

## Reviews

James Laxer, *Red Diaper Baby: A Boyhood in the Age of McCarthyism* (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004).

How does one remember a childhood? Not easily, is the simple answer. The matter is all the more complicated when this personal history is cut to the core with ambivalence and 'secrets', when it is refracted through subsequent experience, and reflected on with the guiding hand of principles, politics, and pragmatic judgments nurtured by a later adult intellect. This remembering is not only difficult, then, but interpretively layered. All human beings, to one degree or another, are caught on the horns of the past's varied dilemmas.

James Laxer's memoir of growing up a red diaper baby in the age of McCarthyism is at once an engaging account and a somewhat truncated political statement. Elegant in its presentation, refreshing in its candor, and at times brave and admirably restrained in its subjective revelation, it is an evocative narrative that will appeal to sensitive readers on a number of levels. But it is a political statement that at times needs to be challenged with pushes and prods as well, precisely because while it recognizes and names the ugliness of Stalinism, it ultimately sidesteps coming to grips with this most pernicious degeneration of a critically important wing of the revolutionary left.

Laxer tells a tale of a childhood in the 1940s and 1950s that was lived in a series of conventional boxes, but they were surrounded by 'secrets'. In many ways the Laxer household was quite ordinary, and in outward appearance the family was respectable and traditional. Gender relations, for instance, seem lifted out of Betty Friedan's 'feminine mystique' or 1950s 'sit com' representations such as *Leave It To Beaver*: family life was ordered by a nurturing mother obsessed with the details of domesticity and an authoritative, patriarchal father who provided the orthodox breadwinner sustenance as well as decisive guidance. Children were christened in the United Church; paper routes provided money; and neighborhood pranks confirmed that boys would be boys. Hockey was played in the streets and on a series of outdoor rinks, occupying a place of prominence in most male lives. Summers were sometimes spent at a Muskoka Lake. A part of Laxer's presentation of his childhood is noteworthy because it is totally unexceptionable in its 'middle-class' routine, albeit one that existed within quite pinched material circumstances.

Beneath the surface of 'being normal', however, lay the conflicted actualities of 'underground' identities. Of prime importance, understandably, was the Laxers' communism. Robert and 'Queenie' (Edna May) Laxer were staunch members of the Communist Party of Canada, with Bob a leading Toronto functionary, a professional revolutionary who taught study groups, organized political campaigns (including his own electoral efforts to secure

minor municipal office), and orchestrated communist work in the trade unions and the peace movement. James recalls being affectionately hauled up onto Tim Buck's lap in the family living room. And he grew up handing out leaflets, trudging alongside Mom at demonstration marches, and fearing that his parents would end up like the Rosenbergs.

As public as was the family's commitment to communism, it was also hidden, like so much in 1950s households, especially in the neighborhood where Jim and his siblings made friends, went to school, and walked local streets and back alleys. Teachers, police, schoolyard chums, and those who lived next door or ran the corner store where groceries were purchased were never to know the political 'truth' about the Laxers. It was not prudent in Cold War Canada to proclaim too loudly and visibly one's allegiance to workers' revolution and its international leaders, Lenin and Stalin.

Terror struck the young Laxer boys at school when asked what their father did for a living: they were tongue-tied, their predicament reaching beyond the seeming embarrassment of not knowing Dad's occupation to indeed being all too cognizant that to blurt out his 'job' was to risk ostracism in the classroom, the wrath of parents, and possibly the reprisals of capitalist authority. Jim's sister dressed her dolls in preparation for family flights from threats she could not comprehend. Laxer notes that to this day his sister has nightmares relating to this 1950s fear that the family would be 'found out', and pay the awful price of exile or worse. This book thus takes us into the conscious *and* unconscious toll that the Cold War exacted on young children in communist families, whose fears and tortured training in negotiating the politicization of truth proved a terrible burden.

The keeping of this communist 'secret' was paralleled in the Laxer household in hiding the Jewishness of Robert Laxer and his children. Jim's mother was the daughter of anglophile Protestants of a missionary bent, their gentility matched by the security of 'old money'. But his father, born Menachem Laxer, came from a rabbinical Hasidic background where neither dollars nor complacent adaptation to a Canadian homeland were much in evidence. Blond and blue-eyed, however, Robert Laxer could 'pass' for what he was not. The distance between identities born into and consciously chosen widened when Menachem Laxer gravitated to secularism and then communism rather than religious orthodoxy, his road to 'enlightenment' illuminated by an initial reading of Darwin rather than Marx. The grandfather was broken by his son's repudiation of the rabbinical path, his shame only deepening as the now self-identified Robert married a 'shiksa' who soon gave birth to a son. In the small occupationally-defined Montreal sector of Hasidic Jews (the grandfather was a butcher) who looked to Jim Laxer's paternal grandfather as their spiritual head, tolerance was not a trait highly valued: hearing of the religious teacher's disgrace, they offered him no empathy, but rather a public humiliation, pelting

him with tomatoes on the street. The old rabbi died shortly thereafter, before he ever saw his grandson.

Out of this family and socio-cultural setting, Robert Laxer decided to raise his children as though they were WASPs, a project of deception not all that difficult in Anglo Toronto, where his wife's family was deeply embedded in the Britishness of the mainstream. As James Laxer reports, "this fitted in with my father's migration from the Jewish ghetto and his adoption of an anti-religious ideology. Being Jewish was an unnecessary complication, and he wanted no part of it" (54).

Perhaps not, but the charade added to his children's unease. Denying his Jewishness, James Laxer grew up a lie, at times feeling "tight inside, ... violated and miserable." More colloquially, it "bugged [James] that being Jewish meant that your nose and your dick looked different" (53-54). If communism presented the Laxer children with a difficult tightrope to walk, taut in its necessities of hiding practices and thoughts vilified as evil, Jewishness was often a more physical marker that demanded denials of a different, and likely more routinely agonizing, kind.

These secrets, obfuscations, and discomforts disordered a part of James Laxer's childhood, but as this recollection indicates, there was much happiness and love in all of this as well. Young Jim grew up at the borderlands of a boisterous, sensual Jewish Montreal and the restrained comforts of British Methodist Toronto. When these familial cultures came together there was an inevitable dissonance, but the distinct halves provided comforts and warmth that were separate but equal in their appeals to a child. The grandfather Jim Laxer knew was a cultured, caring man who introduced his grandson to the beauties and bounties of the Muskoka cottage country, renting summer residences for the extended family, and taking the time to fish and catch bullfrogs with the children, enjoying them as much as they did him. A storyteller and a man tolerant of dissent, he gave his son-in-law and his grandchildren the benefits of what must have been many doubts. The Montreal side of the family had a different allure entirely. Aunts, uncles, and cousins were a raucous, newly urbanized coterie of scotch-drinking, cigar smoking, hockey-loving, lipstick wearing 'kibbutzers'. If young Jim Laxer was not quite of either half of this divided Toronto-Montreal world, he nevertheless enjoyed what both had to offer.

Laxer's 'secrets' were, in some senses, the extreme and politically charged end of a spectrum, for domestic facades often fronted growing up normal in 1950s Canada. Many families had skeletons in their closets of some kind. There were parents who avoided divorce, but were mired in endurance tests governed by the maintenance of the appearance of propriety. What love had to do with it, was anybody's guess. Alcoholism was often a 'secret' many in families and neighborhoods knew but refused to acknowledge. Child, sexual, and

wife abuse were perhaps more common than some were prepared to admit. Certainly fathers with vile tempers and mothers who made strained accommodations were hardly rarities, and they produced in more than a few children shame and reticence that left them scarred into adulthood.

Jim Laxer's trials were of a different kind than those of the mainstream, and on balance they were of considerably greater magnitude. But they were in some sense the tip of an iceberg of difficulty in the making of childhood in a particular period that demands more scrutiny, and that opens out into critically important suggestion. Indeed, Laxer's account, which will rightly be read as the memoir of a *communist* childhood, is intriguing because of its exploration of a left upbringing, of course, but also because so much of Laxer's youth crossed over into the territory of the ostensibly depoliticized norm. When Laxer recounts, for instance, almost in passing, that he was sexually abused in his neighborhood by a man he did not know, but never told his parents about this, the understatement of the event is a window into something yet to be adequately explored in the modern history of Canada.

Where the book falters lightly, ironically, is at the interface of memoir and political accounting. A boy of fifteen, to be sure, could not be expected to grapple with Stalinism. But we are engaged, in this book, not with a child's or adolescent's understanding of historical process and the politics of the left. Rather, James Laxer, now a figure of some stature in both Canadian academic circles and in the country's oppositional political culture, is filtering his past through his current conceptions. He does his best to convey to us that he always, even as a mere child and early teen, questioned Stalinism's lack of democratic practice and Bolshevism's supposedly hair-splitting sectarianism; he is repulsed by Stalin's monstrosity, evident in his liquidation of Communist leader-rivals and in his murderous regime of totalitarian repression. Laxer apologizes, in some ways, for his father's accommodations to this, which ended with his parents' break from the Communist Party of Canada in 1956-1957. James nevertheless remains resentful of his dad's failure to ever confront the crimes of Stalinism adequately. "I believe the tellers of false tales are almost as damaged by them as the hearers are," Laxer concludes, "and I wonder if by peddling the story [of Stalin saving the Soviet Union in buying time during World War II with the Hitler-Stalin Pact] to me, my father managed to keep the distortions alive in his own mind" (279-280).

In focusing on the post-1935 meaning of Stalinism, however, Laxer himself avoids, like so many New Leftists, the programmatic reversal of the Communist International in the mid-1920s. It was then that Zinoviev's bureaucratization and unduly centralizing authority within the Comintern co-joined with Stalin's concentrated power over the Soviet Party apparatus, administrative deformations that culminated in the political defeat of Bolshevism's project of world revolution. The ideology of "socialism in one country" paved the

way for a parade of disillusioning policies and practical, usually opportunistic, 'turns', all of which meant that Bob and Queenie Laxer's heartfelt commitment to revolutionary social transformation was destined to be stillborn. What their children lived through as a consequence is at times quite sad. There is no doubt that it colours the depiction of communism and individual communists in this book, where what remains most poignant in recollection is place and family, and where what seems distant and distorted are the politics that had promised a wider authenticity, encircling all of humanity. Would that it could have been different.

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Irwin Silber, *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, The Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

Professional baseball has a long-documented history of racial bigotry. This history runs contrary to two of the great myths on which the game has always relied. First, that in sport, every effort consistent with sportsmanship must be spent to achieve victory – to run faster and leap higher. Second, that in business, for the pursuit of profits one must be indifferent to emotive inclination that can potentially distract one from achieving the bottom line. The ultimate objective therefore is to win championships and market share. However, the Jim Crow laws against black athletes that began to fall in 1947 and the prejudices that have since persisted belie these conventions. Major League Baseball sells the colourful eccentricity of its athletes, both on and off the field, who supposedly adhere or adhered to these sporting and economic principles. Individuals such as Babe Ruth, Pete Rose, Bill Veeck, and George Steinbrenner, some of American baseball's most beloved characters and icons, have personified the ideals of competition and success. The myths that these characters embody are so powerful that the meaning of baseball's colour barrier is difficult to grasp, as participants and observers alike evince a preference for the comfort of shared prejudice over the basic rigours of unfettered competition.

The story of the Negro Leagues and the black players who could have gone on to be remembered as some of the best baseballers in history if they had only been given the chance by their white major league counterparts, is a well-documented one, both in academe and in popular media. Thus, one might imagine that *Press Box Red*, a collection of interviews with the largely