

Remembering Montreal in the 40s A Conversation with Mavis Gallant

Linda Leith

Mavis Gallant is always reluctant to discuss her work, but was enthusiastic at the prospect of talking about Montreal during the 1940s. She had been born in the city in 1922, but she left Montreal when she was 10 years old. In 1941, she returned, and after working for the newly established National Film Board, she was hired as a reporter for the weekly newspaper, *The Standard*. Her career as a newspaperwoman lasted six years, until she moved to Europe in 1950 to devote herself to writing fiction. Her bilingualism, her career as a reporter, and her own curiosity and enthusiasm afforded her an unusually extensive familiarity with the worlds that Montreal was divided into during the 40s. I visited her at her apartment in Paris.

MG: I've been dying for someone to write about the 40s. It was unique.

LL: Well, let's begin there. You said in your letter that it was a wonderful, thrilling time... Perhaps you could tell me what you had in mind when you wrote that.

MG: Well, to me, perhaps because of the work I was doing — I loved being on a newspaper — it was very exciting. Montreal was a city in transition. All the old conservative dead weight was still there, and of course French Canada was still locked, but there were elements breaking out, and that was what was so exciting. I'm thinking of the painters particularly, and in a city that size you tend to all know one another, the bohemia. I wonder if I would have said that of any city, but I don't think so, because you couldn't have said it of Toronto in those days.

LL: I'm interested in your comment that Quebec was in transition already during the 40s. Many people who have written about Quebec date the transition only from 1959 and 1960, and very few talk about what was already beginning to happen before that.

MG: The war brought people into the city from the country, and there was a flow of refugees. I often talk to people who have forgotten this or who weren't aware of it, that the people who came from Central Europe, the anti-Nazi refugees, were the cream of a certain educated bourgeoisie. I learned more from them in just a few months to read and what to listen to and what to... I was fascinated by them.

You could feel the change in the forties, and even though of course there was the business with the Church and the restrictions, people did fuss and argue about it.

LL: So Montreal was thrilling in spite of the restrictions?

MG: In a story I have said that earlier even, in the 30s and 20s, there was a feeling in Montreal like that in Eastern European capitals where people who think alike stick together. I would bring that right up to the 40s, during the Duplessis era. People who were opposed did stick together. Everybody I knew was anti-Duplessis — French, English, anything else — that was the first thing. I don't know anyone who was in

Quebec who wasn't interested in politics — of course there are people who are never interested in anything, but I'm talking about newspaper people, people who tried to write, who lived in a certain world obviously. I'm not talking about people who sell insurance. You talked politics morning, noon and night, and it was local politics, and it just never stopped. I remember one newspaperman who went to England, on a scholarship I think, and when he came back he said, "You don't know how I missed it — just sitting there talking Quebec politics!" and everything that seemed to be happening in the outside world seemed to be mirrored, but in a tiny way.

LL: When did you begin to be interested in politics in Quebec?

MG: I would date this from 1944, when I started work on *The Standard*. But even before then, I was beginning to meet people. When you're young it's easy. I don't quite know how, but it's almost a genetic force that pushes you towards the kind of people that you're going to want to be with.

LL: In a story set in the 20s ["The Doctor"] you talk about the different tribes in Montreal and the different pockets of people. Was that still the same in the 40s?

MG: It was very separate in the newspaper world. How many of us could speak French? Jacqueline Sirois, me... I'm afraid I come to a halt there.

LL: To what extent were you interested in local politics before you begin work on *The Standard*? Do you remember the plebiscite in 1942? Did that interest you?

MG: Oh yes, very much. It was a very important event. It was a very difficult thing, because I could see both points of view. That's always been my trouble with Quebec.

There was a complete lack of interest among French-Canadians in the war. They hated the British. They had nothing to do with the war because it was being fought for the British. I was passionately anti-fascist, but to tell my French-Canadian friends I was anti-fascist... they gave me the same look Mordecai Richler gave me when I said Montreal was a wonderful place!

LL: You've told me that you collected money for the workers during the Dominion Textile strike.

MG: That's right. One of the things that shook me so much was to see strikers who were French-Canadian — and it was against the law for them to strike, it was against the law for them to have unions in Quebec, it was feudal. They were jailed, the union leaders and organizers — and the way they treated them, and the rumours they spread about them... I remember a trial in St. Jérôme. This woman was sentenced to two years in the penitentiary — they were put in the penitentiary, you know, the union leaders. And the judge said "I'm giving you a stiffer sentence than the man because women have been temptresses since Eve." That was Quebec in the 40s. So you can imagine, one was always at the boiling point.

I sound like a terrible aging radical, but even

today I feel the indignation I used to feel when I think of what people went through, and how nobody cared, really, except a few. I never did anything useful? I admire the people who did. And well, I did what I could. I was one of the organizers of the newspaper union.

LL: And was it legal for you to organize a newspaper union?

MG: We couldn't do it unless we had the French too, and the French wouldn't do it without a Catholic union; they wouldn't come into the Guild, which was American, they felt they had to have a Catholic union — they were very different forty years ago. We had many, many meetings, and the way it was broken up was that the newspapers fired unlikely people. They fired one very right-wing company man on *The Gazette*, and people got very scared. They said, well, if they fire *him*... The men were more scared than the women. The men would walk up and down and tell you how they were supporting a mother-in-law.

LL: You were taken off labour reporting, weren't you, for having collected money for the strikers?

MG: I was taken off labour reporting for having collected money. I was taken off film reviewing for having given a bad review to a film, and they pulled their advertising. And they took away my radio column, which was very popular. I had a little radio column called "On the Air," with my picture, wearing a beret! (laughter) this was before T.V., you know, so it was widely read. And that was taken away from me because a fellow from an advertising agency took the managing editor out to lunch and said that I was poking fun at commercial jingles, and that this was their life's blood — and how would he like it if the radio stations started broadcasting things that made fun of newspapers? So the managing editor called me in and said, "Gee, you know what? I'd never thought of that."

LL: I'd like to get back to the comparison between Montreal and some Eastern European capitals that you mentioned earlier. Can you elaborate further on that?

MG: Well, I can't really, because I've used it in fiction, and when you've used something in fiction the original fades from your mind — it's been transposed. But people I know who live in Eastern European capitals like Budapest tell me that they live their political feelings, their music, whatever they're doing, and that people who are like-minded find each other. In a place like Paris you don't have to. You know there are lots of people out there who think as you do, and so what? You don't need them. But if you're living under pressure you do need them. You needed the reassurance that you're not a lunatic.

LL: An interview with you recently in *The Canadian Forum* — with Barbara Gabriel. In the interview you talk about the tremendous optimism and confidence there was before the war ended. I know this was an optimism shared by many people elsewhere as well. In Quebec itself do you think it had anything to do with the fact that Duplessis was not in power during the war?

MG: It had nothing whatever to do with Quebec. I thought the world was going to change, that everything was going to change. I was particularly naive about that. I had one or two women friends in particular who were pretty young and we used to talk about it endlessly. We used to sit out on steps, summer nights, under the trees — it was really lovely — and



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we'd talk about this that was going to arrive from Czechoslovakia, for that real democracy, great faith in Masaryk.

I think of how "flouée" — I don't know because I'm not bitter, I don't think about what I've lost, I think about what I've gained, optimism... and a soufflé. Almost all of them were scared to death, terrified.

LL: Why was the optimism so strong?
MG: Because any people were uncorrupted. The unemployment was so much on their minds, living downtown in the slums. Catherines in their cars. They just didn't care.

It broke out on a national alarm. It was a mistake, it was celebrated. I even had a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia and then the S.S. got there. It was over the next day.

I called my next door neighbour — it must have been 1940 — I was at home — and she said, "I'm nervous." They were nervous, they were first nervous, then they were all the way down to



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we'd talk about this new Jerusalem, this great world that was going to arise, and we were all going to go to Czechoslovakia, for some reason, because we thought that real democracy was going to be there, and I had great faith in Masaryk. We were all very naive.

I think of how Simone de Beauvoir says "J'étais flouée" — I don't have the bitterness that she has, because I'm not bitter about my life — but I do sometimes think, if I could be 20 and sitting on a step and thinking about what's going to come with such radiance, optimism...and how quickly it sank, it was like a soufflé. Almost from V-E day, it was over. People were scared to death for their jobs. People were terrified.

LL: Why was the end of the war a terrifying event?

MG: Because any major change is. And I think people were unconsciously terrified of unemployment. The unemployment of the thirties was still very much on their minds. People rioted in the streets. I was living downtown in Montreal. People went up and down Ste. Catherine Street and knocked over street-cars. They just didn't know what to do.

It broke out on the 7th, because we had a false alarm. It was a mistake, and people all over the world celebrated. I even had a friend who was in a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, and they celebrated, and then the S.S. guards came back — it wasn't over. It was over the next day.

I called my newspaper and asked what I should do — it must have been a Sunday or a Monday because I was at home — and I was told to "go out and get impressions." They were getting out a special issue, and the impressions were just of people swarming around, first nervously, then drunker and drunker. We walked all the way down to the east end, and the east end was

dead — there wasn't an ant, there wasn't a fly, there wasn't a mouse in the street. The war wasn't theirs, and it wasn't theirs then, and it wasn't theirs when it was over. *Inglese* culture.

LL: Was it frightening downtown?

MG: It was amazing. And then I called from a drug-store or something, and they said, "Well, the war isn't over. [laughter] We've had a contra-indication." They had ready an extra issue — "War Ends" — and they said it would be tomorrow or the next day. So peace began with a hangover.

LL: By 1955 when you returned to Montreal, it had all changed.

MG: Everything seemed to me to be gone, yes.

LL: How did you notice the change?

MG: Physically it wasn't the same, and that bothered me. The trees were coming down, the city wasn't as attractive, and I remember writing in my journal, "This is a cemetery. I'm in a cemetery."

Things were different. I remember somebody saying to me, "But you don't realize — you left." There was a big housing crisis, everything was at sixes and sevens for a while until things got straightened out. When I went back everyone seemed to be on the rails, with pensions... in sight (laughter). I was living like a bird on a branch, from twig to twig. People were much more settled, and God knows I don't blame them — if everybody lived like me, the world would come to an end.

LL: You stayed in Montreal a long time in 1955, didn't you?

MG: I think I stayed there quite a while, and then I went to New York.

LL: Were you aware of changes on a political level

— of anything that would anticipate what would happen after Duplessis' death in 1959?

MG: No. I remember somebody came over when Drapeau was first elected, and said, "we've got this new mayor, and he's absolutely marvelous, and he's got rid of the Mafia. All the guys with the big cigars are gone. The city's been cleaned up." I believed him. And (laughter) of course when I was in Montreal it was exactly the same. The guys with big cigars were still running things.

LL: The reason I ask that is because "Bernadette," which arose out of your stay in Montreal in '55, seems to anticipate dramatic change in Quebec.

MG: Well, of course, fiction is a different thing. Fiction has its own dynamic. It almost seems to grow out of itself. I can't comment on that.

I was greatly criticized by a woman who taught at Laval. She got very worked up about that story because she felt that I was writing about French-Canadians as a servant class. She said, "Why didn't you make her Ukrainian?" I said, "Because I never saw a Ukrainian maid in Montreal in my life — in the time I'm writing about — never." There were Ukrainians in other parts of Canada — but a Ukrainian maid in Montreal, in the forties and fifties? Really and truly!

Linda Leith, the new editor of Matrix magazine, is writing a book on English fiction in Quebec since 1945.

Linda Leith wishes gratefully to acknowledge the generous assistance of the FCAR in Quebec in supporting her work on the English writers of Quebec.

Walking the Gatineau, walking the planet

Malcolm Reid

The man in the baseball cap let a long silence go by.

"I just wanted to listen to us walking," he finally said. "I just wanted to hear our steps again, crunching on the gravel."

He was one of the twenty people seated in a circle in a church basement in Hull, preparing for their walk into Ottawa the following morning. He spoke in French, a slow sort of French that went well with his straw-brown beard.

Each person, in turn, gave a little statement on why she was walking in this march.

"This is my work," said an American woman with white hair. She was crisp, sitting in a studied upright-ness. "I'm a fulltime worker for peace and social justice. That's all. I'm walking because we have to do something to change things."

Another woman, younger, long wispy hair, a furrow between her eyebrows:

"Well, I got involved in this at the University of Montreal. We were studying the Theology of Liberation. It was very good, it was *theoretical* — and it seemed to me this march might be a way of making it practical. So now, tomorrow, I have to decide if I'm

going to sit down at the Defence Department. And I've got the shakes..."

A lean, olive-skinned young man was curled, almost draped, on a battered couch, his sleeping bag rolled up beside him.

"Every prison-camp guard has said, 'I'm not responsible.' We've all said, 'I'm not responsible. That's why I'm walking.'"

The circle was being filled in, there was something ceremonial about it. Something Indian. In my twenty years around the peace movement I've often found peace people good at this kind of setting of an atmosphere. Marxists are better at evaluating the real chances of an action, NDPers and Péquistes are better at following up their actions with phone and doorbell work. But the peace people have the council-fire in them; the flame of the created moment.

My turn came.

"I'm doing this," I said, knowing I had very small claims in the discussion, arriving this late in the event, "because of three rivers."

The poster that provoked the adventure began appearing on the posts of our neighbourhood in Que-