

## “AUTHOR FIGHTS BAN ON MAVIS GALLANT MEMOIR”

*Walter Bruno*

### **Introduction**

For thirty years, author Mavis Gallant and I maintained a platonic relationship, first, in Toronto and then, somewhere in Canada or Paris. We corresponded frequently and I kept her letters (and copies of mine). In matters of politics and culture, discussed in the letters, she and I were a pair. We admired the writing canon, 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism, and left-liberal civic values.

Mavis’s health deteriorated, and by late 2010, the last time I saw her, she was nearing infirmity. In the following year she could not sustain a phone conversation. Nor was her financial health good; she had savings that barely covered two years’ rent, and, by the end, she was unaware of even that.

On the other hand, material legacy was a non-item for Mavis—she scoffed at writing a will. She had no family and little concern for the future. Most of her estate would have consisted of private notes, a diary, and anything unpublished set onto paper by her.

Under copyright conventions (never legally tested in Canada) an estate would hold “moral” rights to the content of unpublished letters, even when the receiving party owns the letters. Mavis died in 2014. For me to know about a will and legacy, or even a death certificate, I’d have had to hire a lawyer in Paris.

A year later, I began writing my memoirs and built them around our letters. I’d been cut off from her for three years—she was physically and mentally incapacitated. During that time, a group organised as her supporters had entered her life in Paris. I did know they were helping her. What I didn’t know was that some of them had urged her to make a will. In the final will, an academic in Nova Scotia became her beneficiary, and here is the rest:

### **Press release: Author fights ban on Mavis Gallant memoir**

Writer Walter Bruno announced today he is fighting to publish his book, *Notes from the Gate: A Remembrance of Mavis Gallant*, despite an attempt to suppress it. The book is a memoir of the first decade of his 30-year friendship with Mrs. Gallant, the world-famous Canadian author who died in 2014.

The book is based on private letters he exchanged with Mavis Gallant. In many of them, Gallant documents her alienation from the *New Yorker* magazine as the latter is taken over by S.I. Newhouse. In other letters, Gallant bemoans the counter-culture of the early 1980s, as publishing becomes infused with identity politics and social engineering.

Bruno’s book is anchored in half of his 500-piece archive, and wanders through gender-feminism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism. Icons of those contemporary trends, such as

Margaret Atwood, Marguerite Duras, and Doris Lessing, are examined, as are Canadian political figures. Other key topics include early multiculturalism and cultural nationalism.

## **Suppression**

The attempt to suppress the book is being led by Mary K. MacLeod who is employed in Gender and Women's Studies at University of Cape Breton. MacLeod, although unrelated to Gallant, is the executor and heir of the Gallant estate, a collection of materials retrieved post-mortem from Gallant's Paris apartment. Under copyright conventions, estates extend to an author's unpublished letters sent to third parties.

Bruno reports that MacLeod has rebuffed all requests to negotiate his publishing rights. This is believed to be the first time in Canadian history that the estate of a writer has acted to suppress the writer's correspondence, not in its possession.

In September, 2016, the existence of a legal estate was asserted. A warning was issued to Bruno, who was astonished: Mavis Gallant had vowed, throughout her life, never to write a will nor appoint a literary executor. In fact, says Bruno, he doubts the durability of the will, drawn up when Mrs. Gallant was mentally incapacitated.

Nevertheless, Bruno immediately suspended his online distribution. His lawyers then asked to see the will in order to assess MacLeod's claims. In reply, on March 2, 2017, MacLeod's lawyers sent copies of documents, but stated that they were not entering into negotiation.

Bruno was "put on notice that, should he publish, distribute, or sell [the book] or any private letters of the late Mavis Gallant," MacLeod would launch legal action against him.

## **The defence campaign**

In response, Bruno has launched a GoFundMe campaign to collect funds for his defence. The fund is located at <https://www.gofundme.com/freedom-to-read-gallant-memoir>. Its goal is to allow Bruno to proceed with publishing and be able to defend his rights in court. Along the way, he is inviting Canadian publishers to look at the merits of the book and to defend the principle of a free press.

## **Background reveals fears**

The book is not just a collection of letters; it is a private memoir of 260 pages that traces the Mavis Gallant story within a narrative of Bruno's life. There was a connection; it happened that Bruno and Gallant were birds of one background and one political nest, despite their difference of age.

They both grew up on the soils of ethnically conflicted Quebec. As they separately worked through those conditions, they explored many of the same conflicts. Then, together, they saw how Canadian cultural policy changed in the 1980s, as culture was validated by Ottawa and centralized in Toronto.

They were not always impressed, especially when the reading canon followed suit.

This makes many of Gallant's letters politically eye-popping. Indeed, what really bothers MacLeod, Bruno feels, is not sharing book profits, but revealing the debates within the quoted letters. Among other things, they explore the new and loosened criteria for literary depth and universality.

More strikingly, their chatter questions gender-feminism, women's-lit departments, identity silos, and such current tempests as "appropriation of voice." They also question language revisionism, speech codes, and affirmative action.

Bruno points out that these notions have underlain the creation of MacLeod's department at UCB. Thus, there is much in the book that might irritate MacLeod and her employers.

"Here," says Bruno, "is the real issue. It appears that UCB Gender Studies controls the *gender-study-averse* papers of Mavis Gallant, while claiming to tout Gallant's work. For me, the picture is clear: release of my book could reveal how MacLeod is mis-appropriating and perhaps misrepresenting the very author she is promoting.

"At the very least," he adds, "she seems to be preventing her own students from reading the inconvenient truth."

*Walter Bruno is a poet, playwright, and translator, and a long-time SAFS member. He retired from teaching in 2010.*