

First Person Feminine: Magaret Day Surrey

By Patricia Whitney

The Surrey house on Grosvenor Avenue, just above Sherbrooke, stands in the less fashionable part of Westmount. The Surreys don't live there any more. In April 1990 Philip died and his wife chose to follow him. The house where they had lived, Margaret writing and reading and Philip drinking, and painting his wonderful pictures, was cleared out by a kindly nephew and put on the market for sale.

The purpose of this short tribute is to celebrate the life of Margaret Day Surrey while her memory is fresh still. I have written the tribute for three reasons: because the impact of Margaret's personality was very great; because, while the stories of the men associated with *Preview* have been told, her story has been ignored; and because she, and women like her, represent the crone in our literary history. The crone is a source of wisdom and power for all women and for the men who will hear her voice.

I met Margaret in June 1989. I was doing research on Patrick Anderson and thought she could tell me things about him and the start-up of *Preview*, in 1942, that I didn't already know. She could and she did, but the encounter with this old and loving woman turned out to be the real satisfaction of the day we spent together.¹

Although she was over eighty, Margaret looked that day like a fit woman in her sixties. Her movements were quick and neat, her cultivated voice vibrant and full of humour. She sat in an easy chair by a tall window facing the street. She had just risen from the dining-room table, where I had interrupted her sorting of a fat file of letters from her close friend, Mavis Gallant. Otherwise she was occupied with typing her husband's story, the life of a painter.

Margaret was, like so many interesting Canadians, rather shy about speaking of herself. She was ready to address Philip's work, showing-off a landscape with three women: Marian Roberts (during the 1940s wife to the distinguished painter, Goodridge Roberts), Jeanne Rheume, the Quebec painter, and Margaret herself. This visual image seemed to free her memory and she

seated herself again by the window and began to talk.

Margaret Day had an idyllic childhood, with a mother who devoted herself to her son and daughters — a way of life Margaret herself refused to repeat — but for all that no less appreciative of her mother's sacrifice. In 1933, as a young woman of twenty-four, her father provided an allowance that permitted her to establish herself in London to study voice at the Royal College of Music. It was "absolute heaven" in London, "a paradise, so quiet and beautiful" in spite of the Depression. Within six months, however, Margaret's father died and there was no money to provide for cultured daughters in England.

Margaret returned to Montreal to find "everything gone." She was fortunate to have two uncles on the Montreal Protestant schoolboard and she secured a teaching post almost at once.

It was a difficult time for the young woman. Her school was in a slum, and the suffering of the children dreadful. Tuberculosis swept through her family, killing her brother Stanley and sending her sister to the sanatorium at Ste-Agathe, north of Montreal. Margaret felt near nervous collapse herself as she and her mother hung on through the Depression in Montreal.

Deeply moved by the plight of her pupils, distraught over events in Germany, disgusted by the callous treatment of the unemployed in Canada, and bitterly unhappy over her personal sorrows, the idealistic young woman began to read Marxist literature. "You know," Margaret said, "it comforted me; it made me feel that I wasn't important, made me feel I didn't matter, made me feel that my private affairs weren't important at all . . . maybe there was somewhere a good country, somewhere where things were being done."

So she went to Russia. A friend, Molly by name, who was an Englishwoman of private means, wrote from Britain to suggest that she sponsor Margaret's voyage to utopia. Margaret, who was putting it about Montreal that she was a Communist (she wasn't) decided that if she were to refuse Molly's offer of a \$500.00 loan for the journey, she would "have to wait til ninety to go." She accepted and set sail that summer for England en route, by Soviet ship from Southampton, to Leningrad.

The workers' paradise was not quite what the young Montreal Marxist expected. A week in Leningrad, by train to Moscow, and then she found herself touring a factory. "What," she asked herself,

"am I doing here? I've never been near a factory in Canada!"

Margaret was disenchanted with the Soviet Union, but not with Marxist theory. She returned to her teaching job in Montreal and joined a study group. Of course, Norman Bethune was a hero to these Canadian Marxists for his radically progressive ideas about socialized medicine; the young Margaret's interest was doubly piqued when she read in the newspaper, in 1935, that he was to speak, in Montreal, about his recent trip to Russia. Not only was Bethune a champion of the poor, he had treated Margaret's tubercular brother, Stanley, when he had been a patient at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The famous Dr. Edward Archibald had been head of thoracic surgery and Bethune was on his staff at the time.

"I fell in love with him in five minutes flat," Margaret recalled. Later she was to realize, after extensive psychoanalysis, that Bethune bore a significant resemblance to her father, not only in appearance, but in his charming manner. Bethune said that he had been to Russia to stand in the street and watch to see if people looked happy.² Such insouciance sealed Margaret's fate; she was determined to become Bethune's lover. She found that men her own age left her "bored stiff"; Bethune was forty-six, more than twenty years Margaret's senior. As significant to the idealistic young woman, he became a member of the Communist Party in 1936.

Back in her bedroom on the night of their meeting, Margaret wrote a letter to Bethune. She was still a virgin and "sick of it" besides. She asked Bethune if he would "go out" with her just once. Before tucking the letter in her bureau drawer to cool off, she added: "I trust to your honour as a gentleman to destroy this letter at once."

The next day at school, Margaret was seized with terror that her mother, on some foray into her dresser drawers on a tidying mission, would come across the letter. In spite of a monthly salary of only \$72.00, \$50.00 of which went to her mother for board and room, Margaret sped home by taxi at her lunch hour to destroy the evidence of her passion.

But fate was to have a hand, and one evening, to Margaret's delighted surprise, Dr. Norman Bethune was special guest at her Marxist study group. Margaret talked with him about Stanley — Bethune had kindly brought the young man books while he was recovering from the operation Bethune had performed — and Bethune learned that Margaret's brother had died. When Margaret

was getting her coat to leave, Bethune offered to drive her home.

"I was looking for trouble," Margaret said, "and I found it." They arrived at Bethune's apartment at one o'clock in the morning and Margaret stayed the night. She told him the story of the letter; he replied, "Why didn't you send it? We've wasted the past three months." Margaret was taken aback: "My dream was only once. I wasn't aiming higher than that."

The ensuing affair was stormy. He wanted to marry Margaret and have a child, but the Spanish Civil War was the nightmarish background to their plans. Moreover, as blind as she was with passion, Margaret could see that Norman Bethune was a dangerous man: "He was a destroyer, he was not right in his mind, he was an alcoholic, twice divorced. I have seen him fall drunk on the bed at three a.m. when he had to operate at nine that morning."

His obsession was to go to Spain. Margaret became pregnant and refused, under the circumstances, to carry their child. Fearful of abortionists, Bethune performed the operation on his lover himself. Margaret felt only relief. He left for Spain in October of 1936.

After his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, Bethune returned to Montreal in the spring of 1937, sunken further into a reckless alcoholism. Margaret felt he courted death, one night driving directly into a tree and nearly killing both of them. She knew then, as she told her sister, that he wouldn't "see fifty years of age." (In fact Bethune died in China in at the age of forty-nine.)

In spite of a triumphal return to Canada — marching bands in Toronto, a thousand cheering his return to Windsor Station in Montreal where he was carried "shoulder-high"³ — he told her that he had "burnt all my bridges, no hospital will touch me. The Party wants to send me to China." He began to cry, saying in his despair, "I'm too old . . . I have no money, nothing." Margaret felt she knew, as did Bethune himself, that he would die in China. Neither realized that it would be a glorious hero's death.⁴

In January 1938, just as Bethune was sailing for China from the port of Vancouver, Margaret met Philip Surrey. She told him of her love affair with Bethune, they grew to love one another and in January of 1939 they married. They moved in the literary and artistic worlds of Montreal, becoming close friends of F.R. Scott and his wife, Marian Dale Scott, like Philip a painter but also

Margaret's life-long friend. On Sunday afternoons the Surreys attended tea parties at the home of the painter John Lyman and his wife Corrine. There, in November 1940, they met Patrick and Peggy Anderson. Peggy painted under her maiden name of Marguerite Doernbach, and was a pretty American girl who seemed to Margaret to be like "Alice in Wonderland" with her full-skirted dresses and shining hair. Patrick was "very elegant, very much the Oxford young man and a poet." The Andersons were a "delightful pair" and Margaret thought at once that they must meet the Scotts.

Scott, ever the Anglophile in spite of his intense patriotism, was taken at once with Anderson, who had arrived in Montreal via New York where he had completed his M.A. thesis on "John Wilkes and the American Revolution" at Columbia. As an undergraduate, Anderson had been President of the Union at Oxford, travelled widely in Europe and the United States, and had recently taken up a post as the English master at Selwyn House School. He was earning a miserable salary, but cared for little else besides pocket money for drinks, tea and cigarettes; but above all, he craved an informed audience for his poetry.

Scott supplied that audience, although Louis Dudek, another taste-maker on the Montreal poetry scene in the 1940s, was too devoted to the American school represented by William Carlos Williams to find the young Englishman's writing congenial. Anderson appeared to the *First Statement* group — Dudek, John Sutherland and Irving Layton — as the effete expatriate who found in Canada both a refuge from war (Anderson was morbidly, and by his own admission, neurotically frightened of war) and a clean white page for his writing.

Their second Christmas in Canada, the Andersons made presents to friends of their own little magazine, "The Andersons". Peggy had typed it and contributed a pencil-sketch nude of Patrick; he wrote the content and ran off the copies at school.⁵

About this time — early winter 1942 — Margaret, now a close friend of both Andersons, decided that she would "like to do some writing." Margaret recalled the birth of *Preview* (1942-45), the magazine that would adopt an anti-fascist editorial position and publish the most important poetry in English of the war years in Canada:

So Frank and Patrick and I decided to start a little magazine . . . it ended up with Bruce Ruddick and Neufville Shaw and P.K. Page. Frank loved little

magazines, he was full of enthusiasm, he loved to start things. I realized that after we'd been meeting for about six weeks that I hated groups. I'm not the little mag type.

In fact, Patrick Anderson became the force that propelled *Preview*.⁶ But it was Margaret Day Surrey who planted the seed and nourished the plant. She remained a loyal friend, introducing the Andersons to a widening circle of literary friends, presenting Patrick to Miguel Prados, an expatriate Spanish psychiatrist, in therapy with whom Patrick came to accept his homosexuality. Margaret continued to lend Patrick books, aspirins for his headaches, the use of her telephone (the Andersons were too poor to have one of their own) and the welcome of her own small apartment where Philip was trying to paint in the cramped livingroom.

Margaret did not, however, share the Andersons' enthusiasm for the Labour Progressive Party. After the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, Margaret quickly grew out of sympathy with Marxism.

Margaret lived with Philip in the house on Grosvenor for nearly fifty years. She told me that she realized that if her husband were to be able to paint, given his "artistic temperament" and his chronic drinking, then she must subsume her ego to his and create for him the kind of oasis of calm where his talent would emerge. She did this, giving up her own dreams of writing. The recurrent sieges of depression she suffered were the price she paid for stifling her own creative nature. Evidently, she felt that Philip's success was the vindication of her decision. Such a judgment seems bizarre in the contemporary social climate, but Margaret Day Surrey was born and nurtured in the patriarchal age. Given her times and circumstances, she acted with sensitivity and love.

When the definitive story of *Preview* and the dynamics of English poetry in Montreal during the war years is written, Margaret Day Surrey will be remembered as a talented and gracious instigator of that crucial little magazine.

Notes

1. The reminiscences that here comprise Margaret Day Surrey's story were conveyed to me by her in an interview taped at her home in Westmount on 1 June 1989, in several telephone interviews and in correspondence between us. She wished,

after her own death and that of her husband, that her story be told. She did not have an inflated idea of her own importance in literary history, but neither was she foolishly modest. [\[back\]](#)

2. Roderick Stewart quotes Bethune as saying: "I went to Russia primarily to look at the Russians, and secondarily to see what they were doing about eradicating one of the most easily eradicable of all contagious diseases — tuberculosis." See Stewart's *Bethune* (Toronto: Paperjacks, 1988) 72. [\[back\]](#)
3. Stewart 108. [\[back\]](#)
4. In spite of Bethune's private despair and worsening alcoholism, his public persona remained strong as he campaigned for funds and organized in Canada and in New York for his journey to China. Before he left, he wrote to Marian Dale Scott "I feel so happy & gay now. Happier than since I left Spain" (Stewart 119). [\[back\]](#)
5. Only one issue of "The Andersons" ever appeared; its actual date of publication was April 1941. For a full discussion of Patrick and Marguerite Anderson see my "From Oxford to Montreal: Patrick Anderson's Political Development" (26-48) and "*En Masse*: An Introduction and an Index" (76-91) in *Canadian Poetry* 16 (Fall/Winter, 1986). [\[back\]](#)
6. For an interesting record of a discussion among the founders of *Preview*, see "Four of the Former *Preview* Editors: A Discussion" in D.M.R. Bentley and Michael Gnarowski (ed.) "Three Documents from F.R. Scott's Personal Papers" in *Canadian Poetry* 4 (Spring/Summer, 1979): 93-119. Also helpful is Don Precosky's "*Preview*: An Introduction and Index" in *Canadian Poetry* 6 (Spring/Summer, 1981): 74-86. Elsie Pomeroy and Sir Charles G.D. Roberts [\[back\]](#)