

# BOOK DESIGN IN CANADA

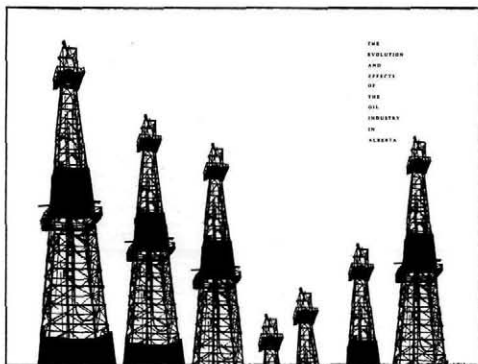
*William Toye*

ANYONE WHO TAKES an interest in Canadian books will have noticed that they look better than they used to and that their appearance — their design — is often referred to in the reviews (at least in Toronto). It has become something to be mentioned, and not only by reviewers but by almost everyone else, especially if it is the author you are talking to, for it provides an easy subject for comment and obscures the fact that you haven't read the book and don't intend to. Authors themselves are gratified by this interest; it is only human to feel that a superlative looking package reflects favourably on the contents, and authors are only human. Then there are the annual well-publicized typography shows to focus further attention on the non-literary aspect of a book. They consider books as objects of design and isolate their handsomest elements, just as though the reason for it all — the author's words that lie behind the arresting jacket, the handsome binding, the clever display lines, the type and drawings and paper — were of secondary value. When I join others in gazing solemnly at the latest exhibition of our best designs in print, I keep expecting to hear someone say over my shoulder, "Who gives a damn?" and I ponder a suitable reply. I have done my little bit in fostering what may be thought a blown-up interest in book-design, pulling it out of the context of the whole book; furthermore, I design myself; yet I also help to *publish* books, and in publishing the first and last things must be the author's words. I know what the cynical viewer in my fantasy means, but I am convinced that the sneer would be undeserved. Reviewers who notice

good design and authors who prize it are perfectly correct to do so; publishers who provide for it are responsible and wise; shows that celebrate it are salutary; the average reader who notices it and talks about it is exercising a natural aesthetic sense and is also taking one step towards comprehending the book as a whole, if its outward form can be thought of as an allusive invitation to read. When the design of books is considered out of context, made an arty, fashionable subject of interest for its own sake, it can be boring and sterile. But the fact remains that the designer is in a position to serve the written word profoundly; first of all by making it legible, giving it the proper type face, length of line, leading, and margins, and handling the type meticulously. By using imagination, taste, and craftsmanship, he can also put every aspect of the physical book in perfect accord with the work itself, and even heighten its meaning. Whether this is done or not done, whether it is done well or badly, is surely of some importance.

Of course the very nature of a book implies the need for design, and great gifts have been lavished on its appearance from the days of the *incunabula*. Even those unknowing people who produce the ugliest books are designers in a sense: they make decisions about page size, type etc. that give their books form. As long as books are made they will have to be designed — planned in detail to produce some kind of harmony — and their design will have an effect on them, and on the reader as well, conscious or unconscious, pleasing or otherwise. It is inescapable.

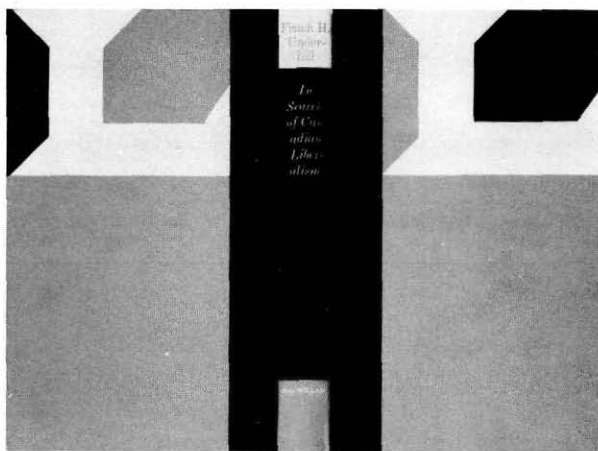
The movement to have Canadian books designed by people with training and skill was begun in the middle fifties by several English designers who had recently come to Toronto and eventually joined with Allan Fleming, who had been doing some jackets and cases for Macmillan's, and Carl Dair to form The Society of Typographic Designers of Canada. (Mostly through its annual exhibitions which it co-sponsors with the Rolland Paper Company of Canada, the TDC has forwarded the cause of Canadian book design ever since then.) While a few Canadian publishers had the odd book designed outside the firm, most books up to this time were conceived and produced by editors who had acquainted themselves with the various structural requirements of the book but lacked a knowledge of type. As they were editors first, it would have been surprising if they had had anything more than a groping sense of how to achieve graphic effects and the taste to choose between good and bad. They were vaguely aware of the conventional style of English book-designing and frequently and amateurishly used this as their guide; often, in the press of work, they left such things as choice of type and display to the printer. So it is not to be wondered at that the books produced



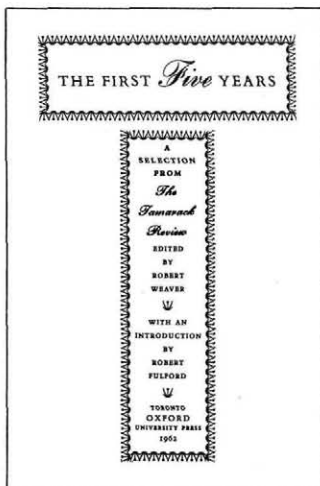
(left)  
Half-title spread/  
FRANK NEWFELD/  
*Dynamic Decade*/  
McClelland & Stewart



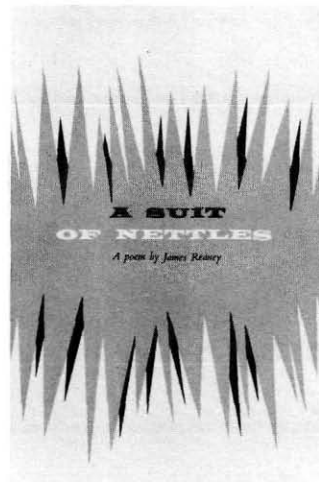
(right)  
Title page/ROBERT REID/  
The private press of  
Reid & Tanabe



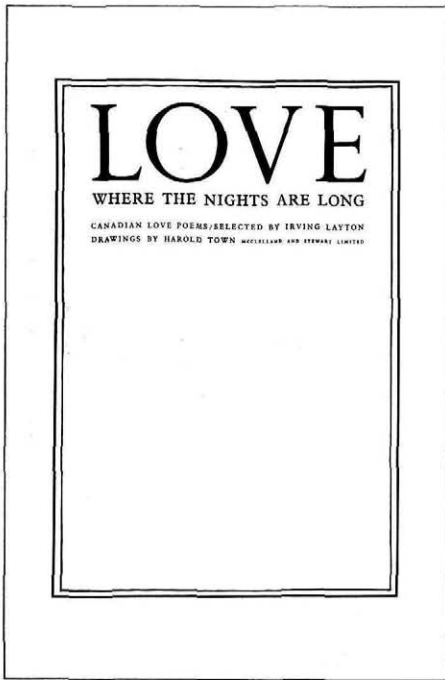
Case/FRANK DAVIES/*In Search of Canadian Liberalism*/  
Macmillan.



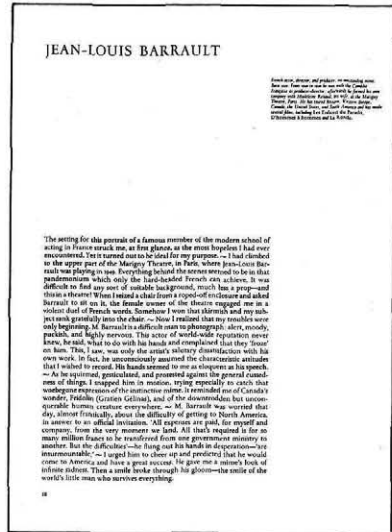
Title page/WILLIAM TOYE/  
Oxford.



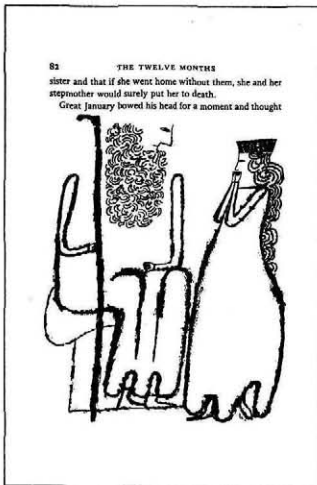
Jacket/ALLAN FLEMING/  
Macmillan.



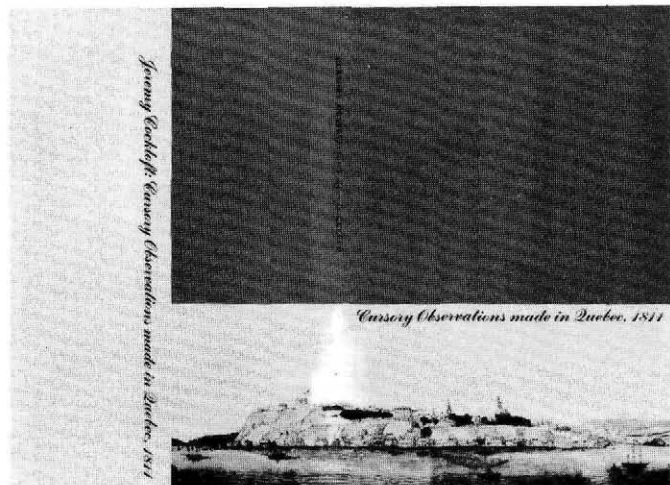
Title page/**FRANK NEWFELD/**  
McClelland & Stewart.



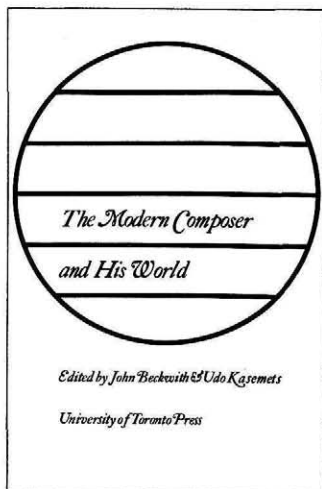
Text page/**PAUL ARTHUR/Portraits of Greatness/**University of Toronto Press.



Drawing by **THEO DIMSON/**  
*The Sunken City/Oxford.*

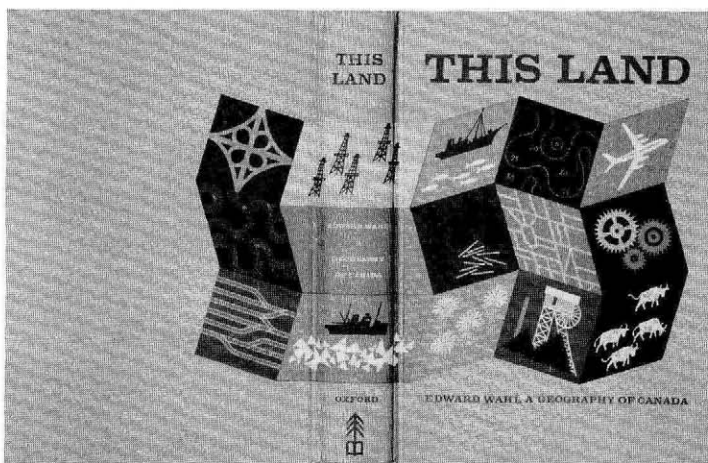
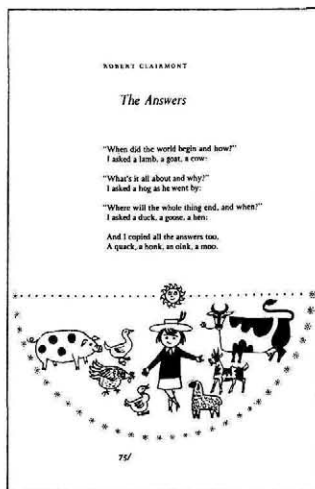


Case/**LESLIE SMART/Oxford**

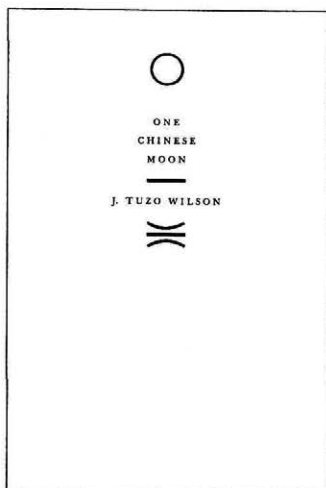


(left)  
Jacket/  
HAROLD KURSCHENSKA/  
University of  
Toronto Press.

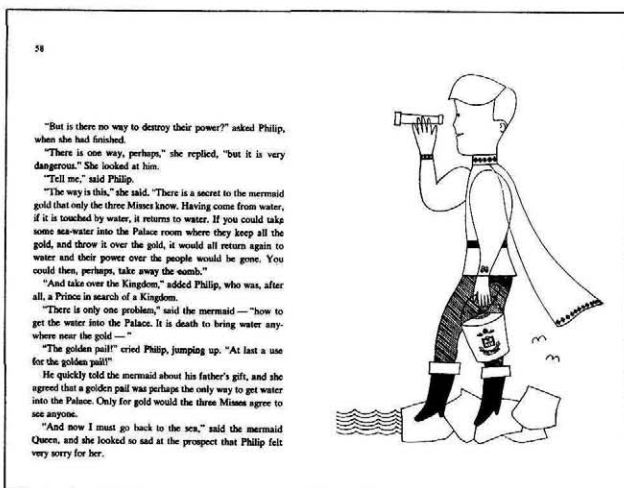
(right)  
Drawing & text page/  
FRANK NEWFELD/  
*Your Poetry Book 5*/  
Gage.



Case/HANS KLEEFELD/Oxford



Title page/ARNOLD ROCKMAN/  
Longmans.



Drawing by ARNAUD MAGGS,  
text-spread by ARNOLD ROCKMAN/*Nunnybags*/Gage.

in this way, usually the result of several people's thinking, were scrappy and gauche — unprofessional, in other words. And indifferently produced, for without sufficient guidance in matters of typesetting, choice of paper, machining, and binding, printers and binders gave less than their best.

Sometimes designers in reminiscent mood like to recall among themselves how they came to philistine Toronto and put book publishers and printers on the rails where design and production were concerned. But at least the publishers had the sense to take them up — after a little diffidence and hesitation — and give them a chance to exercise their craft freely, and to increase their skill (for however much these designers improved on current native work, their own attainments were far below the level they are at today). It was the beginning of a time of expansion in Canadian publishing, when the growing number of books being published created a need for getting them produced more efficiently and in a style that would make them distinctive in a lively competitive market. Not only did this coming together of publisher and designer happen at the right moment; it was fateful, and since then neither has looked back.

Now the few designers who practised in the middle fifties have multiplied and their own competition among themselves (not overt) stimulates the work of all. In contrast to the two or three publishers who occasionally and experimentally had a design job done outside the office, today virtually every Canadian firm that does original publishing has most or all of its books designed by a free-lance professional or by a qualified designer within the firm. At the judging for the first typography show in 1958, a large number of books were so ill-conceived they were thrown out after a few seconds' riffing. At the judging for *Typography '62*,<sup>1</sup> only two or three books were given this summary treatment; all the others — and the submissions were numerous — demanded thoughtful examination before the best were chosen. Finally, discussion of Canadian book design has evolved from didactic preachments on first principles and how they were flouted into appraisals of superior accomplishment, or opinions ventured on how a body of interesting though uneven work can be made even better. No one doubts that there is still room for improvement. But it is a relief now to deal with the work of craftsmen who draw on training and imagination, not with amateurs whose realm is the accidental.

Perhaps some fragmentary impression of the work of the leading book designers in English-Canadian publishing will give an idea of what is being done today

<sup>1</sup> It is hoped that this exhibition, which has already been shown in Montreal, Quebec, and Toronto, will visit Vancouver.

and provide more background to the field. (The fine graphic designers in French Canada have not yet had much to do with books.) I shall discuss them alphabetically.

PAUL ARTHUR asserted himself as a home-grown typographer of promise while he was still in university in the forties when he designed the format of the Indian File poetry series for McClelland & Stewart, and of course with his famous magazine *Here & Now*. Then he spent several years working for the Graphis Press, and in Zurich the fresh clean waters of Swiss typography washed over him and brought about a kind of designer's rebirth. He came home with the best methods of the Swiss at his command, a reliable versatility, great assurance — especially with the large-format, de luxe book — yet retained something of his own, an English orientation, that keeps his most successful work from being completely derivative. He is responsible for the fine catalogues of the National Gallery collection (University of Toronto Press), but his masterly production of Karsh's *Portraits of Greatness* (also University of Toronto) is probably his best and shows a strong design that is truly handsome — entirely fitting to the contents — and a firm adherence to those production standards that make for the immaculate book, though perhaps his Dutch printers should share the credit for this.

FRANK DAVIES attended art schools in England and specialized in illustration before starting to design books. Most of his book work in Canada has been for Macmillan. His *Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt* — with its elongated, unadorned text so appropriate to the poems, and the inspired case with titles handwritten by Pratt — is probably one of the soundest Canadian book designs, only slightly weakened by the drabness of its exterior colours. Davies' ability to suggest the four-square plainness of some of our creative writers is shown also in his text-pages for *Morley Callaghan's Short Stories*. He sometimes slips into colourlessness, though his graphics can be effectively bold, as on the jacket and case of Underhill's *In Search of Canadian Liberalism* where the letter L is a forceful decoration and hardly seems to have come from the same person who designed the patchy jacket for *Brown of "The Globe"*.

HAROLD KURSCHENSKA, a Canadian by birth, is largely self-taught and has had some experience as a printer. His flair for design and his skill with type give many of the books he does for the University of Toronto Press a strong typographic look that is handsomely modern. Two of his best are *A People and Their Faith* and *The University as Publisher*. His weak title page and case for the otherwise excellent *In Search of Greatness* by Karsh is an example of how his taste sometimes falters. (If I harp on taste, it's because it is essential to the serious designer

and is the missing factor in much that is being done today.) Nevertheless he is becoming an accomplished craftsman and will doubtless achieve a wide reputation. He and his colleague ANTJE LINGNER — whose work is more uneven, for though usually graceful in basic design, it is often insipid in the colour and character of the decoration — and the University Printing Department keep to a steadily improving standard for enlightened craftsmanship in book production, as a university press should.

The most prolific book designer in Canada, FRANK NEWFELD, was trained in England, and brings to his work a background of training and practice as painter, engraver, illustrator, typographer, student printer, teacher, and lately as art director of McClelland & Stewart. I think of him not just as a book designer but as an illustrator-designer. Not only does he illustrate or decorate and do the jacket artwork for most of his books himself, but his handling of type, white space, and decoration bespeaks the painter's eye for pattern, colour, and texture; he also has a fine imaginative inventiveness. This last gift exists alongside an ability to produce undecorated work that is beautifully disciplined and simple (see Eccles: *Frontenac*). But there is a conflict sometimes when his artistic facility and exuberant ideas overpower the basic book, which is essentially a conservative thing. When the two harmonize, however, and he keeps his cleverness in check, then a rich, satisfying job results, as in Mowat's *Coppermine Journey*, Hanson's *Dynamic Decade*, and in the quietly appropriate, meticulous designs for the eighteenth-century *History of Emily Montague* and Klein's religious novel *The Second Scroll*, both in the New Canadian Library paperback series. Newfeld's output for McClelland & Stewart — many successes and, inevitably, some failures, all injecting variety, colour, and liveliness into the stream of otherwise fairly sober Canadian books — is too large for me to do even a few titles justice here. But I must mention the series of poetry books that designer, publisher, paper-maker, and printer have collaborated on to make volumes of high production quality and decorative appeal at no extra cost to the buyer. Gustafson's *River Among Rocks* is probably the best. Its unusual feature is an abstraction of water and rocks printed on transparent paper and inserted in the front to suggest the depth and movement of water — a gimmick, perhaps, but one that does not interfere with the text and adds immeasurably to the atmosphere of the book. The typography is faultless and the production commendable. Cohen's *The Spice Box of Earth* is in the same class. Its vigorous drawings have annoyed some poets who feel they encroach too much on the written word. Four type ornaments too many give the impression that *they* were used excessively, but to me the drawings



punctuate the poems and contain some of their own character. Are the drawings to be criticized because they are so strong? And should poetry never have evocative art work? No to both questions I would say. The latest volume in this series, Daniells' *The Chequered Shade*, has a beautiful jacket and an ingenious effect on the case made by covering the cloth with striped crash. Perhaps one of the most difficult tests Newfeld has ever had as a designer was imposed by Irving Layton's anthology *Love Where the Nights are Long* in its sixty-five dollar edition. Its page size is 12 by 18 inches. (It's a coffee-table book, someone has said; all it needs is legs.) It has an original etching by Harold Town as frontispiece and other Town drawings — some elegantly sensual, others wispily insignificant — scattered throughout. Assuming there was good reason for such a jumbo book (the poems? surely not; the etching? it belongs on a wall), the handling of the outside title and text pages is superb. A monumental display of Newfeld the master typographer and of Town the matchless draughtsman, it has one flaw: book and drawings are not in visual harmony. Still it is a splendidly grandiose volume to come from a Canadian publisher, and may very well fetch several times its present price before it is forgotten.

ROBERT R. REID practises in Vancouver completely detached from the flurries and forced intimacy of designers in Toronto, and he has remained his own man in everything, working with marked success to realize his ideal of the well-made book that is an amalgam of good materials well handled and strong, conservative design. He rigorously refuses to let design proclaim itself in a kind of duet with the text — a failing that besets some of his eastern colleagues. And his work reflects a disposition that is probably indispensable for the producer of books that make a claim to lasting effectiveness — he is a booklover: underlying everything he does is an attention to mechanical details that preclude the kind of breakdowns (too transparent paper, say, or shoddy cloth and stamping) that inflict themselves on the rest of us, as well as a pervasive respect for the author and his work and for the reader. The basic typographic design of *Canadian Literature* shows his skill and taste. Most of his books that I have seen were produced privately by himself and his wife Felicity in small numbers, and reflect a richness of materials and a fineness of design that set them apart as volumes for the bibliophile. (*Gold* is one splendid example.) But two of his books done for McClelland & Stewart and Macmillan and printed in Vancouver — *B.C.: A Centennial Anthology* and Margaret Ormsby's *History of British Columbia* — show him carrying his painstaking efforts to provide the most appropriate, readable, and pleasing format into the commercial field. I think the history is the

better of the two; this and the striking curiosa he has printed privately suggest that it is books on the Canadian past that he responds to most happily; I wish more of our histories could be designed by him. When you acquaint yourself with Reid's work you feel that he should be enabled to pass on his knowledge and ideals to students, and it is good to know that he has been doing this, and, unwittingly perhaps, shaping what Carl Dair calls hopefully a British Columbia school of typography.

ARNOLD ROCKMAN, born in England, was mostly self-trained in Canada. His work for Longmans and Gage shows intelligence, imagination, inventiveness, and courage to try new things; all it lacks is discipline. Few of his books stand up as complete design units, right in every detail. (Tuzo Wilson's *One Chinese Moon* does — it is excellent — and his handling of the voluminous *Source-book of Canadian History* is also noteworthy. Both are Longmans books.) He is an impulsive designer who lacks the patience to blend his ideas or to winnow them until the book at hand is a carefully integrated whole; it is as though there were a split in his design personality between the intellectual who is passionately interested in the written word regardless of how it looks, and the designer who can't resist drawing on his graphic ingenuity to embroider the basic text with frills. But he brings a fine modern vision to his designs and has a vigorous talent.

LESLIE SMART has a background as a printer, a teacher of printing, and an embryo designer in England, and his book designs, most of which have been done for Macmillan, are characterized by a minimum of decoration and a dependence on type forms for his effects. His books are uneven: though always readable and tidy, some are weak in their display matter. When he uses the simplest means of display and layout his work can be strong, clean, and quietly tasteful: see *Cursory Observations* (Oxford), the jacket of Massey's *Speaking of Canada*, and Ethel Wilson's *Mrs. Golightly*. But ungainly type effects crop up when he departs from this simplicity, or when he has an abundance of copy to style, as on the title pages of *Quebec 1759* and *The New City*. His handling of MacLennan's *Seven Rivers of Canada* is pleasing, with a fine case and jacket and good styling inside, except that the two-colour title-page design wants to be centred and the inside margins are too narrow.

Finally there is my own work. I am self-trained, without the advantage of a printing or art school background. My aim has been to use the full resources of type to maximum effect in producing strong-looking books that are not only appropriate but are completely and permanently pleasing to the most critical eye. I have not yet done this. For better or for worse, restraint is one of my watch-

words; I sometimes make mistakes in judgment and still show signs of uncertainty. I suppose my best-known design was for *The St. Lawrence* whose extended prelims came in for most comment. I wanted to establish the topography of the river at the very beginning of the book, and it seemed a good idea to use a sequence of pages as though they were one wide page; the style of Leo Rampen's drawing of the river was suggested by a fold-out map in an 1860 travel guide from Niagara to Quebec. Of my recent book designs, *The First Five Years: A Selection from The Tamarack Review* is the one that satisfies me most at this moment.

I must conclude this summary of designers by referring only briefly to other names in the field. CARL DAIR does not design many books, but his *Karsh and Fisher See Canada* (Allen) is notable for combining photographs and text handsomely. ALLAN FLEMING, one of the finest graphic designers on the continent, did Reaney's *A Suit of Nettles* (Macmillan) in 1958, to me a favourite Canadian book design. The unattractive books produced for years by the Ryerson Press are now giving way to more skilful and prepossessing designs under the supervision of ARTHUR STEVEN, whose own work so far seems at its best in jackets and cases. TAKAO TANABE of Vancouver designed *A Quality of Halves* among other distinguished books for the Klanak Press. ISOBEL WALKER has overseen, or done herself, some pleasant things for Clarke Irwin, whose least successful book designs have always tended to be weak but never ugly. ARNAUD MAGG's *Annual of the Art Directors Club of Toronto* (1961 — McClelland & Stewart) has original touches that are stunning in their simplicity. Illustration for children's books, which could do with a short article of its own, is a special skill, and Maggs is one of our few graphic artists who do original and memorable work in this field (his *Nunnybags* for Gage is outstanding), along with THEO DIMSON (*The Sunken City* for Oxford); LEO RAMPEN (*Canada's Story in Song* for Gage; *Swann & Daphne* for Oxford); and FRANK NEWFELD (*Your Poetry Book:5* for Gage; *The Princess of Tomboso* for Oxford). Two artists who have thus far concerned themselves only with the exterior of the book should be mentioned for their arresting text-book cases: ROLF HARDER (*The Methods of Science* for Clarke Irwin) and HANS KLEEFELD (*This Land* for Oxford).

CANADIAN BOOK DESIGNERS have done few things that could not be improved upon. But whatever their faults of over- or under-design, the

majority of our books suggest imaginative planning of some sort. The volume of publishing in the United States and Britain is of course very much bigger, but considering this, the number of commonplace, cheap-looking (though high-priced) books produced there is huge; the superbly designed ones are few. The Fifty Best Books catalogue of the American Institute of Graphic Arts annually bemoans the very things we used to complain about ourselves: ignorance of basic design principles and poor production standards. (From the 1961 Jury Report: "The argument that the economies of book publishing do not allow sufficient time for *good* design was disproved by the many books [on which] someone had expanded much effort to make bad.") Given the interest in design of our publishers, the strivings of our designers, illustrators, and printers, and the number of books that are receiving the best attention of all, the situation here is a healthy one. The possibility that Canadian design may eventually rank with the world's best is not by any means remote.

But we try not to think of that. It is the book at hand that commands our attention — the challenge of taking these words, those conditions and materials, and adding something of the mind to create a thing that serves its purpose honestly and leaves nothing to be desired in the way of visual rightness. With every new book this objective is live and fresh — though usually, in the end, it seems mad-deningly unattainable.