

# PRIVATE PRESSES IN VANCOUVER

*Marya Fiamengo*

A NEW PUBLICATION from Klanak Press, *Signatures* by F. R. Scott, and a group of three brochures of verse from the Periwinkle Press — *Kyoto Airs* by Roy Kiyooka, *White Lunch* by Gerry Gilbert, *elephants mothers & others* by John Newlove — show the continued vitality of private publishing ventures on the West Coast.

Describing the origins and history of his Klanak Press in *The Canadian Reader* of September 1960, William McConnell writes, "We're only in competition with ourselves." This is a significant comment, and it applies equally to Takao Tanabe's Periwinkle Press, the other concern of a similar nature in Vancouver. There are other resemblances, for it is no accident that Mr. Tanabe's publications immediately remind one in format of those of the Klanak Press. Tanabe has been the designer and typographer for all Klanak Press publications but one, while both presses maintain an excellence of production which is undoubtedly facilitated by the happy condition of being "in competition with oneself."

William McConnell has described Klanak Press as a "Cottage Industry". The epithet is both apt and misleading. Like the best of cottage industries, Klanak Press reflects a care in making, a sense of concern for the workmanship and craft involved, all aimed at a final touchstone of individuality. Unlike cottage industries, however, there is nothing of the homespun or the rustic in the formats that are attained. Their elegance is the reflection of a desire for a pleasing aesthetic whole, in which format and content shall if possible complement each other. The product of this attitude has been five books of unquestionable distinction for design and typography, apart from their literary merit.

*The Quality of Halves*, a first book of poems by Marya Fiamengo and Klanak's first publication, received honourable mention in *Typography* '59. The second

publication, *Klanak Islands*, a collection of short stories, was exceptional on several counts. First, it was a venture into prose publication, which is relatively expensive, with a larger press run of 1,500 copies as opposed to the 630 copies of *The Quality of Halves*. Secondly, the eight stories chosen were works by eight Western writers of varying reputation, ranging from Henry Kreisel, the best established, to the relatively new and unknown voices of Margaret Mills, Marion Smith and Raymond Hull; these stories were accompanied by illustrations by artists — also from the West Coast — such as Don Jarvis, Robert Steele, Ben Lim and Herbert Gilbert. Collections of short stories not only cost more to produce than verse, but also seem to have a more limited appeal, yet *Klanak Islands* continues to sell steadily and to justify the publishers' determination to extend their scope. The format of the third Klanak volume, *Rocky Mountain Poems* by Ralph Gustafson, was undertaken by Ben Lim, whose design won an award at the Stratford Festival of Typography in 1960. Like its predecessor in verse, *The Quality of Halves*, *Rocky Mountain Poems* has sold well; both books, almost sold out, are becoming collectors' items.

F. R. Scott's outstanding volume of translation, *St. Denys Garneau and Anne Hébert*, appeared with Klanak Press in 1962, and now it is followed by Scott's own volume, *Signatures*. These poems have the qualities we have learnt to expect from Mr. Scott — the satirist's wit, the elegance of the civilized man, the seriousness of the poet, and the eloquence of a former Dean of Law. They do not strike one as supreme examples of lyricism, and they sometimes fall short of rapture when rapture is intended, as in "Heart" and "Lips", but they are invariably perceptive and astute. They provide a welcome relief from the intense young men who wear their intense egos on sleeves of basic vernacular.

The forging of new identity; the discovery of the self as "being", expressed in the imagery and the process of geologic and human evolution; an ironic sense of the repetitiveness of human error; these are the themes which preoccupy Scott: these and the ever prevalent Northern vastness and solitude which broods over the geography of Canada — a "land so bleak and bare/a single plume of smoke/ is a scroll of history." *Signatures* is a book whose poems indicate a sensibility both varied and accomplished, expressed in a verse that is satisfyingly finished, even if on occasion it is neatly eloquent rather than profound.

In welcoming this latest production of the Klanak Press, it seems appropriate to comment on the singular initiative, imagination and taste of the Press's founders, William and Alice McConnell. Not only have they exhibited a serious concern for the fate of much writing which for commercial reasons might not

otherwise have found a publisher, but they have also translated this concern into the acceptance of an active personal responsibility. Yet their sense of responsibility to the writer has been matched by their trust in the existence of a discriminating audience which would respond to their venture. The McConnells find that they have not been disappointed. Klanak Press, while it does not make a profit, does not lose money. And the final financial concern of these publishers is to break even, or at most to make a small profit that can be used to continue their work.

**P**ERIWINKLE PRESS is the private printing venture of Takao Tanabe, who divides his time between the twin obsessions of painting and typography; he insists that his obsessional interest in typography was the result of an association with Robert Reid, the former British Columbian printer and the pioneer in fine typography on the West Coast.

Periwinkle Press began with the publication of handsome broadsheets, poems by Phyllis Webb and Robin Mathews, open letters by the painter Joseph Plaskett and the director of Vancouver's New Design Gallery, Alvin Balkind. It could be said of Tanabe's work as a typographer that he "touches nothing that he does not adorn." His broadsheets were a triumph of taste, and the three brochures of poems which have now appeared are equally impressive. Since Periwinkle Press is non-commercial, the books are published without profit and for the cost of materials, the printer in a sense subsidizing them by contributing freely his time, his experience and his skill.

The design of all these three books is neat, unobtrusive and simple, yet in each case subtly suited to the tone of the individual work. In the case of Gerry Gilbert the tone is one of quiet, personal lyricism. The poems in Mr. Gilbert's *White Lunch* are the direct and tender minutiae of a private life. In the main they arise out of the experience of marriage and parenthood, as in the case of "Marriage and the Maple Tree", where the self of a child is juxtaposed against adult awareness. "I came to my childhood and said/to myself your mother is a maple tree."

There is a certain monotony owing to the evenness of tone which runs through the collection. Yet in the final poem, "The Man in the Valley", poignancy gives way to a sharper tone, a stronger, more assertive voice. The final image is arresting; "the glow of the fat burning in the loose coffin" provides light, the image,

the imagination through which the poet becomes aware of the vulnerability and fragility of both the creative and physical self in the face of death. "Paper is not thinner than/I am is not the servant that I am/to ink, the shadow moving under the mountain."

*Kyoto Airs*, by Roy Kiyooka, are the poems of a painter. They have the quality of Japanese art at its best, severe and delicate restraint. There is the occasional obvious poem, where the subject defies the simplicity of approach; "creased with dust/the painted smile looks back" in "Reclining Buddha" is a descent into the commonplace. Most, however, have the terse strength and spareness of "The Warrior". "Did/they lie here — her pale/white face/upturned/to his/beneath his cherry/tree where they lie buried/his brother too." Sometimes a hint of coldness intervenes, as in the irony of "The Guest", but on the whole it is the exact delicacy of "the sash you bought/for my ukata is/firm around my waist/how else tell/of a brother and sister/thirty years parted/drawn together, again." These poems certainly gain from the unity of theme suggested by the title, *Kyoto Airs*. They are the poetic record of Kiyooka's visit to Japan, his family there, and the shrines of his people.

John Newlove has written more impressive poems than those which appear in *elephants mothers & others*. The language and imagery of his earlier volume, *Grave Sirs*, strike one as fresher and sharper than those of *elephants*. The new collection is, nonetheless, interesting in itself. If an almost too tender vulnerability to experience is the characteristic of Gerry Gilbert's verse, a stern and strict honesty is explicit in John Newlove's. There is considerable self-appraisal and self-analysis; there is also an open and compelling strength, as well as compassion, in such lines as "Smelling your blood, dear friend,/I have more fear than I can use/young and morbid and alive, and so/I spare a part of it for you." It is this sense of the validity of the "other", a sense of groping toward the responsibilities of love that is most moving in Newlove's work. "Half in love with the grimacing girl/whose tears I regret, is/half in love with myself."

Mr. Newlove's work shows the intrinsic attitude towards experience that is essential in the making of art, an intelligent and sensitive awareness as well as a completely honest evaluation. He is capable of the purely lyrical response: "And as the trees, a small girl/said once, make the wind/move, you the leafy trees thusly/make me move, and so move me."

There are weak and even unsuccessful poems in this book, but these are the expected growing pains of any young poet — and John Newlove shows a power of poetic growth that promises well for his future as a poet.

It is something of a reassurance to find in Vancouver the taste and venturesomeness displayed by Klanak Press and Periwinkle Press. One hopes they will act as incentives to other ventures of a like nature or even form a challenge to commercial publishers to move in a similar direction.

