

## An Experimental Documentary: Making a Case for Baird's Modernism

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### ABSTRACT

The refutation and the obliteration of the modernist era in Canadian literature by Robert Kroetsch and reasserted by Glen Willmott makes it imperative to look at highly experimental literary works in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada. The purpose of this paper, thus is to make a case for the inclusion Irene Bird's *Waste Heritage* in the repertoire of modernist works in North America. The various criticism of Canadian literature as not having a modernist era needs to be debunked. The false assertion that Canadian literature moved straight from the Victorian era to a postmodernist face is probably due to the difficulty of defining what modernism is. The evolution and the expansion of the term modernism makes it imperative for one to reappraise the creative works of Irene Bird (*Waste Heritage*) and Sheila Watson (*Double Hook*) as modernist. An attempt to include *Waste Heritage* in the new modernist discourse of global literature by looking at the experimental way by which Baird used documentary modernism. The sustainability of a growing modern society vis-à-vis modernism, and the resistance of capitalism in Baird's narrative would be used to make a case for Baird's modernism.

In many ways, Irene Baird's 1939 classic *Waste Heritage* is beyond fiction. Events in the novel occurred in Vancouver and Victoria during the Depression era in the 30s. The sit-downs that occurred in this era of great suffering were significant in Canadian history. The challenges faced by a group of unemployed people who found it difficult to secure a job and a decent life evoked some emotions amongst sympathizers. The leftist communist also used this opportunity to advocate for their socialist ideology. One can hardly argue that Baird was politically neutral, despite her objective documentation of the travails of the sit-downers. Her experimental style of social documentary is something worth mentioning, as she gave a voice to the voiceless. Hill notes that "Few if any early twentieth-century Canadian novelist match Baird's stylistic rigor" (Hill ix). Her singular plot shows the seriousness and the urgency of her documentation. Published just before the calamitous World War II, *Waste Heritage* did not get the kind of reception it should have received. With the continuing expansion of the term modernism, an inclusion of social commentaries that capture the experience of the unemployed during the Depression era is necessary. The various criticism of Canadian literature as not having a modernist era needs to be debunked. The false assertion that Canadian literature moved straight from the Victorian era to a postmodernist face is probably due to the difficulty of defining what modernism

is. The obliteration of Canadian modernist fiction by Robert Kroetsch—"Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern (1) — and reasserted by Glen Willmott—"a link between Canadian and modernist works is lacking" (5) — needs to be put aside now. The term modernism keeps evolving over the years. It seems to encompass our whole modern experience. "Modernism is still ongoing and can't be reduced to a simple definition" (Mao and Walkowitz 737). We can't also restrict it to a myopic view. An attempt will be made here to support the inclusion of *Waste Heritage* in the new modernist discourse of global literature by looking at the experimental way by which Baird used documentary modernism. The sustainability of a growing modern society vis-à-vis modernism, and the resistance of capitalism in Baird's book would be used to make a case for Baird's modernism. Willmott asserts that: "Canadian modernism has not been examined through the lenses of modernist and international critical theories" (6). With the growing expansion of modernism and its increasing ambiguity, it is worthy to note that: "everything we write is a story told from a viewpoint, and the author expects his or her readers to share, or at least to understand, the values presented in the fiction" (Daniels 1). Values inherent in literature are not restricted to its didactic and intellectual function; literature also serve as a documentary container. The fictional representation of

happenings around us has been one way literature functioned until the likes of Steinbeck and Baird used a more journalistic and realistic approach to represent the negative effects of capitalism. Their representation is very serious and devoid of any form of excitement. The multiplicity of the interpretation of the term modernism encompasses the following: modern industrial societies, rapid growths, Freud's primacy of the unconscious mind, resistance to religion, experimental technique, self-consciousness and modern expression and technique. One might be tempted to categorize Baird's narrative as Prairie realist; a journalistic or documentary style of writing set on a Canadian prairie, which focuses on gritty details of life on the prairie, during the great depression: features are isolation, bareness, dust, despair, but what sets Baird apart is the urban setting of her plot. Despite arguments made by Altieri against the expansion of modernism (764), there is a great need to reconsider putting *Waste Heritage* in the archives of Canadian modernist fictions. Doing this would not be futile, and it would not be an over ambitious attempt to expand the modernist discourse; it would be commitment to service, and not self-indulging in pleasures. Candida Rifkind notes the comparison between *Waste Heritage* to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in one of its review

MacGillivray opens his "Letters in Canada: 1939" review of the novel by comparing it favorably to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Although he recognizes differences between the two works, MacGillivray urges Canadians who were impressed by Mr. Steinbeck's novel as a sociological document to read Mrs. Baird's also. (166)

This review supports my argument that *Waste Heritage* is a modernist work. If *Grapes of Wrath* is accepted as an American modernist fiction, one can make a case for Baird's modernism because of the similarity both novels. They are both socialist writings that reveal the travails of the middle class at one of the most perilous periods in history. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* was categorized as modernist because of the militant nature of Steinbeck, and his opposition to capitalism and the marginalization of the masses. Irene Baird exemplifies these qualities in her *Waste Heritage*, and even more. She was more daring, more of a dissident, more experimental, and more objective. She was an epitome of a true modernist.

### Documentary Modernism

Documentary modernism is an experimental form of naturalism that serves as a social commentary. Baird's audacious move to move close to the Sit-downers to take note of their daily activities and efforts can be compared Emile Zola's *Germinal*, who went into a mine to get daily information about their conditions before writing his classic novel. Candida Rifkind notes that "Baird's sources for her descriptions of the actual events she fictionalizes were her own notes obtained when she disguised herself as a nurse to tour the flop-houses the men occupied in Victoria" (172). Baird saw an urgent need to relate the plight of the Sit-downers in Victoria to the public. She is one of the people who empathized with the Sit-downers. She was willing to disguise herself as a nurse to make her objectivity undiluted. She had a clear view of some of the

character's plights. Her representation of the sit-downs gave account of police brutality, and hypocritical laws that disallowed the unemployed qualify for social benefits twice in a region, thus giving birth to transient men. These transient men moved from one region to the other looking for jobs and as a last result confronted the government by grouping together to stage sit-downs at major public buildings like the post office. There was public resentment on the part of people who believed these transient men deliberately refused to work. This kind of resentment was shown when a man asked Matt; "Don't you boys have nothing to do but sit around here and wait for a settlement" (Baird 50)? Another account was given of another man who questioned the sincerity of the sit-downers: "most of these men don't want to work. If they'd wanted work they'd have gone out and rustled for it, not waited around to be spoon-fed by the government" (Baird 76). Baird, on the other hand, informs us of the difficulty of maintaining full time jobs by some of these transient men. Some of the sit-downers had several seasonal jobs and found themselves right back in the labor market. Matt mentions his travails before finding a voice with the sit-downers: "Before this it was always lone-wolfin', fightin' up against something you couldn't see an' not gettin' any place. But it's different now, I got an organization behind me to back me up" (Baird 73).

The media are also one of the venues through which Baird documented the social injustice that went on during the depression era. Some media outlets during this period belonged exclusively to the government. The media did a bad job of not being sensitive enough to the struggles of the transient men. Their participation was somewhat political; they portrayed the sit-downs and riots as mere entertainment that people wait eagerly to hear about and discuss in cafes. There were reports in newspapers and on radio about the condition of the boys, but no suggestions of potential solutions on the social crises. Harry gave one of such insensitive and pitiful account of the information he got from the newspaper: "I read in the papers where you boys do not seem to be doin' so good" (Baird 197). The superficial impact of the media is also seen in one of the letters Harry wrote to Matt: "I hope the papers is all wet as always when they say you boys is not doin' so good but I picked up the same news over the radio so I guess the radio is not all wet too" (Baird 198). The insensitivity of the media was one of the motivating factors that made Baird write *Waste Heritage*. The war did not deter her from ensuring the novel was published on time. The hypocritical role played by the media can also be seen in the letter Matt sent to Hazel: "The newspapers stayed friendly and the general impression left on the town was good. There was talk of a big sympathetic walk-out of loggers and mine workers and a march on Gath solid sympathizers. The air buzzed with rumours, mostly wild, but outwardly the situation remained deadlocked" (Baird 121). The monopolized media is the only source of information about the sit-downers for most people, before *Waste Heritage* was published: "I guess you will be wondering what happened to me unless you read in the papers about our arriving" (Baird 130). The unimpressive journalism of the media propelled Baird's experimental journalism, documentary, and experimental naturalism.

### The Sustainability of a Growing Modern Society

The sustainability of a growing modern society was a great challenge in the early twentieth century. The invention of new technologies, and the creation and expansion of bigger cities rapidly changed a world that was previously rural. One of the first major negative consequences of advancement was the use of sophisticated weapons in the First World War. By the time Baird was done writing her novel, the world was ready to use nuclear bombs and high tech machine gun in World War II. The misery caused by the great depression did not only affect the unemployed. The confusion of the inner cities is captured by Baird: "massed bodies, swimming heads, urgent single hurrying ant-like units, formless confusing weaving into pattern, slow tightening into disciplined design. Spat of motorcycles, Shrill crowd voices, heavy surging of feet" (Baird 34). The hopelessness of Matt's dream of having a decent life is emphasized when Harry tells him he will never achieve his dreams: Matt says, "I'd like to live here all the time. I'd like to get me a job an' be some use to myself an' some use to someone else for a change. That's what I'd like to do, Harry. God," Matt said, staring straight at the closed-up fronts of the Wong on fish market, "I never saw a lovely place as this is!" (Baird 45). Harry's blunt response shocks Matt: "But you ain't never goin' to do any such thing" (Baird 45). This highlights the hopelessness in Matt's dreams. Climbing the social ladder in a chaotic environment was almost impossible in this era of depression and war. The rapid pace by which things go in the city vis-à-vis the slow response of government to new societal challenges logically determines the progression of the plot. Matt, who had this lofty dream owning a big house, could not even afford a clean shirt to take a girl out; he had to ask Charlie. As an adult, he could not even afford a place invite his date. When he took Hazel out on a date they had to make love in the bush: "Down there, down there in the trees where it's dry" (Baird 80). This sexual scene is also a characteristic of modernist fiction because sexual scenes were considered as taboos in literary works in the proceeding centuries. Matt confirmed his sexual activity to Charlie "I made out okay" (Baird 81). The sexual scene also shows the decadence in the society and the loss of moral values during chaos. The representation of a crude woman in the person of Hazel whose profession is typically that of a man shows women did not have it better.

### The Resistance of Capitalism

The entire plot of *Waste Heritage* is a resistance to capitalism. The sit-downers basically wanted to have social benefits. Baird resisted capitalism as a system of government. Their stance on capitalism is due to what they perceive as the evils of capitalism. Capitalism as a market based system where profit is the bottom line has several advantages, which includes maximization of the nation's resources, variety of products, and the possibility of those at the base to move up the social ladder. Moving up the social ladder is not always viable since the means of production are owned by a few. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a select few ensures

those at the base of the economy, the proletariat, remain perpetually in their place. It is due to the unequal distribution of resources that many advocate for communism a system of government where the government ensures equal distribution of the nation's resources. Baird's narration serves as a wake-up call to reevaluate the existing social and economic structures that are in place. During the era of depression, capitalism failed as a system of government as it could not even ensure that those that were hardworking had a meal on their table. The negative effect of capitalism in Baird's novel is highlighted when Eddy sees an advert for shoes: "Come around Saturday and get a pair of shoes for one cent" (Baird 252). In the hope of getting what he needed desperately, he went to the store to get shoes only to be told he couldn't get them because the prize of the shoes were more than the advertised prize. This also add to the fact *Waste Heritage* is a voice for the masses: "I read *Waste Heritage* as an example of documentary modernism that draws on satire and allegory, but it also has a history of being identified as either social or socialist realism and even as proletarian fiction" (Rifkind 174).

To better understand the resistance of Baird, *The Resistance Theory* by Paul de Man would help elucidate what constitute resisting a theory. This would help us understand the resistance to capitalism in *Waste Heritage*. This discourse by de Man was written at the request of a "Committee on Research Activities of the Modern Language Association as a contribution to a collective volume entitled "Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures" (de Man 101). In this essay, de Man's focus is on how theory should be treated as a practice and not a body of knowledge. He emphasizes that the goal of scholars should be on how to use theory properly. De Man believes resisting theory means theorizing, because a discourse that criticizes another theory in debunking its views brings about another theory itself, just as resisting capitalism means making a case for communism. Resistance theory then is a theory because it uses a frame to resist. Jody Mason reemphasizes how *Waste Heritage* is more on the communist side than the capitalist side:

Existing criticism of the novel is largely influenced by leftist nationalist Rubin 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. (Mason 143)

Baird's narration calls for labor reforms because the condition of workers is the pivot of a nation's economy. The novel serves as a social document that strongly pushes for the ideology of communism which they think would save the country from the manipulative hands of the capitalist.

The experimental nature of Baird accords *Waste Heritage* to be considered as a modernist novel. Her journalistic reporting of actual events in a documentary—like book is artistic beauty that is worth mentioning. Not even Steinbeck could boast of the rigor in the singularity of Baird's plot. The intermingling of events that show the difficulty of many keeping up with the advancement of the modern world is a modernistic feature that can be used to make a claim for

Baird's modernism. The resistance to existing structures like capitalism is another point that makes *Waste Heritage* modernist. Creating a voice for the oppressed in a capitalist society and resisting the government in a pseudo-objective documentary gives advocates of communism an important tool for battle in an era where capitalism crumbled. The communism that Baird advocate for would ensure that everybody only get what they need for survival irrespective of their level of education or talent. In *Waste Heritage*, the tragic conditions of some Canadians as narrated by Baird are directed to advocates of capitalism. The narration serve as a wake-up call to reevaluate the existing social and economic structures that are in place. During the era of Depression capitalism failed as a system of government. This system of government could not even assure those that are hardworking a decent life. Baird's narration would remain in the archives of Canadian modernist fictions, despite the obliteration of the modernist era in Canadian literature by some scholars.

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