

# CANADIAN PUBLISHING

## *Answers to a Questionnaire*

*by Earle Birney, Kildare Dobbs,  
Arnold Edinborough, Robert Fulford,  
Roderick Haig-Brown, Carl F. Klinck,  
Hugh MacLennan, Robert Weaver*

### 1. What is worst in Canadian publishing?

Editorial standards. Editorial initiative. Dim-witted old ladies in backrooms instead of bright young talent.

KILDARE DOBBS

Editorial weakness. I hear complaints constantly from writers about the passive and often indifferent editorial attitudes of the Toronto publishing houses, and those writers who have dealings with publishers in New York say that they are treated quite differently there. Possibly the economics of publishing in a country with a small population has something to do with the editorial situation. Still, it's noticeable that the Toronto publishers don't employ editors who are personally influential in the literary affairs of the country; the last book editor I can recall with this kind of influence was Kildare Dobbs when he worked for Macmillan a few years ago. The editorial policies of the two most important Canadian publishers, McClelland & Stewart and Macmillan, are dominated by their managers, Jack McClelland and John Gray, and I think that by now it would be very difficult for a strong and independent writer to find a place in either firm. For that matter, the editorial policies of the other houses seem to be dominated by their managers.

ROBERT WEAVER

Half-hearted promotion and marketing of books.

CARL F. KLINCK

The desire on the part of some publishers to have a list at all costs. This means the inclusion of shoddy works which should never see the light of day.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

Lack of enterprise and imagination, though this is not universal with all of them. Generally it stems from the fact that nearly all Canadian publishers are branch plants of English firms, and in the past the home offices regarded them largely as outlets for their overseas trade. It was the policy of at least one to down-grade Canadian work.

HUGH MACLENNAN

The fact that it must operate for a limited market and a largely unconcerned public, both of which are still further reduced by the existence of two language groups with, seemingly, little intercommunication.

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

From the author's view, I think it is the near-certainty that whatever is published will not circulate outside Canada. In other words, that less than 3% of the world's English-speaking public will ever be reached.

EARLE BIRNEY

What is worst in English-speaking Canadian publishing is a lack of audacity. Example: the most important (in terms of influence) thinking to emerge from Canada in recent years is that of Marshall McLuhan; yet commercial Canadian publishers have had nothing to do with McLuhan. One of his books was published by the University of Toronto Press, the other by McGraw-Hill, a subsidiary of the American firm. This was a difficult area for a commercial publisher a few years ago, and none cared to enter it. It is only now that McLuhan is famous that Canadian publishers are taking an interest in his work. Example: in England and the United States, books on current affairs are now common; in Canada they are still rare. They demand speed, imagination and audacity, qualities Canadian commercial publishers rarely exhibit.

After the lack of audacity, perhaps the worst aspect of most Canadian publishers is their inability to sell (as opposed to merely issuing) books.

ROBERT FULFORD

## 2. What is best in Canadian publishing?

What is best about the best of the English-language publishers is a certain residual idealism. They are businessmen, but they realize that they have a duty to the community as a whole, and they take pride in doing that duty, whatever the costs. This is old-fashioned in the best sense, and is too seldom recognized as the virtue that it is.

ROBERT FULFORD

The fact that it exists at all.

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

Again from the author's point of view, the feeling that if one's book is any good, it is likely to find *some* publisher, even though not necessarily an established one.

EARLE BIRNEY

Sales effort.

KILDARE DOBBS

A few publishers — Longman's, Oxford, General Publishing, for example — are looking more actively for Canadian books, and hopefully, they will help to make the publishing scene a more lively and varied one.

ROBERT WEAVER

Recently, the production of volumes on academic subjects and various arts.

CARL F. KLINCK

The determined efforts by Macmillan, University of Toronto Press, Clarke Irwin and one or two others to restrict their list and publish only what they consider a good book.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

A new willingness on the part of a few to take chances with new Canadian writers.

HUGH MACLENNAN

3(a). During the past decade, have Canadian publishers become more adventurous in their choice of books?

*The general view was that they had become more adventurous, but the "yes" of those contributors who replied briefly was qualified by terms like "within limits" and "apparently". Those whose views were emphatically affirmative enlarged upon them.*

Undoubtedly, and in this respect McClelland & Stewart (a native house) leads the way, most notably with its Canadian Library paperbacks. But these should be available everywhere that paperbacks are sold, and not merely in bookstores. I understand the bookstores enforced this sales practice, but I may be wrong.

HUGH MACLENNAN

In the last decade our publishers have become more adventurous in both the form and the content of their books. *Form*: They now produce far more ambitious books than in the past — *No Mean City* (University of Toronto), *Birds of the Northern Forest* (McClelland & Stewart), *French-Canadian Furniture* (Macmillan) are examples of books which are physically ambitious. This change reflects both the influence of the Canada Council (which subsidizes some expensive books) and the growing affluence of book-buyers. *Content*: At the same time, the publishers have taken advantage of weaker censorship laws to publish books which in the 1950's would have seemed impossibly daring — Layton's poems, *Love Where the Nights are Long*, *Beautiful Losers*, perhaps *Place d'Armes*. In this case the change appears mainly in the work of one publisher, McClelland & Stewart. At the same time, it should be pointed out that Canadian publishers have played no significant part in the fight against censorship. The one important case (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*) was carried to the Supreme Court of Canada by New American Library. (In fairness, incidentally, I have to add that Canadian publishers, through their association, offered to assist financially in this fight.)

ROBERT FULFORD

No, why should they? Adventurous probably means unsaleable. KILDARE DOBBS

Somewhat. Mostly because McClelland & Stewart has been forcing the pace. ROBERT WEAVER

Yes, though it has taken them a long time. The leader in this regard has been Jack McClelland, though the creation of a Canadian list by people like Doubleday and Longmans has also burst certain barriers. Ten years ago it would have been quite impossible for Cohen's book *Beautiful Losers* to have been published.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

3(b). Have they become more sophisticated in the design and production of books?

*Here the view was more positively affirmative than on 3(a). The five contributors who answered briefly were agreed that on the whole there had been real improvement in this direction.*

Yes, particularly the University of Toronto Press, though Oxford and Macmillan deserve favourable mention here. Clarke, Irwin have always produced elegant books and they continue to do so.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

Yes, and a good number of Canadian books are now good-looking books. From time to time some of the book designers go too far, and like a movie or television director, use the writer as a tool. But generally I'm very much in favour of what is happening in the design and production of Canadian books, and people like Frank Newfeld, William Toye, Allan Fleming, and others deserve the credit for it.

ROBERT WEAVER

Certainly Canadian publishers are more sophisticated in the design of their books, but there are still far too many weak spots — the Ryerson books are mostly deplorable, Macmillan's are seldom impressive, and the McClelland & Stewart paperbacks continue to be mediocre or worse. Compared to 1957, however, our books are much closer to a good international standard. A novel, for instance, is likely to be better treated visually in Canada than in Britain. Macmillan's books are often better looking than Doubleday's, though not as good looking as Atheneum's, Knopf's or Little Brown's and not as consistent as Random House's. Our picture books are vastly improved and now can be shown at an international book fair without shame.

ROBERT FULFORD

3(c). Have they become more enterprising in their public relations?

*Here the name of one publisher came up with astonishing frequency. In addition to the answers we reproduce, three contributors remarked on the achieve-*

*ments of McClelland & Stewart in developing public relations. The only other publisher commended specifically (once) was the University of Toronto Press.*

Not really, so far as I can see. But except for a book so obviously a best-seller even before its publication that it can underwrite radio and television or bus and subway advertising, the publishers' promotion departments seem to be limited in what they can actually accomplish.

ROBERT WEAVER

Not really. They still rely too much on launchings and getting their authors on to local TV and radio interview shows. Again, Jack McClelland understands this area much better than anybody else, the classic example being *The Comfortable Pew*.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

In public relations only one firm has shown any significant change for the better in recent years — McClelland & Stewart, which sells its books with vigour and imagination and whose President is his own best public relations man. In other cases, public relations is still mainly a routine activity, carried on at the lower levels of each company; mostly the publishers depend for publicity on the luck of the draw, which means that they generally lose out to more energetic areas of activity.

ROBERT FULFORD

3(d). Have they become less inclined to publish bad books because they are Canadian?

*Here there was less agreement than on the previous questions. Carl F. Klinck and Kildare Dobbs thought there had been no improvement, the latter adding that "some bad books are saleable if they have local relevance." Earle Birney saw an improvement among "the leading publishers", Arnold Edinborough thought there was perhaps less inclination to bring out bad books "but some clangers still get published", and Roderick Haig-Brown remarked that "undoubtedly some very bad books are still published solely because they are Canadian in content".*

This is a tricky question. Twenty years ago it was my impression that it was policy with some firms to publish really bad books. Their purpose was to indicate that the parent houses were trying their best with no material. The real aim, of course, was an excuse to mark up U.S. imports. But this situation has improved if not disappeared.

HUGH MACLENNAN

I don't think Canadian publishers, generally, are any less inclined to publish bad books than they were a decade ago. Certainly there are far too many bad Canadian books. But is it fair to say these are published *because* they are Canadian? New York publishers, who presumably have no parallel nationalistic motives, also

publish many books for which it is hard to imagine any excuse, literary or commercial. Rather, I think publishers in all countries tend to set up publishing "programmes" and little office bureaucracies, and that these require, in effect, a set number of books per year. The books are then found, whether they have value or not. The unfortunate aspect is that good books are crowded out — they don't receive proper bookstore space, or they may be insufficiently promoted.

ROBERT FULFORD

In 1967, probably not: this year is a cross that we all must bear. But the question is at least partly irrelevant. Canadian publishers ought to publish a wide range of Canadian books, and some of them are bound to be inferior. But how else do you serve readers whose tastes in books are at least as impure as my own tastes are? How else do you bring on a writer except, often, by publishing him before he is fully at ease in his craft; or support an established writer except, sometimes, by publishing him in periods when he isn't at his best? In this respect I don't think that Canadian publishers are really so different from publishers in London or New York.

ROBERT WEAVER

#### 4. Have the possibilities of paperback publishing been properly exploited in Canada?

*Among the shorter answers there was a general consensus that the possibilities in this direction had not been properly exploited. Roderick Haig-Brown felt that there was "an immense potential" which had not yet been even "properly examined, much less exploited", but Carl F. Klinck pointed out that there had been "considerable improvement of range, nevertheless."*

Perhaps not. But the sale of really cheap paperbacks depends everywhere upon the existence of a mass market that this country doesn't really possess. Some years ago Collins and Harlequin tried to service a mass market in Canada, and failed. Their books looked drab and their editorial policies were, to be polite, erratic; I think that the same criticisms can be made of McClelland & Stewart's new Canadian Best-Seller Library. But I'm still not convinced that there's much chance of succeeding with Canadian reprints in this market. I'm sorry, however, that a more selective reprint series like McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library had to be left to the initiative of one firm; I think it would have been a better idea to form a subsidiary with access to the back lists of all Canadian publishers.

ROBERT WEAVER

I don't think so, but then I don't know what the possibilities are. McClelland, University of Toronto and Ryerson are moving in the right direction (a direction set by McClelland in the New Canadian Library and the Carleton Library), which is towards university and high school auxiliary reading. The trade possibilities of paperbacks in Canada must be very limited.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

The possibilities of paperbacks have not been properly exploited yet. In this we have greatly improved during the last few years — the University of Toronto, Oxford and Clarke, Irwin are all publishing handsome quality paperbacks, and there are the shabby but useful books of McClelland & Stewart's New Canadian Library and Carleton Library. But there has been hardly any serious attempt to penetrate the cheap (under one dollar) news-stand market. This, it seems to me, is more likely due to lethargy than (as the publishers sometimes say) to problems of marketing. The popular Canadian books — including the *very* popular ones, like *Anne of Green Gables* — should be available cheap, as similar American and English books are.

ROBERT FULFORD

Probably not, but already too much so far as authors' royalties are concerned. When *Turvey* went into pocketbook, sales doubled, but royalties dropped to one-tenth per book.

EARLE BIRNEY

##### 5. Are Canadian publishers too much restricted by their role of distributors for British and American houses?

There may be restriction in this, but if so it is a matter of inclination and laziness rather than compulsion. I am aware that inclination towards growth and independence of Canadian branches has been restricted at times, but it would be hard to show that the restriction has not been economically sound.

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

Yes, most Canadian Houses (but not all, now) are playing it safe, as glorified agents for foreign books, and taking no risks. But the leading Canadian firms are learning how to make money, or not lose it any way, from Canadian authors.

EARLE BIRNEY

Most of them are nothing but distributors.

KILDARE DOBBS

The word isn't "restricted"; it's something like "paranoid". Those firms that do nothing but distribute books in Canada imported from England or the United States have a minimal stake in the publishing community here. Subsidiaries of foreign publishers sometimes make the gesture of publishing some books by Canadian writers (Doubleday, for example); others don't even bother to make the gesture (Random House, for example; Bennet Cerf should come up to Toronto to investigate). Most Canadian houses are burdened by too many books from English and American firms which they must attempt to service. Canadian publishing has been gelded by the agency system — and the best firms wouldn't have existed without the support of the agency system.

ROBERT WEAVER

It is possible that profits derived by Canadian publishers in their role as distributors of British and United States books are too high and too tempting for gambling on books of Canadian origin. Perhaps Canadian publishers could not exist without

performing this role as distributors; yet there are now foreign publishers setting up Canadian establishments to skim off the distributing profits. The role of the Canadian publisher may be changing; McClelland & Stewart appears to be a successful Canadian firm engaged largely in the trade of books of Canadian origin.

CARL F. KLINCK

The restrictions are less now than they used to be, and most of the major houses use their connections to promote Canadian authors, which is a liberation rather than a restriction. Many of the larger houses abroad are now handled entirely by firms which are more jobbers than publishers anyway.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

There was a time when Canadian publishers, because they made so much money out of distributing British and American books, took a rather cool view of their responsibility to sell their Canadian books. Perhaps this accounts for their rather over-gentlemanly approach to promotion. I like to think that dependence on distribution of British and American books is gradually diminishing.

ROBERT FULFORD

## 6. Has publishing in Canada a future, and, if so, what?

It has a future so long as Canada has, and exactly as much. So long as this country remains a small political satellite of the United States, involved in the American economy of waste and war, our cultural future will be negligible. "Publishing" needs defining. The future is with the disc, tape, film, even more than with the printed book. The publisher who understands this will alone survive into the next century.

EARLE BIRNEY

Yes. It will grow rapidly with the educated population, if it learns to diversify its books and appeal to more special groups.

KILDARE DOBBS

Of course. It will probably remain as chaotic and illogical as it now is, improve its economic situation, and put more emphasis on Canadian books. Most Toronto publishers are probably not important enough to tempt the English and American publishing cartels.

ROBERT WEAVER

Canadian publishers have a future here and abroad, provided that they exercise the ingenuity of, say, the Australian publishers who do very well in selling Australian books in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

CARL F. KLINCK

Reading has a future, and the book has a great future. I can't think that Canada doesn't share in this. How, I am not prepared to say, because it's a matter of economics. In the magazine field I would know what the future is (within the limitations of my crystal ball), but in book publishing the situation is entirely different.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH



Definitely a large future owing to the rapid increase in population and a remarkably growing interest in Canadian books as their merit becomes truly international. Also the Canadian market is a good one, as I know from experience. My novel, *The Watch that Ends the Night* (1959), was 12 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list (from place 12 to 8) and sold 26,000 in the States. It sold the same number here.

HUGH MACLENNAN

Of course. Gradual growth in all lines of publication, tied to population growth and improved education.

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

I believe there is a future for Canadian publishers as publishers to the world, printing books in Toronto or Montreal for distribution in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. The advantage would be that the Canadian writers could be represented internationally by publishers genuinely and permanently interested in them — in this way, for instance, Callaghan would be permanently in print in the United States and Britain, as I think he should be. At the same time this greater business activity would eventually raise the level of editing in Toronto and Montreal and have a generally favourable effect on the Canadian literary community. But this growth will be slow and will depend on the international popularity of certain Canadian writers. It has already started with a non-commercial house, the University of Toronto Press.

ROBERT FULFORD

## 7. Any other comments?

Only that publishers should have greater confidence and understand that an international literature, based on Canada, already exists.

HUGH MACLENNAN

In general, the change for the better which has come over Canadian publishing in the twenty years that I have been in Canada is remarkable. When I think of the inexpressibly ugly books that Ryerson used to put out, when I think of the junk that used to be published, I am astonished at the elegance and the richness of Canadian publishing now. On public affairs I think we do remarkably well, both for readers and writers; in poetry we surely are a model for the rest of the world. Fiction alone lags behind. The reason for this latter is, of course, economic risks for the writer, who would prefer to get published abroad where the market is bigger.

ARNOLD EDINBOROUGH

There is in my opinion no comparison between the state of Canadian publishing 35 years ago, when I began publishing books, and today. At that time one was not aware of any such thing as Canadian publishing in the real sense. To publish, one turned to London or New York or both. This remained pretty much the case until after World War II, and there has been steady improvement ever since. Though I am not thoroughly informed on the point I suspect that U.S. copyright law works against Canadian publishing more than any other single factor, though

I understand there have been some recent improvements. Canadians, French or English, are in an advantageous position in that they have alternatives to native publication. At the same time I believe all publishing is declining in the following respects:

- (1) Interest in and concern for the individual writer.
- (2) Quality of content, partly due to (1).
- (3) Concern for keeping good books in print. This is most marked and reflects, as does (2), a sort of mass-market obsession with turnover, perhaps economically inevitable.

I seriously doubt that Canadian publishers had too much choice in the whole matter. They are limited by economics, competition and their own capabilities (aren't we all?). Textbooks or something of the sort are the backbone of most firms and literary publishing, here or elsewhere, takes its chances among these larger issues.

RODERICK HAIG-BROWN

- (1) The gravy is in school and college textbooks. Since they're "recommended" (or not) there's danger of corruption. Whether there *is* in fact corruption I don't know.
- (2) Canadian publishers, as mercantilist branches of foreign houses, have made no effort to seek markets in Africa, South America or other emerging countries.

KILDARE DOBBS

Despite everything I may have written above, the Toronto publishing scene would be bleak indeed without Jack McClelland and his firm. I suppose it's a comment of sorts on this symposium that it's common knowledge that McClelland & Stewart is not one of the fat cats on the Toronto publishing scene. I suppose it's also a comment on this symposium that the two firms about which I hear the most criticism from writers are McClelland & Stewart and Macmillan, the houses which have done the most in recent years for Canadian publishing and have still failed to create the editorial climate so necessary to the book business in Canada.

ROBERT WEAVER

It seems to me that the growth of the University of Toronto Press, from a tiny house publishing a dozen or less books per year, to a major university publisher, is one of the two major events of Canadian publishing in this period. The other major event is the change in McClelland & Stewart from a fairly modest and not very distinguished house to an aggressive and expanding corporation.

ROBERT FULFORD

Canadians, I think, profit greatly by being exposed to books from abroad as well as to those produced at home. I believe that this condition should be encouraged

and even consolidated if (i) the Canadian mark-up on foreign books were substantially lowered (inviting an increase in number of books sold), and if (ii) Canadian books of quality could be guaranteed publication and extensive sale. In the fluctuations of the market in Canada, Canadian books lead a precarious existence; they should be the staple items come what may. CARL F. KLINCK

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