

From Pulps to Prestige: A Conversation between Canadian Comics Historians John Bell and Ivan Kocmarek

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Introduction

This fascinating discussion took place on October 15, 2021, as a keynote for 80 Years and Beyond: A Virtual Symposium on Canadian Comics. What follows is an edited version of the conversation, which begins with a first-hand history of the recovery of Canadian Second World War (War Exchange Conservation Act or WECA) comics in the 1970s and then moves on to discuss challenges in archiving, preserving, and maintaining access to Canadian comics, past and present.

The Conversation

Ivan Kocmarek: How did you become aware of Canadian comic books and become interested in them?

John Bell: Well, like you, as a boy I was a Marvel addict. I almost felt like a junkie. I had to buy every Marvel comic book published. You know, there were even weeks where the only Marvel comic was *Millie the Model*—okay, I'd buy it!

Like you, I discovered Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert's book *The Great Canadian Comic Books* in 1971.¹ I was working in an independent bookstore in Halifax at that time, and I was stunned to discover that there had been Canadian comic books, that there was a generation of Canadian kids who grew up with Canadian heroes, Canadian graphic narratives. That was just an absolute revelation.

You know, for those of us who grew up on the US superhero comics—and they were thrilling, they were powerful, especially the Jack Kirby narratives—it was for us, as Canadians, a particularly alienating experience, because you always knew in the back of your mind that, for me, living in Halifax and Montreal, the Fantastic Four weren't coming to Halifax—it wasn't going to happen! It underscored the notion that we were living in a bit of a hinterland, a place bereft of heroes.

My own interest in Canadian comics was sparked by that Hirsh and Loubert book, but when I really started to explore it was a little later, after I graduated from Dalhousie University and joined the staff of the University Archives. At that time, I started getting interested in some of the marginal aspects of our culture, particularly Canadian science fiction and fantasy and Canadian comics. I can trace that back to the discovery of *The Buyer's Guide for Comic Book Fandom*.² It was a weekly tabloid devoted to comics published in the US, usually three sections, well over one hundred pages every issue. It had some editorial content, like interviews and some reviews and profiles of creators, but it was mostly classified ads for comics, fanzines, and small-press publications. It's through the pages of that magazine I connected with Gene Day and Dave Sim and a lot of the people active in the science fiction and fantasy and comics semi-pro milieu in Canada.³

I came to realize that there was activity in Canadian comics and there were actually people in the mid-1970s creating Canadian comics. About that same time, I discovered *Orb* and *Captain Canuck* on local newsstands, so that, I think, is sort of where my interest began.⁴ At a certain point, though, it became obvious to me that Canadian science fiction and comics had really been seriously neglected, and there was very, very little work out there touching on either of those traditions. So, I started to think, as I was working in an archive within a library setting, that maybe I should start work on a bibliography of Canadian science fiction and fantasy, and maybe also a checklist of Canadian comics and just see what's out there and start digging. So that's how it all started.

Not long after that, I had the good fortune to meet Owen McCarron, who ran the giveaway studio Comic Book World.⁵ He was an extremely generous, open person. He was working for Marvel at that time, and he invited me out to his studio. I went out, and I left there with copies of virtually every single giveaway that he had produced, and he'd taken the time to date them all as well. So, as a bibliographer of Canadian comics, this was pretty exciting, walking off with thirty or forty new entries touching on these obscure comics that most people weren't even familiar with. And then, maybe a year after that, I stumbled on a small archive of Bell Features material in a science-fiction bookstore in Halifax. I have no idea what the provenance of this material was—how it ended up in Halifax I don't know. What it consisted of was hundreds of Bell Features production negs, textual records, including contracts and correspondence, and a lot of file copies of Bell Features comics. So that really helped me along in terms of building my Golden Age collection. The obvious thing for me working on that comic-book checklist was that I realized there were no institutional holdings to speak of. If I was going to document

Canadian comics, I had to accumulate my own research collection, which is what I started doing in the mid-1970s.

IK: American comic fandom has stratified its comic book history. It produced such terminology as the Golden Age or Silver Age, Bronze Age, and so on. Is that a template that we can transpose to Canadian comics? Or do you think there must be a different way of looking at them?

JB: I think there is a different way. I'm uncomfortable with those American demarcations, all the various ages. I mean what are we in now, the Lithium Age? I do think, though, that there are distinct periods in our history. I've pointed to those and outlined them in my book *Invaders from the North*, but I think I should really underscore that that's just one person's opinion. I would expect other people to look at the history of Canadian comics and define those periods differently, maybe weigh it all in a different fashion, and I would welcome that. In fact, I encourage people to challenge my narrative, my take on it all.

IK: I agree with you, I think we just can't transpose the American template right on Canadian comics. It's such a varied history, and I have watched Canadian comics develop from a very marginal existence up to many Canadian graphic narratives that fill our bookshelves, stores, and our libraries. Comics scholarship and comics, in general, have grown in acceptability. Are we at the point where we can say there is a definite Canadian comics legacy or tradition? Even given the global world we live in, can we still think about Canadian comics as having a legacy and a tradition?

JB: Well, we certainly have our own tradition, we have our own distinct history—particularly if you factor in Quebec. That makes us quite unique. I think that the bicultural aspect of our comic tradition means we have our own stories. We have our own heroes and anti-heroes. But whether we're distinct in terms of formal or stylistic considerations, that's another matter altogether. You know: is there a uniquely Canadian way of doing comics, of making comics?

IK: Going back to its origins and those strange wartime comics, we did have a Canadian take on comics. It was so patriotic as we were involved in the war, but they quickly became marginalized after the war was over and disappeared into history. Then it was hard for us to chip out and eke out some sort of Canadian comic book identity, which happened in the 1970s, as you say. I think there is a legacy and we need to celebrate that legacy, not just a pure celebration but also to recognize the voices that have been left out and need to be heard in that legacy. So, I would say there is one. Now, connected to that, part of the pursuit of Canadian comics has been to produce a sort of national or nationalistic hero. What is the role of a nationalistic hero in our tradition of comics?

JB: Well, I think it's inevitable. When comic book artists and writers in Canada discovered the Hirsh and Loubert book, and the wartime comics and our wartime superheroes, you could see that reflected in the small-press comics of that same era and in the fanzines. A real nationalist current emerged in Canadian comics. That was a natural reaction to that discovery—and to the domination of American comics in our culture. I'm not sure how successful anyone has been in creating a Canadian national superhero, but I think it's something that will remain an extremely important current within the field of comics. It's natural that Canadian creators and fans of superhero comics will endeavour—and there have been many of them over the years—to create a distinctly Canadian superhero. It's something that we will just see happen cyclically over and over again. That seems inevitable.

IK: Now, aside from the superhero comics, we've got a magnificent tradition of graphic narrative. And I think of Joe Ollmann's recent selection for the final list of Governor General's Awards nominations in literature, with his work *Fictional Father*. It's a wonderful level to get to. What is your take on the growth of graphic narrative in the Canadian comics tradition?

JB: You and I have talked about this before. Comics have become extremely mainstream. That is certainly a welcome development. When I was a kid, and when you were growing up as well, comics were everywhere; they were widespread, they were in the grocery stores, they were in drugstores, they were in corner stores, they were in tobacco stores. You could find them practically everywhere but bookstores and libraries! Now you go into Indigo and there are huge sections devoted to graphic narratives and bound volumes of comics, and that's fantastic. I think it's something that we should certainly welcome. But the more respectable comics become, I hope that we also don't lose sight of comics' more pulpish roots and of less respectable forms of graphic narrative.

IK: Yes, there is an essential dialectic there.

JB: I think that's part of the challenge for the library and archival community. It's easy now to document mainstream Canadian comics, graphic narratives, and graphic novels, but there's still marginal stuff going on out there. That's a real challenge, to continue to document the little Xerox local fanzines, the really edgy and fringe stuff. That takes an enormous amount of imagination and effort—and effort, of course, translates into resources and money for institutions that set out to document Canadian comics.

IK: How important is a main repository, or at least a network of varied repositories, that can be accessed by researchers and people who are just interested in Canadian comics?

JB: I think it's crucial for anyone doing research and anyone who's trying to take a historical perspective on the development of Canadian comics. It's absolutely necessary that we see more institutions making an effort to document the comics, but working co-operatively to share. Whether we have a single national institution that takes on that challenge, maybe that's not so important. I'm really glad to see that Library and Archives Canada is making an effort, but I'm glad to see that collections are also emerging at other institutions—university archives and university libraries. The key for researchers would be that these institutions find some way to collectively describe and share information about their holdings.

IK: Not only repositories or archives, but we've had a rise of Canadian comics in galleries, libraries, and even museums. In the last century, Canadian comics seemed marginalized. Now, I don't think we should simply wave our maple-leaf flags in the celebration of eighty years of Canadian comics without the sobering recognition of the voices that are marginalized and have been marginalized throughout the tradition. Throughout those eight decades, from that first Canadian floppy, the voices of women, of Indigenous peoples, of queer communities, of immigrants, and so on, have not been very loud. One thing that I'm very proud and happy about is that these voices are growing in our comics now. What is your take on this?

JB: Well, I think it's important that we realize that comics are cultural artifacts. They tend to reflect the societal values and attitudes of their time. But this would be true of just about every aspect of our popular culture—not just comics. We should definitely welcome and encourage attempts to come to terms with any legacy of racism and marginalization. You know, personally, I'm keen to see new approaches to the history of Canadian graphic narrative. As I've said before, it was probably my main motivation for donating my collection, the hope that people would look at the comics in a different way and read and reinterpret our history from all kinds of different vantage points. So that's all to be welcomed, as far as I'm concerned.

IK: You were involved in the archival sense of Canadian history in Canadian comic books, but you also helped put on a bunch of exhibits and developed an online presence for this information. How important is it for our comic book legacy in Canada not just to be shut behind closed doors in archives but to be accessible through galleries and libraries and museums?

JB: I think that's incredibly important. When you look back and realize that the Hirsh and Loubert book was accompanied by a National Gallery exhibition that toured the country, it had an enormous impact. It received an incredible amount of media attention and allowed people to rediscover this neglected aspect of their history. It probably would rank it as one of

their most successful exhibitions ever. At the end of that exhibition and the tour of the material, the National Gallery decided that maybe this stuff wasn't for them, though, in terms of making it part of their holdings. I think they encouraged Hirsh and Loubert to talk to people at the Archives and that perhaps it would be more appropriate for the material to go there.

I know that the *Guardians of the North* exhibition that I did at the Museum of Caricature received an incredible amount of attention in the national media and even some international coverage. In fact, the first person to cover it in the media was a guy working for the *International Herald Tribune* and *Washington Post* who wrote a piece that was picked up by other American newspapers. The gist of the story was, "You're not going to believe this, there is such a thing as Canadian superheroes!" All of a sudden, the Canadian media, noting that the American media was interested, became very interested. We were deluged with requests for interviews and that sort of thing. But what was great about that show was that people could come to the museum and we had the original artwork, we had drafts of scripts, they could learn about how comics were produced and what a comic-book script looked like—and the dialectic between the two. That's really important, but whether or not institutions are prepared to do that in this new era, I don't know. I think they're more inclined to do a web exhibition, but it's important for people to see the original artwork.

IK: Few people know that at the Library and Archives they have over 2,300 pages of original Bell Features artwork. This came from Loubert and Hirsh, who managed to acquire it from John Ezrin back in 1971 or 1972.⁶ Can you say anything else about things that you'd like to see done in a gathering like this, or how significant it is?

JB: Well, I certainly welcome events like this, and I certainly appreciate the invitation to attend. My concern would be that I would hate to see symposiums like this—and gatherings of this kind—be overreliant on the academy and dominated by the academy. I hope that there will always be room for independent researchers, creators, publishers, and other non-academics. I think they have a lot to contribute as well.

IK: Yes, that was exactly the essence of our mandate, what we thought of when establishing this symposium. My last question to you is, do you have any thoughts on the future of Canadian comics in another eighty years or even in the near future? What do you see happening in Canadian comics?

JB: That's really difficult to anticipate, I mean the comics are here to stay, comics are mainstream. I think there will always be a marginal current within our comics. I hope that there are people out there that will make an effort to document that. Who can anticipate where technology is going? That's obviously going to have an enormous impact on comics and graphic narrative. There's one thing I could point to, though, in terms of

scholarship. I hope that someday, someone's going to take up the challenge to produce a full bibliography of English Canadian comics and continue the work that I did with *Canuck Comics* and that you did with your guide to wartime comics. In Quebec they're fortunate people like Michel Viau and Rosaire Fontaine have done remarkable work in documenting their comics. We need someone to do that in English Canada—a bibliography, and it doesn't have to be a price guide. In fact I hope it isn't, but a bibliography like that would be a foundation for further scholarship. Let's document the full scope of the production of comics in Canada. I hope that we see someone tackle that challenge.

Notes

1. *The Great Canadian Comic Books* is one of three projects on 1940s WECA comics by the young Toronto filmmaking duo Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert, in addition to a segment for the CBC program *Telescope* (aired October 5, 1971) called "The Great Canadian Comics" and a touring art exhibit for the National Gallery of Canada titled *Comic Art Traditions in Canada 1941-45*. *The Great Canadian Comic Books* is a glossy coffee-table book that reprints pages from the WECA comics. See Kocmarek.
2. Founded in 1971 by a young comics collector, Alan Light, and subsequently called the *Comics Buyer's Guide*, this was the longest-running periodical dedicated to the comics industry before it ceased publication in 2013. See "Comics Buyer's Guide."
3. Gene Day (1951-1982) was a Toronto underground and independent cartoonist who also did inking and pencilling work for Marvel. Day was a mentor to Dave Sim (b. 1956), with whom he collaborated on some late 1970s indie comics.
4. *Orb Magazine* was an independent Canadian comics magazine published by James Waley in Toronto between 1974-1976, with support from the Ontario Arts Council. *Orb Magazine* no. 2 introduced a new Canadian superhero, Northern Light, the first patriotic superhero since the WECA comics. See "Orb Productions." *Captain Canuck* was an independent comic "[c]reated by cartoonist Ron Leishman and artist/writer Richard Comely" in July 1975 ("Captain Canuck"). It has appeared sporadically ever since. See Dittmer and Larsen, as well as Edwardson.
5. Owen McCarron (1929-2005) was a prolific cartoonist and comics publisher based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who made his name under Stan Lee at Marvel in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, he wrote, drew, coloured, and published dozens of giveaway comics for children through his own company, McCarron Advertising and Comic Book World. McCarron was inducted into the Canadian Comic Book Creator Hall of Fame in 2006.
6. John Ezrin was a wartime investor in Bell Features, which published many of the WECA comics. In 1947, he bought over two thousand original pages of artwork and the rights from Cy Bell, and in April 1971 Hirsh and Loubert bought the collection, which they then sold to the National Archives. See Kocmarek.

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Ivan Kocmarek was born in Blackburn, Lancashire, in the United Kingdom. He received his doctorate in comparative religions (Eastern religions) from McMaster University in 1981 and taught sessionally there for eight years. He received his BEd from the University of Toronto in 1989 and taught secondary school for twenty-three years in Hamilton, Ontario. Since retirement in 2012, he has become an independent researcher of comics that were produced in Canada during World War II, leading to a long-running online column, the appraisal of two university archival collections of these comics, and a number of publications on the subject.

John Bell, a former senior archivist at Library and Archives Canada, is the author or editor of more than twenty books touching on various aspects of Canadian history and culture. Much of Bell's research and scholarship has focused on neglected aspects of Canadian popular culture, particularly science fiction and fantasy, the pulps, and comics. Among his books are Canuck Comics: A Guide to Comic Books Published in Canada (1986), Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-Book Art (1992), and Invaders from the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe (2006). He lives in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.