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Book Review: Strike! The Insurrections of Ellen Dawson

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Strike! the insurrections of Ellen Dawson

2010. David Lee McMullen, University Press of Florida. 256pp (Hardcover).
ISBN97801813034867. \$65.

Reviewed by Mvuselelo Mgeyane¹

The text, 'The Strike: the insurrections of Ellen Dawson' is an unambiguous celebration of the Dawson's participation in the early making of the working class movement in Scotland and the United States. The author states his concern in many ways, with the omission of Ellen in the documentation of the history of critical upsurges of the workers in the United States even in the documentation of "events in which she was the leading participant" (xvii). In stating his intentions, with the documentation project, the author goes further to state it as intended to "to collect surviving details of her life and present them in a meaningful narrative". A highlight should be made of the point that celebrating unsung heroes and heroines, forgotten for one reason or another, is like talking directly to and of the people who make history; who connect the locale to the regional; provincial national and international scales of change processes, also who are the agents through which grand narratives acquire meanings in local spaces.

Up to this point the ambition of the author was modest and manageable. Admittedly, he points out that the context in which the documentation project of Dawson's life was undertaken, was defined by lack of details yet we note how, at the same time, he anchored it "in the spirit of EP Thomson ...who asserted that "there was value in reconstructing the struggles of individual workers like Dawson". (xix). The documentation of Dawson's life with all the expressed limitations considered was partially achieved. Her presence in the strikes was proven. Her work as an organiser of the workers movement was proven, her belonging to the organised workers formations was proven.

The author, however, compounds the problem of scanty details about Dawson by seeking to 'reconstruct' her image yet there is hardly any substantive documentation of Dawson's ideas that the author could use as raw material to locate the character in the political landscape of the United States of the 1920s. Therefore the ambition to 'reconstruct' Dawson's life throws many questions instead of answerers. The first one is, from what to what? Membership of and working for a collective is never a sufficient descriptor of belonging. That rule applies in the case of Dawson as well. While we can appreciate her belong to and working for the working class formations, that in itself is not sufficient. In a biography, as it is in real life, we appreciate a character by the congruence of their actions and ideas. In the case of Dawson this piece of the puzzle is missing and almost obscures the 'wholeness' of Dawson. The author raises an extremely valuable question – what made Dawson, heroin activist, to withdraw from the struggle after enormous contribution in the struggle of the working class, and suddenly retire without any obvious provocation. What made her such an unsung hero? Why did she have such a short stint and retired back into her shell?

While these questions may sound petty, answers to them could be insights into the ever changing question of how to sustain a social movement in the face of the ever growing sophistication of its adversaries. They could unravel the reasons why a different

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world is possible yet never materialising. There is multiple ways to explain this quiz. But for the narrow purpose of explaining the context in hand – the answer is in the realm of cadre attraction, engagement and retention.

The late Oliver Tambo, former President of the African National Congress (ANC), in his reference to the killings in the now kwaZuluNatal and in distinguishing his ANC from terrorists remarked that, *we do not count our strength by the numbers we kill but by the numbers that join us*. Here the South African hero was articulating the principle of sustaining his movement when the apartheid regime sponsored black on black violence. It was almost impossible to stand firm and defend such a pacifist position against blatant apartheid terrorism experienced by his own people at the time. However it was critical to do so given that he had to attract as much talent, knowledge and retain as much experience, across all races of the country. In the long term, he had to prove that his movement was the victim of unprovoked aggression. He had to demonstrate his movement's commitment to the open invitation of every South African to join hands against the aggressor. These two parallels (Dawson's USA and South Africa) are the same in so far as cadre attraction, engagement and retention is concerned. They are both about what accounts for the sustainability of a social movement, which in essence, is what the author attempts to address, using Dawson's life and times as the point of departure. The sustainability of a movement is predicated on conservation of the knowledge base, memory embedded in cadres who display good traits, and numbers that join than those that leave 'us'.

McMullen acknowledges that the project of writing a biography on Dawson was solving a "puzzle with so many missing pieces". (xix) He further asserts that after all the daunting task of filling the riddles of unexplained parts of Dawson's life "there was much that remained a mystery". What we have in the end, as advised by the author, is "basics of Dawson's life... [built through] random accounts of the events...[,] fading photographs and patchy memories recalled by distant relatives". Both time that has lapsed and the patchiness of requisite details compound the problem of information on Dawson.

While admitting that there are varying degrees with which we can capture the "wholeness essential in understanding human behaviour" (xx) McMullen also creates expectations the moment he declares the text in question a biography. On a broad theoretical scale the questions that beg for answers are (1) when is any account on someone a biography? (2) how much and what information must be available on a character to qualify any text a biography. Specifically in reference to the Dawson's biography, considering the expressed shortcomings of information on the character, (3) how much leeway does the author have to make conclusions on the character without being blindly romanticist or negative?

Dawson was too quiet during the years of her activism. To qualify her as something in the spectrum of ideas could be romanticist or negative judgement. However this does not disqualify her contribution into the rubbish bin. Through Dawson's life, the author demonstrates, indirectly, that while some speak with words others do so with actions and others with both. Furthermore we learn that in tracing a character's life, authors are also confronted by man made quietness – that which is a result of deliberate acts of deletion of facts and details about a character. The silence of Dawson and the rest who belong to the unknown majority pose a challenge to social science to invent

methodological approaches for documenting contributions of characters that would have not used all forms of communication so as to be appreciated in their wholeness. The author in this case makes a contribution in shaping methodologies for resolving this problem.

Secondly Dawson's quietness challenges social science with inventing a genre of text that, while it may document someone's life, is not necessarily a biography and the readers should accept it as less of a biography but a genre in its own right. This does not imply that that generation of text would be substandard but rather different and made for a special purpose to document the times, the individual character while executing continuous improvement of the methods to tackle silence (due to personal or social attributes). Given that omissions in documentation of history are generally observed with the working class and associated peoples, yet they are the critical link with the locale, such a genre would introduce new perspectives of certain histories that may have been distorted, obscured or simply never told – especially where deliberate deletion of details by those with power or influence may have occurred.

The scarcity of details about Dawson does not allow certain conclusions to be made. Yet it is interesting that the author qualifies, from no facts, the withdrawal of Dawson from public life as premeditated, “intentionally to erase her years as a communist activist with decades of silence” (xx). This assertion is suggestive yet nothing in the ‘patchy’ details validates Dawson's withdrawal as a deliberate deletion of her memory as a communist in particular. If this assertion is a logical summation of Dawson's beliefs and actions during her times, the author fails to prove why Dawson would have wanted to dissociate herself with the ideology she had served for a considerable part of her life and almost always risking her life. Again the author could have investigated further if Dawson was really a communist in the first place – with a fair or more grasp for the ideology or she was simply a “follower of Jay Livingston, [whose dismissal from the American Communist Party] for attacking the Soviet control of the US party [prompted Dawson termination of her own membership]” (xi). Such investigation could have proven whether or not she remained a communist beyond her cessation of membership of American Communist Party – which would have been conclusive evidence to prove that she was a communist or not, in the first place. The life and times approach to writing about a character like Dawson, also in the context of missing details is reasonable as the author say “...it opens the door to the different categories of analysis...” to appreciate the Dawson in her relative entirety.

While cognisant of the daunting attempt of the author to document, systematically, the life of Dawson, the choice of method did not help create a biography. Biography is, first and foremost, documentation of an individual's life and actions in response to the world they experienced. The treatment that a author may give of that documentation by locating the subject within a wider social group/class or isolate him/her is often decided by ones philosophical inclination. In this instance there is enough evidence of Dawson's treatment, by the author, as a part of the wider group she belonged to. The author was successfully able to locate Dawson in the workers organisations at different times and also place her within the working class as a whole. However, the author does not attempt enough (within the limitations of available details) to single out Dawson for appreciation of her individuality in the working class movement. If this was

impossible to achieve – then the title the “*Radical Insurrections of Ellen Dawson*” was not proven. Ellen Dawson is mirror imaged through others.

The problem with mirror imaging Dawson yet accounting for her life and actions that were her own response to the world as she experienced it, is that she is always reflected through the ideas, utterances and views of others. The assumption is that because they belonged together she would have been of the same view. Yet we know that one's fine understanding of ideas shared with a collective is not always exactly the same with those of the rest of the collective. We also know that even in the most united organisations individuals have their own expressions of ideas they share with the rest of their own ‘comrades’. This is, partly, the reason why we have Radical and Moderate strands of interpretations of one broad ideology. It would have been interesting to distinguish Dawson in this way. It would have been valuable to document Dawson directly. Given that Dawson was in the head of some of the strikes in question - as part of the leadership – her direct reflection as opposed to mirror imaging would have given ownership of the ‘insurrections’ to her as suggested in title.

It remains a speculation as to why Dawson was involved in the strikes, at least in this documentation. On this question we can choose to be romanticist and reconstruct her into a progressive image. This does not insinuate that she was not progressive. It is simply to highlight a methodological problem that is imposed by the choice of method on the one hand and the absence of enough facts. The method and scanty facts limit the space for some conclusions. Dawson would have been better explained if there was a measure of congruence between her ideas and actions. Through singling out Dawson the author would have demonstrated directly or indirectly the fine print of Dawson's interpretation of the ideology of the workers movement she was part of. In the absence of Dawson's own utterances, coupled with actions which are fairly documented, could have sufficed to provide a much fairer picture of her thoughts and who she was.

Dawson was quoted responding to the indictments of the 25 leaders of New Bedford Textile Workers Union, which also included her. The indictment came as the police and captains of industry were waging a campaign to weaken the industry following the 1926 strike where 30 000 men and women took to the streets protesting wage cuts. It is clear that the industry was shaken by the power of the workers numbers, solidarity and mobilisation around a common purpose. She described the indictment as “ a brazen attempt on the part of the mill owners ‘ courts to railroad leaders of the strike to long jail terms” (129). She further pronounced that the attack for the leaders would not intimidate the workers from building a strong union. This gives some insights into the construct of Dawson's mind. According to the author Dawson's rise to prominence as she ascended to positions of authority in the workers' movement cast her into the spotlight. This made her a subject of attraction by a number of media and other organisations. But contrary to the claim by the author that this generated accounts of her life that “provide a more detailed and comprehensive picture of Dawson...”, the details of Dawson's life do not give a compressive picture of this leader.

If details could give a ‘comprehensive picture’ there would have been explanation as to how Dawson could be part of the leadership of the United Textile Workers of America whose President, Thomas Mahon denounced communism without reservations (see p120) yet on the other hand ascribing to Communism (XVIII) which is proven by her easy engagement with Textile Mill Committee in organising the strike of 1929. This

is an interesting point in the journey to unravel the puzzle of Dawson's life. A highlight of this point, particularly by depicting her thoughts on this apparent contrast, would have provided insights as well into the logic of dual affiliation (ideology-wise) - which could have been the order of the day in the US at the time.