

CANADIAN MAGAZINES

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TWENTY OR THIRTY YEARS ago one of the great glories of North America was its magazines. One didn't realize this, of course, until traveling in Europe, or perhaps going off to college there, for North Americans took their magazines very much for granted. Europeans, one was told — usually by other Europeans — read books, so they did not need magazines; North Americans had a more limited attention span, were interested in the ephemeral and fashionable, had more money to spend on throwaway publications. So they read magazines. North American popular publications were glossier, fatter, had more pictures, were a good bit more vulgar than their European counterparts, and many of the specialized North American publications had no counterparts at all: no *Dog Breeders' Monthly*, no *Vargas and Petty Girls*, no *Popular Mechanics*, much less a magazine devoted solely to model airplanes.

The Europeans were only partly right, of course. There were European magazines for specialized audiences, but language barriers limited those audiences; there were plenty of pin-up magazines and, perhaps, there was more near-pornography than in North America; if one got outside the circles of Oxbridge and the Sorbonne one discovered that people didn't appear to read all that many more books once they were out from under the expectations of their schools. Still, the basic judgement was accurate: North American magazines were handsomer, better edited, more *fun*: they played a greater role in North American lives than magazines could ever do in Europe. Who, in the United States, would be without their *Saturday Evening Post*, their *Colliers*, their *Life*, or even *The National Geographic*? Canadians read these too.

The North American mania for magazines showed a distinct class bias — after all, that is part of the meaning of “popular culture” — though it was irredeemably middle class, while the better European publications were for an upper middle class of the well educated. In North America, if you wanted to break into print, you had a wide range of opportunities, from the pulps (many a good writer started out in *Black Mask*) to the serializations in *Redbook*, to a shot at the

big time in the *Satevepost*; in England there were a few staid journals with almost unchanging covers, still trying to live on the reputation of Dickens and Doyle. If you wanted to learn about North America, you read its magazines.

This was thirty or so years ago. Today European magazines are just as glossy, and the internationalization of language, in particular English, has created hundreds of mass market publications that can be found anywhere in Western Europe. The United States has replaced France and Italy as the pornography capital of the world; its magazines are far less well edited than before, and advertisements take up ever-growing space. And yet, a visit to any large newsstand should convince the casual browser that in sheer quantity and diversity, North American magazines still outgun all the others.

Those North American magazines remain solidly middle-class in the bulk of their content. Most read rather as though they had been edited by the researchers who prepare the American Automobile Association travel guides, those gazeteers that pick out especially notable places to visit by awarding a star, and invariably favour the nearest wax museum with that star. North American magazines are weighty with personality; even people who have no personality are treated as though they might. Articles are growing shorter, type larger, as the editors judge attention spans to be limited more and more by the tiny window of opportunity that occurs on television between one ad and another, that window to be used for just a little bit of actual programming. Viewers with the greater attention spans, perhaps the more intelligent viewers, watch more and more football on television because there are fewer interruptions, even allowing for the obligatory commercial breaks. In the first ten magazines I picked up this week, the average story ran to three pages, or about six minutes of reading (I'm a slow reader). What could better reflect popular culture? Perhaps the Europeans really were right those thirty years ago.

Canadian magazines are North American, of course, and they reflect the same access to technology, the same middle-class values, the same dental waiting room retention rates as magazines produced in the United States. As first glance they are simply North American. At second glance too, since the jobbers want to rack them in the same way: a stack of forty different Canadian magazines may be piled one on top of another, each to precisely the same measurement, with forty American kin. Pacts on interchangeable parts appear to have reached the printed word.

On third glance some differences begin to be seen by the addictive reader. The differences are small (with one exception), perhaps not all that important, but very real. The parts, the physical objects, may be interchangeable, but the content is not entirely so. Of course some Canadian magazines intend to look precisely like an American publication and to read like one too; still, there are obviously plenty that don't.

IN PURSUIT OF THE DIFFERENCES I tried a simple comparison: the editors of *Canadian Literature* went along one early Summer day to a representative newsstand in Vancouver and bought for me one copy of every Canadian publication on sale there. There were thirty-two titles. I went along a month or so later — no exact sociological study, this — to a representative newsstand in New Haven, Connecticut, and bought one copy of every American publication there. There were (not counting the porno magazines in shrink wrappers) 147 titles. Since the United States has ten times the population of Canada, but apparently only five times the number of publications (perhaps I shouldn't have left those shrink-wrapped titles out), Canadians are obviously twice as literate on a per capita basis. Of course this comparison may be skewed a bit by putting West Coast (where they read less?) against East Coast, or by the month's separation in purchases, or maybe *Can Lit* sent someone along who was too short to get the magazines down off the top shelf. Still, I don't really want to read more than thirty-two magazines from cover to cover anyway. (Naturally I was already quite familiar with the 147 from the States.)

Any Canada watcher is already familiar with a good bit of Canadian publication. Off and on I have subscribed to any number of Canadian magazines, hoping to find the three or four that would, if read faithfully, "keep me up" with Canadian affairs. Every subscription has lapsed after two or three years, in favour of a pre-tuned and never moved short wave radio that brings in Montreal, nine or ten scholarly journals, and one newspaper. In reflecting on why I had dropped my various subscriptions, to *Saturday Night*, to *Maclean's*, to the Canadian Edition of *Time* (well, actually, it dropped me), to the *Atlantic Advocate* (does it still exist? if so, Vancouver doesn't know it), to *This Magazine*, even to *Books in Canada*, I suddenly realized that none of them had told me enough about Canada. The reason for this, I think, is that they were trying too hard: to understand any society, one must understand other societies. He who only his own country knows, knows not his own country.

Having put that bit of piety behind me, I settled down to enjoy my creative drift through thirty-two of Canada's best. First, one becomes aware of the dog that didn't bark in the night. Amongst these thirty-two publications there was not one *Playboy*, *Playgirl*, *Hustler* type. Of course, these magazines enter Canada freely, and perhaps there is no special Canadian need: Canadian bodies presumably look very like American bodies. Nor were there any self-consciously semi-intellectual magazines, no *Harper's* (which now appears to consist of interviews, snippets from other places, and colloquia, so that virtually no editing is needed; a money-saver that) or *Atlantic*. There was only one magazine on *Athletics*, not ten, and it looked remarkably like *Runner*, clearly not edited for the people

hungry for the weekly scores from Texas high school football. There was nothing on wine, though surely somewhere there lurks a *Canadian Wine*? Best of all, there was no *People*, no nit-wit and trivia magazine for the thirty-second heavy-weight. But of course there are not many beaches, and relatively few strap-hangers, in Canada. In short, some of the elements that make the American magazine scene so lively — raw sex, intellectual pretense, insanely competitive athletics, snob appeal consumerism, gossip — seemed to be lacking. One can condemn all that rubbish as much as one wants, and feel superior to it, but you can't beat it for life — or sales.

Second, there was the Cerberus that simply wouldn't stop barking all night long. Of the thirty-two magazines, four were in French and one was bilingual (hardly representative of French Canada, but our sample is from Vancouver, remember). The French-language magazines were pretty good, and for a moment there I thought I just might subscribe to *L'actualité*, which told me quite a lot I didn't know and rather supposed I ought to know, until I realized that the most informative piece was the cover story on Gorbachev. I am probably not the person to judge *Madame au foyer*, though I was happy to discover there a tidy article on vin canadien, especially when I learned that a \$9 bottle of Chardonnay Canadian Estate was as good as a \$17 bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé.

Of course these two dogs had something to say that was important, though not very original. Canadians do get a great deal of their culture from the United States. I am an ardent defender of the separateness of Canadian culture, not alone because I have a vested interest in its identity, since I teach about it, but also because I think Canadians have, in a number of important ways, a rather better life than Americans have and I hope they keep it that way. I am also a staunch advocate of bilingualism, since I believe that continued Canadian survival as a separate political entity depends on the presence of a substantial non-English speaking population. Having said all that, I find in myself little patience for those who would "improve" Canadian tastes by not allowing them to buy what they patently want to buy: the schlock of American popular culture. I'm inclined to think that if people buy junk, the people who buy it are at least as much at fault (if there be fault) as the people who sell it. That said, it strikes me that *Playboy*, *The Bible on the Head of a Pin*, and *People* are, in fact, profoundly Canadian publications too.

Nor should one expect Canadian publications to sell so well, make such profits, thus be able to pay top dollar for the most "in" writers of the moment, in the manner of *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, or *Newsweek*. Magazines from the United States sell in Canada, after all, and probably ought, while Canadian magazines ought to sell in the United States, and almost certainly don't. Combine that obvious fact of economics with a Canadian population one tenth that of the United States, and fragment that tenth further into two, perhaps several, language

communities — my “important exception” — and even the best edited, most fashionable, slickest, and quickest Canadian magazine cannot hope to sell a twentieth as many copies as its look-alike across the border.

SO WITH CANADIAN MAGAZINES one thinks small, and at times one thinks imitatively. *New Maritimes*, begun in 1981, is a 16-page tabloid-style monthly (actually, ten times a year) which looks like any small-circulation alternative press product. (The issue in hand, with an excellent article on the Black United Front, which is part of my academic turf, was quite lively; I wish I could have seen the issue that surely must have appeared on Tuna.) *Shades of Rolling Stone* told me far more than I could digest about someone I had never heard of named Gary Glitter, which says more about me than anything else; the truth is, I can relate to *Rolling Stone*, which also worries about the CIA and lets Jan Morris write whenever she wants to. But then, Leonard Cohen was in *Shades* too, and that’s real Can lit, though being a Cohen fan of a sort, I thought *People* could have done it better. Head-to-head confrontation isn’t the wisest form of flattery. We’ll get back to the question of imitation.

There are, in these thirty-two, also some magazines that do not exist in the United States. One is *Campus Canada*. To be sure, there are several mass magazines for the audience interested in education in America, but there are none that cover the ground precisely like this one. Styled “The Magazine for University and College Students,” this bi-monthly is a good bit more serious than magazines intended for the same audience in the States, without ever taking on the guild-air of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. To a university teacher, the magazine seems to contain very little about ideas, study, even (surprisingly) collegiate sports, but then study is simply that to most students, not a form of pleasure and therefore not something to write about. *Campus Canada* is full of what one would expect: concern about jobs, interest in hobbies that appeal to the young and moderately affluent, travel, reviews of books on education in the broad sense. The content is distinctly Canadian, which is fine, and yet one feels that one is learning about something generic — educational institutions, if not education itself — as well. Perhaps the relative interchangeability of Canadian and U.S. university life, or the international nature of youth culture, provides the editors with a natural blend of the Canadian and the comparative that makes for the best kind of contribution to popular culture in Canada, but at least those editors have had the good sense to lead from strength and not simply hope that a combination of nationalism and obvious imitation of a cross-border periodical will come up a winner.

Campus Canada is representative in another way: it is very new. The copy in hand was the fourth issue of the second volume; seven other magazines in the stack were within the first three years of their launching, which means that we can't count on them yet, and that they most likely aren't into the black and can't testify as to what makes money in Canadian publishing. About the same age, *Goodwin's* is one of those very serious examples of the popular culture that serves up thousand-word stories under titles like "Quebec Youth Protest Plight of Poor" that don't get us beyond a moderately close reading of a few newspapers. The longest article in our sample issue was by the editor, a look at professional fund-raising for social issues groups in Canada, and it is interesting though not interesting enough. *Goodwin's* nicely shows the other side of the mirror in Canadian popular culture: the facts, names, places are Canadian, but nothing that is unique to Canada is learned by the reader, and nothing (other than a ritual observation that compares Brian Mulroney to Ronald Reagan) is sufficiently comparative to provide a sudden shock of recognition even on so obviously a contrasting subject as social welfare.

Another remarkable Canadian publishing phenomenon is the provincial news and business magazine. There most likely is something called *New York Business*, though it isn't to be found at any newsstand in a neighbouring state, and if it does exist, it is probably an "insider's" by-subscription-only journal. I'll take anyone's bet that there isn't a weekly news magazine, made to look just like *Time*, called *Montana Report*. But there is an *Alberta Report*, it is weekly, and it's pretty good. Canadian culture expresses itself in regions — another cliché which got that way by being true — and somehow Canadian popular culture comes through better at the provincial than the national level. The sample issue seemed to me to hit its Canadian target just about right. The cover story, on sexual child abuse in Alberta, covered the provincial scene in depth, provided some comparative perspective on other provinces and other countries, and didn't fall into the trap of implying that, bad as things might be in Canada, they're worse across the border. *Playboy* even makes it, with a wry piece on Wayne Gretzky's interview in the April 1985 issue of the magazine, and one learns quite a bit about Canada from the remark of the mother of one young Gretzky fan that the hockey star has "sacrificed his respect, integrity and credibility on the altar of human degradation."

Alberta Business isn't as interesting, though it is a reasonable facsimile of *Business Week* narrowed down. It supports the thesis that popular culture — and what is more popular these days than business? — is best viewed through regional or even local lenses, for when it sticks to Alberta it's lively enough, and certainly informative, and when it dips into the national scene it doesn't have anything to say one can't learn from the *Financial Post*. What it does show, by example, is why magazines on specific cities and provinces in Canada have taken off in the

same way locality magazines in the States have boomed. There is a kind of geographic declension in such magazines: from *WestWorld* (travel, mostly abroad, and a gourmet section, mostly Chinese, but all for western Canadians) through *Western Living* (Morocco and Buenos Aires, but a good bit of western Canada too, a kind of cross between *Sunset* and *Desert* magazines, those California success stories), to *Toronto Life*, *Calgary*, and *Vancouver*. The formula is almost exactly that of *New York* magazine, allowing for small regional variations, with emphasis on consuming well, going to the right restaurants, visiting the right homes, and having a racy story or two to talk about with one's friends. Some of the best journalism in the United States is showing up in these magazines, so why shouldn't the same be true in Canada?

In Canada, more than in the States, these local magazines appear to fill the function of *Parade* and other purveyors of appealing trivia. Here is just half of one sentence in one paragraph of a fairly long article in a recent issue of *Calgary*:

SOS doesn't mean anything (it's just a simple three dots, three dashes, three dots), Hoagy Carmichael didn't write the lyrics to *Stardust* (Mitchell Parish did), still water doesn't run deep . . . it is still, Alexander Graham Bell didn't invent the telephone (Phillip Reis did), tomahawks were invented by the settlers and not the heathen Indians, because the latter did not indulge in ironmaking, Harry S Truman had no middle name (and the initial doesn't even have a period behind it) . . .

This sort of thing goes a very long way, but then Calgary is a long way. But "indulge"?

THERE IS LITTLE POINT in comparing type with type much further. Canada has its "women's magazines," and magazines for those who knit, and for those who ride, and for those who like to take the snowmobile out and make a bit of noise. So does the United States. One will not find the tap root of Canadian popular culture in some mano-a-mano confrontation between *Toronto Life* and *New York*, since the overpowering common denominator of urban life tends to blot out the differences. Where one must look is to the self-conscious guardians at the gates.

Here Canadian popular culture is served reasonably well. An attentive outsider can get a good sense of what is bothering Canadians as Canadians by reading *Canadian Forum* or *Dimension* or *This Magazine* or even *Briarpatch*, "Saskatchewan's independent newsmagazine." To take the last first, *Briarpatch* offers a spiky, rather solemn, sometimes angry view of the world as seen from Regina.

The material is timely and often, even when on a subject widely covered in virtually every country in the West (destabilization in Mozambique, for example), just oblique enough to be different, and thus, presumably, Canadian. Like many such magazines, *Briarpatch* appears to think that “the interests” are out to get us, forgetting that we are all members of interest groups (that’s the way democracy works: environmentalists, and I am happy to be one, even “environmental extremists,” are interest groups), and so it shuts out as many potential readers as it brings in. This probably assures a no-growth subscription rate but survival through the efforts of the believers.

The other mildly intellectual mass magazines — though “mass” is probably a misnomer here — are rather more restrained, if generally from a left perspective. They take the *Spectator* as their model and might be unhappy to be compared to *The New Leader*, or *Nation*, or certainly — these days — *The New Republic*. The fact that the glossies, the trendy architecture and good food magazines, are bent upon following their U.S. counterparts, and thus contributing to that creeping continentalism that all who would protect Canada from American sleaze so fear, is a statement about mass life in Canada, just as the fact that the Canadian magazines of opinion take their form from British models continues to play out the old dichotomy so frequently remarked on by J. Bartlett Brebner, Donald Creighton, and others, though in their time more from the right than the left.

Even these magazines have fallen for “the new journalism,” that device — usually said to be American — which reduces most observations to personality sketches. Does one have a profound point to make? Put it in the mouth of an old codger, a jogger around the reservoir, an Inuit who cannot read but can follow the message of blood in the snow. Canada doesn’t need a *People* magazine: if Canadians care about what happens to Prince, they can buy *People* for themselves, and if it’s Brian Mulroney, Robertson Davies, Wayne Gretzky, or Peter Gault they want to get inside, their own magazines will provide all the personality bits necessary. Truth is, the old codger in Barkerville is neither more nor less interesting than the Cajun in Thibodaux, the Nez Perce at Orifino, or the oysterman off Tangier Island, but they are Canadian, and that makes all the difference.

Of the magazines of opinion sold off the racks in the newsstands — which omits *Queen’s Quarterly*, the *Dalhousie Review*, and any number of good greying journals of opinion which, by being quarterlies, really have little to do with the original meaning of “journal” — the one that most expresses a steady sense of separate Canadian identity without coming out all goosebumps about it is the *Canadian Forum*. The *Forum* calls itself “An Independent Journal of Opinion and the Arts,” and that’s about right. In the sample issue, the *Forum* was a bit upset, and properly so, at least on its evidence, over acid rain, labour, the decline of public broadcasting, or Canada’s diplomatic representation abroad, and these

are good issues for the Canadian purpose, which is my purpose. There are distinctly Canadian things to be said on all four subjects, and all four subjects have a universality which both illumines the distinctiveness of the Canadian statement and makes that statement useful, applicable, to a larger problem. Of course, Canadian publications have no necessary responsibility to the larger problem, but if they want to be heard outside Canada, they will have to take up that responsibility. The best do, so that the voice from the attic becomes another expression of a broadly North American popular culture, more independent, separable, distinctive than, say, the regional voice of the upper South and less distinctive than the voice from South Africa. Surely that is a good thing, and Canada's magazines are representative of that good thing: not, truly, a separate identity so much as a distinct identity.

The internationally minded, those who think of themselves as intellectuals — and it is interesting that one may call oneself an “intellectual” in Canada and get away with it, while in the States anyone who used the term in self-nomination would be thought either utterly pompous or a member of the so-called new conservatives, that group that appears never to have read a line of Edmund Burke — often condescend toward truly local newspapers. Those are the papers that put all the foreign news after page 12, run eight pages of sports, two pages of comics, and four pages of wedding and obituary notices, and lead off with a story on the local sewer assessment. To the historian, these are very good newspapers, doing what a newspaper is supposed to do: tell the local population about what it wants most to know, leaving the heady matters of Russian-American summitry to the *New York Times* and the *Globe & Mail*. In a sense the best of the Canadian magazines serve for Canadian popular culture the same function: if Canadians want to know about Rocky IV, that is their right, perhaps even to some small extent their choice, and if they want to know about Elspeth Cameron, they will have *Books in Canada* to turn to. This is not condescending, it's life.

A student of popular culture, if Canadian, would no doubt read these thirty-two magazines differently. A reporter would find a way to comment on all of them, from *Owl* (for children) to *Chatelaine* (which, no surprise, takes its model from France, with a hint of *Family Circle* thrown in). A professor of literature would surely deplore the many split infinitives one encounters in these pages, the student of political science the general lack of rigorous analysis of how things really work. The historian, however, has only three questions to ask of any documents, any artifacts: are they interesting? Are they significant? Are they true?

Some of these magazines are interesting. Some of them are significant. All of them are true, in the sense that they truly tell us something about culture in Canada. And, significantly, those dogs in the night tell us even more. Most of all, however, is the obvious fact of the initial statistic: at a news agent in Vancouver,

one found only four French magazines (and one bilingual up-scale publication, *enroute*, published in Toronto for Air Canada). Last week, in Montreal, I found thirty-nine magazines from Quebec and one from Vancouver; I did not find *Alberta Report*. And yesterday, at the largest dealer in foreign magazines and newspapers in New York, there were two Canadian magazines. That is significant, and true, and very, very interesting.

TRAILS IN HIS HEAD

Dennis Cooley

the old man
in boots that creak
his hurt breath in the air
theres always a chance
short of breath hearing it

that old man on the radio
looking for his son
he went to hunt rabbits
& didn't come back
five years & he looks
every day *scrunchhh unnchh*
every day through the forest at Beausejour
he walks across the snow over &
over & *I don't find nothing*
his eyes lost in the frost

his voice sounds old
in the cracks in the air
it is pinched off somewhere
like a creek in winter

he knew every side road within five miles
he couldn't have got lost

his head aches
like birch when they fur
& burst with frost