

# Imperial Commerce and the Canadian Muse

The Hudson's Bay Company's  
Poetic Advertising Campaign of  
1966-1972

In July of 1965, Barbara Kilvert, the Executive Assistant of Public Relations with the Hudson's Bay Company, kicked off an unusual advertising campaign by buying a poem from Al Purdy. She had come across a review of *Cariboo Horses* in the May issue of *Time* magazine, and, in her words, "decided I should make contact." As she later reminisced, "This was the beginning of it all." "It all" referred to a promotional venture inaugurated by Purdy's "Arctic Rhododendrons"—a series of ads featuring "new poems by Canadian poets, with layout design handled by young artists" (Kilvert, Annotation, Purdy Review). Over the next six years, the advertisements appeared in such respected periodicals as *Quarry*, *The Tamarack Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *The Malahat Review*, *Cité Libre*, and *Liberté*. Participants in the ad campaign made for an impressive roster of writers, including, besides Purdy, Margaret Atwood, Earle Birney, Louis Dudek, Joan Finnegan, Phyllis Gotlieb, Ralph Gustafson, D. G. Jones, Gustave Lamarche, Gwendolyn MacEwen, John Newlove, Alden Nowlan, Michael Ondaatje, Fernand Ouellette, P. K. Page, Jean-Guy Pilon, James Reaney, A. J. M. Smith, Raymond Souster, and Miriam Waddington.

Focussing on HBC's use of original works by Canadian poets in three of these journals—*Quarry*, *Tamarack*, and *Canadian Literature*—(See Appendix), this essay assesses the consequences of recontextualizing poems within a commercial frame of reference. Some of those consequences, as we will argue, were positive. Others, however, were troubling; poetic meaning could irresistibly be drawn into the orbit of HBC's commercial objectives. We will also demonstrate that, while in some respects the campaign

represented a divergence from HBC's customary promotional practices, in other ways it was complicit both with the company's advertised self-image as the corporate embodiment of the nation it served, and with the historic imperialist agenda that this corporate image did not advertise. Although the poems purchased were unpublished but not expressly commissioned for the campaign, and although the authors were given no directions as to preferred subject or tendency, many of the works used aligned with that nation-building agenda. As we will suggest, this was not a coincidence; HBC's commercial nationalism intersected with the growing spirit of cultural nationalism during this decade—a spirit that many of these poets shared.

This apparent meeting of minds needs to be read against a generally contentious historical relationship between poetry and advertising. Frequently the very idea of any affinity between the two modes of discourse has been flatly denied, and even those who recognize such an affinity have often taken a dim view of it. The semanticist S. I. Hayakawa acknowledges that both modes “strive to give meaning and overtones to the innumerable data of everyday experience, they both attempt to make the objects of experience symbolic of something beyond themselves” (204). However, he adds “If we speak separately of what are ordinarily called poetry and advertising, let us speak of the former as *disinterested poetry*, the latter as *venal poetry*, the word *venal* being used in the sense of being available for hire” (206, emphasis original). In short, Hayakawa concedes poetic status to advertising only with stringent reservations; the word “venal” implies the dominance of the utilitarian over the freely creative.

Such pronouncements suggest that poetry, once delivered into the clutches of commercialism, will inevitably suffer degradation—a critique reminiscent of Frankfurt-School cultural theory, as espoused by influential exponents such as Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Such axiomatic suspicion of the relationship between art and commerce often finds its way into popular discussions of poetry and advertising. A 2000 *Harper's Magazine* article by John Jeremiah Sullivan wittily entitled “The Death of the Hired Poem” examines the consequences of smuggling a piece of what Hayakawa would call disinterested poetry into the realm of available-for-hire venality. Sullivan discusses the use of a familiar Robert Frost poem, “The Road Not Taken,” in a television advertising campaign by Monster.com, an internet employment agency. By brutally abridging Frost's poem, the Monster.com commercial turns it into a clichéd advocacy of stalwart individualism. As Sullivan explains:

Out went the second stanza, in which the qualifying note is introduced: “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” Out went the wishful resignation . . . of “I doubted if I should ever come back.” Out, most brazenly, went the first two lines of the last stanza, in which the speaker imagines himself as an old gasbag, turning the wavering and randomness of his life into a tale of courage and foresight. Scraped clean of irony, the abridged text that Monster.com’s “cast of characters” recites is an uncomplicated paean to heroic individualism, just the sort of thing the speaker’s old, sighing self might come up with in one of his less honest moments. (Paragraph 7)

Using his Frost example as a springboard, Sullivan argues that advertising capitalizes on poetic texts by forcing them into a Procrustean bed, homogenizing complexities and ironies into the banality of platitude for the sake of an easy, instant appeal to consumer susceptibilities. (It should be noted that none of the poems used in HBC’s ad campaign were mutilated in this fashion; all were reproduced intact, with the exception of an excerpt from Gwendolyn MacEwen’s *Terror and Erebus*.) The social theorist Andrew Wernick sees promotional culture in comparable terms as a voraciously parasitical force: “[T]hrough the ties which have developed between advertising, commercial media, and mass entertainment, the intertext of product promotion has become absorbed into an even wider promotional complex founded on the commodification, and transformation into advertising, of (produced) culture itself” (95).

Such hard-and-fast negative assumptions about the damaging relationship between art and promotion tend to oversimplify the actual workings of both promotional culture and poetry, and do not provide an adequate basis for assessing the HBC advertising campaign. One theorist who has attempted to counter such programmatic negativity is Jennifer Wicke, in her 1988 book *Advertising Fictions*. Wicke views advertising as “a language and a literature in its own right” (3). She maintains that “[b]oth literature and advertising are composite, heterogeneous language practices, which need to be read off each other to gauge their respective outlines” (14). More recently, the political theorist Jane Bennett has taken the case further; she argues that advertising, rather than ipso facto implicating the consumer in commodity fetishism, permits a wider range of possible responses, including what she daringly calls “an enchanted materialism” (118). “Although pleasure can entail stupidity, passivity, and, eventually, moral indifference,” she acknowledges, “I contend that it can also enliven, energize, and, under the right circumstances, support ethical generosity” (128). Indeed, the sort of pleasurable openness Bennett envisions as a feasible response to advertising

closely resembles the sensual and intellectual engagement to be gained from the reading of poetry. Rather than relegating all advertising to the role of always-already venal exploiter of art, we propose, following Bennett's lead, to consider HBC's "poetic" campaign as potentially energizing, while still highlighting its corporate and imperialist designs.

The sort of complexity we have in mind emerges if we view HBC's poetic venture against the backdrop of earlier company promotional practices, which blended nationalist fervour with settler-invader ideology. Kilvert, for her part, envisioned the initiative as a departure from earlier strategies: "We are most anxious," she wrote to a young Margaret Atwood, "to produce a new series of ads; this time avoiding the 'Company history' bit and, instead, choosing a copy subject more closely related to the interests of this rather specialized readership, namely, poetry" (Kilvert, Letter to Margaret Atwood). Kilvert's "Company history bit" refers to HBC's long-standing approach to enhancing its public image through identifying itself with the nation and with the exploration and development of the West and the North. The flagship vehicle for such self-promotion, *The Beaver Magazine*, owned by the company until 1994, evolved over time from an in-house publication to an extramurally circulated magazine. Although it did not normally feature works of poetry in its pages, it did foreground subjects of potential interest to nationalistically minded Canadian poets. (Margaret Atwood, responding to Kilvert's invitation to contribute to the campaign, opens her letter by declaring that "I . . . think the idea . . . an excellent one" and adds, parenthetically, "I admire *The Beaver*, too" (Atwood, Letter to Barbara Kilvert, 4 Jan. 1966). As Joan Sangster notes, already by 1943, "*The Beaver* had long been a deliberate public relations effort on the part of the HBC to align its commercial image with positive interpretations of Canadian nation-building" (2). Specifically, it rationalized the Company's historic trading relations with Indigenous people as an instance of benevolent outreach to grateful subjects of empire. Peter Geller, author of several studies of HBC's promotional initiatives, argues that in "*The Beaver* magazine, as in the HBC's public relations project in general, stereotypical and simplified images of peoples and places served to present a particular vision of the company and its activities" (183).

That imperialist project, aimed at publicizing the company's positive role in nation-building, gained urgency in the late 1950s and the 60s as the company came under fire for its role in the relocation of Inuit communities (Tester and Kulchyski 108-09). HBC's attempts at damage control took the form of a series of self-congratulatory print ads, placed in journals such

as *The Tamarack Review*, featuring extracts from the diaries of Company traders like James Isham (“These Natives are Very Loving and fond of their Children . . .”), fulsome testimonials by writers such as Ernest Thompson Seton (“The Hudson’s Bay Company has always been the guardian angel of the north”), and so forth. Prominent motifs included HBC’s role in exploration and “discovery” of “wilderness” areas, bringing the “fruits of civilization” to Indigenous inhabitants, building peaceful relations between “warring tribes,” and celebrating the North as a snowy *tabula rasa* ripe for development. In the years immediately preceding Kilvert’s poetry initiative, HBC ran a series of ads eulogizing Company agent-explorers of the past several centuries, each ad underscored with the slogan, “Great Men—past and present—build a great Company” (“Samuel Hearne”).

As the phrase “past and present” suggests, HBC plumed itself on continuity of service over a remarkably extended period of time. The Company, of course, had its origins as a commercial arm of a steadily expanding British Empire, to whose North American outreach it contributed heavily. In “Art, Advertising, and the Legacy of Empire,” Jeffrey Auerbach draws attention to the “long history of commodifying the British Empire, from the imperial displays at the Great Exhibition [of 1851], to the famous Pears’ Soap advertisements of the late-nineteenth century, to the Empire Marketing Board of the 1920s” (16).<sup>1</sup> He cites Thomas Richards’ observation that commodities were “convenient vehicle[s] for expanding the Empire’s sphere of influence” (16). The Hudson’s Bay Company exemplified this time-honoured symbiosis between imperialism and commodification; it was a commercial empire upon which the sun of exchange value never set.

There were several compelling reasons why Kilvert considered it appropriate to depart from HBC’s long-established set of promotional practices. To begin with, the venture had an appealingly public-spirited aura. In the interest of “selling” her novel idea to Atwood, Kilvert assured her that all parties to the venture would benefit: “I think the space would be used to the best possible advantage for the Company, for the periodical involved, and also for those poets in Canada who, unfortunately, still find it difficult at times to publish new works and realize financial gain from their undertakings” (Kilvert, Letter to Margaret Atwood).

The “financial gain” in question was fifty dollars for each poem used—a modest amount even by standards of the time, but not negligible, as the poets’ eager responses suggest. Within four days of receiving Kilvert’s invitation, Atwood submitted seven poems for her perusal, commenting:

"[I]t is encouraging to see a Canadian company doing something that ought to be done"—presumably, supporting the arts (Atwood, Letter to Barbara Kilvert). In a more candidly financial vein, Phyllis Gotlieb wrote, "For my part, as a card-carrying customer of long standing, the amount of money you paid for my poem and the promptness with which you paid it are the best advertisement you could ever hope to produce for the Hudson's Bay Co.!" (Kilvert, "Comments on Poetry Advertising Series"). John Newlove concurs: "I must say that Hudson's Bay is quicker about making a decision and in paying for it, and more generous in payment, than any literary outfit I've run across so far" (Newlove, Letter to Barbara Kilvert).<sup>2</sup>

But the poets' enthusiasm for the project was not solely based on financial considerations. A number of their responses dwelled on the aesthetic values of the advertisements. Miriam Waddington declared, "Your idea and way of using Canadian poems is really brilliant—whoever thought of it—I'm very glad that Hudson's Bay had such an original and attractive notion and then put it into practice" (Kilvert, "Comments on Poetry Advertising Series"). D. G. Jones professed himself "quite impressed by the series—by the combination of words and graphic images—and I've wondered if some day the company might consider publishing a selection of the best among them" (Kilvert, "Comments on Poetry Advertising Series").

The surge in cultural nationalism in the 1960s would also have been a major cause for the poets' enthusiasm. By mid-decade, the Pearson government, led by its finance minister Walter Gordon, was taking steps to limit foreign ownership of Canadian cultural industries (television, radio, newspapers, magazines), a move that the Watkins Report, commissioned by Gordon, seconded in 1968. As a result, the Canada Development Corporation was formed in 1971 to promote Canadian ownership of private-sector companies (only to be dismantled by the Mulroney government in 1986, as part of that government's privatization agenda). Telefilm Canada was created in 1967, to support Canadian film production, and the Canada Council began to receive monies from the federal government in the same year. In short, as Sarah Corse writes, "by the 1960s, Canadian mobilization against British and especially American cultural domination was in full swing. . . . Pan-Canadian nationalism reached its zenith in the period of the late 1960s and 1970s" (52)—exactly the period in which Barbara Kilvert's new advertising initiative took flight. Add to this the resurgence of Quebec nationalism in the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution, and Kilvert was assured of a welcoming response from poets in both official languages. Gustave Lamarche wrote

to Kilvert congratulating the HBC “for the initiative they have displayed in desiring to make known the poets of Canada,” while his compatriot Marcel Bélanger’s appreciation was more focused on Québécois cultural visibility: “I congratulate you on your enterprise and I hope it will contribute to the knowledge of Quebec poetry in the English speaking world” (Kilvert, “Comments on Poetry Advertising Series”).

Although, as these poets recognized, the campaign was in some ways a groundbreaking initiative, we still need to ask how radical a departure it actually represented. In fact, the imperialist motifs we have identified in earlier HBC promotional culture persist in more oblique guise in some of the “poetic” ads. John Newlove’s “The Hitchhiker,” for example, even while evoking the symbolic title character’s existential wandering, replicates the earlier “Company history” theme of exploring the vast Canadian terrain from sea to sea:

...there you stood on  
the road in the wind,  
the cold wind going  
through you and you  
going through the country  
to no end, only  
to turn again at one sea  
and begin it again... (back cover)

Newlove’s “cold wind” also touches on another frequent motif in earlier HBC publicity: the harshness of the climatic conditions to be braved in the Cold Nation. Other contributing poets also dwell on this theme of the inhospitable North. Alden Nowlan’s cattle in “Midnight of the First Snow”

lift up their heads  
with a little stir of wonder,  
then go back to grazing,  
getting every blade within reach  
before taking  
another sleepy step in the darkness. (back cover)

Like the venturesome human subjects populating earlier HBC series, Nowlan’s animals are shown stepping into a dark, frigid unknown.

As in those older ads, contact with Canadian nature in other HBC poems can also provide vatic glimpses like Nowlan’s “stir of wonder.” In A. J. M. Smith’s “The Birches,” the quintessentially northern trees “seem to be flashing / a message” when their leaves rustle in the breeze (back cover), but that message is an ambiguous one: “What do they say?” the speaker wonders,

“or seem to?” The message of the land is similarly emphatic yet intangible in Purdy’s “Arctic Rhododendrons.” The “vivid blue-purple / and white foam zig zagging / from flower to flower” are too elusive to be pinned down, yet the blossoms represent something as momentous as a secularized “Stations of the Cross.” The speaker’s vision of the flowers marks an epiphanic moment of discovery: “—and no one has seen them here / but the loud river / and the land itself” (back cover). Although we are not made privy to the ethnographical musings of Company “pioneers” like Governor George Simpson or James Isham in these ads, the pioneering compulsion to decipher the orphic hieroglyphs of the continent persists.

This desire to read the landscape symbolically often takes the form, in these poems, of mythologizing the local—a frequent strategy of cultural-nationalist poets of the 60s. In Souster’s Toronto-specific “Ward’s Island,” for example, the flight of “two mallards with wing-stroke / of patience, strength of all continent-crossers” becomes an augury of the onset of Canadian winter and ultimately of death: “leaving summer / which had hardly been / inevitably over” (71). Other poems attempt even more explicitly than Souster’s to transmute natural phenomena into pieces of local mythology. James Reaney, the mythologizer of the local par excellence, evokes the natural scene “Near Tobermory, Ontario” by personifying earth, air, and water as mythological sister-spirits “Urtha,” “Pale Blue Airy,” and “Watty Blue,” all held in suspension by the fourth sister, “Light” (back cover). The “enchantment” of the land, and of specific places within it, calls to mind what Bennett identifies as one of the characteristic pleasures of advertising. In the context of HBC promotional history, however, there still clings to such “enchantment” a lingering aura of white European “taming” of an alien realm.

Nowhere in the new series of ads is this imperialist taming more conspicuous than in Gustave Lamarché’s “Kateri Tekakwitha,” a poem paying homage to the seventeenth-century Iroquois saint. Here we have a narrative that dovetails neatly with HBC’s historic colonizing initiatives, in particular their abetting of missionary work with Indigenous people. Initially Kateri, like the speakers of poems by Purdy, Smith, and Reaney, finds divinity in objects in the natural world: “Kateri adorait des dieux de feuillage” (Kateri worshipped gods of the foliage). For Lamarché’s Kateri, however, these gods of the natural scene prove inadequate because unresponsive: “Ils étaient beaux mais ne répondaient pas” (They were beautiful but did not answer). Frustrated by their silence, Kateri eventually lapses into a state of melancholy. Her sadness is remedied only when she is told (“Un jour lui fut dit”) that the things she



loves in nature—grasses, waters, the flight of birds—are not themselves God, but “simplement le signe partout que Dieu t’aime” (simply the omnipresent sign that God loves you). Thus instructed, the girl promptly dies “du parfum de Dieu sur son sein” (the perfume of God on her breast) (back cover). Lamarche, an ordained priest, is somewhat coyly evasive (lui fut dit) about who may have enlightened Kateri, but his readers could easily decode the reference to Jesuit missionaries in New France. In classic colonialist fashion, Lamarche’s poem deprives Kateri’s natural religion of any sense of divine reciprocity, blithely running roughshod over the centuries-old Indigenous sense of communion with a vividly responsive environment.

In earlier HBC advertising, too, the mission of “enlightenment” had been carried out by male authority figures, typically identified as “great men.” Peter Geller, in his study of *The Beaver’s* representation of the North, recounts how a 1935 photograph of three men—an HBC district manager, an Army officer, and a bishop—was captioned, “This issue[,] our news pictures lead off with ‘The Crown, the Company and the Church, the three great powers in the Northwest Territories’” (181). Earlier ads featured a gallery of white male physiognomies and testimonies: Samuel Hearne, James Isham, Henry Kelsey, William Stewart, Anthony Henday, Sir John Ross, Governor John Nixon, to name just a handful. In Kilvert’s new series the impression of male predominance is markedly less distinct; we encounter the voices of Gwendolyn MacEwen, Joan Finnegan, Phyllis Gotlieb, Margaret Atwood, and Miriam Waddington. This is hardly surprising; the late 60s saw the rise of second-wave feminism, and Kilvert’s interest lay in giving HBC publicity a stronger sense of the *au fait*.

At the same time, the ads (and the poets featured) project an even stronger sense of racial uniformity than did previous campaigns. For example, the sequence of ads that the Company ran in 1956-57, entitled “Songs of the Eskimo,” did at least include the voices, even if translated and coopted for commercial purposes, of Tatilgäk (Bathurst Inlet), Kingmerut (Ellis River), and Igpakuhak (Victoria Land) (HBC, *Songs of the Eskimo*). Kilvert’s series, for all that it broke some new ground, did little to mitigate the Company’s long-standing tendency, in Geller’s words, to rest “the humanity of Natives... on the representations offered by non-Natives” (169), a tendency of which Lamarche’s poem is a signal example.

What did make Kilvert’s campaign diverge strikingly from what had gone before was its novel emphasis on the inward, the personal, and the idiosyncratic. Newlove’s “The Hitchhiker,” for example, while reprising

familiar exploration motifs, focuses less on the rugged geographical terrain to be traversed than on the traveler's mental terrain—not on external dangers but on precarious psychic security:

going through the country  
to no end, only  
to turn again at one sea  
and begin it again,  
feeling safe with strangers  
in a moving car. (back cover)

In Nowlan's "The Spy" psychic insecurity is given a more domestic focus. Perturbed when his child "cries out in his sleep," the speaker bends close to "spy on his dreams," while realizing that his son's interiority is "too private to share / even with me" (back cover).

Like Newlove's "The Hitchhiker," Gwendolyn MacEwen's "This Northern Mouth" takes up the familiar discourse of exploration and transmutes it into an internal search: "this, my northern mouth / speaks at times east, speaks south, / if only to test / the latitudes of speech." The metaphorical progression from geographic exploration to poetic quest, dating back at least to Keats—"Much have I travelled in the realms of gold"—here gets imaginatively mapped onto a northern landscape. But it is not a landscape to be found on any conventional, HBC agent's map; MacEwen's "latitudes" is a witty pun. When the speaker declares "I sometimes journey outward / and around; yet in the east / they ask me of the dark, mysterious west" (back cover), the east and west she refers to belong uniquely to MacEwen, not to Mercator. MacEwen is playing slyly with geographical clichés; here the hackneyed "mysterious East" is transformed into her own poetic "mysterious west."

A comparable shift from the rigidly corporate to the more flexibly personal is executed by another HBC poet with an eloquent northern mouth, Al Purdy. In "Arctic Rhododendrons," the speaker repeatedly shies away from categorical explanations for the feelings prompted by these tiny, purple flowers: "a matter of association I guess / But that doesn't explain it." And when Purdy's speaker approaches a cosmological explanation that is broader still, he tentatively borrows its terminology while emphatically rejecting its doctrinal tenets:

Like the Stations of the Cross  
if a man were religious  
--but the feeling I have  
for something like this  
replaces God (back cover)

In effect, Purdy and Lamarche are participating in an implicit dialogue: where Lamarche's "Kateri Tekakwitha" insists on the compulsory progression from "pagan" nature worship to Christian orthodoxy, Purdy walks the Stations of the Cross backwards, abandoning orthodoxy in favour of spontaneous paganism. For all its affinities with earlier HBC campaigns, Kilvert's "poetic" initiative is more hospitable to ideological variance than the reverently cited recollections of Company men.

Because of this openness—because Kilvert took the unorthodox risk of pressing poetic productions into service as advertising text—some of the poems Kilvert chose for the purpose are implicitly resistant to the national promotional objectives of the HBC. In "Rasmussen Speaks," excerpted from the verse play *Terror and Erebus*, MacEwen has the eponymous explorer—the first European to cross the Northwest Passage on dogsled—address a famous forerunner: "Now the great passage is open, / the one you dreamed of, Franklin." Rasmussen evokes a stirring picture of commerce pouring through the passage in the best Hudson's Bay Company fashion: "great white ships sail through it / over and over again, / easily, lightly, / packed with cargo and carefree men." The focus now shifts, however, from brute material accomplishment to the inward power of imagination: "or . . . is it that the way was invented, / Franklin . . . ? / that you cracked the passage open / with the forces of sheer certainty." But the speech concludes on a more subversive note still: "or is it that you cannot know, / can never know, / where the passage lies / between conjecture and reality . . ." (2). Here the "sheer certainty" of commercial triumphalism dissolves into indeterminacy; passages that can be mapped or charted yield place to speculative passages that resist being fully probed. This is a far cry from the swelling confidence of standard HBC self-promoting proclamations, on the order of "Across the span of nearly three centuries . . . and from sea to sea Ours is a tradition of service to Canadians" (HBC, "Across the Span").

A poem even more subversively challenging to HBC promotional commonplaces is "Carved Animals," the piece Kilvert selected for use from among the seven poems Atwood sent her. An identical version of the poem would shortly be included in *The Circle Game* as the last in a sequence of three poems entitled "Some Objects of Wood and Stone." "Carved Animals" thus appeared in two quite disparate contexts: one of which Hayakawa would no doubt class as "venal" and the other as "disinterested." But whatever the mediating force of the commercial frame of an HBC ad, Atwood's poem resists any simple imputation of "venality."

To begin with, HBC's use of the poems Kilvert selected, "Carved Animals" included, is obviously unlike Monster.com's appropriation of Frost's "The Road Not Taken"; there has been no invasive tampering with the texts of the poems. And like the other poems, "Carved Animals" was of course not initially tailored by the poet to fit the commercial context. Instead, its evocation of people seated in a circle clearly places it within recurring patterns of imagery that run through the collection *The Circle Game*, and the poem's resonance partly depends on that context. Parachuted into an ad rather than finding its home in a collection, the poem inevitably loses some of that resonance. Still, even when relocated for commercial purposes, the poem can hardly be reduced to a mere pitch for HBC consumer goods. "Carved Animals" dwells not just on the naïve external gratification of possessing concrete objects, but on the *internalizing* of the skillfully crafted artifact:

and the hands, the fingers the  
hidden small bones  
of the hands bend to hold the shape,  
shape themselves, grow cold with the stone's cold, grow  
also animal, exchange  
until the skin wonders  
if stone is human. (89)

This kind of "exchange" between the artistic maker, the material medium, and the appreciative consumer leaves far behind the sorts of transactions normally engaged in by companies like HBC.

However, one should not exaggerate the immunity even of so resistant a poem to the subtle influence of a commercial context. One might still argue that the poem's transposition into a commercial frame entails a more covert but deleterious form of tampering. Once the poem is situated within a promotional campaign, its focus on consumable objects inevitably harmonizes to a degree with the role of the Hudson's Bay Company as the purveyor of as "choice goods as can be bought for money." Ironically, in 1953, only sixteen years before "Carved Animals" appeared, HBC had become the main supplier of Inuit carvings to the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (*Corporate Collections*), in a move that has been criticized for its tendency to circumscribe the artistic freedom of Indigenous producers. In other ways, too, the advertisement as it appeared, with its combination of visual and verbal text, reverses the trajectory that the poem itself traces from material object to cultural interiority. The inclusion of Bruce Head's totemic drawings also refers the viewer back to the poem's concrete starting

point, in effect rematerializing what the poem wishes to render inward and spiritual. So that, while not crudely mutilating the text like a Monster.com ad, the commercial layout enforces the logic of the marketplace, in effect contradicting the logic of the poem. The same process holds good, to a greater or lesser extent, for the other poems employed in HBC's campaign.

Ultimately, of course, no published work of literature can be considered entirely "disinterested," existing in a realm above and beyond the soilure of economic exchange. Any such literary production is, after all, a commodity. Rather than dismissing HBC's initiative as fatally besmirching the pristine beauty of art, it would make more sense to view it as an exceptional venture that served the corporate agenda while, at the same time, increasing the visibility of Canadian poetry. In a rare critical reference to this now largely forgotten advertising campaign, Mark Abley makes essentially the same point: that, despite being geared to corporate purposes, the HBC poetry campaign at least offered poets social visibility and a modest equivalent of traditional patronage:

In a magazine like *Quarry*, you might expect to find ads from the local university, a local bookstore and a few poetry publishers. You might not be surprised to find an ad from the local newspaper. All those institutions did, in fact, advertise in *Quarry* in 1966. But so did the Hudson's Bay Company, whose ad took up a back cover and featured a poem by Gwendolyn MacEwen, "This Northern Mouth." Can you imagine Wal-Mart paying good money to advertise in a literary magazine? Can you imagine Sears or Canadian Tire approving marketing copy with a poem at the heart? . . . In 1966, evidently there was nothing odd in the idea that local businesses, from barbers to jewellers, had a responsibility to support literary culture, and that it might even prove economically worthwhile for them to do so . . . many of us now feel we're writing into a social vacuum. (4)

Abley's inference that "there was nothing odd" about the HBC campaign is certainly an exaggeration. True, the initiative was not altogether unique or unprecedented.<sup>3</sup> Nor, as we have shown, did it represent a total break with earlier HBC promotional culture. However, the use of literary works to promote firms and their merchandise was hardly common in the 1960s. Even Barbara Kilvert, in a letter to *Time* journalist Serrell Hillman, guardedly refers to the idea as "slightly off-beat" (Kilvert, Letter to Serrell Hillman). There is no proof that the "social vacuum" which Abley laments was any less gaping then than it is now.

Still, Abley's central point—that the HBC poetry campaign was a valuable and far-sighted promotional venture—has substantial merit. The linkage between commercial power and poetic creativity offers some obvious positive possibilities, like the "enliven[ing]" energizing potential Jane

Bennett perceives in the pleasures of promotional art. At the same time, though, that linkage opens other, more troubling possibilities. As we have also argued, poets' works risk becoming complicit with an imperialist culture that continues to profit from the colonization of Indigenous people and the commercial exploitation of their land and creative powers; the poet's northern mouth can too easily get upstaged by the louder company one. The insistent presence of corporate logos and trademarks, too—even a demurely inscribed “Hudson's Bay Company” at the foot of a poem—has an inevitable, mediating influence over readers' perceptions. The union of poetry and commerce is not necessarily an infernal beauty-and-the-beast misalliance, but neither is it a marriage made in heaven.

## APPENDIX: SELECTED HBC POETIC ADS

**1966**

- Phyllis Gotlieb, “I Ask You.” *Canadian Literature* 29 (1966): Inside Front cover; *The Tamarack Review* 41 (1966): Back cover.  
 Gwendolyn MacEwen, “Rasmussen Speaks.” *Canadian Literature* 30 (1966): 2.  
 John Newlove, “The Hitchhiker.” *The Tamarack Review* 39 (1966): Back cover.  
 Alden Nowlan, “Two Poems” [“Midnight of the First Snow” and “The Spy”]. *Canadian Literature* 28 (1966): 56; *The Tamarack Review* 40 (1966): Back cover.  
 A. W. Purdy, “Arctic Rhododendrons.” *The Tamarack Review* 38 (1966): Back cover.

**1967**

- Joan Finnigan, “Windy Night.” *The Tamarack Review* 45 (1967): Back cover.  
 Gustave Lamarche, “Kateri Tekakwitha.” *The Tamarack Review* 43 (1967): Back cover.  
 Gwendolyn MacEwen, “This Northern Mouth.” *Canadian Literature* 32 (1967): 67.  
 A. W. Purdy, “Arctic Rhododendrons.” *Canadian Literature* 31 (1967): 73.  
 James Reaney, “Near Tobermory, Ontario.” *Quarry* 17.1 (1967): Back cover.  
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#### NOTES

- 1 John Everett Millais's 1886 painting entitled "A Child's World" ("Bubbles") was famously used in an advertisement for Pears soap with a bar of the soap added to the painted image. This use of an artwork was vigorously debated at the time, even charged with being an act of "prostitution" (See Hindley and Hindley 43-44).
- 2 The evidence in the HBC archives includes no critical responses or refusals on the part of poets who were contacted by Kilvert. Although this may be a result of company editing of its own archive, we do not know of any poet contacted by Kilvert who was not receptive.
- 3 To cite just one example, between 1950 and the mid-1970s, the Chicago Container Corporation of America (CCA) ran a series of ads "Great Ideas of Western Man" that featured citations from, among others, Montesquieu, John Stuart Mill, Dr. Johnson, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Henry David Thoreau. (See Allison, Chapter Three.)

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