

CANADA AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

An Anthology

EDITED BY EMILY ROBINS SHARPE AND BART VAUTOUR



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EMILY ROBINS SHARPE AND BART VAUTOUR

University of Ottawa Press

2026



Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa
University of Ottawa Press

Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa Press (PUO-UOP) is North America's flagship bilingual university press, affiliated to one of Canada's top research universities. PUO-UOP enriches the intellectual and cultural discourse of our increasingly knowledge-based and globalized world with peer-reviewed, award-winning books.

www.Press.uOttawa.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Canada and the Spanish Civil War : an anthology / edited by Emily Robins Sharpe and Bart Vautour.

Names: Robins Sharpe, Emily, 1983- editor | Vautour, Bart, 1981- editor

Series: Canadian literature collection. Canada and the Spanish Civil War.

Description: Series statement: Canadian literature collection. Canada and the Spanish Civil War | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20250163152 | Canadiana (ebook) 20250163160 | ISBN 9780776644943 (soft-cover) | ISBN 9780776644967 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780776644974 (PDF)

Subjects: CSH: Canadian literature (English)—20th century. | CSH: Canadian literature (English)—21st century. | LCSH: Canadian literature—20th century. | LCSH: Canadian literature—21st century. | LCSH: Spain—History—Civil War, 1936-1939—Literature and the war. | LCSH: Spain—History—Civil War, 1936-1939—Literary collections. | LCSH: Spain—History—Civil War, 1936-1939—Foreign public opinion, Canadian. | LCGFT: Literature.

Classification: LCC PS8251 .C25 2025 | DDC C808.8/0358—dc23

Legal Deposit: First Quarter 2026
Library and Archives Canada

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Printed in Canada

Production Team

Copy editing	Robbie McCaw
Proofreading	Tanina Drvar and Lauren McClellan
Typesetting	Ediscript enr.
Cover design	Benoit Deneault

Cover Image

A poster for the theatrical production, *The Mac-Paps*, from 1980. Poster design by Theo Dimson.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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PUO-UOP gratefully acknowledges the funding support of the University of Ottawa, the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Government of Ontario.

Canada



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Acknowledgements

While the work of this anthology has taken us to many places, we would like to acknowledge that much of our work has been done in the places where we work and make our homes: Emily, on the traditional ancestral lands of the Abenaki, Pennacook, and Wabanaki Confederacy Peoples; Bart, in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

This anthology is the culmination of over a decade of collaborative research on Canadian cultural production inspired by the Spanish Civil War. Through our Canada and the Spanish Civil War project (spanishcivilwar.ca), we have had the privilege of working with many talented scholars, and this book bears their imprint. We are grateful to all of our research interns: Jane Boyes, Kevin Levangie, Lily Marcotte, Emily Christina Murphy, Ryan van den Berg, and to Ella Ratz and Catherine Bryan for some last-minute research help; to our research collaborators: Susan Brown, Stephen Collis, Michael Petrou, Patricia Rae, Christl Verduyn, and Erin Wunker; and especially to our former co-director, project manager, and brilliant thinker and friend Kaarina Mikalson. Kaarina's and Kevin's work has helped shape this anthology.

Canadian cultural production about the Spanish Civil War is dispersed across North America and Europe, and in producing this anthology we have relied on the able assistance of many to access these texts. We are grateful to the staff of Library and Archives Canada; Simon Fraser University's Special Collections and Rare Books, and to Stephen Collis for his research on our behalf; the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto; University of Guelph's Archives and Special Collections, especially Ryan Kirkby; Dalhousie University's Special Collections, especially Karen Smith; the University of Manitoba Archives; and Archives and Special Collections at the University of Calgary. Many more researchers and scholars have also shared advice and pointed us in helpful directions, including Enrique Álvarez, Juan Manuel Camacho Ramos, Alan Filewod, Alberto Lázaro Lafuente, M. Lourdes Prades Artigas, David Mathieson, Ray Hoff, Graham Jensen, Bernard Dionne, Myron Momryk, and J. Matthew Huculak. The phenomenal work of SIDBRINT (Digital Information System on the International

Brigades) and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives has made us feel solidarity. The family and friends of Canadian volunteers have generously shared their stories with us, contributing to our database and keeping the volunteers' memories alive through the "Mac-Paps" Facebook group.

This anthology is part of the Canada and the Spanish Civil War subseries of the University of Ottawa Press's Canadian Literature Collection, and we thank the press's staff for this fruitful ongoing collaboration, especially Lara Mainville, Caroline Boudreau, Laurence Sylvain, Mireille Piché, Martin Llewellyn, Suzane Khalil, Dean Irvine, Maryse Cloutier, Justine Hart, and Robbie McCaw.

The support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has been foundational to our work. An Insight Development Grant and an Insight Grant funded the Canada and the Spanish Civil War project, including the research that created this anthology.

Bart would like to thank his colleagues at Dalhousie University for their support. He would also like to thank Erin for her patience and constant support—many a family vacation has included "a quick trip to an archive" or a "short walking tour." Bart would also like to thank Emily for the many years of collaboration and comradeship—the work done together has made it even more rewarding.

Emily would like to thank her colleagues at Keene State for their support, and her students for reading and thinking about some of these texts with her. She would also like to thank Micky for his willingness to be a fellow traveller on this project, offering invaluable feedback, encouragement, and even travel companionship. Finally, Emily is deeply grateful to Bart for such an enriching and fun collaborative research adventure.

Sources are further acknowledged below and every effort has been made to obtain permissions where possible.

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and Mansfield Press. Graham Spry's *Canada in Spain* appears courtesy of Lib Spry. "Málaga" by Peter Stevens appears courtesy of Gillian Stevens. Nicola Vulpe's poem "This Same War Once Again" appears courtesy of the author. Miriam Waddington's poems appear courtesy of Jonathan Waddington. Patrick Waddington's poems appear courtesy of Jonathan Waddington. J.A. Wainwright's poem "Lament for Federico García Lorca" appears courtesy of the author. J.S. Wallace's poems appear courtesy of Margot MacAulay. John Weir's "The Grouser" appears courtesy of Lorna Clark. Leslie Warren "Curly" Wilson's POW testimony appears courtesy of Sandra Burke. And "Poem for García Lorca, 1942," © George Woodcock, appears with permission from the Writers' Trust of Canada c/o the Woodcock Estate.

Introduction

Emily Robins Sharpe and Bart Vautour

There are many ways to fight a civil war. Some take up arms. Others channel their energy and expertise into building advocacy networks, forming committees, fundraising, lobbying, designing posters, or by writing plays, poems, or polemics. Others still set out as journalists, intent on finding and circulating the truth. But why is there an anthology of texts about the Spanish Civil War appearing in a series dedicated to Canadian literature? The short answer is because the Spanish Civil War has taken up a curiously inordinate amount of space in the imaginations of Canadian cultural producers. As thousands of Spaniards fought against the assault of fascism during the war, so too did thousands of Canadians. Our hope is that, after engaging with the texts gathered here, you may wonder why so much Canadian writing about the Spanish Civil War has been jettisoned from so many historical and critical accounts of writing and culture in Canada. The Spanish Civil War was often eclipsed in the popular imaginary by the Second World War, the Cold War, as well as the ensuing scholarly focus on cultural nationalism instead of transnational cultural networks. We certainly think it is an oddity that the Spanish Civil War does not receive more attention in the critical and scholarly histories of Canadian cultural production.

If you cannot tell by the very heft of this book, our aim here is to show that writing and cultural production in Canada has been deeply intertwined with the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, as scholars who have spent incalculable hours poring over texts that make varied connections between the anti-fascist defence of the Spanish Republic and diverse Canadian contexts, we believe our job is to make those connections clearer in the service of a wider sense of public and scholarly *rememoration*—an active, purposeful opportunity for a collective remembering in the service of guarding against reoccurrence. In other words, we are explicitly re-circulating a set of diverse texts that were either written and published in Canada or written by Canadians abroad that deal with the Spanish Civil War. In some cases, texts are published in this collection for the first time, but they are “re-circulated” here to the extent that they serve an additional, historical purpose.

This anthology joins Ted Allan's *This Time a Better Earth*, Hugh Garner's *Best Stories*, and Charles Yale Harrison's *Meet Me on the Barricades* in the Spanish Civil War subseries of the University of Ottawa Press's Canadian Literature Collection. Together, these edited texts are now re-circulating under a common banner to establish what we consider to be the first stage in the *recovery* of anglophone Canadian literature about the Spanish Civil War. The materials we have selected for this anthology—fiction, poetry, drama, reportage, journalism, pamphlets, memoirs, and other life writing—represent just a fraction of the Canadian cultural production inspired by the Spanish conflict. While attempting to be as representative in our choices of texts, genres, and authors as possible, we are not able to include a comprehensive set of texts in a single volume. There are simply too many texts to include here. That said, our selections are not solely governed by a limitation of space. As we outline in the Editorial Rationale below, our selections have been made to show contemporary readers a range of the acknowledged as well as unrecognized texts on the subject, while also attempting to demonstrate the formal and subjective range of contributions. As a result, our hope is that this selected anthology generates more popular interest in (and scholarly research on) this vitally relevant corpus of texts so that interested readers and scholars will search out some of the texts we were unable to include.

This anthology positions Canadian Spanish Civil War literature within several frameworks. In addition to the author biographies, explanatory notes, and textual notes included at the end of the volume, this brief introduction provides a historical-cultural overview of the 1930s to contextualize Canadian involvement in the Spanish Civil War and the cultural production the war generated. After establishing a historical and cultural context, we explain the rationale we've applied to the selection of texts for inclusion. The books published as part of the Spanish Civil War subseries have been previously published texts that, while out of print, were nonetheless variously available in used bookstores around the world. With this anthology, we are bringing these texts together for the first time in a new collection. We think bringing a multiplicity of texts together will allow for a relational reading of texts that can provide new insight into a larger cultural formation or movement. As such, we have foregrounded lesser-known texts that exist both in previously published form as well as texts that have been resting in archives or are otherwise difficult to access. Most texts included here were also composed in English; we hope that our work will inspire additional scholarly attention to Spanish Civil War literature written in French and in the many languages spoken by the settler communities in Canada who supported a widespread movement in defence of Spain's Republic and anti-fascism more generally.

Outbreak of the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish people's vote for the establishment of a democratic republic over a continued monarchy, followed by King Alfonso XIII's abdication, marked the establishment of the Second Spanish Republic, in 1931. The Republic ushered in many democratizing and equalizing reforms: enfranchising women, establishing rights to divorce and freedom of speech, nationalizing many public services, and decreasing the power of the nobility and the Catholic Church. Yet, wary of aggravating Spain's European allies, the Republic retained what was left of its colonial holdings. Although established through largely peaceful means, the Second Republic was by no means stable: in addition to pushback from the Spanish "establishment," the government was challenged by anarchist and socialist factions, union strikes, workers' revolutions, and a movement for Catalan independence. Eventually, these struggles led to the creation of a leftist coalition government, the Popular Front, but also foreshadowed the dissent among leftist groups that would continue to complicate the organization of the Republican forces after the civil war began, in 1936.

Meanwhile, General Francisco Franco and a group of right-wing supporters, unhappy with the country's progressive direction, were preparing to stage a rebellion. Franco's July 1936 coup attempt was financially backed by many from the Spanish nobility, with funds and arms additionally provided by the governments of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, as well as Portugal. A mercenary army of Spanish Moroccan colonial subjects also supported the *coup d'état*; Franco had had a hand in colonizing Morocco during the bloody Rif War (1921–1926) and would maintain control of the colony until well into the 1950s. Collaboration between Spanish colonial authorities and local Moroccan tribes in the Rif War's aftermath developed into the support of Franco's 1936 coup, financially incentivized and with vague promises of Moroccan independence.¹

In response to Franco's coup attempt, most of the world's governments opted to maintain an outward policy of non-intervention in what was only nominally a civil war. This non-interventionism—on the part of Britain, France, the United States, Canada, as well as other countries who actively supported Franco's fascists, including Germany, Italy, and Portugal—amounted to a tacit approval of the Republic's overthrow. Republican Spain was only weakly supported by the Soviet Union and Mexico. While states worldwide abstained from officially supporting either side of the conflict, popular support for both sides began to play out—often mixing with domestic politics—in public forums (newspapers, radio, union organizing, religious groups, etc.).

1. See Sebastian Balfour's *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War*.

Desperate to support the new democracy and staunch the wave of fascism beginning to cover Europe, approximately 35,000 volunteers from around the world assembled in Spain to fight with the Spanish Republicans (also referred to as the Loyalists) against the fascist-led so-called Nationalists. These international volunteers frequently joined the communist-led International Brigades, but many also worked with a variety of Popular Front groups, which included socialist, anarchist, and Trotskyist factions. They became soldiers, medics, ambulance drivers, journalists, and social workers, supporting the Spanish loyalists against the fascist aggressors.²

The Spanish Civil War in Canada

Among the many international volunteers to arrive in Spain were nearly seven-hundred Canadians who made the difficult voyage to Europe, despite often holding passports marked “Not Valid for Travel to Spain.” Many of the volunteers left behind the poverty-stricken conditions of the Great Depression—many had been unemployed in Canada, some forced to live in poorly organized labour camps (Petrou 2008, 25). In the most recent scholarly book to assess the broad implications of Canadian participation, *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*, Michael Petrou suggests that seventy-eight percent of the volunteers were recent immigrants to Canada (22), having fled unrest in Europe only to face anti-immigrant sentiment and antisemitic violence in Canada.³ Three of those volunteers were Canadian women, eager to support the Spanish women who were fighting for the Republic on the battlefields and home fronts of the country as soldiers, nurses, political leaders, social workers, and teachers. Most of these Canadian volunteers travelled to Spain illegally, after the Canadian government brought forth a Foreign Enlistment Act in 1937 that prohibited enlistment with an army of any foreign state at war with any friendly state. When they left for Spain, they were not just risking their lives; their right of re-entry into Canada after the war was also uncertain.⁴ Their lives and their place of domicile were under threat.

2. For a recent history of the international volunteers, see Giles Tremlett’s *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*.

3. For earlier histories of Canadian volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, see William C. Beeching’s *Canadian Volunteers, Spain, 1936-1939*; Victor Hoar’s *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion: Canadian Participation in the Spanish Civil War*; Mary Peck’s *Red Moon Over Spain: Canadian Media Reaction to the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*; and Mark Zuehlke’s *The Gallant Cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*.

4. For more information on the history of the Foreign Enlistment Act, see Tyler Wentzell’s “Canada’s Foreign Enlistment Act and the Spanish Civil War.”

Most Canadian volunteers were variously affiliated with the Communist Party of Canada and entered the communist-led International Brigades. In the early days of the war, the Canadian volunteers were primarily affiliated with an American battalion of the Brigades—the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—which also included Irish and Cuban volunteers.⁵ In 1937, the Canadians formed the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion and became known as the “Mac-Paps,” named for William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis-Joseph Papineau, leaders of the 1837 rebellions against colonial rule in Canada. The chosen name of the Canadian battalion captures something of the Spanish Civil War’s importance to a Canadian people eager to project a somewhat contradictory history of national capacity and strength alongside a historic record of resistance to colonial rule.

During the three years it lasted, the Spanish Civil War animated Canadian public discourse, quickly becoming a vital part of the Canadian public imaginary. With the concurrent rise of news agencies, photo agencies, and other technologically driven systems of transnational mass communication in the 1930s, accounts of what was happening in Spain were making their way around the globe with unprecedented speed and reach. In Canada, the conflict was closely followed by the mainstream press, but especially in Anglophone leftist magazines and periodicals, such as the *Daily Clarion*, *Canadian Forum*, and *New Frontier*. Reports from writers such as Ted Allan, Norman Bethune, and Jean “Jim” Watts—one of the three Canadian women to travel to Spain—kept many back home invested in publicizing and fundraising for the Spanish Republican cause. Bethune, a medical doctor, was becoming famous internationally with his Spanish-Canadian Blood Transfusion Unit, an innovative effort that brought blood transfusions to the wounded on the battlefronts. After the war, Bethune would become a legendary figure and has come to occupy a position as a metonymic stand-in for Canadian participation in Spain. Less investment in the Spanish Republic’s success is evident within French Canada, and in many cases public opinion sided with the Catholicism of Franco’s movement.⁶

The artistic community in Canada also adopted Spain as one of the most represented subjects of the time. They were encountering a global art movement that supported the Spanish Republic and they were keen to add their voices to what Cary Nelson, in *Revolutionary Memory*, refers to as the “chorus”

5. See David Jorge and Sebastiaan Faber, “Naming the Lincoln Battalion” and Uma Arruga I López, “In Spanish Trenches, Irishmen Fought Against Fascism.”

6. For a bibliography of French-language sources, see Bernard Dionne’s “Bibliographie en français sur le Canada, la guerre civile en Espagne et l’engagement des communistes et du bataillon Mackenzie-Papineau.”

of voices on the left that responded to a set of conditions that are “fundamentally interactive, reactive, and responsive” (2001, 7). As readers, Nelson suggests, we must understand that the material that contributes to the “chorus” is going to be articulating an alternative aesthetic: “A poet who seeks in part to be an instrument in a larger musical composition is not pursuing the same aesthetic as one who thinks only of a solo performance” (7). While Nelson writes about an American context, we see those same conditions in the Canadian context too. The Spanish Civil War was a crucial moment in developing Canada’s political identity on the world stage, but it was also vital in rearranging artistic expectations in the global development of literary modernism. Indeed, the anti-fascist cause in Spain helped to reorganize some of the prevailing aesthetic principles circulating throughout Canada.⁷ Many Canadian artists—like their compatriots around the world—were inspired to support the Spanish Republic, in particular, because of the fascists’ killing of queer Spanish poet-playwright Federico García Lorca. Lorca was an internationally acclaimed writer and non-combatant. His murder demonstrated the fascists’ antipathy towards—and fear of—art, especially art that depicted the lives of working-class people, women, Jews, people of African descent, and *Gitano* (Romani) people. Lorca gained a martyr status and, like many martyrs, became a rallying figure for much artistic work, especially in poetic form.

As the table of contents to this anthology demonstrates, even a partial record of poets who have written on the events surrounding the Spanish Civil War reads like an anthology of modern poetry in Canada: Patrick Anderson, Louis Dudek, Ralph Gustafson, Leo Kennedy, A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, Kenneth Leslie, Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, E.J. Pratt, F.R. Scott, Raymond Souster, A.M. Stephen, Miriam Waddington, Patrick Waddington, Joe Wallace, and George Woodcock, among others. During the conflict itself, two novels with strong Canadian connections were published which deal directly with the events in Spain: Charles Yale Harrison’s *Meet Me on the Barricades* (1938) and Ted Allan’s *This Time a Better Earth* (1939). Visual artists, such as Paraskeva Clark and Laurence Hyde, also responded to the war in their work, often in the pages of the same leftist magazines and periodicals where writers published their fiction, poetry, and journalism about Spain. The artistic output during the three-year conflict was large, diverse, and groundbreaking. But the legacy continues despite the Republican defeat.

7. See work by Candida Rifkind, Emily Robins Sharpe, and Bart Vautour.

The Spanish Civil War's End and its Canadian Legacy

Despite the triumphal and optimistic tone of much Canadian Spanish Civil War literature written from 1936 to 1939, the war's conclusion was disastrous. In 1939 the government ordered the withdrawal of international troops—a botched attempt to embarrass Franco into a parallel move—and the Spanish Republic fell. Franco captured Madrid and appointed himself *Caudillo*, a term in Spanish-speaking regions used to denote a leader in both military and political control. He would subject Spain to his fascist rule until his death in 1975, when the country began a transition to a constitutional monarchy.

With Franco's victory in 1939, Spanish and international supporters of the Republic were in immediate danger. Thousands of Spaniards were imprisoned and killed. Many international volunteers were sent to French displaced-person camps, and not all of them were allowed to return to their home countries. Most—but not all—Canadian volunteers would eventually return to Canada. Within months, the outbreak of the Second World War led to a broader anti-fascist movement and demonstrated the international volunteers' prescience in attempting to staunch the spread of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini's power. Many volunteers went on to fight in the Second World War, but the subsequent anti-communist fervour of the 1950s and 1960s also led to their continued stigmatization.

Canadian veterans of the Spanish Civil War continue to receive little official recognition: while a variety of local memorials to the veterans and war dead exist, all were funded by grassroots efforts (or, in the case of a Bethune memorial, as a gift from the government of the People's Republic of China).⁸ Canadian cultural producers have continued to commemorate volunteers' involvement. Two films about Dr. Norman Bethune (along with fictionalized depictions of him by authors and playwrights) demonstrate his ongoing significance to Canadian identity: Donald Brittain's National Film Board documentary *Bethune* (1964) and Philip Borsos's film *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1990), written by Ted Allan. Albert Kish directed a documentary about the Canadian volunteers for the National Film Board, *Los Canadienses* (1975), which includes extensive interviews with the veterans. More recently, CBC producer Steve Wadhams of the radio show "Living Out Loud" aired a two-part series based on these interviews, *The Spanish Crucible* (2012).

While new documentary accounts of the Canadian volunteers' experiences in Spain have continued to be produced in the eight decades since they found

8. See Kevin Levangie, "From Union Station to Rideau Hall: Public Commemoration of the Canadian Contribution to the Spanish Civil War."

themselves in Spain defending Spanish democracy, so too have diverse forms of literature and art enjoyed continued attention: long after the fall (and post-Franco resurgence) of democratic Spain, art about the Spanish Civil War has continued to be made, poems have continued to be written, and plays have continued to be performed. Along with the texts produced during the three-year conflict, much post-conflict work is included among our selections. This post-conflict work attests to the ongoing life of a world-shaking event, the consequences of which are still being interpreted and re-interpreted today.

Canada and the Spanish Civil War: An Anthology collects a largely overlooked chapter in cultural history. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) prompted extraordinary creative responses from Canadian writers, artists, and intellectuals, yet its imprint on Canadian literature remains understudied. The editors bring together texts from archives around the world—fiction, poetry, drama, reportage, journalism, pamphlets, memoirs, and other life writing—many of them never before published.

The anthology joins fiction by Ted Allan, Hugh Garner, and Charles Yale Harrison in the *Canada and the Spanish Civil War* subseries of the University of Ottawa Press's Canadian Literature Collection, a foundational step in reclaiming anglophone Canada's literary engagement with the conflict. A substantial scholarly introduction and extensive notes situate each text within its historical and cultural moment, illuminating how Canadians interpreted, debated, and were transformed by the struggle for Spain, leaving a considerable transnational legacy of political commitment and artistic expression.

“In an era of modernist experimentation and genre-blending anyway, where writers were regularly treating their reportage with poetic techniques, having as full a range of genres available is phenomenal.”

– Laura Hartmann-Villalta, University Writing Program, Johns Hopkins University



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