

# INSIDE THE TRADE

## *An Editor's Notes*

*John Robert Colombo*

**F**ROM MY EARLIEST YEARS I wanted to be an editor. If an anxious aunt had asked me, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” the last thing in the world I would have answered was, “An editor.” At the time I didn’t know what the editorial function was, or even that there was a profession called editing. But what I did know was that I loved books; I was curious about their format, smell, heft, manufacture, appearance; I liked collecting them, even if I never actually got around to reading the books I had bought.

When I was eight years old, I remember cutting out two or three dozen cartoons that had made me laugh from the pages of *Esquire* (it was not the sophisticated publication in those days that it is now). I prepared a dummy booklet, stapled the pages together, and I even recall the words I pencilled on the cover and title page: “Favourite Cartoons by John Colombo.” My mother took an interest in my first collection, and I can hear her today as she said, “But you didn’t draw them. How can you say the cartoons are ‘by’ you?” I was puzzled by this for some time, but I was unshakeable in my belief that the collection *was* mine in some curious way, and that only the labelling of my selection was at fault.

That was my first introduction to the editorial function. My second came through a part-time job, not through running high school yearbooks, editing a college newspaper, setting type and running a handpress in my spare time, or even being invited on to the editorial board of a Toronto literary magazine — that is another story entirely. More through a fluke than anything else, I found

work on the campus of the University of Toronto while an undergraduate. The University's publishing company had just moved into spanking new editorial offices just a few yards west of University College, where I was enrolled, and a few steps south of Sir Daniel Wilson Residence, where I was living. Nothing could have been more convenient, or awe-inspiring.

**T**HEN AS NOW, the University of Toronto Press was a tight ship. My summer job was with the Editorial Reading Department which I soon learned was euphemistic for the Proof-Reading Department. It turned out that the books and academic quarterlies published by the Press were typeset and proof-read in the unionized printing department which was located a block south of the editorial offices. But the books and academic publications of the Press were so incredibly complicated and specialized that in many cases at least two sets of proof-readers were required to oversee them. Two sets of unionized readers would be too expensive, so the second stage of reading was performed by non-union help, some permanent and some, like myself, part-time.

I was more delighted than dismayed when I learned this because, in the back of my mind, I had always wondered about the secret language educated editors used when they wanted to communicate with seemingly illiterate printers. Clues were given in the introductory pages to mammoth dictionaries which sometimes featured a page of proof-reading marks, but that was "pure" information and what I needed was "applied" instruction. So for two summers and a few hours each week running through two academic years, I learned the business of reading proof and production procedure. We read in tandem, the copy-holder reading to the copy-marker, and then back again. We learnt to watch out for errors of fact, which we automatically question-marked, but more to the point we learnt to mark those errors which were not really errors at all because they were only divergences from the copy which occasionally looked incorrect. Through long hot summer months, back and forth, we croaked our verbal equivalents of four-line mathematical equations, and with bleary eyes we confused all manner of algebraic unknowns, superscripts, subscripts, German and Greek letters when the English upper and lower case alphabets had been exhausted. I was gradually learning a science, and today the most complicated of mathematical or statistical tables do not faze me in the least.

The University of Toronto Press was being transformed from “practically nothing to one of the major university presses on this continent.” These are only roughly the words Northrop Frye used to describe what its Director, Marsh Jeanneret, was doing. I wish I could boast I had a hand in this transformation, but in fact I only glimpsed Mr. Jeanneret striding through the halls with (to me) famous people like Jack Pickersgill and Mason Wade and Robert Finch in tow. I was on the outer fringes of the publishing world, but at least I had one foot in an editorial office!

While at the Press, I was never given a title, but in retrospect I would call myself an editorial assistant. I quickly introduced myself to the half-dozen full-time editors who were lucky enough to actually correspond with the authors whose work I was proof-reading. The editors were able to mark up their copy with pencilled characters and meet their authors when they came to town. Peeking into their offices, I enjoyed watching them at work. They were a delight to behold — all girl graduates, young, attractive, nubile (only later would the Press begin hiring male graduates as editors). They checked spellings in their Concise Oxfords and resorted to chapter and verse of that publisher’s Bible, *The Chicago Manual of Style*. I wondered how these young lady editors were able to keep everything consistent and correct until one day I asked one of the prettiest ones her secret. As it turned out, while she laboured through a three-hundred page manuscript on ophthalmology, she jotted down all the variables on a piece of foolscap which she kept beside her. This sheet of paper was ruled into twenty-four sections, each for a letter of the alphabet, and in this way she could remember whether she had earlier spelt “judgment” with an extra “e,” and whether “regime” had appeared a hundred pages ago with an acute accent or not. Purely typographical variables, like the use of the hyphen, the “en” dash, or the “em” dash, were noted there too. This simplified things immensely.

Although I didn’t realize its importance at the time, today I like to boast that I was one of the first to work on the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, a monumental series and the greatest single publishing venture to date in Canada. I asked myself where Professor George Brown would even begin his task of compiling a multi-volumed encyclopaedia of great Canadians. I learned soon enough the nature of the first step: Buy two sets of all previous encyclopaedias published in this country — even if they are collectors’ items — and have editorial assistants like myself clip the entries and paste them on to large filing cards. Then divide the cards into specific periods and shuffle them into alphabetical order — that’s as good a beginning as any.

I can't imagine a better introduction to the intricacies of the mechanical aspects of publishing than the one I had at the University of Toronto Press. Over the two-year period, I had absolutely nothing to do with its publication policy, but I automatically began to identify with the books the Press had elected to publish. Gossip reached my ears on the use of readers' reports, editorial conferences, indexing procedures, the importance of scheduling, and even the odd bit of information on contractual stipulations. I had not the luck to share in expense account lunches, nor was I privy to important discussions on movie rights. I met no important authors or publishers, although I did manage to shake hands once with Yusuf Karsh at the launching of his *Portraits of Greatness* in the Press' new bookstore immediately below the editorial offices.

At the same time, I had learned something about myself too. I realized that I didn't want a career of editing such books as *Late Archaic Chinese*, which was one of the most important books published by the Press during my period with the house. I understand it supplanted all previous Sinological grammars, but the system the proof-readers devised of voicing all kinds of diacritical marks simply broke down when faced with the Chinese characters that Professor W. A. C. Dobson was introducing into the manuscript at the rate of half a dozen a page. Academic publishing was not for me. Every year the Press published a few books of general rather than specialist appeal, but the house existed to take on books no trade publisher could hope to produce at a profit. To my mind, academic publishing was a specialized branch of educational publishing — producing textbooks for scholars rather than for students. What I wanted was a job in trade publishing, producing books for the "lay" reader.

AS IT HAPPENED, the Dean of Canadian Editors — the Alfred A. Knopf of Canada who had spent more than thirty years behind the editorial desk at The Ryerson Press — had just retired and left a vacuum in his wake. Dr. Lorne Pierce's successor was not a publisher at all, not even an editor, but an author and — in his own right — a man-of-the-letters. John Webster Grant was an ordained minister who had resigned his teaching position at the University of British Columbia to help the Ryerson people along. Dr. Grant saw his move, curiously enough, as shifting from one sector of the United Church to another, since The Ryerson Press was really one of a number of operations under the banner of the United Church Publishing House of Canada.

A few years after hiring me, Dr. Grant moved out of publishing entirely and took to the Chair of Church History at Emmanuel College in the University of Toronto. But while he held the editorship, the house thrived. He had the impossible task of tackling the hydra-headed problems that Dr. Pierce had managed to stave off with his own combination of seniority, authority, and outright bluff. In retrospect, I cannot but admire Dr. Grant's level-headedness. Working under him each day was an eight-hour lesson in tact and diplomacy as much as it was an introduction to publishing procedure itself.

At Ryerson, I was known as Assistant Editor of Trade Publications. This involved being responsible for (but not actually reading, if I could help it) the approximately thirty-five unsolicited manuscripts that arrived on my desk each week. I checked through the dog-eared MSS, wrote brief reports on them for our weekly conferences, and then filed them away. (Only the exceptional books get published; to my knowledge, no one has ever done a study of *unpublished* book-length manuscripts. Such a study -- by an anthropologist rather than a literary critic -- would lay bare much about Canadian educational and mental-health standards). More important to me was the task of pioneering new publications. This involved watching the newspapers and reading the popular and little magazines for new names and new book ideas. But by far the greatest part of each day was spent (in Dr. Pierce's inimitable phrase) "lining up the copy for the machines." By this he meant checking the author's copy for consistency and correctness, seeing the proofs through production, putting the book to bed. In between, there were discussions about rights, contracts, design, illustration, proper jacket copy, promotion, and all this merged one long meeting into another. As well, I talked with salesmen, had conferences with authors if they lived in Toronto or were passing through, and got involved in endless correspondence with authors who resided elsewhere.

Scouring the country for manuscripts by mail, with the occasional trip to Montreal or Ottawa, was exciting but generally unproductive. About this time Marsh Jeanneret was quoted by *The Globe and Mail* as saying, in effect, "There are no good manuscripts going unpublished in Canadian attics." I began to realize that he was right, but that what Jeanneret had not said was equally important. There were no completed manuscripts begging for publishers, but there were plenty of good ideas that would never be turned into good books because, first, the publishers were working to capacity already and, second, the market was too small to warrant too much enthusiasm over projects that might take a considerable period of time or money to get off the ground.

This was all happening while the Quebec separatists were blowing up buildings. French Canada was slowly coming into focus, and it occurred to me that French-Canadian literature offered a ready-made source of already written books which Ryerson could publish with great benefit all around. Mostly because Toronto publishers are monolingual, excellent books published in Paris and Montreal go untranslated and even unnoted in English Canada. I am not talking now about limited-appeal books, but popular novels and popular studies. Potboilers like Yves Thériault's *Agaguk* were unjustly neglected, and topical titles like Marcel Chaput's *Pourquoi je suis séparatiste*, it seemed to me, should immediately be made available in English. Both of these appeared on Ryerson's list. As often as not the Canada Council came up with the necessary subsidy to pay the translator and even aid the publisher to budget the book.

One day, to satisfy my own curiosity about Quebec writing, I tried to buy an English-language introduction to French-Canadian literature, the equivalent of Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada*, an unjustly criticized volume. I was astonished to find that there was not then and had never been a survey of French-Canadian literature either written in English or translated into English! Gérard Tougas' excellent *Histoire de la Littérature Canadienne-Française* presented itself and was duly subsidized, translated, and published. Another major book, but with less appeal, was Jean Le Moyne's collection of essays *Convergences*. A conservative thinker not unlike George Grant, Le Moyne's ideas deserved a wider audience; he too was translated and published.

All editorial decisions are group decisions; this is a particularly useful formula when the decision is a negative one. I take pride in the fact that, during the three years I spent at Ryerson, the organization again began to publish books that were judged worthy of Governor-General's Awards. There were three of these, in fact, for books by James Reaney, Hugh Garner, and Raymond Souster.

About nine o'clock one morning (I was an early riser when I was salaried), the secretary of the editorial department said there was someone on the line for me. I knew it was too early for any of my friends or writers to be calling, but it turned out that the call wasn't really for me but was being directed to me. It was Ryerson policy — and probably still is — to direct all those who telephone in blind to the newest member of the editorial department. I lifted the receiver and said, "May I help you?"

"Yes," a woman replied, obviously elderly. "I would like to know something about the book business."

"What specifically would you like to know?"

“Well, I have a book I want published, and I want to know how one goes about it.”

This was a usual request so I made the usual reply. “Why don’t you send the manuscript to us for a starter. We will read it, and if we like it we will make you an offer to publish.”

“You will ‘make me an offer’? What does that mean?”

“What I mean is, we would manufacture and sell the book for you and pay you royalties on the sale of your book.”

“Royalties?” She sounded suspicious. “How much would they amount to?”

“Most contracts begin at ten per cent of the list price of the book.”

“You mean I would get ten per cent of what the book sells for at the store?”

“That’s right. There is a sliding scale, so that if the book sells more than a few thousand copies you automatically receive an even higher royalty.”

“Only ten per cent!” She was getting cranky. “Why do I get only ten per cent? Who gets the other ninety per cent?”

I DECIDED TO leave The Ryerson Press about the time the next publisher in my life entered the office. He was a fiery Hungarian named Stephen Vizinczey, and his one-man publishing house corresponded in an uncanny way to my own one-man editorial service. Stephen came into my office with a bulky manuscript under his arm. “Would you look this over, John,” he asked, “not as an editor here but as a friend?” I agreed and was delighted with what I read. I mentally decided that I would like to edit for the company that would be pioneering enough to publish a book like this. As it turned out, no company published Vizinczey’s book, but *In Praise of Older Women* became a bestseller nonetheless.

So I struck out as a freelance editor. Actually I dislike the word “freelance” because it invariably means “between positions.” I was not between positions because I had turned down two full-time appointments in order to try my hand at being self-employed. After three years of being in an office, I wanted to sleep in the mornings, work hard when the mood hit me, and avoid as much as possible inter-office friction. I’ve been successful in this ever since. I accepted manuscripts to read from any number of publishers, did substantial editorial work for three of them, lectured, conducted writing courses, wrote reviews, articles, and scripts for newspapers, magazines, and radio, and on the side even wrote a shady market letter for a stock promoter (a story in itself). I was delighted to discover

that there are no limits to your earnings if you are self-employed, fairly versatile, and willing to work a twelve-hour day and enjoy it. It is an exhilarating experience, after being office- and salary-pent, because you never know on Monday what Tuesday will bring. It turns one from a civil servant into a small-time capitalist, but the main difficulty is that you spend the latter part of the morning and the earlier part of the afternoon rounding up work and the evening actually doing it. It was Jock Carroll, the Toronto journalist for *Weekend Magazine*, who said, "The trouble with freelancing is that if you take an extra half-hour over lunch, you think you are starving to death."

In between assignments, I edited Stephen Vizinczey's manuscripts through three drafts and into production. I felt as if all along I was working strictly for Vizinczey because he was always on the phone or at the door (he never resorted to the mails) with revisions, proofs, suggestions, questions, jacket copy, illustrations, or what-have-you. After the manuscript was whipped into shape, he published it himself with his own capitalization under the imprint of Contemporary Canada Press. In Canada alone, the hardbound edition sold approximately ten thousand copies, and it is currently doing excellent business as a Ballantine paperback. At last count, Vizinczey made \$65,000 out of the venture and is now in London dickering over translation rights.

**M**Y NEXT VENTURE in publishing corresponded to the phenomenal success of *The Comfortable Pew*, which was, surprisingly, the first book I edited for McClelland & Stewart. It was a small editorial task, and it consisted of checking the punctuation, the quotes, and seeing through speed publication "a manuscript about the church." After three years at the United Church Publishing House, I was becoming a religious editor! When I learned that the manuscript was by Pierre Berton, and after I had read it, I knew instinctively (perhaps even more than the publisher — certainly *not* more than the author) that this was a big-time operation. It went on to become the outstanding trade bestseller in Canadian history.

The trouble with money, John Kenneth Galbraith once said, is that it exerts "pre-emptive tendencies." The same thing could be said about good books which are destined to become big books. The publisher of big books in Canada today is obviously Jack McClelland. This has only been so since 1959, the year the firm he directs, McClelland & Stewart, published paperback and hardbound edi-



tions of Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* and Irving Layton's *A Red Carpet for the Sun*. Since then his truly contemporary list has grown impressively, and part and parcel of his concept of publishing is the need for promotion and striking packaging. Jack McClelland is the Barney Rosset or John Calder of Canadian publishing. Forty years ago he would have been the Alfred A. Knopf or Sir Stanley Unwin of the business. How times change. . . .

It is a pleasure to work with McClelland & Stewart, first as an outside editor or stringer and then, comparatively recently, as an editorial consultant. It is an astonishing experience to handle a book like *This Game of Politics*, rework it against an impossible deadline, and see it through publication, all the while reading about its author, Pierre Sévigny, in the newspapers and seeing him interviewed on television telling everyone that he is going to "tell all" about John Diefenbaker and his Cabinet days. It makes an editor feel that he is in his own small and anonymous way helping to make history. A delusion perhaps, but Samuel Goldwin used to call the sweet sensation "being immortal for a day."

I could continue and discuss other books, like George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* and Walter L. Gordon's *A Choice for Canada*, and dozens which no one expected would make the headlines and which didn't, but this phase of my operations is not by any means over. In fact, I hope it will never be over, because the supply of excellent books seems never-ending and appears to increase from list to list. Working half inside a house and half outside has turned out to be my ideal way of both writing and editing. It takes a fair amount of organization, a lot of nervous energy, some moving about, and vast quantities of midnight oil. But I always did like sleeping in in the mornings.

RATHER THAN STOP *in medias res*, let me round out this personal account of the publishers in my life with a few observations based solely on my own experience. I am numbering my points, not because it is fashionable to do so today *à la* Susan Sontag, but because the points are really unrelated and taken at random.

1. Raymond Mortimer once said that publishing was "at once an art, a craft, and a business." In Canada it is only becoming all three. The Yellow Pages of the Toronto Telephone Directory lists 19 ½ column inches under the heading "Publishers — Book," but only by the wildest stretch of the imagination could more

than half a dozen be said to be serious publishers. The rest are dabblers or strictly distributors of foreign titles (one bookseller in Toronto refers to them as “jobbers”). Only a few Toronto companies give one the impression that they could exploit the possibilities of a *Gone With the Wind*. The best of the worst would probably turn the literary property over to their U.S. or U.K. principals and be content to handle the title on an agency basis in the country of its origin.

2. Sir Stanley Unwin made elementary distinction between an editor and a publisher. “An editor,” he said, “selects manuscripts; a publisher selects editors.” In my experience, very few editors in Canada ever select manuscripts; they are too busy second-guessing the publisher. No one really knows what will sell. The odds are against anything selling, but when you are a gambler by profession it is foolish not to go for broke now and then. The editor has to be a perpetual optimist; the publisher a grim (and game) realist.

3. The continued existence of Canadian publishing often seems to me very much an open question. It is possible publishing in Toronto will simply vanish like a mirage one day — with the Americanization of the country, the gradual easing out of British books, and the “free-flow” copyright and tariff acts which seem to be looming on the American horizon. The classic debate is between Marsh Jeanneret and Jack McClelland. The Director of the University of Toronto Press feels that “Canadians should be publishers to the world,” and the President of McClelland & Stewart feels that Canadian books should not be exported but should be republished in foreign countries by resident companies. But between the two positions — between books like *Late Archaic Chinese* and *The Comfortable Pew* — there are perhaps a hundred books published each year in Canada that could automatically be exported. Obviously the most commercial titles will be contracted for by foreign publishers before publication, but what about the remainder which have a limited but legitimate market outside Canada which no company except the University of Toronto Press is attempting to service? What is needed is a decision by the Book Publishers’ Association of Canada to invest in a joint outlet for Canadian titles in New York and London. Doubleday-style bookstores should be merchandising points for English-language books manufactured in Canada when the American or British rights have not been previously placed. One book I worked on comes to mind. It was a prairie pioneer’s reminiscences, one of the first Canadian titles of its kind. I suspect similar books have appeared in the United States, but still there are midwestern areas south of the border where possibly two or three hundred copies of the Canadian book could be absorbed at only a nominal cost to the publisher.

4. If you are an unpublished author, permit me a word of advice when submitting to a Canadian publisher. Establish conditions with your submission. Too many houses are still in the horse-and-buggy days of office organization and think nothing of keeping an author waiting nine months to a year for a yes or no answer. One United States company, Simon & Schuster, boasts that it will report back to the author within two weeks of submission, and I am certain this policy, which is not an unreasonable one, nets them the first look at a number of promising manuscripts. So when submitting, I recommend imposing a polite time limit in the covering letter. "If I don't hear from you within two months, aside from a routine acknowledgment of receipt of the manuscript, I will assume the manuscript has been rejected by your company, and I will submit my carbon elsewhere." That should get action. To be politic, a letter two weeks before the impending deadline, drawing attention to the condition of submission, is a gentle reminder to the publisher how long you have been waiting. The truth of the matter is publishers and editors feel as guilty about their bad organization and lethargy as authors feel irritated.

5. Let me conclude with some advice to the young graduate wary of an academic career, bookish, and curious about publishing. I meet half a dozen such young people a year. I find myself lending them a pamphlet called *So You Want to Get into Book Publishing* by Daniel Melcher, published by *Publisher's Weekly*, 62 West 45th St., New York 26. It discusses opportunities, salaries, ways and means of breaking in. Besides Sir Stanley Unwin's classic introduction to the field, *The Truth About Publishing*, two paperback collections of essays are excellent. These are edited by Gerald Gross and are called *Editors on Editing* and *Publishers on Publishing*. Unfortunately, opportunities are limited in Canada, especially in trade editorial work, and advancement as often as not comes from leaving one firm and joining another. There is no problem here except that there just aren't that many firms to go around. And the main barrier remains getting started, since there are no training programmes. The great myths about the business also stand in the way. One of these is that every editor "needs experience on the road." Any normal person can pick up all he has to know listening to bookstore managers at their annual meetings and talking to travellers after they return from their trips. My advice to publishers is leave the editors to their editing and the travellers to their selling. Once you are working as a junior or senior editor, meeting book-buyers is an exciting experience, but the actual selling (euphemistically called "representing") is best left to the experts. If I had had to start out as a salesman, I don't think I would have lasted long enough to become an

editor. Another of the great myths is that trade editors are — well — parasites and that educational editors are the Real McCoy. Fundamentally the only difference between educational editing and trade editing is that educational editing is easier. Textbooks are obviously more profitable than trade books, but the latter are often profitable too, and even if they aren't they are an attractive "loss leader" to an educational department. There are more openings on the educational side, but the worst thing that can happen is for a young editor, who has his eye focussed on trade work, to be categorized as an educational man. If you are good at it, you will be doing it for the rest of your life. But if you are a trade editor, doing the odd educational title on the side can be a refreshing change. There's nothing to it!