

# GETTING AWAY WITH SURVIVAL

*George Woodcock*

IT IS UNDOUBTEDLY a fiction that birthdays are occasions when one sums up the past and tamps it down as a good foundation for the future. Most adult birthdays, if they ever get beyond an attenuated ritual, are times of mild regret or mild relief; regret that another set of seasons has slipped so fruitlessly away, relief that it has slipped away without disaster. There are especially traumatic birthdays — as one hurries past thirty, as one races past forty-five, as one pants up towards the great climacteric, but there are few birthdays after one's teens that are the occasion for anything more joyful than the shared geniality that confirms a place in the world.

And perhaps this is the first reason for celebrating the birthday of that animate creature of paper and print called a magazine. It has not merely, like its writers and readers, got away with survival; it has also established a place in the world. And, if it has lasted as long as ten years, which is now the life span of *Canadian Literature*, and has shown the least sensitivity to the time in which it exists, it will have become one of many possible versions of that time, a symphonic version, as it were, with the writers as performers and the editor in the conductor's podium, striving to mark out a shape in a music in which each violinist and bassoonist and tympanist is bent on giving a solo performance.

In this sense *Canadian Literature* can be regarded as having been, up to this point near the end of 1969, a kind of interpretation of the Canadian Sixties. It has been concerned mainly with a single activity during that period — writing and the criticism of it — but writing brings much else in its train, and it is probable that a concern for the literature of an age will teach more about it than any other specialized viewpoint, for the historical, the psychological, the sociological, the political, the artistic manifestations, as well as the changing physical background,

all find their way into the eye of the writer and hence into the mind of the critic.

With this thought in mind, I decided to mark the first ten years of *Canadian Literature* with a symposium whose first aim would be to celebrate, not the magazine itself, but its time in literature. This is the aim of the two main groups of articles. In the first, eight Canadian writers — four novelists and four poets (one of whom writes as a dramatist) — talk of their own writing over the past decade, or in some cases over a lifetime. In the second, five Canadian critics give their views of ten years' achievements in the main categories of Canadian writing, both English and French — the novel, the short story, poetry, criticism. Two other items evoke an earlier decade in celebrating the Canadian literary journals which expired in the early Fifties and whose place was in a measure taken at the end of the decade by *Tamarack Review* and *Canadian Literature*. One, a documentary, commemorates *Contemporary Verse* in the voices of its editor, Alan Crawley, and of some of the poets who worked with him. The other, an essay by Miriam Waddington, brings to light for the first time the unpublished poems of John Sutherland, editor of the *Northern Review*. Many of us, editors and writers, still feel strongly our debts to both Crawley and Sutherland, who carried on their magazines under considerable difficulties at a time when there was no Canada Council to assist them, and this seems an appropriate occasion to acknowledge in some way their achievements.

As for *Canadian Literature* itself, A. J. M. Smith in another essay speaks of its record with a generosity and a perceptiveness that leave me little to say; in the court of opinion, as in the court of law, it is best to let a good advocate speak for one and to keep one's own peace. What does remain is to strike a historical note, talk briefly of the origins of *Canadian Literature*, and acknowledge the contributions which many people have made to its development.

*Canadian Literature* had a double origin, as a notion that began to form in my own mind round about 1954, and as a scheme for a journal of Canadian studies which had been developed independently by a group of faculty members and librarians at the University of British Columbia.

In London during the 1940's I had edited a literary review called *Now*, which one of the reprint houses has just re-issued, and had played a minor part in a number of other periodicals at the time. *Now* came to an end in 1947, I returned to Canada in 1949, and very soon afterwards I began to feel that, if a good enough reason presented itself, I would like to edit another magazine. I enjoyed, as a change from writing, the kind of intellectual carpentry that goes into the making of a good journal. Soon I realized that in Canada there was no magazine

devoted entirely to criticism. By 1954 I had developed my ideas on the question far enough to write an article, which the *Dalhousie Review* published in the autumn of 1955, in which I surveyed the state of critical writing in Canada at that time, and ended with these words:

... and it seems to me that a Canadian journal devoted specifically to the critical consideration of native and world literature is a goal to be aimed at, a minimum beginning. For now, more than ever before, we should foster that critical spirit which can bring Canadian writing out of the hesitations of adolescence and into the self-consciousness of maturity.

That, so far as I was concerned, was the beginning of *Canadian Literature*, though the magazine that eventually appeared was to be somewhat different from my first conception. In 1956 I joined the faculty of the University of British Columbia, with an understanding that there might be a possibility of my eventually editing a magazine sponsored by the University. In 1957 I went to France on a Canadian Overseas Fellowship (one of those grants from blocked francs which preceded the Canada Council awards) and when I returned in 1958 I was approached by Inglis Bell, of the U.B.C. Library, on behalf of an *ad hoc* group which had been considering the publication of a journal of Canadian studies at the University, but had narrowed the idea down to a journal dealing with Canadian literature; other members of the group, I remember, were Neal Harlow, then University Librarian, Geoff Andrew, then assistant to the President, and Roy Daniells and Stan Read of the English Department. There was enough common ground between my original idea and theirs for me to consider the proposal seriously. I had — as my *Dalhousie Review* article indicated — envisaged something broader in scope than a journal of Canadian literature, but I realized that for me the important question was not the actual area of writing that would be under study, but the development of a critical attitude among Canadian writers, and the fostering of a tradition of criticism as one of the attributes of a maturing literature.

So I accepted the task of editing the new magazine, and by the beginning of 1959 the University had agreed to sponsor it. My condition for accepting editorship was that I should have a completely free hand in selecting material, and this was granted without question, so that the committee which existed in the early days of *Canadian Literature* advised and assisted rather than directed, and discreetly faded from existence once the first practical difficulties of founding the journal were over. The narrowing of the field of reference to Canadian writing I

never found a real limitation; it was a subject that turned out to have endless ramifications, surprises and possibilities, doubtless because *Canadian Literature* started out at a time when writing in Canada was going through a series of very interesting changes in outlook and technique. The main thing was to avoid getting caught in the trap of a narrow nationalism. The study of Canadian literature is merely the study of writers who happen to live and work in Canada; it has no greater political implications than they choose to put into their works.

I will not pretend to be exhaustive in mentioning those who have helped in the many tasks of running *Canadian Literature* during its first decade, but I thank everyone collectively before I acknowledge the particular debts that the journal owes to those whose contributions were vital to its very existence. Inglis Bell took on at the start, and continued for several years with great resourcefulness, the direction of the journal's business affairs. It was he who suggested that Robert Reid be asked to give his advice on typography, and it was Robert Reid who created the classic design we still use, a design so simple and harmonious that its appeal has been remarkably durable. Reid also suggested that Charles Morriss of Victoria was the only possible printer to do justice to his design, and so started an association which has given us ten years of splendid craftsmanship in the production of *Canadian Literature*. Reid furthermore introduced George Kuthan, who provided the linocut decorations for the first seven years of *Canadian Literature* until his death in 1966; we reproduce in this issue a selection of the best of these designs.

On the editorial side, Donald Stephens joined *Canadian Literature* in 1960 and William H. New in 1965. I am indebted to them for good ideas, good writing, good and creative discussion, assistance in the humbler tasks of putting a magazine together as a physical whole, and particularly for conducting the affairs of *Canadian Literature* with skill and tact on the occasions when my writing commitments have taken me for months on end to Asia and elsewhere.

Anyone who searches the mastheads of past issues of *Canadian Literature* will encounter the names of many other people who have helped for shorter or longer periods in the circulation, advertising and financial sides of the journal. Among these I would particularly mention the contribution of Basil Stuart-Stubbs, who acted as first circulation manager, using a dark corner of the University Library as office and depot, and of Joan Symons who later took up the task and sustained it for most of magazine's life, resigning a year ago, and the equally important contributions as advertisement managers of Rita Butterfield and Dorothy Shields.

Like the conductor who, without his orchestra, can only wield his baton in si-

lence or at best attempt a disconsolate solo, an editor is nothing without his writers. When *Canadian Literature* first appeared there were many who found incredible the suggestion that a magazine devoted to writing in Canada could possibly last more than a year. There would not be enough subjects, they claimed. And, if there were, how could one find the writers? The subjects have never been lacking, because the literature of our country is constantly growing and thrusting up new manifestations. By the same token, the writers have been found, and by now they run into the hundreds, with new names appearing in every issue. They appear because *Canadian Literature* itself was launched at a time when the cultivation of a critical view of Canadian writing had become necessary; it is a natural stage in the maturing of any literature, and in this sense the magazine appeared when it was needed. In its way, I think, it caught the spirit that was afoot in Canadian writing during the 1960's, and that has accounted for its modicum of success.

"This money certainly is a devilish thing!" said Aphra Behn. "I'm sure the want of it had like to have ruined my dear Philibella . . ." The want of it would ruin also most literary magazines, since I have yet to meet one that did not rely on a subsidy to meet its deficit. For having saved it from the near fate of dear Philibella, *Canadian Literature* is indebted to the University of British Columbia, to the Leo and Thea Koerner Foundation, and to the Canada Council, all of which have contributed to its sustenance and, in the case of the Canada Council, to an expansion to the present size.

So much for history — and now for the Seventies . . . !

