

Alexander Saxton,  
*The Great Midland*  
 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1997)

It turns out that Alexander Saxton was ahead of his time even earlier than we knew.

The eminent historian whose 1971 book *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* arguably inaugurated “whiteness studies” in the academy also anticipated the current ongoing revision of U.S. proletarian literature studies. Saxton’s long out of print 1948 novel *The Great Midland* tells this story in its republication in the University of Illinois’ Radical Novel Reconsidered Series. The book is the judicious selection of Series editor Alan Wald, a leading scholar in the recent expansion of the proletarian novel “canon” of the 1930s and 1940s to which Saxton’s forgotten book most certainly belongs. It also comes with an abbreviated adulatory essay by Constance Coiner, who until her untimely death in 1996 had established herself as a leading Marxist-feminist theoretician of women’s overshadowed place in U.S. literary radicalism. Justification for this impressive conjunction of new scholarly attention is found in Saxton’s remarkable book, one which with great literary dexterity throws into relief the intersecting political and personal lives of male and female, black and white ethnic Chicago radicals between the World Wars.

Saxton’s novel was written after a stint in the merchant marine during World War II and nearly a decade after he joined the Communist Party. It followed publication of his first, *Grand Crossing*, in 1943, and preceded his last, *Bright Web in the Darkness*, by eleven years. *The Great Midland* is a sweeping historical tale in the manner of Dos Passos’ *USA* Trilogy, ranging from 1912 to 1942 and encompassing a cross-section of American labour organisers, academics, Wobblies and rank and file. Yet its historical perspective on these years is materialist rather than epic. “Depression and war” are overarching determinants in both the political and personal lives of its characters. Saxton’s task is to play literary dialectician, dramatically illuminating the collision of people and world events while allowing readers to experience the daily emotional and physical push and pull of class – and romantic – struggle.

At the centre of both stories are two vivid characters, Stephanie Koviak and Dave Spaas. Of the two, Koviak’s place in the novel is the more intriguing in light of the on-going reconsideration of U.S. radical history and U.S. literary proletarianism. We meet her in the late 1930s when she is already enrolled in university, an estranging environment for a first-generation Polish-American woman who chooses academia because “I was going to begin a new life for

myself. I didn't intend to be a workingman's daughter any longer." At this point she has already met and married Spaas, a passionately Communist railroad worker, son of a union loyalist and nephew to a Wobblie, but their marriage has foundered (to be shortly reborn) on political and personal differences: he has chosen Spain over domestic stability, while she has taken an academic lover and hovers at the centre of socialist intellectual life on campus. Much of the novel is taken up with what Saxton presents as a romantic allegory of political commitment: Stephanie thinks of Spaas as the "only person I've ever known who seemed to have no divisions with his soul," while she compares herself to *Hamlet's* Ophelia and suffers depression over "the civil war of her own mind." Stephanie's extraordinary intellect, class confusion and promising career as a Ph.D. in the sciences is Saxton's petri dish for the effects of Popular Front-style radicalism that could and did lure and create this unique brand of revolutionary. While studying at university she also joins the CP, accepts Dave's invitation to speak to railroad workers on the south side, teaches a course in race and evolution at the People's School and leads a Party branch of largely middle-class white collar workers who out of necessity spend more time peddling the *Daily Worker* than debating "The Problem of India." Stephanie's magnificent ambivalence as a woman both outside and inside of male-dominated labour-based radicalism makes her a memorable addition to the pantheon of feminist radicals limned in the once forgotten but recently recuperated novels of Saxton's female contemporaries Myra Page and Grace Lumpkin.

Indeed Stephanie is the most fully realized character in the novel, the only one Saxton provides with an "interior life." Pace Virginia Woolf, Stephanie's trips as a child to the Art Museum "as to a house of her own" construct a mental space in Saxton's novel where ideology can be personalized, if not transcended. By contrast Spaas, the novel's traditional labour hero, is sympathetically obtuse to ideas beyond his revolutionary goals: he arbitrarily sleeps with women and is even chided by his mother – hardly a conscious feminist – for thinking "a woman's something that grows in the kitchen like a sink or a garbage pail." Put in contemporary critical language, Saxton shows how Dave gets class and race right but gender wrong. He is magnificent as an organizer, approaching the all-black Independent Railways Lodge of railroad workers after they are shunned by the discriminatory white union. Together with Lodge leader Pledger McAdams they create the book's most successful political alliance, bridging Chicago's Unemployed Councils, CP organizers, disenfranchised and embittered black railroad workers and even representatives from the CIO. Here Saxton both mirrors and takes license with history: black Chicago responded so enthusiastically to the depression-era CP that fully one half of its national black

membership resided there. But *not*, as Saxton acknowledges in his introduction, in railroad, which ran well behind more progressive industries like rubber and coal.

The stretching of historical truth underscores an urgent continuum in Saxton's career from *The Great Midland* all the way through his 1990 book *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, namely an engagement with working-class and labour movement racism. Pledger McAdams is, along with Stephanie Koviak, the novel's other protagonist to query the possibilities and limitations of solidarity across difference. He and his constituency of black workers, too, are "inside and outside" of both organized labour and traditional organized radicalism up until his encounter with Spaas. Yet the moment in the novel when McAdams himself signs Stephanie's application for a CP membership card seems less a utopian corrective than their organic response to the material conditions of worker's lives. McAdams' death later in the novel at the hands of the symbolically overfreighted anti-labour cop Morgan is also the book's most damning indictment of a traditional rank and file who oppose not just Spaas and the CP but the attempted inroads of the CIO, described by the union patriarch Uncle Jennison as "niggers and Mexican gandy dancers [trying] to take our jobs away from us." Of white California workers' hostility to Chinese labour in the late nineteenth century Saxton wrote, "Ideologically they were drawn in opposite directions. Racial identification cut at right angles to class consciousness." The incarnation of this tragedy in *The Great Midland* gives Saxton's novel unique political gravity and many of its most dramatic events. The same racist forces Jennison represents ultimately cause McAdams death and Spaas' temporary expulsion from the Car-builders' Union for being a Communist. Soberingly, Saxton leave the dilemma of racism unresolved in his 1948 novel.

Novelistic fate shines brighter on Stephanie and Dave. The former earns her Ph.D. and continues her work at the Labor School; the latter heads off to war yet again. Fittingly, Stephanie is given the novel's final vision of a better socialist world, and seems best-suited and prepared of all the book's characters to deliver it. That said, Saxton's novel is disappointing in minor ways: the novel's exposition is at times flattened out by the writer's documentary calling; there are, for this reader, one or two redundant self-reflections by Stephanie about her differences with Dave or revolutionary politics; the novel's aspirational ending seems willed if not forced. Still, *The Great Midland* is a remarkable fictionalized account of a city – Chicago – whose centrality to midwestern and American radicalism continues to deserve attention, especially of its black and interracial coalitions forged during the Popular Front. It is also one of the best-observed novels to date about the pedestrian romance and romanticism of American

labourers and radicals. Two scenes of this spring to mind that are difficult to dislodge from memory even after completing the book: in one a pair of unemployed railroad workers strain to remove brass nose rings from stock car cattle in order to cash them in; in another Dave and Stephanie swim nude on a beach under stormy skies that seem both appropriate to the season and a symbol of their relationship. The dialectical range and force of these images, as well as their author's masterful and authoritative rendering of time and place, put *The Great Midland* in league with the work not just of Dos Passos but E.L. Doctorow, Harriet Arnow and William Attaway, authors of proletarian and radical novels whose prescient representations of class struggle are amplified by their entanglement with a larger web of human life and personal subjectivity.

Bill Mullen  
Youngstown State University