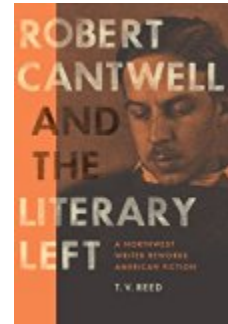


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

T. V. Reed. *Robert Cantwell and the Literary Left: A Northwest Writer Reworks American Fiction*. Robert B. Heilman Books Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. 254 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-99362-1; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-99363-8.

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## The Literary Left

Robert Cantwell (1908-78) was a novelist and literary critic born and raised in the rough logging world of Washington State. A great-grandson of the well-known Puget Sound pioneer Michael T. Simmons, he grew up in Aberdeen. During the 1930s, Cantwell was a “proletarian” fiction writer and left-wing literary critic. One of T. V. Reed’s aims is to extricate this era and this American writer from the stereotypical idea that he and other Marxist writers were toeing some Moscow line and that their works lacked literary value.

Indeed, Cantwell’s second novel, *The Land of Plenty*—which I had never heard of much less read—turns out to be a gem of an American novel of working-class life. It is, in Reed’s words, “a magnificent, subtle, elegant literary achievement that stands with the best writing of the era” (p. 64). *The Land of Plenty* was well received when it was published in 1934. Clifton Fadiman, writing in *The New Yorker*, called it “the finest novel of the year” and thought it should be nominated for the Pulitzer (p. 84). Another admirer was Ernest Hemingway. That it failed to gain a place in the canon and was thus largely forgotten had little to do with literary values and everything to do with the politics of Cold War hysteria.

Literature is not politics but politics infuses our literary choices, whether or not we like to think so. Cases in point: it was within the cultural milieu of the civil rights and women’s movements that such masterworks as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale

Hurston, or “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or poems by Langston Hughes remained visible in the culture or were returned to visibility. But the working-class struggles that were so vital and vibrant and various in the early decades of the twentieth century—including in Cantwell’s Pacific Northwest lumber camps and mill towns—were ultimately suppressed. In that process, the writings and literature that emerged from this working-class milieu were ignored and disparaged. And so they faded from the culture. This is the likely reason why *The Land of Plenty* more or less disappeared, only to become news to the likes of me some eighty years later.

During the decades before World War II, American working people (in several industries, including logging) and the Left in its multitudinous forms were thoroughly entangled. Reed elaborates that the Cold War hysteria of the 1940s and 1950s shaped a caricature of left-leaning and left-wing writers of the 1930s as “Communist dupes and party hacks” (p. 3). Despite new historical work piling up for decades that reveals a more complicated picture of the era and its writers, we are, as Reed argues, still under the shadow of those times.

Reed begins with a chapter, “Rewriting the Left,” that reviews the critical context within which left-wing writers of the 1930s have been reevaluated in terms of aesthetics and our current concerns with gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Indeed, Reed does not intend his

book to be a “full-scale biography” of Cantwell but “a case study in the intellectual and cultural history of the 1930s,” following and adding to previous work by such scholars as Alan Wald (p. xi). Reed looks at Cantwell’s later life—as a writer of nonfiction books and on the editorial staffs of *Time* (1935-36), *Fortune* (1937), *Time* (1938-45, as associate editor), *Newsweek* (1949-54), and *Sports Illustrated* (1956-73)—mainly in terms of how he continued to distance himself from his own radical days.

Those radical days unfolded in the late 1920s and 1930s. As a young man (he turned twenty in 1928), Cantwell was a committed revolutionary from a working-class and hardworking (in the wood industry) background who wrote fiction as well as criticism and reviews that endeavored to honor working-class themes and lives while also strongly advocating modernist aesthetic values. Reed describes the Cantwell family as being “working class” in income but “middle class” in its aspirations, since as an adolescent in Aberdeen, Robert was “a model middle-class high schooler—a member of the debate team, drama society, and honor society, and editor of the yearbook and student newspaper” (p. 24). Here I question a concept of “working class” that excludes readers, writers, and good students.

Cantwell attended the University of Washington for one year, but when his father fell ill with tuberculosis (and died the next year), the family’s fortunes plummeted. Both Robert and his brother were obliged to drop out of college and contribute to the support of their mother and younger (severely ill) brother. Robert got a job as a veneer-clipper operator at Harbor Plywood, in Hoquiam, Washington, where he worked from 1925 to 1929. Meanwhile his high-school friend Calvin Fixx (1906-50), who also had literary aspirations, moved to New York, got connected with the literary scene there, and helped Cantwell get connected as well. The two friends corresponded and mutually read modernist writers, such as Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. During his years working in the plywood mill, Cantwell continued to write and in 1929 his first story was published. In 1931, Cantwell finally moved to New York, despite not really having the financial means to do so. He completed two novels of working-class life, *Laugh and Lie Down* (1931) and *The Land of Plenty*; wrote critical reviews for periodicals, such as the *New Republic*; and went to work at *Time*.

During the 1930s, Reed writes, most members of

the Communist Party USA (Cantwell was a “fellow traveler”—close, but not a member) had no clue of “the dictatorial and criminal nature of Stalin’s regime” before the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in 1939 (p. 4). After the nasty revelations about Joseph Stalin, some American leftists veered to the right, but other disillusioned Communist Party USA members and “fellow travelers” simply left the party and went on to express their consistently progressive values in the union movements, the civil rights movement, the women’s liberation movement, and the gay rights movement. Cantwell drifted (rather than veered) to the right.

He suffered from chronic financial insecurity (he supported his wife and children and contributed funds not only to his mother but also to his in-laws). He also suffered from mental instability exacerbated by the atmosphere at *Time*, where work pressure was relentless and where the staff in the 1930s represented a microcosm of the country’s polarized political conflicts. In 1942 Cantwell had a breakdown. He spent some months in a New York State hospital, where he received “a full battery” of the “electroshock and insulin” therapies routine at the time (p. 148). He was not a resilient personality and spent the rest of his life attempting to avoid politics, though his relationship with Whittaker Chambers, the journalist, former spy for the Soviet Union, and chief accuser of Alger Hiss, confounded that goal.

Cantwell and Chambers, who had both worked at *Time*, were friends for a decade in the 1940s, a relationship that later cooled and later still soured. People frequently confused the two men (Chambers used the name “Cantwell” for a time, Cantwell’s wife’s maiden name was Chambers, no relation), and Cantwell ended up panning Chambers’s famous book *Witness* (1952). During the McCarthy era, Cantwell did become an informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Reed has established, though “it is not clear that he ‘named names’” (p. 149).

Reed’s complex and multilayered book on Cantwell will help rescue *The Land of Plenty* from oblivion. It is also a significant contribution to the project of reconsidering the American literary left of the 1930s, including the “popular front,” the masses unaffiliated with the Communist Party but standing with the idea of the rights and dignity of working people. Progressives from our own time have much to learn from that era and from this book.

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