

CANADIAN BOOKS

A Publisher's View

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THE PROBLEMS THAT WRITERS and publishers talk about together have usually to do with money and the publishing situation. Writers are always searching for the means to make a living from writing, or to find an occupation that will leave them time and energy to write. This is as true in England and the United States as in Canada, but the smaller Canadian market sharpens all aspects of the problem. This is not a return to the charge that Canadians do not buy books; Canadian books, at least, they support quite well. But the Canadian market for books in either English or French is not a large market and will not be so for many years. In our circumstances, the emergence of a cadre of professional writers, and of a publishing trade equipped to serve them, was bound to be slow. There are some who believe that it hasn't happened yet.

Of professional writers who live chiefly by the writing of books there are certainly few in Canada, and few enough anywhere else. In older and more sophisticated societies there were always some writers who lived on private means, but the majority in all societies have had to struggle and contrive in order to live while practising their chosen art. So generally was this the case of the more important writers that it is not difficult to believe the struggle has been itself an essential element in the writer's experience.

To talk of "professionals" is not simply to define a means of earning a livelihood; by that definition the writers of radio scripts and of jingles for advertising commercials are alike entitled to call themselves professional writers. "Professional"

implies qualifications, a finished skill in a trade or craft or art that exists apart from its earning power. In that sense we have scores of writers in English in Canada who, if not in all respects professional, are also neither hacks nor merely gifted amateurs.

Teaching and the communication media have always provided a base from which would-be writers have sought to move toward the work of their choice. University teaching or other campus-based occupations now serve this purpose for some of our most important writers, among whom obvious examples are Hugh MacLennan, Earle Birney, Robertson Davies, James Reaney, Frank Scott, George Woodcock, and Irving Layton, though there are many others. Journalism and writing for broadcasting or films are major occupations for a large and vital group that includes Bruce Hutchison, Pierre Berton, Joseph Schull, Mordecai Richler, W. O. Mitchell, and Charles Israel.

A number of important writers who have little enough in common fall outside these two obvious groupings. They appear to have fewer external supports for their book writing, or at least no other major commitment. Chief of these must be Morley Callaghan, a great influence, and almost a legend in Canada from his youth onward. Various in their writing directions, but sharing what must at times be a perilous singleness of devotion to the writing of books are Farley Mowat, Thomas Raddall, and Margaret Laurence.

Unsatisfactory as the listing of names must be, there still remain two important groups to recognize. There are first those who as yet defy classification but who have done at least one book of great promise and might at any time do more: Adele Wiseman, Sinclair Ross, Colin MacDougall, Phyllis Grosskurth, Kildare Dobbs, and possibly Leonard Cohen. A very important group is that of the academic writers in Canadian history who have chosen to stay within their field, but in terms of a national literature are making a major contribution which could come from nowhere else. And finally there are a few highly gifted writers who fall into no clearly defined group, among them Ethel Wilson and Roderick Haig-Brown.

Whatever is to come, a great deal has happened to Canadian writing during the past fifteen years. It has been stimulated by our post-war nationalism and by our growing prosperity. It must seem that better publishing is also a product of these factors, and in part it unquestionably is. Yet it is at least proper to record that the houses that have led the way in the movement — McClelland & Stewart, Macmillan of Canada, the University of Toronto Press, the Ryerson Press, and Longmans — were trying, less successfully but no less hard, in the 1920's, and

through the frustrating years of the depression, to further Canadian writing; this at a time when it had no possible economic justification.

Even now the publishing trade suffers from the same basic disability that hampers most writers in Canada. A brilliantly successful book, within our borders, will not set a writer free from financial pressure for long; nor will it offset many of the promising but unsuccessful books in a publisher's list. Ten years ago at a Writers' Conference in Kingston, I said publicly that the relationship of author and publisher in Canada lacked a rational economic basis; that the Canadian author who depended on his books for money did not make it from sales in Canada; that the Canadian publisher made none of the net profit of his business from the overall result of his Canadian general publishing.

I revert to this now, because the statement has been rather widely quoted and discussed. Ten years ago I found only one Canadian publisher to challenge the opinion, and he was better known for his generous intentions than for his arithmetic. It was properly recognized that even if publishers issued Canadian books as loss-leaders, as props to their egos or from better motives, they could hardly be counted on for major and sustained adventures. They could not, for instance, continue for long to subsidize a young writer who showed no measurable sign of arriving, of achieving major critical acclaim, if not financial independence. Even the Canada Council, far above the market place, is not prepared to do that.

Though the situation in Canada has not changed beyond recognition in ten years, I would not now make the same statement without qualification. The publisher's "no net profit" has at least become "a possible profit". And if Canadian authors still do not look to Canada for any important part of their income, a successful book may now make them a surprisingly good return from this market—though it will still be far below what a comparable success in the American market would yield an American author.

The economic problems of the established writer have lessened substantially in ten years, though not chiefly from the sales of books. The increase in academic salaries, and in the returns from free-lance writing, have left him free to write only the books of his own choice. Such changes help the writer's situation, but they do not much simplify the publisher's task. Increased sales in Canada, as elsewhere, have almost all gone to non-fiction: biography, popular history, and current events. Fiction, which was in trouble ten years ago, is in worse trouble now, and the publication of poetry has become almost an empty act of defiance. Too many novelists and poets seem to be lookouts who have little of general interest to report. There are notable exceptions, but notably few.

PUBLISHERS MAY FEEL they have contributed something to the improved climate for some Canadian writing, but it is not easy to see what they can do for the areas that have worsened. Publishing can support a generation's vision or view of the world it lives in, but it cannot provide a new insight. There are some who consider that support in the form of much more publishing of poetry and fiction at the apprentice stage would help; the assumption is that this would help writers to learn their craft and presumably to sharpen and clear their vision. Both parts of this proposition may be true, but the second at least is in doubt. Against such doubt the publishers must set the cost of well-intentioned proposals of this kind. This is first of all a cost in dollars, and secondly in the health of the book industry. In the second, at least, all writers of books are involved. Merely to issue more volumes of poetry and more first novels through commercial publishers to booksellers would probably incur losses at the rate of something like \$500 per volume of poetry, and \$1,500 or more per unsuccessful novel. An industry which is still gathering strength cannot contemplate such losses on any large scale for long. Just as much of an obstacle is that no publisher wishes to win a reputation for publishing unsaleable books. If the public doesn't want his books and the bookseller can't sell them, such a publisher can look for a diminishing welcome. Such a programme, if prolonged, would actually work against publisher, bookseller — and author. That it stimulates and teaches to see one's work in print there is no doubt, but normal commercial publication and distribution by commercial houses is not the way to increase greatly what is being done. Other ways — such as a Poetry Book Club — are being thought about, but it is questionable how far over-taxed publishers can, or should be expected to involve themselves in such concerns.

If it is reasonable to wonder whether Canadian publishers should be expected to act beyond their commercial interests, it is realistic to ask how far they are likely to do so. At present there are about forty genuine publishing houses in English Canada, of which ten appear to be Canadian-owned. Together, the forty sell and stock the books of almost eight hundred British and American houses. Apart from the Canadian-owned houses, perhaps ten of those owned abroad have long had some record of support for Canadian writing. Though it is part of world publishing tradition that the industry has always published many books at an anticipated loss, that tradition is everywhere being put to the test in a world of mounting costs, and to specially severe tests in Canada. Publishing has to be recognized as a business accountable to shareholders. Formerly, the shareholders were owner-managers, but increasingly, as houses "go public", management must

face shareholders more interested in money than in books. This trend is not likely to be reversed in Canada, where foreign ownership of public companies is so widespread. Though our publishing resources have greatly increased theoretically in recent years, they may not in practice have done more for Canadian purposes than keep pace with the growing number of manuscripts.

Within the next five years there will be about twenty publishers in Canada equipped to publish Canadian books in English; that is, to take a manuscript, arrange for and finance its printing and binding in appropriate form, publicize it and offer it for sale. Though that may seem (and in many ways is) a simple series of steps, each calls for immense care, skill, and experience. Of those twenty publishers, about half will be chiefly interested in publishing "general books"; that is the trade term for books that reach the public through bookstores and libraries. Since textbook writing is chiefly the work of teachers, it will be to the publishers of general books that Canadian writers will tend to look for publication.

There is, of course, nothing to prevent an author who writes in English from sending his book to a publisher in London or New York; but for the majority of books written in Canada, the logical publishing centre is Toronto. Toronto did not become the centre of English language publishing in this country as the result of any discernible plan, and it is pointless to regret or resent it. At the time British publishers began to set up branch offices in Canada, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Toronto was the capital of the most densely populated English-speaking area in Canada, seat of an already distinguished university and of the largest provincial school system. Canadian school book houses were already in being there, the Methodist Book and Publishing House, Copp-Clark, Morang, and W. J. Gage, and it was logical for Thomas Nelson, Macmillan, the Oxford Press, and Dent to settle near them. In the next few years several young Canadians who had learned their trade under William Briggs of the Methodist Book Room started businesses of their own, among them J. G. McClelland, Fred Goodchild, Thomas Allen, George McLeod, and S. B. Gundy. The cluster was formed and by 1914 Toronto was unalterably the English-language publishing centre for Canada.

These rather primitive publishing organisms did not at once develop maturity of editorial judgment or much interest in the craft of bookmaking. They existed chiefly to sell imported books and were chronically short of skilled manpower and of capital, but they did from the first publish their more important books in Canada. The first war checked this promising development and the industry had no time to regain momentum before the depression, followed by the second great war, froze the situation for another twenty-five years.

Toward the end of that time there were indications of a new vitality in both writing and publishing. It was little enough, perhaps, but books like Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941), Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (1941), Earle Birney's *David* (1942), and Bruce Hutchison's *Unknown Country* (1942), carried more concentrated excitement and promise for Canadian readers than they had ever experienced or had seen any reason to expect. They were the more ready to welcome a group of books that spoke to them urgently and directly as the war ended: Gwethalyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven* (1944), Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* (1944), Ross Munro's *Gauntlet to Overlord* (1945), Edward Meade's *Remember Me* (1946), Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute*, and, first of a long list of fine books in Canadian history, Donald Creighton's *Dominion of the North* (1944) and A. R. M. Lower's *From Colony to Nation* (1946). It appeared that a new day had been announced; on these early showings, the critics could not be certain of the probabilities, but to the Canadian reader, who had waited too long, it shone brightly and seemed infinitely promising. For about three years, Canada bought Canadian books as it had never done — and wasn't to do again for a dozen years.

Canadian publishers shared in the excitement and basked in the bright day though their role had been a modest one. Much of the initiative that had found and launched these books had come from American publishers. In the main, the Canadian houses performed their historic role of selling the books. It was not that Canadian publishers would have been incapable of recognizing talent, but they had limited resources and experience for its exploitation. More serious, the writers lacked confidence in them and tended to look first for American publication. But when the flurry of excitement died down it had done its work: it had awakened an appetite for Canadian books; it had given authors confidence and made them aware of their problems; it had given the publishers some increased confidence in the market, and a new notion of what they might become.

IT IS AN INDICATION of the comparative sophistication of several "Canadian" houses (i.e. companies that had been functioning in Canada for many years, whatever their origins) that the next step in their development could be taken in so short a time. The recognition of what was called for and the knowledge of how to set about finding the right people, could not have been

done quickly or well by those interested only or chiefly in the selling of other publishers' books. The personality and the ethos of a publishing house are complex as a result of the trade's mixed, and sometimes muddled purposes. Many houses swing unevenly between the clear-cut demands of business and the temptation to behave like a prestigious literary foundation. A Canadian publishing house's personality is at once the cause and the effect of its publishing policy (or perhaps that of a parent house in London or New York); changed by the inter-action of its own traditions and the attitudes of the senior executives and of the people they have gathered around them.

A house's character appears in its dealings with authors, its promotional policy, its relationship with its customers, and in many lesser ways; but it will be best known for its editorial policy in the publishing of general books. In Canada this has meant above all whether it looks for and publishes Canadian books. Again, no one person shapes editorial policy, except in broad terms. The chief editor may come to do so after many years, if he has won some special standing (as in the case of the late Dr. Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press), but usually editors work within a policy, which in any case is always subject to financial circumstances. This has been the more true in Canada until very recent years, because publishing houses were weak financially and had very limited funds to devote to highly speculative ventures.

The reaching out for experience and qualifications was the publishing trade's response to the literary explosion of the late 1940's. The sound of the explosion did not reach far beyond our borders, but some publishers and agents in New York were mildly aware of it, and interested, and a few of our books achieved the big prizes in the United States: book club selections, movie sales, and paperback editions. Canadian publishers' awareness of their own deficiencies were reinforced by their dealings with authors who had been published elsewhere. The resulting growth in editorial range and of interest in more sophisticated book-making was probably greater between 1945 and 1960 than in the previous fifty years. If this is to the credit of today's publishers, it is to be shared with those who had gone before, who understood the task but were continually frustrated by small markets and a quality of writing that waited on some stimulating and liberating impulse.

It was not to be expected that the new energy and excitement would at once produce a literary outpouring of consistently high quality, nor has it done so. But there had been a substantial increase of both quantity and quality, and from the publishing side a strengthening of editorial resources to make the most of

whatever is offered. The number of book manuscripts offered to Canadian publishers has doubled in the past twenty years, but the number of published books has almost quadrupled. Of the published books, a large number fall within the general term "commissioned", that is books that have been planned in advance with the publisher. The balance, books that have been accepted after unsolicited submission is, always and everywhere, very small. Ten years ago Philip Unwin, writing for the National Book League in England, put the figure at less than 1% for his own house and implied a similar figure for the publishing industry there. The same figure would certainly be valid in Canada.

The unsolicited manuscript may be defined as a manuscript sent in by an author for whom a firm has not previously published, and with whom the book has not been discussed. It will always be the view of the unsuccessful writer that publishers don't really welcome manuscripts, that "they" have had their taste blunted by sex or best sellers, and can't appreciate his work. A like conviction is the certainty that a meeting with a publisher or an editor is the necessary key to success. The poor showing of unsolicited manuscripts from unknown authors tends to give substance to this view, and always has done so. But the arrival of a good manuscript from an unknown author is eagerly looked for and greeted with great satisfaction in any publishing office. Even if a talk with a wise and experienced editor can sometimes point an author towards a better use of his gifts, such talk can best follow the submission and consideration of a manuscript; this will tell an editor much more about an author's potential than can the author himself.

THE GREAT BULK of all publishers' lists is made up of books that have been previously discussed with authors. An important section is of books from authors whom the house has formerly published, and with whom it is more or less constantly in touch. Another section is composed of books that have been discussed and the writing of which has been commissioned. Commissioning may grow from an idea for a book suggested by either author or publisher, and the publisher's support may range all the way from a mere expression of interest in the project to the provision of a sum of money, as a grant, or more often an advance against royalty earnings.

A commission may result from a talk with the author of an unsolicited manuscript, if his manuscript has shown talent and perhaps knowledge of a particular field. The book he has submitted may be unpublishable but his next submission,

under these conditions, will not be unsolicited. It must still make its way, but he has earned the right to such guidance as the publisher can give, and he is reinforced by the knowledge that he is writing a specific book for which the publisher has been looking.

This makes both the writing and the commissioning of books sound simple, which they are not. Every publisher and editor has ideas for scores of books for which he may never find the right author. This is both because commissioned books are frequently by their nature more useful than exciting, and because writers can seldom respond to ideas that are not their own. Moreover, commissioned books will frequently require research as well as writing time, and in the still small Canadian market the book may be a long time returning to the author his investment of hours and energy. If he has another means of livelihood the project will interest him only if the topic does, or if the book offers prestige; if he lives by his income from writing, the majority of proposals of the kind will not be sufficiently attractive. There are times when an industry with enough money to spend can bribe an author to write for them, but the ordinary book for general sale cannot provide this kind of bait.

There will always be many would-be writers whose longing to be published outruns all other needs; they are most often the very young or the writer *manqué*, the writer who lacks some essential ingredient. It is an editor's responsibility — and a grave one — to decide who is worth helping and, sadly enough, who is not. Authors often complain that in rejecting their book an editor has not given them a detailed comment. This usually happens when the required revision seems to be beyond the author's powers. Traditionally in Britain, editorial direction (or interference) is much less than is assumed to be needed in North America. The British start from the assumption that authors worthy of publication don't need a lot of "messaging about" with their manuscripts. The American attitude seems to have grown from the early realization in a vigorous and developing society that many people with important stories to tell have never learned to write, and can only manage with substantial help. The editor thus becomes the successor to the ghost writer of an earlier day. Canadian publishers, in recent years, have moved much nearer the American position; they are now much better equipped to work with writers, or at least with writers of non-fiction.

We shall leave to others the debate on whether non-fiction writing is creative writing. It is at least the area in which editors may most properly and most usefully offer suggestions. And many of the non-fiction works written in Canada will find publication here or not at all. This will hold for most of the work in

Canadian history, politics, and regional studies; of immeasurable value to us and an essential part of the bed-rock of a national literature, but frequently of limited interest outside our borders. It could be argued that the publishing trade's first responsibility is to this material, and that the first priority for limited resources should be to help the doing of those things that no one else will do for us. It is not a business argument, but then publishing has never looked to business arguments alone for its justification.

In the non-fiction field the writer is applying a technique, or at most a craft, to an ascertained body of reasonably established fact. What he is trying to do is usually clear enough and the editor's task is simply to comment on the degree of his success in the form: "Can you clarify?", "In this you assume more knowledge than is to be looked for in your reader", "here the emphasis or the proportion seems to be wrong". The author's purpose is declared and the editor merely contributes his experience of writing, his knowledge of the audience, and above all a fresh reading, to the result. If his comments are offered tactfully they are usually welcomed and often acted upon. In cases where a writer is working to an editor's blueprint for a commissioned book, the editor, theoretically at least, has a sort of right to suggest revision and reworking of the material that is normally exercised only by magazine editors.

Though the margin between fiction and non-fiction has narrowed and become less clear, there is at least a body of writing that is in its essence creative. This will be better handled for a knowledge of the writer's craft, but it will not be accomplished by craft alone. It is altogether more subtle of purpose, and its source is mysterious. This is true of "serious" fiction, of poetry, and of what is vaguely called *belles-lettres*. Ideally it is also true of biography. In this area the editor's task is far less clear and his responsibility correspondingly great. This is accentuated as fiction tends increasingly to follow poetry in the casting off of familiar forms. The more inward and deeply personal the author's vision, the more difficult will it be for an editor to be helpful.

The best editors (in Canada or anywhere else) are not by temperament or training chiefly interested in the higher criticism; nor are they merely frustrated writers, as some authors contend. To be either would create a too great temptation to impose ideas or technique or form on the author. It might lead to attempts to change a writer's view of the book he intended. Granted some or all of these things may sometimes be needed, it should not be a conclusion the editor comes to lightly. These are desperate remedies and may more often kill than cure. In the creative area, above all, the editor's first job is that of a midwife, helping the

author to set free his book, as it has been conceived — to realize his full potential. To do this, he must try to understand completely the author's purpose. And much of the time he will be only a sympathetic bystander; available, but not too ready to offer his help.

If an editor is not an advanced critic, he is at least a man of letters. He should have a broad background of reading and an intense interest in books and in current trends in writing. This should extend to as many fields as possible, though it will not be equally valuable in all. He may be asked for an opinion on any type of book, but his response will be conditioned by the policy of his house and a knowledge of the market.

Just as there are certain types of book that should look to Canadian houses for publication, others are better launched elsewhere. With this kind of decision Canadian publishers are familiar and can be helpful. Generally speaking, books with a pronounced Canadian content will find their major market in Canada; some of them will find no market outside (though they may be first-rate). For those that can have a modest sale in other countries, the Canadian publisher will normally be able to make appropriate export arrangements which may not produce much sale or royalty but will, at least, help to get the author known. In the case of books that have larger sales potential outside Canada than in, he will either send the manuscript to a publisher in the States or Britain, or may send the book to a literary agent who will act for the author. This kind of helpful activity has often been misunderstood. It is frequently interpreted as meaning that the Canadian publisher "won't take a chance" unless somebody makes up his mind for him; but with many books it is the way he can serve the author best. Light fiction, for instance (detective, spy, or what used to be called "romance"), unless it is outstanding, will usually sell 250 to 500 copies in Canada in cloth or hardcover, and not enough in paper to justify its publication in that form here. If it is good of its kind, even though not outstanding, certain British or American houses will take it for its larger sale in their market in cloth, for the possibility of a paperback sale, and in the hope of other and better books by the same author.

In the field of children's books, especially those heavily illustrated in full colour, the Canadian publisher can also be helpful but he can seldom offer to publish. Again, if the content is wholly Canadian, he will try. If not, it is best published in the United States; even the British market supports comparatively few of the expensive read-aloud type of picture book. The reason is simply a question of economics. Books of this kind, if they are to be reasonably priced, have to be

printed in an edition of 15,000 copies or more at an investment of perhaps \$20,000. Even if successful such a book will usually not sell 15,000 copies in Canada in several years; and it may not be successful, no matter how enthusiastic the author and the publisher. And if such a sum is put into a book of this kind (which if good enough will be published anywhere else) it is probable in an allocation of limited resources that some other books must go unpublished. The same factors apply to heavily illustrated books for adults, *unless their content is peculiarly Canadian*. It is a mistake to interpret this as deplorable caution; it is the kind of decision people of limited means must make continually in deciding what is important to them.

Authors in Canada who are just beginning to write, and to be published, take the publishing trade as it exists for granted; they like it or they don't, but except for differences in size they find it much the same as publishing elsewhere. Those who began to write fifteen or twenty years ago know how much has been changed and is changing. They can look more confidently for experienced comment on their manuscript, for good design of their pages, for careful editing and reading of proofs and, at the end, for a well-made book. If it doesn't always happen in just that way, it does so increasingly.

Most important of all is the knowledge that within Canadian houses there exists a group that is growing in numbers and experience, of people who understand what the author is trying to do. This does not refer to editors who suffer from the Max Perkins syndrome — a compulsive need to discover and inspire and remake authors — but rather to editors willing to do what the late Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's did, as opposed to what legend says he did. At their best, they are more ready with encouragement than advice, for they know they are among the privileged few to whom an author can talk about his lonely work. And like their authors, if not in all respects professional, they are a great deal more than gifted amateurs.