

CURRENT TRENDS

THERE IS A HABIT OF MIND most of us fall into now and then: which is to predict the future on the basis of the present. Statisticians tell us so often that “if current trends continue” such-and-so will follow that unless we pick up quickly on the supposition involved we are likely to believe what they say. It strikes me that “current trends” seldom continue. People, being human, have such a persistent knack for changing their minds and acting as individuals and making separate choices that they confound those who would classify and categorize their behaviour. But even a statement like this one is built on certain assumptions: one of them being a hope that there will continue to be options among which people will be able to choose. That might be equally as blinkered a belief as the statisticians’ set of axioms.

Consider what has happened in the publishing industry in the past few years. During the 1960’s there was such an explosion of print that we all began to accept such a *quantity* of books and information as the norm we lived with. The Canadian literary scene thrived; scores of books of fiction and poetry (and more lately, drama) appeared, not all of it good by any means, but all contributing to the general seriousness with which people (academics, governments, industry, the public at large) began to treat Canadian writers and writing. Last year and this, there have been quite extraordinary cutbacks in the quantity of Canadian books published. Tundra has cancelled its excellent children’s literature programme (and coincidentally *Canadian Children’s Literature* and *Contemporary Literature in Translation* have folded); Talon briefly suspended publication (and as the major drama publisher in the country, this had serious ramifications regarding the availability of play-texts); Macmillan has cut back both on publication and on distribution, its future under Gage unknown; McGill-Queen’s announced its demise; McClelland & Stewart has removed all items from its backlist that have been selling fewer than 1000 copies per year (including items in the New Canadian Library), and refuses now to consider manuscripts that have not come to the company via literary agents; the University of Toronto Press has indicated it will publish more “high-scale” academic works (specifically meaning biography and

social science, and by implication meaning fewer works in literature and criticism). Companies across the country have been raising prices of books in backlist; and all face the future in a certain tension. Unfortunately neither the tension nor the cut in quantity guarantees any increase, even on average, in quality. The industry's reflexes are not aesthetically or altruistically motivated, but responses to inflation, to government policy, and to development in retail sales. The effects of these actions may well in the short run be to minimize financial losses; but in the long run they will also curtail the development of a richly varied Canadian literature, and reduce, for school students and public alike, both the availability of books and the opportunities for choice.

One cannot blame the publishers for these actions. As responses to inflation — even if inflation doesn't make sense — the actions make sense. As responses to government policy — over two governments — they are, moreover, protective stances. One would like to attribute tiredness, for example, during the recent election campaign, as the sole motivation for the then Minister of Cultural Affairs to assert that the number of copies sold was an accurate measure of a book's quality (such a statement came as a defence of a policy that supported publication *in a ratio based upon number of copies each publisher sells*: i.e., best-sellerism); but that does not necessarily explain the policy. Mentioning Shakespeare in such a context does not clarify matters: the current policy applies over single publishing seasons — which is why the retail sales policies of the big chains (now taking over so large a part of the retail book market) also have their effect. By choosing mainly to stock mass sale volumes — and by not keeping backlist items in stock — the centrally controlled chains compound the impression given the public that best-sellers are the only current works of quality, and they closely restrict the choice from among which people may select books to read. By not stocking all works that publishers do produce, they create problems both for author and publisher; but by controlling the market, they also come dangerously close to controlling the availability of art and information.

Textbooks constitute a distinct subset of this problem. Enough of us went through Canadian schools with American textbooks to remember that the cultural bias of texts designed outside the country will often interfere with education rather than aid it. To take an easy example: think of that question that always appeared as a writing assignment — “Discuss the role of our President.” The fact that he wasn't “ours” was only mildly intrusive; and the weak teacher's simple substitution “Discuss the role of our Prime Minister instead” was only mildly irritating. Deep at the heart of the question (and the substitution) was a far more disconcerting problem of attitude: whatever role the President has in the United States, it is neither the same as the Prime Minister's in Canada, *nor do the two functions occupy the same position in each nation's set of cultural priorities*. To effect a simple substitution implies that they do, and that the societies in structure and values

merely mirror each other. Surrendering to the assumptions of the misleading texts (whether American, British, French, or whatever) meant in some degree surrendering the viability of one's own culture. It doesn't always happen, but we cannot afford to ignore that it sometimes does, and that cultural bias and education are related in more than obvious ways.

In the last ten years, one of the efforts of Canadian publishers has been to make a lot of Canadian textbooks available. Again we are concerned both with quality and with availability: with *choice*, and with preserving for new generations of students an availability of resources which will individually and variously aid them. Now, with the general paring away of national publishers' backlists, a lot of textbooks — and consequently the opportunity to choose to use them — have disappeared along with remaindered volumes of poetry, fiction, and drama. Once again we have to match the reality of financial exigencies against the more general threat of cultural loss. One must applaud the efforts of many cost-conscious school boards not to waste public funds — provided, of course, that they have a sensible definition of "waste": even when a generation of students is small, as now, the individual students have the right to expect from their society a quality education. It has to be funded adequately; it has to make advantageous use of all current resources, including teachers first of all, and space, and mechanical and other equipment, and books; and it has to cultivate individual talents and encourage a breadth of cultural expectations. This is something that the Lévesque government has understood about the youth of Quebec: the government is acutely concerned to invest in the young, and in a particular belief about the future. By contrast, Anglophone Canada seems intent lately on sacrificing a generation to the economy and to have rooted its educational imagination in the managerial world of Frederick Philip Grove: the watchwords are *Cut Back* and *Control* rather than *Encourage* or *Choose*. The difference has implications for publishing as well as politics.

I have been considering lately a variety of Canadian texts concerning the teaching of French to elementary school children: in part because they reveal some of the differences between Quebec publishing and publishing elsewhere in the country, and in part because they focus on a political/educational dilemma. Clearly having a command of both English and French is an advantage for anyone, facilitating a flexibility of movement and expression; yet for political and economic reasons (stubbornly ignoring the commonsense attitude that says it behooves us to insist that the next generation be as skilled in all the skills it possibly can be), we all too often in Canada have dismissed second language training as unimportant or improper. Texts have been unavailable. And the market has been susceptible to the Package Deal promotions of American textbook-tape-&-machinery companies. To find Canadian materials now coming available at this time of burgeoning bestsellerism is therefore both a remarkable and a welcome event. Two particular series are worth careful notice. The first, from Copp Clark-Pitman, is

called *Invitation à la lecture*, and comes as a set of seven small simply-illustrated books (at level 2; there are other levels as well), by Claudine Courtel and Marie-Antoinette Mantione; though one balks, in one of the volumes, at the comicbook biases used to portray Indians, the mini-stories appeal to children and at the same time show a pedagogical sensibility at work. The writers are aware of the importance of *sound*, and the stories are written to develop a sense of *cadence*, which second-language teaching so often ignores. (Indeed, Copp Clark-Pitman's *En français, s'il vous plaît*, intended for early teens, is far less successful in part because it fails to transform grammar into a flow of speech. It tries to. It nicely balances cartoons and photographs and tries to emphasize the linguistic function of the mélange of points each chapter asserts; but the situations it offers as bait — “this chapter will enable you to do . . .” — are not coherent enough for a student on his own to be able to sort out what he is learning, or interesting enough for most teenagers to want to bother.) From Quebec, however, comes another quantity of material designed for second-language learning. Two records, designed to supplement printed material, are quite simply marvellous kindergarten songs to listen to: Guy Auger's *Chansons dans le vent* (Les Editions projets) celebrates seasons and festivals, city and country, and so on; while *C'est la récréation*, by Edith Butler, Angèle Arsenault, and Jacqueline Lemay, is a game and nonsense record that just plays vigorously with sound and takes great joy in the patterns of speech. Again the stress is on cadence, on the mastery of *voice*; and several levels of text (books like *Du soleil pour toi*, *Fantaisies*, and *Farandoles*) entertain as well as instruct, while addressing themselves to aural mastery. In an age when print seems such a foreign medium to so many people, this assertion of the connection between voice and the printed word reaffirms the fact that language can at once be functional and give pleasure.

A number of children's books from Leméac, boldly coloured and in large type, reinforce the delight in language that can come from an elementary “educational” book; in particular I admire Céline Larose's *Petit soulier* and *Une Tomate inquiète*, the latter a witty story, despite a lame ending, of a tomato's quest to discover its place in the vegetable kingdom. These are richly coloured texts, and one must be impressed by the quality of print as well as of text (and by the amount of financial support that must have been given these Quebec publications). Though also handsome, Rita Scalabrini's *La Famille Citrouillard aux poissons des chenaux* seems illustrated more for the adult than the child, not geared exactly to the level of its informational story about a St. Lawrence fish. This is a flaw in much English-language children's publishing as well — such as Elizabeth Cleaver's collages in *The Fire Stealers* (Oxford), aesthetically interesting but debilitated by a colour sense all wrong for the subject. The story, moreover, lacks in this version the punch that the Ojibway tales have in Doubleday's fine collection *The Adventures of Nanabush*, told by Sam Snake, Chief Elijah Yellowhead, and other elders of

the Rama Ojibway band; but the Doubleday tales — moral and marvellous — of the great but imperfect magician Nanabush, are illustrated only mechanically. Finding a balance seems difficult in other ways as well. Christie Harris's *Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads* (McClelland & Stewart) is disappointing; Haida stories are transformed by a European set of conventions into fairytale fantasy of no particular distinction. Joe Rosenblatt's *Tommy Fry and The Ant Colony* (Black Moss) is an unfulfilled and under-financed production about a boy's affinity with ants and his ability to lead charges upon his unsavoury and unsurprisingly insect-like neighbours. And Tibor Kovalik's edition *From Tale to Tale* (Mosaic Press/Valley Editions), a simply worded but arbitrary collection of tales from various places, seems like one of those books that adults give to children because they think they ought to be interested in it, without much justification.

One might wish a lot of books written expressly for children to be better written and better produced. But one does not wish for *fewer* resources to be available. To follow up the pedagogical suggestions in Alice K. Hale's *An Introduction to Teaching Canadian Literature* (Atlantic Institute of Education) or Peter Birdsall's *Antitoenailimagery* (Canlit, P.O. Box 155, Peterborough) — despite occasional lapses: a raspberry to Birdsall's "The Madawaska World of Margaret Laurence"! — would in fact require teachers to make inventive use of a wide variety of resources as they encourage their students to recognize the vitality of their literature in the vitality of the culture at large. Among recent books that an able teacher could use imaginatively are André Bernier's *Le Vieux-Sillery* (Québec Ministère des Affaires culturelles), Theo Dimson's *Great Canadian Posters* (Oxford) and Pierre Des Ruisseaux's *Le Livre des expression québécoises* (Hurtubise HMH). Bernier's book is a collection of maps, drawings, photographs and commentaries that provides an integrated history of a French village becoming an English establishment becoming a city suburb; from it one derives a way of comprehending not only place but also visual design: of perceiving the relation between home and place, and the process of transformation in time that converts place into literary setting. One might hope for more direct social history from Dimson, but he concentrates more on design than society — despite which, his book offers a visual way into the past that scores of textbook dates could never match. And from Des Ruisseaux one discovers a language in use and in flux: on peut avoir une mémoire de chien, it seems (remarkable; cf. elephant); ou être malade comme un chien (from the English); or be obscure (noir comme chez le chien); or abandon hope (son chien est mort); and much much more.

At least, one can if the books are available. In 1980, Canadian literature is still being written; Canadian voices are still there to be heard; I would hope that it is not yet time to abandon hope about Canadian publishing. There is no question but that we face dramatic times, but there does exist the possibility that current trends may not continue.

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