

BY HEART: Elizabeth Smart, A Life

Rosemary Sullivan. Markham: Penguin Books Canada, 1991.

By Patricia Bishop

Myths are essential to the story of Elizabeth Smart, both the ones she helped to create and the ones other people created for her. Erotic passion comes to mind as the myth and watchword of Smart's youth, although she was twenty-seven when she met George Barker, the love and nemesis of her life.

Smart published a short, lyrical "prose poem," *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, in 1945, and it is this book upon which her reputation rests. Although she worked as a journalist and editor to support herself and her family, the literary output stopped for thirty years. She never retrieved the great promise of her youth, and on this account she experienced tremendous frustration and disappointment. She published poems, essays, and a novel during the last years of her life.

Grand Central did not engender an overnight literary sensation, but it attracted admirers from the very beginning. It still does. It was, simply, *sui generis*, truly an innovative effort and a fine one. It used personal events creatively, but it was not an act of autobiography, or not *just* an act of autobiography. Indeed, as Sullivan points out, Smart had commenced the novel before she met the poet Barker.

Still, many readers will want an answer to the question of how or why Smart believed a positive reciprocal relationship could have developed from the palpable angst of that love affair. Was there a loving, supportive side to Barker that readers, friends, and associates somehow missed? Was Mr. Wonderful lurking under that cruel exterior? Was pain an ineluctable corollary of romance? Did suffering enhance love, make it more "real"? Was Smart enthralled with the myth of romantic love?

Did Smart have four babies in quick succession as a single parent to elicit a commitment from Barker, or to evade her art, or to punish her family, or because she had a strong desire to reproduce and to nurture?

These questions are particularly interesting, as from the very beginning there was never any indication that Barker would

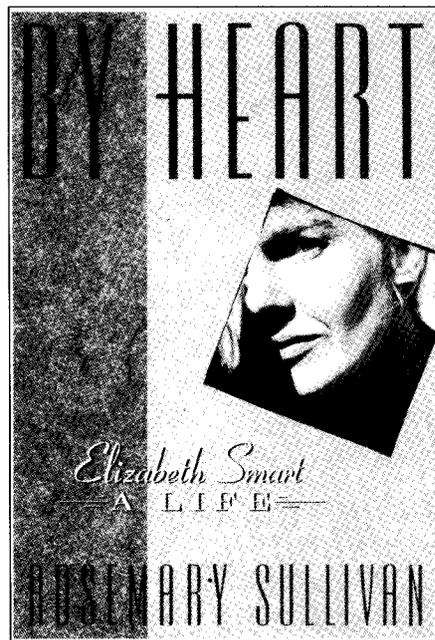
be anything but a cad.

Barker was nothing if not consistent. Sullivan argues his poetry betrays a pervasive misogyny. He had a violent temper and a demeaning manner with women. He had fifteen children by five women; he never considered taking responsibility for the care of his offspring. It didn't cross his mind; he was a poet.

After the initial "courtship" ended, and the duplicity began in earnest, Barker offered primarily negative criticism of Smart's work. She constantly affirmed him as a poet; he rarely affirmed her gifts. Had he or others prodded her onward, and supplied the necessary child care, Smart might have been able to keep writing.

Smart and Barker were a fantastic mismatch from the start. He was married, and even for that, not the marrying kind; she was single and looking for attachment. He was of English-Irish working class stock; she was from a well-to-do Ottawa family with all the right connections. He grew up in poverty; she had the advantages of wealth and education. He was a bit rough and physically "all wrong" as Smart said; she was extraordinarily beautiful and polished.

Smart pursued Barker with obsessional resolve. Sullivan recounts the famous story of the young Smart coming across a book of Barker's poems in a Charing Cross bookshop. On the spot she determined to meet and marry him. Unfortunately, when she did meet him, she was about ten years too late, as his family informed her when she first visited them, pregnant, and with babe in arms.



What Sullivan calls Smart's "outrageous and brilliant determination" could be called dissipation and excess, particularly in middle age as she drank more and more. Sullivan argues that "what she wanted most was to be a writer." Yet had Smart been even half as obsessed with her art as with Barker and his art, she would likely have pushed herself to write.

It is dispiriting to learn that upon meeting a new acquaintance, Smart immediately thrust forward a copy of Barker's latest poetry. She did this up to the end of her life. Ms. Smart was no feminist, despite the considerable insights which occurred in her later years. Aesthetic self-abnegation became her art form.

Something like battered wife syndrome happened to Elizabeth Smart; she lost her self-esteem as she became more and more mired in child care, housework, and plain drudgery. She began to see herself as a handmaiden, not an intellect. Of course, since she had full responsibility for four children, she spent much energy on survival, theirs and hers. She was isolated with small children for months on end; she craved adult discourse.

To her credit, Smart survived, and to a degree she triumphed. She was independent and never acquiesced passively to a man. The most perspicacious move she ever made with George Barker was never to live with him. She got wiser once she realized she could not expect anything from him. Before her death she remarked to her son Sebastian of his father, "He's marvellous for about an hour. If you catch him at the right time."

Elizabeth Smart chose her life, indeed she sought it out. She would have been happier, Sullivan leads us to believe, with a little less suffering and anger, but she wanted the drama and the originality and audacity. She wanted the raw intensity and the adventure. She happily eluded her potential destiny as an Ottawa hostess but she missed the centrality of poetry in her own prime middle years.

Sullivan has produced an admirable biography, energetically written. Her scholarship is impressive. She became a friend of Smart in 1978, and sometimes her critical judgement deserts her for friendship's preserve. This occasionally compromises her research, particularly in her dismissal of the seriousness of Barker's culpability and Smart's drinking, and some fairly precarious parenting.

Nevertheless, *By Heart* is a contribu-

tion to understanding not only the life and work of Elizabeth Smart but the growth of the realm of art as a place where women might live and even prosper.

JOURNEY WITH MY SELVES: A MEMOIR 1909-1963

Dorothy Livesay. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991.

By Jennifer Henderson

"Many are the ways of telling the truth. There is his way and her way and now, my way." With these words, Dorothy Livesay introduces her reconstruction of the troubled relationship between her parents. But these words also frame the narrative of her own life in *Journey With My Selves*, a collage of memories recounting the poet's lifelong struggle to find her own way. No one who has read her poetry, spanning sixty years and never ceasing to re-invent itself, will argue that she has not succeeded in doing just that.

The journey begins with an attempt to come to terms with the extraordinary influence of parents with diametrically opposed personalities: "JFB" Livesay is faithfully remembered by his daughter — in his own words — as a "radical, one who goes to the root of things," while "FRL" (Florence Randall Livesay) is remembered as a prudish woman constrained by her Victorian mentality. The young Dorothy Livesay was, for her mother, a promising 'lady-poet.' Her father had different plans: he wanted a daughter who would think like Emma Goldman and write novels like George Eliot.

"Inheritance," a poem written by Livesay as a tribute to her father after his death, begins with the line: "In the rooms of my mind you pace." Indeed it is "JFB" with whom she allies herself — even when her engagement in left-wing activities becomes a little too much for the manager of the Canadian Press. It was her mother — a writer in her own right and a translator of Slavic literature — however, who first pushed the young poet to get her work published.

The relationship between Livesay and her mother is, among all the relationships recalled in this book, the most interesting. A woman who refused to say the word "obey" at her Anglican wedding ceremony, and who left her job at the Winni-

peg *Telegram* in protest when she was made "part secretary and part women's page editor," there was undoubtedly more to "FRL" than her traditional Protestant upbringing. This "bag of tricks" — as she was called by her husband, who also beat her on one drunken occasion — was constrained more by marriage and motherhood in patriarchal society than by her own prudishness. This, perhaps, is the realization Livesay recalls having when she remembers reading her mother's diaries shortly after her death: "...I came to know that she had been, in her own way, a feminist. A feminist, but sadly restricted."

This autobiography overlaps somewhat with an earlier collection of memoirs from the 1930s: *Right Hand Left Hand*, published by Porcepic in 1977. That book was an attempt to recount the politicizing effect of the Depression on Livesay as a student at the University of Toronto, her involvement with the Communist Party in Canada and her experiments with agitprop.

Reading *Journey With My Selves*, I experienced the same discomfort with Livesay's lack of self-analysis that I had felt reading the earlier autobiography. In neither account does she come to terms with her class privilege — growing up in a middle-class family, attending a private school in Toronto, studying in France — and thus her approach to radical politics seems rather naive, at best a liberal-humanist approach to socialism.

But if some of the old gaps reappear in this book, there are also some new

honesties. Secret passions for other girls in her school years, an abortion performed by a comrade-doctor in the 1930s — but especially the chapter on Gina (Gina Watts Lawson), her fellow "bluestocking" and one of her closest friends. In this chapter, Livesay addresses her friend as if she were still alive and in her presence: "Ah Gina, is it only after seventy years of living that I begin to understand you?" Through excerpts from interviews with Gina, from Livesay's girlhood diary and from letters between the two friends, we learn of the tremendous love between two girls who were "started out on a direction completely the opposite from that of our fellow classmates." Witty and daring Gina, with whom Livesay discovered Elinor Wylie, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Katherine Mansfield and Emily Dickinson, was clearly an impetus to her early writing.

Livesay's friendships and associations with writers and literary figures such as Alan Crawley, Raymond Knister, Earle Birney and Malcolm Lowry give shape to much of this autobiography. In a sense, she is writing the narrative of her writing: with her poems, articles and letters in front of her, she recalls the inspiration behind a poem, or the influence at a certain moment in her writing, and these details become part of the story.

Not long ago in Canada, a woman was forced to give up her professional career as soon as she was married; in the late 1930s, Livesay had to give up her job as a social worker with the B.C. Welfare Field Service in order to make room for the employment of married men. She would subsequently teach in schools and universities and work for Unesco in Zambia, but being forced into unemployment at this early stage was devastating for a young woman who was full of energy.

The situation did give her more time to write however, and it was during this period that Livesay helped establish the literary journal, *Contemporary Verse*. Having children made it difficult to find the time to write, but she continued. "I was still writing poems, time snatched in the basement supervising an old washing machine with hand wringer, or waiting until everyone was asleep to put on a record and write to music." Livesay's husband, Duncan McNair, was supportive of her writing — like her father, he was "an advocate of women as creative beings." ("All this I was sure of," she writes, "until there were children, household du-

