

GIVE THE CORPORATION A COMPASS!

I SHALL NEVER FORGET A CURIOUS, rather sad incident at one of those almost pointless conferences of artists and impresarios that preceded the Centennial of 1967. It was Seminar '65. From all corners of Canada we had gathered in a pine-smelling ski hotel at Ste. Adèle, to drink indifferent wine and food at government expense, and to talk about the kind of money we might extract from the Centennial budget. The members of the literary panel — bitterly divided because it included publishers whose interests were quite different from those of the writers with whom they sat — realized from the beginning that it stood little chance in comparison with the noisy extroverts of the performing arts. We therefore spent little time formulating our modest demands for the small proportion of the funds that would be available for those who *create* works in comparison with those who merely *interpret* them, and devoted most of our energy to a series of thunderous resolutions intended to call to order all those Canadian institutions which claimed to be dedicated to cultural ends.

Our most eloquent resolution — a veritable Jeremiad — was a denunciation of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for the decline in quality of its programmes since the beginning of the 1960's. (Had we known how much farther they would have declined by the early 1970's we might have held some of our fire for a later skirmish!) At the final plenum of the Seminar my fellow chairman of the panel — Jean-Ethier Blais — read it with savage relish from the platform; it was (in terms of popular acclaim though not — alas — in results) by far the

most successful resolution of the day, received with a thunder of desk-pounding and floor-stamping that for the only time at Ste. Adèle united actors and artists, conductors and editors, writers and composers, architects and museum directors, French-speaking and English-speaking. There was only one man who appeared not to appreciate it, and he sat in a gallery reserved for visitors. I saw his face go pained and blanched; after a decent interval he withdrew. I later learnt that he was the incumbent President of the CBC; he had heard the men and women whom he regarded as his ultimate, hardcore constituency, turning against the Corporation in condemnation. I felt, at that moment, rather guilty at having had such an enthusiastic hand in the resolution, since, however just our complaints may have been, by framing it we might appear to be aligning ourselves with the philistines who habitually attack the CBC because it offends their ideas of free enterprise and their hatred of anything truly cultural.

I have since realized that such guilt was pointless and unjustified, since the ambivalences of the situation have been created by the failure of the Corporation itself and of successive governments to define clearly the role of a national broadcasting service. Among the artistic and intellectual community there is no doubt that it should fulfil a cultural, educational and informative role, leaving marketable popular entertainment — *including hockey* — to those stations and networks which are in the business of selling broadcasting as a commodity. (Such a decision would largely defuse the philistine attack on the CBC in any case, since it would eliminate the element of business rivalry.) With this view *Canadian Literature* has always agreed, since it has seemed to us so limpidly reasonable. Not so, however, to politicians, whose own motives are rarely limpid and whose actions, even when expedient, are rarely reasonable, and not so, unfortunately, to many of those high Ottawa bonzes who make the final decisions in the CBC, and who regard themselves not as trustees of a cultural heritage, but as mere mundane business executives, as frenetically concerned with *ratings* as any private station boss who depends on advertisements for his Chivas Regal. The power within the Corporation of these business-minded bureaucrats has unfortunately grown so much of late that even the improvement in content and quality which we were recently promised when it was decided to reform programming by establishing Radio 1 and Radio 2 and has not yet been properly implemented, and one wonders whether the delay in restoring intelligent programmes will not be continued indefinitely. While a few national network programmes — Tuesday Night, Anthology, etc. — have sustained a reasonably high standard, there has been a steady and regrettable decline since the early 1960's — when Vancouver

for example had a first-rate staff including Robert Harlow, Peter Garvie, Gerald Newman and Robert Chesterman who produced first-rate local CBC programmes — in the quality and scope of broadcasting originating in the regions; in an intensely regionalized country like Canada such a condition is disastrous.

There are many men and women in the lower ranks of the CBC hierarchy who have worked and still work hard to provide first-rate cultural and educational programmes, but indecisiveness about the true role of the CBC has long afflicted the professional administrators who populate the higher echelons of the Corporation. It has resulted in the erosion of any sense of responsibility that may once have existed towards the role the CBC has played and might still play in the national cultural life. In the past the CBC has encouraged writers, as well as many other kinds of artist, and was responsible not only for saving them from despair in the lean years of the past, but also for encouraging the production of many works of considerable merit, especially in the fields of drama and historical documentary. However, once a work was created, the CBC has always been inclined to put it out in the cold to find its own way in life, and this usually means that a very good play may be written and superbly produced — once! (Though radio plays *are* occasionally revived, it is rarely indeed that they are performed more than twice.)

We are grateful that radio kept drama alive as a literary form in Canada during the long years before the recent revival of live theatre; even today far more new Canadian plays are performed on radio than on the stage. But radio drama is a genre with which even scholars are not really familiar, because radio plays are very rarely published. At the least one would have thought that the CBC could have sponsored the publication each year of a volume of the best radio plays; such anthologies *are* published in Germany, and they are very successful. But the CBC has always been hesitant in its publishing; it has never established a regular periodical like *The Listener* in England to publish the best broadcast material, and its few pamphlets of collected lectures — while often excellent in themselves — are much too scanty to be considered an adequate publication programme for a Corporation so much concerned with the commissioning of literary works.

However, one at least lived under the illusion that at the CBC material of cultural importance was protected even if it was not published, and that it would be available if some day its publication were to become possible. One heard rumours of a CBC archive — though scholars seeking access to material showed great signs of frustration — but one did not realize that no adequate rules had

been drawn up to protect important material before it reached the archive. A recent incident in one of the regional headquarters of the CBC has dramatically demonstrated the extent to which invaluable documents are still at the mercy of irresponsible petty bureaucrats.

In the Vancouver studios, early in 1971, a collection of more than two hundred tapes of important lectures, first performances of Canadian plays, first performances of Canadian translations of foreign plays, first Canadian performances of musical works, and first performances of valuable historical documentaries, had been put aside for transmission to the archives. Under circumstances which are obscure but which the President of the Corporation assured me *several months ago* were under investigation, more than one hundred and fifty of these tapes were destroyed by a minor official and the remainder would have been lost if one of the producers had not learnt what was happening and vigorously intervened. We have not yet heard the result of the investigation, but so far, though dubbings of some of the items destroyed in the studios are said to exist in private hands, no effort appears to have been made by the Corporation to reconstitute this important national cultural material, which includes the first acting versions of nearly thirty original Canadian plays.

Such an incident is scandalous in itself, but even more disturbing in general terms is the way in which this episode reveals that the CBC is not living up to its responsibilities as custodian of the literary (and also musical) works which — let us give credit where it is deserved — were written only because dedicated producers and programme directors in the CBC commissioned them. We hope that the high officials of the CBC will pause for a while in their obsessive pursuit of ratings and in their undignified competition with commercial networks to make provisions ensuring that such official vandalism cannot again be perpetrated and that the lost material will be reconstituted and placed in an archive adequately staffed and open to scholars who have up to now had very little opportunity to study intensively such interesting forms as the radio drama. Perhaps we should do more than call on the officials of the CBC; perhaps we should demand that M. Pelletier, the Minister of State, pay more than his usual lip service to the cultural needs of the country, and ensure that special funds are allocated to establish a Public Library of Broadcasting designed to safeguard documentary material of historical and cultural value which exists in the various centres of the CBC under perpetual threat of capricious destruction; perhaps we should go farther and suggest to the government in general that, for once and all, it be established that the CBC dedicate itself not to entertainment considered as a

commodity, but to fulfilling the cultural, educational and informational needs of the country. Give the Corporation a compass!

* * *

After twelve years we have decided to discontinue the annual checklist of books and critical articles. When *Canadian Literature* began in 1959 no such list appeared in either English or French. Now there is an excellent annual bibliography of English-Canadian books in *Commonwealth Literature* and one of French-Canadian books in *Livres et Auteurs Québécois*. There is no need for competition, and since our original function is that of a "Journal of Criticism and Review", we have decided to devote the space formerly allocated to the list to more reviews so as to keep up with the increasing flow of Canadian books. In doing so we thank those bibliographers who over the years when it was needed worked so patiently and disinterestedly at providing the checklist.

G.W.