in 1933 before the provincial government of Ontario banned further performances and threatened the licences of theatres who dared to show the play. E. Cecil-Smith, “Foreword,” in *Eight Men Speak and Other Plays*, ed. Richard Wright and Robin Endres (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976), 22–24.

- 36 Marion Saunders to Hugh Eayrs, 9 June 1939, First Accrual, Authors’ Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.
- 37 Carl Eayrs to Hugh Eayrs, 1939, First Accrual, Authors’ Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.
- 38 Bob Haas to Hugh Eayrs, 30 June 1939, Archival B5, file 1, Random House Fonds.
- 39 Marion Saunders to Bennett Cerf, 5 July 1939, Archival B11, file 1, Random House Fonds.
- 40 Although controversial, *The Grapes of Wrath* was a bestseller in the United States: initially published in April, 1939, it was in its seventh printing by August, 1939. Marci Lingo, “Forbidden Fruit: The Banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* in the Kern County Library,” *Libraries & Culture* 38.4 (October 2003): 358. For a discussion of the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Kern County, California, see Lingo’s full article. Baird’s correspondence to Bennett Cerf, in particular, indicates that in 1939 she was reading and enjoying modern authors like Steinbeck, Dos Passos, and Clifford Odets.

Random House chose to buy the printed sheets for *Waste Heritage* from Macmillan rather than producing their own edition, and indicated that the novel would not likely sell more than one thousand copies in the United States.⁴¹ Baird nevertheless defended her novel to Cerf: "cash or no cash I could not have resisted taking a crack at the subject as the stuff was going on all round me and I got close enough to feel it deeply."⁴²

Yet, in her correspondence with Cerf, Baird clearly distinguished her novel from works like Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Indeed, she adamantly rejected the idea that hers was a "strike novel": "The strike is incidental, it is the men themselves and the irony of their status that is the substance of the story."⁴³ The author repeated her defence in her description of *Waste Heritage* for the Macmillan sales catalogue, claiming that "although the book deals with the sit-down it is not primarily a strike novel."⁴⁴ Moreover, Baird's proposals for future novels, which she sent to Cerf throughout 1939, indicate that she took his advice about marketability to heart. Baird sent these proposals to Cerf so that he could vet her application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, which she asked him to support. Although her first proposal to Cerf was for a "novel of heavy industry using Pittsburgh as a base," she dismissed this idea herself and instead suggested a novel set in California that would attract war-weary readers "by providing a brief pause for minds tense and tired by news of perpetual crisis, reminding them incidentally that there still remains one country where life can be lived in freedom, security and peace."⁴⁵ Cerf responded that this was fine,

41 Ibid. Random House had done the exact opposite with a more marketable Canadian author, Morley Callaghan. *They Shall Inherit the Earth* and *Now That April's Here* had both been printed by Random House in New York and sold to Macmillan Canada. Random House estimated the sales of *Waste Heritage* correctly: by January, 1940, the novel had not sold more than six hundred copies in the United States, and Random House never ordered more than the initial one thousand and forty copies that it received in 1939. Bennett Cerf to Baird, 18 January 1940, Archival B96, file 2, Random House Fonds; Hugh Eayrs to Bennett Cerf, 7 October 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.

42 Baird to Bennett Cerf, 11 July 1939, Archival B15, file 1, Random House Fonds.

43 Ibid.

44 Baird to Macmillan, 10 July 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.

45 Baird to Bennett Cerf, 5 October 1939, Archival B53, file 2, Random House Fonds.

but cautioned that the “labor angle” had been covered by Steinbeck’s California novels.⁴⁶ Later, he told her that she should put some of her characteristic humour in her next novel: “The world definitely does not want to be improved; it wants to be amused. Let’s give the boys and girls what they want!”⁴⁷ Cerf is clearly urging Baird to write a less politically incendiary and more easily marketable novel, but his comments also reflect the fact that the Depression-era social protest that had garnered *The Grapes of Wrath* so much public attention in North America was, by late 1939, largely overshadowed by the war in Europe. It is therefore somewhat surprising that the description on the dust jacket of Random House’s copies invited readers to compare Baird to Steinbeck.⁴⁸ Despite his obvious reservations about political “redness,” Cerf was certainly aware of and willing to capitalize on Steinbeck’s popularity, but rightly predicted that Steinbeck’s style of social protest would be less marketable in a wartime climate.

The onset of war created other palpable effects for *Waste Heritage*. Baird’s commitment to her novel was further tested in late 1939, when, in the early days of Canada’s involvement in WWII, *Waste Heritage* was subjected to the state censorship of the Defence of Canada Regulations. After the pages for Random House had been printed but before the novel was released in the United States or Canada, Hugh Eayrs wrote a panicked letter to Baird, in which he informed her that he would have to excise sections of the novel that were likely to be interpreted as seditious in light of the Defence of Canada Regulations, which were made public in September of 1939.⁴⁹ He suggested three (fairly minor) changes, all of which appear in the Canadian text and which remove any reference to the hypocrisy

46 Bennett Cerf to Baird, 9 October 1939, Archival B56, file 2, Random House Fonds.

47 Bennett Cerf to Baird, 16 November 1939, Archival B73, file 2, Random House Fonds.

48 Hugh Eayrs to Bennett Cerf, 14 September 1939, Archival B47, file 2, Random House Fonds. Eayrs commented on the parallel in his letter to Cerf, but I have not been able to locate any extant dust jackets.

49 Hugh Eayrs to Baird, 6 November 1939, First Accrual, Authors’ Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds. The regulations, which acted as supplements to the existing War Measures Act, barred the publication of material likely to cause disaffection with the war effort, to influence relations among countries involved in the war, or to prejudice military recruitment. Standing Interdepartmental Committee on Emergency Legislation, *Defence of Canada Regulations* (Ottawa: J.A. Patenaude, 1939), 44.

of the government's recruitment efforts.⁵⁰ For example, on pages six and seven of the original text that was published in the United States, Matt Striker's friend Harry comments that it "seems like the country's waitin' for Hitler to give you boys a job so you can all be heroes overnight." Matt replies: "Sure, an, get blown to hell an' damnation in the morning! That's one job I don't take. If we was a bunch of beef cattle at least we'd get gov'ment grading." In the altered Canadian text, Harry avoids referring to Hitler as a potential employer: "Seems like the country's waitin' to get a real scrap on its hands so all you guys can be heroes overnight." Matt's response is much less militant: "Yeah? An' where do we wake up the next mornin'? I asked guys that an' they just look at me. Maybe I didn't ask the right guys." Baird's social critique is, therefore, significantly softened in the Canadian text.

Although the archival evidence shows that Baird was willing to make changes, she did not, in any case, have much choice. As Hugh Eayrs wrote to Bennett Cerf at Random House, changes had to occur in the Canadian text due to "a private tip from the highest possible circles that it was either that or the book wouldn't come out."⁵¹ Yet Baird's communication with Bennett Cerf about the issue of state censorship reveals that she was not bothered by the intervention; indeed, she saw a potential marketing opportunity:

Random House will be bringing out the "unexpurgated" version. "Unexpurgated" is a such a grand sales word. Want to make something out of it? The "reactionaries" have reacted and my apologies to your blurb man. To my knowledge this is the first time in war or peace that a Canadian book has been censored. That makes history two ways; it is the first labor novel to come out on this side of the line and the first to get in the official hair. So what does that make us? . . . As a loyal British subject I would not want to do anything to dis-help [sic] Canada win the war, but

⁵⁰ All the changes to the Canadian text were made such that no additional lines and very few additional letters were added to the text. The pagination of the two is therefore the same. For a discussion and analysis of the exact changes that were made to the Canadian *Waste Heritage*, see Jody Mason, "State Censorship and the Reconsideration of Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage*," *Canadian Literature* 191 (Winter 2006): 192-95.

⁵¹ Hugh Eayrs to Bennett Cerf, 21 November 1939, First Accrual, Authors' Series, Part I, box 71, file 4, Macmillan Fonds.

as a hard-working writer dependent on royalties I hope we raise
a beautiful stink.⁵²

Baird's capitulation to editorial decisions and publishers' concerns might shed some light on the novel's careful negotiation of sympathy with and control of the strikers. Yet this correspondence also reveals that she was not a passive observer of the novel's fate or its meaning for political culture. Indeed, she was an avid correspondent of Cerf's, and she used her letters to interpret *Waste Heritage* for the publisher, despite the fact that many of her suggestions for the novel were ignored or solicitously declined by Cerf.⁵³

As I have tried to demonstrate, the question of Baird's commitment to the political causes of transients' rights and a national system of Unemployment Insurance cannot be resolved through a close reading of the novel alone. I hope that my attention to the archival documents of Baird's publishers, Macmillan Canada and Random House, will allow a forgotten novel and a forgotten writer to widen our sense of leftist literary activity in the interwar period in Canada to include more women's writing and to accommodate theorizations of commitment that can account not only for class, but for gender, ethnicity, and the historically material production of literature, as well.

SOMMAIRE

Le roman d'Irene Baird intitulé *Waste Heritage* (1939) qui se déroule durant les années de la crise économique a suscité récemment un regain d'intérêt au Canada. Alors que la critique littéraire de l'époque présentait cette œuvre comme étant un exemple classique de littérature prolétarienne au Canada, l'analyse que réalise Mason des différentes

52 Baird to Bennett Cerf, 13 November 1939, Archival B71, file 2, Random House Fonds. Baird was somewhat mistaken, as she later admitted to Cerf. *Waste Heritage* was not being targeted specifically; the Defence of Canada Regulations applied broadly to all published materials.

53 For example, Baird supported Cerf's campaign to have the novel's title changed from *Plow These Men Under* (one of Baird's suggestions) to *Waste Heritage*. However, as mentioned briefly above, she changed her mind in August of 1939, and wrote an urgent letter and telegram to Cerf, imploring him to consider a new suggestion, *Wrath to Come*. Cerf's reply to the telegram is a firm "no": "The final title for the book, then, is *Waste Heritage*." Bennett Cerf, telegram, 8 August, 1939, Archival B41, file 1, Random House Fonds.

étapes qui ont jalonné l'édition de ce roman et de la censure en vigueur sous la loi des mesures de guerre, permet de prendre en compte l'aspect ambivalent de l'engagement politique de l'auteur.