

# John Dos Passos

## NEWSLETTER

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### TWO STUDIES ON MARY FRENCH

by

Melvin Landsberg

#### ***1. "Friends and Acquaintances of Novelists": Was There a "Model" for Mary French?***

Thirty-three years ago I sent John Dos Passos a list of questions. One was: "Did any of the women you knew in the twenties or thirties strongly suggest the career or character of Mary French in *U.S.A.*?" Dos Passos answered: "Of course. Mary Heaton Vorse, who recently died, was one of them. Never forget however that the friends and acquaintances of novelists are merely the seed from which their invented characters grow."<sup>1</sup>

Of the twelve major characters in the trilogy, French is probably the most sympathetic to readers sharing Dos Passos' outrage over workers' sufferings and violent repressions of strikes. Alfred Kazin called French "the only fictional character in *The Big Money* who gets our respect."<sup>2</sup> So it not surprising that my curiosity about Dos Passos' originals has been shared by others.

Donald Pizer in his study *Dos Passos' "U.S.A."* (1988) writes: "There is no known source for the portrait of Mary French."<sup>3</sup> Dee Garrison in a book published a year later, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent*, states: "Scholars who have discussed the work of Dos Passos have not recognized that he used Mary Vorse as the model for his portrayal of Mary French." Again, in a note, Ms. Garrison says that she is the first to show that Vorse was "the model for Mary French."<sup>4</sup>

But Garrison also says that Dos Passos "presents a fundamentally nineteenth-century Victorian view of women"—portraying French "without glamour or toughness, quirkishly devoted to ideals, asking no questions, and making no struggle against her fate."<sup>5</sup> I think that in offering this comment (whatever its validity), she is implying that French differs considerably from the historical Vorse. What then does she mean by "model"? In this study I shall recount enough of Vorse's life to allow me to compare it with the Mary French story in *The Big Money*.

Mary Heaton Vorse (1874-1966) was a neighbor and friend of John Dos Passos in Provincetown, Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> Ellen, her mother, who was of old New England stock, had married a very rich merchant and sea captain when she was eighteen and borne him five children before his death, when she was thirty-seven. Two years after he died she married Hiram Heaton, an innkeeper's son of Anglo-Canadian ancestry, who was seven years her junior. Twenty-two months after the second marriage Mary Heaton was born at the family house, on East 40th Street in New York City. When she was five, her parents bought a twenty-four room house in Amherst, Massachusetts, but they did not confine their life to Amherst. Until Mary Heaton was ten, they spent their winters in New York; afterwards they were more often in California, Vienna, or Paris in the winter. Before Mary Heaton was fifteen, she learned to speak and write French, German, and Italian. Although she attended two private schools, and high school in Amherst briefly, she got most of her education through private tutoring, travel, and attendance at art galleries, concert halls and opera houses.<sup>7</sup>

During Mary Heaton's childhood, her mother devoted her life to getting the children from her first marriage well launched in life; she sought economic opportunities for the boys and good marriages for the girls. Though the mother was a rebel in small ways (e.g., disdaining fashion in clothing), she opposed women suffrage, believing that women

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should confine themselves to domestic life. Vorse wrote much later: "My mother's life was tragedy. She had a fine mind and great executive ability, and all this dynamo was idle."<sup>8</sup>

Mary Heaton was closer to her father, who—while enjoying a life of leisure—interested himself in geography and history. By the time she reached her teens, her favorite pastime was reading, and at sixteen she published some light fiction in the *Springfield Journal*. "But Mary [Heaton] found no certain goal" says Garrison. "She longed to escape both her mother's vacuous life and Amherst's decorum."<sup>9</sup>

Her mother dominated the family. At nineteen Mary Heaton persuaded her parents to allow her to study in a Parisian art school, but her mother went with her to Paris. After the young woman's return, her parents ignored her desire to work, her mother wanting her to have a conventional life of domesticity, and her father counseling her to obey her mother. When Mary Heaton was twenty-two her parents enrolled her in an art school in New York City, but only after she made it clear that if they refused, she would go anyway. For this her mother never forgave her.

Mary Heaton started studies at the Art Students' League in 1896. Two years later she married Albert Vorse, a Harvard-educated newspaperman with literary aspirations. First they wed secretly in New York, and later publicly and formally in Amherst. Then they moved into a Greenwich Village apartment. At about the time that Mary Heaton Vorse gave birth to a son, in December 1901, her husband started to be unfaithful.

As Albert did not do well at writing, they moved to France, where they could live cheaply while he developed as an author. In Europe, the two separated for a while, she going Fiesole, but later they reunited. Mary Heaton Vorse had given up painting, deciding that she lacked talent. But she had begun to write stories and articles to help support the family, and she met with increasing success while

Albert had further disappointments and finally gave up his literary ambition. He continued to be unfaithful, and by 1905 the marriage was close to an end.

In the summer of 1905 they rented a house in Provincetown, and in 1907 Mary Heaton Vorse purchased one there, and it became her base for the rest of her life. For the winter of 1907-08 Mary Heaton and Albert went to New York and lived in a cooperative house in Greenwich Village. There her contacts with other residents began to turn her towards leftist political reform. Summers in Provincetown and winters in New York became part of her pattern for many years. In 1907 she had a daughter, but because of Albert's continuing infidelity, she separated from him in 1909, and that summer lived in Provincetown with a young male cousin of his. In 1910 Albert died, as did Mary Heaton Vorse's mother.

Her mother left her no money, in reproof of her way of life, and left only one thousand dollars a year to Mary Heaton Vorse's father, who was growing senile. He lived with Vorse for a year, in Provincetown and New York, and then went into a hospital, where he died three years later.

Vorse had supported her family by writing since 1906, her fiction exploring the problems of middle class wives finding ready interest. She published in well-paying women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Women's Home Companion*, and in general magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *McClures*.

Living in a Greenwich Village apartment in the winter of 1910, she became a district leader in Mrs. Florence Jaffray Harriman's New York Milk Committee, and wrote of poor children dying from contaminated milk in the city. In 1911 she witnessed the Triangle Fire, in Greenwich Village; one hundred and forty-six workers perished because the Triangle Shirtwaist Company refused to allow safe conditions. The next year, when police interfered with workers' sending their children to safety with friends and relatives during the I.W.W.-led textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, she got *Harper's Weekly* to send her to Lawrence to write an article on the situation. She went there with Joe O'Brien, a socialist and free-lance reporter whom she had met the year before, and in Lawrence talked to the I.W.W. organizers William Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. On Vorse's and O'Brien's return from the strike, they decided that they wanted to tell the workers' story—and also to marry, which they did in 1912.

Vorse and O'Brien spent three happy years together, and in February 1914 had a son. They lived in Greenwich Village and in Provincetown. Vorse had been one of the founders and owners of *Masses* in 1911. When after its bankruptcy in 1912, Max Eastman became editor, she remained on the staff, and in the magazine's first issue under Eastman, attacked the Goddess of Domesticity. In *Mass'* later years, before the Federal Government shut it down in 1917, most staff meetings were held in her house. She was one of the founders of the feminist Heterodoxy Club, in the Village in 1912. Vorse and O'Brien were original

#### THE JOHN DOS PASSOS NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter seeks to promote scholarship on and interest in Dos Passos' writings and biography, and will publish short articles on these subjects. It will also publish news items, notes, letters, and queries on these and other relevant matters. Among these matters are work in progress, manuscript locations and accessions, bibliographies, and textual scholarship.

For return of manuscripts, contributors should send, along with their submissions, stamped envelopes addressed to themselves. They should address all queries and manuscripts to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.

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members of the social, political-reformist, and artistic Liberal Club, begun in 1913. Partly because of Vorse's presence, Provincetown became a summer retreat for many Greenwich Village intellectuals, and she was one of the small group that started the Provincetown Players.

Vorse and O'Brien went to Europe in 1913, she having an assignment from a women's magazine to write a series of articles on the Montessori method of education, under development in Italy. They went on to Budapest, where she was deeply affected by a convention of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, on which she was reporting. After her return from Europe, she started a Montessori school in Provincetown, did much writing, and enjoyed sailing. She and Joe were also drinking heavily by the summer of 1913.

American cities faced economic hard times during the unusually cold winter of 1913-14, and the two were active with I.W.W.-led protests against unemployment and police repression in New York. Such protesting, writing to support the family, and nursing her baby boy, born in February 1914, were too much for Vorse. She, and Joe too, fell ill late in the spring. In the fall Joe, who had been hospitalized but seemed much better, urged her to take an opportunity to report on the European war for *Good Housekeeping* and *McClure's*.

She was in Europe for six weeks, first going to Holland, to an international peace congress presided over by Jane Addams. Vorse was a delegate of the Women's Suffrage Party of New York City. Afterwards she was in Germany and Switzerland briefly, and then went on to witness wartime misery in Paris and northern France. On her return, O'Brien met her at the boat, and they went to Provincetown.

In October 1915 O'Brien died of stomach cancer, in a New York hospital. Overcome with grief, Vorse took to bed in the city for weeks. Now she had to support herself, her children, and their nurse, through her writings—but she found herself unable to write effectively. Nevertheless, while in New York she worked in the publicity committee of the state women suffrage movement, and also worked to get media support for Margaret Sanger, then under indictment for distributing birth control information.

Late in the spring of 1916, Vorse and her children returned to Provincetown. Now it was crowded with writers, many of whom probably would have been in Europe in peacetime. Lonely and with less and less money in the bank, she took refuge in alcohol, dance, music, and frequent lovers.

Then letters from her friends Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn arrived, asking her to come to Minnesota to report on the Mesabi Range strike, which had been sparked by a reduction in the wages of iron-ore miners. Flynn's letter was decisive for Vorse. Carlo Tresca and ten others were in jail, Flynn wrote, charged with first degree murder—the officials claimed that their speeches had incited violence. Early in August Vorse left her children with Albert's mother, obtained magazine and

newspaper assignments, and went to Mesabi. There she witnessed violent repression of the strikers and for the first time actually participated in a strike, mounting a platform and addressing workers.

Vorse had become obsessed with a desire to get away from her children, to interact with the greater world, and to think and write about her experiences. In 1918 the Red Cross telegraphed three times asking her to do publicity work for them in Europe, and *McCall's* and *Harper's* gave her assignments there. Leaving the two younger children with their nurse (the eldest, now seventeen, was away at school), she sailed for Europe one day after the armistice. For the next four years she would live with the younger children during summers only.

In England she reported on the Labour Party's campaign in the general election, and even addressed envelopes for one of the women candidates, a notable union organizer. In France she heard President Woodrow Wilson speak to American troops and viewed devastation in the war zone. With her military pass and Red Cross assignments, she went on to see and write about Germany and northern Italy. Then from Italy she made a trip to Switzerland, to report on the International Socialist Conference in Bern. When she got back to Italy, the Balkan Commission of the Red Cross offered her a job reporting on relief activity there. On returning from the Balkans to Paris, she learned that the prompt transportation back to the United States which the Red Cross had promised her was not to be had.

While she was awaiting transportation in Paris, she met Robert Minor, a thirty-five-year-old Texan, who had become an anarchist in France some years before. He sacrificed a lucrative job as a cartoonist for the *New York Evening World* because he would not support its stand on the war, and joined the *Masses'* staff in 1915. A year later he went to San Francisco to organize the defense of Tom Mooney, a labor leader charged with planting a bomb at a San Francisco Preparedness Day parade, and sentenced to death. In March 1918 he went to Russia, wishing to see the revolution there, and in early 1919 he went to Germany to see the Spartacist rebellion against a majority socialist government. And he seems to have participated in that rebellion.

Vorse and Minor became lovers almost immediately. While they were waiting to return home, the American Relief Administration, directed by Herbert Hoover, asked her to describe for American women's magazines how the ending of the wartime food blockade affected Austrian women and children. She left for Vienna on June 3, after being assured of transportation home for her and Minor. In Vienna the A.R.A. director asked her to go to on Budapest, deliver a message to the fallen prime minister, Count Mihály Károlyi, and to observe the workings of Béla Kun's Communist government. Though she disliked what she saw of Kun's authoritarian regime and its censorship, she was more concerned with the U.S. government's using food against Communism there, and Hoover's secret urging that French troops, then in Yugoslavia, intervene against Kun.

When she finally sailed from Paris to New York on June 19, she went alone. Robert Minor had been arrested for disseminating Bolshevik propaganda among U.S. troops in Germany, and was charged with treason. However, he was freed on July 8.

Vorse delighted in her release from domesticity, Garrison reminds us more than once. Leaving her two younger children in Virginia with Joe O'Brien's sister, she went to Pittsburgh in September 1919 to report on the start of what would become the Great Steel Strike of 1919, planning to return in several weeks and be in New York with the children during the winter. But she stayed till the end, traveling in several states to get information for her news stories, which were published in the steel strike bulletin and in liberal newspapers and journals. After the strike failed, she was afraid to stay in New York lest she be arrested in Federal Government raids against "reds," and got a job as an organizer in Pennsylvania for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Afterwards she worked for a year in New York, doing publicity work for the Amalgamated and writing for its newspaper. To supplement her very low pay from the union, she wrote fiction for women's magazines and articles for magazines like *Harper's*. When the Federated Press—a non-profit syndicate presenting news from a labor point of view—was formed she took a job writing for it.

Besides publishing two volumes of fiction in 1920, Vorse finished *Men and Steel*, an account of the steel strike (her ninth book). In May of that year Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested and charged with murder. Minor and Flynn produced the initial defense pamphlet. When Tresca and Flynn asked Vorse to help publicize the case that year, she traveled with Flynn to the Dedham, Massachusetts, jail to interview Sacco, met with his wife too, and wrote about the interviews in socialist journals. Vorse also interested the American Civil Liberties Union in the defense.

Minor by 1921 was a follower of the Russian Communist Party line. When he wrote asking Vorse to come to Moscow, where he was an American delegate to the Third Congress of the Comintern, she went, looking forward to observing the Soviet Union and reporting on the famine there. She remained in the U.S.S.R. for six months, until early in 1922, visiting the famine area, sending reports to American newspapers, and twice speaking with Lenin. Vorse and Minor were married in the U.S.S.R., and when they returned, lived together for a while in New York. In April 1922, she found herself pregnant, and in the early summer moved with her children to a resort town, Highlands, New Jersey. There while walking down a flight of wooden stairs leading from her apartment to the beach, she stumbled, had a long fall, and miscarried.

Less than a week later, while she was still bedridden, Robert Minor came by, accompanied by an old leftist flame, to tell her that the two loved one another and were going to be married. (The Soviet marriage was, for some reason, not valid in the U.S.A.) Vorse's elder son, who was now 21, looked after her until she was able to go to Provincetown.

Besides losing her baby and her husband, Vorse had become addicted to morphine, as a result of her physician's treatment after her accident. She remained addicted through 1923 and 1924, then broke the habit, though she succumbed to it again briefly in 1928, when she was having serious problems with her daughter. Vorse took no more lovers after Minor. For most of the decade, says Garrison, she was obsessed with a single thought—that she had failed as a mother, and for years she tried to make it up to her daughter. As before, she had a family to support. She won O'Henry prizes for her popular short stories, but when she wrote truly realistic fiction, the editors of the general and women's magazines rejected them.

Vorse became publicity director for the Passaic textile workers strike in 1926—a strike in which Dos Passos interested himself, journeying to Passaic with a group of intellectuals. Then, in April 1929, she went to Gastonia, North Carolina, to report on the strike of textile workers there and elsewhere in the South. "As always," says Garrison, "Vorse's primary focus was on the women." Vorse left before a mob destroyed a workers' tent colony, following violence between workers and the Gastonia police. (In Provincetown Dos Passos brought her news of the destruction.) She returned to North Carolina to report on the trial of textile strike leaders for conspiracy leading to murder.<sup>10</sup> Following the judge's declaring a mistrial, mobs destroyed union headquarters and killed Ella May Wiggins, a white striker and ballad singer, who tried to organize black workers. After three weeks of reporting nearly continuous terror, Vorse went on to Marion, North Carolina, where factory deputies had killed six strikers.

During the early 1930s, says Garrison, Vorse continued to work with Communist labor organizers she admired, but had little sympathy with Communist leaders. As she could not live harmoniously with her daughter in her Provincetown house, she went to Mexico to write, and there finished *Strike* (1930), a novel about events in Gastonia. The success of *Strike* led the Communist Party to try to use her in party-led cultural programs. But she resisted close ties to the party, one reason being that she was repelled by events in the U.S.S.R., above all the treatment of the kulaks.

In September 1931 friends invited her to join a writers' committee headed by Theodore Dreiser to go to Kentucky and publicize how union coal miners were being denied civil liberties. Dos Passos was among the writers on the committee. Vorse agreed, but while at a party with Dos Passos in Provincetown, decided instead to report on Great Britain. Upon her return Vorse's friends asked her to join a second writers' group—including Edmund Wilson, Waldo Frank, and Malcolm Cowley—to convey food to coal miners and again test civil liberties in Harlan County. Fearing that Communists would provoke violence in Kentucky and finding that the writers didn't perceive the dangers there, she hesitated. But wishing to help the starving miners and their families, she finally decided to go. Dos Passos visited her at her house on three successive nights to help her make

up her mind. In Tennessee the committee discovered that a nineteen-year-old National Miners Union organizer who that day had left Pineville, Kentucky, to meet the food truck, had been killed by sheriffs. In Pineville, armed men, some with machine guns, were everywhere. Deputies took the male writers on the committee for a ride to the state border and bloodied up Waldo Frank and Allen Taub, an attorney for the International Labor Defense.

We have carried Vorse's biography through February 1932, near the time when Dos Passos in *The Big Money* concludes the Mary French narrative. At this point French is in New York working with a Communist-led relief committee to raise funds and send trucks to striking coal miners in Pennsylvania.

Vorse and French are both leftist labor journalists, but we need to note that French is sixteen years younger. She is first drawn into labor publicity in Pittsburgh during the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Later, in New York, she writes a labor article for the *Freeman*, gets a research job with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and is active in labor defense. When Ben Compton, the young Communist Party organizer who has become her lover, leads the Passaic Textile Workers strike in 1926, she toils devotedly and without pay at publicity and fund-raising for it. She and Ben quarrel after the strike is lost, and she goes to Boston to work with a committee to save Sacco and Vanzetti.

Outside a jail house where French and some pickets have been held, she meets Donald Stevens, a Communist Party leader who like them has been released on bail. French assists Stevens in his final, desperate attempt to organize strikes against the executions. Afterwards they become lovers, live together in New York, and are involved with the committee helping the striking Pennsylvania coal miners. One day Stevens suddenly says that he must go abroad on essential Communist Party business, and refuses to take French. When he returns to New York, he gives her a quick brush-off at the pier. A day later she learns from someone else that Stevens married an English comrade in Moscow.

Despite the resemblances, French is largely a creation of Dos Passos' imagination, I believe, not a character modeled closely on Vorse. She is a leftist reporter and publicist who participates in historical events like, or identical to, some that Vorse did, though Vorse was a more experienced journalist and a more effective participant. Besides her journalism, Vorse wrote fiction—French merely projects a novel about Boston, and she plans to write it after the Sacco-Vanzetti case has been won. Like Vorse, French is not a Communist Party member, but—again like Vorse—she will work closely with Communist labor organizers. Like Vorse in 1922, French around 1930 is abandoned by a lover who is a Communist functionary, and we should add that French, like Vorse, is a plain-looking, native-born white woman with a bookish past.

However, for Dos Passos in *U.S.A.* it would have been an anomaly to develop a major character without reference to her parents. French's identification with her father, a poor man's doctor among Colorado miners, who drives himself to exhaustion for his patients, votes for Debs, and dies a martyr fighting the influenza epidemic of 1918, turns her to self-sacrifice for the impoverished and oppressed. Her mother's continual denunciations of her father's choices as a physician lead French to hate her and her values. We do not know what Dos Passos knew about Vorse's parents. But for Dr. French's decisive influence on his daughter's social sympathies, Dos Passos would have found no precedent in Vorse's life.

If parental influences can be immense in a character's development, the era in which a character reaches early maturity can leave a predominant impression. Goethe noted this when he wrote in the preface to his autobiography: "Anyone born only ten years earlier or later might have become, as regards his education and his effect on others, a totally different person." Vorse belonged to the generation that initiated pre-World War I left radicalism in Greenwich Village. She became strongly pro-labor during the heady days when progressivism was a powerful, growing political current in the nation, when the Socialist Party drew increasing numbers of voters nationally, and when a strike like the 1913 one in Lawrence, Massachusetts, could gather national support.

For French, whose early political-economic experiences come after World War I, the atmosphere is different. Wartime repression, arrests, and heavy jail sentences destroyed the I.W.W. The Socialist Party split over support for the war, and its best-known leader, Debs, was sentenced to ten years in prison. An aggressive Communist movement, new in the American scene, prompted labor's opponents to declare that strikes are foreign-led and treasonable. Vorse's career as a labor reporter and publicist began with the I.W.W.'s victorious strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. French's career begins with the disastrous Great Steel Strike of 1919.

The pre- and post-war eras, then, provided different initiations for Vorse and French, and their parental influences are different. So also are certain important personal circumstances. Vorse in her childhood and youth lived and traveled in Europe; her familiarity with the continent and ability with French, German, and Italian opened the way for her career as a reporter on European events. Mary French totally lacks this area of experience. From Vorse's Greenwich Village years, she was a suffragist and feminist. French has no feminist purpose as such, though in high school she wants to be like Helen Hunt Jackson and at college she thinks of Jane Addams as a role model.

Formal marriage and children, elements in Vorse's life about which Dos Passos certainly knew, are absent in French's story. Vorse's psychological and practical problems in being a mother of three and yet pursuing a public career give her a far different identity.

One event in French's life, her abortion at Ben Compton's urging, when he is about to organize strikes in the Passaic area, may be based on the experience of a second historical figure. Compton's role in the strikes resembles that of the Communist labor organizer Albert Weisbord, who was living with his Communist companion Vera Buch. When Weisbord proposed their union, during the Passaic strike, he clearly said that they should have no children, and she tacitly agreed. Afterwards, Buch became pregnant, and hesitated, as she wanted a child; but Weisbord was insistent. Vorse and Buch roomed together and became friends during the Gastonia strike, while Buch was still suffering psychological, and perhaps physical, pain from of her operation. We cannot say that Dos Passos heard about the abortion from Vorse, but it is conceivable that she told him or a mutual friend. Like French, Buch was in Boston during the final appeal for Sacco and Vanzetti; with co-workers she went door to door giving out bills and talking to people.<sup>11</sup>

There were likely other people whose stories Dos Passos drew upon. But biographical sources were not all that prompted his creative imagination. We note that French lives a far narrower life than Vorse. Besides lacking her rich European background, French has no circle of stimulating friends, no thoughts for painting and sculpture, and never goes sailing, or even row-boating in New York's Central Park. She has become obsessed with the class struggle—and large parts of the explanation are the example of her father's selflessness in Colorado and her experiences later in an era of defeat for organized labor.

#### NOTES

1. Letter from John Dos Passos, July 12, 1966.

2. Alfred Kazin, Introduction to John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (New York: Signet Classics, New American Library, 1969), xvii.

3. Donald Pizer, *Dos Passos' "U.S.A."* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 164.

4. Dee Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 159, 368–69 n. 24.

5. *Ibid.*, 186.

6. In telling about Vorse's life, I rely entirely, except for the material documented in footnotes 7 and 10 below, on Garrison's biography, following her book chronologically and closely paraphrasing her presentations of important matters.

7. On her attendance at art galleries, concert halls, and opera houses, see Mary Heaton Vorse, *A Footnote to Folly* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), 26–27.

8. Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse*, 7.

9. *Ibid.*, 13.

10. On Dos Passos' journey to Passaic, see Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972). For the quotation by Garrison, see her *Mary Heaton Vorse*, 222. Edmund Wilson, who was on the *New Republic's* editorial staff when the mob destroyed the workers' tent colony, later wrote: "John Dos Passos and Mary

Heaton Vorse both asked the *New Republic* to send them to report on Gastonia, but both were thought to be too far to the Left to be reliable from our point of view." Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952), 497–98.

11. On Compton's resemblances to Weisbord, see Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."*, 131. On Buch's activity for Sacco and Vanzetti and on her abortion, see Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 145, 165–69.

## 2. Ada Cohn: *A Secondary Character in U.S.A.*

Criticism of *U.S.A.* has done little with the secondary, minor, and "bit" fictional characters, present in sections devoted to the twelve major ones. More than twenty-five such characters appear in the Mary French episodes, as do three additional major characters, and we could examine the roles of many of these lesser one with profit. Thus Ada Cohn, Mary's friend from high school, helps us understand both Mary and the general society.

Ada is Jewish, the daughter of a prominent Chicago attorney, whose failing health forced him to move to Colorado Springs. Mary's mother does everything she can to prevent her from going to the Cohns' house, where Ada's parents often invite their daughter's friends to stay for dinner, and Mary does not dare to bring her friend home; however, Mary's father, who refuses to participate in his wife's social climbing, supports her friendship with Ada. We need hardly point out that we are getting commentary on the social position of Jews in Colorado Springs.

At Vassar College, Mary is popular during her first year. But in the second, when Mary's friend arrives, Ada lacks the prevalent restrained style and manner, and Mary is "horrified to catch herself wishing Ada hadn't come." Dos Passos' words, which allow a glimpse of Mary's conscience before she becomes political, again point to Ada's usefulness in the Mary French narrative. The two young women room together, and Vassar students who are socially successful shy away from Mary. As Mary's allowance is minuscule, Ada buys her most of her clothes and books. When Mary is a junior an anonymous person sends her a newspaper clipping, with marks in red pencil, about her mother's Reno divorce on grounds of Dr. French's intemperance and mental cruelty. Upon reading it, Mary has a long cry and when Ada asks her why her eyes are red, says that she cries when she reads "about those poor soldiers being killed in the war in Europe." Ada is an appropriate recipient of this fib, as she has fragile nerves, and might

herself cry over the soldiers. Dos Passos, in another display of Mary's conscience, adds: "It made her feel awful having told Ada a lie and she lay awake all night worrying about it."<sup>1</sup>

Both Mary and Ada major in sociology and say they are going to be social workers, and both go to Hull House the next summer to do settlement work. But Ada finds the poverty and squalor she encounters too hard to endure, and she leaves. Back at Vassar in the fall, Ada takes courses in music, studies the violin, and will not talk to Mary about the war, pacifism, or social work.

After Mary does publicity work in the Great Steel Strike of 1919, she takes a job as secretary to George Barrow, a self-serving, conservative labor figure, who claims to be able to help the steel workers, and she becomes pregnant with his child. But when she concludes that he is a "labor faker," she goes to New York to stay with Ada and get an abortion.

Although Ada is deeply agitated by her friend's decision, she lends Mary the necessary money and looks after her for a week after the abortion. When Ada goes to Michigan with her family, she lets Mary stay in her apartment for the summer. Of the relationship of the two women at this point, Dos Passos writes:

Mary was relieved to have her gone; she was still fond of her but their interests were so different and they had silly arguments about the relative importance of art and social justice that left them tired and cross at each other so that sometimes they wouldn't speak for several days; and then they hated each other's friends. Still Mary couldn't help being fond of Ada. They were such old friends and Ada forked out so generously for the strikers' defense committees, legalaid funds and everything that Mary suggested; she was a very openhanded girl, but her point of view was hopelessly rich., she had no social consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that Mary, from her vantage of ideological righteousness, is using Ada. The term "forked out" in Mary's stream of consciousness is not in her favor.

When Ben Compton is released from prison (having been sent there for opposing the "capitalist war") and fears being followed by U.S. government agents, Mary brings him to Ada's apartment, seemingly without asking her permission. Her values have changed since she stayed up all night worrying about having told Ada a fib, and her interactions with Ada allow Dos Passos to show that change.

While Mary is living with Donald Stevens and working with the miners' union, she never sees Ada. However, after Mary walks out on her mother during a lunch at the Plaza Hotel, she is so upset that she has to talk to someone, and she calls Ada. Her friend is sobbing, and asks Mary to come over. She has just broken up with a male friend, and

Mary stays with her all afternoon. She also leaves with a hundred dollar check from Ada for the miners' milk fund.

Ada makes her promise to come to one of her concerts the next week. But when Stevens abandons Mary, she stays home instead. Ada, worried, comes over and finds Mary in so bad a state that she brings her to her apartment for a week. After Mary recovers, Ada induces her to go to one of Eveline Johnson's cocktail parties, which George Barrow attends and where the motion picture star Margo Dowling makes an appearance. So in part through Ada Cohn, Dos Passos brings together three major characters—each with her own path and destiny—and allows us to view Eveline and Margo through Mary's eyes.

At the office of the miners' relief committee the next morning, Mary hears that one of the truck drivers, a young friend of hers, has been shot and killed. Then the telephone rings, and Ada tells Mary that Eveline is dead, possibly from suicide. She is too upset to stay alone, Ada says. Won't Mary come over. The Communist Party has called, asking Mary to organize a protest meeting, however, and Mary tells Ada that she can't come. "Say, Rudy," she tells one of her associates at the relief office, "if Ada Cohn calls up again tell her I'm out of the office. . . . I have too much to do to spend my time taking care of hysterical women a day like this."<sup>3</sup>

As Ada twice spent time and emotion taking care of Mary when she was in distress, Mary's remark is at best unseemly. Ada's loyalties are personal, not political, and she is badly shaken by Eveline's death. Dos Passos' contrast of the embattled leftist Mary with the aesthete Ada is not in Mary's favor. But given Dos Passos' political and economic values in *The Big Money*, neither is it in Ada's. Pondering the relationship between the two women, we realize how Ada's presence adds psychological and ethical depth to *U.S.A.*

#### NOTES

1. John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.: The Big Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 114.
2. *Ibid.*, 439-40.
3. *Ibid.*, 558.

## BASEBALL AND SEX IN *NINETEEN-NINETEEN*

by

James B. Carothers

In the second fictional chapter of *Nineteen-Nineteen*, Dos Passos' Joe Williams goes ashore in Port of Spain, Trinidad, "though it wasn't much use going ashore because nobody had gotten any pay."<sup>1</sup> Ducking out of the rain, Joe encounters, in front of a bar, "a youngish man in a white suit and a panama hat, who looked like an American" (18). This marks the beginning of a frustrating and disappointing afternoon for both Joe and his new acquaintance, for the man in the white suit is seeking a homosexual encounter, while Joe hopes only to find out the baseball scores. Although Dos Passos writes little of sport in *U.S.A.*, his juxtaposition of sex and baseball here is strikingly consistent with the practice of many of his contemporaries and successors in American fiction. For Dos Passos' Joe Williams, as for characters in the fiction of Hemingway and Faulkner, among others, baseball is an unequivocal pastoral pursuit for pre-adolescent and adolescent males. As such, it becomes the standard against which subsequent adult experiences, especially sexual experiences, are measured, and found wanting.

Joe Williams' interest in baseball and his talent for the game are first introduced in the Janey Williams chapters of *The 42nd Parallel*. Joe, we are told, "was an untalkative sandyhaired boy who could pitch a mean outcurve when he was still little" (135). When Joe goes to high school, Janey compares him to her romantic interest, Alec McPherson.<sup>2</sup>

After him Joe was the bestlooking and strongest and the best baseball player anyway. Everybody said he ought to go through high-school on account of being such a good baseball player, but at the end of his first year Popper said he had three girls to support and that Joe would have to get work. (139)

Forced to move into the adult world, Joe continues to play baseball. Employed first as a Western Union messenger and then at the Adams express, he stops eating at home and sees Janey only when he comes home at night.

He smelt of tobacco and liquor though he never seemed to be drunk. He went to his job at seven and when he got out in the evenings he went out with the bunch hanging around pool-rooms on 4 1/2 Street or playing craps or bowling. Sundays he played baseball in Maryland. (144)

After watching Joe pitch in one of these Sunday games, Alec McPherson is killed in a motorcycle accident (145). At this juncture in the narrative, the emphasis is on Janey Williams' sense of loss, but the incident also marks

the end of something for Joe himself. He leaves home for good, enlisting in the Navy.

As *Nineteen-Nineteen* opens, Joe is "on the beach" in Buenos Aires, having deserted from the Navy. He carries with him a cigar box of mementoes, including "Janey's highschool graduation picture, a snapshot of Alec with his motorcycle, a picture with the signatures of the coach and all the players of the whole highschool junior team that he was captain of all in baseball clothes. . . ." (4) The box also contains souvenirs of his more recent experiences: "an undressed postcard picture of a girl named Antoinette he'd been with in Villefranche, some safetyrazor blades . . . a package of Merry Widows, and ten little pink and red shells he'd picked up on the beach at Santiago" (4-5). Innocence and experience, baseball and sex, are juxtaposed in this collection.

By the time he encounters the man who calls himself Jones, Joe has developed a positive nostalgia for baseball. A realist who understands that a man without money cannot expect to find the usual consolations of shore leave, Joe nevertheless perks up when it occurs to him that the stranger may have access to the major league baseball scores. "Say, you don't know any baseball scores, do you? Last time I saw a paper looked like the Senators had a chance for the pennant."<sup>3</sup> The man in the white suit ignores Joe's query and buys him a beer, "looking at Joe as if he was making up his mind about something" (19-20). When Joe repeats his inquiry, the man seizes his opportunity.

"I got the papers up at the hotel . . . like to look at them?"

"I sure would." (20)

Thus begins the extended, repeated, and unsuccessful attempt of "the man who said his name was Jones" (this designation is used seventeen times between pp. 20 and 26) to seduce or proposition Joe Williams. Dos Passos leaves no doubt as to the stranger's sexual preference. "The man's palm was soft when he shook his hand. Joe didn't like the way his handshake felt" (18-19). The man has "a round poutlipped face"; Joe looks at him "suspiciously" (19). After buying a second beer, the man orders a flask of Planter's Punch and invites Joe to tour the island with him. He embarks on a long monologue that is vaguely complimentary to Joe. "He kept giving Joe cigarettes" (21). When Joe steps out of the car to urinate, the man joins him. "'Two minds with but a single thought,' he said" (22).

At the Blue Pool, Joe sees wild monkeys and hears a waterfall. For a moment he thought "of Great Falls and Rock Creek and he went all soft inside." His hopes of a cooling swim are dashed, however, by "people picnicking there, girls in light pink and blue dresses, two or three men

in white ducks, grouped under striped umbrellas" (22). The stranger suggests joining them, but Joe concedes that this group constitutes a class barrier to his pleasure. "That'll spoil their goddam picnic," he says.

When the man who said his name was Jones asks Joe if he enjoys raising cain on shore leave, Joe explicitly juxtaposes the adult pleasures with baseball. "Joe said he didn't usually have much pay to raise cain with, used to play ball sometimes, that wasn't so bad." When the man suggests that he and Joe might "paint the town red," implying that it would be his treat, Joe firmly refuses him. They stop at the hotel and the man orders drinks. "Say," Joe asks, "have you got them papers?" (24). The man continues to ignore Joe's query, but Joe persists.

When the hindoo servant had gone Joe asked again about the papers. "Honestly, Slim, I looked everywhere for them. They must have been thrown out." "Well, I guess I'll be gettin' aboard my bloody limejuicer." (25)

At this point the man becomes desperate, even offering Joe fifty dollars to "go on a party" with him. Joe shakes his head, pulls his hand away, gives the other man a shove and runs down the stairs. "He felt rotten and sore and he'd wanted real bad to see some papers from home" (26).

Back aboard his ship, Joe recounts his experience to his shipmate Tiny, who alternately admits the cash offer might have attracted him, assails Joe's would-be seducer for "corruptin' morals," and suggests blackmailing him. None of these alternatives is a real option for Joe.

He went down into the focastle again, crawled into his bunk and pulled the blanket over his head and lay there sweating. "Damn it, I wanted to see the baseball scores." (27)

Throughout this episode, Joe's behavior is clear and consistent. From the beginning, he is suspicious of the man who says his name is Jones. Though he would like to enjoy food, drink, and sex, he understands that these pleasures are not available to him without money. He is willing to have the stranger buy him a beer or two and treat him to an afternoon's tourist entertainment, but he is never tempted by the offer of sex, not even sex-for-cash. Joe is neither outraged nor tempted to blackmail by the man's behavior. In subsequent episodes, he consorts with prostitutes and "easy women," catching gonorrhea in the bargain. He eventually marries a "nice" girl, who, however, refuses to consummate their marriage.

In invoking the adolescent innocence of baseball in the context of the problematic adult experience of sex, Dos Passos contributes to a motif in American fiction simultaneously developed by Hemingway and Faulkner, among others, and continued by such novelists as Ken Kesey, Philip Roth, and E. L. Doctorow. In Hemingway's "The Three-Day Blow," Nick Adams and his friend Bill

discuss baseball with more specificity and enthusiasm than they deal with Nick's relationship with his girl-friend and lover, Marge. In Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, Temple Drake is in an automobile wreck, then kidnapped and raped by an impotent gangster, and later sequestered in a Memphis brothel—all as a direct result of her choice to leave the chaperoned train taking University of Mississippi students to a baseball game.<sup>4</sup>

In most fiction in this tradition, baseball is the green pastoral world to which boys and men seek to escape, whether in actuality, in memory, or in imagination. This attempt to escape is characteristically unsuccessful, or if successful, only temporarily so. In such attempts, one of the things the boy or man seeks to escape from is the complex world of heterosexual relationships. This theme is developed as background matter by Kesey in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Doctorow in *Ragtime*. In novels using baseball as a central subject, the same juxtaposition has been developed by, among others, Bernard Malamud in *The Natural*, Mark Harris in the Henry Wiggen tetralogy, Robert Coover in *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, Roth (again) in *The Great American Novel*, and Eric Rolfe Greenberg in *The Celebrant*. In *Nineteen-Nineteen*, Dos Passos gives us a clear early exploration of the baseball-and-sex *motif*, richly intertwining the homoerotic desires of the man who calls himself Jones with both the resistant heterosexuality of Joe Williams, and, perhaps, the implicit homophobia of the author himself.

## NOTES

1. *U.S.A.* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 18. Subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

2. In this adolescent world, an interest in baseball and romantic interests are, at least temporarily, compatible.

3. The time of this episode is less than immediately clear. Certainly the incident in Trinidad occurs before America's entry into the World War. Joe's optimistic interest in his hometown Senators is unsupported by the outcome of the American League races for the period in question. Washington finished fourth in 1915, seventh in 1916, and fifth in 1917. See *The Baseball Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 228, 233, 236. For a different handling of similar materials, see the conversation between Nick and Bill in Hemingway's "The Three-Day Blow," which can be precisely located in the autumn of 1917 (*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966, pp. 116-118).

4. For Hemingway, see above, n. 3. In *Sanctuary*, just before Gowan Stevens, in quest of bootleg alcohol, wrecks the car, Temple has a vision of the place where she should be at that moment:

She said nothing, thinking of the pennant-draped train already in Starkville; of the colorful stands; the band, the yawning glitter of the bass horn; the green diamond dotted with players, crouching, uttering short, yelping cries like marsh-fowl disturbed by an alligator, not certain of where the danger is, motionless, poised, encouraging one another with short meaningless cries, plaintive, wary and forlorn (New York: Modern Library, 1932, p. 43).

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### Abstracts of Ph.D. Dissertations

*We attempt to publish abstracts of recent dissertations on Dos Passos that may be of interest to our readers. Such publication depends, however, on receiving the author's permission.*

"One Life Is Not Enough: John Dos Passos and the Authorial Self," by Stephen Crossley Enniss. 226 pages.

The central paradox of John Dos Passos' early career is that he set out to become a writer at a time when words themselves had been greatly destabilized by the representational conflicts of the day. The distortions of war-time propagandists, the official censorship of the war years, the suppression of political dissent during the Red Scare, and the conflicting images of America prompted by civic and political boosters in the twenties all thrust Dos Passos into a series of ideological conflicts over how to represent America.

These experiences shaped Dos Passos' own sense of his authorial role and led him to adopt narrative strategies in his own writing that would conceal his own presence as author.

This study begins with the premise that the early novels (the apprentice novel "Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho" up to *U.S.A.*) grew directly out of Dos Passos' engagement with these issues of language and representation. It re-examines the biographical and historical context of the novels of the twenties and thirties and finds in the shifting status of the authorial self evidence of Dos Passos' own development as an artist.

The innovations that we point to when we speak of his major modernist novels are, in fact, efforts to mute his own voice and conceal the authorial self altogether.

University of Georgia, 1996

"John Dos Passos: A Study in Literary Reputation," by Claudia Grace Matherly Stolz. 273 pages.

Confluent factors affecting Dos Passos' literary reputation are examined to determine the causes of his relegation to "literary limbo" after achieving near-great status in the Thirties. The reviews for each of his novels are examined, as is the criticism which appeared in each decade. The changing standards of criticism are described during the fifty-five years of publishing events for Dos Passos, which account, in part, for the fluctuation of his reputation. Also scrutinized are changes in the publishing industry, his extensive contributions to journals and magazines, as well as his prolific production of non-fiction books, the social, political, and economic conditions in the United States when each novel appeared, and censorship, all factors which have played a role in the construction, maintenance, and dismantling of his standing in American letters. The study includes ways his works can and should be used in the classroom, provides evidence of renewed interest in the author, and strives to incite a re-assessment of his literary works.

Miami University (Ohio), 1996

### Books Received

Janet Galligani Casey, *Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998.

### Textual Notes

The New American Library edition of *Nineteen-Nineteen* (1979) has "they took it [the Unknown Soldier's body] home to God's Country on a battlefield" (p. 466). The word is *battleship* in the first edition of the trilogy (1937). Again, in the NAL edition of *The 42nd Parallel* (1979), Janey Williams suspects that the Comptons might be spies. "Benny was a scientist or worse," she thinks (p. 352). The word is *socialist*, not *scientist* in the first edition of *U.S.A.* (p. 346), and the textual error in the NAL edition may make a difference in the way a reader regards Janey's mind. Unfortunately, Janet Galligani Casey, relying on the NAL edition, uses *scientist* in quoting the passage (*Dos Passos and the Ideology of the Feminine*, p. 160; see citation in "Books Received").