THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CASH REGISTER

A Bookseller's View

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PUBLISHERS AND BOOKSELLERS have never been really friendly, although they have many common interests. One reason is that booksellers always owe publishers money. But apart from that, publishers lament — usually publicly — that with a few exceptions booksellers in Canada are not doing their job properly. And booksellers complain just as publicly that the publishers have only themselves to blame, or thank, for this situation. Over the decades the publishers in Canada have taken away from the booksellers many of their traditional markets: the textbook business; the library and school library business; to a large extent the technical book business; certainly the medical and legal book business. Not satisfied with that gentle attrition, they have recently launched into the book club and direct mail bookselling business; this without mentioning the wooing of the academic customer through discounts and free reading copies. In Great Britain, Europe, and the Far East, unlike in North America, it is the volume of this institutional business, plus the university text business, that allows booksellers in those countries to carry large stocks of current and standard books, and to operate as showrooms for the latest publications from the publishers.

In spite of this unfavourable situation, perhaps in defiance of it, there are now in Canada more and better bookstores than there have ever been before, though not every city in the country is as well served as, ideally, it should be. The reason for this is that the educated public is increasing in numbers, and, perhaps more

important, the public that is in the process of being educated, or wants to be educated, is growing proportionately at a startling rate! Hence the market for books on an almost limitless range of subjects has grown remarkably, with the result that booksellers, while operating in sometimes savage competition with their own suppliers, are doing a better job than would have seemed probable a decade or so ago.

Among various reasons for this improvement has been the increase in demand by the Canadian public, as well as the institutional buyers, for Canadian books. It is likely that by now the selling of Canadian books provides at least thirty per cent of a bookseller's volume, and perhaps more. Fifteen years ago the figure was closer to ten per cent.

Reliable statistics on the Canadian book trade are, however, hard to isolate. Some time in the fall of 1967 there will appear for the first time a catalogue of Canadian books in print, i.e. available from the bookstores. The preliminary work on this catalogue has shown that there are over 10,000 Canadian books in print, over 6,000 of these in English and 4,500 in French (there is some duplication here of course). This quantity has startled most of those involved in our business — publishers, booksellers and librarians — and makes it obvious that such a catalogue is long overdue. It should be mentioned also that this catalogue does not include publications of the federal and provincial Queen's Printers, who publish more titles than all the other publishers combined. It should also be noted that many of the titles included are texts for elementary and secondary schools.

What this catalogue proves is that there is an appreciable body of available Canadian literature, more than was suspected, which is the result of decades of work by authors, of course, and by Canadian publishers who have worked diligently to present native writing to an often ungrateful public. The cumulative effect of all this writing and publishing is that more Canadian books are being published and sold and read than ever before. The rate of increase of this activity is impressive. Twenty years ago a Canadian publisher who put out more than ten trade (fiction, non-fiction or juvenile) books a year was outstanding. This year one Canadian publisher (McClelland & Stewart) will publish about one hundred trade titles, another (the University of Toronto Press, which occupies a special and somewhat privileged position) will probably bring out even more, and half-a-dozen Canadian firms will publish from 25 to 50 new trade titles, while several others will issue a dozen or so books each, and smaller publishers all over the country will produce a remarkable number of regional books, which are important to booksellers of their particular localities, if not nationally. There

may well be, too, 100 new books or pamphlets of poetry published this year. Not every title is profitable, naturally, but all this activity does mean that bilingually some 1,500 to 2,000 new Canadian books are being published this year (compared to some 25,000 in England) and are being absorbed into bookstores and schools and libraries across the country.

It is not my purpose to give a history of publishing in Canada. It is sufficient to say that it started with religion, and was enlarged by the requirements of popular education. At the beginning of the century some famous British publishers opened branch offices in Canada, and in the ensuing years these — where operated efficiently — have become independent in everything but name. Some of them are essentially Canadian as (or even more Canadian than) the Canadian publishing firms that originated at the same time. After World War II, American publishers (obviously recognizing a good thing), started opening branches in Canada, and some of these branches too have achieved a considerable degree of independence. All these firms try to show their Canadianization by publishing more and more Canadian trade and textbooks, which is good for us (the Canadian reading public) and, if profitable, good for them. Every branch firm, and almost every indigenous Canadian publisher earns a considerable part of his income from importing and selling United Kingdom and United States books (the so-called "agency" system). The volume of business that this provides subsidizes to some extent the Canadian publishing programme. The printing of a book is a technical skill, but the choosing and editing of manuscripts, the promotion and selling and distribution of finished books in the Canadian market, are both difficult and expensive, and, without the volume of business provided by imported books, would be economically difficult, if not impossible.

PERHAPS IT IS TIME to move on from generalities to the books themselves.

The publishing of original fiction in Canada is a risky business, and made more risky here because the subsidiary profits — film and TV rights, paperback rights, book club revenues — which figure prominently in the publishing of fiction in the United Kingdom and United States, seldom make any contribution to the Canadian publisher's profits. This is perhaps a reason why only four Canadian publishers, McClelland & Stewart, Macmillan, Ryerson and Doubleday, seem willing to take these risks, and all four will probably admit that they take a loss

on twice as many novels as those on which they show a profit and that quite a few others may not lose money for them, but do not make any either. It is our good fortune that these publishers are trying to publish for us the work of Canadian novelists. It is their problem to make it profitable, and they have a variety of ways of doing it. All of them will try to arrange for the publication of these books in the other English-speaking markets, thus hoping to attract international publicity for the books and their authors and by means of a joint publishing programme to supply the number of copies of a book which they can reasonably hope to sell. If this is not possible, they will grit their teeth and print the 3,500 or 4,000 copies that the economics of publishing dictate, and hope like hell that they will sell all or most of these, while admitting to themselves that they will be lucky to sell 1,500 copies though there is always at least the possibility that they will sell 10,000.

An interesting, daring, and unassessable experiment in fiction publishing is being tried by McClelland & Stewart. In the two most recent seasons they have issued about fifteen new novels, in simultaneous paperback and hardcover editions, hoping thereby to widen the public for their authors, and sell more copies of their books. In this experiment they appear not to have differentiated between established novelists — Gabrielle Roy and Margaret Laurence for example — and the many young and experimental novelists they are introducing. In order to keep their printing costs within reason they have used paper that is not the best, and adopted a stereotyped format, thus forcing a uniformity of appearance on some individual and widely varying novels. By using this very formula they have published several books this year that otherwise would never have appeared in print, and some, but not all, of these first novels deserved to be published.

One recent development, which makes prospects look a little more cheerful for publishers of Canadian novels, is that the universities (even Toronto) have started offering courses in Canadian literature. Students are now directed to read *The Master of the Mill* as well as *Middlemarch*. In response to this demand *Wacousta* has just reappeared as a paperback. As an example of what this development can mean to publishers, W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* sold 10,000 copies slowly between 1947 and 1960; since then it has been reprinted three times as a $1.95 paperback.

The publishing of poetry is probably no more difficult in Canada than in other countries, except perhaps Russia. More of the large Canadian publishers issue books of poetry than issue novels. And the number of small publishers whose whole output is poetry shows that the market must be improving a great deal.

Here again McClelland & Stewart, while having nothing like a monopoly on the good poetry being published in Canada, have been very successful at promoting the poets they do publish, using the same hardcover-paperback formula as with their fiction, and selling their poetry in quantities that a few years ago would have been considered fantastic.

Every Canadian publisher is willing to publish humorous books, though they seem to rely almost completely on authors whose reputations have already been made in newspapers or on radio or TV. This may well be good commercial publishing, since most of these authors have continuing exposure in these media, and they can help to promote their own books. It is unfair to complain about this, since British and American publishers have the same habits, and all publishers, regardless of race, creed or colour, know that a good funny book will outsell a good serious one, certainly in the short haul.

The publishing of Canadian history is the most important single function of our publishers. The amount of historical material produced, and bought and read, has done as much towards establishing our sense of national identity, such as it is, as anything achieved by the C.B.C., and certainly a great deal more than anything attempted by our newspapers and magazines. Perhaps it is because, as A. R. M. Lower wrote recently, "History in Canada is a profession in a sense that, with one or two exceptions, other disciplines have not yet attained. The Canadian historian is a member of a distinctive school with its own standards and traditions, developed and tested over many years in a large body of writing."

It is probably fair to say that Canadian historical writing came to maturity with the publication of Donald Creighton's biography of John A. MacDonald and of Lower's *Colony to Nation*. Since then there have been hundreds of books, some popular and some academic, on early exploration, on political development, on personalities, on the debates during the various periods of our history, and many of these have been very successful. There are multi-volume series now being published, as well as very useful paperbacks making available historical material that has been out of print for decades. The situation with such books is similar to that with Canadian fiction; there are so many courses in Canadian history and Canadian politics being offered, that the sales of some of these books are often much better now than at the time of their original publication.

As befits a country with so much space, and so much wild land, books of adventure and books about our animal and plant life have often been very successful in Canada. Most of the first material published about Canada was contained in the journals of the early explorers and the reports of fur traders. The wolf

and the grizzly and the caribou are prime subjects now as then, as is the struggle for survival against the elements. Many of the regional books published fall into this category — those stories of nursing in the far north, trekking through the arctic wastes, surviving in the rugged mountains or on the equally rugged sea coasts. Such books are widely read by Canadian city dwellers who have bookstores and libraries handy.

To turn aside briefly from the output of the major Toronto publishers and to the books issued by smaller regional publishers, it is safe to say that there are many more of these than most people imagine. A few years ago it was easy to recognize them for their bad design, typography and printing, but all these are gradually improving, and some of the regional publications are now very handsome, probably because more and more of the art schools across the country are teaching typography, and teaching it to good effect. In Saskatoon there is a local publisher who issues important books, all in colour, on the wild flowers of the Rockies and of the Pacific Coast. In British Columbia there are several publishers who specialize in regional material and seem to do so successfully. And everywhere in Canada there are publishers of poetry and of literary magazines. Some of the best printing in Canada is done by these small concerns. And some of the sales figures they achieve are extraordinary. A locally published book about British Columbia, which appeared in late 1966, has already sold well over 60,000 copies. This type of publishing, while not nationally important, is very important to booksellers in the regions concerned. The sale of the books it produces contributes substantially to the thirty per cent of a bookseller's volume that now comes from Canadian books.

The paperback revolution had little immediate impact on Canadian publishers, although its effect on the bookstores here was quick and considerable. However, after a slow start our publishers have now provided a respectable list of paperbacks, some from their backlists, some original publications. Here again McClelland & Stewart, with their New Canadian Library (which now offers among other titles almost the complete works of Stephen Leacock), and their Carleton Library (which concentrates on books for history students), have published most titles, but other publishers like Oxford, University of Toronto, Clarke Irwin and Macmillan have helped to ensure that booksellers have to provide a respectable shelf space for Canadian paperbacks.

In conclusion, Canadian publishers are now beginning to benefit from the missionary work they did for so many years on behalf of Canadian writers. So, obviously, are the booksellers. There is a growing element of professionalism in

the industry which is long overdue and for which the public as well as booksellers ought to be sincerely grateful. The publishers are becoming more sophisticated in their choice of manuscripts; their editors seem, sometimes, to be more effective; their designers have shown remarkable improvement. Perhaps the writers are better. Certainly the prices are higher.