In Tribute to
Irene Mary Biss Spry

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Irene Spry died at her home in Ottawa on December 16, 1998, at the age of 91. In the week previous to her death, she learned that the University of Alberta Press and the University of Calgary Press had agreed to co-publish her book on nineteenth century Western Canadian history. She had been working on the book for almost 20 years. Hampered by failed eyesight, and using a crutch, she travelled off to the National Archives to do her research, lugging a large magnifying glass, until she was in her very late eighties. How she navigated the bus routes remains one of her secrets.

Irene Mary Biss was born in the Transvaal, South Africa, in 1907, where her father was in education service. The family moved to India, and Irene went off to boarding school in England. Eventually, after a year at the LSE, she enrolled at Girton College, Cambridge University, as an undergraduate student in economics—a student of Keynes, Pigou, Robertson and Dobb—in the great days of Cambridge economics.

She developed her intellectual creed at Cambridge in the 1920s. All ideas had to be justified from first principles. You could take nothing on faith or authority; ideas had to be worked out, first to your own satisfaction, then challenged by others in conversation. Intellectual value was inversely related to obscurity of exposition, and directly proportional to clarity of thought.

She formed these views in company with other undergraduates at Cambridge—they called themselves the heretics—and carried them with her throughout her life; a life lived sometimes in the University world, or close to it, but always in conversation with others about ideas, and what mattered in the world.
Irene joined the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto in 1929. Her formal academic career did suffer interruption. She married in 1938 to Graham, had Robin (a filmmaker now living in Montreal), served her country in wartime at the prices control board, had Richard (a journalist with the CBC until his tragic death from a rare disease in 1973 at age 29) and Lib (playwright, director and actor, now in Ottawa). She then went to London where Graham had been named Agent-General for Saskatchewan and, with him, co-founded Saskatchewan House where the Sprys stayed until 1967. Then she resumed her formal career, first at the University of Saskatchewan, then at the University of Ottawa.

She came to appreciate the importance of first-hand knowledge to scholarship. As a graduate student in Philadelphia, to learn about industry, she worked in a factory where she said “we pasted little bits of rubber on large bits of rubber, and only after many enquiries was it revealed to me we were making rubber boots.”

At the University of Toronto, she worked closely with Harold Innis. While the academic social sciences were turning away from direct experience as a source of knowledge and moving towards formal models as representations of the world, she was off in a canoe to learn what it was like to be a fur trader, or taking a bush plane to investigate the head waters of a hydroelectric installation.

At a dinner party in London she met Lovat Dickson, the Canadian who was the top editor at Macmillan Publishing. Her talk of the Prairies led him to invite her to write *The Palliser Expedition.*2 Her years in London were spent, in part, in investigating the British archival sources on Canada. She edited the Palliser paper for the Champlain society.3 She was soon at the centre of a new group of historians of 19th century Western Canada. By the time her new book on the subject appears, her academic contributions will have spanned 70 years.

For over 20 years she was active in the Association of Country Women of the World, promoting grass roots economic development. Many fellow academics, activists, and family friends came to visit the Sprys in London. At one
point it was estimated that some 167 front door keys had
gone off in visitors' pockets.

Irene may have been a self-styled heretic, but she was
never a mere iconoclast. She held to some ideas very
strongly. She believed in public broadcasting and did not
welcome kindly negative comments about the CBC. She saw
it, perhaps, as a Spry family project, as she was well entitled
to do. After all, her husband had been instrumental in its
creation. One of her last public acts was to demonstrate
against cuts to the CBC.

She loved Saskatchewan and what the CCF and NDP stood
for there. In the 1930s, as a member of the League for Social
Reconstruction, she helped give the content to the pro-
gramme set out in the Regina Manifesto. She admired Audrey
McLaughlin's stand at the time of the first Gulf War massacre
of innocent people, and wrote her to say so. Ms. McLaughlin
was so impressed by Irene that she came to meet her.

For over 20 years, Irene Spry was at the centre of a lunch-
eeon group that met weekly in a modest restaurant on Laurier
Street next to the University of Ottawa. It was where I came
to know her, and make other good friends. Inspired by her
lead; it was where the real life of the University took place,
the world of ideas, keenly debated. As a colleague her special
genius was that she made people better. She encouraged their
work, wrote to comment on a publication, and offered time
from her own work to provide criticism. She was a fierce
critic when she thought it was needed. Sending her a text
to review was always a daunting proposition. But mostly
she was adept at pushing us to do better, think better, go
back and do it again until it was right. I have many favourite
memories of her. She was someone who took a keen interest
in others and seldom arrived at lunch with any talk of her
problems or anxieties. But one day she did seem preoccu-
pied. When I asked her if anything was wrong, she explained
that she had spent the entire morning attempting to compose
a letter of apology to her hostess for her behavior at a dinner
party the previous evening. It seems she had been seated
across the table from the Governor of the Bank of Canada.
"He may be from Saskatchewan, but he has some monstrous
ideas about monetary policy," she said. They had fallen into
a bitter argument that ended in a shouting match, observed silently by the other ten guests. Apparently it started with the soup and was not over by dessert. She really felt badly about what has transpired. "The evening was ruined, I don’t know what got into me, to behave so badly." We consoled her by pointing out that that the Bank of Canada was ruining peoples’ lives and the Governor deserved everything he got which, of course, is why she went after him in the first place.

On another occasion, another Bank Governor, John Crow turned up at our regular lunch. He had seen Allison Mitchell who he had known when they both worked for the IMF. When Allison mentioned that she attended a lunch where the subject was often the economy, he expressed interest in joining us. The turnout was strong to meet Crow. The regular waitress had closed off a small secluded section of the restaurant. Crow arrived on foot from Wellington St. because a demonstration had blocked traffic. He ordered what we all ordered: soup of the day, and a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich, toasted on brown. I sat beside him. His hands were shaking so much he left his soup untouched.

Crow had so little sense of the occasion that he suggested it would be best if he began by giving us a 15-minute presentation on monetary policy. Out of misplaced politeness he was allowed to do so. When he had finished, Irene was one of the first to speak. "You must be concerned that in a country as diverse as Canada, where Ontario can be booming and the Maritimes virtually in depression, that monetary policy has uneven effects. How do you account for this in your interventions?" Crow replied, "Two-thirds of the economy is in Ontario and Quebec, that’s what concerns us." With that one question, Irene had given us the opportunity to get the measure of the man.

She particularly enjoyed the anecdote that surfaced the next week. At the end of the Crow lunch Andrew Sharpe, who at the time worked for the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre, collected the cheque for Crow. He explained that he could put it on his expense account, which he did when he got back to his office. Shortly thereafter he was called in to see the Executive Director. "What’s this?
Lunch with the Governor of the Bank of Canada, $3.95. Couldn’t you have taken him someplace decent?”

Her spirit was captured in the video, *The Wit and Wisdom of Irene Spry*, directed by Karen Shopowitz and sponsored by the Innis Foundation, as part of its celebration of the Innis centenary, at the instigation of Mel Watkins and Daniel Drache.

At the end of the day, it was Irene’s humanity that mattered to us. She may have doubted like Descartes, but she was in the spirit of Terrence “Nothing that is human is foreign to me.” Her many friends and admirers will gather again to honour Irene when her new book is published.

Notes

1. For a warm, informative account of her life and academic career, see Gerald Friesen, “Irene M. Spry: A Biographical Note” in Duncan Cameron, (ed.) *Explorations in Canadian Economic History: Essays in Honour of Irene M. Spry* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1985). The book includes a bibliography of her work.
