

LITTLE PRESSES IN CANADA

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LITTLE PRESSES in Canada are rapidly expanding and becoming noticeably more productive. As underground alternatives to the larger publishing houses, they represent a retreat into a more intimate circle of production. They are characterized by their co-operative nature and their dedication both to the literature itself and to the forms in which it is published. The work of the little press — publishing, editing and often designing, printing and binding books — is done in close working relationships. The people involved range from academics to writers, artists and radicals. However, most little presses are predominantly the creations of poets. The reasons for forming a press and the processes of development are as varied as the presses are numerous. What does seem to distinguish the little press in general is a concern for a literature which is ignored or subverted by the existing publishing situation (in many cases a reflection of the dominant culture.)

Little presses in the past were usually part-time endeavours, but now federal and provincial government aid (Local Initiative Projects and Opportunities for Youth as well as federal block publishing grants) have allowed many presses to develop as full-time ventures. But even these presses operate mainly on shoestring budgets with little financial security.

The impact of the little presses, both on literary activity and on the reading public, has escalated over the past six years and during the past three has — like publishing in general — developed in a rapid crescendo. The little presses of Canada can no longer be counted on one hand, nor are they all to be found in Montreal or Ontario. Moreover, while little presses in the past tended to remain in literary reclusion, nowadays, since the changes in publishing patterns signalled by the formation of the Independent Publishers' Association, they are entering into the politics of publication. For example, David Robinson, editor of Talon-

books in Vancouver, is an active member of I.P.A.'s executive, while his press, together with other little presses such as Delta Canada, Fiddlehead Books, Ingluvin Publications, Ladysmith Press and Weed/Flower, are chartered members of IPA on the same basis as more commercially oriented Canadian-owned publishers. Other newly formed presses, such as Tree Frog in Edmonton, have been admitted to affiliated membership until they have published enough titles to qualify for full membership.

Another politicizing aspect of the present situation of the new presses is of course the fact that nine of them, including Fiddlehead Books which for the first time in its long history has accepted government aid, received block publishing grants ranging from \$1,500 to \$6,000. (The others assisted were *Alive*, *Intermedia*, *Coach House*, *Vancouver Community Press* [now *New Star Books*], *Delta Canada*, *Ingluvin*, *Talonbooks* and *Weed/Flower*.) The infusion of federal money has, indeed, recognized the national importance of the little presses and has had the practical effect of keeping the collector temporarily from the door. But the benefits of this new aid, together with that provided by the Canada Council, LIP and OFY, can be overestimated, while questions arise, on the governmental side of avoiding paternalistic attitudes and on the side of the presses of maintaining independence of editorial control.

THE PROFUSION of new presses and the size of their operations is in marked contrast to such celebrated but largely isolated predecessors as *First Statement* in 1945, and the presses of the seventies are even different from those of the sixties; they have more stability, a wider readership, and receive more publicity.

Of the little presses that did flourish in the sixties, some of the more notable are still in existence: the three new presses into which Delta Canada has now split, *Sono Nis*, *Coach House*, *Weed/Flower* and *Quarry Press*. These presses have retained much the same policies over the years, and their editors have not changed, but even they, in their established patterns, have expanded and grown, and there is good reason to believe that they will continue to flourish well into the seventies. They have been joined by many newer little presses — of whom some of the most interesting will find mention later in this article; it is hard yet to judge whether individually these will be ephemeral endeavours or will persevere. But it seems clear that as a phenomenon the little press is established.

Little presses can now be found widely scattered over Canada. The highest concentration is on the West Coast, mainly in Vancouver, where the roots of the tradition go back to the 1960s, the growth of the presses being closely linked with the literary underground which first found its voice in a succession of little magazines, several of which developed into presses; *Talon*, for example, was started in 1963 and in 1967 grew into Talonbooks, while Bill Bissett's *Up the Tube* eventually developed into Blew Ointment Press. Other active West Coast presses include Blackfish, Pulp Press, Sono Nis, Intermedia, B.C. Monthly and New Star Books (formerly the Vancouver Community Press affiliated with the Georgia Straight). Both Blackfish and Pulp Press have produced magazines and poetry broadsheets as well as books.

There are few little presses, moving eastward geographically, between British Columbia and Ontario, though an interesting example is Tree Frog which recently began in Edmonton, where a great deal of the more ambitious publishing has been undertaken by M. G. Hurtig, a small rather than a little press.

Ontario — and especially Toronto — has become an even more active centre of book production over the past six years than in the past. Apart from the small presses like Anansi and new press, both of which arose largely through the initiative of Dave Godfrey, a more traditionally little press — press porcépïc — was started last year by Godfrey and a number of associates as an outlet for young and experimental writers. It now operates out of an old farmhouse in Erin, Ontario. Some of the little presses which began in Toronto during the sixties, notably Coach House and Weed/Flower, continue in strengthened form. After four years, Alive Press is still publishing actively out of Guelph, and Quarry continues operations in Kingston under the poet and critic Tom Marshall and a community of rotating editors.

Montreal, which has always been a strong centre of small-scale publishing activity, has emerged in recent years with several important new little presses. Ingluvin Publications is edited by K. V. Hertz and Seymour Mayne, while Delta Canada has recently split, with its three editors — Louis Dudek, Michael Gnarowski and Glen Siebrasse — parting ways to continue their publishing activities independently. Their new presses are, respectively, D.C., Le Chien d'Or/The Golden Dog and Delta Books.

In the Maritimes several new presses have recently appeared, while Fiddlehead Books, edited by Fred Cogswell, is continuing with renewed strength. At the Purple Wednesday Society, also in New Brunswick, William Prouty has produced several books of poetry. Sand Patterns Press and the Square Deal have

both started recently in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. In Halifax, Rick Rofihe has produced some highly imaginative books of writing by children and for children.

In eastern Canada, as on the West Coast, many little presses either grew out of small reviews or have since published their own magazines along with books, poetry broadsheets and folios. The histories of Delta Canada and Fiddlehead Books are instructively variant in this respect.

Louis Dudek edited his journal, *Delta*, from 1957 to 1966. In 1967 he joined Michael Gnarowski and Glen Siebrasse to publish books under the imprint of Delta Canada. The joint editorship continued for five years and resulted in the publication of more than thirty books, mainly of verse. The decision to divide activities was mutually agreed in 1971 because, as Dudek explained, "It is difficult to have a clear editorial policy when three points of view are involved." Gnarowski now publishes a little magazine which bears the same name as his press — Le Chien d'Or/The Golden Dog — but neither Dudek nor Siebrasse has returned to magazine publishing.

The first book which Dudek published under the imprint of his new press, D.C., in 1972 was Avi Boxer's book of verse, *No Address*. As well as many books of poetry, Dudek is also planning to publish more conventionally scholarly books, including an edition of the letters of Ezra Pound and a book on painting by Henry Miller. Gnarowski has been led by his historical interests into publishing at his Golden Dog Press such literature from Canada's past as Heavyside's *Jezebel* and Lampman's original text of *The City of the End of Things*, as well as the first cumulative index of *Canadian Literature*, and small introductory volumes by the Montreal poets Peter Lord and Nancy Stegmayer. The third former editor of Delta Canada, Glen Siebrasse, has continued to publish young poets and is at present compiling an anthology — the first to come out of Montreal in many years — of 25 to 30 contemporary Canadian poets.

The origins of Fiddlehead Books were linked only indirectly with a little magazine. While Fred Cogswell was editor of *The Fiddlehead* he published four poetry pamphlets, and out of this venture developed Fiddlehead Books, a publishing enterprise quite separate from the magazine, and more prolific in its production of small books of poetry than any other Canadian press, little or large.

Several other presses — Alive, Quarry, Square Deal and (as we have seen) Talonbooks grew out of magazines bearing the same name. New Star books grew out of *Georgia Straight*, an underground newspaper. Other little presses began with books and soon after produced magazines. On the West Coast *Black-*

fish is published by Blackfish Press and *3¢ Pulp*, a funky bimonthly, comes from Pulp Press. Sand Patterns Press in Charlottetown produces *Sand Patterns* magazine. Between 1966 and 1967 Weed/Flower in Toronto produced *Weed*, while Coach House Press, founded jointly by Victor Coleman and Stan Bevington, published *Island* until 1968, has published *The Ant's Forefoot* (which comes to an end this summer with No. 10), and currently publishes *IS* and *Open Letter*.

AS WELL AS editing and publishing, the operations of the little press often include printing and book design. For simplicity, financial reasons or lack of interest in printing, some presses farm out their books to jobbers. Others print them cheaply and inartistically by offset or mimeography. However, there are many who painstakingly do their own printing. They possess or have access to equipment for quality reproduction, and often work with artists. There is an increasing return to the once apparently dying art of book-making, and a strong new emphasis on the visual and aesthetic aspects of publishing. In this field the work of Stan Bevington at Coach House Press has given other houses an excellent example in design and creative printing set.

While many books have been produced with hand-set print and a careful choice of papers, bindings and illustrations, in the tradition of artistic small presses, Coach House has paid particular attention to photo-offset lithography and appropriate book design. This summer (1973) its founders plan a two-week workshop for other small presses, dealing with photography, colour, graphic techniques, book design, distribution and pricing; this is being organized in response to the fact that many small publishers have approached Coach House for information about its mode of operation.

Coach House is still operated after seven years by Victor Coleman and Stan Bevington, working with a loose association of poets in their coach house just behind Rochdale College. They have expanded and diversified considerably. Originally they published mainly poetry, but recently they have been producing prose and engaging in printing with a more directly visual appeal. Last year they published a catalogue for the Image Bank exhibition of old postcards, sponsored by the National Gallery, and M. Vaughn-James' *The Projector*; more recently they have brought out *A History of the Toronto Islands*. At the same time, they have continued to publish poetry, both Canadian and American. Coach House

is aiming towards a “post-literate” society with books that tend more and more to be as visual as they are verbal. Frank Davey’s *Arcana* — a tarot book of lyric document — is printed on pages under-printed with pale green symbols from the occult. The trains printed on the pages of Ginsberg’s *Iron House* create a moving train effect when the book is leafed through quickly. Coach House books have appeared in all shapes and sizes, including one shaped like a baseball pennant. The images are taken from graphics, wallpapers, colour-screen photographs and photo-stills, etc.

Among other presses producing books of experimental design, Talonbooks, Tree Frog, Pulp Press, an-der-bo and especially press porcépic have some interesting work.

Press porcépic started in 1972 with a small magazine — also entitled *porcépic*, which was exceptional in both format and content. Printed with the help of Coach House Press, it included an essay by Eldon Garnet, a short story by Gilles Vigneault, and poems by known poets (Birney, Gustafson, Colombo), younger experimentalists (Joe Rosenblatt and bill bissett) and by total newcomers, including Tim Inkster. This “magazine of writing” marked the emergence of what may well be one of the most exciting and important little presses in recent years. Porcépic has gone on to produce a series of books which have maintained a remarkable standard of aesthetic and — in most cases — of literary excellence. All the production goes on at the Erin farm, where the design and making of books — presided over by Tim Inkster — is treated as if it were as much a creative act as the writing of them. The papers, bindings and visual logos are chosen meticulously to harmonize with hand-set print in unusual typefaces. In 1972 porcépic published four hardcover books, and more recently it has produced Joe Rosenblatt’s *The Blind Photographer*, a book to delight bibliophiles, containing poems and drawing by the poet relating to the organic underworld.

Another small press run by a typographer was Bob Burdett’s Roundstone Press in Toronto, which published an unusual book of poems and graphics by Vera Frenkel, entitled *Image Spaces*. The type was set entirely by hand and printed by artist Bob Marsh; many of Vera Frenkel’s graphics, executed in subtle shades of grey, were printed directly from her plates on to the page, so that the book actually contained original prints. *Image Spaces*, printed in a limited edition of 1,000, was Roundstone Press’s sole venture as a little press; it has since been incorporated as a non-profit council for the arts, under Bob Burdett, which is at present compiling a catalogue of the works of Canadian artists on exhibition.

OUTSIDE ONTARIO many little presses act as regional publishers producing the works of local writers and serving a geographically immediate reading audience. Tree Frog, in Edmonton, which has a full-time printshop, is a good example of development on these lines. Its origins go back to 1968 when its editor Allan Shute began to print his own poetry and that of his friends and to circulate it privately. As printing equipment was acquired, volunteer labour became available, and manuscripts were submitted, Tree Frog developed until finally in 1972 it became a full-fledged little press. It has published books by such local poets as Stephen Scobie (*The Birken Tree*) and Jan Lander (*Space Baby*), and an anthology of Edmonton poetry, *39 Below*, including work by Douglas Barbour, Dorothy Livesay, Elizabeth Brewster, Richard Hornsey and many others. Tree Frog does not plan to restrict itself to local writers only; it plans to produce *One Quart of Canadian Poetry*, "an anthology of new Canadian writing packaged in a sealed quart container." Other little presses in Edmonton are *The White Pelican* and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, which publishes poetry broadsheets.

On the West Coast the little presses are predominantly regional in orientation, publishing local writers mainly for local consumption, through enterprises that are largely co-operative in organization and that concentrate mainly on poetry. A few presses, however, like Talonbooks and Sono Nis, do publish books by writers working outside British Columbia.

From modest and experimental beginnings in 1967, Talonbooks has become a dominant force in British Columbian publishing. It produces a wide range of books, from poetry and a series of plays to art and film. It is one of the presses that describe themselves as co-operative societies. Talonbooks does its own printing, and its books are designed carefully in collaboration with their authors. Though often original, the resulting format does at times have overtones of Coach House style.

The series of Talonbook plays, which began in 1969, includes works by James Reaney and George Ryga as well as by younger playwrights like Jackie Crossland (*Rinse Cycle*) and Beverley Simons (*Crabdance*). The press's poetry publishing programme has cut across the whole spectrum of British Columbian poets, both well and little known, including poets who were prominent in the experimental writing movement of the West Coast during the Sixties, such as Bill Bissett, Frank Davey and Jim Brown, but also established poets like Phyllis Webb, who is represented by a definitive *Selected Poems*. Poets from outside the region are also

represented on Talonbooks' lists; they include Victor Coleman and bp nichol.

Pulp Press and New Star Books, both of which have emerged recently in Vancouver, can be classed as alternate presses. New Star has affiliations with earlier underground publications, for its origins can be found in a tabloid writing supplement to the *Georgia Straight* which developed into the *Georgia Straight W.S. Series*. This series published works by well and little known West Coast writers, including George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Fred Wah, Judith Copithorne and Chuck Carlson. In 1972 a group broke away to form themselves into the Grape Collection, to establish New Star Books, and to publish their own newspaper — “a political analysis of society.” From this point they began to turn away from the kind of literary works they had published before, such as George Bowering's *Autobiology*, and now they are producing such books as labour organizer Jack Scott's *Class Struggles in Canada*.

Pulp Press began in 1972 with a group of eight members “mainly interested in publishing”; it has already published six books and its little magazine, *3¢ Pulp*, which is worth at least the price of its title for its interesting rambles and trouvailles. Pulp Press, whose attitude of creative anarchism is expressed in its slogan “Independence without gov't”, publishes poetry and “conversational” novels by young writers who are not well-known.

Blackfish, another recent and lively Vancouver press, was started by two poets (Brian Brett and Allan Safarik) to provide an alternate to the existing publishing facilities on the West Coast. They seem to have attracted the best of current local poetry, which they publish in a little magazine (*Blackfish*) and in small edition books, folios and broadsides. The writers they have so far published include Earle Birney, Seymour Mayne, Milton Acorn, Pat Lowther, Pat Lane and Dorothy Livesay, and they plan shortly to produce a thirty-page illustrated poem by Al Purdy, *The Bear Paw Sea*.

Very Stone House began in Vancouver in 1966, with Seymour Mayne as one of its four poet-editors. Since the demise of VSH, Mayne — with K. V. Hertz — is publishing again in Montreal. Hertz and Mayne had worked together in the past to produce the militantly experimental magazine *Cataract* in Montreal, which in the sixties was a close rival to *Tish* in Vancouver. They founded *Ingluvin* in 1970 as a “magazine of Canadian writing”. Out of it emerged Ingluvin Press, whose books were printed by Hertz and for the first year edited by Mayne from Vancouver. The early volumes were all of poetry, including *40 Women Poets*, edited by Dorothy Livesay. This year (1973) *Ingluvin* has veered towards

prose, publishing Raymond Fraser's short stories, *The Black Horse Tavern*, and K. V. Hertz's imaginary and satirical world history, *Eurethrea*.

Although most of the little presses in the Maritimes are strongly regional, Fiddlehead Books stands out with its concern for poetry across the country. Recently Fred Cogswell, who for many years edited and printed Fiddlehead Books and gave a hundred or so poets a first chance to expose their works to the public eye, announced that he had decided to suspend the press, owing to financial and personal pressures. If this happens, Canada will lose a press that has served poets well, in accordance with the eclectic editorial policy Cogswell established when he began publishing ten years ago and determined: "insofar as time and effort permitted not only to publish as many poets as I could, but to publish poets of all kinds — whoever showed a particular kind of promise or finished achievement." In Fredericton, as well as Fiddlehead Books, a more regionally oriented series, New Brunswick Chapbooks, is published and edited by Nancy Bauer. Up to now it has published some fifteen brochures by local poets.

Of the remaining little presses in the Maritimes, Square Deal Publications in Charlottetown is regional in the best sense of the word. It began in 1972 by publishing *The Square Deal*, a little magazine revolving around editor Réshard Gool and a group of local poets. *Square Deal* has received assistance from the University of Prince Edward Island, where Gool teaches, and from an OFY grant; it is not a university publication. Gool, a much-travelled political scientist, is also a notable poet. He has published six handsome volumes, including verse (*In Medusa's Eye* by Réshard Gool, *Winter in Paradise* by John Smith, *Pomes de Terre* by Jim Hornby), a play (*Amadée Doucette & Son* by Tom Gallant) and *Portraits & Gastroscopes*, a book on island people by Gool and Frank Ledwell. Sand Patterns Press in Charlottetown also publishes, apart from its little magazine, small books of poetry.

Generally speaking little press publication is in a healthier condition than it has ever enjoyed in the past. Though many of the books published by these presses do not find their way into bookstores, particularly outside their own area, there is a growing market for them. Distribution is the problem, and many of the little publishers are concerned over the difficulty of making their books available to a geographically wider public. Some of the presses, and especially those who are members of IPA, have considered pooling booklists, since many bookstores do not like to order small quantities. This proposal was discussed at the February 1973 IPA Conference on Book Publishing in Toronto, where the idea of a small press readers' club was also suggested. Some arrangement of this kind

is needed to bring together the large group of little presses — on the one hand — which are publishing so many excellent books of poetry, short stories and plays, and — on the other hand — the growing number of students and others who are interested in the developing literature of our country. At present it needs an alert eye to know what is going on among the little presses, though useful leads can be found in such booktrade publications as *Quill & Quire* and *Books in Canada*, in the book pages of local newspapers, and of course in the wide selection of literary journals now published in Canada.

Editor's Note. Sarah McCutcheon has perceptively noted the characteristics and the dominant trends of little publishing in Canada; she has also mentioned most of the active presses. But, as we become aware from the books that reach us, it is hard to keep up with the numbers of such presses and harder still to discuss them all in one article. However, for the help of our readers, we would record the names of a number of other active presses: Concorde Press (Windsor), November House (Vancouver), Aliquando Press (Toronto), Anak Press (Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan), Borealis Press (Ottawa), Manna Publishing (Toronto), Disposable Paper Press (Ville La Salle, Quebec); Klanak Press of Vancouver, a pioneer in the Sixties, has reactivated itself with a finely printed volume (*When We Lie Together* by G. V. Downes), and Ladysmith Press of Ladysmith, Quebec, continues to publish regularly.