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McKillop, A.B. *The Spinster and the Prophet: Florence Deeks, H.G. Wells, and Mystery of the Purloined Past*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2001. Pp. xvi + 477; illus. CDN\$24.99 (paper). ISBN: 1-55199-084-9.

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For my tenth birthday, in 1954, my Anglophone grandparents gave me a worn copy of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia* in ten buckram volumes (1925, original edition 1910).¹ A year later, they followed up that gift with another, Naomi Mitchison's *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents* (1932).² Both books had been in my grandparents' library for decades, most likely since 1925 and 1932, respectively. I had spent happy hours reading all I could on annual visits to see our parents/grandparents. My enthusiasm must have been considerable, for Gran and Grandad parted not only with Mee and Mitchison, but two more "big" books as I got older. At Christmas 1956, they gave me a new edition of H.G. Wells's *An Outline of History* (1956) in two volumes,³ and the year after, H.C. Knapp-Fisher's *Outline of World History for Boys and Girls* (1931).⁴

Wells's *Outline* lies in front of me now, complete with dust-jackets, each volume showing few signs of wear or love. On the other hand, Mee's work caught my attention all through childhood, and Mitchison's appealed to me as a bookish adolescent: both have long since fallen to bits and disappeared. Wells never attracted me (or anybody I have known, so far as I can recollect). Despite the *Outline's* production values (nice paper, pleasant typeface) and its useful maps and graphics, and despite Wells's fame as novelist and scientific populariser, its two million copies have — one suspects — gathered dust in many a household across the world. It was the sort of book one wanted on the shelf, but did not read.

Wells's *Outline* divided the critics of the 1920s. Doubters in the historical press were legion, but that never mattered much to Wells, to his publishers, or to those who were impressed by his achievement (it was a history of nearly everything, after all). A still-young Arnold Toynbee, Carl Becker, and even the august H.A.L. Fisher thought Wells had given a pretty good performance, the sort of thing no one else would want to do, appealing in its monumental way.

But when it came to “nobody else” wanting to do such a thing, the critics were wrong. In the two decades 1920-40, there were dozens, possibly hundreds of such attempts in English, some successful, some not.⁵ In Canada and the United States, in Australasia and Africa, in Europe, writers obscure and famous took to their desks in numbers, hoping to do as Wells had done.

Wells had caught a wave, just as Arthur Mee did after 1910. My grandparents were swept up in that same wave, and thus bought (but did not necessarily read) the books they gave me in the 1950s. The 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s were, after all, an age of popularised science.⁶ That development was enabled partly by the rise of mass education, but also on deeply historically-rooted grounds: people hoped through the “new sciences” of psychology, social history, biology, and physics, to solve the great problems thrown up by War and by social change.

The book-buying public (especially in the upper-middle-classes of western Europe and North America) were sufficiently numerous, and sufficiently committed to make publication an attractive proposition for works that could not have appeared in the nineteenth century (for cultural reasons) or the late twentieth century (for commercial ones). Stanley Unwin’s memoirs of his publishing career describe the way things were during the inter-War period: “[I]ooking through the lists of this period I am struck by the number of titles we managed to issue. . . [I]t was possible then to print quite small editions of 1,250 or even sometimes 1,000 copies and yet make the undertaking pay its way if the entire edition was sold. How one sighs for those conditions in which the publication of scholarly work was so much less difficult than it is today!”⁷ Naomi Mitchison wrote that even her “fat book” was a reasonable success despite vigorous attacks in the Anglican Church press. Gollancz made a little money on this obscure work, edited by a novelist in fields about which she knew next to nothing.⁸

At all events, Wells was by 1918 a firm adherent of the view that modern science and the new history could save humankind. Besides, as usual, he needed cash.⁹ Enlisting the help of highly competent specialists, Wells wrote his history of “everything” in just over a year “of fanatical toil.” It was a great success from the moment it appeared in 1919, as McKillop persuasively shows (166-7).

Wells was by no means the only universal historian. Victor Duruy and J.R. Green, among numerous others, had preceded him in the nineteenth century. In one sense, the tradition on which Wells relied had its roots in antiquity, in Vergil and St Augustine, thence to the universal histories of the late Middle Ages, and on to the eighteenth-century Encyclopédistes. Now, in the new century, Wells borrowed freely from all his predecessors, just as his competitors did. The “new thing” was the rise of a constantly sizeable buying public, and the widespread desire for scientific enlightenment.

A.B. McKillop’s important book gives us the remarkable story of a writer in direct competition with Wells—and, finally, his accuser in a lawsuit for plagiarism. Until McKillop’s publication, she had been utterly lost to history.

Florence Deeks (1864-1959) was an unmarried Toronto woman, a sometime lecturer and teacher from a large and well-established Ontario family. Deeks was what we should now call a “private scholar” through much of her adult life, and gifted with rare self-discipline. Working by herself, Deeks did most of her research in the reading room of the Toronto Public Library (nicely depicted, facing page 129). Unlike Wells, Deeks worked without a writer-researcher “team.” On the other hand, *like* Wells, she made extensive use of sources we would usually call “secondary.” Deeks made a point in the typescript of her *Web* of acknowledging quotations

from these numerous sources, where Wells famously did not always bother to make references.

Deeks understood history as “[m]an’s struggle for social values,’ including women’s share in that struggle. Thus I endeavoured to weave in chronological order a fabric composed of facts, . . . the story of the world essential to a historical perspective from the ‘the beginning’ down to today. . . In it was featured the work and influence of woman in weaving up the story of the human race—the web of human history” (McKillop 102, quoting Deeks). She was, in short, a Whig historian and a feminist historian, a difficult combination at that time or possibly any time. It took Deeks four years, during the Great War, to write what she came to call *The Web*, and again in the mid-1920s to revise it completely in vain hopes of publication.

In summer 1918, Deeks submitted her work to the Canadian branch of Macmillan, the great British publisher.

At the end of July 1918, Florence Deeks stepped off the streetcar at Yonge and Dundas Streets, carrying a bulky package under her arm. . . Florence could see St. Michael’s Cathedral at the first intersection, not far from Massey hall.

The building she wanted was number 70, and she found it standing proudly between the offices of Presbyterian Publications and a house once lived in by the fiery Upper Canadian rebel William Lyon Mackenzie. (112)

By this time, McKillop’s writing strategy is well established. For each segment of Deeks’s life as author or litigant, McKillop gives a parallel segment from Wells’s (or his wife’s or mistresses’) life/lives.

McKillop’s strategy changes as he comes to the frustrating and frustrated suit of Florence Deeks against H.G. Wells for plagiarism (184-377). McKillop then takes a narrative and chronological view of Deeks’s long search for “justice.” Her grounds were that *The Web* had been deposited at the Toronto branch of Macmillan, that it had been sent secretly — *de modo occulte* — to the London office of the firm, that Wells or his helpers made free use of *The Web*’s form and content to make quick progress with their own *Outline of History*, and that the manuscript of *The Web* had been returned to Toronto just in time for Macmillan Toronto to formalize its refusal to publish Deeks. McKillop’s narrative of the documentation for this version of events, and for Wells’s contrary version, and of the trial and appeals afterward, is detailed and well written.

For non-lawyers, as most of McKillop’s readers will be, it might have been “trying” to follow the legalities. McKillop keeps it interesting. We have the needful details of the examinations for discovery in 1928, then a description of the trial in 1929 in the Supreme Court of Ontario, the appeal to the Court’s Appellate Division, the appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, to the Law Lords, and, at last to the Home Office secretary. But by page 184, McKillop has given us reason to empathize with Florence Deeks, her sister Mabel, her patient and financially crucial brother George, and the whole Deeks family.

We discover that some of Macmillan’s, one especially, was a fraud artist. At trial, we meet members of the historical profession who illustrated high standards of reason and criticism, but we also meet others who did not. The scarcely-remembered Lawrence Burpee, Bertram Windle, and W.A. Irwin took their turns, as did the much-recollected Frank H. Underhill (331-9). In McKillop’s careful account, none of these men (all of them men, of course), comes off terribly

well. *The Spinster and the Prophet* offers, along with much else, a thorough and convenient survey of the theory and practice of copyright and intellectual property, which alone would justify buying and reading the work.

It's clear by the end (408) that nobody — judges, lawyers, historians — had a firm grip on either the theory or the practice of intellectual property, and that Florence Deeks's legal tangles with Wells were doomed. Her "voice" was at any rate almost inaudible from start to finish. Once her case reached the stage of pure legalism, that is, from the first stage of appeal onward, she had little hope of success. The key moments were at the first trial, at Osgoode Hall in 1929. After that, Deeks was in for it, seen as "obsessed" by her hopeless cause. She could rely on her family and few others, a circumstance that must have encouraged McKillop to write a whole chapter (378-408) on problems of voice, authority, and power, complete with his own reconstruction of what *may* have happened in 1919-1920 at Macmillan. McKillop's use of sometimes rebarbative and theory-laden feminist work in history is impressive and stimulating. Here again, McKillop has done a service to the field and for the public, writing so as to invite the scrutiny and participation of generally-educated readers, not just historians.

Although the book could have done with another edit (McKillop's two-hundred-page treatment of Deeks and Wells at various trials might have been shortened), it is still good historical writing. It falls under two great traditions. The first is the tradition of history-as-reconstruction. Think for a moment of Garrett Mattingly's stunning books on *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada* and on *Renaissance Diplomacy*.¹⁰ In the *Armada*, one is taken direct to the overheated courts and fields of sixteenth-century Castile, made to hear imagined conversations and to accept descriptions of physical circumstance for which there are not (and could not) be direct evidence. In *Renaissance Diplomacy*, the putative whisperings of emissaries from the Doge, the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Kings of two dozen countries are relayed as if on page 2 of yesterday's *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Mattingly's mastery of archives and documents is such that the reader hesitates only for a moment, then engages with Mattingly's argument.

So it is with Florence Deeks, stepping off her streetcar in July 1918. There can be no evidence for Deeks's exact actions and feelings on that day, but one feels enough trust in McKillop's work to go along with his slight-of-hand. It is a bracing experience, and in the end, I am far less sympathetic than he to his subjects, especially to Deeks. Still, one reads willingly and for good reason, right to the end.

Secondly, the book illustrates an even older tradition, that of detailed document criticism. One thinks of Acton's and Ranke's sceptical treatments of various papal claims to Piedmont,¹¹ Mason Wade's treatment of Lower Canadian claims to judicial powers in the 1850s, and their like. McKillop's dissection of trial transcripts, especially in light of his successful disinterment of the parties' previous actions and lives, is a good example of work in the Actonian-Rankean spirit.

At the outset, the motives of these two protagonists were not all that different. Like Arthur Mee, Naomi Mitchison, and the rest, Deeks and Wells were participants in a grand chapter of publishing and cultural history. They had each their gospel to preach, and each had a living to earn. Deeks cared more for her gospel than for money, one might say, where Wells cared for both. McKillop has, in the end, given us a study in historical psychology. His methods may not fit every case, but they work well enough for *The Spinster and the Prophet*.

Notes

1. Arthur Mee, ed. *The Children's Encyclopaedia* (London: Grolier, 1925), ten vols.; in many later editions in the United Kingdom — and in the United States — these were known as *The Book of Knowledge* (New York: Grolier, 1920 and afterward). There were ten-, fifteen-, and twenty-volume versions of the *Encyclopaedia*, whose sales were astronomical until the advent of competitive works in the 1950s. As a work of education and autodidacticism, Mee's volumes must have shaped the minds and attitudes of many millions of children, especially in the old British Empire. It deserves far more research, as a contributor to the history of world culture, and as a force in the history of education.
2. Naomi Mitchison, ed., *An Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932), pp. 932. Mitchison's collaborators, more than two dozen of them, were all well-reputed writers and scholars in some fifteen fields of art, social science, history, and the natural sciences. The *Outline* was remarkable for its graphics, but its text was, to that eleven-year-old boy, far too difficult.
3. H.G. Wells, *An Outline of History: The Whole Story of Man*. Rev. ed. R. Postgate (New York: Garden City Books, 1956), two vols., pp. 996, continuously paginated. First edition: (London: George Newnes, 1919), in twenty-four bi-weekly parts; first one-volume edition, (London: Macmillan, 1920); most recent edition, ed. E. Barker: (London: Low-Price Publications, 1999) in one volume, pp. 753.
4. H.C. Knapp-Fisher, *Outline of World History for Boys and Girls* (London: Routledge, 1931), pp. 445.
5. Cf. W.T. Ross, *H.G. Wells's World Reborn: The Outline of History and its Components* (Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania; London: Associated University Presses, 2002).
6. Viz. Bertrand Russell, *The ABC of Relativity* (London: Unwin, 1925), and *ibidem*, *The Scientific Outlook* (London: Unwin, 1931).
7. Stanley Unwin, *The Truth About a Publisher: An Autobiographical Record* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 157-8.
8. Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), 169-70.
9. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *H.G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 318ff.
10. Garrett Mattingly, *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949); and *ibidem*, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955).
11. John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton, *Lectures on Modern History*, ed. John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1906), and Acton's references therein to Ranke.