

seems firmly based on rationality. In the face of a torrent of self-indulgent ego trips, its firm link with reason may make it durable, and of continuing value to our life.

¹ The books which prompted these notes are: *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete*,

edited by bp Nichol (Ottawa: Oberon Press); bill bissett, *S Th Story I To*; Ken West, *Wire*; Maxine Gadd, *Hochelaga*; Bertrand Lachance, *Eyes Open*; d.a. levy, *Red Lady* (all Vancouver: blewointment press).

² Mike Weaver, "Concrete Poetry." *The Lugano Review*, Vol. I, no. 5-6, 1966, p. 100-125.

BIRTH OF THE BUTTERFLY

Robert Harlow

THESE NOTES are personal, set down with the hindsight not available to me during the dozen years I spent with the CBC in a job that allowed me some access both to the production and the executive sides of its operation. I must say, too, that I do not share Max Ferguson's romantic view of the Corporation (*Here's Max*), nor am I able, for temperamental reasons, to share Frank Peers' classical and scholarly approach (*The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting*). A beginning, then, might be to restate what most of those who read this already believe: the CBC was a good idea. The proposition that all public radio and TV frequencies should be used for profit and the perpetuation of private points of view is not a tolerable one. So, even at a time (now) when the CBC has become a \$160,000,000 giant, in which rather inexpensive brains jockey for petty power and ways to keep it, there is still a real case for its continuance, though not, perhaps, in its present form.

Another beginning, and this closer to the subject (the CBC's influence on

Canadian letters) might be this: a country already blessed with good writers may use any new medium well (witness Germany, France, Italy, England, where the best authors participate with distinction in all forms of expression, and where the media use their works with a real sense of contributing to a cultural heritage). Good writers will enlarge a country's consciousness and widen its horizon of expression even under adverse conditions. The CBC, however, was created at a time when there were virtually no useable literary talents in the country to contribute to the new public medium. This situation was made more complex (and the situation is still with us today) by the fact that most of the audience that potentially good writers might have had was reading, watching, listening to the products of other talents from other cultures. Remember too that the CBC did not grow from fertile ground but was created by legislation to satisfy an intellectual need. The Corporation's service to Canadian letters was born in triple jeopardy: no writers, minimal audience and small local experience.

BIRTH OF THE BUTTERFLY

In the beginning and before the war, announcers, so the legend goes, wore evening dress to read the news. Singers did Edwardian recitals. Musicians thumped through junior symphony repertoires. Variety shows extolled the virtues of Empire. And actors and producers and writers did the best they could, imitating Arch Obler and BBC light drama. No sense of panic: it was enough to be alive from coast-to-coast.

During the war, Dan McArthur founded a news service that still has traditions and real virtues; the Stage series began as a medium for dramatists, Ira Dilworth's Wednesday Night began to function, and a good, if sometimes over-anxious, Public Affairs department emerged. Perhaps this department more than any other felt the brunt of the CBC's *de facto* policy not to create a climate where good writers and producers could work out well in advance of the public's expectations. It tried, and thought that this was what it was doing, but it found out how wrong it was when it ran headlong into that dark tunnel labelled "Tell It Like It Is" from which it never really emerged. Neither the Corporation nor its member departments were prepared for, or understood, the gap between the new age born in England and America on the one hand, and the Canadian public and its parliament on the other.

So, during its first twenty-five years, the CBC's character was at best avuncular and stuffy; at worst it served then as it does now, only as an instrument of public policy. Like the CN and CP, Air Canada, the pipelines and, sometime in the future, a national power grid, the CBC quite simply helps tie Canada together. It was, and still says it is, devoted

to entertainment, information, the encouragement of Canadian talent and the fostering of a Canadian identity. For a long while, CBC staff people believed these were not mere words and tried to act accordingly. It would be difficult to say now what new beads the CBC tells when it says its private novenas at annual executive conferences. Perhaps there are no new ones; perhaps "give the people what they want" still salves as many consciences in the CBC as in the U.S.A. And no one seems to understand that to follow this slogan renders the public network superfluous.

Yet the CBC had a kind of golden age. And during that time — for a decade or so after 1950 — it produced enough good programming to gain a place in the hearts of my generation if not in those of any other. Still, the talent it fostered was seldom literary. In fact, even during those better times, the CBC, despite its liberal image and stance, was anti-literary. The reason is simple; it sought to support men-of-letters as other corporations support *their* idea men: as instruments of its own corporate means and ends. Thus, what writing talent we produced in the fifties wrote for a Canadian version of Grub Street. Perhaps this would not have mattered, except to the taxpayers, if there had been anywhere else for real authors to go. We had then no theatre, no adventurous publishers, few magazines. Certainly the CBC could not have done it all alone. Publishers and a viable theatre are necessary to create a literature, but I don't happen to think this lets the CBC off the hook. While writers were not thrown to the dogs who can compute with the speed of light the lowest common denominator of public taste, they were up against what

was necessarily an institutionalized taste which tended to recognize only certain modes of expression and could only tolerate a low level of artistic consciousness. These modes and levels were defined by a programme policy which perpetuated the taste of a corporation that seldom knew what it would do to foster a literature, but which was always quite clear what it wouldn't do, as outlined in Government White Papers and various executive directives, all conceived and written with hellish good intentions.

There are points here which must be sharpened. There *was* a kind of Golden Age. The CBC was able to do a fair job of recruiting after World War II. In 1948 the recruits were avant-garde. Those who are left have moved up in the Corporation; they are still avant-garde — in terms of 1948. A second point: the Golden Age was given its original impetus by A. Davidson Dunton, a man who rightly felt that the CBC's mission was not necessarily to be popular. Alphonse Ouimet, who succeeded him, was pressured to take the opposite view. Or perhaps it came naturally to him. Great ages sometimes come to a close on the heels of a rousing speech. M. Ouimet's speech was to the National Convention of the Canadian Chambers of Commerce at Halifax in 1957 where he declared, with emotion, that the CBC wanted to be loved. If a moment were to be marked when the CBC died as a literary possibility — indeed, as almost any kind of culturally useful possibility — that moment would be the most likely choice. No literary (or cultural) force can be *loved*. When it becomes beholden it ceases to breathe its own air.

A still larger point must be made. Because the CBC did not establish an inde-

pendent definable tradition (as with News) *in collaboration with* emerging writers, it has been unable to remain in contact with the young and vigorous. Nor, because it never had an independent vision, has it been able to establish an audience which will — or can — tolerate the incivilities of real creativity. Its true audience is now at the movies, and it is loved as much as any broadcasting outfit is ever loved by an audience of older apathetics, of whom not a few have been taught to be colonial Americans, the very thing — rightly or wrongly but ironically — the Corporation was set up to prevent. And this is an indictment the CBC could have escaped only by understanding the necessity of being deservedly unloved a good deal of the time.

Doing violence to manners, mores, to conventional wisdom and philosophy, to everything but life itself is basic to any publishable literature. The CBC's point of view on this matter was solidly corporate. It produced (and still does), sometimes shyly, sometimes with fanfare, a little electronic music, an occasional ballet, an eclectic original play here and there throughout the winter season. In short, these gestures are not a usual thing and the result is rather like suddenly seeing your mother walk down Main Street with one breast exposed. It's shocking, so shocking that it's impossible to say whether it's a good breast or not. A lot of breasts have to hang out before compassionate judgment is even thinkable.

In Europe, for example, Larry Kent's *High* and Maurie Ruvinsky's *Plastic Mile* have, I'm told, been broadcast on TV. Without speaking of the merits of either of these feature films, the point must be made that neither of them could possibly

be broadcast on the CBC. In Europe, time has been available for all kinds of art, and in sufficient bulk for it to be accepted as relevant by its audience and appraised as part of a normal schedule of programmes. This will not happen in Canada now. The moment during the fifties when the tradition could have been established which would have made the CBC a real influence for good inside the literary scene is gone. The Corporation opted for almost total pop and pap, and a sycophant's relationship to Ottawa's politicians. To begin now would require a revolution which no one has the stomach for, or the psychic energy to produce. The potentially good men hired fifteen to twenty years ago are long since gone. The small uprisings of the sixties were made by trendy popularizers of small originality. They might have done some good — kept the battle going — had there been leadership at the department and executive levels, but by that time there was no one of strength or stature left. The image of the Corporation became, quite naturally, the butterfly.

My small part in this losing game was played out during the years about which I have been speaking (1951-64). One of the black comic aspects of the CBC's history during that period was that a good many production people sensed what the priorities should have been. We knew that we did not need press officers, but good programmes that led the public's taste. We did not need systems and procedures men, personnel people, hundreds of head office drones and emissaries proving Parkinson's Law while ostensibly satisfying M. Ouimet's obsession with re-organizing and re-organizing again the superstructure of the Corpora-

tion. We did not need supervisors supervising supervisors supervising supervisors until reality became power instead of programmes. And we did not need to have to think that executive personnel were the enemy. What we needed was the sense Dunton had given in his time that someone was leading us who could handle the people in Ottawa and elsewhere who believe that new experience is always obscene and the CBC is a left-wing plot. But even under Dunton we had failed to make contact with the clear-eyed among the young. And this was a kind of slow suicide. The job of adjusting our priorities was never done. The CBC simply grew old and died. Even this kind of suicide is a betrayal.

If the CBC had ever really met the Canadian writer it would have been in one of three areas: the dramatic, the documentary, or the literary. In the beginning, there were neither the creative nor the production talents to make these forms viable. The CBC functioned at the level of a local Little Theatre group where social position and some small "showbiz" experience fostered careers far more quickly than was good for the fledgling network. There came a sense of Establishment that did not leave the Corporation until hiring for television was in full flood. When I joined the CBC there was really only one rule; in essence it was "let it be in good taste." One didn't ask what good taste was; one knew or wasn't hired. You can run a tight ship if everyone knows what everyone else is thinking and, what's more, believes it. It gives a fine sense of mission (which the CBC often had), but literature out of such environments tends to be Kiplingesque at best. One must ask questions, voice real complaints if there

is to be any forward movement. There were, of course, slips, moments of consummate frustration when one of our own went beyond the bounds, as when Dan McArthur wrote his famous memo to Management headed "Up Shit Creek Without a Paddle." But these things were handled quietly; Dan's career levelled off abruptly. He eventually became someone's Executive Assistant. He was one of a handful without whom the CBC would have really come apart.

Another was Andrew Allan. If there is a first name in Canadian post-war drama, his must be it. Without his work before, Stratford could not have survived its beginning. We are indebted to him for erudition, professionalism, a sense of style and mission and a heightened consciousness of what had to be done. Perhaps what he didn't know was the short time there was to do it in. By the time TV came along he had established the first possibility of a Canadian drama, but then both time and continuity ran out on him. Drama was to be big in TV, and without the experience we gained in radio. Television was new, different. Somehow, somewhere a new god was to reveal a shortcut to literary creation

through the use of dials, knobs, lights, lenses. No one touched with only monaural experience would be able to see the grand design or be let in on the new cosmic secret. The natural laws of a new creative universe were to be delivered, but the celestial mail got held up in a permanent snow storm and we've been suffering ever since from what those bright young things, so recently auto-beatified, recoiled in Sheridan-esque horror from: radio with pictures.

Andrew Allan was the first and the last inside the CBC with a practical, aesthetic vision of the possibilities of a dramatic literature, and the power to put it into effect. I am not naive enough to think he could have saved the situation. My point is that had we allowed ourselves a sense of continuity and built on the only dramatic tradition we ever had, TV drama might have become original instead of minor, eclectic and irrelevant to what we as Canadians are. With leadership we could have forced our almost thriving dramatic literature. As it was, instead of encouraging and conspiring with young writers to subvert its audience to consciousness, the CBC, along with Stratford, conspired

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But the drama is difficult and treacherous; it is a form where the writer has to share control; fashion and “creative” directors tend to take over the inexperienced. Perhaps a more viable form for new talent is the documentary. This form is, in one sense, pre-fiction. In another, it can be used as a form for fiction. But no matter how hard one tries it can never just report. It always tells, and in the telling it attracts meaning willy-nilly. But in Canada, our most known saying, the one that is in the bones of every one of us, is that our history — our experience, everything we do — is dull. The CBC believed that too and in this area, where it should not have failed, it did. A CBC documentary was a *serious* proposition, conceived along the lines of a *Paris Review* interview: the interviewer was to be knowledgeable, pertinent, polite and anonymous. Radio journalism never really progressed beyond this: the idea that a documentary, no matter about what, was, in fact, a document, a forging, if you’ll allow the reference, in the smithy of someone’s (the broadcaster’s) soul, “the uncreated conscience of the race.” No one had actually heard the order, but all of us knew it: documentaries were to be objective. History, experience contemporary and otherwise, expired wanly in 15, 30 and 60 minute chunks as anxious executive ears measured carefully whether equal time were given to every point of view.

Yet history in its broadest sense — the sense of a culture *doing* — is pre-fiction and necessary to fiction. It is the great instigator of literature, as in Tolstoy and

Faulkner and Ford Madox Ford. It is, to switch images, our national wilderness where writers, if they are to be writers, must slash out their individual ways toward identity, and even sometimes towards truth and beauty.

But literature — as distinct from history — is mostly writers writing alone in unguarded moments about how it is to be alive and have to die, and in this ultimate area the CBC hardly made contact at all. Canada in fact, has managed to run a broadcasting corporation for a generation without any real writers, without a Gunter Grass, a Vesaas, a Dürrenmatt, a de Mandiargues. We were bound to produce a McLuhan. Our medium had to be the message: there was no other.

There have, of course, been programmes for writers on radio. During the last sixteen years *Anthology* has broadcast stories and poetry once a week. I was in on its birth, along with Robert Weaver and, if I remember correctly, Helen James.¹ It should have been part of a beginning, but it is nearly all there ever has been on a regular basis. We should have gone on creating more and more ground for writers to live on. One wonders what would have happened if we had bought a half-dozen novels a year from young writers and had them read in nightly instalments in the place of late evening concerts of recorded music. Often the CBC has spent four or five thousand dollars to produce dramatic adaptations of novels old enough to be in the public domain. To buy the rights to a new, unpublished novel of average length, and to have it narrated might not have cost more. I mention the novel for a reason: the trouble with Canadian would-be writers has been that

they have not been able to go any distance. Authors of stature are twenty-book men who have gone long and deep into their consciousnesses and to the roots of their experiences. The novel and the full-length play are the major forms of written expression that allow this ability to go a distance. When that ability matures a literature of substance is born, an identity is found and a confidence is fostered both in those who write and in those who become their audience. When would-be authors are asked only to write short, there is little impact and small discovery. A whole culture suffers. This insight should have been reflected in early CBC programme policy (as it was in music, opera, or the presentation of adapted literary works from other countries and times). Probably our books would have been bad to begin with, but perhaps no worse than some of our commissioned symphonies, operas and films.

The fact is that the one thing the CBC had to do, if it were to be a success, it did not do: it did not provide an outlet for a literature that may have spoken to the Canadian people. And that

is one of the reasons why the Corporation is dead to the generation that is about to take over. They literally do not know that the idea of the CBC ever existed, they do not know how it was betrayed, and I think it matters little to them now. The new writers are writing short for a dozen good little magazines, and long for *Anansi*, and *Oberon*, and *Sono Nis*, and *Prism International* and other small but important presses. They are making films on their own, and setting up theatres in back rooms and even on the streets. The next few years may, I think, be a wonderful time for Canadian letters, Trudeau and inflation willing. Yet, I can't help but feel, at this distance from that other time ten and twenty years ago, that the new magazines and the new presses and the new theatre and the new writers would have been with us a lot sooner if the CBC had not conned us, diverted us, and then failed to understand and act upon the most important part of its mandate and public trust.

¹ So, to complete the record, were George Woodcock and Joyce Marshall. [Ed.]