Reviews


This is an important book. It brings together under one cover a broad sampling of letters to the editor written by Eugene Forsey, the man deemed by the press to be Canada’s foremost “constitutional expert.” However, like one of those had-to-be-there anecdotes, it is also an example of a phenomenon losing some of its punch in the re-telling. Forsey the prolific letter-writer, as a phenomenon, is fascinating. Here is a man who, during the course of his lifetime (1904-1991), had more than 800 of his letters to the press published—an output which, as J. E. Hodgetts points out, surely goes unchallenged. A little less fascinating, however, are Hodgetts’ account of the man behind the letters and, it must be said, the letters themselves. This is not to say that Hodgetts does not do an exemplary job of taking us through the various stages of Forsey’s multi-hatted professional life and driving preoccupations, and re-creating—through a careful selection of his letters written over six decades—both a picture of the changing Canadian political and social landscape throughout this period, and of a man compulsively driven to pass epistolary comment on each and every aspect of it. Nor is it to say that Hodgetts lacks a passion for his subject or is anything less than rigorous when it comes to contextualizing Forsey’s letters for those readers unfamiliar with (or grown hazy as to the finer details of) the many issues with which he vociferously engaged. It is, however, to say that the kind of exemplary scholarship, passion, and rigour that is required both to plough through 800 Forsey letters at the National Archives, as Hodgetts did, and to produce the results of such a formidable undertaking, does not always add up to a consistently compelling read.

I speak here as someone whose research has involved extensive analysis of letters to the editor and who thus readily recognizes the zealous passion for one’s material that develops as a result of constantly sifting through it and being completely immersed within it. If this means that the researcher in me can well understand Hodgetts’ compulsion to provide his readers with, for instance, a long and detailed statistical breakdown of Forsey’s letters to various press outlets in the second chapter of his book, the literary dryness inherent in such meticulous quantitative documenting forces the reader in me to question the extent to which one’s single-minded fascination with a phenomenon might cloud one’s ability to discern which aspects of a research project will be equally fascinating to a wider audience. A better place for these statistical details, perhaps, would have been in an appendix at the end of the book. But this is mere nitpicking. A more important consideration to arise from this line of thought is just who Hodgetts’ audience actually is.

Early on, Hodgetts states that he initially set out to re-examine key moments in Canada’s constitutional history and to contribute to the ongoing debate over Canada’s future through an exploration of Forsey’s many letters addressing this subject. However, the richness of Forsey’s letters on matters that went far beyond this arena inspired him to broaden the focus to include a more in-depth examination of the role of the public letter and letter-writer in civic society. Whereas the extension of his project expands his audience beyond the inevitable Forsey fans and those interested in Canadian politics to include communications scholars such as myself who are interested in questions surrounding the letter, the overall structure of the book somewhat limits its continuing appeal—and usefulness—to this latter group. This is because most of his reflections on this topic are confined to the (rather short) first part of the book entitled “Forsey Meets the Press.”

Though Hodgetts does raise some interesting points here about the symbiotic relationship between editors and letter-writers in general, and Forsey’s unusual exploitation of this mode of communication to publicly air his views specifically, one cannot help but feel that Hodgetts does not push his analysis far enough. Brief allusions are made to the promise of participatory democracy enabled through ordinary citizens’ access to the press, and to new
communitarian movements emerging as a result of technologies like the Internet, but these are never fully developed. As to the overriding question that Hodgetts asks regarding Forsey—what motivated this man to choose the common “Letters Section” as his prime media outlet when, in his various capacities as scholar, spokesman for the organized-labour movement, active CCF member, and senator, he had easy access to more “official” media venues?—the answers are more forthcoming, if not entirely satisfying. Again, Hodgetts’ tendency toward description rather than probing analysis means that although we reach the end of Part 1 with a very vivid picture of this man for whom the word was his sword, who was a stickler for facts, whose acerbic style and characteristic deployment of the “Info-slam” technique meant that editors recognized “a Forsey” before they even reached the final signature, we are left to ponder just how, and where, Forsey fits into Hodgetts’ theoretical underpinnings of a letter-based, communitarian, participatory democracy.

Perhaps the problem here is that Eugene Forsey does not fit the framework—a possibility evoked by the title of the book, *The Sound of One Voice*, but never elaborated upon in the text itself. On the one hand, we are offered a portrait of an erudite “one-man-academy” who always preferred to speak for himself, not others, and whose epistolary *modus operandi* was “not to propose but to dispose” through the use of “colourful, often astringent, phrases well adapted to demolition rather than construction, to conservation rather than innovation” (p. 18). On the other, we are offered Forsey as the perfect model for exploring what it means to be part of a democracy that provides “access for a wide range of opinion from the attentive public of readers” (p. 6). Something here is amiss. For surely the whole idea of a participatory democracy is that it is the sound of many voices, talking to and with each other, and not the sound of one voice—in this case, Forsey’s—barking instructional soliloquies designed “to bring the ill-informed and the biased to account before his stern court of judgement” (p. 241).

If I am particularly troubled by this seeming incongruity, it is because my understanding of the participatory potential of the letter to the editor—an area Hodgetts describes as “a singularly unexamined subject” (p. 6)—is informed by Kathryn Shevelow’s (1989) very thorough examination of the emerging female “writerly-reader” (Barthes, 1976) and resulting “epistolary pact” established between editors and readers, readers and other readers, in early British periodicals; by Helen Damon-Moore’s (1994) equally insightful inquiry into the letter-writing practices of readers of the *Ladies Home Journal*; and more recently, by Valerie Korinek’s (2000) detailed analysis of community-building through letters published in *Chatelaine*. What these feminist scholars contribute to the study of this oft-neglected mode of communication, the public letter, is the notion that it serves not only to transmit information, but to build links and foster a sense of solidarity among geographically disparate readers. True, Hodgetts’ primary aim is to shed light on but one of that enigmatic band of dedicated letter-writers—an extremely colourful and provocative one at that. But for his book to be of significant value and interest to a Communications Studies audience, Hodgetts should have discussed how this master of the “Gotcha!” response who, even when engaging with others, always insisted on having the last word, either fit in or did not with this more public-spirited concept of a letter-writing community.

As for his other two audiences—Forsey fans and Constitutional Issue aficionados—both will find much to delight and inform them here. The much lengthier second part of the book, entitled “Forsey’s Abiding Concerns,” provides the reader with a healthy dose of “Forseyana,” Hodgetts skilfully weaving his bridging (and highly illuminating) commentary through a representative sampling of this remarkable patriot’s letters. These he arranges thematically by chapter to highlight the diversity of Forsey’s passions and concerns: Forsey as staunch guardian of the English language, as moral arbiter and civic censor, as keen watchdog over journalists’ (mis)representations of him in the press, and,
most important, as constitutional expert on subjects ranging from the introduction of the maple-leaf flag—dismissed as “a dish towel from Woolworth’s” (p. 227) by a scornful Forsey—to the Meech Lake Accord.

Though each of Forsey’s witty, cleverly crafted, and fact-packed letters is a treasure trove in itself, I have to admit that when reading them en masse, I did begin to tire of them. I mention this not so much to critique Hodgetts’ oeuvre as to suggest, perhaps, that a public letter is meant to be read as the “one-off” it was intended to be—a little gem of eloquent elucidation sandwiched in between the editorials and the harder news items. This problem is not limited to the public letter, as a recent reading of Rodger Streitmatter’s (1998) edited collection of the 3,500 intimate letters exchanged between Eleanor Roosevelt and journalist Lorena Hickok over a 30-year period reveals. Here, too, a steady diet of their correspondence grows tiresome: it is not nearly as fascinating as the actual phenomenon (the suggestion that there was a lesbian relationship between the two women) that it more or less confirms. All this to say that if there is a methodological challenge facing researchers working with letters, both public and private, it is how to render our presentation of them as interesting as the stories they tell and the extraordinary characters who lie behind them.

The author of this book, reminiscent of Forsey’s own technique, has built a literary ship that, in its provision of “the facts,” is almost leak-proof. Therein lies its scholarly merit, but also its tendency to be rather dry at times. Confirmed “Forseyites” and budding “Constitutionalists” will revel in The Sound of One Voice: Eugene Forsey and His Letters to the Press, and will, like anyone outside of these two groups, learn much from it. As for communications scholars asking questions about letters, it should definitely be on your bookshelf. But it is likely to raise as many of them as it actually answers. A tad more analysis of the potential of the letter to create a participatory democracy, a bit more speculation as to what compelled Forsey to write so compulsively—in other words, a bit of risk-taking, of going out on a limb—would, perhaps, have made this account more interesting to communications scholars interested in the role and nature of the letter to the editor. As it is, we learn much about Canadian constitutional issues—the first of Hodgetts’ aims—but little of real depth about the letter as form or, indeed, the letter-writer as role.

References

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