

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Summer 2008

**Review of *A Great Restlessness: The Life and Politics of Dorise Nielsen* by Faith Johnston**

Valerie Korinek  
*University of Saskatchewan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Korinek, Valerie, "Review of *A Great Restlessness: The Life and Politics of Dorise Nielsen* by Faith Johnston" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1364.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1364>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*A Great Restlessness: The Life and Politics of Dorise Nielsen* by Faith Johnston. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006. 361 pp. Map, photographs, endnotes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

For years, we've known little about Dorise Nielsen, other than the curious fact that she holds the distinction of being the first federally elected communist in Canada. What, one wonders, caused a prairie farm wife and mother to run successfully as the United Progressive candidate for North Battleford, Saskatchewan, in 1940? The answers are multifaceted according to Faith Johnston's award-winning biography. Partly, Johnston attributes Nielsen's motivation to culture shock at her transformation from a middle-class urban English existence to the isolation, poverty, and deprivation of life on a central Saskatchewan farm during the Depression. Secondly, and equally significantly, Nielsen's personality, with her stubborn refusals to accept the status quo, combined with prodigious energy, enthusiasm, and charisma were what led to her politicization and lengthy career as a spokesperson, politician, and loyal party worker.

Johnston is skilled at getting us quickly into the heart of the story, relaying "how Canada was Nielsen's university" and how the tough

lessons taught there forged her political views. Recounting Nielsen's short stint as a single, greenhorn teacher at a rural Saskatchewan school through to her unfulfilling marriage to a farmer, Johnston goes on to emphasize the impact of providing for a family while on relief, and how the degradation and anger forged by this experience (which included the loss of a child for whom medical care was unattainable) provided a brutally harsh tutorial about economic and gendered inequities. Notably, where other radical women found themselves in the backrooms and kitchens supporting male politicians, Nielsen's natural talents for public speaking and her ability to connect with people made her the logical, yet unconventional choice to be the political candidate.

Given that this is Nielsen's claim to fame, it is disappointing that Johnston doesn't offer more explicit analysis of Nielsen's ability to transcend gender differences in the West when the opposite would prove true for her in central Canada. First in Ottawa, then in Toronto, she struggled as a female oddity (similar to Agnes McPhail) whom male politicians and radicals treated either deferentially or dismissively. Those who strove to treat her as "a lady" she scorned, including Prime Minister Mackenzie King who was initially impressed by her and then aghast when he discovered her political beliefs. Johnston concludes that Nielsen's lack of theoretical rigor was to blame for her failure to maintain a leadership position within the communist party and leftist circles; however, a more sustained discussion of this issue, and of the gendered differences between the rural West and the urbanized East might have offered much of value to the long-standing historiographical debates about gender relations on the prairies.

Proceeding chronologically, Johnston provides a detailed overview of Nielsen's political work and accomplishments in Saskatchewan, Ottawa, Toronto, and, lastly, China (where she lived from 1957 until her death in 1980). She is more cautious in navigating Nielsen's chaotic private life as a wife, mother, lover, and grandmother, providing us with a portrait of a person who did not fit the normative nurturing and supportive role. While Johnston is sympathetic to the insurmountable challenges Nielsen faced as a single

parent, she doesn't shy away from enumerating the often callous treatment that her children and male partners received. When they held her back, she jettisoned them, and it was only in later years, lonely and ailing in China, that Nielsen appears to have reached some rapprochement with her children. In this regard, there are striking parallels with innumerable biographies of male politicians who placed their families on the margins, their biographers easily dismissing their private lives as less consequential than their public work. By devoting so much space to Nielsen's difficult private life, Johnston has held her to a very different standard than her political peers, and this diminishes her political accomplishments.

*A Great Restlessness* provides us with a superb portrait of the making of a radical, female politician. While Nielsen remains, as her biographer acknowledges, a somewhat enigmatic figure, and one who resists uncritical celebration, this well-written book goes a long way towards providing us with important insights into the making of this exceptional western Canadian woman and of the challenges she faced in the public and private domains.

VALERIE J. KORINEK  
Department of History  
University of Saskatchewan